CHAPTER XXIII

Monday, July 15, 1776

I ALSO HAVE BEEN WHIPPED MANY A TIME ON MY NAKED SKIN, AND SOMETIMES TILL THE BLOOD HAS RUN DOWN OVER MY WAISTBAND; BUT THE GREATEST GRIEF I THEN HAD WAS TO SEE THEM WHIP MY MOTHER, AND TO HEAR HER, ON HER KNEES, BEGGING FOR MERCY . . .
—REV. DAVID GEORGE, ON HIS CHILDHOOD AS A SLAVE

A MAN PULLED ME BY MY ROPE outside to the courtyard. After two days in the dungeon, the noonday sun scalded my eyes. I stumbled but did not fall. The man led me to the stocks, then untied my hands and pointed. I laid my head and hands in the crescents carved into the wood. He lowered the top board, pinning me in place, and secured the two pieces together with a large padlock.

A brazier filled with hot coals set on the ground a few lengths in front of me. A second man stuck two branding irons into the metal basket to heat them up.

My knees turned to water. I sagged against the wood.

"Stand up, girl, or you'll choke yourself," growled the man locked into the stocks to my left. I couldn't turn my head enough to see him, but his voice was rough and scarred. "Whatever you do, don't scream," he continued. "That's what they want to hear."

I did not answer him but forced my knees to hold me up.

The wood locked around my neck was rough and splintering. My hands were soon without sensation, my neck and arms pricked a hundredfold by pitchforks. Two men were housed in the iron cage next to City Hall. One lay on the ground, asleep or dead. The second, his skin burned by the sun and peeling and missing his left ear, stared back at me blankly.

A court official, his coat covered with yellow dust, arrived with a man who wore a leather apron. He set to work pumping a hand-bellows to increase the heat under the branding irons. The bellows wheezed in and out while the sun rose higher in the sky.

It had rained in the night. The mud puddles scattered around the yard gave off steam like cauldrons coming to boil.

Sweat rolled off my face and fell in great drops to the dirt below. The wind shifted and blew the smoke from the brazier into our faces. I held my breath. In betwixt me and the brazier, dandelions grew in the mud.

The man in the dusty coat pulled one of the branding irons out of the fire. He brought it close to his face and spit on it. The iron sizzled. My companion coughed and cursed the court officials and the judge who had sentenced him.

A crowd had gathered a few lengths on the other side of the brazier, mostly soldiers and tradesmen, with a few women, one carrying a babe in her arms. I thought I saw a boy in a red hat, but when I blinked, he was gone. Men at the front of the crowd called us names and jeered. The sunburned man in the cage yelled back, and soon the courtyard was filled with shouts and filthy language, the kinds of words my mother never wanted me to say or hear. I fought against tears and lost; they fell to the dust in big drops too. If I cried a river, maybe I could swim away, or slip under the water to freedom.

The man in the dusty coat said something to the man in the leather apron. I could not hear him because of the noise of the crowd and the crackling coals and the beat of my heart in my ears. The men walked toward me. The dandelions were lemon yellow with bright green leaves and thick stalks pointing at the sky.

At home in Rhode Island, the corn was tall as Ruth now. The spring lambs would be too heavy to pick up. The new goat, he'd be running headfirst into every fence post. This was a good day to bleach the wool.

The man with the leather apron pinned my head against the wood. He stank of charcoal. I tried to pull away, but my hands and head were locked fast. The splinters chewed on me. Dandelions grew in the mud.

The glowing iron streaked in front of my face like a comet.

The crowd roared.

The man pushed the hot metal against my cheek. It hissed and bubbled. Smoke curled under my nose.

They cooked me.

The man stepped back and pulled the iron away. The fire in my face burned on and on, deep through my flesh, searing my soul. Stars exploded out the top of my head and all of my words and all of my rememberies followed them up to the sun, burning to ash that floated back and settled in the mud.

A few people at the edge of the crowd had fallen silent. They walked away with their heads down.

My momma and poppa appeared from the shadows. They flew to me and wrapped their arms around me and cooled my face with their ghost tears.

Night crept into my soul.

CHAPTER XXIV

Monday, July 15–
Sunday, July 21, 1776

THE TIME IS NOW NEAR AT HAND WHICH MUST PROBABLY DETERMINE, WHETHER AMERICANS ARE TO BE, FREEMEN, OR SLAVES; . . . THE FATE OF UNBORN MILLIONS WILL NOW DEPEND, UNDER GOD, ON THE COURAGE AND CONDUCT OF THIS ARMY. . . . WE HAVE THEREFORE TO RESOLVE TO CONQUER OR DIE.
–MESSAGE ISSUED TO CONTINENTAL TROOPS FROM NEW YORK MILITARY HEADQUARTERS, JULY 1776

THE SPARK KINDLED ON MY CHEEK flared and spread through my entire body. First my eyes, then hair, then down my limbs, until even my toes and fingers felt they were aflame.

Strange scenes swam before me, first in light, then darkness, then light again. I saw Poppa, but no, not truly him; another son of Africa, brow furrowed, his voice deep and strong as a church bell. Momma hovered over me, but her face faded into a woman I did not know, older than Momma, with strands of white in her hair. She talked Jamaica, more song than words, and brought bitter tea to my mouth and made the world smell of lemons and told me to sleep. I asked about Ruth over and over again and tried

to apologize for letting her get stole, but the words were sawdust in my mouth.

Curzon's face floated up in front of me. He told me to shake my lazy bones and get out of bed. He did not turn into a dead person from when I was little. This was a strange comfort.

I blinked and he was gone.

The room was dark again, with starlight in the windows and the sounds of a baby crying, and farther away, the barking of a lonely dog.

Strangest of all was the hive of bees that had taken up residence inside of me. They swarmed under my skin and gave off peculiar vibrations. The buzzing echoed in my brainpan and crowded out my thoughts.

The fire in me burned on and on.

I woke.

I did not know where I was.

This was not Rhode Island, or the hold of a ship, or the Locktons' cellar or any other room in their house. It certainly was not the dungeon under City Hall.

Was this a dream? Had I passed over to the land of the dead? Did ghosts sleep on clean sheets that smelled of mint?

I sat up. The room was warm and quite small but entirely free of dirt, vermin, and mice. The walls were freshly whitewashed and the floor polished. Lace curtains fluttered in the window. Through it I saw the tops of trees. This was an attic room, then. The bed was softer than anything I had ever lain in, properly made up with linens, two pillows, and a coverlet of deep blue. A chair was positioned next to the bed, and a chamber pot, empty, rested under that.

I tried to stand, but the room spun around me and I

plopped back down. I was wearing my shift, still stained with blood at the neckline, but my skirt, stockings, and bodice were not to be seen. Or my shoes. I closed my eyes tight, then opened them again. Same room. Still no shoes.

The door opened and in stepped the funny-talking Dutch maid of Lady Seymour. Her eyes flew open wide, then she slammed the door shut and ran away. A moment later, the door opened again and in walked the Lady herself.

"Ah," she said with faint surprise. "You've come back to us." She poured water from the jug into a mug, handed it to me, and sat on the chair.

I drank down a gulp. My lips were dried and cracked. When I swallowed, it caused my burned cheek to ache. My fingers flew up to check the wound. There was a cloth stuck to my face, with ointment oozing out from the edges.

Lady Seymour leaned forward and gently removed my hand. "Best not to touch it yet," she said. "The healer woman put a comfrey salve on it to draw out the pestilence."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," I croaked. My voice was raspy with lack of use. "But where am I? And why?"

She glanced out the window before she spoke, her mouth set in a grim line. "How best to say this?" she began.

I waited, not sure how to answer.

"You have lain here, near insensible, for six days."

"Six?"

"Do you remember what happened?"

The bees threatened to overtake my mind again, their wings beating quickly. I took another drink of water. "I remember some. The rest is a jumble, ma'am."

"You tried to run away and were beaten in the attempt. You passed two days under City Hall and emerged gravely ill with fever and heaven knows what else. After your trial,

you were branded. I was not aware of these events until after they occurred. Your friend with the red hat came to the door with the news that you were near-dead in the stocks. After consulting with Anne, I arranged to have you transported here."

She looked directly at me. "I further questioned Anne and discovered her version of the events. I find the buying and selling of children most repugnant. Your reaction to the news of your sister, while unfortunate, was understandable, in my view."

Ruth, Ruth, Ruth, buzzed the bees. I blinked back tears. "Do you know who bought my sister, ma'am?"

"I have so far failed to uncover that fact." She stood up and walked to the window. "My nephew's wife is stubborn as well as intemperate."

I clutched at the bedcovers. *I will find her.*

She pulled the lace curtain aside and studied something passing in the street below.

I thought through what she said and found a slim thread of hope to grasp hold of. "Begging pardon again, ma'am, but do I work for you now?"

She let the curtain fall. "I am afraid not. Anne insists that you be returned to her household as soon as you are able. The law supports her position, I fear, and in these unsettled times, there is little remedy."

A wave of weariness crashed over me at the thought of serving Madam again, of allowing her to see her mark upon my face every day.

"I expect you'd like to bathe," Lady Seymour said. "Angelika is preparing the water for you as we speak. You'll find the rest of your clothes in the kitchen." She paused in the doorway. "You miss your parents terribly, don't you?"

"Pardon, ma'am?"

"While you lay in the fever, you spoke of them with great affection, as if they were in the room with us." She hesitated for a moment, then picked up her skirts. "No matter. I will escort you back to Anne's once you've bathed and eaten."

Angelika took the trouble to make the tub full and the water warm and sweet-smelling. I thanked her and she gave me a little smile. She said something in the Dutch speech, which I did not understand. We must have looked two fools, me speaking English, her talking Dutch, both nodding our heads and wishing we had the right words.

My clothes had been washed and ironed, my shoes wiped clean of mud and muck. Even better was the meal of fried eggs, toasted bread, and a fruit compote of pears and apples topped with strawberries and cream. When Angelika set the food in front of me, her eyes went to the fresh scar on my face, rinsed clean of salve and patted dry. She winced at the sight.

As I wiped up the last of my egg with the bread, Lady Seymour entered, followed by her cat. She had changed into a peach-colored crinoline gown and was pulling on lace gloves.

"It is time," she said.

I walked two steps behind her, carrying a basket of daisies and a heart filled with dread. When we arrived at the Locktons' she walked up the front steps without ever looking back at me. She paused before she lifted the door knocker.

"Go on," she said.

I opened the side gate to the garden, entered, and closed it behind me. I heard the knocker booming under Lady Seymour's hand as I walked, slowly, to the back door.

Part II

CHAPTER XXV

Sunday, July 21–Tuesday, August 20, 1776

OUR SLAVES, SIR, COST US MONEY, AND WE BUY THEM TO MAKE MONEY BY THEIR LABOUR. IF THEY ARE SICK, THEY ARE NOT ONLY UNPROFITABLE, BUT EXPENSIVE.
–BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, THE *GAZETTEER AND NEW DAILY ADVERTISER*

MELANCHOLY HELD ME HOSTAGE, and the bees built a hive of sadness in my soul. Dark honey filled up inside me, drowning my thoughts and making it hard to move my eyes and hands. I worked as a puppet trained to scrub and carry, curtsy and nod.

Madam would not look at me. When she had an order to give, it went through Becky, even if we all stood in the same room.

"Tell the girl the hearth needs sweeping."

"Sal," Becky would say, "please sweep the hearth."

"Tell the girl to fetch my fan."

"Sal," Becky would say, "please fetch Madam's ivory fan."

"The library needs dusting. Tell the girl."

"Sal–"

I swept the hearth and fetched the fan. I dusted the library without looking at the books on the shelves or the horse on the

wall. I preferred the chores that took me out of the kitchen, for it was there the bees tricked me into seeing Ruth's ghost playing on the floor, churning butter, or counting out kernels of corn. When her voice whispered to me, I caught fire again, from my toes to my face, and I burned slow, like damp wood.

Becky watched me careful when I turned inside myself like that. She once tried to apologize for what happened. The instant she stopped talking, I forgot what she said.

"Tell the girl there are bedbugs in my chamber."

"Tell the girl to wash the steps."

Curzon came around day after day and talked to me through the boards of the fence.

I did not answer him.

July marched out and August sailed in on a suffocating tide.

British ships continued to land at Staten Island, hundreds of them carrying thousands of soldiers armed with countless guns and bullets. We went two weeks without rain. There were outbreaks of camp fever, smallpox, and dysentery amongst the rebel troops. They turned King's College into a hospital to care for thousands of sick men.

I prayed that Colonel Regan was there. I prayed he would fall ill and die a terrible death for lying to me and betraying me and letting them break my body. Whenever I heard the words "liberty" or "freedom," I wanted to spit in the dust.

The air was steeped in evil during those muggy, pestilent days.

"Tell the girl to sweep the cellar."

When I swept it I found the cobwebs I had saved for Ruth. I threw them into the kitchen fire, along with the mouse carcasses and rotted potatoes.

"Tell the girl the milk has soured."

'Twas left in the sun on purpose.

The British finally made a move toward the end of August, rowing half their army across to the Long Island in flat-bottomed boats. Becky convinced Madam to send me to market on my own again because she was afraid to go, what with battle due to break out any minute.

Madam agreed. She said my mark would ensure I stayed out of trouble.

As commanded, I purchased two packets of straight pins, a piece of lace, and a basket of turnip greens. The shopkeepers and other folks looked at my face and saw only the angry red scar, just starting to fade at the edges. They did not see the girl hidden behind it.

Curzon approached me on Pearl Street and tried to talk.

I walked away from him and carried the purchases back to Madam's house, wings abuzz in my ears.

Hours later, as I ate my dinner of greens and cornbread with molasses, Becky entered the kitchen with a scowl.

"That Curzon boy, the one with the hat, he's in front of the house again," she said. "You must tell him to leave."

I lifted my eyes from my plate. "Why?"

"Because Madam wants him arrested, and I don't want trouble, that's why," Becky snapped.

I did not move.

"Do you want his beating on your conscience?" she continued.

I chewed the last of the cornbread, then wiped my fingers and stood up.

"Tell him to stay away," she said as I set my plate in the washing-up tub. "Blasted fool doesn't know what's good for him."

When I lifted the latch of the garden gate, Curzon appeared, mouth a'flapping. "Finally! We've much to talk about."

"Go away," I said.

He glanced up and down the empty street. "Look, I'm sorry. The colonel . . . I thought sure he would help." He stopped and leaned close to my face. "You don't look right. Camp fever?"

My tongue felt the ragged edge of a broken tooth. "I'm fine."

He dropped his eyes to the ground. "Sorry's not enough, but . . . I am. Sorry. About all of it."

I picked at a splinter of wood on the gate. There was something changed about him, but I could not figure it. Many things looked different since they burned me up. "Not your concern," I said.

"'Tis so," he said. "I've asked about your sister. A sailor I know thinks she was put on a ship to Halifax."

"No. They sent her to Nevis."

He opened his mouth but could not find any words.

"Go away," I said, "or they'll arrest you. Madam said."

"Has she received any letters from Lockton?"

The question hit me like a bucket of cold water. "You asking me to spy again?"

"Listen," he started. "Our freedom—"

I did not let him continue. "You are blind. They don't want us free. They just want liberty for themselves."

"You don't understand."

"Oh, no. I understand right good," I countered. "I shouldn't have believed your rebel lies. I should have taken Ruth and run the night we landed. Even if we drowned, we would have been together."

He reached out and grabbed my arm. "Don't say that."

His hand was strong, but so was mine. I grabbed his thumb and twisted it backward. "Turn me loose." My body and voice shook as if trapped in one of Ruth's fits.

"Sorry." He released me, and I released him. "I'm sorry for your sister and your face and your broken head." He wiggled his thumb. "A hundred times as sorry as the hills."

I moved to shut the gate in his face.

He held it open. "We all have scars, Isabel."

"I'll never talk to you again." I threw myself against the gate, shut it, and threw home the latch.

CHAPTER XXVI

Wednesday, August 21–Sunday, August 25, 1776

WE HAVE OUR COACH STANDING BEFORE OUR DOOR EVERY NIGHT, AND THE HORSES ARE HARNASSED READY TO MAKE OUR ESCAPE, IF WE HAVE TIME. . . . POOR NEW YORK! I LONG TO HAVE THE BATTLE OVER, AND YET I DREAD THE CONSEQUENCES.
–LETTER WRITTEN BY MARY, DAUGHTER OF PATRIOT BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN MORIN SCOTT, AS HER FAMILY PREPARED TO FLEE NEW YORK

THE STORM THAT HIT THE CITY THE next night was the worst I had ever seen.

A thundercloud big as a mountain swept up the river just before sunset. Lightning danced at its edges like horses at a mad gallop, then the sky turned ink black and the storm crashed over us. The wind blew signs off buildings, overturned soldiers' tents, and stripped the clean clothes that had been pegged out to dry. Thunder boomed like a thousand cannons. A house three blocks over was struck by a lightning bolt and burned to the ground. Thirteen soldiers were killed by lightning, too, the coins in their pockets melted and their flesh roasted. One lightning-struck soldier survived but was turned deaf, blind, and unable to speak.

We were forced to concern ourselves with more domestic

matters. The window frames in the front parlor leaked terrible during the storm. Rain soaked the drapes and rugs and left the wall plaster soft and spongy.

"Tell the girl to clean up this mess."

Becky asked around for days, but there were no spare carpenters to be found, no matter how much coin was offered. The men were all getting ready for war. The British had set up a new camp in Brooklyn on Long Island, and Washington was moving his troops around like pieces on a checkerboard. He sent most of his men across to face the British and others north to defend Fort Washington and Harlem.

The front windows continued to leak.

Becky began to talk of leaving for her uncle's house in Jersey. I pretended to listen to her. The streets were filled with the hurry-scurry of a moving army, splashing through mud puddles. Madam called for tea.

I left to fetch fresh water.

A few bees flew out of my head as I walked north with my buckets, blown out by the strong east wind. The pain helped, too. I had cut the palm of my left hand on a dull blade at breakfast. Becky wrapped it for me, but it stung to carry even an empty bucket.

Nassau Street was fair deserted all the way up to the Commons. Most folks had fled, afeard to be caught between two angry armies. That's why I was surprised to see a crowd at the water pump, a dozen or so men and boys—slaves who had been hired by the army to build barricades—and a few

women fetching water, like me. Beyond the men I could see the pile of paving stones that had been pulled up for the barricade. It was midday and the folks were gathered for a cool drink, a bite to eat, and some conversating.

The talk stopped as I approached. All eyes went to my face.

I had not been to the pump since my branding. I gripped the buckets tight, holding in the pain. Most in the crowd were strangers to me.

"Mercy," muttered one woman as she studied my scar.

"Pain you much?" asked another, her hair wrapped in a worn yellow cloth.

"It tugs some, ma'am," I said. "Not as much as it did."

One man spat over his shoulder and said something in a language I did not understand.

The other men turned their eyes from me back to Grandfather, the old man who sat by the pump, and went back to their argument. I was grateful to have the attention leave me.

"You're not looking at the facts," a bald man said to Grandfather. "The British Lord Dunmore in Virginia offered freedom—total freedom—to any slave who escapes to his camp." He shook his fist in the air when he said "freedom." "Thousands have run away and joined up already."

Grandfather simply nodded his head. "With more behind them, I expect."

A second man, this one with neatly trimmed hair, leaned on his shovel. "Dunmore freed the Virginia slaves so the crops would go unharvested and ruin the planters. The British care not for us, they care only for victory. Some Patriots own slaves, yes, but you must listen to their words: 'all men, created equal.' The words come first. They'll pull the deeds and the justice behind them."

"You're a fool," the bald man said. He motioned to the piles of paving stones and the logs waiting to be dragged into position. "We should sabotage the barricades. If the British win, we'll all be free."

"Shhh!" several people scolded.

I blinked. The bees in my head fell silent and hugged their wings tight to their bodies. The British would free us? All of us?

The men fell to arguing with each other, the women chiming in occasionally. Finally the bald man raised his hands. "One of us here was privy to the rebel plans, worked with one of the bosses there. Tell us, Curzon boy, what do you think of the rebel lies?"

At the sound of his name, Curzon stepped forward from the side of the building where he had been sitting in the shade. He looked even more changed than he had the week before. What was different?

"What say you?" Grandfather asked.

"I say I'm an American," Curzon said. "An American soldier."

It was his clothes. When I first met him, he was dressed like the house servant of a wealthy man, which he was. Now the tailored waistcoat was gone and his shirt was dirty with sweat and mud. It hung over a pair of working man's breeches that were cut off below his knee. He did not have on stockings or shoes. Even his fancy red hat was flecked with mud.

The wind caught at my skirts and swirled them around my ankles. Did he say *soldier*?

The first man laughed. "You are an American slave." He untied the cloth around his neck and rinsed it in the pump water before adding in a lower voice, "As are we all."

Curzon shook his head. He was still stubborn as ever, if a bit worn. "Not me. Not for long. Master Bellingham promised me freedom for enlisting in his place."

"And you believe him?" The man laughed louder. "He's feeding you to the cannons so he can be safe! If you don't die, he'll stick your neck under his boot again."

"Lower your voices." Grandfather held up a shaky hand and motioned to me. "Come, child. Get your water."

I walked to him and set my buckets on the ground.

The woman in the yellow head cloth worked the pump for Grandfather. "The British promise freedom to slaves but won't give it to the white rebels," she said as she pushed the handle up and down. "The rebels want to take freedom, but they won't share it with us."

She set down the first bucket and picked up the second. "Both sides say one thing and do the other."

"The British act on their promises," insisted the bald man.

"No!" The man with the shovel drove it into the ground with frustration. "They lie. When the British fled Boston, back in the spring, they took escaping slaves with them. They promised them freeeeeeedom." He stretched out the word until it sounded ugly. "Where are those slaves now?"

No one answered him.

"I'll tell you," he continued. "Forced into the Louisbourg coal mines in Canada. They work and die under the ground. They never see the sun, and they'll never taste your freeeeeedom."

We stood in silence as the pump handle creaked. At last, Grandfather chuckled.

"This is not funny, old man," said the fellow with the shovel.

"Young people are always funny," he said. "Funny and foolish."

The woman in the yellow head cloth finished filling the second bucket. "What do you mean, Grandfather?"

"This is not our fight," the old man said. "British or American, that is not the choice. You must choose your own side, find your road through the valley of darkness that will lead you to the river Jordan."

"We don't have the river Jordan, here, Grandfather," the bald man said as he retied the wet cloth around his neck. "We have the East River, with currents fast enough to kill a man, and the North River, two miles wide. Both are mighty hard to cross."

Grandfather chuckled again. "You don't understand. Everything that stands between you and freedom is the river Jordan. Come closer, child."

This last he said to me. I stepped in front of him and reached for my buckets, but he took my hands in his.

I stopped, unsure what to do next.

"Look at me," he said.

I bent down a little, bringing my face level with his. He tilted my chin to the side so he could examine the brand on my cheek. I tried to pull away, but he held fast.

"A scar is a sign of strength," he said quietly. "The sign of a survivor." He leaned forward and lightly kissed my cheek, right on the branding mark. His lips felt like a tired butterfly that landed once, then fluttered away.

I stepped back and touched the cheek. The men were returning to the barricades. Other servants had formed a line for the pump.

Grandfather winked and handed me the buckets. "Look hard for your river Jordan, my child. You'll find it."

Carrying those full buckets back to the Locktons' was powerful hard. The cut on my left hand pained me too much to use it, and my right hand was not big enough, my arm not strong enough, to carry two buckets at once. I journeyed in a crow-hop fashion—carrying one bucket for twenty strides, setting it down, then returning to fetch the second bucket and carrying it forward to meet its partner.

I made slow progress in this manner for two blocks when Curzon joined me.

He would not look at me. Didn't say a word, neither. He simply carried the buckets to the Locktons' gate for me, then walked away.

CHAPTER XXVII

Monday, August 26–Saturday, September 14, 1776

PERSONS EXPOSED TO GREAT DANGER AND HAZARD . . . REMOVE WITH ALL EXPEDITION OUT OF THE SAID TOWN [NEW YORK] . . . WHEREAS A BOMBARDMENT AND ATTACK, MAY BE HOURLY EXPECTED–
–GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON, OFFICIAL HANDBILL ISSUED TO NEW YORKERS, IN AUGUST 1776

THE BRITISH THRASHED THE PATRIOTS in a big battle in Brooklyn. Thrashed them but good. They killed or captured near a thousand rebels and sent the rest scurrying away. After the worst of the battle, the skies opened up again and we all waited–us in a house with leaking windows and a damp parlor, the soldiers in open fields and muddy ditches–for the rain to stop.

Madam wore a groove in the floor pacing back and forth awaiting news of the final British victory, her footsteps tipping and tapping in measure with the ticking of the clock. I poked at the logs in the kitchen hearth, trying to summon back the bees so they would chase out the thoughts invading my brainpan.

But the words of the bald man echoed.

Would the British truly free me? Should I flee to them? What about Ruth; would they help me find her?

The firewood was wet and green and would not catch. It smoldered and smoked and made a terrible stink.

When morning came, a thick fog smothered New York; the kind Momma called a "pea-souper." When the fog finally lifted, the American army was not to be found. Washington's men had spent the dark night and foggy morning rowing all of the troops back to New York Island–some nine thousand men, folks said. That Washington was a conjure man, for sure.

Madam took to her bed when Becky brought back the news. I muttered a quiet "Blast" and continued to eat my dinner, porridge with dried apple.

Becky didn't hear me. She was going on and on about the nasty things she'd passed by at the campgrounds. "–and there was this one lad, ooh, he'd had his hand blown clean off and a grubby bandage wrapped round his wrist, and I looked at that and I said to myself, 'That arm's coming off next, young man, and maybe your leg for good measure' on account of a noxious pestilence that filled the air. The stench of the place! And the groans and moans!"

She shivered with gruesome delight. "If I had a stronger stomach, I'd take a nurse job and help a bit with the washing of the wounds and the like. But with this heat and the flies, you just know the wounds will be maggoty by morning, and if there's one thing I can't abide, it's the sight of maggots in living flesh."

I looked in my bowl. The dried apple bits curled like fresh-hatched maggots.

I stopped eating.

Becky ladled out her own meal. "They's all saying that this proves the Lord Himself is on the side of the Rebellion,

on account of that fog He created. Did the same thing for them back in Boston; blew in a thick mist so the American army could win the day."

It seemed to me that if God really wanted the Americans to win, He would have sent sea monsters to devour the fleet when it left Boston. As I went to empty my porridge into the scraps bucket, Becky pointed to her own bowl. I filled it with my leftovers and commanded my belly to stop flopping so at the sight of the curly apples.

Becky paused with her spoon in the air. "Makes a body wonder, though . . ."

"What?" I asked.

"Washington had them melt down the church bells and remake them into cannons. That will surely displease the Lord, I say. If God switches sides and allows the British to take New York, you'll see me headed for Jersey, back pay or no back pay. I'm not sitting here waiting to get carved into pieces by them beastly redcoats."

It took me eight days of slow trips to the market and the water pump before I finally spied Curzon working with other men to set up a filthy tent in the mud of the Battery campgrounds. It was good to see him not dead nor chopped up.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Sunday, September 15, 1776

THE CLOUDS GROW VERY DARK.
–DIARY OF WILLIAM SMITH, CHIEF JUSTICE
OF THE PROVINCE OF NEW YORK

THE TRUE INVASION OF NEW YORK started with the firing of a hundred ships' cannons when we were at church Sunday morning. The first blast made the women shriek. The second blast made me wonder if God Himself was fixing to blow the island apart.

The third blast caused us to run for the door.

Rebel soldiers were dashing everywhich direction on the street, muskets in their hands, officers bellowing loud. The horses pulling carts and carriages whinnied nervously, bobbing their heads up and down and rolling their eyes in fear of the commotion and noise.

The cannons roared again. The sound was coming from the East River side of the island, to the north. I searched the skies for flaming comets, for that was how I pictured a cannonball would look. All I saw were startled birds and campfire smoke. The city itself seemed unharmed, though fear ran neck-deep.

Madam reached out and grabbed at the coat of an officer striding toward the Battery fort. He whirled, a curse on his lips, but caught himself when he realized he was speaking to a lady.

"Does this unholy racket mean the arrival of the war?" Madam asked.

"Yes, ma'am," the officer said. "But you need not be afraid. The generals have the matter well in hand." He hesitated as the cannons roared again. "Civilians should go home and lock your doors. Do not peer out of windows."

Madam contemplated him coolly. "What are those men doing?" she asked, pointing to the campground. The soldiers were quickly assembling their guns, ammunition, and whatever they could stuff into their sacks. They moved so fast you'd have thought the ground was afire.

"We are preparing to meet the enemy," he said.

"You are running away," she said.

"No, ma'am," he said as he started to move away from her. "We're moving up to Fort Washington, to guard the King's Bridge." He shouted to be heard as a wagon pulled by four horses raced by. "We must follow orders!"

"Indeed," Madam said.

Becky had the Sabbath off, so I served Madam her meal of cold pork, peas, and onions cooked with sage. She was calm about finally having war at her doorstep and thousands of riled-up menfolk marching with guns. In fact, as she ate, she kept a sheet of paper, a quill, and an ink bottle by the side of her plate and would from time to time jot down a word or two.

When her plate was empty, she spoke to me direct. "I am

preparing a list of items for you to purchase. You may leave as soon as the dishes are washed."

"Beg pardon, ma'am?"

"I need you to go down to the shops. I've no doubt Elihu will soon return home, and I'd like to celebrate with a suitable meal. It's a shame that turtles are so hard to come by here. Elihu loves turtle soup."

Had she lost her mind?

"But the cannons, ma'am," I started. "The battle. Surely it will be a few days before—"

"Most of the items can be purchased at Mr. Mason's." She dipped the quill and scratched out another item. "He's a thieving rat of a man, but he's loyal to the King. I know he's been hoarding his best wares." She paused as cannon fire boomed again from the north. "I don't know why the rebels don't just surrender. They cannot win."

I froze at the sideboard. The words of the bald-headed man came to me: "If the British win, we'll all be free."

Could it be so simple? Might the invaders liberate me from this nightmare? Was this my chance?

Madam said something, but I couldn't make out her words. "Yes, ma'am," I mumbled, my hands doing the work of a slave, my mind racing free.

I will run and join the British.

The thought washed over me like a river, sweeping away the dead bees that had filled my brainpan with confusion. The answers tumbled one after another. They'd grant me freedom and give me work. I'd save my money and make my way to Nevis and rescue Ruth. Plain, simple, and true.

"Are you deaf?" Madam scolded me.

I had been staring at the door and not minding her words.

She shook the paper in her hand. "I said take this to Mason. If he can't supply you with everything, he'll direct you where to go."

I'll be going home, I thought. And you can fetch your own food and empty your own chamberpot and carry your own blasted firewood from this day forward.

"Girl?" Madam squinted at me and tilted her head to one side. "Are you feverish?"

I gave thanks that she could not hear my thoughts. "No, ma'am." I put the list in my pocket and set the last knife on the tray. "I'm strong as can be. I'll go to Mr. Mason's directly."

I paused at the parlor door. "I may be delayed a wee bit, ma'am," I said with care. "What with the commotion and all."

A dozen or so soldiers dashed down the middle of the street, their boots thudding.

"It cannot be helped," Madam said with a sigh.

Walking down Broadway I was a fish swimming in the wrong direction. Everyone else in New York flowed north and fought against my progress: Continental troops in ragged formation, militia units carrying packs and haversacks, small artillery pieces pulled by horses, and carts weighed down with women and children. The noise was deafening. Along with the shouts of men and women, every dog in the city was barking alarm, pigs squealed underfoot, and occasionally a musket would fire, which led to shouted oaths and yelps. Drums beat and fifes blew and beneath everything was the steady clockwork blast of the British cannons firing at the troops stationed north of us.

I kept to the fronts of buildings, ducking into doorways when necessary, until I finally took refuge in the abandoned chandler's shop. The door was locked, but the front windows had been smashed to bits when the owner was tarred and feathered some weeks previous.

I crawled through the window, taking care not to cut myself on the glass shards jutting out of the frame. I set my basket on the floor. Ruth's doll rested inside it under a rag. That was the one thing I could not leave behind.

The shop smelled musty and damp and the shelves stood empty. All the candles and other goods were stolen the day they ran the chandler out of town. It was a gloomy place but would serve well as a temporary shelter.

I stood by the window and watched the tide of people roll out of the city.

Hurry, I silently urged them.

Hurry, I also urged the British army. I did not want them to land right away, not until the last of the crowd had fled. But it would be nice if they arrived right quick after that, before Madam could hire someone to seek me out.

Finally the crowd thinned and cart wheels could be heard echoing up the road. I waited a little longer, just to be sure. A few Continentals dashed by, their hands holding their hats on their heads, and canteens and cartridge cases banging against their backsides. They were followed by a rough-looking militia unit that was trailed by a group of slaves carrying shovels and pickaxes. I searched for a familiar red hat but did not find it.

When the air fell still, with just a few voices calling orders in the distance, I hiked up my skirts and crawled out through the window.

CHAPTER XXIX

Sunday, September 15, 1776

. . . THE DEMONS OF FEAR AND DISORDER SEEMED TO TAKE FULL POSSESSION OF ALL AND EVERYTHING UPON THAT DAY.
–JOURNAL OF PRIVATE JOSEPH PLUMB MARTIN,
FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD PATRIOT SOLDIER

I WAS THE ONLY PERSON ON THE STREET. The army was gone and the city abandoned. I shivered, though the day was still warm. Had I made a mistake? Should I run after the rebels and join them? Should I go back to the Locktons'?

A cannon boomed to the north.

No, I chose the right course. At least, I hoped I had.

I headed for the waterfront. Several of the grand mansions of lower Broadway stood with their doors ajar. A fire burned at the edge of the street, heaped with books and scads of papers. The smoke rose up into the air, drifting toward the masts of the few ships at anchor. Cannons boomed again.

What if they didn't arrive right away? How long did I have before Madam grew suspicious?

A gust of wind blew and carried with it the first hint of fall: canoe-shaped chestnut leaves, turned yellow round the edges.

The leaves caught and piled up against the soldiers' tents left behind at the Battery campground.

I walked over and pulled back the flap of a tent. Inside lay two bedrolls, a pipe and tobacco pouch, and a shirt dropped in the middle of mending, the needle still threaded and stuck in the fabric. I closed the flap. They left near everything—tents, blankets, extra clothing, cook pots, and food. It would be a cold night for Curzon and his companions.

Voices came from the waterfront, military voices shouting orders. I hurried away from the Barracks, dashed down Water Street, and hid behind a rain barrel at the corner of the joiner's workshop.

A half-dozen flat-bottomed boats were being rowed to the docks. Two were already tied up, and tall soldiers wearing the red uniform of King George were striding down the street. Lobsterbacks, folks called them. They fanned out across the waterfront, their muskets primed and held at the ready position. As I watched, a third boat floated to the wharf. The soldiers on it jumped out and marched in formation to the Battery, in search of rebel soldiers.

A woman carrying a baby fled, screaming loudly. A few of the redcoats chuckled and stabbed at the air with their bayonets. My throat went dry.

As the fourth boat landed, an officer stepped off and barked a command at the laughing men. They lined up and stood at attention. The officer gave another command, and the men marched off, splitting into three groups to investigate the Battery and waterfront buildings.

The officer stood alone at the foot of the dock, surveying the deserted town as more boats splashed toward the landing

spot. This was my chance. I forced myself out of my hiding place and walked toward him, my back ramrod straight.

"Begging your pardon, sir," I said boldly.

"What is it, girl?" he asked.

Before I could answer, a soldier dashed up to him. "Captain Campbell, sir. The campground appears deserted. The rebels left behind their tents and bedrolls."

"Secure the tent flaps open and check every one," the captain commanded. "It could be a trap."

"Yessir," came the crisp reply before the man ran off.

I prayed I would not faint from fear and tried again for the captain's attention. "I can cook, sir," I said. "I can wash, sew, even doctor the sick a little."

"Don't bother me, child."

I trailed after him as he walked toward the campground. "Please, sir," I insisted. "I'm all kinds of useful. I can chop wood and carry water or messages."

I was interrupted by another soldier, who approached us and saluted.

"Report," Captain Campbell said.

"The spies were correct, sir. The rebels have retreated. The Battery is empty of men but filled with the provisions and weapons they left behind, including several cannons. They even left a tea kettle bubbling over the fire. Civilians in the first three streets north of here all attest to their haste. Putnam's unit was the last one out. They're on their way up the island, by way of the Greenwich Road. Do we pursue, sir?"

The captain fought the smile that played at the corner of his lips. "Our task is to occupy the city. We'll let the Highlanders hunt them down. Tell the men to take over the

barracks and prepare Washington's headquarters for Major General Robertson."

"Yessir." The soldier saluted again but did not move.

"What is it now, Jennings?" asked the captain.

"Begging pardon, sir, but I've not been informed as to the whereabouts of Washington's headquarters. If I was to be given that information, I could pursue my obligations with greater speed."

"I don't know where it is," Captain Campbell said with irritation. "Use your noggin, man. Ask the tavern keeper."

"You want the Kennedy mansion, sir," I said. "Just beyond the end of Battery, facing the Bowling Green."

"What did you say?" the captain fired at me.

My knees were shaking under my skirt. "The Kennedy mansion, sir, that was General Washington's main headquarters. Number 1, Broadway. His wife stayed up at the Mortier House. But he kept headquarters straight thataway"—I pointed west—"and more army offices were in City Hall." I pointed north, up Broad Street.

"Very good," he said. "There you have it, Sergeant. Proceed."

The sergeant yelled to his unit as he walked away from us. The waterfront was awash in red now as boatloads of soldiers disembarked. Shouted orders filled the air, along with nervous laughter and the sound of British boots on the cobblestones. A few more boats were on their way in, with the first boats headed back for more. The occupation was well and truly begun.

"You are correct, young miss," Captain Campbell said to me. "You are useful. But we do not want troublemakers in camp. What is the meaning of the mark on your face?"

I touched the raised scar and decided that honesty was

my only course. "This stands for Insolence, sir. When my mistress sold my little sister, I tried to run away. She is five years old, sir. My sister, not my mistress."

He blinked and cleared his throat. "Regrettable. And understandable. I have a younger sister myself. Your mistress, am I to assume she supports the rebel cause?"

"No, sir," I answered. "Our house is Tory. My master was driven out of town by the Patriot leaders. My mistress is much cheered by your arrival. She wants to hire a proper staff so she can entertain again. She'll not miss my services one bit."

The words tumbled out before I measured them. The captain's mouth hardened, and I knew I had stepped wrong.

He tugged on his sash. "I cannot accept your service, child. We only employ slaves run away from rebel owners."

I did not hear him right. "Pardon me?"

"Gentlemen docking, sir!" cried a soldier on the wharf.

Captain Campbell turned as the men tossed thick ropes from the dock to the occupants of the next boat. It contained only four soldiers, each manning an oar. The rest of the passengers were men dressed in expensive civilian clothes.

"When they're ashore, escort them into the tavern for a celebration," the captain said loudly. "Issue the tavern keeper an Office of Forage certificate. Warn him, Sergeant, he is not to ask the gentlemen for payment, unless he wants to spend this night in irons. They are our guests."

"Yes, sir!" came the enthusiastic response.

As we had been talking, ordinary city folk had begun to creep out of their houses. Now there was a full crowd gathered, the Tories of New York who had been awaiting this day for months, years. Cheers were heard in the

distance. The arriving soldiers were greeted by townsmen who shook their hands and patted them heartily on the back. I recognized a few faces—the reverend and his wife and a few people who had called at the Lockton home.

Captain Campbell bent toward me. He spoke quickly and quietly. "I do not hold with slavery, but I cannot help you. We do not interfere with Loyalist property. Return to your mistress."

A loud "Huzzah!" from hundreds of throats came from the Battery as the American flag was pulled down. A drummer started beating time, and the Union Jack rose to the top of the flagpole, accompanied by whistles and shouts from the lobsterbacks and Loyalist New Yorkers, who took off their hats in respect. A woman in the crowd snatched the American flag out of the hands of the British soldiers and stomped it under her boots. The men laughed.

The *rataratat*ing of the drumsticks rattled through me, setting my teeth to shaking and waking the bees who had lately gone to sleep in my brainpan.

He couldn't take me. He would not.

I was chained between two nations.

The bees swarmed again behind my eyes, making the scene grow dim and distant. The sun was nearing the horizon, casting long shadows across the wharf. I was a ghost tied to the ground, not a living soul.

"All ashore, sir," called the soldier tying up the last boat.

"All ashore, Corporal," the captain acknowledged. "I want patrols assembled immediately to keep watch in the streets, and sentry fires built on every corner."

"Yes, sir!"

The gentlemen who had arrived in the boat walked toward us, talking with great excitement. One of them was

painfully familiar. He called to me before I could flee.

"Sal?" called Master Elihu Lockton, thinner from his exile, eyes bloodshot and wary. "Is that you?"

I dropped into a curtsy and dared not say a word.

He studied on me with suspicion. "What are you doing here?"

Sergeant Jennings approached. "The tavern is open if the gentlemen would care to drink to victory."

Lockton waved to his companions. "I shall join you shortly." As the gentlemen hurried to the tavern, his eyes traveled from my head down to my shoes and back. "What news, Sal?" he asked. "How do you come to be here?"

I pulled Madam's list from my pocket and prayed he would not look inside my basket. "Come to market, sir," I whispered.

"Ah. What is this?" He took my chin in his fingers, turning it so that the last rays of the sunset fell on my scar. "Is the *I* for 'illustrious' or perhaps 'impertinent'?"

My face burned both in the scar and where his lavender-smelling fingers pinched my skin. The bees flew through me and told me to grab Campbell's sword and run it through Lockton's belly.

And then what? And then what?

"I suspect it stands for Insolence," Captain Campbell said calmly. "'Tis a common brand among the people of Boston."

Lockton laughed at the small joke and released me. "Now we'll call her Insolent Sal, a very saucy gal."

The captain smiled and put his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I should have known she was attached to your household, sir. She greeted me in the name of the King and thanked me for rescuing the city from the rebels."

They both looked at me.

"We prayed for liberation," I said.

"Even our slaves have become political," Lockton said. "How quaint."

"Do you wish to accompany your servant home to greet your mistress?" the captain asked.

Lockton shook his head. "Not at the moment. Go on home, Sal. Tell Anne I shall be along after I've lifted a few glasses in celebration."

The two men headed for the tavern as the sun finally dropped out of sight.

I must have gone to Mason's and bought the items on Madam's list, tho' I remember it not. My body moved through the streets, past sentry fires and redcoats carrying torches down suspicious alleys and into abandoned houses. Around me was the sound of the victors celebrating and the smell of meat they roasted for their supper.

Around me, all was darkness.

CHAPTER XXX

Monday, September 16–Saturday, September 21, 1776

OH, THE HOUSES IN NEW YORK, IF YOU COULD BUT SEE THE INSIDES OF THEM! OCCUPIED BY THE DIRTIEST PEOPLE ON A CONTINENT . . . IF THE OWNERS EVER GET POSSESSION AGAIN, I AM SURE THEY WILL BE YEARS IN CLEANING THEM. –A LETTER FROM NEW YORK IN THE *MORNING CHRONICLE AND LONDON ADVERTISER* NEWSPAPER

THE BRITISH ARMY PARADED UP Broadway the next day, cheered by Loyalists all wearing a red ribbon or flower in their hats in support of the King. I did not see this, of course. I overheard the report that Madam gave the master as they ate supper that eve with their houseguests, the two officers who had moved into the bedchambers on the top floor.

The highest-ranking men of the British army had taken over the empty rebel mansions. Lower-grade officers had moved in with Loyalist families who had suitable furniture and staff, such as the Locktons. Only we didn't have a staff. Becky had vanished, her rooms at the Oliver Street boardinghouse abandoned. I was the only servant in the house.

It mattered not. My bones were hollow sticks; my brainpan empty.

I cooked a chicken and roasted potatoes and carrots. I left the chicken over the fire too long because Madam ordered the silver polished and the table linens ironed in honor of her guests. The bird was so dry it near splintered the tongues of the officers. Madam let loose on me in the kitchen after the gentlemen had taken Master Lockton to Ashley's Tavern for a night of beer drinking and pipe smoking.

It mattered not.

When Madam finished scolding me, I set to my evening chores; cleaning out the ashes from the bedchamber fireplaces and carrying them outside, bringing in the firewood and laying the fires in case the night turned cold, turning down the beds, cleaning up from supper, and sweeping the floor.

When I finally laid down to sleep, I set Ruth's doll beside my head. I had stopped kissing it good night. I did not say prayers.

My bones were hollow and my brainpan empty.

Madam ran me like a donkey all the next day, then demanded that I stay awake all night to make rolls for breakfast because the bakers in town were rebels, and they had fled. I did as she ordered and ruined two perfectly fine batches of dough. I threw them down the privy and baked cornbread deep in the night for that was one thing my hands knew how to bake.

The cornbread burned to charcoal when I fell asleep, head on the table.

It mattered not.

Three mornings after the invasion, a message was delivered to the master as I served the coffee. I set the note on a small silver tray and carried it into the drawing room.

The officers were in the middle of excusing themselves from the table, buttoning up their coats and putting on their hats. After the master said his "good days" to them, he opened the note.

"A social invitation?" Madam asked. "Or business?"

"Neither," Lockton said. "It's a desperate plea." He handed the note across to his wife. "Aunt Seymour is in need of our Sal. All of her Dutch girls fled, and she is without servants."

Madam snatched the paper from his hand. "Surely she can do for herself. We have company. Why should we go without a servant?"

"We have only two men lodging here. Somehow Aunt has managed to take on a dozen Hessian brutes. She requires our assistance."

Madam gave a little shudder. "Hessians." The hired soldiers from Germany had a fearsome reputation. She crumpled the paper. "I will not perform housework like a common wench. Tell her to hire someone."

"The times demand sacrifices, Anne. Just for a week or so. Women will soon come to the city looking for work, and you and our aunt will be able to hire a full staff."

Madam scowled into her cup. "You favor her over me, Elihu. It's unseemly."

Lockton wiped his mouth with his serviette. "The loan of the girl is the least we owe her. I hope you regret your decision to send away the sister. Even small hands would be helpful now."

His mention of Ruth so startled me I near dropped the tray.

Madam bit back the hot words in her mouth, picked up her serviette, and cleaned off her chin. "You will clean the kitchen and prepare the dinner, girl, then you will take

yourself to the house of Lady Seymour and do what she requires of you."

Lockton shook his head. "No, Sal. You will leave immediately."

I took a clean apron and Ruth's doll with me to Lady Seymour's house. In truth, I did not walk there quickly. In truth, I dawdled something fierce. Folks said that Hessian soldiers were fire-breathing monsters who walked about with swords drawn and blood on their chins. I figured that would be as bad as Madam.

I was near correct.

They did not breathe fire, tho' they spat when they talked. Nor did they walk about waving their swords, tho' some sported knives in their boots. None had blood on their chins, except when they ate rare-cooked meat. I found it hard not to stare at the enormous mustachios that sprouted under their noses, especially when the men combed and waxed them, and twirled the ends.

Their speech sounded like they were swallowing rocks, but Lady Seymour understood them. She learned the German from her husband, she said, same way she learned the Dutch. There were all manner of secrets locked in that old skull.

When I served them supper my first night, a couple of them said *"Danke"* to me. Lady Seymour explained that *danke* is German-talk for "thank you." She told me not to be afeard, that they were just soldiers far away from home. A couple of them were fond of her cat, she pointed out. How could men who liked cats be bad? She tolerated them fair enough, except for the muddy boots on the furniture and

when they spread butter on their bread with their thumbs. That made her gasp and go pink in the face.

I practiced saying *"danke"* when alone.

The work at the Seymour house was every bit as tiring as it had been at Madam's, more so because there were more mouths to feed and boots to clean and basins to fill and linens to wash and coats to beat free of dust. Lady Seymour made sure I et a proper meal three times a day and let me sleep in the tiny attic bedchamber on the bed where I laid after my time in the stocks. It was hot up there, but there were no mice nor worms on the floor when it rained.

The city swelled by the hour with Loyalist refugees who wanted to live under the protection of British cannons. Some of the folk returning from exile were surprised to find strangers had taken over their houses and were sleeping in their beds and wearing the clothes they left behind. There were many fistfights, a great deal of name-calling, and threats of duels.

The British didn't mix in with the arguments. They had war on the brain, drilling their soldiers from sunup to sundown. At the Middle Dutch Church they pulled out the pulpit, the pews, and the floorboards and let the horses of the Light Dragoons practice. Horses in a house of the Lord made some folks grumble, including Lady Seymour.

Up to the Tea Water Pump, I found only unfamiliar faces, slaves who had freed themselves by joining the British. I could not bring myself to speak to them. The old man we called Grandfather had vanished. Maybe he had started his own revolution and led Curzon and the other slaves over the river Jordan to freedom.

A fanciful notion. 'Twas useless to ponder such things.

Friday stretched long and longer because the Hessians had moved in five more of their countrymen. I heard Lady Seymour arguing with the fellow in charge, but he would not listen to her pleas. I spent the afternoon chopping a field's worth of cabbage while a half pig roasted in the pit dug by the men in the flower garden. The soldiers ate their supper and drank more beer than I thought a body could hold. They lost the few manners they possessed and used the table linens for blowing their noses.

It was a relief when they finally left for merrymaking elsewhere.

I prepared a tray of supper and served it to Lady Seymour in her bedchamber, the one room where she could find peace. When my chores were done, I climbed to my attic room, kicked off my shoes, and laid down on the bed without even removing my skirt or bodice. Ruth's doll lay next to my head, her eyes staring up at the ceiling. I knew I ought pray for Ruth, or for Momma, or for anything; I ought just pray, but the words would not come. I feared the Spirit had left me.

I slept.

When I woke, the city of New York was consumed with burning hellfire.

CHAPTER XXXI

Saturday, September 21–Sunday, September 22, 1776

THE FIRE RAGED WITH INCONCEIVABLE VIOLENCE AND IN ITS DESTRUCTIVE PROGRESS SWEPT AWAY ALL THE BUILDINGS BETWEEN BROAD STREET AND THE NORTH RIVER . . . SEVERAL WOMEN AND CHILDREN PERISHED IN THE FIRE; THEIR SHRIEKS JOINED TO THE ROARING OF THE FLAMES, THE CRASH OF FALLING HOUSES, AND THE WIDESPREAD RUIN WHICH EVERYWHERE APPEARED, FORMED A SCENE OF HORROR GREAT BEYOND DESCRIPTION, AND WHICH WAS STILL HEIGHTENED BY THE DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT.
—*NEW YORK MERCURY* NEWSPAPER

I AWOKE COUGHING SO HARD I NEAR brought up my supper. When I finally caught my breath, I smelled the smoke and saw the light, bright as day, outside my window. I jumped from the bed and peered out.

It was not morning; it was an inferno.

Flames curled out of all the windows next door. The rooftop beyond that was a lake of fire. Every building in sight was burning. The air was filled with crackling and popping sounds, with shrieks and screams coming from the street below.

A hot gust of wind blew the curtains back and sent the

fire straight at me. Fiery shingles floated from the roof and caught in the branches of the tree outside my window, setting the bark ablaze. A burning leaf drifted to the sill. I quickly brushed it off, my hands quivering.

Get out!

Seized again by coughing, I fell to the ground where the smoke was not so heavy. I pulled my shoes toward me and quickly buckled them on, then took a deep breath, rose to my feet, grabbed Ruth's doll off my bed, and opened the door.

Smoke filled the hall, curling down from the ceiling along with fingers of fire.

Get out now!

I clattered down the stairs, screaming, "Fire! Fire!"

The door to Lady Seymour's bedchamber was just opening. As I went to pass by, she grabbed my arm.

"Quick, child," she cried. "Help me!"

Her chamber was even brighter than the attic, but the windows were closed and the smoke thinner. She bent over an enormous trunk by the wall. "It contains my valuables." She pulled at a handle. "Please, Isabel!"

I reached for the handle and tugged. The trunk did not move. "It's too heavy, ma'am. Leave it. The roof is afire."

"No, wait." She flung open the top. The trunk was filled with a silver tea set, a small portrait of a yellow-haired man, something wrapped in velvet cloth, dusty sacks, small wooden boxes, and packets of letters tied in a ribbon.

There was another crash outside and screams. I grabbed her arm. "We'll die if we stay!"

She pulled out the letters and two small boxes and thrust them at me along with the portrait. "Take these!"

I stuck the portrait and letters in my pocket, and balanced

Ruth's doll on top of the boxes in my arms. The room was so hot I thought the cornhusks might explode into flames.

Lady Seymour grabbed two of the sacks; the coins within clinked together as she rose to her feet, coughing. "Hurry!" she gasped.

The smoke in the hall was thicker than it had been moments before. We felt our way, one step at a time, to the staircase. I went down first, with the Lady behind me, her frail hand on my shoulder. My eyes watered. My lungs felt like they were pulling in the flames. I thought for a moment we were trapped; the thick haze tricked my mind and I knew not if we should proceed down or up. My ears filled with the crackle of burning wood.

"Help me!" Lady Seymour cried. Her hand vanished.

"Ma'am? Ma'am?" The smoke stopped up my throat. There was a thunderous crash overhead, a ceiling giving way or a piece of the roof collapsing.

The old woman had crumpled to the stairs. *Is she dead?* I put my hand on her chest. Her heartbeat was light and fast as bird's wings beating against a cage. I put my face close to hers and screamed, "Get up!"

She moaned once and tried to move her hand.

I pulled her arm. She moaned again, but I could not be gentle. I dropped the boxes and doll, draped her arm around me, and half fell down the rest of the stairs. Once on the ground floor, she tried to walk, but one of her legs was failing her. I opened the front door and dragged the two of us out to the street.

The air was aswirl with flame, soot, and burning shingles, each caught in a devilish whirlwind. The cries and screams of men and women mixed with the terror of the horses burning alive in locked stables. Windows exploded, beams

crashed, and trees split, their crowns ablaze like torches in the hand of a cruel giant. I felt the clothes on my back ready to ignite. The brand on my cheek scorched, as if the fire within me called to the fire in the air.

Move or die, whispered the flames.

I dragged Lady Seymour north, then east, away from the course of the wind, which blew like a bellows and fanned the flames. British soldiers looted a burning house, running out with arms full of silver, and forks and spoons sticking out of their pockets. A dog ran by howling, its tail on fire. We passed a family, all in their nightclothes, throwing buckets of water against the wall of their house, as the fire chewed through the wood. A group of men had harnessed themselves to a fire wagon that held a large tank of water, but one of the wheels broke and it proved too heavy to drag.

One more block, and we could go no farther. Lady Seymour and me collapsed in a heap on the edge of a graveyard.

Time burned up while we lay there, caught in the sparks that flew overhead, swallowed by the noise of a city ablaze.

When I finally came to my senses, I sat up, coughed at length, and breathed in slow. It hurt, but it would not be the death of me. Lady Seymour still lay beside me, shaking her head from side to side in the dirt and muttering. I bent my ear close to hear.

"The bells, where are the bells?" she asked.

Had the fire ruined her mind? Why worry about bells?

"You're safe, ma'am," I said, patting her hand.

She frowned. "Why don't the bells ring alarm?"

Her words were garbled, like she was talking underwater, but I finally understood. Every bell in every church steeple

should have been ringing loud and fiercesome. But they were all gone, melted and reformed into cannons.

I stood up. Over the rooftops I could see men pouring water on the flattish roof of St. Paul's, the buckets handed to them from a long line of people that stretched to a backyard pump. To the south, Trinity Church was not as lucky. Its tall steeple was a pyramid of fire, the flames licking the undersides of the clouds that scuttled above.

"What shall we do, ma'am?" I asked.

Her tears turned black as they rolled through the soot on her face. Her left arm and leg lay limp as if some cog within her had snapped. She did not make a sound.

'Twas up to me to make the decisions.

"Come." I helped her to sit. "We need to make our way to safety."

I stood to her left, draped the useless arm over my neck, and held her body tight to mine. In that manner, step by slow step, we staggered on. We passed countless people standing in the streets like statues, their toes bare on the stones, nightclothes blowing in the unnatural breeze, mouths agape. Carts rolled by carrying half-naked people, bleeding and dazed. A collection of charred bodies had been stacked on a corner, not fully covered by a blanket. A child's boot and stocking lay in the gutter, next to an overturned rain barrel.

Step by slow step we made our way to Wall Street, then down to the seventh house on the left. She was near insensible by the time we reached it. In truth, I pinched her as hard as I could. It roused her some, and she lifted her working leg. Thus we mounted the steps of the Lockton house and entered the front door.

CHAPTER XXXII

Sunday, September 22–Thursday, September 26, 1776

OUR DISTRESSES WERE VERY GREAT INDEED BEFORE; BUT THIS DISASTER HAS INCREASED THEM TENFOLD. MANY HUNDREDS OF FAMILIES HAVE LOST THEIR ALL; AND ARE REDUCED FROM A STATE OF AFFLUENCE TO THE LOWEST EBB OF WANT AND WRETCHEDNESS– DESTITUTE OF SHELTER, FOOD OR CLOTHING.
–*NEW YORK MERCURY* NEWSPAPER

NEAR FIVE HUNDRED HOMES WERE destroyed that night, plus shops, churches, and stables. Thousands of people were homeless, without even a change of underclothes or clean stockings. Many did not eat meat for weeks on account of the death smell that poisoned the air. The job of finding bodies was so gruesome it caused grown men to scream out loud.

They buried the dead quickly.

Folks said the fire started in a low groggery near the Whitehall Slip. From there it burned uptown, pushed by a strong wind, devouring Bridge Street, Dock, Stone, Marketfield, and Beaver, then it ran up both sides of Broadway. Almost every building from Broadway to the edge of the North River was in ruins, all the way up to the

open field below King's College. They called it "the burned-over district."

"God's judgment on the British," whispered the Patriots.

"Rebel sabotage," shouted the Loyalists.

Most figured the Americans wanted New York burned to the ground to leave the British without shelter. While the fires still raged, groups of soldiers searched for arsonists. One man, found with rosin and brimstone-tipped slivers of wood in his pocket, was tossed into a burning cobbler shop, another was quickly executed with a bayonet through the chest. Half a dozen people were hung while the fire still raged, one from the sign post of a tavern. Another was hung from his heels and had his throat slashed.

The day after the fire, they captured a schoolteacher, name of Nathan Hale, up island near the Dove Tavern. He admitted he was a spy but said he did not set the fire. There was no trial, nor proof of his guilt. They put a rope around his neck and hung him high.

Folks talked about a pretty speech he gave afore they kicked the stool away from his feet. He said he was sorry that he could die only one time for his country.

The lobsterbacks laughed at that.

I coughed up mouthfuls of soot for days. My eyes felt crusted with embers. No matter how much I rubbed them or rinsed them with clean water, they remained swole up, red, and hard to see out of. I was lucky. I was not killt nor burnt; I had not even twisted an ankle running from the flames.

All I lost in the confusion was Ruth's doll. All I had lost was everything.

My bees a'swarmed back into my brainpan. They hummed

loud so I need not ponder on the baby doll. The burned-over district looked like the inside of me. It was hard to tell where one stopped and the other started. I feared my wits had been melted by the flames, twisted and charred.

Doctor Dastuge came to examine Lady Seymour. The left side of her body had gone to sleep and would not wake. The doctor said it was an apoplexy brought on by the fire. He bled her twice and prescribed Maredant's Drops to cleanse her blood.

Master Lockton insisted his aunt should recover in the bedchamber he shared with his wife. Madam was not pleased with the arrangement but said nothing, for a change. She visited the ruins of the Seymour house daily, waiting for them to cool enough so that she could poke through the ash with a hoe, in search of coin or melted silver.

Lady Seymour called me to her bedside when she regained her senses. She tried to thank me, but the affliction pulled at her mouth and made it hard to figure her words. I gave her the portrait of the yellow-haired man and the letters that I had stuffed in my pocket as we fled. She studied them close with her good eye, then she sobbed and both her eyes overran with tears. Madam bade me leave the room.

By the third day after the fire, the Lockton house was packed tighter than a barrel of salt cod and smelled worse. We had been invaded again. Many of the rebel houses that were occupied by the British army had burned to the ground. Soldiers found themselves as homeless as regular folk, so their commanders ordered that anyone with an undamaged home share it with the men.

We wound up with eleven fellows from Kent sleeping three to a bedchamber and using the second-floor drawing room as their common area for dining and conversating.

The master and Madam moved their bedchamber to the downstairs front parlor and gave the library over to Colonel Hawkins, a high-ranking officer whose favor Lockton sought.

The cellar was turned into a barracks for five soldiers who had their wives with them. This was the Lord's blessing on me because the women were used to cooking and cleaning for their men's regiment. The new bosslady in the kitchen was named Sarah, a black-haired gal with a baby in her belly. She was not a friendly sort—none of them were—but she did not call me names nor seem inclined to hand out beatings.

I did miss Becky Berry, more than I thought possible.

It was odd sleeping in the cellar with strangers. They sure did snore, the women as bad as the men. Their bodies gave off noxious odors, too, gases so strong they made my eyes water. The night of the first frost, I woke up to a soldier pulling off my blanket. I lay in the dark, fists clenched and teeth sharp, thinking he meant to do me harm.

He did not. He was simply cold and in need of another layer of cloth.

Next morning, Sarah agreed I could move my pallet up to the kitchen hearth.

It was lonely sleeping without that fool doll.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Friday, September 27–Saturday, November 16, 1776

MANY OF THE INHABITANTS ARE COME INTO TOWN; AND MANY OTHERS WHO WERE OBLIGED TO FLY FOR THEIR LOYALTY ARE COMING IN DAILY.
—*NEW YORK MERCURY* NEWSPAPER

THE AUTUMN PASSED IN A DOGWEARY haze for me, with much work and little time left to ponder or breathe. Everything was cloaked in gray: oyster gray, charcoal gray, pewter gray, mold gray, storm gray, and ash. Scraps of ash floated through the air for weeks and found their way into everything, from the butter to the tea. The rains turned the ash to mud. Frost painted the ground the color of a gravestone, ashes trapped in ice.

I flaked ashy too. Momma used to rub a salve of bear fat and mint on us as winter approached so our skin would not dry and crack.

Was Ruth's skin dry? Did anyone notice?

Ashes drifted into the hollow places in my bones and silted up my brainpan. I had the fanciful notion that perhaps we had died in the fire, that we were all lost souls, forbidden to

enter heaven. When I had low thoughts like that, Curzon's voice would call from my remembery and tell me to join him, to become a rebel.

I told that voice to hush.

With the ash so thick inside and out, I had few thoughts to spare for that fool. I figured he was dug in with the troops at Fort Washington, which seemed a good place, what with the strong walls and the cannons protecting it. Folks said the British wouldn't attack the fort until spring.

The men drilled and patrolled. Sarah and the other soldierwives spent most of their days down at the campground doing the chores for the regiment—washing clothes in big iron pots and cooking whatever could be found to roast or stew. They did some tidying at the Lockton house and kept the officers fed too. The dirtiest jobs fell to me: water hauling, wood chopping, and chamber-pot emptying. On top of that, Colonel Hawkins claimed me for his errand girl, sending me out with messages for this captain or that sergeant or in search of snuff or hair powder or almonds. He was terrible fond of almonds.

By the time the apples were harvested, hundreds of ships crammed with expensive British goods crowded the docks. The price of food doubled and doubled again. This did not affect the Locktons nor the rich Loyalist refugees who streamed into the city toting bags of gold. We took delivery of enough potatoes to fill the bin in the cellar and had no trouble buying meat. But regular folks burnt out of their homes and penniless Loyalist refugees on the run from the rebels, they were forced to shelter in Canvastown, the new name for the burned-over district. They used tent canvas to make huts against the standing

chimneys and half-crumbled brick walls. They ate beans and rice when they were lucky and begged on the streets when they were not.

One day I noticed that the plants grown from Momma's seeds had been killed by the frost, the stalks dead on the ground, with shriveled paper leaves. A lump of mud stuck in my throat. I had forgotten to care for them. I collected the few seeds left from the flower heads and wrapped them in a scrap of cloth that I laid under the loose board in the pantry, where I had hidden my sliver of lead from the King's statue.

As the weather turned colder, Lady Seymour's mind cleared and her body strengthened. She could walk with help and move the crippled arm some, but her mouth still dragged at the corner and her speech was hard to follow. Madam was not entirely pleased that her husband's aunt was mending. I heard her grumble to Lockton that "the old biddy will never die, just to spite us."

A month or so after the fire, I was setting down a clean pitcher of water in Lady Seymour's bedchamber whilst Madam read the newspaper aloud to her. I thought the Lady was dozing, but her eyes snapped open when Madam described how British soldiers had looted the City Hall library. They stole books, ruined paintings, and broke scientifical equipment stored there by the professors of King's College.

Lady Seymour made Madam repeat the entire story, then demanded pen and ink and paper, fighting her way out from the blankets with her good arm. Once dressed warmly and settled at the writing table, she composed a strongly worded letter about the library destruction to General Howe, supreme commander of the Royal forces, and called for a glass of brandy and a bowl of soup.

After that it fell to me to walk with Lady Seymour along Wall Street on days when the sun was strong. She hired three seamstresses to sew her a new wardrobe and included a heavy skirt and thick woolen cloak for me in the order. I protested that I could not pay for the clothes, but Lady Seymour simply pointed to the portrait of the yellow-haired man, her husband, on the mantel and his letters stacked next to it.

"We'll not discuss payment again," she said slowly.

"Thank you, ma'am," I said.

After the pigs had been slaughtered and fresh pork was for sale in the market, another wave of British officers moved in and set up their camp beds in the second-floor drawing room. The long dining table was covered end to end with maps. The men would stand over them, chins in their hands, trying to figure out how to finish off the rebels. They were now scheming to finish the war in time for the New Year. Battles and skirmishes were fought on the north part of New York Island, though the city was safe.

Whilst they plotted Washington's downfall, I dozed in a chair in the hallway in case they needed victuals or a bottle of port. Sleep was a rare and precious thing to me in those days.

The next day I was yawning hard as I trudged up to the Tea Water Pump. The November wind carried the promise of snow, and I was glad for the new cloak Lady Seymour had given me. Soon I would need rags to wrap round my hands.

My muddled head did not register the great hullabaloo at first, but then my ears awoke. Folks were shouting and

hurrying toward the Greenwich Road where it dumped out onto the Commons. I was not sure what the race was for, but I lifted my skirts and joined along with it.

"They got them!" cheered a red-faced man, throwing both of his arms into the air. "They got them all."

By the time I made it to the Commons, I had to fight my way to the front of the cheering mob. The end of the Greenwich Road was lined with British soldiers, relaxed and laughing as their prisoners—captured American soldiers—walked three to a row between their enemies through the doors of the Bridewell Prison.

"Was there a battle?" I asked a serving girl next to me.

"Up the fort," she answered. "Them Hessians killt lots. Blood was running like water, they say. They fired them cannons from the ships. Blew arms and legs everywhere. Heads, too."

I nodded, unable to think what I should say. A chant started in the crowd, and singing. I did not join in, nor did I throw clods of mud as many did, including the bloodthirsty girl next to me.

The rebels kept coming in, row after filthy row, most with their heads down, some limping with a crutch or an arm in a sling. Their uniforms were torn and tattered. A few walked barefooted over the icy cobblestones, flinching when hit square with mud or a rock. They carried neither flag nor weapons. Their breath billowed like they were hard-ridden horses. It hung around their heads like smoke.

He was toward the end of the line, with the other enlisted slaves, his head bent forward, his face invisible. A bloody bandage was tied above his right knee, and it looked painful to step with his right foot.

The only way I knew him was that hat, nearer brown

than red now, with a rip through the brim, and the ring in his ear.

The guards shoved the last of the prisoners, including the boy with the red-brown hat, through the doors of the prison and closed them with a loud metal *clang*.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Sunday, November 17–
Sunday, November 24, 1776

WE HAVE NOW GOT NEAR 5000 PRISONERS IN NEW-YORK AND MANY OF THEM ARE SUCH RAGAMUFFINS, AS YOU NEVER SAW IN YOUR LIFE . . .
–LETTER OF A BRITISH OFFICER, PUBLISHED IN THE *LONDON PACKET* NEWSPAPER

I HAD NO TIME TO PONDER CURZON'S fate. Madam commanded that a supper be thrown to celebrate the capture of Fort Washington, complete with turtle soup.

The house fair exploded with dust and activity. The junior officers cleared out their cots, clothing, and maps from the second-floor drawing room so we could scrub and polish it from ceiling to floor. The kitchen hearth was crowded with irons heating to press the tablecloths and serviettes.

Madam hired the cook from the City Tavern to prepare the meal. Folks said he had a way with turtles. She then chose the prettiest of the soldierwives to wait at the tables. The ugly ones and Sarah with her big belly were to stay in the kitchen to assist the cook, and wash up. My job was to ferry the food up the stairs and the dirty crockery down.

The food began arriving long before sunup, packed into crates and hauled by sleepy-eyed boys. Three turtles each the

size of a footstool came in a wooden pen. The sound of their flippers scratching made Sarah yelp in fright. Two of the turtles kept their heads tight against their shells. The third stretched out his neck and watched the commotion with wet, solemn eyes.

While we scurried to finish the house, and the cook butchered the turtles and plucked the pheasants, the hairdresser arrived to tend to Madam. He spent hours applying pomantum wax, padding, and lengths of brick-colored hair to fashion a high roll on Madam's head. The hair swept off her brow and soared into the air like a wave curling before a ship's prow. I thought the wave might crumble, but Madam did not ask my opinion. She wanted a pot of hot chocolate made with two handfuls of sugar, which was a shocking amount.

Sarah and the cook were exchanging heated words in the kitchen. Empty turtle shells stood drying in the corner, and the cook's assistant stirred the thick soup bubbling over the fire. I grabbed the chocolate pot and left, not wanting to see what became of the poor creatures' heads.

As I served the hot chocolate and tidied the chamber, Madam rubbed her face with Venetian Bloom Water beauty wash, said to remove wrinkles. After that came a layer of Molyneux's Italian Paste to make her skin white as bleached linen. It made her resemble a corpse.

And then, the final triumph. She used a tiny brush to paint a thin line of glue above each eye. Madam opened an envelope and shook out two gray strips of mouse fur, each cut into an arch. Leaning toward the mirror, she glued the mouse fur onto her own eyebrows, making them bushy and thick as the fashion required.

It truth, she looked like a woman with two lumps of mouse fur stuck on her face.

A delicate bell sounded overhead–Lady Seymour summoning help.

"The guests will be arriving soon," Madam said, admiring her reflection. "Aunt Seymour wishes to be seated in advance of them. You may assist her."

After I helped the Lady limp from her chamber to her place near the head of the long table, I placed a foot warmer filled with hot coals under her chair and spread a woolen blanket on her lap. She thanked me kindly and looked about.

"When I was young, we dined thus every night," she said with a sigh.

I could scarce credit it. The table was covered by the finest linen tablecloth I'd ever seen. Each place had china plates, crystal glasses, and ivory-handled knives and forks. Candles were positioned every three hands. Saltcellars, each with a tiny spoon, and pepper mills were set in easy arm's reach of each place. Smaller tables and sideboards were positioned at the edges of the room to hold trays and dishes. One table was covered with wine bottles.

Candlelight reflected back and back again in the polished mirrors that hung from the walls. I caught a glimpse in the hearth mirror of a girl with a mark on her cheek that trumpeted her shame. I quickly turned my eyes away.

There was a heavy knock on the front door.

"It begins," Lady Seymour said. "Go below, child."

I set the tray loaded with the turtle soup bowls on the table by the door. Three more trays needed to be brought up the

stairs, but I allowed myself a quick peek at the company before I fetched them.

The table was crowded with officers wearing splendid uniforms and perfectly powdered wigs along with several of Master Lockton's business companions. Lockton wore a cardinal red satin waistcoat, black satin coat and breeches, and shoes with silver buckles. The new clothes could not hide the fact that the master was grinding himself down with work. Long hours serving the British commandant had melted off the fat from his second and third chins and created heavy black circles under his eyes. But his bags of gold grew fatter, and that was what he cared for the most.

Madam reigned over her end of the table with the occasional flutter of her fan, the wave of hair above her brow threatening to crash at any moment. Lady Seymour, the only other woman present, looked like an elegant spider wrapped in her black lace shawl. Her eyes were lively in the candlelight and her cheeks had color in them for the first time in weeks. The officer next to her was the size and shape of Edward, the shaggy bull who lived down the road from us in Rhode Island. The man did not have a ring in his nose, but he laughed with an impatient snorting sound.

I hurried up and down the stairs with the remaining trays of soup, then the roasted tongue and mushrooms. The serving girl cut the meat on Lady Seymour's plate before setting it down so that the weakness of her arm would not hinder her. The young soldier who was appointed wine steward danced around the backs of the guests, keeping their glasses full. The conversating flowed as fast as the wine—the taking of Fort Washington, news from London, plans for a fox hunt. At this last, an officer joked that the next fox would be a tall sort from Virginia, by the name of

George Washington. That caused hearty laughter all around and glasses raised.

A serving girl hissed at me to go back to the kitchen.

When I entered the room a half hour later, my arms shook under the weight of the tray. The cook had prepared enough to feed a battalion: pheasant stuffed with figs, stewed oysters, potted larks, greens cooked with bacon, pickled watermelon rind, and buttered parsnips. The pheasant smelled good. I had hopes that some might find its way into the scraps bucket.

By the time I lugged in the dessert tray—rice pudding, lemon biscuits, two creamed pear tarts, and an iced cake—the fire was blazing and the room much warmer. Lockton had freed the top buttons of his waistcoat, and two of the officers had loosened their lace neck cloths. The heat had softened the glue of Madam's left mousy eyebrow, and it had begun to free itself from her face. She did not notice this. The serving girls and wine steward watched the progress of the eyebrow and fought to keep the smiles from their faces.

The voices of the men were loud and booming, as if the wine they drank affected their hearing. I handed a plate of tart to one of the serving women, who carried it to the table and set it in front of Colonel Hawkins.

"So how many rebel prisoners did your men bag, Colonel?" asked Master Lockton.

I passed another dish of tart.

The colonel shook his head. "Near three thousand of the devils. Wish we could have shot them all."

My hand shook as I reached for the third.

"Why so?" Lockton asked.

"We've no place to put them." The colonel pushed the

tart to the side and reached into the bowl of shelled almonds in the middle of the table. He tossed a few into his mouth and crunched loudly.

"I thought you were using the Bridewell," Lockton said. "That should provide ample space."

The colonel snorted and shook his head. "The prison is so stuffed, the walls are ready to burst. We've had to pack them into the sugarhouses and the confiscated churches, too." He reached for more nuts. "It's a right nuisance. Never thought we'd have so many."

"I'd say so many prisoners are a badge of honor for your men and the King," Lockton said.

The colonel raised an eyebrow. "We do not need a badge of honor. We need a decent plague to take them off our hands." The men around the table chuckled. "The expense of feeding them will be staggering."

"The rebels planted the seeds of war, let them enjoy their harvest." Lockton ate a forkful of tart. "Force the local Patriots to feed them."

"I say shoot 'em," growled the man who looked like Edward the bull. "'Course then we have to dispose of the bodies. Messy work, that."

"Waste of ammunition," the colonel said. "And some members of Parliament would fuss like wet hens. No, I predict a cold winter will dispatch most of them in a natural way."

Lady Seymour spoke up. "What if the rebels decide that turnabout is fair play? We need to care for them so they do not harm their British captives."

"With all due respect, ma'am," the man said with a smile, "the rebels would first have to capture a prisoner. Given their blunders, it is an unlikely prospect."

Lady Seymour nodded gravely. "What of the prisoners they took after their victory at Breed's Hill?"

The table fell very still at that. Talk of what happened at Breed's Hill in Boston was as rude as stating that Madam's false eyebrow was about to fall off. But Lady Seymour was the wealthy, elderly widow of a British lord, incapable of social error, so all pretended she had not said a word.

Several men cleared their throats and reached for their wine. Madam lifted her goblet.

"I am told there are plans to reopen the John Street theater," she said loudly. "This heralds a return to civilization and order."

Her eyebrow flopped into the rice pudding. The man seated to her right coughed loudly into his napkin. The wine steward's face turned the color of a plum, and a serving girl bit down on her lip to prevent a laugh.

Madam avoided looking at her pudding. "A toast," she said with a wobbling voice.

"A toast to civilization!" Lockton added. "I've heard plans for a cricket club, too."

As the men roared in approval, I carried the tray loaded with the dirty supper dishes down the stairs. On my return trip upstairs I carried two pots of coffee. My trips up and down the stairs continued until my knees threatened to fold up and quit, bringing dishes down, carrying more delicacies and hot drinks up. Down, up, down, up, a hundred miles of stairs in one night.

As the candles guttered out and were replaced with new, Madam and Lady Seymour retired to their bedchambers and Lockton's business companions left to play billiards at the King's Head tavern. The officers requested more coffee, lit their pipes, and unrolled their maps across the tablecloth,

stained now with splashes of turtle soup, butter, wine, and candle wax.

The serving girls moved down to the kitchen, where kettles of water were put on to boil for the washing of the dishes. The cook was long departed, and Sarah dozed on a kitchen chair, her swollen feet propped up on a pillow.

I picked up the enormous bowl of table scraps and headed out the back door. Miss Mary Finch always mixed table scraps with muck and spread the smelly mess on her garden come spring, but the Locktons weren't much for growing things, not when the markets were so close to hand. Scraps here were dumped down the privy.

I closed the door behind me and stopped. The cold air took my breath away. The sky was a black curtain; the stars, ice chips whittled by an old knife. I wrapped the shawl tighter across my shoulders and pulled it high to protect my neck.

Through the kitchen window I could see two of the women squabbling about who would wash and who would dry. The second floor windows glowed with candlelight shadowed by the shapes of the officers circling around the map.

I shuddered and my teeth banged together. Water would turn solid tonight. It was a bad night to be without a blanket.

Would they truly allow prisoners to freeze to death?

The soldierwives stopped arguing, and the men lit fresh candles. The stars wheeled above me and inside, deep inside, something turned. I could not name it nor recognize its form. I drew in a cold breath and blew it skyward. The air came out of me in the shape of a cloud. It drifted above the rooftop and dissolved into the stars.

Would they let him starve?

The stars said not a word.

The back door banged open and I jumped. "Don't tarry," said Sarah. "You need to dry the last of them glasses afore you lay yourself to sleep."

"Yes, ma'am. As soon as I finish this."

I quickly carried the scraps bowl out into the yard, walking past the privy, all the way back to the stable wall where straggly holly bushes grew. I glanced quick at the house to make sure no one was watching, then pulled aside the prickly branches of the bush and set the bowl down within it. I covered the bowl with my apron. On my way back to the house, I loaded my arms with firewood. I doubted she'd notice that I left the bowl outside, not with me bringing in extra wood.

I took another deep breath of the frozen air before I opened the door, confused that I should be so awake after such a long day. I frowned as my thoughts tumbled and multiplied.

I had been invaded. A dim plan had hatched itself in my brainpan without my consent, and I did not much like it.

CHAPTER XXXV

Monday, December 2, 1776

YOUNG MEN, YE SHOULD NEVER
AGAIN FIGHT AGAINST YER KING!
–SCOTTISH SERGEANT SCOLDING REBEL TROOPS
AFTER THE DEFEAT OF FORT WASHINGTON

I HAD TO WAIT THREE DAYS TO SNEAK up to the prison.

My chance came when Madam received an invitation from a friend who had moved into an abandoned rebel mansion in Greenwich Village, north of the city line. Madam smiled in triumph as she read the note, then told me to clean her best shoes. After the midday meal, the soldierwives helped Lady Seymour and Madam into the carriage. I brought out foot warmers filled with hot coals and heavy blankets to lay over the women for the air was crackling and cold.

The driver snapped the whip above the heads of the horses, and the carriage rolled away. The soldierwives waited until it was out of sight, then dashed off to visit their own friends. When they were gone, the house stood empty for the first time in months.

I lined my shoes and cap with newspaper to keep out the wind and emptied the leftovers hiding under the holly bush into a bucket that I covered with an old rag.

I stood across the street from the Bridewell Prison and pondered hard.

Don't do this. Don't do this.

All around the Commons folks went on their business, soldiers rubbing the cold out of their fingers, women wrapped in long cloaks and thick shawls. They walked over the ground where the gallows had been built last summer, where they hung the traitor Hickey. Back in August the Patriots had torn it down to use the wood for the barricades. The British had built their own hangman's platform at the opposite end of the Commons. It could kill three people at a time.

The ashes in my soul stirred.

Don't do this.

Men stood at the windows of the prison, calling out to those who passed by. Few folk looked in their direction, pretending that the noise came from the throats of the crows circling overhead.

Go back. 'Tis not your affair.

The whispers in my brainpan grew louder as I crossed the street.

Madam will beat you bloody, he's not your concern, it's not your place. Go back, go back before it's too late.

The crows cawed and wheeled and beat their shiny black wings against the wind-whipped clouds. They saw everything. I stopped in front of the iron-studded oak door and frowned.

He freed me from the stocks. He is my friend. My only friend.

With that, the ashes settled and shushed. My arm lifted light as a feather and pounded the door knocker.

A giant guard opened up. "Wot do ye want?" he growled. He looked like he had been fashioned by setting boulders atop boulders; his hands were iron mallets and his face rough-carved out of granite. He was a mountain clothed in a lobsterback uniform.

"'Nother do-gooder," he grunted, when I explained my mission. He lifted the corner of the rag that covered my bucket and sniffed. "You got anyfink tasty in there?"

"Scraps, sir. The mistress normally feeds them to the pigs, but she's a good soul and told me to bring them for the prisoners," I lied.

He grunted, peered into the bucket, and poked through it with a finger. "Rice pudding?"

"Yes, sir."

The guard crossed the room, took a bowl down from a shelf, and used a spoon to dish the rice pudding from the bucket. "And you're kin to this boy you seek?" he asked.

"My older brother, sir," I lied. "Always was a stubborn cuss. Made Momma cry herself to sleep at night."

"Why ain't yer mother here then?"

"She's dead, sir." That much was true.

The guard was more interested in rice pudding than my patchwork story. He shoveled several spoonfuls in his mouth and chewed while looking me over.

"Come on then," he said, taking a ring of keys from a hook on the wall. "I'll give ye a little time."

The sound of his key turning in the lock brought back my time in the City Hall dungeon with the madwoman and the rats. Despite the cold, a trickle of sweat inched down my backbone. We walked down a hall lined with four doors on each side and at the end, a staircase. He stopped at the last door on the right and unlocked it.

"'Ere we go," he said.

The cell was little bigger than the one I had been confined in. It was filled with men and boys milling around like nervous cattle herded into a goat pen. There was no fire burning, nay, not even a hearth where it could burn. A short man dressed in black peered out of the cell's one window, stuck in the middle of the outside wall. The man's collar was flipped up to protect his neck, his hat was pulled down, and his hands were stuck in his armpits for warmth. The window had bars across it, but no glass. It was an empty hole open to the rain, wind, and snow.

All turned to stare as we entered.

"Girl come to see her brother," the guard said.

"Excuse me, sir," I said as he started to close the door. "What about my bucket?"

He smiled. "Needs further inspection."

No one said anything nor moved until the guard finished relocking the door and his footsteps echoed down the hall.

"You'll be wanting him in the corner," said the short man by the window. "Show her."

A few of the prisoners stepped to the side so I could see a bundle of rags on the floor. Curzon was lying on the stones, with no blankets covering him nor a pallet under him, not even straw. His leg was still wrapped in the bloody bandage, his lips were dry and cracked. He clutched his hat in one hand.

I crouched next to him, unsure what to do. The soldiers around us grew tired of staring and returned to their low conversating. I leaned close to figure if he was breathing. Finally, I put my lips to his ear.

"Are you dead?" I whispered.

He answered without moving. "No, Country. Are you?"

I near jumped out of my skin. "Curzon?"

His eyes opened slow, bloodshot and bleary.

"Can you sit up?" I asked.

"Suppose so."

I helped pull him upright. He winced and leaned against the wall, shaking with chills.

"Here." I untied my heavy cloak and laid it over him.

He protested. "You don't have to—"

I interrupted him. "Hush. Did you get shot?"

He pulled the cloak up under his chin and shivered again. "In the leg. My luck held, though; bullet went in and out fair clean. Didn't break the bone." He stopped as a man nearby broke into a fit of coughing.

I sat next to him. "Was it awful?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"When the redcoats invaded," he started, "we raced up the island to the fort. Figured we'd hold there for months, then drive them from the city come spring when our forces would be stronger."

"Ha!" spat the man closest to us. He rolled over to face the wall.

"Did you shoot a gun?" I asked.

"Mostly dug ditches and carried rocks. The soldiers, they worked alongside us, and they drilled to get ready. When the battle finally started, the men fired their guns so fast the barrels grew hot. The cannon smoke was thick as fog. I saw the most horrid sights, Country, not fit for the eyes of any person."

He swallowed hard. "I wound up next to a militia boy

from Connecticut. He'd just learned to shave and was a poor hand at it, razor cuts all over his chin. Said he was worried his pa was mad at him on account of he didn't make it home for the apple harvest like he promised."

He fell silent for a moment, then continued. "So this boy, he had two muskets, one his own, the other from a fella who died on Long Island. When the Hessians came at us, the boy would shoot one gun, whilst I reloaded the other. We continued thus, loading and shooting, loading and shooting half the day.

"The British moved their small cannons up the hill and took aim, but I loaded. He shot." He paused to wipe his eyes on his sleeve. "As I handed him his gun, a cannonball ripped his head from his body."

We sat without a word. The ashes within me swirled and filled up my throat again. Around us men muttered low and coughed.

Curzon let his tears run. "After that, I shot the guns for myself. Took the bullet in my leg, but kept firing. An hour or so later, Colonel Magaw surrendered the fort. We laid down our weapons and walked out. The British called for our officers to walk forward, and we feared they'd be shot."

"Were they?" I asked.

"Not hardly." He sat up a little straighter. "Officers get special treatment on account of they're considered gentlemen. They have parole to walk around the city. They live in boardinghouses and eat regular."

The man who faced the wall muttered a string of curses that echoed against the stones. He said every kind of bad word imaginable about officers, gentlemen, the war, the British, and the Congress, and he cursed himself for leaving his wife and farm in Maryland.

Curzon's tears dried, leaving a thin trail of salt down his cheeks. "You should go home now."

Before I could ask one of a hundred questions, the key turned in the lock and the guard appeared. He stuck out my bucket. "Inspection complete," he said, wiping a smear of butter off the side of his face.

I stood, walked to the door, and looked in the bucket. Half of the food was gone.

"May I stay a while longer?" I asked.

"Sing out when you need me," the guard said with an unsettling wink.

As soon as the door was relocked, a man with powder burns on his face snatched the bucket from my hands. "I'll take that," he snarled.

I held tight to the handle and shouted, "Give it back!"

The man grabbed my arm, his fingers like the claws of a panther.

"Enough!" shouted a powerful voice.

The cell fell silent as a tomb.

The short man dressed in black limped over to us from his post by the window. "Release that bucket, Private Dibdin," he ordered.

The thief did as he was asked but crossed his arms over his chest and stood his ground. "She brought food for the black boy, Sergeant," he complained. "T'aint right for the slave to eat while we starve."

The tiny sergeant stood motionless. Somewhere water was dripping. "No one here will starve long as I have breath." He turned to me. "Excuse the poor manners, miss, but we've not eaten for three days. Hungry men are sometimes rude."

"I understand," I said.

"Would you be willing to share what you've brought?" he asked. "We would all be most grateful."

I looked the sergeant in the eye. He wasn't much taller than me. "There's not enough to feed everyone."

"I know that, miss. But we're all equal hungry."

"Don't fuss, Country," Curzon asked. "We fought together, we'll eat together."

Outside a heavy cart rolled down Broadway, the driver calling to his horses. There was an argument from the cell on the other side of the wall and a thump from the one above.

I handed the bucket to Curzon.

The nasty man dug his claws into my shoulder. "The sergeant goes first."

I waited for him to release me, fighting the urge to bite his wrist down to the bone. Once he let go, I gave the bucket to the sergeant. He looked inside and pulled out a piece of pie crust the length of my finger. He handed the bucket to Curzon, who removed a long parsnip peel.

The bucket made its way around the room at a snail's pace as each man studied the contents and chose a small portion of discarded potato or bread or gristle. When it was returned to me I was confuddled.

"There's still food in here," I said.

"These are fine men," the sergeant said with pride. "Each took his portion without stealing from the next. Mind if we send it round again?"

"No, sir."

As the bucket went down the line again, the sergeant motioned for me to stand with him close to the wall.

"I wonder if I might ask a favor."

"What kind of favor?" I asked.

"We need to pass messages on to our captain. He'll be able to get word out of the city. Some of the other womenfolk who bring food to the prisoners are helping in this manner."

"I can't spy for you."

"No, no, not a spy. Simply a message carrier. You come by here, I drop a word or two in your ear, and you pass it along."

"It will put me in danger."

"It's a way for you to continue our fight for freedom."

The bucket was moving more quickly the second time around.

"I cannot, sir." I was not fool enough to let the Patriots hurt me again.

The key sounded in the lock as the bucket returned to my hands, wiped empty this time. The guard entered. Curzon struggle to his feet and handed me my cloak. "Here."

"No," I said. "You keep it."

"As soon as I fell asleep, it would be . . . borrowed, little sister. Bring it the next time you come."

I wrapped the warm cloak around my shoulders and was struck with a sudden notion. I pulled the newspaper out from my cap and quickly removed the pages lining my shoes. "Can you use this?"

"Hurry up," said the guard.

Curzon smiled. "Just what I need for a bed," he said. "Go on home now."

I nodded, grateful to be leaving and heavy with guilt. "You'll be here when I return?"

"Don't plan on leaving anytime soon," he said.