

## ***BEYOND BRANDYWINE***

### **PART I: JULY- SEPTEMBER 1777**

#### **CHAPTER 1 --SCOTLAND**

Gillis turned his back to the familiar peaks of his home. He'd not likely see Skye again and preferred to leave with the rare sun-washed image of the rough highland terrain freshest in his mind. Winding between tradesmen and travelers feverishly trying to keep their packages from sliding across the spray-slicked deck, he pushed toward the front of the boat. It was a short trip to the Scottish mainland and he could already see the stones of a ruined castle among the boulders of the far shore.

"Is it Eilean Donan?" he asked an old, bent man who sat on a bench wedged in the boat's prow.

"No," the old man said with a rattling cough. "It's some other useless castle the English have pulled down."

"When?" Gillis asked as he took a flask from his shirtfront and sat.

"Och, I dinnae ken if it was after the rising of '15 or '45. Does it matter? It is just a heap of stones today." The old man accepted the flask, raised it in salute, then took a deep draw. Handing it back, he snorted and spat over the gunwale. "Yer lookin' a bit peely wally. I thought all ye Danes took to the sea like otters."

Light-haired in a land of dark Celts, Gillis was accustomed to inferences about his likely descent from invaders. He was, however, surprised that the old man had discerned his seasickness. He looked more closely at his companion and his glance was met by sharp, black eyes that glinted with a spark the younger man knew well. It was the look of one, like himself, who enjoyed a bit of a scrap, whether fought with words or fists. “Ye look old enow to have known the first Danes who came to the Isles. Did ye never inquire why they stayed?” Gillis asked, allowing himself to slip into the lilting brogue he’d worked for years to suppress. “Now granted, this land of ours is as lush as a garden.” He raised his hand and gestured at the craggy slopes of the mainland shore as the wind made his light gray eyes water. “But still, did ye no wonder?”

The old man crossed his arms on his chest and stretched his long, thin legs out before him. “I’d always thought it because of the warmth of our women.” He tilted his head toward a stout, red-faced woman whose complaints could be heard over the creak of the rigging. Gillis gave a little shudder. “Well, it was not for yer shite whiskey,” the old man said, signaling that Gillis should again pass him the whiskey. “So, tell me, why *did* they choose to stay?” he asked, tipping the flask.

“They dinnae choose it. It was chosen for them by their mates who’d tired of cleaning their mess off the dragon boats. For ye see, hate for the sea runs as deep in m’ family as does the yellow hair.”

“Yer bum’s oot the windae,” the old man said laughing. He pointed at the bulging sack Gillis had set between his feet. “So, why do ye now choose to leave it? Where are ye headed?”

“To Stirling for the muster and then on to America.”

The smile slipped from the old man’s face. “So, ye mean to fight as a Redcoat. Have ye no pride, no honor?”

Gillis stood. Not meeting the old man's gaze, he watched the rapidly approaching shore. "Pride and honor are words used by a broken people to explain why they don't dare change their beaten ways. If fighting for the English is the price I must pay to leave this land they've ruined, then fight for them I will." He waited for a response, but none came, and he turned and looked again at his companion, who had drawn his coat tighter about himself, seeming to have shrunk into his own thoughts.

The boat shuddered as its keel dug into the gravel shelf of the Scottish mainland. Not waiting for the gangplank to be extended to the beach, Gillis climbed over the gunwale and landed in the thigh-deep, icy water. "Shall I help ye ashore?" he asked.

"No, I have no business off Skye and come only for the ride," the old man said with a faint smile.

Gillis extended his hand and the old man took it between his twisted fingers. "What do they call ye, Dane?"

"Gillis MacLeod."

"Go then, MacLeod. I'll read for ye on the list of the dead."

## CHAPTER 2 --PENNSYLVANIA

Three unfamiliar horses stood tied to the orchard fence. Slack-lipped and with lids half lowered, they dozed in the afternoon heat. Though they'd recently been shod, Robin saw it had not been by her father. Richard Parker was the best farrier and blacksmith on the Brandywine; this work was sloppy. *Not at all a good way to start a journey*, Robin thought, noting the packs strapped to the saddles.

Closer to the smithy, a dozen horses churned in the paddock. Crowded in a corner a young mare wrinkled her lip, ready to fight her way out of the melee. Robin climbed the paddock fence and, clutching the mare's halter, led her through the roiling mass of rumps and necks and through the gate. Hitching the mare to a post, Robin strode toward the smithy but stopped outside, surprised to hear her father's voice rise above the rhythmic ring of his hammer.

"I told you no last week, and no it stays. I won't run from a fight, but I can't go seek it."

"Why? Everyone knows you favor independence."

"I don't see how I owe anyone an explanation." Richard Parker paused then added more softly, "I've seen what happens to girls left behind during war. I won't take that chance."

“For the love of God, Richard. This is the Brandywine Valley not the wilds of the Allegheny. And, these are the English. They may be tyrants, but don’t make them out to be like the French or Indians you fought as a Ranger. Your daughter will be fine.”

“Men are men, regardless of their uniforms. They may not take her scalp, but she’d still be a tempting diversion from a wet bedroll and scant rations. I saw things in the last war that made me hope I’d never have a daughter, and not all at the hands of the enemy.”

“Any Redcoat who tangled with Robin would have to be mad,” a younger voice chimed.

“Or in desperate need of spectacles,” another added.

Laughter rolled through the open smithy door and Robin felt her fingertips tingle with anger as the taunting she tolerated at school intruded into her home. Her father insisted the boys simply teased because they didn’t know how else to act with a girl who knew her own mind. But, Robin suspected their mocking had more to do with the fact that, at fourteen, her body was only grudgingly surrendering the flat planes of childhood while her face already had the strong lines of a woman’s. Even her name was a source of amusement to boys whose sisters were named for feminine virtues – Prudence, Grace, Hope – not folklore outlaws.

Robin stepped into the smithy and the laughter stopped. A jowly man stood by a heavy gelding. Two youths leaned against a stall wall, their sparsely haired chins jutting with pride. Each held a rifle in the crook of his arm as if something in the smithy might need immediate shooting. Robin suspected neither was as good a shot as she, but she envied how their larger hands wrapped easily around the weapons. Her father hunched at the big gelding’s backside and crescents of hoof flew from his blade. “Leave mocking Robin to the women. She may not be sweet and mild like the Quaker ladies, but she’s a good girl and that’s the way I mean to keep her.” Straightening with a grunt, he smiled at Robin in the

smithy doorway. “You’re blushing from bodice to brow. For once you look more like a robin than a sparrow.” The boys laughed and Robin glared at them until they retreated to the yard.

Her father led the gelding out of the smithy and his visitor jogged to keep pace. Though he tried to speak quietly, a breeze carried his words. “If you really think Redcoats capable of harming women, you’d better get your daughter away. The British will surely march on Philadelphia.”

Robin’s father said nothing, only raised his hand in farewell as the threesome mounted and pointed their horses down the farm lane. He led the young mare into the smithy and, tying her, examined her hooves. As he bent, the muscles of his back and shoulders flexed under his sweat-soaked linen shirt. Hard work had kept him lean; and Robin knew that at forty-two he was by no means too old for soldiering.

“They wanted you to go with them,” she said picking out horseshoes that might fit the mare. She passed them to her father.

“It’s understandable. There are few here willing to go with the militia. The lack of men joining from town makes us appear to be Tories.”

“The Quakers aren’t Tories. They just don’t believe in fighting.”

“You don’t have to believe in fighting to be killed by a war. Besides, somethings are worth fighting for.”

“So, it sounds like you *do* mean to go,” Robin said, angrily. “That’s fine for you, but I won’t go live with the women. They’re horrible with their mindless prattle about sewing and soap and whatever other nonsense.”

“I didn’t say I was going. But, if I do, you’ll go where I send you. And Lord knows you could benefit from the company of women.”

Feeling his gaze follow her, Robin became painfully aware of the sooty smudge on her sleeve, the rings of sweat under her arms. When her father spoke, however, his tone was soft. “You could indeed use a bit of polish. Still, you are a pretty little thing.” Robin groaned. “What? There’s nothing wrong with being pretty. Your mother was a beauty and still utterly competent.” He reached out and cupped Robin’s chin, examining her face. Refusing to wear a bonnet, Robin’s skin had darkened and her brown hair was striped with gold and silver. Her amber eyes were wide-set and large, though the frequent smiles that animated her face made them seem smaller. A spray of freckles covered her narrow, slightly hooked nose. “Carolyn’s golden hair and blue eyes may have been more striking than your shades of brown, but you do look a great deal like her.”

Robin jerked free of his touch and walked stiffly out of the smithy. Throwing open the garden gate, she grabbed a hoe. Spotting a large beetle, she struck it a shell-splitting blow then watched with satisfaction as its legs thrashed the powdery dirt. Others frequently compared her to her mother, rarely with flattering results. This, however, was the first time she could recall her father doing so and the experience had chilled her, like a cloud passing between her and the sun.

Hoeing between rows of beans, she breathed deep the tang of crushed weeds and tried to stifle her rising panic as the suspicion that her father would indeed leave for the fighting took hold. For the first time in many years, she wished her mother there, sure that if Carolyn Parker lived, her father would not be tempted to leave. Robin tried to remember her mother’s face, her voice, even her smell, but nothing came.

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Spinning and ducking in well-practiced patterns, Robin and her father worked through the days of early September in a companionable silence. In the evenings, however, a new tension charged the air between them. From the hearth, Robin could hear the rattle of papers and the drum of her father's heels as he paced the parlor. Whenever a moment alone allowed it, Robin would rummage through the drawers of his desk and read the pamphlets and broadsides that spoke of the progress of the war. She was beginning to understand that, with each day that passed in small skirmishes to the south, it became more likely the British would advance on the Continental capital. The Parker home lay adjacent to Chadds Ford, where an important road to Philadelphia crossed the river. Robin could not imagine what that would mean for them – to have a battle rage in their village -- but she saw her father's growing agitation and it was unsettling.

Looking about the kitchen at the work that needed to be done, Robin drew a deep breath. She wasn't sure if it was the heat of the hearth or her father's silence that pressed on her chest like a stone, but she defiantly walked out to the twilight farmyard. Winding listlessly between the twisted trunks of the orchard trees, she looked up at the sudden splash of a horse at the ford. Steam rose from the dripping animal into air that held a hint of autumn soon to come. Spotting Robin amid the trees, the rider called out, "Is this the Parker farm?" Robin nodded and the man spurred his horse to a canter.

The fine hairs on Robin's arms rose as she dashed through pockets of cool air trapped between the fruit trees. Breathless, she watched her father beckon the rider from the open parlor door. Sprinting around the house, Robin skipped the porch step that creaked then stood in the dark of the kitchen and watched through the parlor doorway. The stranger offered his hand. "Captain Parker, I'm Lieutenant Edward Calhoun, of the Virginia Regiment under General Stephen."

"It's been a long time since I've held a commission, Lieutenant. Call me Richard." Robin's father shook the man's hand then pointed to the room's only chair. Sitting hesitantly, the young



lieutenant pulled off his hat. His hair flamed like autumn sumac. Under his fringed leather coat, Calhoun wore a spotless, pressed linen shirt. Robin had heard that women followed the soldiers, tending to their needs, but she'd assumed this was only true for the top officers. This man was young and relatively low ranking, yet he apparently had someone who saw to it that he had a clean shirt each day.

"Please bring beer for our guest," Robin's father said. The young officer looked about in confusion. "How is Adam?" Richard asked.

"General Stephen is well and sends his greetings. He would have come himself, but he is indispensable to Washington's planning team."

"I would think so," Richard said, taking the tankard Robin brought to the parlor. He handed it to Calhoun who nodded at her in silent thanks.

"General Stephen and General Wayne both hold you in very high regard, Cap-," the young officer faltered, not knowing which was worse – to address this legendary Ranger by name or defy his instruction to do so. "Sir, I hear you know *everyone*, as well as *everyplace* here along the Brandywine." He took a long swallow of the beer. "I'm here because we're finding good information scarce. Both the Generals are hoping I might be able to enlist your assistance. Your trade and location bring you in contact with many people."

Robin could not see her father's face, but in the silence that followed the young officer's request, she saw his posture soften. He'd been expecting something more.

"I'll try to be helpful," Richard said.

Calhoun gave a sigh of relief. "Excellent, I've been quite out of my element here. These people are not at all like those I know from Virginia." He raised his tankard in salute and smiled.

“I’ll cheers to that,” Richard said though he did not have a cup. When Calhoun had finished his drink, Richard stood, signaling the meeting had come to an end. Robin returned to the kitchen and began to noisily set the supper dishes in order. Through the open passage she heard her father say, “Come by evenings. My daughter may not quite comport with the manners you Virginians expect from your young ladies, but she is a tolerable cook.”

“It’d be an honor,” Calhoun said as he followed Richard out to the yard.

Robin climbed to her bed in the loft above. The sun-warmed shingles creaked as they shrank in the cooling night air. *And as simply as that, it is done*, she thought. *My father now has a role in the war.* Despite the loft’s heat, she pulled her quilt tight to her chin.

### CHAPTER 3 -- SCOTLAND

“My cousin runs a boarding house near the crossing of Broad Street and St Mary’s Wynd just below the castle proper if ye change yer mind and need lodgings,” the old woman said turning to watch Gillis slip to the ground from the back of the ox cart. “I will see him this evening and tell him to kape an eye out for ye.”

“Why must ye mind everyone’s matters? Just, leave the lad be,” her husband said also turning. “He’s tauld ye already that he has made up his mind to join the muster.”

“He did. He did,” the woman agreed with a sad shake of her head. Suddenly she brightened and wagged a fat finger in her husband’s face. “But he hasna put his name in the ledger and may yet come to his senses. Save his skin.”

Gillis walked to the front of the cart and stroked the ox’s shoulder. It turned a kind eye to him then let out a wet snort.

“I appreciate the ride. I hadna many miles left in m’ legs.”

“See, Malcolm. The marching alone will kill the lad,” the old woman said holding up a small sack of provisions and beckoning for Gillis to come take it.

“Thank you, m’ blossom,” Gillis said giving her wrinkled hand a kiss.

The old woman blushed and touched her hand to her cheek like a young girl. “What a sweet charmer ye are. Malcolm was once like ye. Now he’s sour like vinegar.” She reached over and gave her husband’s knee a squeeze as he shook the reins to drive the ox forward.

Gillis waved, then hoisted his gear and looked about. The road the old couple had taken skirted the base of the cliffs from which the mass of Stirling castle rose. He could have ridden on with them to the congested city that climbed the back of the crag to the abbey and royal palace. But he’d heard that the muster was being held on the field on which the famous Battle of Bannockburn had been fought some 450 years earlier. Gillis looked up the cliffs to the stone turrets that jutted from them like slick-sided fungus. Each turret was topped by a Union Jack, not Saint Andrew’s Cross or a clan emblem as they might have been at the end of that long-ago battle.

He walked down the gentle slope and crossed a meadow filled with grazing sheep. As he’d travelled through the lowlands cattle had grown scarce and sheep plentiful. To Gillis, it was a sure sign of national decay. Highlanders were cattlemen and they gloried not only in the orneriness of the furry horned beasts that grazed amid their mountains but also in the joy of steeling them from each other. Stealing sheep that would mindlessly go wherever a barking dog sent them seemed more an act of survival than of clan honor. Gillis picked up a stone and chucked it at a grazing ewe hitting her rump and sending her into a bleating gallop. The other sheep began to dash about and bleat. When the racket abated, Gillis heard a sound that livened his step -- the strange wail of a bagpipe being brought to tune.

Climbing atop the stone wall that hemmed the pasture, Gillis saw spread below an encampment with tents enough to house the residents of twenty highland villages. Women stirred cauldrons the size of washtubs as hundreds of men stood in a field and watched a line of red-coated soldiers march forward, shoulder their weapons, then drop to a knee and go through the motions of reloading while another line stepped forward.

Hurrying down the slope and through the camp, Gillis joined the men watching the drill. The man by his side turned. "Just arrived?"

"Aye," Gillis said with a nod. "It was a long walk from Skye."

"Well, ye made it just in time. We march for Glasgow tomorrow and sail within the week. Ye'll want to see the quartermaster to be assigned a tent and given your kilt and kit." He pointed to a tent at the field's edge. A long line of men snaked from it far into the camp. "Och, pay that line no mind. They are taking any who come. The only skill needed to be a Redcoat is an ability to fall straight when ye're shot so the line behind ye can keep moving forward."

## CHAPTER 4 -- PENNSYLVANIA

A series of storms marshalled in hot, thick air – summer’s final battle before surrendering to the calm of autumn. The scorching heat of the forge filled Robin’s lungs until each breath felt like a punishment. At night, when finally able to strip off her tight bodice, Robin would find the skin on her ribs and belly puckered with damp as though she’d spent the day lazing in the river.

Hoping a little time spent in the open would refresh them, Robin was laying a quilt in the shade of the large elm that shaded a side of the house when a wagon rolled through the farm gate. Richard poured the basin of water he’d used to rinse his face onto a bed of wilted flowers. Rolling down his sleeves, he walked to the wagon which was driven by a plump man in a lopsided wig.

“Are you the blacksmith?”

“I am,” Richard said as the man set the brake and eased down to the ground.

“I’ve a broken axle. Not this wagon, obviously, but another, far side of the ford. It may have been cracked when we left. We were in some haste. Whatever the case, it is broken now. Will you come have a look?”

“I’m no cartwright,” Richard said, though he walked toward the smithy to retrieve his girdle of tools.

“Can’t it wait? I’ve your food ready,” Robin protested, following him.

“Let it cool.”

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The broken wagon stood in the road, canted to one side, cargo stacked by it and covered with a tarp. Two men lounged in the shade of a tree. Richard jumped down and slid under the wagon. A few moments later, a pair of thick, stocking-clad ankles appeared by his side.

“I need to take these parts back to the smithy. I should cast new ones, but, if you’re rushed, I can try to mend these to see you for a while.”

“We must press on. If you can make a temporary repair, I’d prefer it.”

“It should hold if the road isn’t too rough, particularly if you can lighten the load.” Richard shimmied out from under the wagon. Rubbing the dust from his pants, he nodded toward the tarp-covered cargo. “Let’s put as much of that as you think the horse can manage into your wagon. We’ll take it with us. You can water and rest your horse while I make the repairs and return with my own rig. Your men can follow when this wagon is mended.”

The man looked at the cargo with knit brows. Seeing his hesitation, Richard added, “It’s the quickest way to see this done and you on your way.” The man nodded and the two others rose and pulled back the tarps revealing several crates and casks stamped *BARBADOS RUM*.

“I understand your haste,” Richard said, lifting a crate into the wagon. “I’m not sure who’d enjoy lightening your load more, the Lobsters or the Mobsters.” The men laughed and quickly loaded several more crates and casks. Richard and the man climbed to the wagon seat and turned back toward the ford.

As they approached the farm lane, Richard pointed past the smithy. “You’ll want to take the wagon into the barn where it’s less apparent. I’ve had my share of Washington’s troops through here,” he said. Nodding, the man directed his horse into the barn then stepped down and started to undo the harness while Richard took the broken axle to the smithy. On his way, he waved to Robin and she joined him by the forge.

“Once I’ve made the repairs, I’ll be going back.” Robin started to speak but her father stopped her. “The gentleman will want to stay with his load. Try to find out where he’s from and where he’s headed.” Robin again began to object but fell silent when her father reached out and smoothed her hair, which hung from her loose braid in ringlets, the tips dusted white with dried sweat. “Sparrow, please, do this for me. I think it’s important.”

Though her father gave her countless instructions each day, Robin knew this was different. He wasn’t telling her what to do but asking and his voice held an unfamiliar urgency. She nodded and walked to the barn.

“I’ll water your horse, sir. There’s beer set out on the blanket in the shade, and I have pie if you’d care for some.”

“That’s very kind of you. A drink and pie sound wonderful.” The man reached in his pocket and pulled out a coin, but Robin busied herself with the horse and the man shrugged and walked out.

The stranger’s horse settled in the paddock, Robin took a halter to the pasture to bring up Marquis Montcalm, their draft horse. By the time she’d convinced The Marquis to allow her to catch



and hitch him, her father had finished his repairs. Climbing to the wagon bench, he gave her an encouraging smile then snapped the reins and was gone.

Robin slowly walked to the kitchen where she cut a large piece of pie and set it on a plate. Though accustomed to strangers, she was at a loss how she'd start a conversation that might reveal the traveler's plans. She drew a deep breath and, trusting the matter would settle itself, stepped out to the yard and walked to where the man sat on the blanket she'd set out for her father.

The stranger smiled and reached out to accept the plate. "I have a granddaughter who must be about your age. How old are you?" he asked as he forked a piece of pie into his mouth.

"Fourteen."

"I thought you older. Must be your confident manner."

Robin dropped to the blanket by him, all her fear gone. "Most folks think I'm younger since I'm small. Girls in my school who are thirteen are half-head taller."

"School? You're still in school? How very excellent of your father to have arranged that!"

"Quakers – not us, our neighbors, I mean – they teach any who come. Or they did until recently. They're keeping everyone close to home now. Because of all the soldiers."

"Too bad – cancelling lessons that is." He waved his fork above his empty plate and added, "You make an above average pie." He dabbed his lips with a handkerchief. "Did they teach you baking, these Quakers? If so, I'll have to bring some home with me to Newport so they can set up a school. They could stay at my inn and pay their board in pies." Brushing crumbs from his shirt front, he leaned back against the tree. "This is nice country. Not as humid as Newport. That's the one thing nice about having to make this unexpected trip to Sconneltown. The air will be drier there." He closed his eyes and

seemed to fall into a doze. Robin picked up his plate and tankard then walked back to the house, softly repeating “Newport, Sconnelton, Newport, Sconnelton,” with each step.

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As the Parker wagon pulled through the farm gate, the man rose. “Your men have continued on,” Richard said. “They will have to go slowly so I saw no reason for them to stop. You’ll catch them up soon.” The man bobbed his head in agreement then began to count out the fee they’d discussed for the work. Looking past him, Richard caught Robin’s eye and she gave a quick nod then walked to the paddock to retrieve the stranger’s horse.

The exchange of money complete, the man mopped his brow. “I appreciate your haste and your discretion. You’ll find a small token of my gratitude in your barn. Your daughter is quite a young lady.” They watched Robin harness his horse, her head a foot short of its withers. “I wish my granddaughter half as self-assured.”

“I find it’s a mixed blessing,” Richard answered, and they both laughed.

“Well, I hope all goes well for you in the days and weeks to come,” the man said. “Let’s pray that’s all it takes to get this blasted rebellion sorted.”

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That evening, when Lieutenant Calhoun came to the parlor door, Robin welcomed him with a shy smile. “What’s this? A thawing in our relations? Dare I call it friendship? If I may, I’d like to say that I have very much admired the color of your hair.”

“You may not, Lieutenant,” Richard said, from the kitchen doorway. Blushing, Robin pressed by him to the hearth.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to be forward,” Calhoun said.

“It’s fine, Lieutenant. I know you Southern men fall naturally into charming the ladies. But you should beware. It seems *this* young lady has some cunning charms of her own. Shall I tell Calhoun of your work or will you, Robin?”

Robin shook her head and began to set the dinner she’d prepared for them on the table. As they ate, Richard told the young officer about their visitor and how Robin had learned the route he was travelling. When the story was told, Calhoun turned to Robin, “Well done, Miss. I’ll need to guard my secrets, as well as my heart.”

Richard laughed. “Lord sakes, Calhoun. You really are unable *not* to flatter.”

“Apologies! What do you make of it?”

“Of you flirting with my daughter?”

“No, sir. No, I mean of your visitor.”

Richard rocked back in his chair, leaning it against the wall so it balanced on two legs. Robin couldn’t recall her father ever doing anything of the sort. For weeks he’d been pensive, even surly, but tonight, her father seemed happy. *He enjoys this*, Robin thought. *My father enjoys intrigue.*

Richard let his chair drop. “I think our man, who is clearly a Tory, has had some advance warning that the British intend to take Newport and is removing his valuable stores to Sconnetown, where he’s been led to believe they will be safe.”

“Newport doesn’t lie along the direct route to Philadelphia. Washington is preparing for the British to make a direct march. Perhaps this is proof that the real British strategy is to flank.” With these

words, Calhoun rose and pulled on his fringed leather coat. “If that is the case, I have my work cut out for me tonight. I’d better be off.” Cramming a roll into his pocket, Calhoun dashed out the door.

Robin stepped out to the porch and waved as he rode away. Turning, she collided with her father, who had silently stepped out behind her. “Don’t,” he said, his hands on her shoulders.

“Don’t what?” Robin asked.

“Get attached.”

Robin drew a deep breath and nodded slowly. “I understand, because he’s a soldier. Because he could get hurt.”

“Yes, but also because he’s from another world, Robin, a world where people own people.” Richard turned and walked into the kitchen, where he began to help Robin clear the table. “War makes odd bedfellows. Slave owners and abolitionists may be aligned on fighting the English today. But some day, when the English are gone, they will likely fight each other. I don’t see how it can end with anything less. And, I didn’t leave Maryland and move here to live among the Quakers to lose you too to that world.”

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Robin and her father were finishing breakfast when Ben Lang walked through the kitchen door. A Welshman who’d come to Pennsylvania under a contract of indenture, Ben had bought the small tract next to the Parkers’ when his term of labor was done. The property was rocky and fell off steeply to the river, but it was of little matter to Lang who made a good living as a cooper and had no family to feed. As two craftsmen and outsiders among Quakers, Ben and Richard had quickly become friends.

“Newport fell yesterday. They say Washington was taken by surprise and ceded it without a fight,” Ben reported, shaking his head in disgust. “At least you got a bottle of rum for your troubles.” He glanced at Robin, unsure if he should continue in her presence.

“Go on,” Richard said, and Robin realized that having involved her in gathering intelligence, he no longer thought it right to restrict what she heard.

“The Lobsters are headed this way. The Continentals have sent orders to move out all essential equipment. I’ve come to see if you need help.”

“Most of what I use is too heavy even for the English to pilfer. We’ll take the tools with us, but you could help me bury my stores of iron.” Moving toward the door, Richard indicated that Ben should follow but stopped Robin as she rose to do the same. “You stay and pack a week’s supply of food and clothing. We leave at noon.”

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Marquis Montcalm farted as he strained to pull the wagon. Richard waved his hat at the horse’s back end but was unable to coax a smile from Robin. They rode on in silence to Jeffries Ford, where Richard handed the reins to Robin and jumped down. Fearing his saddle horse would resist crossing, he swung up on its back. The big bay pranced at the end of his tether and Richard spoke to him softly, “Come now, your highness, it’s just a bit of water.” When the animal had settled, Robin flapped the reins and drove the wagon into the river. Water rushed around her, reaching nearly to the floorboards of the wagon. Rivulets streamed down The Marquis’ bulging flanks as he pulled the wagon up the far bank. Once clear of the water, Robin set the brake and climbed down with a basket. Her father dismounted and they sat in the shade of the wagon and ate.

“How long?” Robin asked, hoping the mouthful of bread would disguise the tremor in her voice. She’d felt close to tears since the wagon had pulled out of the yard. It wasn’t so much fear as a sense that she’d lost all control or understanding of what would come next.

Her father pushed back his hat and started counting on his fingers. “They’ll jockey for position for another two or three days, spend a day fighting and another two sorting the wreckage before moving on. So, that’s five or six.”

Robin was taken aback by her father’s conversational tone, by his ability to reduce the act of war into discrete tasks with time allotments like she did making soap or putting up preserves. For weeks she’d sensed a shift in her father, a falling back of the man she knew and rising of a man he’d hidden from her, a man who’d gained renown for the ruthless efficiency of his assaults on the French. Robin looked at her father’s handsome face as he lay back for a short rest. With eyes closed, he looked unchanged. Dropping her gaze, she saw the flintlock pistol newly installed in a holster at his side and realized nothing was the same.

##

From the ford, the road rose steeply. Expecting to follow it, Robin was surprised when her father reined The Marquis onto a faint wagon track that led back along the side of the river. The track grew fainter until, plunging into a hemlock grove, it disappeared. Setting the break, her father stepped down. Robin blinked as her eyes became accustomed to the green-tinted darkness. Eventually, she discerned a thin trail winding through the trees. She looked for a cabin but saw only a rock field rising steeply. It was to this scree that her father headed, his arms full of provisions. She grabbed their bedrolls and followed. Breaking out from among the trees, Robin had to steady herself against a boulder, her eyes

blinded by the dazzling light of open sky. Slowly, she worked her way up the scree toward a ledge over which her father had vanished.

Even in the heat of afternoon, the air flowing from the cave was cool and damp. Robin ducked inside and was overcome by the sense that she'd just stepped into the gaping mouth of some sleeping animal – the overhanging rocks like teeth that might clamp shut if it woke. Eager to leave, she set down the bedrolls and hurried back to the wagon.

When the last of their cargo had been ferried to the cave, Robin's father led her down again among the trees. "I'm going home. I'll be back tonight, but it may not be until after dark. You should spend what's left of daylight getting us comfortably settled." He pulled a hand axe from beneath the wagon seat. "Hemlock boughs make good bedding," he said as he passed the axe to her. "Be careful with that. It could hurt someone." His eyes did not leave her face until Robin, who'd killed many an old hen with the same axe, nodded.

As the jingle of The Marquis' harness faded, only the gurgle of the river and the sigh of a breeze through the tops of the hemlocks remained. More out of a desire to make noise than any eagerness for the task, Robin began hacking at the lowest limbs of the ancient trees.

##

Nestling deeper into the fragrant bed of boughs beneath her bedroll, Robin resolutely refused to open her eyes.

"You've done a fine job in here. Looks quite homey," her father said as he lit a fire.

"If you can overlook the damp and utter darkness, it's quite charming," Robin said slowly rising.

They ate in silence and Robin was given her instructions for the day. She was to do nothing – no wandering, no fires, no loud noises. Accustomed to working from dawn to dusk each day, Robin had often dreamed of a day of inactivity but now found the prospect seemed more punishment than reward. She sat at the cave mouth and unhappily watched her father prepare to leave. He dropped a small, ribbon-tied stack of papers in her lap then wordlessly slipped away.

Her hands trembled as Robin untied the silk ribbon and unfolded the first sheet. The paper was yellowed, the corners tattered from too much handling, the ink faded with time. Yet, it was clearly a letter written in a feminine hand. The greeting at the top – *Dearest Carolyn*. The closing at the bottom – *Your loving sister, Catherine*.

Robin laid down the sheet unread and opened the next. In all there were a dozen letters covering from the year of her own birth to when she was six and her mother died delivering a stillborn baby boy. Robin carefully refolded each letter. She hadn't read past the first line of any and resolved not to do so until she'd completed her short list of chores. She told herself this was so she could give them her full attention, but, in truth, Robin knew she was scared what the letters might reveal, how they might shatter the narrative she'd constructed to make life without a mother or siblings seem more an adventure than a lonely slog.

##

As Jeffries Ford came into view, Richard slowed his horse in preparation for a call to halt. No such command came, and he crossed the ford then turned off the main track and kicked the bay gelding to a trot along the river's edge headed downstream.

The clatter of shovels and dull thud of axes reached him before he could see through the thick waterside brush. Urging his horse forward, he broke through the thicket to the road. Startled by his



sudden appearance, soldiers who'd been stacking logs between the trees along the bank, moved toward their muskets. Richard swung off his horse and approached a young officer. "Captain, I'm glad to see you." The officer shook Richard's hand but said nothing. "There was no one at Jeffries Ford and I was concerned that perhaps there was no plan to secure it. When will the rest of your men be arriving?"

"This is it," the young officer said but then frowned, realizing he'd perhaps said too much to a stranger. Chagrined by his mistake, it took a few moments for the import of Richard's statement to register. "You came from the north. But this is the northernmost crossing."

Richard shook his head. "Jeffries crosses the east branch to the north and connects to Trimble's ford where the road crosses the west branch."

"You must be mistaken. If there was another crossable ford, the Major would surely have told us to secure it."

"I don't know which Major that might be, but he's the one who is mistaken."

"But the reconnoitering is complete. They've gone to make their report. I'm sure if this Jeffries Ford is passable, they'd have told me."

"I just crossed it, son. Look at my horse. He is wet only to the belly. That means it is passable. There *is* another ford and now you *have* been told of it. So, what do you propose to do?" Richard asked, his voice low so the men, who'd returned to their work, would not hear.

"It's not for me – or you, for that matter—to propose anything. Even if we had enough men to secure this ford and the one you *claim* lies upriver, I don't have authority to send any troops beyond this point. Perhaps you should share your concern with the militia forces, the Philadelphia Light Horse perhaps." He began walking back to his men.

No longer able to disguise his frustration, Richard shouted after him, “And where the hell am I to find them?” The soldiers stopped shoveling but resumed when the captain ordered them to continue. Realizing nothing would be done by these men, Richard remounted and continued down the lane.

The number of soldiers increased as Richard travelled south. By the time he came within view of the village of Chadds Ford, the road was crowded with infantrymen, artillery and dragoons. Dust whipped up by their activity hung low in the river valley like fog.

An army supply wagon lumbered up the lane to the Parker home. Infantrymen pushed to assist the exhausted mules in the traces. Richard, trapped behind them, groaned at the delay then squeezed by where the lane widened at the hill’s crest. His farmyard was crowded with soldiers and equipment. A group of black women washed clothes by the well. In the midst of this activity, the Parker’s little stone and log house waited behind shuttered windows. Richard climbed the stairs to the parlor door. With no fire in the kitchen and the shutters closed to the sun, the house was refreshingly cool. He sat and ran his fingers through his sweaty hair. He knew he’d handled his meeting with the young officer poorly, challenging him in front of his men. Wearily, Richard pushed up from the chair and, walking through the house, collected a few final items.

A window in Robin’s loft had remained open and he leaned out to grasp the shutter. In the cornfield below, infantrymen were digging bulwarks. A drover hitched a mule to the pasture fence to tear a hole large enough for the passage of cannon. Richard watched as his cows rushed out and ran, bewildered down the road.

##

Richard walked his horse up the final knob to Ben Lang’s log cabin. Finding this farmyard in a similar state of activity to his own, Richard was surprised to see the Welshman dozing on the porch.

Richard nudged him with the toe of his boot and Ben snorted awake. “There’s no one guarding Jeffries Ford and few at Buffingtons,” Richard said as he slowly sank to sit by Ben on the step.

“Well, there’s no absence of them here,” Ben answered flatly.

“I suppose Washington thinks the British are going to only take the direct route up this road.”

Ben looked up. “You don’t agree?”

“If I had the British numbers, I’d be a bit more strategic and also flank.”

“Even if it meant going as far off course as the crossings at Jeffries and Trimbles?”

Richard shrugged. “Maybe.” He paused. “God, I hope not. I took Robin up to the cave above Jeffries because logic told me the Lobsters are too heavy to go that far, but now my gut tells me otherwise.

“Your gut was right about Newport.”

“Damn it.” Richard pushed to his feet and jogged down the steps and to his horse.

He swung up in the saddle, dug his heels firmly into the bay’s flanks, and cursed at it loudly when the startled horse shied. Soldiers in the yard cheered when they heard it, but Ben only shook his head then yelled after Richard, “I don’t care if that horse puts on pompous airs, you’d better pick a new name for him or risk getting hanged if we lose.”

##

Spying a clump of trees amid the commotion in the camp of the Virginia Regiment, Richard dismounted and tied his gelding to a low hanging branch. The command tent had been raised on a bluff overlooking Chadds Ford. Below the bluff, hundreds of men were digging a defensive perimeter. On the

far side, a meadow banked the river, the only movement upon it the slow wave of the grass. Richard looked out at the odd scene – serenity and feverish activity split by a narrow ribbon of water. Slowly, he turned back to the churn of men around him and touched the sleeve of a young officer as he passed.

“General Stephen, where can I find him?”

The soldier’s intelligent gaze quickly took in Richard’s leather woodsman clothes and the flintlock pistol he wore strapped to his ribs. “They’re all at Ring House meeting with Washington. Can I help you?”

The day was quickly passing and Richard had an eight-mile ride to return to Robin. Ring House was in the wrong direction. “Do you know where I might find Lieutenant Calhoun?” Richard asked.

“I believe he accompanied the General. Shall I take you to the Colonel in charge in the General’s absence? Richard nodded and followed.

The Colonel sat behind a table, a half-filled mug of beer by his elbow. Sweat ran down his cheeks and he fanned himself with a handful of papers while he yelled at a soldier about missing supplies. Thrusting the papers at the man’s face, he jostled the mug and liquid splashed across the table. Cursing, he used his handkerchief to mop up the mess. Without looking up, he dismissed the soldier and grumbled, “Yes?”

“I came to see General Adam or Lieutenant Calhoun, but neither is available. My name is Richard Parker. I’m a blacksmith here in Chadds Ford but have come from north of the fork.” Richard paused to allow the Colonel to finish his mopping and look up. He did not. Richard hesitated but then continued. “I have information. Could you please pass it on and let the General know it is from me?”

“No help from the locals for days. Now, suddenly every shopkeeper and craftsman has advice to offer,” the Colonel grumbled.

“You’re vulnerable on the upper fords. Jeffries is unmanned and Buffingtons is undermanned.”

“Where is this Jeffries Ford?” the Colonel asked, finally meeting Richard’s gaze.

“A mile upstream from Buffingtons along the east branch.”

“Well then, that explains why it is unmanned. Buffingtons is the northernmost ford that can be crossed by foot soldiers.”

Richard tried to keep his voice level. “I crossed Jeffries this morning, granted on horseback. But the water barely skimmed my boot bottoms at its deepest point. That’s just about to an infantryman’s waist.”

The Colonel shifted in his seat and began rubbing at an ink smear on his hand. “Let’s assume you’re right and infantry could cross at Jeffries Ford, how far would they have to march to flank us via the route you suggest?”

“Maybe eleven or twelve miles to make the crossing then another six to drop down behind us.”

The Colonel snorted. “There you have it. The idea that Lobster Tom would march eighteen miles and still have the gumption to fight is absurd. We can only hope that they try such a flank and exhaust themselves in the doing.” He again dropped his gaze to the papers spread before him.

Seeing he’d no longer have any of the Colonel’s attention, Richard turned and lifted the tent flap to exit. “Just tell Adam I came and tried to talk sense to you.” He dropped the flap behind him and headed for the trees and his horse.

It was a few moments before the Colonel realized that the man he'd just summarily dismissed had referred to his commanding officer by his Christian name. By the time he'd lurched into the bright sun, the man, whose name he couldn't remember, was nowhere in sight.

##

The water rippling by Robin's rock had a golden sheen like honey. Laying down the letter she'd been reading, Robin raised her face to catch the sunlight filtering through the canopy. Then, returning her gaze to the sheet of paper, she reread the lines at the bottom of the page.

*Robin, your lovely little songbird – what a sweet name you have given her, though I am not sure I have ever heard of a baby with the voice of songbird, even a robin's. Nonetheless, your description of her is enchanting. I ache to see her rosy face and feel her small hand wrapped snugly around my finger. I am filled with joy for you and Richard, though I would be a liar if I did not admit that I also feel some envy. I can only hope that, with time, William and I will also be blessed and I beg that my envy not stop you from sharing every bit of your happiness with me. Until I can experience it for myself, I will have to be satisfied to taste motherhood through you. My wild little Carolyn is a mother. It's still hard for me to believe.*

Robin had always found other women's fascination with babies unfathomable. Their jerky movements and the apparent frailty of their limbs disconcerted her. She dreaded those tense moments when some new mother, overcome by the wonder of her creation, would thrust a newborn into her arms and expect her to feel the same awe.

As her rock fell into shade, Robin collected the letters and slipped them in the pocket of her apron. She was climbing the scree when the drum of hoof beats came from below. Craning to see through the trees, Robin lost her footing and fell to one knee. She grasped a rock for balance but only

scraped her knuckles then dropped to her seat among the boulders. Tentatively lifting the hem of her skirt, she examined her bloodied knee as her father unsaddled and hobbled his horse. He soon joined her among the rocks and, setting down his saddle, pulled a flask from his pocket and poured strong-scented liquor over her knee. “Tomorrow. It’ll be tomorrow,” he said, but Robin could only hiss in reply as the liquid burned her ripped skin. “Rum. The burn means it’s working. Learned that from a French Jesuit we took captive.”

“What’ll be tomorrow?” Robin asked as her father pulled her to her feet and helped her limp to the cave mouth.

“The battle.”

“Oh, good. So, we’ll be able to go home sooner than you thought.”

“There is nothing good about it. It’ll be a bloody, ugly thing. And, we may not have a home to go to when it’s done. When those two armies start firing volley after volley of cannon and musket, there will be little left standing.”

Richard dropped Robin’s hand and bent to spark a fire. The cave and boulders were already in deep shadow. Laying her hand on the rapidly cooling rocks strewn about the cave entrance, Robin tried to imagine their house reduced to such a pile but was unable to see it as anything but the only home she’d ever known.

##

The morning sun was already ringed by a halo of haze. Robin sat at the mouth of the cave while her father paced like a chained bear. She gently touched the delicate letters in her pocket. She longed to read them again but felt a fragile bridge had formed between her and the two women correspondents that

the inclusion of anyone – even her father – would crumble. Caught up in this thought, Robin jumped when her father brushed by her to the cave’s interior.

“I’m going to take a ride across Trimbles Ford and down along the far shore.”

In the dim light, Robin watched her father strap weapons to his body – pistol under left arm, cartridge box under right, sheathed knife to right shin, small axe to left thigh. Grasping his rifle in one hand, he hoisted his saddle with the other and began to work his way down the rock field. Robin quickly filled a saddlebag with a canteen and food then limped after him. She was halfway to the trees when her father climbed up to her. He took the saddlebag and turned her back up the slope. “Stay by the cave. If anyone finds you, just do as they say.”

“What?” Robin stammered as he pressed her up the slope. “Who?”

“Scouts. They might send out scouts. If scouts find you, they’ll want to take you with them so you can’t tell anyone where they’ve been. Don’t resist. Just go. I’ll find you.”

“Do you really think they’d climb that?” Robin asked, pointing back down the scree.

Her father shook his head. “No. The view from up here is in the wrong direction.” As he was speaking, he reached to his shin and untied the strap holding the knife sheath. “Here, put this on your thigh, under your skirt. It was your mother’s. She wore it every day.” Handing the sheathed knife to Robin, he wound his way back down through the rocks and disappeared behind the curtain of hemlocks.

Robin pulled the knife from its sheath revealing a blade that ended in a pronounced hook. She tried to imagine the woman whose letters expounded on the beauty of roses with this weapon. *Had Carolyn Parker written those flowery lines with this cold piece of steel snugged to her thigh?*

##



The track to Trimbles Ford wound through the lush peninsula formed by the two branches of the Brandywine. Much of the land lay under water each spring and debris snagged high in the branches of the trees attested to the river's volatility.

Wider than Jeffries Ford, the water at Trimbles ran only a foot deep and Richard splashed through it at a canter then turned his mount into the woods between the river and road. The drum of marching feet reached him about a mile below the ford. Leaving his horse in a thicket, he crept to the road's edge. The din indicated a large force moving quickly and Richard waited only long enough to see the advance guard and verify it was British. Cantering along the narrow, sandy strip at the river's edge, he was soon across Trimbles and up the first hill overlooking the ford. At the hill's crest, he spun and looked out over the Brandywine's western valley. A dust cloud snaked along the road reaching back miles to the horizon.

##

Robin sat in the shade of the cave mouth, the letters spread across her lap. The knife pressed uncomfortably against her thigh and she shifted, trying to find a position that would accommodate its bulk. Still, it jabbed and she reached under her skirt, untied it and set it in the dust by her bare feet. Returning her attention to the letters, she was engrossed in her aunt's words when her father called her name in a breathless shout. She looked up and saw he was only a few yards down the scree. Scrambling to her feet, the letters spilled across the ledge. Robin bent to collect them, but her father clasped her hand and pulled her toward the rocks.

"My letters!" she cried as the sheets tumbled across the ledge in the breeze.

Her father turned back. He bent and picked up the sheathed knife, slipping it in the back of his belt as he straightened. “No, my letters,” he said and gave Robin’s arm a ferocious tug as he headed down the scree.

Robin scurried to keep pace as her father, still with a firm grasp on her arm, wound down the slope toward the hemlocks. Her bruised knee throbbed; and she stubbed her toes on the sharp edge of a rock. Relieved when her father slowed and turned, Robin gasped as he drove his shoulder into her belly and flung her across his back. The forest floor rushed by in a blur that shifted to sky as she was heaved up onto the sweaty rump of her father’s gelding. Robin struggled to sit up and straddle the horse as her father swung up into the saddle and spun toward Jeffries Ford. She wrapped her arms around him; the knife hilt digging into her belly.

The horse sank back on his haunches as they slid down the bank to the river. At the ford’s midpoint, they stopped to let the water rush around the gelding and cool him. “The British are not far behind us and coming on fast. I have to get word to ... damn it! I’m not even sure who to try.” Robin jumped as her father slapped his hand against the taut leather of his breeches making a sharp crack that echoed off the hills.

He swiveled in the saddle. “I couldn’t leave you behind, Sparrow. It probably would have been safe, but they were going to pass so close. I couldn’t take the chance.”

Though she’d stayed calm in the face of his rough treatment, Robin’s eyes welled with tears now that his voice was soft and expression kind. She swiped at a tear that streamed down her cheek. “I’m sorry about the letters.”

“I know them by heart,” her father said, drawing a deep breath.

Robin rested her head against his back then straightened her leg and dipped her toes in the water. She watched as traces of blood from her rock-torn feet swirled in the river's ripples then disappeared.

They'd travelled about a mile toward Chadds Ford when they slammed to a stop. Robin had been trying to straighten her skirt which had bunched beneath her uncomfortably. Nearly unseated by their sudden stop, Robin gave a little yell then looked up. Six horsemen blocked the lane. The midday sun glinted off their shiny black boots and brass scabbards. Though they wore neat white breeches and short blue coats, their helmets were topped with strips of fur giving them a barbarous look.

Easing his mount slowly forward, Robin's father called out, "Large British force has crossed the west branch and may be across the east branch by now."

"How large?" asked a man whose helmet had a white plume.

"I didn't stop to count, but from the sound and dust, I'd say thousands, not hundreds."

The men exchanged skeptical glances. The white-plumed one pointed and barked, "you three go ahead and reconnoiter. You two, bring them." He pointed at the Parkers and two cavalymen cantered forward with swords drawn. Richard Parker backed his horse and drew his pistol. The cavalry officer did the same and the two men stared at each other in silence. Finally, the officer spoke. "You'll be free to go once you've made your report to my commander. And these men verify the truth of it."

"Fine. I'll speak to your commander, but I'm done wasting my breath on fools." Richard holstered his pistol and the two cavalymen flanked his horse.

The officer bobbed his head. "I trust you won't find my commander a fool."

##

The cavalry commander's hatchet-sharp face showed growing respect as he listened to Richard's recital of service in the French and Indian War. Had this not been enough to convince him to merit the blacksmith's report, the appearance of the three troopers was. Horses lathered and faces pale, they confirmed a large British force had crossed the east branch and was on the march.

"My horse, quickly," the cavalry commander yelled then turned to the junior officer and his troopers. "You two with me to Ring House. The rest of you get back on the road to keep track of the British progress. The commander mounted and looked at Richard. "I'd like you to come with me Captain Parker. My man will get you a fresh horse."

Richard shook his head. "Save it. Mine has miles yet in him." He jogged to the tree where he'd left Robin and the gelding. Swinging up into the saddle, he extended a hand and she climbed up behind him, skirts bunched around her waist.

The commander made no remark about Robin, but he did raise his voice over the heavy drum of the four cantering horses. "How is it that a blacksmith in a Quaker town rides such a fine mount?"

"I let my daughter pick and tend my animals."

The commander looked at Robin. "And what's this beauty called, Captain?"

"King George," Richard answered as he kicked the gelding to a gallop.

"Well, kick the bloody hell out of him for me, Parker!" the commander yelled as he and the other cavalymen spurred their horses to keep pace.

##

An elderly, red-faced man was descending the stone stairs of Ring House as the Parkers and cavalymen reined their horses to a halt amid the chaos of Washington's command post. Richard

shouted a greeting, but the man looked about in confusion. Richard waved and, with a sudden look of recognition, the man walked over. “Damn Tories have made brilliant work of convincing the Continental command that everyone is lying to them. They trust no one,” he said in a soft English accent. He held up a hand. “You needn’t say it. I know. But, if it’s a sin to have been born English, then today I’ve done my penance. I spent the morning trying to figure out what the damn Redcoats are about, and now that I know, I can’t make anyone listen.”

“If you mean the flanking maneuver, I think they will listen now” Richard said. Before he could explain, the cavalry commander leaned out the door and shouted his name. “I saw it too as did these dragoons,” Richard said as he jogged away.

“Hallelujah,” the man yelled, pumping his fist at the sky.

##

Soldiers rushed about or leaned on the garden wall waiting for instructions. Desperate to escape the feel of their eyes on her, Robin slid off King George’s back and walked the lathered animal to a springhouse in the shade of the garden trees. She left the gelding standing with reins hanging and stepped down into the little stone hut. Enveloped in a mantle of stone-scented darkness, Robin pressed her forehead against the moss-covered wall and shut her eyes. She loathed the prospect of leaving, but fearing King George might wander off, she wet her apron in the spring then stepped out into the noontime heat.

Streams of cold spring water ran down her arms as she used the apron to mop sweat from the gelding’s head and neck. The cavalry troopers watched, then led their own spent mounts over and began to do the same.

“How old is she?” the cavalry commander asked as he and Richard stepped out of Ring House.

“Fourteen,” Richard said, drawing a deep breath.

“Very pretty. You’d better keep her close.”

Richard nodded, his face blank but his stomach knotted. He walked over and, taking Robin by the hand, led her and the horse to the side of the house. Robin reached into the saddlebag and took out two apples.

“They’ve asked me to run dispatches between the two fronts.”

“No!” she slurred around a mouthful of apple.

“I already said yes.”

“But why you? Don’t they have real soldiers to do that?”

Her father stifled a laugh. “Real soldiers don’t know the deer trails.”

“Fine, but I’m coming with you,” Robin said, feeding her apple core to the horse.

Her father glanced back at the troopers by the springhouse, then silently nodded. Robin climbed up to the saddle, as he took the sheathed knife from under his belt. Lifting her hem, he strapped it to her thigh. “Everyday. Don’t you ever not wear it.”

“Like my mother,” Robin said quietly.

“Yes. Just like your mother,” he said with a sad shake of his head.

##

The cloud of dust engulfed them well before they could hear the beat set by the drums. Trotting to reach the leaders of the northbound Continental brigades, Robin and her father were soon alongside the body of the men marching at double time. Robin looked down at the infantrymen from her bouncing

perch. They would have looked comic had their faces not been etched with lines of strain. Squinting in the bright sunlight had left stripes of clean skin around their eyes and the collars of their shirts were stained ochre by the wash of dust-laden sweat.

As she and her father crested a rise, Robin turned back and saw the rolling hills were a mass of Continental troops. Riding by them, she'd seen the men as individuals, smelled their sweat, heard them exchanging words of encouragement or dread. From this high vantage point, however, they seemed more like masses of autumn leaves swept by the wind – here a green cluster, there a brown or yellow. The scene ahead of her was much the same, only uniform in color – red.

Living by a busy road, Robin had always thought herself worldly but, from the moment of her birth up to this one, the total number of souls Robin had encountered did not approach half that now spread before her. She was awed by the sight – so many hearts pumping blood, lungs filling with air, minds grinding over things left undone.

##

Robin held King George's reins and watched her father deliver the dispatch. He was making his way back to her when a cannon bellowed. Whipping Robin about mercilessly, King George ripped the reins from her hand. Running up, her father caught a stirrup iron and the spooked horse pulled him several yards then stood with trembling legs braced wide. Once the animal had settled, Richard walked the horse to a high spot from which he could view the field below. Unwilling to be left alone, Robin followed.

“What happens now?” she asked as she watched her father's gaze rove over the field of men below. His brow was creased and the lines around his eyes pulled tight, but the corners of his mouth lifted one side of his mouth in a wry smile; anxiety and excitement vying for dominance.

“That depends on the mood of our men,” he said. “There comes a point when you just want the thing to start. This is their first real battle and there has been scant time for training. So, I’d wager our boys will pop off first. The Redcoats have had that kind of impulsiveness drilled out of them.” As he said this, a number of shots rang out and smoke rose from the Continental line. Across the field, the sea of red stood motionless and silent.

“Hold, boys. Hold,” her father said under his breath. “They’ll come soon enough and there’s no call to waste shot when they’re still too far off to take your lead.”

A bugle blared in the still air. The rattle of snare drums rolled up the hill. The Redcoats advanced as one. A deafening roar of cannon fire rang from the Continental line and an invisible knife carved gashes into the body of British soldiers as the cannon balls flew through their ranks. But the red wall rolled on, soldiers stepping over the wounded and dead. As they drew within musket range, the men at the front of the British line fired as one, dropped to a knee and the men behind them stepped forward to do the same. To Robin the drop and rise of the men in lines looked like the rippling of grain in a breeze. Fewer and fewer men rose after each volley as the Continental soldiers fired on them from the protection of walls and trees.

Another bugle call and the wave reversed as the Redcoats pulled back in a series of volleys. When they were again out of musket range, a stunned hush descended over the field as both sides surveyed the carnage.

A single cry rose from the field. Like wolves howling in a choral, other cries of anguish joined it. Robin covered her ears as a shudder gripped her.

One of the bodies sprawled on the field slowly rose. Robin could see that the man’s white breeches were as red as his coat. He held his hands across his abdomen, cupping them gently against his



belly as if carrying an apron full of eggs. He turned from side to side in a macabre dance until the silence was broken by a shot. The man's face disappeared in a spray of blood and his body crumpled. Robin's stomach twisted and, through a haze, she watched her father lower his rifle then reach out to hold back her hair as she vomited.

##

Robin hunched on the ground, rocking, her head lolling, chin to chest. Her dazed senses barely registered the repeated battle cries of the charging men and the answering blasts of musket and cannon. She'd vomited until there was nothing left to bring up.

King George's nimble lips played gently at her hair, raising goosebumps on Robin's arms. She reached up to swat him away but instead let her fingers rest on the velvet skin of his nose, his breath filling her palm. Her stupor somewhat lifted, Robin realized the thunder of cannon now came from two directions. She raised her head and saw a dark cloud on the horizon where she knew her home must be. Tugging at the gelding's noseband, she let him pull her to her feet. She was still watching the distant smoke when someone grabbed her from behind and lifted her into the air. Stabbing with her elbows and drumming with her bare heels, Robin thrashed wildly.

"Damn it, Robin. Stop!"

Recognizing her father's voice, Robin went limp as he tried to swing her up on King George's back. Unable to do so, he groaned and lowered her to the ground.

"Climb up! Go! Go! Go!"

Robin scrambled up and slid back behind the saddle. "They're falling back. We have to go tell them at Ring House." With a curse, her father swung up and fell hard into the saddle. A red smear

covered his left thigh where his leather breeches were peppered holes. She gingerly touched one of the largest and her father winced, but said, “Don’t worry, Sparrow. Just shards of rock from a cannon blast to a wall. Hurts like hell but nothing deep. Hold tight,” he yelled as King George, happy to be moving away from the battle, approached a stone wall at a gallop.

Robin felt her father pull back and the horse sank on his hocks then sprang forward. The stone wall swept far below his neatly tucked legs and, for a moment, there was no sound but the wind rushing past Robin’s ears. Then, the din of battle came back like a blow as she slammed hard against her father’s back with the gelding’s landing. Galloping across the field, they took the far wall with as much ease as the first then skidded down a hill to the tree line.

The woods were cool and the dim light through the leaves soothed Robin’s smoke-burned eyes. As they slowed, she relaxed her grip around her father’s waist and lifted her hand to shoo a fly that had landed on her face. Only then did she see that the glen they were passing through was littered with bodies. “Are we on the battlefield?” she asked.

“No,” her father said softly. “More likely these are scouts who ran into a larger British party and were pinned down.” At the stream crossing the horse jiggled nervously. “Close your eyes, Robin. Close them,” her father said. Robin did but the motion of the horse backing and turning to avoid the crossing sickened her. When she finally heard him splash into the stream, she opened her eyes and saw that a body lay in the stream, the fringe of a leather hunting shirt and vibrant red hair waving in the gentle current. Robin and her father had wagered on the color of Lieutenant Calhoun’s eyes, which were always hidden in folds of sunburned skin. Now, she saw that she had been right, Calhoun’s eyes were as blue as the sky and, like the sky, empty.

##

Richard watched the party of officers trot out between the posts of the manor gate. Then, thinking they might pass through the village unseen, he wound down the alleys behind the large stone houses. Above him, a window opened and a dark figure leaned out. “The girl! Leave the girl with me!” The window shut with a bang. A moment later, a gate in the alley wall opened and a black-clad figure stepped out.

Nearly asleep, Robin gasped when someone grabbed her leg. Clutching her father, she was stunned to feel his fingers working to loosen her grip. She slipped to the ground and watched her father wordlessly ride away as she was hurried through the gate and into the large stone house.

A few steps in the door, Robin slumped to the floor. The black-clad figure disappeared but returned quickly with a basin of water and a rag. She began to wipe the smoke and dust from Robin’s face and neck then handed her a tankard of cider. Pressing on the floor with balled fists, the old woman rose and took the dirty basin of water to the kitchen. With each step, she jingled like a tinker’s cart as the silver forks and spoons she’d stuffed in the vast pockets of her gown clattered together. Robin snorted back a laugh but found she could not contain herself. Soon, her peals of laughter were mixed with choking sobs. Rushing back, the old woman sank to the floor and pulled Robin to her bony chest.

##

Sunlight through water, blue eyes looking up at a blue sky through water, water filling her mouth, her nose, running ice cold down her throat, Robin bolted upright, gasping. Slowly, she realized the man squatting by her side -- his mouth stained black from the powder cartridges he’d ripped with his teeth and his hair a tangle of brown and silver, so much silver – was her father. An old woman hovered behind him.

“They killed Calhoun,” Robin whispered.

Her father nodded. "I know they did, Robin. Now listen, you have to listen. I haven't much time. I have to go as soon as the sun has set. Our men are in retreat. I'm going with them. If the British find me looking like this, they'll take me prisoner." Robin tried to rise, but her father held her down. "No, you're staying with Widow Evans. Her son is here. They won't let any harm come to you. I'll be back for you tomorrow."

Robin tried to speak but stopped when her father drew a shuddering breath and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. He spoke without lowering his arms. "I'm so sorry, Sparrow. I've made a terrible mess of trying to protect you. I swore to your mother you'd never see the likes of what she did, and I've failed. I should have taken you away sooner." He dropped his hands and his face was again composed. "Tomorrow. I'm going to take you away from all this tomorrow." He stood and walked out the door. King George's shoes cracked on the stones of the alley. Then there was silence.

##

As the evening fell, British soldiers gathered in the village green, eager to see what prizes the large houses around it might hold. An officer dispersed them, but then walked up the front steps of the Evans house with his own detachment of men. Shrugging off the restraining hands of her son, Widow Evans jingled her way to the door and, opening it abruptly, nearly caught a musket butt in the face. Blushing and stepping out of the old woman's glare, a young British soldier let his commander pass.

"There's no need to be frightened," the officer said but then cleared his throat when he saw that the old woman's face held no trace of fear. "We've only come to ensure that no rebels have forced their way into your lovely home." He signaled in five men who began to walk from room to room opening cupboards and lifting chest lids.

“The rebels you hunt must be wee fairy folk or you wouldn’t be looking for them in my china hutch and desk drawers,” the Widow said loud enough to be heard throughout the house. Her son grew pale, but the soldiers became more discreet in their search.

Noting her dirty feet and the stains on her gown, the young soldier who’d inspected the kitchen pulled Robin to the parlor. “Rather untidy aren’t you, my girl?” the commanding officer said dryly, though his eyes were not unkind.

“This is my granddaughter,” Widow Evans said before Robin could reply. “She was searching for her dog, but the noise and smoke confused her. She wandered around for a long time before she found her way here.”

The officer wagged a finger in Robin’s face. “There will be no more wandering about. We do what we can to keep our boys in check, but it’s best not to tempt them with pretty girls.” Robin nodded and faded back into a dark corner.

“I told her the same,” the Widow said, looking cross. “Now, get upstairs, young lady, and get yourself clean and in bed.” She pointed up the stairs, then turned to the officer. “I thank you and your men for the fine job you’ve done chasing all the rebels from under our beds.” She walked to the door and opened it. The officer nodded curtly and walked out, his men following.