

# *Chapter* **I**

**H**is paddle dipping silently in the still water of the bay, protected from the freshening breeze, Caleb pushed his heavy dugout canoe along the familiar shore, alert for the presence of the Abenaki. One could never be quite sure which side they might be on at any given time. True, he'd heard they had provided guides for Colonel Arnold's bold seizure of the British Fort Ticonderoga the prior week, and they had been known to offer other forms of support to Colonial forces, but there were dark rumors that information about the movements of Colonials would often make their way back into the hands of the British, too.

Caleb could see, upon reflection, why the Indians would be ambivalent about the war between the Crown and its former American Colonies—after all, the Crown had been actively engaged in granting lands to settlers where the Abenaki still resided—sometimes even with competing grants from different Crown Governors—while the Colonists simply took what land they needed for their crops and cattle, driving off the Indians by whatever means were necessary.

He still didn't like that he couldn't so much as take a clandestine canoe trip along the shore of the deeply forested island without having to worry that his position and activities would be spotted and reported to the wrong people. His attention was particularly keen as he steered around the point into the southern bay

of the island, approaching the spit he would parallel on his way back to the mainland.

Caleb had spoken briefly with a party of scouts who mentioned that they had encountered a good-sized village just inland from this natural sand bar. The Abenaki had settled there to take advantage of the rich fishing in the protected bay between the island and the mainland, as well as the hunting prospects in the impenetrable forests that lay thickly over the brow of the ridge behind them.

This calm, quiet morning, though, either the Abenaki were occupied inland, or else they were feeling favorably toward the Colonists, for Caleb felt no unfriendly eyes upon his broad back as he added more power to his paddle strokes and made for the mouth of the Winooski river, past the homestead of the crazy—if sometimes quite helpful—Frenchman who styled himself as “Captain” Mallett.

Caleb made for the familiar reedy bit of shore where he had started from that morning and gave his canoe a final push so that it beached itself firmly enough for him to make his way to the front. Once he stood on the muck at the edge of the water, he set his feet as firmly as possible and pulled the heavy dugout further up onto the shore, so that it would be there when he returned.

Several years back, soon after the family had settled into their new homestead, he had neglected to take this precaution, and the arduous weeks spent replacing the lost canoe were a potent reminder to him of the fickle nature of the river and its marshy banks. Perhaps even more potent than the thrashing he’d received at the hands of his father, who was not at all understanding of the importance of bringing a string of

fat bass up to the cabin to show off.

Having selected the pine that he would use, Caleb had toiled for over an hour with the heavy axe to fell the tree. Fortunately, the lost canoe was not comparable to the 25-man monsters the Abenaki sometimes built, but it still required a sizable tree to start with. Shaping the prow and the stern, then hollowing out the space where two or three men could sit had taken much longer.

Caleb's brother Samuel had been all too glad to take over his role with the fishing lines, and he would detour past where Caleb labored over the stout bole to show off his daily catch. Samuel would draw anywhere from a scowl to a swift kick from his elder brother, depending upon how stubborn the wood grain was being and how big his self-satisfied grin was.

Even after the new dugout was completed and declared fit by their father, Caleb had not been permitted to return to his fishing duties. He'd been permanently usurped by his younger brother, and it put yet another wedge between the boys. Elijah put Caleb's hard-won new strength to better use, as he saw it, clearing land for a new barn to house additional cows.

Now, however, the routine tasks of raising and maintaining a farmstead had been disrupted by the outbreak of open warfare on Lake Champlain. Elijah was away with Colonels Arnold and Allen, who were taking advantage of the British confusion in the wake of their ignominious surrender of the largest garrison in the region.

Caleb strode up the muddy slope to the cabin where Samuel stood, paused on his way back from tending to the cows. The excitement on his face must have been evident even from a distance.

Samuel called out, "What news, Caleb?"

“I saw a schooner sailing north, and it flew the colors of the Green Mountain Boys. I think it must have one of the ships taken by Captain Herrick at Skenesborough—’twas a lovely sight!”

“Indeed! I wonder whether Da was on it?”

“No way to be sure, Sam. In any event, I had best go tell Ma what I’ve seen, so that she can rest easier –or else worry herself even more.” Caleb sighed. As hard as it was being too young to take part in the struggles that had swept the family along for the past several years, he could see in his mother’s eyes the toll that it took to have no news of the fate of his father.

Samuel nodded at his older brother and turned back to the barn. Caleb had turned to go inside when Samuel called to him again. “No other ships on the lake, then?”

“Nothing,” Caleb answered, and his brother nodded again.

“Good—I just worry that the British have forces somewhere else along the lake that Colonel Allen didn’t know about.”

“I think that unlikely,” Caleb answered. “Colonel Allen knows this territory as well as any man alive, and it’s hard to find fault with the intelligence he provided to Colonel Arnold regarding the ease of taking Major Skene—or Ticonderoga.”

“That’s a good point,” Samuel agreed, his shoulders rising in confidence. “Da will be safe, then?”

“It’s war, Samuel, and there’s no safety to be had when the bullets fly ... but he’s in a good company, at least.”

“I suppose you’re right, Caleb. Still, I know we’ll all be happier once this business is settled.”

Caleb nodded and turned once again to go inside.

There, he related to his mother what he had seen, and then asked, “Ma, do you suppose that I should go to the Fort and share what I saw there?”

Polly pursed her lips briefly, and then nodded assent. “Just bear in mind that you have work to do in the field today.”

Caleb replied, “I haven’t forgotten that, Ma. I just think that this is an intelligence that they ought have. In turn, I may be able to learn news of recent events across the lake. Since the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga, we’ve heard little of what’s passed.”

“True enough, Caleb.” His mother’s expression passed from disapproval to weariness. “I’ll sleep better knowing what your Da is involved in, that’s certain. Go then, and hurry back.”

Caleb dashed out to the barn, saddled the old horse, more accustomed to the plough than to a rider, and directed her up the trail to the small fort at the falls on the Quinouschick River. Though mostly used as a trading post and land office, Fort Frederick gave comfort to the settlers in this territory that had been the subject of contention long before hostilities with England had broken out in Massachusetts Colony earlier in the year.

Indeed, Ethan Allen’s Green Mountain Boys had taken up arms a couple of years before Caleb’s family had settled here on the shores of Lake Champlain, as the Colonel’s land grants, purchased from Governor Wentworth of the New Hampshire Colony, had been declared invalid by the Governor of the New York Colony, who then demanded that Colonel Allen and others purchase their grants all over again—and at higher prices than before.

Since the settlement on the Onion River had been

established under the cloud of conflict, it had seemed only prudent for Colonel Allen to provide for its possible military defense right from its foundation. Fort Frederick had never been tested, but its stout brick walls stood as a statement that the Green Mountain Boys were willing to repulse whatever threats might arise to the Colonel's claim over the land its two stories overlooked.

Caleb hurried into the blockhouse, where the proprietor of the general store was holding court with some of the gentlemen of the settlement.

"Well, Remember Baker set out to answer Colonel Allen's call on Thursday, and he and Colonel Warner took another British fort, this time down at Crown Point. Too easy it was, too—just twelve men under a sergeant they found there. Even better, Captain Baker's men captured two British boats that were carrying dispatches north to alert the British forces there to the surrender of Ticonderoga."

He let out a hearty guffaw, then continued, "No sense in letting them go with incomplete information, I suppose—best to have a full accounting of what we've taken from them before they report, eh?" As the men's chuckles subsided, one of them noticed Caleb standing at the doorway.

"Young Caleb, what tidings?" Caleb's keen eyes had provided the first reports of several points in the unfolding events on the lake, and the men who frequented the blockhouse had come to know and rely on him.

"Well, I saw a schooner headed northward this morning," he reported breathlessly. "Making good time under the north wind, and it flew the banner of the Green Mountain Boys!"

"Excellent news, my boy," boomed the proprietor. "We'll have those British bastards wishing that they'd



never put a single plank afloat in these waters before we're done." He leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially to the men gathered around the counter. "I hear we're already sending cannon captured at Ticonderoga south to Massachusetts Colony. So long as they don't wind up in the hands of the Yorkers, that's all to the good, if you ask me."

He sat back, a satisfied smirk on his face. "Mark my words, the Crown will come to rue the day they permitted the Yorkers to invalidate Benning Wentworth's grants—they stirred up a wasps' nest with that, and now it's beginning to really sting."

# Chapter 2

A few days after he'd spied the schooner heading north, Caleb again convinced his mother to allow him the trek to the blockhouse to hear the latest news. When he walked in the door, the mood was jubilant.

Mister MacGregor, the stout proprietor called out, "Ho there, Caleb! Have you heard the news?"

"Nay, that's what brings me here—what's happened?"

"Well, now, Colonel Arnold and the Green Mountain Boys gave King George a right sharp poke in the eye, is what!" The other men in the room shared a joyful guffaw at that, and MacGregor continued, "They paddled up to Saint Johns and traded that little schooner for the King's own sloop-of-war and sailed it back down to Fort Ticonderoga, and thank you very much to the Redcoats for the fine ship!"

After another raucous round of laughter had settled down, Caleb noted that the men were passing around a jug, and it didn't seem to be merely cider, either. More likely applejack and they were, perhaps, imbibing a bit more than might be customary this early in the morning. Well, and what if they were? This was good news indeed—the war now openly upon them seemed to be auguring in the favor of the bold Colonists.

Another man spoke up, giving voice to Caleb's thoughts. "It was one thing when the Green Mountain



Boys were merely giving the Yorkers a taste of the tar and sending them back to their Governor, but I don't expect that they would have guessed that we would eject nearly every garrison the British placed along the lake in the course of just a few weeks!"

He accepted the jug and took a deep draught, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve and offering the jug to Caleb. The younger man smiled in gratitude but shook his head. "Ma wants me back to do my chores," he said, flushing red at the knowing grins on the men's faces.

MacGregor smiled more kindly at Caleb, saying, "We know that your Ma needs you at your best, Caleb. There's no shame in that." He took the jug for himself then, saying, "And, that means all the more for us," before lifting it high and taking a large gulp. He grinned merrily and passed it along to the next man.

"We've heard no news of your father, though, Caleb ... I'm sure that's what you came looking for?"

"'Tis," Caleb replied, glad for the change of subject. "The last word we had was that he was with Colonel Allen, but we've not heard anything since."

"Well, if he's still with Ethan, then he's still underway, headed north again."

Caleb swallowed hard and nodded. "Thank you kindly, sir. I'll bring the news to my mother, and I'll return when I've seen something or we hunger for more news ourselves."

"Be careful, lad," MacGregor said to him. "It's a dangerous time on the lake, and I don't mean the weather."

"I know," said Caleb. "But I reckon that I'll see the British long before they'd see me. And I've marked where the Abenaki post their lookouts, so I can avoid

them, too.” He grinned. “Besides, I doubt that any of them can outrun me on the water.”

Clark shook his head, frowning. “Lad, don’t underestimate the British. We may have bloodied their noses, but that will just make them all the keener to punish us wherever they can.” He put a friendly hand on Caleb’s massive shoulder. “I’ve no doubt that you can skim the water like a goose taking wing, but even you would be no match for a crew of Redcoats with murder on their minds.”

Caleb didn’t dispute the point, but he knew in his heart that he was one of the fastest men on Lake Champlain, and he felt certain that he could outrun most anything driven by oar or paddle.

Upon his return, he shared the glad tidings with his mother and younger brother, but he had no answer when Polly asked, “When will your father be able to return home? Did they hazard a guess as to that?”

“No, Ma,” he answered, knowing that had he asked the question, the men would have spent a long hour or two debating the question of whether the war against the British would be over once King George and the Parliament granted the Colonies representation as they were demanding, or whether that would just leave unsettled the question of the Yorker’s attempts to extort payment all over again for land grants already given by the Governor in New Hampshire. Caleb had heard the point debated many times before, and further doubted that the cider would have added any clarity to the discussion today.

However, he didn’t say anything, because he did not want to have to explain to his Ma why he suspected that the question would have been fruitless. After meeting her questioning gaze for a moment, he tilted

his head to the door and said, "I've got to go attend to the cows, Ma."

Her shoulders slumping a bit, Polly nodded and returned her attention to the bread dough she had been kneading when he arrived. She'd known that it would be hard when Elijah had come home from the village less than a month previous, his mouth set in a grim, purposeful line.

He'd begun, "Polly, Caleb and Samuel are old enough to take care of the farm for a few weeks. I cannot sit by and let other men go in my stead." He saw her face turn ashen and her mouth draw into an expression of fear.

"You know what's at stake here, Polly. Since the Crown seems to be indifferent to our suffering under the demands of the Yorkers, the destruction of all we've worked to build here, we have little choice but to join in the insurrection. Once King George sues for peace, we'll have another chance to plead our case, and direct to the King or Parliament, instead of the Yorkers' own court." He snorted. "One might have guessed from the outset that their court would have invalidated the New Hampshire grants, but it's still difficult to believe that they would be so obvious about their motivations."

"I know all of this, Elijah, but... why now?"

"Ethan Allen's been commissioned a colonel by the Congress and he is raising a militia ... and by God, I do believe that he's got the right approach in mind. I can't say what his plans are, of course, but I am well convinced of both the impact and the likelihood of success."

"It's just ... Elijah, I can't face raising those boys alone. You know my mother had to raise us after Father fell to the French, and it put her in an early grave, too."

She looked at him with pleading in her eyes, and sobbed, “Don’t leave me alone, Elijah!”

He gathered her into his arms and comforted her, stroking her hair with one hand and softly rocking her in his embrace. “I’ll take no foolish chances, Polly. But I do not think it meet to stand idly by while my sons can manage the farm, and my service is needed.”

He held her at arm’s length and tilted her chin up with hard but gentle fingers. “Your father did not ask other men to defend his family’s safety when the Indians were sent to visit savagery upon your settlement. A different form of savagery looms now, and I’ll not shirk my duty to you or our neighbors.”

At the mention of her father, Polly closed her eyes in pain, but her sobs subsided and she gazed at her husband with unhappiness but understanding in her eyes. “I know you speak the truth, Elijah. Just ... come back to me. Certainly, we can manage for a little while. But the boys need you ... and I need you. Come back as soon as you’re able.”

“I will, Polly. I know this is hard ... war always is. But peace purchased at the cost of capitulation is harder still. If the rebellion fails and the Yorkers prevail, we will lose everything we’ve worked so hard for. The time has come to take up arms and defend what is just, lest all should be subject to the caprices of the Crown and his officers.”

Polly knew, as she watched Elijah stride out of sight up the track to Fort Frederick, that this would be just the first of many farewells. His enlistment was for the remainder of the year, not just the few weeks this particular campaign might take to complete, and she had no faith at all that a single victory would make the King or his agents in the Colonies see reason.

The boys were both eager in attending to their duties around the homestead for the first week or two after Elijah's departure, and the family soon settled into a new routine, each doing their part to do the work usually reserved for the head of the house.

At the first dinner the evening after Colonel Allen's force had departed, the three had taken their seats as usual, and then there was a momentary pause as they waited for Elijah to say the blessing. After an awkward silence, Caleb had spoken up. "We beseech You, O Lord, to keep our beloved father Elijah safe in his journeys, and we thank You for the bounty that graces our table."

Polly had choked back a sob and left the table for a moment, until she could regain her composure, but the new ritual had been established, and Caleb continued to offer the mealtime prayer each evening.

A week later, Caleb had finished up his morning chores and then gone to Polly. "I'm going to take the canoe and see whether the geese are still over in that bay on the island. I want to set some snares."

"You can't set snares just off Mallett's point?"

"No, Ma. He chased me off the last time I did that. I've got to go further."

Polly sighed and nodded. She knew that Caleb's interest in the island had less to do with the ideal place to find geese and more to do with a better vantage point from which to observe events on the lake. While nothing had been said aloud, British forces in the region were encamped along the far side of the lake, and a young man who knew Lake Champlain as well as anyone around might be able to observe enough to discern what actions his father might be engaged in.

And so began Caleb's nearly daily excursions along the shoreline. A steady traffic in men brought

*The Prize*

news overland from the south, but Caleb's intelligences had more than once been the first information either the family or the men in the village had had of events on the lake.