

Chapter **I**

Sunlight filtered through the tall windows of the meeting house, dappling the floor and wall as Peter shifted slightly in his seat, aware of the presence of the dozens of other silent worshipers around him. With a conscious effort of will, he set aside the sounds of people breathing, the occasional scrape of a foot on the floor, and even the staccato cough that punctuated the stillness from the other side of the room. As he did so, he could feel the familiar sensation of the light filling him, and the peace of his Creator's presence.

He savored the feeling, and the cares of the world fell away from him for a time. His mind no longer buzzed with the details of worries about his business, running a successful mercantile exchange in the bustling town of Trenton. His wife's illness, the aches that accompanied him now through his days, his fears about present events in the world, all faded like the sound of a distant cataract on a river—present, but not a matter for concern at the moment.

One problem refused to sink into the gentle rush of distant worries, however, and he knew that he must seek guidance now, while the light was in him, and hope for the clarity of an answer. Only a few times before in his life had he so urgently needed assistance in making a crucial decision.

He breathed deeply, and gently queried within himself what the correct course was, whether the difficult

path that seemed to lie before him was the correct one. An answer, inchoate, but firmly resolute, formed in his mind almost as soon as the question had been posed.

He found himself on his feet, speaking into the quiet of the meeting as though some other presence moved his tongue. His words brought bitter tears to his eyes even as he spoke.

“It pains me more than my words can convey to say this to ye, my brothers and sisters, but my own son, Robert Harris, has taken up acts which are intolerable in our Society. In consequence, I believe that he must be read out of our meeting, and denied the future joy of our fellowship.”

Peter could hear the shocked inhalations around him as friends and family listened and realized what he was saying. He avoided the gaze of his son, whose head had risen to face in his direction as he began to speak. He knew that Robert’s face would be stony, his lips pursed and white with anger at his father, much as they had been when they had argued earlier in the week, the recollection of which threatened to disrupt his calm now.

Robert had been fixed in his intent when Peter had raised the subject with him. “Father, thou knowest that the King and Parliament are committing violence against these colonies, in contravention of all commitments to respect the freedoms we are due as Englishmen. How long can it be before they sweep away all of their commitments, and we are forced to attend services in the King’s churches, or to tolerate the keeping of slaves by our neighbors? If they can change their word so easily in one matter, what stops them from all things being malleable in their hands?”

“Robert, thou raisest alarms against actions that

no Parliament has ever considered, to which the King has never given voice, and use these as arguments for violating the most important principals we hold in our hearts? If we raise arms against all who transgress against us, are we different in any way from the rest of this warlike world?" Robert's face had hardened as Peter spoke, and he could contain himself no longer.

"Father, I am not unmoved by thy desire for peace, and thou wilt not see me directly take up arms, no matter the provocation. However, this is a matter of too great import to be constrained by the thoughts of men who faced everyday princes' squabbles over some muddy stretch of ground. This struggle is for the very freedom of mankind against despots everywhere, and whether thou canst see that or not, I still feel called upon to act in some small measure in its defense."

Robert had turned on his heel and walked away then, tossing a final bitter remark over his broad, powerful shoulder at his father. "I wonder, truly, whether thou art not happier with the Colonies under the King's thumb, watching thy neighbors pay Parliament's taxes while thou enjoyest our traditional immunity from measures related to war. Art thou hiding behind thy devotion to peace in the interests of personal gain?"

The anger Peter had felt rise within himself in that moment had frightened him. He had never before thought himself capable of raising a hand to strike another man, let alone his own son, but the urge had seized him to chase Robert down and knock his head with whatever came to hand. He had, however, mastered himself, and even now felt shame for the passion that had risen in his heart in that moment.

Peter's voice was steady, low and firm, although his heart now fluttered like a wounded bird in his chest

as he continued to speak to the congregation. “He has urged the taking up of arms in the present disorders which convulse this colony in its relationship with the King, and provided real aid to those who would persist in the furtherance of violent conflict, rather than pursuing the peaceful resolution that has been the aim of this Society. I invite any who would speak against the expulsion of Robert Harris to say their minds now.”

The silence, which had been a source of peace to him before he spoke, now seemed pregnant with unspoken conflict. His wife gazed steadily at him from across the room, her expression unreadable. She loved all of their children equally, but it was no secret between them that Robert was Peter’s particular favorite.

Peter remembered feeling from the moment that Margaret’s midwife had called out to announce the arrival of his firstborn son that Robert was marked for something greater than the mundane. Throughout the years, when Margaret had been inclined to rely upon the Biblical warning against sparing the rod, Peter had been the one who had interceded on the boy’s behalf. In lieu of the more direct instruction that his mother would have delivered, Peter had instead engaged Robert in endless discussions on the nature of right and wrong, good and evil.

Though his sisters sometimes had needed guidance to avoid the temptations of the world about them, these childhood evils had never seemed to reach Robert as he had grown and matured. Peter had counted himself as lucky to have avoided the difficulties that so many fathers had with their sons... until now.

He could sense the eyes of the congregation upon him and then upon his son. Both men were well respected in the community, and no public strife had

before arisen between them. The shocking suggestion of reading his own son out of meeting had been foreseen by none, Peter could see from the glances exchanged around the room.

To rise in Robert's defense, however, carried the risk of being seen as advocating for the same cause that the younger Harris was being censured over. As he listened to the silence around him, Peter reflected on having heard that in other meeting houses, whole groups of members had been read out for publically taking the side of revolution against the King.

That his own son could be the trigger for such a split within their own tightly-knit community gave Peter a deep sense of apprehension amongst the fierce contemplation of the meeting. After a space of several minutes, though, nobody spoke, and Peter took his seat, to find his hands shaking as he strove to return to the grace of the inner light for a while longer before the meeting ended for the week.

He was still staring at his shaking hands as people began to rise from their seats and file out of the meeting house around him, each member of the congregation eschewing the typical gathering at the door, by an unspoken accord. Peter took a long, deep breath to steady himself and then stood and walked out into the brightness of the light that had now abandoned him within.

Chapter 2

Robert Harris walked alone to the modest home he shared with his wife and young daughter, at the edge of town. Deep in thought, he opened the door, greeted by the unabashed joy that was a little girl upon seeing her beloved papa return home. He picked her up and held her close for a moment, reflecting as he did that here, at least, was something that his father could not take from him.

Mary came out of the kitchen behind her daughter, her smile changing to a look of concern as she noted Robert's unhappy expression. "Rebecca, go thou and make sure that the stew doesn't scorch. I'll be right in, after I speak for a moment with thy papa."

"Oh, mama, I want to speak with him, too. Can I stay and talk, too, papa?"

"I will come and talk to thee in a little while, Rebecca. Do thou as thy mama says, though."

The girl pouted for a moment, and then reluctantly returned to the kitchen.

Mary took her husband's hand in hers and said, "Thou seemest not to have come home from meeting in any better spirits than on thy departure."

Robert took a deep breath, holding Mary's hand as though it alone held him upright. "No, Mary, indeed, I am lower now than I have been for some time. Father proposed to have me read out of meeting for my opposition to the tyranny of the King."

Mary gasped, though she'd known since Robert had related to her his conversation with his father earlier that week that this was a potential consequence of that conflict. "It grieves me severely to hear this, Robert. Will nobody speak for thee?"

"No, my darling, thou mistakest completely the bravery of our friends. In the face of the distant and strange British Crown, it is boundless, but against the opposition of those whom we have held near and dear, it withers like a plucked flower in the summer air."

His tone held an edge of acid, although a rueful smile illuminated his face. "I do expect that we will be receiving a stream of visitors, though, as those worthies come to protest their support. Have we tea and bread to greet them with?"

Mary shook her head, marveling. "Thou remainest too calm in the face of such reverses, Robert. I should almost prefer that thee loose thy spleen and rage and rant at moments such as this."

He smiled at his wife. "What good would that do, but to shake dust from the rafters? In any event, I did enough raging and ranting when I spoke with Father, and that accomplished nothing beneficial, as we may now witness."

She sighed and nodded agreement. "Let us get the water started for tea, as I expect that we'll see our friends sooner, rather than later."

Indeed, the first of Robert's silent supporters was at the door within the hour. By the time dusk had fallen, the table in the kitchen was crowded close around with an angry buzz of conversation. Robert found himself saying, again and again, "No, I do not expect thou to speak against the congregation, should they decide to follow my father's counsel. What can it gain thee, but

expulsion thyself?”

His friend Charles, though, had an answer that surprised Robert and gave him food for thought over the coming days. “What have we to gain by staying within a community that fails to act in its own defense? How long will the King honor his commitments to our Societies, should the Colonies’ struggle be lost?”

Leaning in conspiratorially, Charles said, “What is there to stop us from meeting as a Society of Friends who do not hold with waiting for the King’s troops to come to our doors to force us to fight against our own interests? I have heard that there are some who have established their own meeting-house, down the river in Philadelphia, and who would welcome the chance to aid thee in doing likewise here.”

Robert nodded gravely at this information, and thanked Charles, asking, “Wouldst thou speak for me, then, and perhaps travel with me to their meeting-house, should we both find ourselves read out of meeting here?”

Charles extended his hand to Robert. “So shall it be, my friend.”

Chapter 3

Stirring restlessly in his bed, Robert once again opened his eyes to see whether the dawn was truly upon the world yet. Through the curtain—a gift from his mother on his wedding day—he could see just the first faint brightening of the morning light.

The songbirds in the trees outside were beginning to chirp back and forth amongst themselves, and Robert caught himself wondering whether their relationships were as fraught and fragile as those between humans. Did finches eject members of the flock for failing to behave as finches were expected to? Were bluejays subject to codes of bluejay conduct? Did a grackle need to find a new path to follow as a grackle if he found his conduct one day in agreement with that of the crows?

Robert sighed and swung his feet over the side of the bed. He knew that, regardless the hour, he would get no more sleep this morning. It was the day of the Monthly Meeting, and the congregation would be gathering in mere hours to seek the way forward on, among other matters, the question of his continued acceptance within the Society.

He had spent long hours, both in meeting and alone with his hammer in the forge, looking within himself for the pure principle to guide him in the question of becoming involved in the obvious storm gathering about the Colonies. No shot had yet been fired, but the forces of violence were in evidence in every dispatch

from Boston, in every broadsheet in Philadelphia.

Robert pursed his lips as he performed his morning ablutions, his hands following the timeworn movements he had learned from his father, cleaning and shaving his face, combing his hair and donning the plain clothes of his faith. He had long known that his father harbored a deep respect for the institutions of the British Crown, even at this distant remove.

Peter had often held forth over the dinner table when friends visited, praising their position in the Colonies as holding the best of all possible worlds—the liberties of independent states, but, spoken of in lower voices, the protection of the British nation, when the wickedness of the world threatened to intrude on this American idyll.

Events during Robert's childhood seemed to bear witness to the wisdom of this belief. The Society of Friends enjoyed a position of favor in William Penn's colony and elsewhere, unequalled even in Mother England. At the same time, the British Parliament sent naval forces and soldiers to protect the colonists against marauding Indians—and the French, who had encouraged them in their attacks on the Colonies.

Robert had watched, with a sense of detachment, the convulsions of anger that had rippled through the Colonies as the Parliament had raised taxes on their subjects in America, in order to pay for the defense so ably rendered. By long tradition, members of the Society in those colonies under Penn's civilized influence were exempt from such levies, as they were excused from conscripted service in the militia and anything else warlike, so the whole question took on an air of the theoretical to Robert and many of those around him.

It had been all too easy, he reflected as he slipped

on his boots, to devote himself to learning a trade and building a business, and to let the momentary troubles of the world wash past him. He quietly left the house, breathing in the crisp morning air as the world around him seemed to stretch its limbs and welcome another day. As he walked aimlessly down the road, he recalled a discussion with Charles at his iron smelter, not far from Robert's own smithy.

Chopping the air with his hand for emphasis, Charles had said, "The King and his Parliament have violated the most important of our rights as Englishmen. We have tolerated the fact that we send nobody to sit in the House of Commons, because they have also not asked us to pay any special taxes... until now."

Charles' voice had risen as he continued, "How easy it is, to lay taxes on those who must depend upon the good offices of those who profess to speak for these Colonies for any voice whatever in the Parliament. How can we hope to be heard in those chambers when we may not send any who will speak for our interests? I say, if we are to be taxed as Englishmen, let us be represented as Englishmen, as well. As it stands, we are but mute animals at a bloodletting, neither expected nor permitted to protest, but required to stand still and but bleed on command."

Charles had been quite red in the face as he concluded, and Robert had placed a calming hand on his friend's shoulder. "There are, though, as thou hast said, those who do carry our interests to the councils of the Parliament and the King, true?"

"Aye, but they are but a crumb in a cake, and bear no relationship to the just weight of our voice in that body. Dost thou know, Robert, that there are nearly as many English subjects on these shores as

in Mother England herself? And yet we have not one elected member in Parliament, but only those who by their own consciences speak from time to time on our behalf.”

Robert had spoken with his father later on this question, asking, “Are there not those who might bring about a change in the Parliament, that we here in the Colonies can be represented fairly in their considerations?”

Peter’s response had been deeply disturbing to Robert, and the memory of it caused him to clench his jaw for a moment as he walked. “Thou art become too concerned, my son, with the particulars of the world, when, for the greater part, the circumstances of these Colonies fall to our advantage, and are, in any event, no part of our concern as Christian men.”

He had said nothing to his father on that occasion, but had continued to listen to his friends’ arguments as the abuses by the Parliament of the colonists had continued to mount. Among his circle of peers in town, Robert was increasingly aware of the stockpiling of arms, and the nervous expectation that the British Navy, once a welcome sight in the harbor, might at any time arrive to enforce a blockade—or worse.

Robert remembered the moment at which he had become convinced that the old way of eschewing any involvement in matters of arms could not possibly answer the threat that now gathered around his community. Charles had been delivering a load of good pig iron, accompanied by a small, solidly-built man, sour of face, whom he introduced as Rufus Porter.

“Rufus, this is Robert Harris, a blacksmith of some renown in the city. Robert, Rufus Porter owns the mines out at the Western frontier where I get most of my ore,

now that the Congress has banned the importation of iron from Britain, he has become my particular friend.” Charles laughed as he spoke, but Robert could detect an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice.

“I am pleased to know thee, Rufus,” Robert said, inclining his head politely.

Porter regarded Robert with a malicious twinkle in his eye. “So you’ll be another of them Quaker laddies, now will ye? The country out where my mine sits is rotten with you lot, but what can an honest man do?” The small man shrugged expressively. “I suppose ye laddies came over here for your reasons, and my people did so for our reasons, but no reason we can’t do business together, now is there?”

Robert drew upon his inner quiet for a moment before replying to the offensive little man. “Indeed, in such times as these, we seem to have little control over such matters. Still, thy iron is welcome indeed, and our industry depends upon our ability to make do with what we can within our own frontiers, until such time as the current upsets are dispelled.”

Porter’s eyes narrowed as he regarded Robert. “You’re not actually saying that ye believe that we’ll all be jolly Englishmen again, soon enough? No, I know full well that we colonists will be at the throats of the Crown’s men soon enough, hammer and tongs, as ye might say. I knew ye Quakers fear giving a proper defense of yourself, but I knew not that ye be outright barmy in the bargain.”

He thrust his chin forward aggressively. “Still, as ye say, we colonial beggars cannot be choosers in such times as these. My iron may also be poured into cannon and beaten into swords to welcome the British when they arrive, but your plowshares and pots will fill my

belly just as well. For that matter, supplying ironwork for the Crown's men once they've overwhelmed what defenses we may throw up will answer for our tables, as well." He shrugged. "In the end, we all do what we must, regardless of our precious philosophies, eh?"

Charles was watching the exchange with an increasingly upset expression, and now interjected, "Now, see here, Rufus, there is no call to abuse this honest man so. He is a good neighbor and a good customer to us both, and his faith is his own business, just as mine is my own business. If thou treatest all those whose beliefs thy do not hold with, I am sorry to say that I suspect that the day will soon come when thou findest one who is not as peaceable as my friend and I, and will demand satisfaction of thee."

The small man laced his fingers over his stomach, an expression of grim pleasure on his face. "Aye, and it wouldn't be the first time, would it? Yet still I draw breath, so I will have reason to expect that it wouldn't be the last time, either."

His expression changed, though, to a merry smile, and he clapped Robert on the shoulder, guffawing heartily. "The laddie knows that I am just giving him a working-over because you fellows are too serious for their own good, anyhow. His money's good enough in my pocket, and my iron good enough on his anvil. We've no quarrel, right, Master Harris?"

"I am just called Robert, and I'll be glad enough to have no further quarrel with thee." Robert's voice had sounded icy even in his own ears, and he was relieved when the other man nodded pragmatically and turned abruptly to Charles, leading him out of the smithy.

"Now, I believe you were going to introduce me to a publican here in town, and might I hope that he has a

likely-looking daughter, as well?”

As the two men walked away, Robert drew one slow breath, and then another. Indeed, matters were at a desperate pass if men of good conscience could have no choice about doing business with creatures such as this. He wished his father had been present to witness this encounter, that he could then somehow explain how the situation augured to the benefit of those who shunned violence, that it was right and proper that men such as this should prosper in the isolation of the Colonies by the Crown.

Then, in a moment of blinding clarity, Robert suddenly understood that to stand aside and let men such as Porter assume positions of prominence, with wicked disregard for the beliefs of those who differed from themselves—indeed for any principle at all—would lead inevitably to the day when the Friends would be swept aside, relegated to the slag heap of the foundation of the new nation, or else made a vassal subject in the failure of the rebellion.

Neither path was viable; neither was tolerable. A time comes, he realized, when a man must stand up for himself, stand up for his hard-won liberties, and take the difficult actions to that end.

The firm conviction of that moment was still within him as he walked in the quiet morning, watching the town slowly awaken. He turned his steps back homeward, to greet the new day with his family, and await the conclusions it would bring.

Chapter 4

The meeting was hushed as the clerk rose before the assembly, after a number of more mundane matters had been disposed of. “We must consider now what we should do in regard to Robert Harris’ transgression against the principal of peace that we hold dear within our Society. Any who wish to make comment on this matter, please stand to be called upon.”

Peter Harris rose immediately, as did Robert and his friend Charles. The clerk looked about the meeting slowly, giving all present time to consider whether they felt moved to speak. After a long pause, he nodded toward Peter, who clasped his hands before himself so tightly that one might nearly hear the bones of his knuckles grind together.

“I have raised my son Robert to be a good man, honest and strong, both in his work and in his convictions. I have been proud, mayhap even excessively so, of his accomplishments and of his standing in our community.” Peter closed his eyes for a moment and took a long, deep breath before continuing.

“Know, then, that it is with the heaviest of hearts that I ask each of thee to consider whether this man should continue to be a welcome member of this meeting, and be invited to avail himself of the benefits of our fellowship.”

Turning to face his son now, Peter said, “Thou

hast spoken in favor of the taking up of arms against the British Crown. I have heard from my friends that they receive such counsels from thee as cannot be countenanced within our Society. Why, thy forge has even been turned from an instrument of peaceful production into a place where weapons are crafted.” The stillness of the meeting was disrupted at this last charge, as many among the assembled congregation stirred in shock.

Peter sat down, heavily, certain that he had made his point as forcefully as was needed. After another long pause, giving the meeting time to settle down into silence again, the clerk motioned toward Charles, who stood for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“I agree in my heart that our belief in the strength that flows from peace is central to this Society. The light that stirs within us commands us to turn the other cheek when we encounter the wickedness that is in the hearts of our brothers when they fall under the influence of evil.” He turned now to Peter.

“And yet, it is a point of pride within our Society that we do not have fixed doctrines, that we have no authorities to which we must answer. We are, each of us, compelled to follow our inner light in all matters, even those that are long-standing matters, and which take on the appearance of fixed doctrine.” He fixed the clerk with a firm look as he spoke.

“The struggle which has erupted between these colonies, so friendly to our presence, and the Crown, which has but tolerance for us, and that only at certain times and in certain places, is one in which we cannot stand aside and let those who will engage in the fight determine our fate for us. I stand with Robert in this matter.”

Peter closed his eyes. He could feel the split he had feared forming in the assembly. Another of the younger men now rose, and a third. Before any more could rise to speak, though, the meeting house door opened, and their neighbor rushed in and made her way to Peter's chair. She whispered urgently in his ear, and everyone in the assembly saw his face go white.

He stood, and without waiting for the clerk, spoke. "I must leave to attend to my wife. I trust each of thee to be guided by thy inner light in this matter." He followed his neighbor out of the meeting house, the door closing behind him with a dull thump.

Robert sat heavily and stared after his father, concern for his mother's welfare flooding through his being. The other young men who had stood to wait their turn to speak followed his lead and also now took their seats, confused by his silence. The clerk seemed for a moment at a loss as to how he ought proceed. Finally, he said, "Is there any other of our assembled meeting who wishes to be heard in this matter?"

Another pause, and then he said, "Have we arrived at a way forward, then? Will thou contest the decision of this assembly, Robert, come what may?"

Numb with worry, Robert simply shook his head and waited.

After a long silence, throughout which he scanned the faces of the members of the meeting for any sign that they were moved to speak, the clerk's voice rang out into the quiet room again. "If there is nobody who has an objection to the proposal, then, that Robert Harris is to be read out of our meeting, then I will record the decision of this body and ask Robert to depart as a friend from this worship."

He paused for a moment, and satisfied himself

that none of the men gathered in the room were going to rise. “Speaking for myself, Robert, I will say to thee that this society does not turn its back on thee, but rather is acknowledging with sadness that thou hast turned thy back on us. When thou chooseth to return to the good graces of thy friends, thou wilt find a glad welcome awaits thee here.”

Without a word, Robert rose and went through the same door where his father had just exited the meeting house, focusing first on the breath passing into and back out of his chest, and then on the purely mechanical requirements of putting one foot before the other. It was with great difficulty that he mastered the urge to follow his father to his mother’s side in the home he once had known, instead turning to take the short walk back to his own home.

Since the beginning of her illness, his mother had made it clear that she did not want him to see her unless she was feeling hale and well. She had her pride, but more than that, she had said, her primary memory of her own mother had been in the grip of her final illness, and she told Robert that she did not want to be recalled that way, herself.

It might be only a few steps, yet it felt very much like the longest journey he had ever undertaken. For the first time in his life, Robert could not feel the company of his congregation walking alongside him as he went. Indeed, he had an almost palpable sense of both of his parents drawing away from him, as well—his father in disappointed anger, and his mother in her final struggle with illness. Instead of the comforting presence of family and friends surrounding him, Robert felt for the first time in his life that he stood completely alone in this world.

He stopped and breathed deeply of the late spring air, filling his nose with the rich scent of moist earth, the sweet perfume of the early flowers of the season, and the aroma of the damp on the leaves evaporating into miniature clouds of steam rising from the trees. The sights and smells reminded him of the constancy of nature, heedless of the changeability of human institutions. He might be alone, but the world kept him company even when all others might have forsaken him.