

Chapter 4

George rubbed his hands together in an effort to warm them in the morning chill. The past season of snow and ice seemed to be grudgingly releasing its hold on the island, and he'd heard his parents comment on multiple occasions during the dark months that it had been the hardest winter they could remember. He was waiting by the shoreline for Lemuel, who was to bring him to town for the day, with a list of items his mother desired him to purchase for the coming season.

The sun had risen now, with the promise of warmth later in the day, but a dense line of trees stood along the ridge above the beach where his brother was to meet him, and in their shadow, it was still cold enough that he could see his breath.

He could hear a rooster crowing from somewhere behind him, announcing that daybreak had come to his part of the island, and in the distance, he could hear a hound of some sort howling mournfully. It was probably Lemuel's dog, bereft at being left behind while its master went off on some errand without him.

Just then, the prow of Lemuel's boat swung into view around the entrance to the cove, and George called out to him.

"Hullo, Lemuel!"

"Good morning to you, George!" Lemuel's voice carried cheerfully across the cold water. As he drew closer, he said, "You have Mother's list?"

“Yes, naturally, and the money that Father provided to pay for what she requires.”

Lemuel strained at the oars for a few more strokes, and as the boat scraped onto the shore, he said, panting, “Then I pray that we will be able to secure the items we need. Come, jump aboard.”

George stepped onto the boat with one foot and pushed it off with the other before scrambling into his seat beside Lemuel as the boat drifted silently into the cove. Both took a moment to adjust the oars so that they were placed for two oarsmen instead of one, and at a nod from Lemuel, they began pulling in unison.

Their labor precluded much conversation, until they emerged from the lee of the island and the prevailing breeze could reach them. The sight of the sail rising under Lemuel’s experienced hands and then filling with wind to hurry them on their way made George’s heart glad, and Lemuel’s quiet assurance as he adjusted the sail and set the tiller into the water that sluiced by the side of the boat filled him with admiration. He wondered whether he might ever gain the ability to conduct himself on the water with such skill.

Lemuel did not ask for his help, and George did not offer it—it was a simple craft, designed to be sailed by one person, and George knew from experience that extra hands would only confuse the process of managing the sail and tiller.

This left George free to ponder the shoreline as they approached, marred as it was by the unwelcome intrusion of the fortifications that the British had thrown up upon seizing this area the prior year.

It had mushroomed, seemingly overnight, from a set of rude trenches and earthworks, to fully-realized fort, with low-slung timber walls punctuated with high blockhouses at each corner. The

whole affair crouched, sullen and ominous over the town as a silent threat, and the British flag on its staff served as a daily rebuke to all those who wished that the King would tend to his own affairs and leave this small settlement in peace.

Lemuel steered the boat around the peninsula on which the fort stood, and as they passed into the shadow of the structure, the chill of the morning reasserted itself. They emerged back into the sun as they sailed past the narrow neck of land that connected it to the mainland, which was interrupted with additional walls and defenses. Lemuel furled the sail as they approached the land, calling out to George, "Get ready on the oars, now."

George centered himself between them, and as Lemuel managed the tiller, he began pulling at the oars to keep their momentum toward shore going.

His brother picked the spot on the shore where he wanted to land the boat, and said, "Just a bit more, George . . . good, you can stop rowing now."

The gravel of the beach grated underneath the boat, and George laid the oars back along the sides of the boat and stood, stepping over the side of the prow to drag it further ashore. Lemuel joined him, and the two brothers pulled the small craft well out of reach of the waves.

"Tide's going out soon, and we'll be back before it comes up this far again," Lemuel said, and George nodded in reply. "Shall we go to the mercantile together, and then attend to the rest of our errands individually?"

"That suits my purposes," George answered, and they set off.

The village was relatively quiet, but a few townspeople were

in evidence, going about their daily affairs with friendly smiles and familiar nods to the two young men.

They reached the mercantile, and they each in turn presented their shopping lists to Mr. Jones, who had bought out the prior owner of the shop with the arrival of the British. Mr. Rutherford, who had sold it, was said to have joined up with the rebels at Machias, further up the coast, where the Americans had a stronghold.

Jones didn't go for all that political intrigue, and was well satisfied to do business with all comers, British and Americans alike. Some of the rebel sympathizers in town avoided his store, but like most people, George and Lemuel gritted their teeth and bought what they needed from him.

George's pile of goods was quite a bit heftier than Lemuel's when they were finished, but he gathered it all into a sack and said, "Mr. Jones, I trust that we may leave these with you for safekeeping, until we have finished with my other business in town and we are ready to return home?"

"Of course," said the merchant, a knowing smile on his face. "Can't leave goods unattended these days, what with all the lawlessness and disruption lately in these parts."

Lemuel smiled in reply, perhaps a bit cooler than Jones, and said, "Indeed, with our visitors about, any peculiar thing could happen to unguarded valuables."

The other man's smile stiffened a touch, and he nodded politely. "I'll keep them under my personal observation until you are ready to collect them."

George nodded to him, and as the brothers left the mercantile, he hissed at Lemuel, "Why did you prod him so?"

Lemuel gave George a grim look and said, "I'll not make the British occupation of this district any more easy than it absolutely must be. They are interlopers in this colony, and those who sympathize with them, too. I mean to make him uncomfortable."

"You'll be reported as a rebel supporter."

"Nay, I am most careful to not give them cause to act." He shrugged. "And if he reports me, let him. They'll find nothing in examining me."

"Or Beatrice?"

Lemuel's face grew stormy. "They'll leave my wife out of it entirely, if they have any care for their skins."

"'Tis your skin at risk, more than theirs." George motioned up the hill at the fort. "One man can hardly argue with that."

Lemuel gave George a stubborn grimace, but he did not answer, instead pausing for a moment before saying, "I'll meet you back here at around noontime."

George nodded and said, "I'll keep an eye on the sun." Without another word, the brothers parted, Lemuel to attend to some business he'd not chosen to elaborate upon, and George to see about making arrangements to trade with a local trapper.

He entered a narrow alley between two houses, a shortcut he preferred over walking the long way around the long line of houses and businesses. As he entered the shadowed space where the eaves from the two buildings nearly met, he heard a girlish shriek, followed by what sounded like a hand striking bare flesh and a grunt of surprise.

Cautiously, George proceeded toward the source of the noise, feeling his heartbeat pound in his ears. Coming around the corner in a crouch, he saw a young woman standing over the writhing form

in the uniform of a British soldier.

She was facing away from George and had not heard his approach, and he was surprised to see her draw her foot back and kick the soldier on the chin, saying in a low, angry voice, "That'll serve you for thinking that you can just take of any colonial girl whom you fancy." George wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the crack of bone breaking when her boot struck the man's face.

He had no time to wonder, though, as the girl turned to leave and caught sight of him. She gave out another small shriek and covered her mouth in surprise, her eyes narrowing in anger.

"Are you in league with this devil, then?" she asked, advancing on George with a menacing manner.

Despite himself, he found that he was frightened for his safety—this was obviously someone to reckon with. "Nay, I just heard your exclamation a moment ago, and came to see whether you needed any assistance." He gestured at the now-still figure on the ground behind her and added, "I can see now that you do not."

Her posture softened, and shoulders sagged as she said, "Thank God. I did not relish fighting off another." She approached, looking smaller and more vulnerable than she had a moment before, and George could see that she was shaking visibly.

He felt the urge to take her into a comforting embrace, but stifled that impulse, saying, "We had best be elsewhere when he awakes. I think you broke his jaw, and the garrison here will not look kindly on one of their own being so injured in town, no matter the circumstances." She gasped slightly and took his elbow in her hand, guiding him around the far corner of the building he'd just passed by. "Come quickly, then, and let us tell my father what has

happened. He will know what to do.”

Though he had no part in her predicament, George felt moved to help her if he could, and followed at a jog behind her as she pointed the way through the maze of houses in the village center. They emerged back onto the main road, and she released his elbow, slowing to a more normal pace, as there were more people moving about than had been earlier in the day.

A patrol of four British soldiers was among those on the street, and for an instant, George felt as though his heart had stopped in his chest. The girl spotted them, too, and turned as casually as she could to George, leaned in toward him, and said in an urgent whisper, “Kiss my cheek.”

George tried to hide his startled expression, as he realized what she was trying to do, and mustered the courage to give her a quick, chaste buss. Though the kiss might have been faked, the blush that spread over his face afterward was completely authentic.

The brief contact between his lips and the petal-soft skin of her face lasted for only the briefest of instants, and yet it seemed as though the entire morning ran its course before the connection between them ended.

Acting her role a bit too convincingly, the girl gave him a coquettish little smile and turned away, her skirts swirling about her feet as she strode away. He hazarded a glance up and down the street, and was somehow shocked to find that nobody else present—including the bored soldiers—seemed to have noticed the moment at all.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, George willed his breathing to slow, even as he could feel his cheeks still burning, and turned away from the patrol to find a more roundabout path to his

meeting with the trapper.

As he walked down the road with his ears abuzz, he shook his head at the knowledge that he didn't know where the girl had gone to seek refuge with her father. Indeed, although the warmth of her cheek was etched into his memory, he realized that he hadn't even learned her name.