

Chapter — 5 —

May the Ninth

My dear friend Susannah,

I am certain that you have already heard the Shocking News from these parts, but I must relate the Details as I know them, for I am not utterly convinced that at your present remove, you can gain any clearer a View than your faithful friend may offer you from her own hand. The whole of the Region has been increasingly under the sway of the Evil sentiments of those who Desire to effect a break from their Sovereign, and out of a great concern for the Safety of his loyal subjects, he has sent great numbers of men under arms to these Shores. These several weeks ago, a mass of the King's Men were sent to investigate a Rumour of unrest. As they attempted to pass over the road at the town of Lexington, they were challenged by a well-armed Mob, and responding to that Challenge, they did fire upon the Rebellious Forces, striking some number of them down on the spot. Continuing their march, the victorious Forces of the Crown arrived then at the town of Concord, whereupon they were attacked by Cowards and Knaves who had taken up their positions out of clear sight, among the hills that lay about the Town. Out of an abundance of Prudence, the wise Commanders appointed by the King determined to return to their Quarters and seek reinforcement against the Menace of their Wicked Foes. All along the way, they were subjected to

Barbaric and Disorderly fire, directed upon them from many divers and widespread Hiding-Places. I have been told, and have no reason to doubt, that these Beasts pursued the Deliberate Design of laying low with preference the brave Officers leading the King's Men. It shatters my heart to relate to you that by the end of this Engagement of Arms, over one Hundred brave and loyal Subjects in Uniform lay in unsought blood, marking a most terrible day in the Annals of History. Tho through the Grace of Providence, he was not present at this confrontation, I am filled with Fear for my Precious Friend Ezekiel. I pray daily for our Deliverance from this Time of Trouble and Woe, but the countryside all about is now Aroused in rage, and I fear that it will only be a matter of Time before this Spark shall ignite all the tinder that has been Stored in the hearts of men of good Conscience and ill. These are fearful days, and I shudder to realise that they are Fated to pass during our time. I add to my Prayers the most fervent wishes for your Speedy Recovery from your hurts, and the hope that these Disorders shall not reach the shores to which your father has relocated you with such Foresight. I have broken entirely with Louise, as she has fallen under the fell Influence of her bridegroom's Sympathies with the Troublemakers who seek to undermine the King. We had quite an animated Argument over the terrible Events which I have here related to you, and we resolved on the spot to have no more to do with each other. Begging the Benign Ruler of the Universe for your safety and comfort, I am,

*Your Devoted Friend,
Emma*

Susannah set the letter down with a shaking hand,

and said to her father, “Papa, I had heard of the recent violence near our former home, but I did not previously appreciate how very grave the incident was.”

He looked up from where he sat working his accounts and sighed, “Yes, my dear child, it was very nearly a spark in a tinderbox, but it is to be hoped that less unquiet voices will prevail upon the more excitable souls among them, and cause them all to consider the consequences, should they not step back from the brink of a break with the mother country.”

Susannah frowned. “Perhaps you should read the letter that Emma sent to me, Papa. If anything, her words persuade me that the fuse to the powderkeg is now lit, and we may expect to feel the explosion even at this remove.”

She handed the page over to him, and he accepted it, reading Emma’s fine penmanship without difficulty. Susannah’s mouth quirked at the thought that Emma likely still suffered under Miss Thayer’s constant remonstrations to more carefully form her letters, while Master Grant cared only for whether he could make sense of what was written. As a result, Susannah, thought, her pen was probably less fine than once it had been, while Emma’s would continue to profit by Miss Thayer’s attentions, so long as events permitted such normal things as lessons and correspondence to continue.

Frowning deeply, her father folded the letter and handed it back. “I agree that it sounds as though we have not heard the whole of the story here, but I will also note that your friend Emma is an excitable sort of girl, and so we must no more than take under advisement any opinion of the mood of the countryside that she might advance.”

Susannah considered this for a moment, and then replied, "Nonetheless, I am now grateful that you took the precaution of removing us to this place. Perhaps I have been filled with resentment for having to abandon the comfort of our home, but I now realize that it was a false comfort, concealing great hazards to our safety."

Her father regarded her seriously. "I knew that it would be a shock, and a great hardship upon you to depart from all that you had known and held dear, but I knew also that to stay would be to run the risk of exposing you to the hazards of war."

His brow gathered tightly and his eyes closed as he shook his head sadly. "I did not dream that it would come so openly or soon, however. I fear now for the security of our friends who remain, and indeed, I tremble for the future of our happy experiment on these shores. Can any nation hope to maintain harmony with a far-flung empire of colonies, if the British Sovereign and our advanced system of law cannot? Can any nation hope even to persist as a nation for a span of years greater than the reign of a particularly enlightened king?"

With a sour look, he waved a dismissive hand. "Please forgive me for ranting so. I forget at times that I am not at my table of peers, and that your interests are far different from the high questions of philosophy that haunt the depths of our cups."

"No, Papa, you forget that I have oft overheard you and your friends in your debates and discussions, and find them reliably informative and intriguing. Our old house, for all its many charms, did not conceal the sound of voices raised in banter from one room to the next, and even as I was supposed to be sleeping, it was common enough for me to be marking your words."

She blushed slightly and added, "Even though I

knew that you might again chastise me, I did sometimes open the door, that I might hear more clearly when a discussion was of special interest. I know that it was beyond the boundaries of propriety to listen to your private conversations, but in truth there was much that I could not help but hear, were I even tight in my bed."

He nodded, his expression still sour, conceding the point. "I feared that I was keeping you awake during our midnight tables, but as you never complained, I thought that you were a sound sleeper enough to withstand our voices." Giving her a wry smile, he said, "Perhaps it is for the best; thus are you better informed than would otherwise be the case."

"In any event, Papa, you have not yet found the joy of such society in this place, and while I would not now trade our security here for that pleasure there, I do not fancy myself to be an equal to the conversational skills of your friends."

He gave her a quick smile and said, "Your quest for compliments is noted and rewarded—I do not lack for interesting discussions in your company. As for the society of my friends, why, we may yet see them here, should events in our former home not improve."

They were interrupted by a rapping at the door, and he sprang to his feet. "That will be Miss Vincent, here to examine the progress of your ankle's repair. When I saw her yesterday, I asked her to pay us the compliment of her company at dinner tonight."

Susannah could hear him giving final instructions to the cook, a girl of her own age named Michelle, whose Yorkshire parents were improving a farmstead in a valley not a day's ride distant, but whom they placed with her father so as to earn some hard money to support their enterprise. She was, for the most part, exceptionally

competent in the kitchen—indeed, Susannah privately thought that she must study under the girl once her ankle was well enough—and severely quiet, speaking only in response to direct queries.

After the front door closed, she could hear Miss Vincent's gentle voice as her father took her cloak for her. After a moment, they reappeared in the informal sitting room, and Susannah gingerly rose to her feet to greet her.

"It is so good to see you up on your feet," exclaimed the healer, stepping forward to take Susannah's hands in her own. "Your color is much improved today, as well. Please, do sit, and allow me to examine your feet before we must go to the kitchen for dinner."

Susannah sat, saying, "I appreciate your kindness, Miss Vincent. I think I shall soon be ready to walk about on my own again, though perhaps with the aid of crutches of some description." Behind Miss Vincent, her father smiled at her determination.

Miss Vincent knelt on one knee before Susannah's chair and took the injured foot up onto her own raised leg. She rapidly unbound it, her fingers working with such gentleness that Susannah did not so much as flinch even once. She motioned for the girl to raise her other foot to sit beside the hurt one, and stared at them both, then grasped the toe of each and began gently moving them in unison, first in one direction and then in another. At a couple of points of motion, Susannah grimaced, and once she gasped aloud as a particularly sharp pain resulted from the movement.

Taking her hands off Susannah's feet, Miss Vincent rubbed them together and nodded, smiling. "I think that is probably a good next step, yes. We can talk to someone in town who has some skill with tools,

and have a pair manufactured for you, if your father agrees."

He nodded, saying with a smile, "If I do not agree, she will likely attempt to go for a stroll even without the support of proper crutches, and then undo all of your fine work."

Miss Vincent smiled back at him and took up the wrapping again to bind Susannah's ankle up again. As she worked, she asked, "Should you prefer your draught before we sup, or afterward?"

Susannah reflexively wrinkled her nose in distaste and said, "After, please, if it is no great inconvenience."

Miss Vincent laughed and replied, "None whatever. There, you are set to go. Shall we to the kitchen, Richard?"

Her father smiled, and something like a sparkle of joy shone in his eye as he replied, "Yes, Alma, just let me help Susannah to the table. You go on ahead."

Smiling again, Miss Vincent stood and moved aside so that Susannah could take her father's shoulder and follow them into the kitchen. Michelle had set the table with what finery they had fetched with them in their hasty departure, and a pewter tureen of fragrant soup stood steaming in the center.

As there was no place else for her to dine, she joined the family and their guest, although she stayed entirely silent throughout the meal, only blushing in response to the well-deserved praise that the diners offered her for her cooking.

Soup gave way to mutton, which was then followed by a savory pudding and a small glass of sack for each. The food and drink were accompanied by happy chatter, the somber mood brought on by Emma's letter now lifted with Miss Vincent's appearance.

More than once through the meal, Susannah thought that she caught her father and the healer looking at each other with something more than just casual friendship, but she dismissed the possibility—for as long as she could remember, it had been just her father and her, and she could not anticipate that even so gentle a soul as Miss Vincent might change that.

Soon enough, the final course had been cleared, and, after the noxious and unwelcome draught had been given, her father gathered Miss Vincent's cloak and helped her into it. Father and daughter stood together at the door to wave farewell to their friend, and after they closed the door, he said to her, "I will see to the crutches this evening, if you will promise me that you will not attempt to go abroad before they are delivered."

She gave him a wry smile and said, "Of course, Papa. I have no desire to give Miss Vincent cause to continue preparing those draughts for me—they really are dreadful."

He laughed and nodded. "'Tis a pact, then, and I shall maintain my end of it. I'll set off straightaway, if you will be comfortable enough with your reading?"

"If you will but help me back to my chair, I should be fine until your return. Michelle can attend to anything that I might need in your absence." The serving-girl nodded silent assent, and Susannah smiled at her father as he led her back to her chair.