

CHAPTER XII

Friday, June 7, 1776

BY VIRTUE OF THE AUTHORITY VESTED IN US
BY CERTAIN RESOLUTIONS OF THE CONGRESS OF THE COLONY
OF NEW-YORK OF THE 7TH DAY OF JUNE, . . . DO THEREFORE
SUMMON YOU TO APPEAR BEFORE US . . . TO SHOW CAUSE (IF
YOU HAVE ANY) WHY YOU SHOULD BE CONSIDERED
AS A FRIEND TO THE AMERICAN CAUSE . . .

—SUMMONS FROM THE NEW YORK
PROVINCIAL CONGRESS TO A SUSPECTED TORY

BECKY SENT ME TO FETCH THE LADY Seymour to help Madam get through having her husband arrested like that. The old lady lived two blocks north of Trinity Church, the one with spires that scraped the sky.

"It's one of them old Dutch-style houses. Got a red door and a knocker looks like a heart," Becky said. "Can't miss it."

The house was not far from City Hall, along a street where soldiers with heavy axes were chopping down the row of tall poplar trees. "Fortifications," a soldier explained to a cart man. "To protect against the invasion. Any day now, they say."

The red door made the house easy to find. I walked through a beautiful garden around to the back. Neatly trimmed boxwood hedges created a path lined with

young betony plants, lavender, day lilies, and honeysuckle. Momma would have admired the roses. My fingers itched to pluck up the scraggly weeds that were crowding them, but I dared not.

I knocked at the back. The door was opened by the whitest girl I'd ever seen. Her skin was pale as water except for two flame-colored spots on her cheeks. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were near invisible, and her eyes a mix of pewter and blue. She wiped her hands on her apron and said something I didn't understand.

"I've come for the Lady Seymour," I explained. "Madam Lockton requires her presence."

She frowned. "*Wat wilt u?*"

"What did you say?" I asked.

"*Een ogenblik alstublieft,*" she said before she closed the door in my face.

What was an *ogenblik*? New York was stranger every passing day. I knocked again, but there was no answer. I was about to walk home, when I heard Lady Seymour's voice through an open window. A moment later, the door opened, and she stood there in the kitchen.

I curtsied, proper-like. "Pardon, ma'am, but they've arrested the master. Madam is poorly."

She nodded. "They've been hunting Loyalists all day. I told Anne it would come to this. Come inside, child. Isabel, is it not?"

The kitchen was larger than the Locktons', with a tiled hearth and copper pots hanging on the wall. A smoke-colored cat curled itself around my ankles, its tail in the shape of a question mark.

"Please, sit down. You must be hungry."

I perched on the edge of a chair.

Lady Seymour poured me a mug of fresh milk. My surprise at having a proper lady do so must have shown on my face.

"You could use some building up," she said as she pushed a plate of molasses cookies to me. "Eat and tell me everything." She turned to her servant, who stood by the hearth. "*Wil je alsjeblieft even de meubels afstoffen?*"

The strange girl bobbed once and left the room, the pale pink ribbons from the back of her cap trailing behind her.

"She speaks only Dutch," Lady Seymour explained. "And shows no inclination to learn English, I'm afraid. Now, a bite, and the events."

I chewed the cookie quickly, took a sip of milk, and recounted near everything, tho' I neglected to mention my role as the household spy. She listened carefully as I spoke and asked plenty of questions.

"Did Elihu say anything to the men who arrested him? Did he give them any names?"

"Not in my hearing, ma'am."

She sat back in her chair. "He's in no danger so long as he stays silent." She broke off a piece of cookie, popped it into her mouth, and chewed. "I imagine Anne is in a lather."

"Yes, ma'am," I said carefully. "She told Becky to pack the trunks for Charleston."

Lady Seymour shook her head. "I don't blame her, but fleeing would ensure that the rebels would take everything."

"Yes, ma'am," I mumbled. I took an overly large bite of the cookie, certain she would send me back straightaway.

She tapped her forefinger on the table as she pondered, her rings flashing in the light. "Right," she said firmly, having come to a decision. "I will write a note for you to take to


the lawyer's office before you go home, and another for Anne, telling her that Elihu will be soon set free."

The Dutch girl came back in the kitchen and said something I could not make out at all. Lady Seymour rose from her chair and motioned for me to stay seated. "Finish those cookies, please, and drink a second glass of milk. You can't run errands for me unless properly nourished."

CHAPTER XIII

*Saturday, June 8-
Friday, June 21, 1776*

I DESIRE YOU WOULD REMEMBER THE LADIES,
AND BE MORE GENEROUS AND FAVOURABLE TO THEM
THAN YOUR ANCESTORS. DO NOT PUT SUCH UNLIMITED
POWER INTO THE HANDS OF THE HUSBANDS. REMEMBER
ALL MEN WOULD BE TYRANTS IF THEY COULD. . . .
THAT YOUR SEX ARE NATURALLY TYRANNICAL IS A
TRUTH SO THOROUGHLY ESTABLISHED AS TO ADMIT OF
NO DISPUTE, BUT SUCH OF YOU AS WISH TO BE HAPPY
WILLINGLY GIVE UP THE HARSH TITLE OF MASTER FOR
THE MORE TENDER AND ENDEARING ONE OF FRIEND.
—LETTER OF ABIGAIL ADAMS TO HER HUSBAND, JOHN

HE FRONT DOOR OPENED THE NEXT morning as I walked down the stairs carrying Madam's chamber pot. It was Master Lockton, back from being arrested. His clothing was rumpled, and he looked as if he'd not slept. He paused when he saw me.

"Tell Becky I require strong coffee and food. Where is your mistress, and what is she doing?"

"Above, sir." I gripped the handle of the chamber pot tightly. "Packing."

He stormed past me, bellowing for his wife.

As I dumped and washed out the chamber pot, I gave thanks. 'Twas clear he did not think me a spy.

When I went back inside, there came a ruckus and much shouting from the second floor. I joined Ruth and Becky at the foot of the staircase, the three of us listening with big ears as Lockton and Madam shouted at each other.

"Shhhh!" Ruth said, putting her finger to her lips.

"That's right, little 'un," said Becky. "They don't pipe down soon, the whole neighborhood will turn out to watch."

Crash!

"Bet you that was the wash pitcher," she said.

Craaash!

"And the basin," she added.

"Do they often fight like this?" I asked.

"Often enough," Becky said. She stopped as Madam cried out in pain. "The master likes to be obeyed. He's not happy she wants to head for Charleston. And she don't want to stay here."

Lockton lowered his voice some, but he was still angry and scolding.

"Should we do something?" I asked. "Perhaps Lady Seymour could calm him."

Becky shook her head. "'Twould fire him up even more. Best not to discuss these things."

Ruth stuck her thumb in her mouth.

Once the fighting had ended and the master had been served his meal, I took a cool compress and mug of cold ale up to Madam. As she applied the compress to her swollen, split lip, she scolded me for not scraping candle wax that had dripped on the floor.

"It caused me to fall," she said. "Do you see what your clumsiness has cost me?"

We both knew it was a lie. There was no wax on the floor. A few drops of blood stained the edge of the carpet.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" she asked.

I didn't like picking up the blame and carrying it, but I had no choice. I bowed my head. "I beg forgiveness, ma'am, and promise it will not happen again."

She removed the compress and winced. "It had better not."

In the weeks that followed, the master had me serve him whenever his companions visited. I listened closely to their conversating, but they blew only hot air, complaining about the Congress and the weather and the effect of war on business. I was relieved to hear that the printer, Inkstained, had fled the city with his wife and children. Lockton was certain that he had told the rebels about the money and the plan to bribe the American troops. My secret was safe.

Becky brought back peas, greens, and gossip from the marketplace: the British fleet was in the harbor, no, the fleet had sailed for Jamaica, no, the Congress had negotiated a peace, no, the British planned to kill us all while we slept.

"Gossip is the foul smell from the Devil's backside," that's what Momma always said. I tried to ignore the wild stories and stay alert for something, anything, I might use to secure our freedom.

Becky had been quite happy to give me the chore of hiking up to the Tea Water Pump every day. After my first few visits, it became the favorite part of my day. The pump was set in a little shed at the edge of the Common, a big gathering place ringed by army barracks, the poorhouse, and the jail. There were trees and fields to the north of the Common and the burying place for Africans. The air was cleaner up there, easier to breathe.

A week after Lockton returned home, Curzon stood with me in the line of servants waiting for water. I was desperate to ask him questions but knew they had to wait until we were alone.

When my turn came, I handed my buckets to the ancient slave who worked the pump handle, a man old as dirt, with stone-gray hair and skin the color of the night sky. He carried a country mark on his face, three straight lines that had been cut into his right cheek when he became a man in Africa. Poppa had a mark that looked close to it. It made me feel kin to the old man, and I smiled and curtsied polite whenever I saw him.

"Thank you, Grandfather," Curzon said to the man as he handed us the full buckets.

I was surprised. "He's your grandfather? I didn't know that."

The old man chuckled softly and reached for the buckets of the girl standing behind me. "I'm the grandfather of everybody and everything." He pushed down on the handle of the pump and water flowed. "Mind how you go, missy."

Curzon waited until we were two blocks down Queen Street before he asked me about Lockton's affairs.

"He traveled to Fairfield in Connecticut two days ago and came home late last night," I said. "I thought he was on a parole, that he had to stay in New York. Why don't they arrest him?"

Curzon looked behind us and from side to side before answering. "They don't have enough men to follow him," he explained. "And his aunt has powerful connections, both here and in England. There must be solid proof before they dare arrest him again. Should you ever come in possession of letters sent to him or maps, or—"

"—or if I find the King hiding in our pantry," I interrupted.

"The Congress would give you a medal for that," he said with a grin.

"I would rather have passage home on a fast ship."

"You don't want to sail anywhere, not now," he said, doffing his hat and bowing to three officers passing on horseback.

I likewise bobbed in the direction of the gentlemen and waited for them to draw out of earshot before speaking again. "Why not?"

"The Royal Fleet is fast approaching and is eager for battle and spoils. If you sailed now, you'd likely be captured and sold to the islands."

"Idle gossip and pipe smoke," I said. "You hear it on every street corner. It's a wonder we don't all choke to death on it."

"Where you see smoke, you find fire, Country. Don't worry. The day of our liberty will soon dawn. This country is going to be free, and you and me with it."

"For a boy with a little head, you sure do have big dreams. I just want what's owed me."

"You need to be patient," he said with a frown. "The army has bigger fish to fry than you and your sister."

"And I have bigger fish to fry than your army," I said with a whole lot more confidence than I truly felt.

The sun set later and later in those weeks. The extra light was welcome and put to good use. I aired out our pallet and blanket and tidied our cellar corner. The potato bin was near empty, and Ruth asked to play in it as if it was a little house. I would not let her. Instead, I made her a

cornhusk doll, painting a face on it with pokeberry juice and fashioning a gown for it with a piece of cambric from Becky's scrap bag.

One night, feeling out of sorts and reckless, I crept up the stairs. It was after midnight, and Lockton and his wife slept heavily. I snuck into the library and took a book from the shelves—a story called *Robinson Crusoe* by Mr. Defoe. I sat by the glowing coals in the kitchen hearth and read until I could hold my eyes open no longer.

When the fat moon rose the next night, I planted the mystery seeds I had taken from Momma's jar. I did not know what they would grow into, but planting them deep in the cool dirt was a comfort. Thunder boomed in the distance as a summer storm approached. *I ought check the cows*, I thought. Storms made them nervous. More thunder rolled, and then a third wave.

Fool, I scolded myself. The cows were in our old life, not this one.


The moon climbed higher and the air returned to stillness and waiting. I took myself to bed and did not dream.

CHAPTER XIV

Saturday, June 22, 1776

LIFE VERY UNCERTAIN, SEEMING DANGERS SCATTERED
THICK AROUND US, PLOTS AGAINST THE MILITARY,
AND IT IS WHISPERED, AGAINST THE SENATE. LET US
PREPARE FOR THE WORST, WE CAN DIE HERE BUT ONCE.
MAY ALL OUR BUSINESS, ALL OUR PURPOSES & PURSUITS
TEND TO FIT US FOR THAT IMPORTANT EVENT.

—LETTER OF CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATE
ABRAHAM CLARK TO ELIAS DAYTON

HE NEXT DAY I CARRIED A BASKET of eels from the fish market to Wall Street, thinking only of hot eel pie for supper. I had not eaten eel pie since Momma died, Miss Mary Finch not being fond of it. But Master Lockton enjoyed the dish, so fat eels weighed down my basket. I fervently hoped Becky would chop off their heads and strip off their skins. It made me go all jumbly in the belly to chop off heads.

I entered the kitchen and set the basket on the table. Ruth hummed quietly to herself, shelling peas into a large wooden bowl, and Becky chopped kale.

Madam walked in from the front hall, her hair half-fallen out of her cap, and stains of sweat under the arms of her dress. She crossed the room, peered out the back door,

crossed her arms over her chest, and tapped her foot with impatience, then disappeared into the next room.

"I require you, girl," she said.

Becky looked at me, eyes wide and warning.

"Ma'am?" I asked.

Madam came back into the kitchen carrying a silver tray. She shoved it into my arms. "You will serve your master and his companions."

Becky slowly shook her head back and forth. "Are you sure, Madam, that's what the master requested?" she asked slowly. "'Tis hard to interpret the ways of menfolk, them being so complex and all, but surely when he said 'Let nothing disturb us,' that was indeed his true meaning?"

"Be quiet, Becky," Madam snapped. "You have the manners of a donkey and the voice of a goose."

Becky said nothing more but chopped faster.

Madam paced back and forth. "The mayor of New York is a supremely important man, could well be the next Royal governor. It is hardly appropriate to welcome him into our home without offering refreshment."

She turned to me. "You will not put one foot wrong."

When the tray was loaded so heavily I could scarce lift it, Madam preceded me down the hall and waited by the closed door to the library.

"Go on!" she told me, without offering to help.

I kicked at the door with my shoe and called out, "Wine, sir, and a bite to eat!"

"Leave us!" responded Lockton.

Madam knocked on the door with a not terribly refined fist. "Come now, Elihu, show some graciousness."

Deep voices in the room conferred, then the door was

unlocked and opened. Madam stepped toward the opening, but Lockton filled the frame.

"Thank you, dear," he said. "The girl can serve us. I'll send her to you if I am in need of anything more."

Madam tried to look beyond him to the distinguished guest but could not see through the thick form of her husband. "Very well," she said, loudly. "I shall be composing a letter to our cousins in London, our cousins who are so well regarded by His Majesty."

"Excellent suggestion, dear."

He stepped out of the way so that I might enter.

There were only two men besides Master Lockton—Goldbuttons, wearing a shabby waistcoat of black wool, and the third man, who I took to be the mayor. The mayor had on a fine wig, properly powdered and pulled back, with a curl at the end of his queue, a sable coat and matching breeches, a maroon waistcoat, and a white silk cravat tied loosely around his neck, atop his shirt. The windows were all closed, but sun streamed in, heating up the room to a slow simmer and bringing forth the ripe stink of underwashed gentlemen.

A broad, brightly colored map of the coastline was spread on the master's desk, weighted at each end by a heavy book. Lockton removed one of the books and the map curled up on itself, clearing the desk for the plate of Gloucester cheese and rye bread and the bowl of strawberries I set there.

"My most sincere apologies for the interruption," Lockton said. He took a glass of wine from me. "Pray, sir, continue."

Goldbuttons took a hasty bite of cheese before speaking. "It has proved more difficult to bribe the Patriots to change sides than we anticipated. Those who are fed up with the

situation prefer to melt out of the city and walk home to Massachusetts or North Carolina."

I removed the serving tray and retreated to my corner. The horses in the painting still leapt the fence. I fought the temptation to reach for the adventures of Mr. Crusoe on the shelf. Instead, I centered my eyes on my feet and my thoughts upon a slice of eel pie.

"They turn down the offer of hundreds of acres?" Lockton said.

"The land offered by the King is distant from their farms." Goldbuttons buttered a piece of bread. "My fellow reports they simply want peace and the chance to get in a good crop of wheat."

"Idiots," said Lockton.

"The news from Philadelphia is that Congress is close to declaring independence," Goldbuttons continued.

I fought the urge to yawn. The master and his friends could complain about the Continental Congress at such length I feared my ears might drop off.

Lockton plucked a strawberry from the bowl and pulled the leaves from it. "And Admiral Howe continues to delay the invasion. It's maddening. The Crown must smash this rebellion into dust so we can return to our former lives with a sense of order."

"And higher profits," Goldbuttons added.

If Madam only knew how dull these gatherings were, she would not have been so anxious to barge her way in. I would have happily chopped off the heads of a barrel full of eels to escape another afternoon trapped with men whose voices droned on and on and on like rumbling, dusty grindstones.

The mayor set his goblet on the desk. "The time for

bribery and persuasion is past. This is the hour when we must unsheathe our swords."

Swords?

Lockton shook his head. "We've been over this, David. Our task is to hold this city loyal, nothing more."

The mayor leaned back in his chair. "Holding is not enough. They're coming after us, raiding our homes for lead and our stores for anything they desire."

Goldbuttons wiped the cheese from his fingers with a handkerchief. "I agree with Elihu. A Loyal New York cuts off New England from the other colonies. The rebellion will wither like a vine cut off at the roots."

"Cut off a vine and it will grow back," the mayor said. "You must pull it out of the ground and burn it to ensure it is dead."

Lockton put the strawberry leaves in the bowl. "Is there a plan afoot to destroy them?"

"Most definitely." The mayor's voice was quiet, but steely.

This was not idle prattle about Congress. I stood still as possible.

The mayor scratched at the mustard stain on his cuff. "General Howe delayed the invasion, hoping the revolutionary fervor would die down. On the contrary, independent sentiment now burns as far away as Georgia, as well as the western frontier."

I am a bookcase, I thought. I am a piece of furniture, not a girl who will remember every word spoken in this room.

"The cry for liberty has proved powerful," Lockton said.

"The beast has grown too large," the mayor said. "If it breaks free of its chains, we are all in danger. We need to cut off its head."

Goldbuttons frowned. "How so?"

"We must kill their commander."

Lockton drew in his breath sharply.

"With Washington gone, the revolution will collapse," predicted the mayor. "War will be averted and countless lives saved. Our world will return to the former state of tranquility we enjoyed before all this nonsense."

The study fell so silent, I feared the men would hear my heart beating. *Kill General Washington?*

"No," Lockton said, shaking his head. "Not possible. He is a gentleman. Capture him, arrest him, yes, but we dare not harm him."

The mayor ticked off the reasons on his fingers. "All of the American leaders have committed treason against the King. You cannot deny that. Treason is the highest offense under English law, worse than murder. And what is the punishment for treason, my friends?"

Neither Lockton nor Goldbuttons answered.

"To be hung by the neck until dead, then have your body chopped into four pieces, which are sent to the four corners of the kingdom," the mayor continued. "Others propose we send sections of Washington's corpse to Charleston, Philadelphia, and Boston. They want to keep the fourth bit here, to be displayed in front of City Hall."

The room fell silent again. I could hear the ticking of the hall clock through the wall.

Lockton shook his head again. "You cannot guarantee Parliament would rule treason. It's too dangerous."

"If we dispose of Washington, Parliament will do whatever we ask."

"But how can you accomplish this?" asked Goldbuttons. "The man is surrounded by an entire army."

"We have a man in the Life Guards committed to our plan.

He spends his days within two arms' length of the general. On our signal, he will act."

"And this is why you need the money," Lockton said.

There was the sound of a lid being removed and the jangling of keys. Lockton took a key ring out of the blue china snuff jar on the corner of the desk. He unlocked the top drawer and removed a tall stack of currency, enough to buy a village or two.

I let my eyelids droop as if I were a'dozing.

"The risks are too high," Goldbuttons said in a shaky voice. "If we are discovered, we are dead men."

"Think not upon the risks, but the rewards," suggested the mayor.

I peeked.

Lockton tugged at his collar to loosen it. "Suspicion will fall on my neck first, David. I require assurance that my role will not be betrayed."

"You have my word on it," the mayor said.

"Your promise is not enough, sir." Lockton pushed a sheet of paper, a quill, and the inkstand across the desk to the mayor.

"Write down the names of those who know of this plot."

"Why?" Goldbuttons asked.

"The paper will serve as my insurance should I fall into rebel hands again. It will motivate you and our friends to do everything possible to secure my release."

"How?" Goldbuttons was still frowning, but the mayor reached for the quill.

"If we do not come to Elihu's aid, he will betray our names to the enemy," the mayor said softly. "He is showing us his weakness."

"Planning ahead is my strength," Lockton said. "Do not forget your own name, sir."

I closed my eyes again. The quill scratched across the paper. Goldbuttons shifted nervously in his chair.

"There," the mayor said.

I opened my eyes the tiniest bit. Goldbuttons quickly read the paper. "A vast conspiracy, indeed." He handed it to Lockton, who read the names and smiled.

"We are keeping good company." He handed the money to the mayor and lifted his empty glass. "I believe this calls for a toast, gentlemen."

I did not step forward with the wine bottle. Lockton needed to believe I was a sleepy servant, unaware of his plans.

"Sal!" he snapped.

I drew back my head and acted befuddled.

"Wine," Lockton said.

I crossed the room and emptied the last of the wine into his glass.

Lockton frowned. "Fetch another bottle," he said.

"Yessir." I curtsied and left the room, pondering how I could pass this news along to Curzon.

That was when the blood-curdling screams started in the kitchen.

I dropped the bottle and ran.

CHAPTER XV

Saturday, June 22, 1776

AS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN LIABLE TO BE ATTACKED WITH THIS DISTEMPER, YOU MUST BEGIN WITH GIVING THEM WHOLESOM FOOD . . . APPLY TO THEIR HEADS A SMALL PLAISTER OF TREACLE, WHICH MUST BE RENEWED EVERY EIGHT DAYS. LET THEM ALWAYS HAVE SOME PLEASANT AND AGREEABLE SMELLS, LET THEIR COMMON DRINK BE AROMATIZED AND SWEETNED WITH A LITTLE CINNAMON, ANISE, CORIANDER, AND SUGAR.

—NOEL CHOMEL AND RICHARD BRADLEY,
*FAMILY DICTIONARY. CONTAINING THE MOST
EXPERIENCED METHODS OF IMPROVING ESTATES
AND OF PRESERVING HEALTH . . .*

ST'S THE DEVIL!" MADAM SCREAMED as I opened the door to the kitchen.

Ruth had fallen at her feet and lay there, her body shaking violently. Peas were scattered across the floor.

What I feared the most had happened.

Madam snatched the broom from Becky's hands and raised it over her head. "She has the Devil in her!"

"No, Madam, it's an illness!" I cried. "An ailment, nothing more."

Madam brought the broom down on the small, twisted body. Ruth couldn't raise her hands to protect herself. The seizure held her fast, her arms and legs stiff and trembling, her eyes wide, but not seeing.

"Out, Devil!" Madam shouted as she again raised the broom over her head.

"No!" I threw myself on top of my sister. The broom came down on my back, once, twice, but it didn't matter. I had to keep her safe until the storm passed.

The broom handle cracked, and Madam tossed it aside. I heard Becky yell something, then Lockton's loud voice boomed, "Enough!"

The room quieted, except for the soft bumping of Ruth's limbs on the floor. I looked up. Madam held a chair, prepared to throw it at us. Her husband pulled it out of her hands. Ruth's body suddenly went limp.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lockton asked.

"She's possessed," Madam sputtered. "I will not have a demon-child in my house, Elihu."

I ran my hand over Ruth's face and spoke to her softly. Her eyelids fluttered and her mouth moved. "Come back to me, baby girl, come back, Ruth," I whispered. "Wake up now. It's gone, blown away. Come back, Ruth."

She looked confused; she always did after a fit. I helped her to sit up. A little blood had soaked through the kerchief at the back of her head where it hit the floor. The wound would need some cobwebs.

Lockton sent Becky to the study with the wine. He bade Madam to sit on the chair she had nearly broke over my head, took a seat himself, and addressed me gravely.

"Your sister has the falling sickness," he said. "Does this happen often?"

"No, sir." Ruth wiped her tears on my sleeve.

"This is not a matter for inquiry," Madam said. "I will not have evil in my house."

Becky walked back in, poured cider into a chipped mug,

and handed it to Ruth, who took a large mouthful.

Madam took a step backward. "The child's curse will poison us all. I want her sold, Elihu, sold today."

Sold?

"Wife—," started Lockton.

"You can't sell her!" I burst out.

"Hold your tongue, girl," Madam commanded.

Ruth drank the last of the cider and stood up.

Lockton reached out and set his hand on her shoulder.

"They are sisters, Anne. One must remember that."

"Please, Madam," I said. "She's too little. She'll be hurt."

The room fell silent except for the plopping sound of peas falling to the bottom of a wooden bowl. Ruth was picking up the peas that she'd spilled. The sound reminded me of pebbles plunking into a deep pond.

Becky carried a mug of cider to Madam. "Look there. The little one is already back at her chores. And she did a fine job sweeping earlier."

"How often do these fits take hold of her?" Lockton asked me. "Speak truthfully."

"Sometimes once a day, sir, sometimes weeks will go by."

"Once a day?" Madam's voice rose again.

"Ho, Lockton!" the mayor called from the study.

The master studied my sister, then tugged his waistcoat over his belly. "The girl is harmless and useful," he said. "She will work in the kitchen with Becky. That is my decision. Do not disturb me again with womanly prattle."

The kitchen fell silent as the master walked away. When we heard the door to the study close, Madam pointed at Ruth. "Don't let her near the milk. She'll curdle it. And don't get used to her presence here. Elihu will soon see reason."

She stalked off, leaving a sour smell in the air.

Ruth crawled under the table to pick up the peas that had rolled there. I watched her and tried to stop my hands from shaking. "What will happen to us?"

"No way of telling." Becky pulled an eel from the basket. "It's near impossible to hire help, what with folks running off in fear of the war."

She cut off the eel's head. "Long's you two can stay out of trouble"—she grabbed the eel's skin at the neck and pulled it all the way off—"I imagine you're safe enough."


I bent down to help Ruth with the peas.

CHAPTER XVI

Sunday, June 23, 1776

A REPORT PREVAILS HERE THAT A MOST VILE DEEP LAID PLOT WAS YESTERDAY DISCOVER'D AT **NEW YORK**, I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO ASSERTAIN THE PERTICULAR FACTS . . . , HOWEVER 40 PERSONS ARE APPREHENDED & SECUR'D, AMONG THEM IS THE MAYOR OF THE CITY. WHAT BASENESS ARE OUR ENEMIES NOT CAPABLE OF, WHO WOD WISH TO BE CONNECTED WITH A PEOPLE SO DESTITUTE OF EVERY VERTUE, GOD FORBID IT SHOD EVER BE THE FATE OF AMERICA.

—LETTER OF CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATE
WILLIAM WHIPPLE TO JOSHUA BRACKETT

UTH FELL ASLEEP QUICK THAT NIGHT, my arms around her. I had washed out the blood from her kerchief and hung it to dry. There was a lump on her head, but it would go away.

Madam's threats would not.

I slowly pulled my arm out from under my sister. She sighed and curled into a tiny ball.

I had pondered the problem all day and half the night. No matter how many times I turned it round, I found the same answer.

We had to flee the city.

I sat up and pulled the blanket over Ruth, tucking it under her feet to keep them warm.

The wings that could spirit us away were hidden in the master's desk. I had to take the list; it would buy us our freedom. But Bellingham would not listen, not after the incident with the linen chest. I had to deliver it straight to the army.

The sound I had been waiting for broke through; the low roar of Master Lockton's snores, starting up just as the grandfather clock chimed midnight.

I put on my skirt and made my way to the bottom of the stairs. The hour was upon me.

'Twas time to act.

The moon was my friend.

It lit up the library enough for me to make my way without stumbling into anything. The snuff jar stood on the corner of the desk. I held my breath as I lifted the lid, put my hand inside, and slowly pulled out the keys. I crouched behind the desk and examined them in the moonlight. Only one was small enough to fit into the top drawer's lock.

I inserted the key and turned it gently to the right. There was a dull *clunk*. The drawer slid open a hair. I forced myself to remain still and count to twenty.

Lockton's snores continued above, regular as waves crashing against the side of a ship.

I pulled open the drawer and peered inside. It was crowded with abandoned quills, a rusty tinder box, and a few coins and pound notes, which I was sore tempted to take. I felt through the drawer with careful fingers. What had he done with the list? Was it in his coat pocket? I reached into the back of the drawer and pulled out a black hair ribbon. Had he given it to Goldbuttons for safekeeping?

There!

From the farthest reach of the drawer I pulled out a single sheet, folded once. I held it up to the light and quickly read; it was a list of names, with the mayor's at the bottom. He had titled it "Committee to Preserve the King's Peace."

I tucked the paper in my pocket, tied it tight, and slipped it under the waistband of my skirt where it could not be seen. I closed and relocked the drawer, then carefully returned the keys to their hiding place.

I tiptoed back through the house and slipped outside, quiet as a ghost.

The air was hot and dripping, as if the city were wrapped in a wool blanket just pulled from a boiling pot. I made my way along the streets seen only by cats, rats, and a slave hurrying by with a bundle on her head. Since she carried a lantern, and no doubt had a pass from her master, she was allowed to be out walking after dark.

I was not.

The woman said nothing as she passed by me but started singing the second verse of "Yankee Doodle" in a strong voice, which I thought curious indeed.

I listened close to the words. *"Father and I went down to camp, Along with Captain Gooding; And there we saw the men and boys, As thick as basty pudding. . . ."*

She was sending me a message.

I dove behind a log barricade just as two soldiers turned the corner, talking intently to each other and sweeping the street with their eyes. I said a quick prayer of thanks to the singing woman for her help.

When the echoes of the soldiers' boots had vanished, I moved on, staying away from the lights of the sentry fires, passing under the dark shadow of King George's statue in the Bowling Green, and hurrying to my destination.



The Battery was the fort at the southern tip of the island, with high walls and cannons that pointed over the water to discourage enemies. It was headquarters of the Patriot army in New York. Even if General Washington was elsewhere, here I could find an officer who would understand the value of the list.

I marched past the rows of tents set up on the grounds outside of the fort, trying very hard to ignore the men and boys who stared as I walked by. As I neared the gate, a sentry stepped out and blocked my way. "Do you have a pass, girl?"

I swallowed hard and tried to remember the name of the colonel who worked with Master Bellingham. *Fagen, Jaden, McReadan* . . .

"Well?" A few other soldiers drinking coffee outside of their tents had stopped talking to observe.

"Please, sir," I said, polite and firm. "I've come with an urgent message for . . ." *Regan!* "For Colonel Regan, sir."

"Tell me, and I'll see that he gets it."

"I cannot," I said. "I must deliver it to him personally, sir."

"Who's your master?"

Telling a lie would not benefit me. "A Loyalist, sir, who would beat me bloody if he knew I was here."

He looked me over and yawned. "Come on, then. I could do with a walk to keep me awake."

I followed him inside, past a room of men sleeping on the floor, along a hall to a small room where a low fire smoldered in the hearth, a chair drawn up before it. The moonlight had broke free of the clouds again and lay in gray pools beneath the windows. A table stood by the door, where a heavy-set man scratched away on a piece of paper, his work lit by a half-dozen candle stubs that would soon burn out.

The soldier drew himself up to his full height. "This girl has a message, sir. Claims it must be delivered in person."

The man lifted a hand in the air and continued with what he was writing. I tried to make out what it was, but his scribble was dreadful bad. Finally, he laid down his quill, moved his spectacles high on his nose, and peered through them at me.

"What is it?" he rasped. His voice sounded raw, like it had been run against a grater. An onion poultice was tied around his neck.

I dropped in a polite curtsy. "I have information for Colonel Regan."

"Who sent you? Who is your master?"

"I cannot say."

"Then who will vouch for you?"

"Ah, I vouch for myself, sir. I am new in the city and know only a boy named Curzon."

One caterpillar eyebrow lifted above the glasses as he recognized the name. "Bellingham's Curzon?" He coughed loudly and sprayed drops of spittle on the page. "He's all bluster." He dipped his quill in the ink pot and continued to write. "Take her away, sergeant. I am too busy for this."

My escort grabbed hold of my arm. "Come now."

I tried to break free. "Please hear me out." I shook my arm and twisted. "They want to kill him."

I pulled with all my might and lost my footing. Both the sergeant and me stumbled against the table. The ink bottle overturned and poured across the table and papers. The sick man jumped up with a mighty curse and several ugly statements about my character.

"They want to kill the general!" I finally pulled free of the sergeant's grasp. "I have proof."

The man was concerned only with rescuing his papers from the spreading pool of ink. "Sergeant, remove this bird-wit!"

"Do not touch her." The commanding voice came from the center of the room.

The sergeant stood at attention. The man with inky hands did too, swallowing hard and wincing at the pain in his throat. A figure rose from the high-backed chair that stood in front of the hearth. He wore the dark blue coat of an officer, with buttons and buckles that reflected the firelight. His features stayed in the shadows, but I could see a book in his left hand, his finger marking the page.

"Leave us," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said.

"As you wish, Colonel Regan, sir," said the man whose clothes were stained blue by the papers he clutched to his chest.

When the door was pulled behind them, Colonel Regan returned to his seat. "Come here," he told me. "Show me what you've brought and tell your story, but keep your voice low. The walls have ears."

"Yes, sir." My voice strangled a bit.

The colonel tugged at his coat as he sat down. He was not wearing a wig as did most gentlemen. His own hair was dark, pulled back into a neat queue, and tied with string. His eyes were sunk deep into his face, with dark hollows underneath them.

"Well?" He set the book on his lap, finger still marking the place he left off reading.

I weighed my words before I spoke. "I am in a position to trade with you, sir."

"What kind of trade?"

"My sister and I were wrongfully taken from Rhode Island. I mean to get us back there."

"You want passage home in exchange for what you know."

"Yes," I said, lifting my chin a little. "Sir."

He nodded gravely. "If your information is as useful as you think it is, I shall personally look into your case, miss."

That was far from a berth on a swift ship, but I had little choice.

"They plan to kill General Washington."

He closed the book, set it on the floor, and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Tell me all."

I handed him the list and quickly told him everything I knew. He interrupted a few times with questions and had me repeat the mayor's words. Then he bade me to wait by the dying fire as he left the room, and soon reappeared with four other men, all clearly dragged from their beds. I was fighting to stay awake myself, but I repeated the story to the larger assembly.

A quarrel began instantly, the arguments flying across the room.

"How do we know Lockton didn't send her with a false story?"

"That's just a list of names. Anyone could have written it."

"I know the mayor's handwriting. And those are dyed-in-the-wool Loyalists, every one."

"I don't believe they've turned a Life Guard. Those men are the finest we have. This is nonsense and I'm going back to bed."

"Her story confirms what we've heard from other sources." This from Colonel Regan. He explained that several spies had brought him the same rumor earlier in the day. He walked to the hearth and looked at the glowing embers. "All that remains is to decide what to do with the information. Who has the list?"

A man wearing his uniform coat over his nightshirt waved the paper in the air.

"Return it to the girl."

"Why on earth would we do that?" he asked.

"I want her to plant it back where she found it. 'Tis best they believe their plan is still secret. That improves our chances of rounding them up."

The man handed the list back to me. I thought for a moment about tossing it on the fire, for it suddenly seemed frightful dangerous, but I folded it back in my pocket.

"Do you think you'll be able to return it to his desk?" Colonel Regan asked me.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"If you hear anything else, anything at all, you come and find me, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." I hesitated. "And you'll soon help my sister and me get home."

His eyes darted to his companions, then back to me. "I shall do what is in my power," he promised.

"Thank you, sir."

"She'll need the code to get back into camp," said the man in the nightshirt. "The new regulations go out at dawn."

"Agreed." Colonel Regan bent down so that his face was level with mine. "Do not tell this to another soul, on pain of death. Do you swear?"

"I swear," I whispered.

"The code is 'ad astra.' Repeat it, please."

"Adastra?" I had never heard such a word, but then again, I'd never before spoken a code.


"Two words: 'ad astra.' It's Latin; it means 'to the stars.' Will you be able to remember it?"

"I never forget a thing. Sir."

CHAPTER XVII

*Sunday, June 23-
Friday, June 28, 1776*

AMONG ALL THE SPECIES AND DEGREES OF SLAVERY
THAT HAVE EXCITED THE ATTENTION OF MANKIND . . .
THERE IS PERHAPS NONE MORE PITIABLE THAN THAT
OF THE ILL-SOOTED WIFE. SHE IS BOUND BY TIES FROM
WHICH NOTHING BUT DEATH CAN RELEASE HER, AND
WHATEVER HER SUFFERING AND HER WRONGS IS
COMPELLED BY DELICACY AND A REGARD FOR PERSONAL
REPUTATION . . . TO SUBMIT TO THEM IN SILENCE,
AND CONCEAL THEM FROM OBSERVATION.
—UNSIGNED COLONIAL-ERA LETTER

HAT WITH MY BUSY NIGHT AS A
true spy, code word and all, and the heat in the upper gallery
of Trinity Church, I fell sound asleep during the sermon the
next morning. I woke when the people around me stood,
so startled that I popped up from the pew and near toppled
over the railing.

The next two days were long and hot as I awaited word
from Colonel Regan. Master Lockton did not notice that
his list of coconspirators was a little handworn; he was
too busy visiting the mayor at his home in Flatbush and
spending hours at his warehouse reviewing his accounts.

Madam took her meals upstairs. Only Becky was allowed

to serve her because of Madam's fear of the demons she claimed inhabited Ruth. Becky said Madam sat sighing by the window and shuffling a deck of playing cards over and over. We did not bother keeping Ruth away from the milk, of course. Instead, we kept one ear open for the thud of Madam's feet on the stairs. When she approached the kitchen, one of us would whisk Ruth down to the cellar.

Ruth understood none of this. She did not complain about the egg-sized lump on her head or anything else. After we finished our business in the privy each morning, I took her to check our mystery garden. The green shoots were two hands tall but gave no clue about their identity. It was perfect growing weather, especially for flowers and corn and strawberries. It was perfect weather for going home.

I practiced the code over and over until it felt like a prayer in my mouth. *Ad astra, ad astra, ad astra.* I was desperate to talk to Colonel Regan about our release from the city but dared not leave Ruth alone in the house with Madam Lockton. The thought of Madam putting Ruth up to auction was a constant torment, like bees darting in and out of my sight, daring me to swat at them.

The gossip from the market was fantastical. Becky brought back tales of sea monsters chasing the British fleet and a two-headed calf born outside Philadelphia that portended all manner of disaster. Folks were prickly and fearful. Loyalist shopkeepers had been tarred and feathered by angry mobs and their shops destroyed. Each day dawned hotter than the one before.

Ad astra, ad astra, ad astra.



Two mornings after my meeting with the colonel, a visitor pounded at the kitchen door. I was kneeling on the other side of it, polishing the lock with an oily rag and rottenstone. The noise near gave me apoplexy.

When I opened the door, I was shocked to see not a messenger, but the rotund figure of Mr. Goldbuttons. Instead of wearing a hat or coat, he had a long cloak draped over his head, and his wig sat askew.

He stormed past me toward the stairs. "Is your master still abed?" he shouted back at me.

"Yessir."

Goldbuttons dropped his cloak on the floor and ran up the stairs as if his breeches were on fire. A moment later, Master Lockton bellowed like a stuck bull, then thudded heavily across the floor and yelled for Becky.

The plot to kill Washington had been uncovered.

I was sent to fetch Madam home, for she had gone to call on a friend. Goldbuttons had vanished by the time we returned. Madam hurried to the library and told me to fetch her ivory fan from her bedchamber for she was feeling faint from heat and excitement. As she opened the door, I caught glimpse of the master pacing frantically, his nightcap still on his head.

He looked up and saw us. "Thank heavens. There is much to do and no time. The worst has happened, Anne."

I started up the stairs to fetch the fan, moving slow as possible to overhear their words.

"What is the meaning of this, Elihu?" Madam demanded.

"Listen carefully," Lockton interrupted. "The rebels know. I've sent for a cart. We must burn my papers."

"Dear God protect us," Madam prayed. "How much do they know? Wait one moment."

I took the steps two at a time and was near the top when Madam stepped into the hall and pointed at me.

"Forget the fan, girl. We need firewood for the library," she said sternly. "Now."

Lockton and Madam were exchanging heated words across his desk by the time I bought in an armload of wood and a few coals from the kitchen in the copper coal carrier. They seemed not to notice as I walked in.

"You are abandoning me?" Madam asked.

"You'll be safer here." Lockton dumped a folio of papers on his desk and rooted through the mess. "Aunt Seymour isn't leaving, and we have credit with all the merchants."

"Your aunt despises me," Madam said. "You must stay to defend our name and honor."

I arranged the wood so that it would not catch quickly, set the hot coals underneath it, leaned forward, and blew gently.

"I am guilty, Anne. They won't give me a parole this time. But as soon as the rebels are driven out, I shall return."

"What if they arrest me?" Madam asked. "Let me go with you."

"You must stay to keep them from stealing all that we own."

Madam picked the blue china snuff jar off the desk and flung it against the wall. It shattered and left a mark on the plaster. "I will not!" she shouted. "I will not be left at the mercy of our enemies while you slink away!"

Despite my best intentions, the kindling wood caught hold of a spark and burst into flame.

Master Lockton crossed the room to pick up the keys that had been hidden in the jar. He placed them in his pocket, then, without warning, hit Madam with all the force in

his arm. She flew into the bookcase, causing several books to tumble to the ground. I almost reached for her but was afraid to anger Lockton any further.

"I command you to stay here, Anne. This is your duty and you will obey me." He turned to me. "The fire is satisfactory. Leave us."

"Yessir."

As I closed the door, Madam started in again, begging him to take her with him, or at least to let her know where he was going.

A carpenter soon arrived and nailed the master into a large crate marked CHEESE. As the final boards were being put into place, Lockton told Madam that he would first head north, then to Dr. van Buskirk's house in Bergen County.

Three men loaded the heavy crate onto a cart driven by a man I had never seen before.

Becky tended to Madam's battle wounds with ointment and medicinal wine. I offered to fetch Lady Seymour, but in truth, I planned to run the news of Lockton's escape to the rebels as fast as I could. Madam insisted we all stay in the house with the doors and windows locked. She passed the night burning packets of papers in the fire and demanding gallons of tea and fresh biscuits.

When the soldiers arrived at dawn to arrest the master, his business papers were all ash and the crate of "cheese" was long gone. The angry soldiers tore through the library but found nothing, save for the shards of the snuff jar. These they stomped under their boots before they departed.

Becky went to market and left me to clean the mess. She returned with a freshly killed hen and a basket full of

beet greens. Before Becky could remove her bonnet, Madam shuffled into the kitchen.

"What news?" Madam demanded. Her red eyes perched above dark rings from a sleepless night. A livid purple welt had raised on the left side of her face where Lockton had struck her. Most of the bruises on her arms and shoulders were hid under her gown, but she walked stiff and sore as an old crone.

Becky gave her the gossip from the market stalls. Conspirators who plotted against the American cause had been arrested all over the city and in several close-by villages. The mayor, two doctors, a shoemaker, a tailor, a chandler, a gunsmith, a drummer, and a fifer were all charged with treason and a host of other offenses.

"How did they uncover the plot?" Madam asked.

I picked up the beheaded chicken and carried it to a basin. I held it by the feet so the last of the blood could drain out before I plucked it.

Becky hung her hat on its hook and pinned on her apron. "One of the conspirators flapped his mouth and the story poured out. Hickey, his name is, a tall Irishman who served in General Washington's Life Guards."

"Did anyone mention Master Lockton?"

"Only that he was one of them that got away, ma'am. They caught one feller trying to cross the East River. Couldn't row hard enough against the tide. The master is well out of harm's way."

"Which is more than I can say about myself," Madam muttered, gingerly rubbing the violet bruises on her wrist.


CHAPTER XVIII

Friday, June 28, 1776

. . . RECEIVED INFORMATION THAT A MOST
HORRID PLOT WAS ON FOOT BY THE VILE TORY'S
OF THIS PLACE . . . TO ASSASSINATE . . .

HIS EXCELLENCY, AND THE OTHER GENERAL
OFFICERS—BLOW UP THE [GUNPOWDER] MAGAZINE,
SPIKE THE CANNON, ETC. . . . HOPE THEY WILL RECEIVE
THE PUNISHMENT DUE SUCH INFAMOUS WRETCHES.

—JOURNAL OF SAMUEL B. WEBB,
WASHINGTON'S AIDE-DE-CAMP

HORTLY AFTER THE CLOCK STRUCK
ten on Friday morning, thousands of boots echoed against the
cobblestones of Broadway. Every soldier in New York was
marching up island to attend the hanging of Thomas Hickey, the
man who almost assassinated General George Washington.

Becky urged me to go. "There's nothing like a good
hanging, is there?" She gave the face of the grandfather
clock another swipe with the dust rag. "Keep an eye on your
sister, though. Little ones disappear in big crowds."

"What about Madam?" I asked.

"Nothing to worry about there, eh?" Becky pointed
upstairs, where Madam lay atop the coverlet on her bed,
asleep. She had stayed muddled in strong wine since Lockton
fled the city.

The thought of a hanging turned my belly, but Colonel Regan would likely be there. Perhaps he would provide an escort for Ruth and me direct from the gallows to the wharf.

"Go on," Becky said again. "It'll be good for you to get some air. Fetch a bucket of water home with you, mind. I wager Madam will wake with a thumping headache."

Ruth and I found ourselves in a tide of people moving north. The wave spread out once it reached the Commons, where the prison, the barracks, and a large sugarhouse stood. Beyond the hills to the north lay the African Burial Ground and beyond that, the big pond called the Collect. This was the one spot in the city where twenty thousand folk could gather. I could scarce credit the number, but it was on everyone's lips.

Ruth watched the crowd with big eyes and shy smiles for strangers, but she did not release my hand and kept her doll baby clutched tight to her. I half expected to see vendors selling cinnamon water, boiled sweets, and currant cakes, and a conjure man who could juggle two balls and a stool. There were none in sight, but the air of high spirits made it feel like a fair day.

I took Ruth by the hand and led her around the back side of Bridewell Prison, toward the Tea Water Pump, where there were other slaves and servants gathered. I nodded polite and murmured my "Good day" to the old man we called Grandfather and the others who were familiar.

Ruth sat in the dust. I turned our bucket upside down, sat on it, pulled a length of string from my pocket, and wove it into a fanciful pattern around my fingers.

"Cratch-cradle!" Ruth said, clapping her hands. We lost ourselves in play, our fingers making Candles, Triangles, Diamonds, and the Manger.

Suddenly there came a rough shout from the center of the Commons. The crowd muttered, some folks craning their necks to see. Ruth giggled and held out her hands to me. She had made a complete mishmash of the string and could not untangle her fingers from the knot.

There came another shout, then the drummers started beating their snares. The noise crackled like lightning.

"Game's over," I said to Ruth, freeing her hands and pulling her to her feet.

The crowd surrounding the Commons had swelled to include the entire army and every soul in the city except for Madam and Becky. I scanned the rows of officers lined up behind the gallows, looking for Colonel Regan. I could pick out General Washington astride his big gray horse at the center of the line. Next to him was the rather large figure of Colonel Knox and countless other officers I could not name. Colonel Regan was not to be seen, but he could have been rows to the back. *Blast*. I should have realized they would be in formation, not scattered amongst the common folk.

Another shouted order echoed off the stone front of the prison. Near one hundred soldiers stepped out of the ranks and snapped to attention. The bayonets fixed to the ends of their long muskets flashed in the sun.

The drummers continued beating, sweat trickling down their faces.

"Bet you never saw this out in the country," a familiar voice said in my ear.

I whirled with a gasp.

Curzon laughed at my astonishment. "Miss me?" he asked.

"What are you doing here? Where have you been?" I asked, fighting to keep my voice low. "Much is afoot."

He nodded his head toward the gallows. "So I see."

I opened my mouth to ask the first of a thousand questions, but he quickly put a finger to his lips. "Shhhh," he warned.

Ruth put her arms in the air and grunted. She was tired of staring at the backsides of the people crowding around us.

I shook my head. "You're too big to pick up."

"No, she's not." Before I could protest, Curzon tossed his ridiculous hat at me and lifted Ruth up to a perch on his left shoulder. She squealed with delight and a little fear and hung on to his neck so tightly he looked to choke.

I glanced at the red hat in my hands. A name was written on a scrap of fabric affixed to the crown—*James*.

"James?" I wondered aloud. If he heard me, Curzon took no notice. His eyes raked the crowd, looking intently but giving no clue about what he sought.

I cupped a hand to my mouth and whispered in his ear. "When will they send for Ruth and me? Colonel Regan promised to help."

"The world turns upside down every day." He kept his eyes straight ahead and one hand on Ruth's back to hold her steady. "The time will come, you'll see."

The drums beat faster. My heart sped up to match the rhythm.

The drums stopped.

"Here he comes!" someone called.

A guard marched Hickey out of the prison and across the yard to the gallows, his uniform dirty but buttoned. He kept his eyes on the steps that led up to the platform. He did not look at the rope that awaited him.

The crowd had recovered its voice and was screaming vile curses. Cabbages, rotten apples, and a dead cat were thrown in the direction of the traitor. He flinched as an egg sailed past his nose, but the men holding his elbows kept their backs straight and their boots marching forward.

Hickey was halted in front of the captain of the guard. The captain said something that we couldn't hear, then he pulled the sword from his scabbard, and sliced the epaulets off Hickey's shoulders. He folded them and placed them in his pocket, then brought the sword down in a sweep across the front of Hickey's chest, neatly slicing off the buttons from the traitor's coat. The buttons fell one by one into the dust.

Ruth stopped giggling.

A preacher stepped out of the crowd and approached Hickey, a Bible in his hand. The captain nodded curtly at the preacher and said something else to Hickey, again too low for us to hear. Hickey said nothing, but he had started to tremble. The captain spat on Hickey's boots, took one step back, and slid his sword home into the scabbard. The preacher murmured to Hickey and got no response, so took him by the hand and led him to the wooden stairs that led up to his fate.

"He's crying," I said.

"Good," Curzon said.

When he got to the top of the steps, Hickey turned around so the hangman could bind his wrists behind him. The drummers started beating their snares again, louder than before. The aide on horseback next to General Washington spoke, and the general leaned forward to hear better. He was by far the tallest man in sight. He agreed with whatever the aide said and patted his horse's neck. The animal tossed his mane and pawed at the ground.

The crowd had grown so loud that Ruth released Curzon's neck and covered her ears with her hands. She whimpered once. I held out my arms and she slid into them. I lowered her to the ground. She stood near on top of my shoes, grasped my apron, and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

The hangman led Hickey to the center of the platform. He placed the knotted noose around Hickey's neck, tightened it, then helped him climb onto an upright barrel. The captain of the guard raised his hand. The drumming stopped.

The crowd fell still.

The captain of the guard unrolled a sheet of paper and read the charges in a loud voice. "Thomas Hickey, you have been court-martialed and found guilty of the capital crimes of mutiny and sedition, of holding a treacherous correspondence with, and receiving pay from, the enemy for the most horrid and detestable purposes, and you have been sentenced to hang from the neck until dead. You are a disgrace to your country."

He rolled the paper back up. "May God have mercy on your soul."

With that pronouncement, the hangman kicked the barrel away.

The crowd gasped.

I covered Ruth's eyes with my hands and closed my own.

CHAPTER XIX

*Sunday, June 30-
Monday, July 1, 1776*

SIR, WE HAVE BEEN TOO LONG DEAF. WE HAVE TOO LONG SHOWN OUR FORBEARANCE AND LONG-SUFFERING. . . . OUR THUNDERS MUST GO FORTH. AMERICA MUST BE CONQUERED.

—ALEXANDER WEDDERBURN, SOLICITOR GENERAL OF ENGLAND, TO GEORGE III, KING OF ENGLAND



MOST HEARTILY WE BESEECH THEE with thy favor to behold our most gracious Sovereign Lord King George, and to replenish him with the grace of thy Holy Spirit”—the minister paused to draw breath—“and bless our gracious Queen Charlotte, their Royal Highnesses George Prince of Wales, the Princess Dowager of Wales, and all the Royal Family . . .”

The reverend had so much beseeching to do for the royal family, I thought we'd be stuck in church for a week. Trinity was an Anglican church, filled with prayers for England, burning incense, and ministers in fancy dress. It discommodated me some to attend, but Madam gave me no choice. At home we went to the Congregational church, with ten pews, windows that looked out on the ocean, and a preacher who always wore black. I liked it better. Incense made me sneeze.

"We humbly beseech . . ."

They did a pack of beseeching at Trinity. The church was more than half-empty compared to the first Sunday Madam brought us, what with so many folks melting into the countryside, like Master Lockton. Martha Washington and her ladies were north on the island and those left in the pews were Loyalist. This made matters easier for the reverend, who could pray the way he wanted without worry of insulting men who owned the rebel cannons.

Ruth bounced her cornhusk doll on her lap and flew it through the air. Some folk grumbled about servants and slaves being forced to sit in the upstairs gallery. To my mind, being in the upstairs meant we were closer to God, and our prayers got there first. Besides, nobody upstairs fussed when Ruth played on the floor.

"Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers—"

I beseech thee, O Lord, by Thy great mercy take us home, by the hand of Colonel Regan, take us home, in all Thy glory, take us home, ad astra, ad astra, ad astra . . .

Ruth tugged on my skirt. It was time to stand up again and pray. Below us, Madam leaned against the sturdy figure of Lady Seymour, who had come to the house early and forced Madam out of bed and into a Sunday dress. She covered the bruises still visible on Madam's face with a thick white layer of Molyneux's Italian Paste and told her she must not show weakness.

We sat down again. Up. Down. Up. Down. Yon minister could never make up his mind. My belly grumbled. Good thing the service was drawing to a close. Just a little more beseeching, a few amens, and we'd head home for cold pigeon pie and sour pickles.

Ruth's fingers drifted to her nose for some unsightly digging. As I reached for her hand, the front door of the church slammed open with a thud. The reverend near fainted with surprise.

A young boy ran halfway down the center aisle. "Beggin' pardon, Reverend," he shouted, "but the British have sailed into the harbor!"

The British army was hardly marching down Wall Street, but ten ships had docked downriver on Staten Island. Ruth and me followed behind Madam and Lady Seymour as we strode with the crowd to the Battery as fast as our skirts would allow.

Madam quivered with excitement but was wise enough not to say a word, for we found ourselves in a crowd of rebels furious about the arrival of King George's boys. Someone fired a cannon a stone's throw from where we stood. Gunpowder smoke drifted across the crowd as soldiers started running every which a'way, carrying on about "orders this" and "orders that." Someone fired a musket, and a woman shrieked. Two more muskets blasted. Rough voices commanded the firing to cease. Mothers chased after their children. Five men in frontier leggings and leather shirts sprinted past us, rifles at the ready.

Should I grab Ruth and run for the barracks? Could we slip away to sanctuary in the commotion? I looked for Colonel Regan but saw him not. None of the men were familiar to me. Had I waited too long?

The cannons fired once more, then fell silent. The ships were too far away to be hit, and the cannonballs fell into the river. Another musket cracked fire, but this was more

distant. The crowd had settled some, and soldiers were lining up in orderly fashion, thanks to their barking officers.

"Everyone please disperse," shouted a broad-shouldered man in a crisp blue coat and a sleek, freshly powdered wig. "There is no danger here. Go about your business."

"Come now," Madam said. "We will leave this rabble."

She walked away with Lady Seymour. I went to follow them, but Ruth would not move. She stood rooted to the ground, trembling against my leg as if a gale were blowing.

"Ruthie?" I patted her back. "It's over now. The noise is gone, no more bangs." I reached to pry her fingers from me. They were stiff and shaking. She was in the grip of a fit, a small one. *Oh Lord, I beseech thee . . .*

Madam had stopped and was watching us. "Come along, girl," she snapped. "Turn your sister loose and run ahead to prepare the meal."

Ruth quivered, her teeth chattering in her head.

"She's a wee bit frightened, ma'am," I explained. "Never heard a cannon go off before."

"Neither have I," added Lady Seymour. "She'll feel better once she starts to walk."

Please, Lord. "Hear what Missus said, Ruth? Walking is the best thing." *Please keep her on her feet. Please make it stop.* "We've work to do, baby girl." My voice was as false as my smile. "Please."

I stepped forward, pushing Ruth ahead as I went. The trembling stopped, but her body went limp. I picked her up and settled her on my hip, her head on my shoulder as if she had fallen asleep.

Lady Seymour frowned in concern. "Is she poorly?"

Madam cast a suspicious eye at us.

"No, ma'am," I lied. "Just tired."

"She is not suffering her particular ailment, is she?" Madam asked, her voice cutting like a blade.

"No, ma'am," I lied again. "She helped carry out the ashes this morning, and it tired her."

Madam glared a moment longer.

Lady Seymour stepped in front of Madam. "The heat affects small children more than most. Make sure your sister drinks some water before any more chores."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am." I bobbed a clumsy curtsy and walked as fast as I could with the limp burden in my arms, beseeching with every step.

British ships continued to sail up the river all the day and all the night. Madam set us to polishing the silver in the hope that we'd soon be serving dinner to the British high command. On Monday morning Becky sent me to the washerwoman with a giant basket of dirty tablecloths and serviettes. So many ships had arrived by then—hundreds, folks said, with thousands of soldiers—that we could see the patches of white sail far down the harbor.

The washerwoman's home stood empty. A neighbor said she had fled at first light, terrified at the thought of invasion.

She wasn't the only one.

I carried the basket of linen back to the house on Wall Street, put a pot of water over the fire, and gathered the soap and the scrubbing board. Becky was off in search of a seamstress, so Ruth helped me haul the water to the washtub in the backyard. I gave her a small bucket and sliver of soap and she got to work washing a pair of stockings and singing

to herself. She showed no ill effects of the small fit at the Battery. It had been a brief shower, not a thunderstorm.

As I scrubbed, my mind ran in circles, like a dog chasing its tail. I should take Ruth and march down to the Battery. I should demand payment for helping with the arrests. No. No demands. I should politely ask the colonel to fulfill his promise, as a gentleman would. I should write a letter to the general. I should beg Curzon to beg Mr. Bellingham to beg whoever to get us out.

I flopped the tablecloth into the rinse tub and started in on a shift that had gotten mixed in with the table linens. Ruth dropped her stockings in the rinse bucket and loaded her bucket with rocks.

"We don't wash rocks, Ruth," I explained.

"But they dirty," she said.

"That is a truth," I said. The rocks were dirty and washing them kept her calm and away from Madam. "Scrub away, lass."

There was no use in begging anyone. The chances of them listening to me were as good as a snowball's chance in the Devil's bake oven.

I reached for the soap as Ruth flung her half-washed rocks, now muddy, not dirty, into the rinsing tub with the clean tablecloth. Before I could scold her, the back door slammed. I saw the flash of a yellow gown by the kitchen window. Madam had been watching us, no doubt displeased that Ruth was washing rocks with the tablecloths.


We must escape. Soon.

CHAPTER XX

*Tuesday, July 2-
Tuesday, July 9, 1776*

. . . THE CONGRESS HAVE JUDGED IT NECESSARY TO
DISSOLVE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GREAT BRITAIN AND
THE AMERICAN COLONIES, AND TO DECLARE THEM FREE
AND INDEPENDENT STATES; AS YOU WILL PERCEIVE BY THE
ENCLOSED DECLARATION. . . . I AM DIRECTED . . . TO
REQUEST YOU HAVE IT PROCLAIMED AT THE HEAD OF THE
ARMY, IN THE WAY YOU SHALL THINK MOST PROPER.

—LETTER FROM JOHN HANCOCK,
PRESIDENT OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS,
TO GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON

HAT WEEK UNSPOOLED SLOWLY WITH
hot days and muggy, breathless nights. Militia units from
the surrounding colonies piled into the city. Ordinary folk
skedaddled out of it as fast as their horse or feet would
carry them. The extra soldiers were not the cleanest sort, or
maybe they were too busy drilling and making gunpowder
cartridges to wash. Whatever the cause, New York soon
smelled like a garbage pit mixed with a fresh mountain of
manure. The stench cooked under the midsummer sun.

Madam's moods changed with the tide. One moment she
floated on clouds of fancy, imagining her grand life once
the British beat the rebels. Next she fell into melancholy,

grumbling about the lazy British commanders floating at anchor off Staten Island, observing New York through long spyglasses but making no move to invade. She now carried with her a brocade pouch suspended from a red satin cord. Within the pouch lay a green flask filled with a calming elixir prescribed by the doctor. He advised her to drink from it whenever the need arose. She also took to walking around the house in her stocking feet, trying to catch me unawares as I scrubbed or dusted or polished, often with Ruth at my side. She said nothing during these encounters but watched us with hungry hawk eyes. It unnerved me.

The week after Hickey's hanging, Becky suffered a mild attack of the ague that had befallen so many soldiers. She grew pale and sweaty but did not require purging or leeches. In her stead, I went to the market. Our needs were fewer now that we no longer fed the master and his companions. 'Twas a good thing, for farmers were afeard to come into the city, and there was less to choose from. More people fled every day, including the wives of General Washington and Colonel Knox and Brigadier Greene, her that folks said was such a big flirt.

I searched for Curzon every day, but Bellingham's affairs kept him out of sight. I was afraid to seek out Colonel Regan, afraid that word would get back to Madam and our lives be put in jeopardy.

Ten days after the British flooded the river with their ships, news that the Congress had declared independence arrived in New York. The Declaration was read to the troops from the steps of City Hall. The men cheered so loud it seemed to shake the whole island. I hurried from the egg seller to see the cause of the commotion.

The cheering men danced and marched down Broadway,

tossing their hats into the air and shouting across the river at the silent ships of England. They gathered into a mob on the Bowling Green around the massive statue of King George III. I stayed at the edge of the crowd, hoping for a glimpse of Curzon or a soldier familiar from my visit to the Battery.

The King was mounted on his horse, and the horse mounted on a white marble pedestal that rose to the height of three men standing one atop the other. Both the horse and the man were fashioned larger than could be possible, but I supposed that was the way of kings. They were both made of gold that sometimes glittered in the sunlight but dulled when the clouds interfered.

Ropes appeared as if conjured, thick ropes used for tying ships to the docks. The men cheered louder and worked together to throw the ropes over the King and his horse and tie them tightly.

"One, two, three, heave! One, two, three, heave!"

The men strained their arms and backs. Boys on the edge of the crowd jumped up and down. Common folk stood froze at the sight of a king being pulled down by the strength of the men working together.

"One, two, three, HEAVE!"

The statue toppled, slowly at first, then gaining speed as the weight fell from the sky to the ground. The men scrambled out the way, no one wishing to be crushed by a fallen king. As it crashed, they shouted even louder and swarmed over the thing. Axes were called for and rushed out of workshops and up from the barracks. A half-dozen men took to chopping the King and his steed to bits.

I inched closer. How could they be chopping through a statue with simple axes? A piece of tail broke off, and

a soldier held it up for all to see. The King was not made of gold, but of soft lead, covered with gilt paint. The crowd shouted again as another soldier lifted the King's head freshly removed from his neck. A fife-and-drum corps started playing just beyond the mob, piping out the song usually heard during a tar-and-feathering party.

The men made short work of King George. When the statue was reduced into pieces that could be easily carted off, they did just that. The plan was to melt down all the lead into bullets.

"We'll fire Majesty at the redcoats!" joked a man with a booming voice.

"Aye," said his companion, shouldering an axe. "Emanations from Leaden George will make deep impressions on the enemy!"

As the crowd marched off to make bullets and celebrate liberty and independence in the taverns, I realized dark was fast falling, and I had tarried overly long. I picked up a sliver of lead that lay in the street. It was fringed with gilt; my own piece of majesty. *Tyrants beware*, I thought as I put it in my pocket.

I was surprised to see the front parlor windows alight when I walked down Wall Street.

"Is the master back?" I asked Becky. She was dozing in the chair by the kitchen fire with a red-checked shawl around her shoulders, still worn down from her illness.

Becky yawned and stretched. "Far from it. Madam paid a call on the reverend's wife after supper. Came home with high color in her cheeks and a bee in her bonnet. 'Dress the child,' she says. 'Make sure both of the girls eat something nourishing and sweet.'"

"Did she fall and hit her head?" I asked, setting down the basket of eggs.

Becky laughed. "I think the Missus Reverend served her a dose of Scripture, the hard kind. Madam says, 'I've been too harsh on my servants. I must mend my ways or the Lord will punish me.'"

I was confuddled. "She's being kind to Ruth again?"

Becky stood slowly, wincing from the aches in her bones. "Surely so. Ruth lit up like a lantern when she saw them fancy clothes again. Promised to be quiet as ever. Made short work of the gingerbread Madam baked, too."

This was too much. I sat down at the table. "Madam baked?"

"She's a fair hand in the kitchen when she puts her mind to it. Left the dishes for yours truly, but the cake was tasty. Those two pieces are for you. She was most firm about it." She stopped to cough up what sounded like a large, wet worm from her throat. "She cooked up sweet milk for you, too, with nutmeg, cinnamon, and sugar. Said you was to have some with your gingerbread."

I sniffed the pitcher. It smelled good enough. "Did you have any?"

"Not with this cough. Milk would stop up my lungs."

I looked around the kitchen. "Where's Ruth now?"

Becky unpinned her apron and folded it, then tied on her bonnet, preparing to go home. "Madam got it in her head to play cards this eve. Has two companions in with her, the missus Drinkwater and her daughter, the one who's to marry some sort of lord or duke or somesuch. Ruth is in with them. She was right cheered after the cake and milk."

"Should I take anything in?"

"I just come from there. Madam was most definite: 'Tell Sal to enjoy her cake and a night off. She has worked hard these weeks and could do with a good night's sleep.'"

"She called me Sal instead of Girl?" I asked. "And you are full certain she didn't hit her head today."

Becky laughed, and the laugh caught in her throat and bubbled into a cough. "Look here. She's likely to turn back into a sour old cow by breakfast, so I say have a good sit-down and enjoy a little peace."

I poured a mug of the milk. "Huzzah for the reverend's wife."

I wanted to savor the gingerbread bite by bite and sip the milk slowly, but I couldn't help myself. The mug was drained and the plate empty soon after Becky left. The milk was the sweetest thing I had ever tasted, the spices so thick I could near chew them. No wonder Ruth was cheered by it.

I washed up my dishes, tidied the kitchen, and found myself with idle hands. A rare event, indeed. I might could sneak into the library and borrow that *Crusoe* book. I could read by the fire with a mending basket nearby to slip the book into should Madam approach.

That seemed a fine plan. But first I wanted to shed my bodice; it pinched something awful under my arms. I felt my way down the cellar stairs with my toes and heard the sound of laughter from Madam's company. I yawned. When would they leave? And what sort of ladies came to call this late?

I removed my bodice and hung it on a nail. The pallet looked soothing and cool, and the thought of climbing the stairs again made me weary. But I would like to read a

few more pages . . . but I was overly fatigued . . . but Mr. Crusoe was facing all sorts of dangers . . . but . . .

Inbetwixt one thought and the next, I fell asleep.

For that, I shall never forgive myself.

CHAPTER XXI

Wednesday, July 10, 1776

TO BE SOLD AT THE OFFICE OF WILLIAM TONGUE,
BROKER, AT THE HOUSE OF THE LATE MR. WALDRON
NEAR THE EXCHANGE (LOWER END OF BROAD STREET)

THE FOLLOWING GOODS AND MERCHANDISE, VIZ.:

ONE NEGRO WENCH, 22 YEARS OLD, HAS HAD
SMALLPOX, IS A USEFUL DOMESTIC, PRICE 80 £, . . .

ONE NEGRO BOY, 16 YEARS OLD, PRICE 90 £, . . .

ONE NEGRO WENCH, 30 YEARS OLD, WITH OR
WITHOUT HER SON 5 YEARS OLD PRICE 60 OR 80 £.

-ADVERTISEMENT IN THE *NEW YORK GAZETTE*
AND *WEEKLY MERCURY* NEWSPAPER

IN MY DREAM I STOOD ON A SANDY BEACH,
my back to the sea, the moon over my left shoulder. An
enormous map was unrolled at my feet. The roads on it
were marked with velvet black ink, rivers a pearly blue,
mountains a speckled green. It was a map of a country I had
never before seen.

Just as I opened my mouth to call for Ruth, who always
tagged along in my dreams, a thick mist blew over the beach.
The roads on the map twined and twisted round each
other, hesitating, then they rose up off the paper, no longer
roads, but thick eels with amber eyes. They crawled out of the

map, and I feared they would bite me. They pondered me a moment, then slithered down the beach and into the water.

I awoke with a start and flung aside the blanket, looking for the eels. There were none there, nor in the potato bin. Ruth wasn't there, neither, and her side of our pallet was cold. She was gone to the privy, no doubt. I needed to visit the same place.

The sun was already in the trees when I stepped outside. How had I slept so late?

"Ruth?" I called, walking toward the little building. My nose wrinkled. The Locktons would soon need to dig a new privy hole.

"Ruth?" I knocked on the door and it swung open.

The seat was empty, with a few flies buzzing in the stench. Two blue jays in the sycamore tree called loudly. There was the distant sound of officers shouting orders on Broadway and the clatter of cart wheels. But no Ruth.

I made quick work of looking in the yard. The back entry to the stables was locked, she could not have gone out that way. The gate to the street was closed, too, and the latch too high for Ruth to reach. Had Madam already dressed her, taken her on a call?

A thought slid through me, quick and slimy as a cold eel.

I ran for the kitchen door. "Becky? Becky!"

She came out of the pantry as I flew through the door.

"Where's Ruth?"

"Oh." Becky looked down at the worn tips of her shoes, then turned away from me. Her eyes were puddled up and red rimmed.

"I can't find her," I said. "She was gone when I woke. Have you seen her?"

Becky took the jar of flour down from the shelf.

"You know where she is, don't you?"

She removed the lid and stuck the scoop into the flour.

"Tell me!"

Becky shook her head from side to side. "I should have started this bread earlier," she said, pouring the flour into the bowl. "The wet air will ruin the loaves, that's my concern. I should have stayed and baked in the cool of the night." She dabbed her eyes on her sleeve and measured out another scoop of flour. "But Madam sent me home. Said she wanted a quiet house last night. No baking."

She looked at me over her shoulder. The eel squeezed out all my air.

"No," I said.

"I wouldn't have gone if I'd known—"

"No, no, no." I backed away, shaking my head. "She didn't. She wouldn't. No."

"Isabel, don't." Becky followed me down the hall, trying to control her voice. "It won't change anything. What's done is done."

"Ruth!" I screamed up the staircase.

"Stop, Isabel!" Becky grabbed my arm and pulled me backward, clamping a flour-covered hand over my mouth. "You can't storm around here like a banshee. Madam will beat you bloody. Me too."

I pushed her hand away and wiped off the flour. "Where is she? What did they do to her?"

"She's gone," Becky said.

"Gone?" I repeated. "Gone where?"

Becky studied her shoes again. "Sold."

I stopped hearing right. No more birds or buzzing flies or grandfather clock marking time.

"Sold?" I repeated. "No, she's not. They didn't."

Becky's eyes filled again. "Yes," she said quietly. "She did."

I paced the hall. "No. I slept too heavy last night. Didn't notice when she woke. She wandered outside. We need to find her. She could be lost, could have taken ill and fallen."

Becky watched me go to and fro. "The sweet milk Madam made up? I figure it contained a sleep potion, knocked you out cold so they could spirit her away. I am dreadful, powerful sorry, but they sold her away from you."

It made no sense. I would have known. I would have woken up, fought them off, killed whoever tried to take her from me. I took care of Ruth. I promised Momma I always would.

Becky's face shrank down to the size of a coin. It sounded like she spoke through a long wooden pipe. "Madam was returning in the carriage when I arrived this morn," she said. "Told me not to worry about the milk spoiling no more, that Ruth was headed to Nevis, sold to a physician's family."

I shook my head, trying to clear my brainpan. "Where's Nevis? How do I get there?"

Becky's face grew larger. "You need to sit down. I'll get a cloth for your head. This has been a right shock to you."

"Where's Nevis?" My voice echoed off the walls.

"West Indies," Becky muttered.

"The islands?" All of Momma's terrible stories of slave life in the islands flooded back. "Ruth can't cut cane! She'll die! She'll die in a day!" My feet started for the front door.

"Wait!" Becky grabbed my arm to prevent me from

running off. "I questioned Madam about that very fact, questioned her right close, I did. 'Not to cut cane,' said she, 'but to be a house maid, in a fine house. A physician's house, so they'll care for her should she fall.'"

"She's lying," I said. "She's a spiteful, hateful liar."

A door opened on the second floor. "Becky?" Madam asked. "Has someone come to call?"

"No, ma'am," Becky said in a false, high voice.

Madam came down the stairs, one hand on the railing, the other holding a sheet of paper, half-covered with writing. The paintings of her dead ancestors on the wall watched her. "I do not appreciate interruptions when I am communicating with my husband," she said. "What is the matter here?"

"Nothing, m-ma'am," Becky stuttered. "I was giving the girl her directions for the morning."

Madam looked down without seeing me; she looked at my face, my kerchief, my shift neatly tucked into my skirt, looked at my shoes pinching my feet, looked at my hands that were stronger than hers. She did not look into my eyes, did not see the lion inside. She did not see the me of me, the Isabel.

I saw her. I saw all the way down to her withered soul.

I walked up two steps. "Did you sell Ruth?"

"You will not address me in that insolent manner." Her voice shook a little.

Becky wrung her hands. "Come, Isabel. You need to peel the potatoes. Would Madam like some tea or coffee?"

I took another step up. "Answer me, you miserable cow. Did you sell my sister?"

Madam backed up a step. Her letter fluttered to the bottom of the stairs. Her ancestors hung silent. "Stay away from me," she said. "Get back to the kitchen."

"She is five years old." I rose another step. "She is a baby, and you sold her away from me."

She swallowed hard. Her hands quivered.

I wanted to grab her by the hair and throw her down the stairs, throw her out a window, beat her face with my fists. I wanted her blood to splash the paintings, soak the wall and the wooden stairs.

"Isabel," Becky warned.

The sunlight coming through the window was rosy red. I took the next step. I was almost close enough to reach her.

"Isabel," Becky tried again.

"One more step and I can have you hung," Madam whispered.

I held my breath. There was a click of metal on metal.

Becky had opened the front door wide. A hot wind from the street rose up the stairs, fluttering our skirts and causing me to turn. Madam grabbed a painting from the wall and threw it down on my head. I raised my arm too late and the frame crashed into me. The blow made me addlebrained and weakened my knees. Madam ran upstairs, screaming like a house afire.

Becky dragged me down the steps and shoved me toward the open door. "Run!" she screamed.

I ran out the front door for the first time.

People walking under the shade of the sycamores across the street paused at the sight of a slave running away from a mansion where a woman was screaming. A man called after me, "You there! Girl!"

I ran straight down Wall. Didn't worry about escaping notice of soldiers or strangers, just flew over the cobblestones as fast as I could. The red fog slowly rolled out of my mind. There were more shouts behind me, and people turning to

stare at the cause of the commotion. I didn't dare take the time to turn around. Past City Hall, cross Broadway. I leapt over the remains of a sentry fire, bumped into a gray-bearded soldier wearing a homespun shirt, and startled a man carrying two live hens by the feet. One of the hens broke free in an explosion of feathers. The man shook his fist and called out for someone to stop me. I ducked down one street after another, trying to find a way to the river, but the army had erected barricades at the ends of most of the roads to keep out the British.

I was penned in.

The shouts behind me grew louder and closer.

I darted down an alley, turned blindly toward the right, and ran smack into the barrel chest of a giant.

"Whoa there, young filly," a deep voice boomed. "Don't want to go swimming in the river, do you?"

I had run straight into a blacksmith.

"Please, sir," I said.

His enormous hands released me and I looked over my shoulder.

"Looking to get away from someone, I suspect," the blacksmith said. Behind him billowed the coal smoke from the forge. The air was filled with the hot tang of metal and sweat.

"You're hurt, child," the blacksmith said. "In need of some help?"

I wanted to spill out my story and to trust he could advise me, but he was a stranger, they were all strangers and Ruth was gone and there was blood on my forehead from the painting Madam threw at me and she was going to see me hung and I'd never be able to rescue Ruth and she would be all alone and . . .

"Tell them I went north," I gasped as I picked up my skirts and darted around the forge to the south.

The blacksmith called after me, but his words were lost in the din of the soldiers and the sailors who cluttered my path. The wind off the river cooled my face and helped with my decision. I would turn myself over to the rebels. I had helped them fair and square. Now it was their turn.

We were all fighting for liberty.

"Ad astra!" I shouted. The words were not as magic as I had hoped, but the door eventually opened.

Colonel Regan was sitting in a chair, a white cloth around his neck, his face covered with foamy soap and his eyes closed. Behind him stood a barber, a slave, I assumed because of his African skin, with grizzled hair and an apron. On the table beside him stood a bowl of steaming water, a leather strop for blades, and a cup of lather with a brush in it. He turned the colonel's chin with one finger, then delicately shaved away a stripe of soap with a razor.

"By your leave, sir," said the sentry.

"I am busy," the colonel said, without opening his eyes.

"This girl knew the password, insisted on seeing you," the sentry continued.

The barber scraped off another stripe of soap and whiskers. "Take her to Jamison," the colonel said.

"No," I said.

The barber froze in midshave, and the colonel opened his eyes.

"Please, sir, you must help me," I said quickly. "As I once

helped you. She sold my sister. Please, sir, I'll do anything, just find Ruth, she's so small and—"

The door behind us opened. Two more sentries filed in, followed by Madam Lockton, breathing hard, and a tall gentleman I'd not seen before. My sentry waved me farther into the room so that the newcomers might all fit. I worked my way toward an open window.

"What is the meaning of this?" the colonel asked wearily.

Madam's voice cracked across the room. "Are you the man in charge?"

The colonel sighed deeply, waved off the barber, and stood up, his face still half-covered with soap. "Colonel Thomas Regan at your service, ma'am." He bowed stiffly from the waist. "How can I be of service?"

"You have stolen my property," Madam announced.

"We have several clerks assigned to record civilian concerns. My sergeant will show you—"

"I will not speak with subordinates or grubby clerks. That chit of a girl belongs to me, Colonel. She has committed terrible crimes and must be punished. I demand you return her to me."

The barber rinsed the razor in the water bowl.

Regan looked from Madam to me and back again. "What did she do?"

"She abused me most violently, sir."

The colonel put out his hand and the barber placed a clean towel in it. "Yet it is the girl with blood on her face," the colonel said, wiping away the soap from his chin and cheeks.

Madam's eyes narrowed. "Give her to me."

The sentries shifted their boots on the floor; one cleared

his throat. The gentleman who accompanied Madam stepped forward. "The law is quite clear on this matter, sir. None of us want to live in a world where servants rule their masters. Both the Parliament and the Congress give Madam Lockton rule over her slave."

A flock of crows swooped past the window. A three-masted ship, sails unfurled, pushed down the river. Ruth could be on it. Or she was already at sea, in a dark hold with no candles. Who would feed her? Who would hold her when she shook?

"The girl says you've sold her sister," Colonel Regan said.

"Do you mean to purchase Sal for the army?" Madam asked. "I'm sure she'd make a passing fine washwoman. I shall expect full payment, in cash."

He handed the towel back to the barber. "A washwoman is the one thing I don't need right now. If you had any manservants capable of ditch digging, I'd take you up on the offer, but . . ." He paused and shook his head.

I looked out the window again. One crow had come back. It landed on a carcass near the water's edge—a dead dog or a rat. The crow pecked at the meat of the thing, snatched a pink strip in his beak, and tugged until the piece broke away. He beat his wings once, twice, and flew up in the air high enough to catch a breeze that rode him out over the water.

Another man had entered the room. The night of my first visit to the fort he had worn his uniform coat over his nightshirt. Now his coat was properly buttoned and his breeches tucked into his boots.

"Thomas, we cannot interfere," he said. "This girl is not our concern. And you are late. We dare not keep him waiting."

I looked out the window at the carcass. "Please, sir," I said in a quiet voice. "Let me stay."

Colonel Regan fastened his collar without looking at me. "The law binds my hands and my actions. You must return with your mistress," he said, concentrating on his task. "Even during time of war, we must follow the rules of propriety and civilization."

With that, the matter was concluded. Madam turned to thank the man who aided her. The sentries slipped into the hall. Colonel Regan picked up his hat from the table and set it on his head.

As I stepped toward the window, the barber studied me close. He shook his head once from side to side, just as Jenny had back in Rhode Island, one hundred years ago. Bad advice on both occasions.

I bolted for the open window.


I almost made it.

CHAPTER XXII

*Wednesday, July 10-
Monday, July 15, 1776*

BUT AS IT IS, WE HAVE THE WOLF BY THE EAR, AND WE CAN NEITHER HOLD HIM, NOR SAFELY LET HIM GO. JUSTICE IS IN ONE SCALE, AND SELF-PRESERVATION IN THE OTHER.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, WRITING ABOUT SLAVERY

HEN I WOKE, THE BARREL OF A GUN was stuck up underneath my chin.

Men-voices shouted. Boots stomped. A rain of hands grabbed at me, countless bodies, smelly breath, unwashed feet. My head felt cracked in three pieces.

A woman shrieked and shrieked; she was a crow shattering the air with her harsh calls. I moved, not by my own devices. My toes dragged in the dirt. They tried to pull my arms from my body, ripping the arms off a cloth doll. They dragged me from one place to a second place.

More shouts. More shrieks and whistles and calls, rumbling thundervoices.

They dragged me from the second place to the third place, every voice sowing the wind, all things summoning the whirlwind that would sweep us all away to drown in the deepest sea.

My thoughts would not line up like good soldiers. They

swarmed afield and fled, chasing the blood that dripped from my head and stained my shift. My eyes were swold up and hard to see through. Someone had stolen a tooth or two.

They tied my hands together with prickly rope. They tied the rope to the back of a cart. They tied a horse to the front of the cart. The horse lifted one tired hoof after another and dragged the cart, and the cart dragged me up the broad street where people smiled and laughed and pointed. My eyes cast down. The cobblestones mocked too.

I tried to figure the whos and the whys of the matter, but my own name escaped me, and I knew only the pain in my head and the iron taste of lost teeth. My remembery broke into bits when they beat my head.

They took me to the dungeon under City Hall to await my trial. The jailer locked me in a cell with a toothless madwoman who huddled in the corner and spat at me. She pulled the hairs from her head and dropped them to the mud. She was near bald.

At sunset, the jailer came back with a cup of water and a piece of foul pork half the size of my hand. Dirty men in the other cells fought each other all night long.

On the second day we heard shouts and screams from the world above us, then came the boom and roar of cannons, followed by the crack of musket fire, and the sounds of hundreds of boots shaking the earth. Some prisoners hollered in panic and tried to pull their chains from the stone walls. The madwoman in my cell laughed and laughed, slapping her skirts.

At last the noise above ceased. The jailers threw buckets of cold water on the men who had lost their senses in fear.

They said for us to shut our gobs. The British had sailed their war ships up the North River and had fired on the town, but now all danger was past. Anyone who continued to blubber would feel the lash.

I said not a word.

The second night was same as the first, filled with moans and muttering, scratching, and the sound of teeth and claw. It rained. Water pooled on the floor and soaked through my shoes. Rats wandered in and out of the cells, squeezing their fat bottoms through the bars. I dared not sleep for fear they would bite me. The madwoman and the rats stayed in the corner, red eyes waiting for me all night long.

On the third morning, the jailer unlocked my cell and motioned for me to follow him. The madwoman laughed again.

He took me up the stairs to the courtroom. It was as big as the inside of a church, with the same white walls and dark wood. The windows were of clear glass, grimy with neglect. They stood me behind a rail. Kept my hands tied. I shook with fever and hunger.

"Oyez, oyez, oyez," called a man in the shadows. He said more, but his words slurred together.

A tall man wearing black robes and a long wig sat at a table that was raised on a platform. He was a judge. This was a court. My head was broke and my sister was stole and I was lost.

The woman with the crow voice, her that threw the picture at me, stood up. I raised my head to look at her. Someone poked a stick into my ribs, hard, and hissed at me. I lowered my eyes.

Voices buzzed and blurred into words I did not understand. Lockton, I finally remembered. Lockton, Madam Lockton, her that bought us, her that stole Ruth away. I kept my head down, but lifted my eyes, tho' they pained me. The pain was good. It drew back the curtains of my mind and forced me to pay attention.

Madam was pretending to cry into her lace handkerchief. ". . . and I am but a poor woman, alone, my husband having fled for reasons I cannot comprehend. I plead with Your Honor to assist me in the correct punishment of this girl."

The judge frowned and asked questions of two officers who stood near Madam. I wanted to ask about Ruth, and where the blood on my shift came from, and who broke my teeth, but I was the only person in the room whose hands were tied, so I kept silent. Questions were asked of the incident. Lies were given as answers.

Finally the judge said, "Where is the housekeeper who saw this crime, Missus Lockton?"

"Becky is indisposed, sir," Madam answered. "She suffers the ague."

"Are there no other witnesses to the events you describe?"

A stranger stood up in the back of the room. "I was passing in the street, Your Honor," he said. "I heard the commotion, saw the girl fleeing, and observed the destruction myself."

"There are several other people of standing willing to testify, Your Honor," Madam added. Her tears had mysteriously vanished.

The judge used the end of his quill to scratch at an itch under his wig. "It is clear that this slave has violated the person of her master, destroyed valuable property, and attempted to run away, all contrary to the laws of our colony."

"State, Your Honor," reminded the lawyer. "We are a state, now. Independence and all that."

The judge rolled his eyes. "Colony. State. Who knows what we will be next?" He sighed deeply. "No matter. This girl's crimes of insolence, property destruction, and running away from her rightful owner are not devious enough to warrant a sentence of death. Do you have any wishes as to the punishment that I should consider, Missus Lockton?"

Madam sighed deeply, like my behavior caused her great sadness. "She is a willful girl, Your Honor, with numerous character defects. I believe a permanent reminder of this day might prove the appropriate remedy."

Her words stuck in the air, like flies caught in a spider's web. I could make no sense of them. I could make no sense of anything.

The judge scratched at his wig with fresh vigor. "You wanted her branded then? Twenty strokes of the lash would be more in keeping with her crimes."

"We are now led by men from Virginia, I am told," she said, "land of my birth. I assure Your Honor that in Virginia, we do not tolerate the rebellion of slaves."

The judge nodded. "Once kindled, rebellion can spread like wildfire. Do you want your husband's initials used?"

Madam shot a sideways glance at me. "I prefer the girl branded with the letter *I* for 'Insolence.' It will alert people to her tendencies and serve as a reminder of her weakness."

The judge picked up his gavel. "So be it. Sal Lockton, it is the order of this court that you be branded on your right cheek with the letter of *I* in punishment for your crimes against your lady mistress."

Crack! The gavel cracked on the block of wood. "Next case."