Prologue

*Spring 1825*

*The Grange*

*Harlem, New York*

The promise of liberty is not written in blood or engraved

in stone; it’s embroidered into the fabric of our nation.

And so is Alexander Hamilton.

My husband. My hero. My betrayer.

Though Hamilton is more than twenty years dead now, his

memory lingers where I stand in the garden of tulips, lilies, and

hyacinths we once planted together. He is inescapable in even

the smallest things. I cannot buy a pouch of seeds for this garden

without money from the mint that he established. I cannot

pass a newsboy on my walks through the city without seeing the

paper he founded or without reflecting upon the freedoms for

the press he helped guarantee. I cannot cast my gaze at the busy

ships in the harbor without seeing the trade he assured, or the

coast guard that he founded, or the industry and opportunities

he provided for the people who now flock to our shores in search

of freedom and a better future.

In short, there is not a breath in any American’s life that is

not shaped in some way by Alexander Hamilton. Certainly not a

breath in mine. His memory, which I must honor for the sake of

our children if nothing else, is impossible for me to escape.

Though I confess I have tried.

In the secret seethings of my discontented heart, I’ve searched

for a life that is my own. A life not consumed by the questions he

left in his wake—riddles

I will never solve about our marriage, our

family, and the suffering to which he exposed us. I’ve searched

for a meaning to my existence not swallowed up by Hamilton’s

shadow. By his genius. By his greatness. By his folly.

And by his enemies.

For in the battle for history—a

war for truth, fought against

time—I

am a veteran. I’ve been fighting that battle for decades,

and perhaps never more ferociously than now, within myself, as

I stare at the paper in my hand.

Squinting beneath my bonnet against the sunlight, I see a

calling card, unremarkable but for the single name etched in the

center with bold ink.

James Monroe

At the sight of it, an unexpected pain stabs beneath my ribs,

where my heart picks up its pace. My basket of purple hyacinths

lies forgotten at my feet as I stand up, a little breathless. For the

only thing more astonishing than the name itself is that the card

is folded at the corner, indicating the former president personally

delivered it, rather than sending a servant.

I should feel honored.

Instead, I’m incensed that James Monroe has darkened my

doorstep. And before I can stop myself, my voice drops low, as

it always does when I’m angry. “What has that man come to see

me for?”

“Couldn’t say,” my housekeeper murmurs, straightening her

apron. “But he’s waiting for you in the parlor.”

It’s not the protocol for a gentleman to present a card and

wait, except when presuming upon familiar acquaintance. And

though Monroe definitely is a familiar acquaintance—and

more

than an acquaintance besides—he

has no right to presume upon

our old intimacy. No right at all. Not after everything that has

passed between us. Especially not when he’s caught me out in

the yard, in my gardening gloves and black workaday bombazine

frock.

He should not expect, even under the best of circumstances,

that I would receive a man of his rank and stature on a moment’s

notice. But then James Monroe has always been wilier than anyone

gives him credit for, and I imagine that he’s counting on the

element of surprise to work to his advantage.

“Doubtless he’s come to pay his respects to you,” the housekeeper

says.

And I give the most indelicate snort of my life, because I think

it more likely Monroe has come to collect my surrender. For years

now, to promote his so-called

Era of Good Feelings, a popular

President Monroe cut a swath through cities and towns, using his

southern drawl and amiable manner to smother every last vestige

of dissent. And charmed, no doubt, by that infernal dimple in his

chin, everyone has genuflected.

Everyone but me.

Which is why I suppose he cannot retire in complete victory

until he can boast of having been reconciled with the wife of

Alexander Hamilton. But there are no good feelings here. And

even though I’m not completely reconciled with Hamilton myself,

I have no wish to become Monroe’s final triumph.

As I clutch the card, much perturbed, the housekeeper prompts

me. “Ma’am, you wouldn’t want to leave the gentleman waiting.”

Oh, but I do want to. I’d happily leave Monroe standing on the

stoop of the house Alexander Hamilton built until the Virginian

is bent with age and crumbling to dust. But Monroe has already

invaded my parlor so I must deal with him. And I must deal with

him myself. To do otherwise would be to discount a lifetime of

lessons from my father, a general who taught me that when faced

with the specter of defeat, one must meet it swiftly and with as

much dignity as possible. So I remove my garden gloves, scoop

up my basket of hyacinths, and say, quite grandly, “I will see him.”

After that, I don’t so much walk into the Federal-style

yellow

house as march into battle. I find Monroe in the old, faded parlor,

sitting on a dark sofa I embroidered to hide where it has become

threadbare. The gentleman rises to his feet to greet me, his familiar

expression grave, hat clutched in now aged hands.

And from ten paces, I take the measure of him.

Six feet tall, square-shouldered,

and rawboned as ever, Monroe

is wearing antiquated black velvet knee breeches, long since gone

out of fashion, which leads me to imagine the silver in his hair

is powder from a bygone era. A showman when it comes to reputation,

Monroe must be pleased, I think, to count himself in that

pantheon of presidents my countrymen now venerate.

Washington, the father of the country. Adams, the mastermind

of independence. Jefferson, the voice of the revolution. Madison,

the father of the Constitution.

And Monroe, the last of the founders.

Or so they say. But if Monroe must be counted as the last,

then by my reasoning, my husband was the first. For not one of

these men would have ever become president without Alexander

Hamilton, the architect of our very government.

Yet Monroe doesn’t even glance at the portrait of my husband

that hangs where the piano used to be—long

since sold off to

keep a roof over my children’s heads.

Perhaps I cannot blame Monroe for avoiding the eyes of Hamilton’s

portrait. After all, even for me, the likeness still churns up a

noxious stew of resentment, guilt, and loss. And I am not the only

person in this world who loved the man and hated him, too.

So I nod to Monroe.

I should invite him to sit. I should serve tea. A thousand

niceties are dictated by social grace when a president—even

a

former president—comes

to call. But I observe none of them.

Instead, I wordlessly wait for him to deliver the first volley.

Finally, with a formal bow, Monroe drawls, “Mrs. General

Hamilton.”

Why does it suddenly bother me to be addressed this way? It’s

the title by which I’ve been known for almost thirty years. A title

in which I’ve taken pride. A title some would say has opened as

many doors as it has slammed shut. But somehow, hearing myself

addressed as Mrs. General Hamilton by James Monroe feels

as I’m being forced by him, for a second time, to loyally claim

Hamilton as my own.

And Monroe—as

much as any person still alive—has

cause to

know just how much that loyalty cost me.

Now Monroe rises up from his bow with the hint of the smile

I once found so charming. He clears his throat and begins, haltingly.

“It’s been many years since we first met . . .”

Oh, after everything, is he truly appealing to our history?

As if I’ve forgotten. But I haven’t. Not for a moment. Especially

not recently, when the approach of the fiftieth anniversary

of our independence reminds me daily of how my life has been

entwined with the creation of this nation.

Monroe’s, too, I must, in justice, admit.

At the start, I was a general’s daughter and he was a handsome

war hero. And now I stare at Monroe, wondering if he still has

that bullet lodged in his shoulder, or if a surgeon ever managed

to dig it out . . .

But I don’t ask. I don’t say anything. In truth, I take perverse

pleasure in the pained yearning I imagine I see upon Monroe’s

face as I force him to founder against the wall of my silence.

Silence is often the only weapon available to ladies. And I wield

mine expertly.

In the thick awkwardness, Monroe clears his throat and continues

what seems a rehearsed speech. “Yes, it’s been quite a

long time since we met. I find that the lapse of time brings its

softening influences. Now we are both nearing the grave, when

past differences can be forgiven and forgotten.”

Forgiven and forgotten.

I nearly scoff, but I’m determined to hold my tongue as an act

of resistance. After all, despite what Hamilton believed, I am no

angel.

But Monroe seems not to realize the war I’m silently waging

against him, and his gray eyes are hopeful. Why shouldn’t he be

hopeful? Napoleon Bonaparte once said that history is merely

a set of lies agreed upon, and I know it would advantage me,

and my family, to go along with all the little lies this new nation

has agreed upon with regard to Alexander Hamilton. My sons

will more easily find advancement if I do. My daughter might be

courted by more respectable beaus. I myself might more comfortably

mingle in society, if I so please.

All I have to do is surrender to James Monroe’s wish for reconciliation.

And I should. I know that I should. I have every reason to put

the past behind me.

But as I stand here, trying to form conciliatory words, I am

over aware of my husband’s portrait in its gilded frame, his

extraordinary eyes looking down upon me. I turn my head toward

the arched entryway, where his ghostly marbled bust has

beckoned me, each night, like an intimate and a stranger. And I

glance past that, to the doorway of the little green study in which

I can still remember him toiling at his mahogany and satinwood

cylinder desk, leather-bound

books piled high on either side of

him, ink smudges upon his hands, his quill scratching and candle

burning late into the night.

Forgiven and forgotten.

If I am famous for anything, it’s for being a forgiving woman.

And as for the forgetting . . . there are so many things I should

like to forget. Forgetting would lift the weighty cloak of the past

from my shoulders and make the present so much easier. But

memory unalterably sets our compass, and guides us down paths

we might have preferred never to have walked at all. And my path

goes back all the way to the start. To the fathers of this country

who fought and bled beneath a starry banner of red, white, and

blue. To the mothers who were the menders, the sewers of flags,

the darners of uniforms, the binders of wounds. And, in my case,

the quilter of the torn scraps of old paper that remind me why we

ever fought in the first place . . .

Part One

A War for Independence

Chapter One

*You have called together a host of savages, and turned them loose*

*to scalp our women and children and lay our country waste.*

—Anonymous American soldier to

British General John Burgoyne

*October 17, 1777*

*The Pastures*

*Albany, New York*

I was someone before I met Alexander Hamilton.

Not someone famous or important or with a learned philosophical

understanding of all that was at stake in our revolution.

Not a warrior or a philosopher or statesman.

But I was a patriot.

I was no unformed skein of wool for Hamilton to weave together

into any tapestry he wished. That’s important for me to

remember now, when every thread of my life has become tangled

with everything he was. Important, I think, in sorting out what

can be forgiven, to remember my own experiences—the

ones

filled with my own yearnings that had nothing to do with him.

I was, long before he came into my life, a young woman struggling

to understand her place in a changing world. And torn, even

then, between loyalty, duty, and honor in the face of betrayal.

Torn as I stood in my family’s potato field surrounded by

wounded soldiers, debating a choice that would never have given

me pause before. Should I tend to the injured Redcoats while

under the gaze of mistrustful American soldiers?

“Water, please, Miss Schuyler,” croaked a British regular, lying

in a furrow beneath one of our orchard trees.

He’d been evacuated here to Albany with at least a thousand

others from Saratoga, where a brutal battle had been fought ten

days earlier. Our hospital, churches, and pastures were now overrun

with casualties from both armies and we struggled to care

for them all. The least I could do was fetch the Redcoat a pitcher

of water.

Instead, I hesitated, a knot of anxiety tightening in my throat,

for I was now the daughter of a disgraced American general who

had been relieved of his command under suspicion of treason.

Facing court-martial,

my father already stood accused of taking

bribes from the British and surrendering an American fortress to

the enemy. For his daughter to be seen caring for the same enemy

now . . .

I feared for anything I might do to worsen Papa’s situation, so

even as my face heated with shame, I turned away from the Redcoat

to help others, forcing myself to remember that these British

had been ravaging the whole of the Hudson Valley for months

and terrorizing my countrymen.

They are the cause of this bloodshed, I told myself.

For the king’s men had captured and occupied New York City,

burned our state’s first capital at Kingston to the ground, and

during the fighting upon the plains of Saratoga, they had set fire to

our summerhouse, leaving it in ruin. From here in the relative

safety of the Pastures, we’d seen only the faintest glow of battlefield

fires against the distant evening sky, but even now the acrid

smell and taste of soot carried to us downriver. And I thought,

We’ve set the whole world on fire.

Two summers before, our thirteen colonies declared independence

from the British crown, but now our celebratory bonfires

had given way to the flames of war. I hoped, following this American

victory at Saratoga, that we were finally winning it. So I tended

to a Continental scout who held a gory wound on his scalp that

had reopened since a doctor last saw him.

“How bad is it, Miss Schuyler?” he asked, grimacing against

the pain as I washed the wound and pulled my needle through

the gash at his hairline.

“Fortunately, your brow is cool and it does not look to have

festered,” I replied. Fresh red blood oozed warmly over my fingertips.

“Try not to pull it open again,” I told the young soldier as I

finished my stitches and cut the thread with a hunting knife.

While my father taught me to ride, fish, and know my way in

the wild, my mother had trained me in rudimentary medicine

while tending tenants, Indians, and one frontier army or another.

And since I couldn’t fight in this war, I contributed the way women

could. I sewed. Uniforms, socks, flesh. “If all goes well, you’ll be

left with a battle scar to prove your bravery.”

He grinned. “Thank you.”

As a general’s daughter, I knew what soldiers liked to hear.

But it seemed, these days, I never knew what to say to please my

mother.

“Betsy,” she snapped from where she stood at the back gate

removing an apron she’d dirtied helping soldiers in the nearby

pastures. “Go in the house with the other children and clean up.

Your father is expected shortly from the surrender at Saratoga.

We must prepare to receive his guests.”

I winced, fearful the scout beside me would misconstrue her

words. For we were not expecting guests, but British prisoners.

Nor was I one of the children. In fact, I’d just turned twenty. But

I knew better than to point any of this out to my mother, a stern

Dutch plantation mistress who’d been exceedingly vexed with

me for months now.

You’re the sensible one, Elizabeth, she’d said in the heat of our

quarrel. I expected better.

As if I could stop the tides of change any more than she

could. I didn’t say that, either. I merely wiped my hands, bobbed

my head, picked up my skirts, and went. Broken oyster shells

crunched underfoot on the drive as I passed the stables and made

my way to my father’s handsome brick mansion, which stood

upon a bluff overlooking the majestic Hudson River.

The house was a flurry of activity as I hurried past kerchiefed

Negro slaves moving the heavy mahogany table into the grand

entry hall and went up the stairs to the bedroom I shared with

my sisters. Well—just

one sister, now, since Angelica had run off

to marry a mysterious suitor against Papa’s wishes a few months

before. Now it was just me and eighteen-year-

old

Peggy who

shared the spacious pale-green

room with its wardrobes, armchairs,

and canopied bed.

“Why can’t General Gates take these prisoners?” Peggy cried,

yanking on a pair of stockings. “He took Papa’s victory, after all.”

“That’s true,” I said. It was bad enough that a rival had pushed

our father out of command. Worse that we were now saddled

with the captives. We’d shown courtesy to imprisoned British

officers before, in the early years of the war, most notably to

the dashing Lieutenant John André, a clever and genteel officer

who’d charmed my sisters and me with his sketches and accomplished

flute playing.

But my father wasn’t under suspicion then, and General “Gentleman

Johnny” Burgoyne was no André—he

was a monster and

no gentleman at all. How was it going to look to the Continental

soldiers in our fields, not to mention our tenants and neighbors,

if we wined and dined the very same British general who sent

Mohawk Indians to terrorize them?

But as our black lady’s maid, Jenny, swept into the room and

unfastened my apron and frock while fretting about the bloodstains,

I reminded Peggy, “Even if you’re right about Papa’s victory

being stolen out from under him, you cannot say such things lest

you rub the salt of injustice into his still-raw

wounds. And you

especially cannot say it in front of the British, lest they sense disunity

amongst our generals.”

“That’s no secret, is it?” Peggy asked.

Thankfully not, because Peggy was never very good with secrets.

Indeed, Peggy had the habit of speaking aloud what others

left unspoken. In fact, she’d quite nearly given away Angelica’s

plan to escape the house and run off with her beau, though now

I sometimes wished she had. I wished we both had.

“I just hate that we must go to all this trouble for the same

lobsterbacks who burned our Saratoga house,” Peggy grumbled,

rummaging in her tall oak wardrobe amidst taffeta, frilly petticoats,

gauzy fichus, and embroidered stomachers.

On a sigh, I stepped into the petticoats Jenny held for me. “I

hate it, too.”

I hated that I couldn’t be as happy about our American victory

as I should have been. Hated that our Saratoga house was

in ashes. Hated that Papa faced court-martial,

his reputation in

tatters. Hated that Angelica was gone and our mother blamed

me for it. And hated most of all that it might be, at least in some

small part, my fault.

Peggy harrumphed, admiring her dark glossy curls in a looking

glass. “Well, we’ll at least remind these king’s men that we’re

not paupers. Wear the blue robe à la Française. Oh, and the blue

earbobs. I know what you’re going to say, but they’re not too

showy.”

They were, for me. Angelica was the sophisticated one. Peggy

the pretty one. And I was Philip Schuyler’s practical daughter. The

one who, as the second child in a family as large and prominent

as Philip Schuyler’s, was sometimes apt to be overlooked. There

was even a story told in my family that when I was a babe, Mama

was so distracted by her many responsibilities that she accidentally

left me bound up in my cradleboard, hanging from a tree in the

way of the natives. So it was that from the smallest age one can

conceive of such a thing, I considered it quite natural to be overlooked.

And I never minded, because it allowed me to slip away to swim

in the river, or stay up past bedtime without anyone noticing, and

tag along after my father on adventures that were forbidden to

other girls. Besides, people said very interesting things in front of

girls they didn’t notice . . .

But the blue paste earbobs drew notice. They sparkled like

sapphires—exactly

the sort of jewelry that I did not carry off

well. Still, I treasured them for their sentimental value.

“I don’t know,” I said, studying my reflection as Jenny held

them to my ear.

My younger sister met my gaze in the mirror. “Angelica left

them for you. She wanted you to wear them.”

Almost as one, we both sighed for her absence. Angelica. My

brilliant sister. My closest friend and confidant. I sank down into

the quilted wingback chair by the window where Angelica used

to read her books, hoping in vain to catch a lingering scent of my

sister’s rosewater perfume. And I reread the little note that had

accompanied the gift.

I love Jack with all my heart, but that will never diminish my

first and best attachment to you, Betsy—Angelica

I hadn’t wanted to help Angelica elope with Jack Carter, a

commissary supplier of armaments and other goods, who had

courted her in a whirlwind and stolen her away to Boston. I’d

begged my sister not to run off with him. But she’d argued. “Love

is a thing beyond control. Passion is a thing beyond reason. It

can’t be denied.” Her eyes had nearly glowed with fervor. “It’s a

thing almost . . . predestined.”

That still sounded like perfect nonsense to me. I’d thought her

scheme foolhardy, dangerous, and disobedient. Not to mention

selfish, for all the trouble it would give my parents in the midst of

a war. And, if I am honest, there was also a childish part of me

that despaired Angelica was to break the vow we once made to

be spinsters together like the Douw sisters who lived on Court

Street.

In this world on fire, her marriage was one rebellion too many

for me, too. But in the end, I loved Angelica too much to deny her.

Even though the elopement had put our mother into a fury and

beset Papa with worry and embarrassment at the precise time he

could least afford it.

“I think the earbobs will look quite fine on you, Miss Betsy,”

Jenny said with a shy smile upon her dark-skinned

face. Jenny

always knew the right thing to say. Maybe it was because, as was

the custom on plantations in the Hudson Valley, she’d been given

to us when we were little children still playing together, and now

we couldn’t manage without her. So I let her fasten them and

powder me, even though powder always made me sneeze.

Just then, the sound of horse hooves clattered on the drive.

Glancing out the window, Peggy announced, “Papa’s home with

the British prisoners.” She all but dragged me down our grand

staircase, with its rope-patterned

balusters, past the papered

walls painted with gray murals of ancient Roman ruins, and into

the front hall, where our little brothers and sisters had gathered.

Looping her arm in mine, Peggy gave a spiteful grin. “I’ll bet this

wasn’t what Gentleman Johnny had in mind when he said he’d be

eating Christmas dinner in Albany. Now he hasn’t so much as a

twig for a stew pot.”

“Peggy,” I warned.

Papa appeared from the back door near to where we all gathered

to greet him. I scooped my baby sister Cornelia into my

arms, and stood beside our brothers, twelve-year-

old

John, nine-year-

old

Jeremiah, and four-year-

old

Rensselaer, who, like a

charming boy soldier, saluted Papa with a chubby hand.

“I do hope Papa seized Burgoyne’s champagne,” Peggy whispered

to me, undeterred. “Spirits may be the only thing to see us

through this indignity.”

Papa’s stern gaze cut to Peggy, silencing her at last.

Tall and dignified even in his traveling clothes, my father was

the portrait of a cultured gentleman. But he was more than a

gentleman; he was a general. So it pained me to see him out of his

blue-and-

buff

uniform with its gold braids. Even more so when

he frowned and said, “I expect each of you to show the utmost

hospitality to our captive British officers.”

Peggy crossed her arms in protest. “But, Papa, that man

doesn’t deserve—”

“It’s not a matter of deserving,” my father admonished. “The

British think we’re uncivilized people living in these wilds. If

you’d seen the poor Baroness Riedesel tremble with fear of what

we might do to her and her children . . .”

That image softened me because I knew the sad plight of

women caught up in this war. Girls killed and scalped. Old

widows robbed by marauding soldiers of every last thing they

owned. Young wives abandoned and caught on the wrong side

of enemy lines.

My father’s voice took on the strength of conviction. “The

British think we’re children incapable of governing ourselves.

It is in service to the cause of our independence to show them

otherwise.”

Peggy opened her mouth to argue, but Papa stopped

her short. “There will be no moment, in word or deed, from any

of you that should make the prisoners feel anything but honored

guests. I care not what others may say or do; as for me and my

house, we will serve my country.”

In saying this, he spoke as if giving law. But he was also encouraging

us to see our own small contributions in this cause.

So while others might rebel against him, I would not, even as I

feared that the many watchful eyes around our house might see

our hospitality as treason. “I’ll help Dinah bring refreshments in

from the kitchen,” I said.

And in the end, everything was almost as my father wished it.

Redcoat officers filed glumly into the house, and Mama greeted

them with her chin held high as befit her lineage, which she traced

back to the first Dutch patroon to settle this colony when it was

still called New Netherlands. She always said that a general’s wife

should show no fear, and neither should his children, so I forced

myself to smile sweetly at each and every Redcoat. Not that they

looked twice at me. Nor did I wish them to. Especially since I

could well imagine them marching into our house under far different

circumstances had the battle gone the other way.

After Burgoyne was settled in the most elegant and comfortable

accommodations, I took his men pots of strong tea with

Mama’s short-crust

biscuits and the preserves we’d been putting

up for autumn made from Papa’s prize yellow plums. All

the while, I wondered which of our guests might have set fire to

our country house or given leave to the Mohawks to scalp our

settlers.

That night, our hostess duties continued in the kitchen. “Some

prison this is!” Peggy exclaimed, eyes rolling as she took in a long

table laden with silver platters. “They should be lucky to get stale

bread but they’re getting a feast.”

Our cook, Dinah, had spent the day preparing local delicacies

under Mama’s supervision. All the servants were so busy catering

to the needs of our guests that Mama had enlisted us and Dinah’s

daughter, our Jenny, to help. Like her mother, Jenny had a petite

stature, but where our lady’s maid had always been shy, Dinah

issued orders like a battlefield commander.

Even to us.

“Miss Betsy and Miss Peggy, we’ll start with the oysters. Take

in the trays. Jenny, go fetch the butter.” Peggy wrinkled her nose

even as Dinah gave us a look that brooked no argument.

We did just what she said.

Burgoyne and his officers joined Papa at the long banquet

table while the womenfolk of the household served them oysters

followed by a course of striped bass our servants caught fresh

from the river, along with seasoned cabbage and carrots, all to

be washed down with Papa’s best claret and Madeira wine and

finished with a dessert of spiced bonnyclabber made from soured

milk.

And if I’d not been a Christian, I’d have wished that they

choked on it.

It was no small trouble to keep the British officers and their

wives and children fed, especially since some rascal was milking

the cows before our servants could get the cream. And though I

tried to keep my little brothers from trouble, the next morning

Jeremiah flung open the door to the room where Burgoyne and

his officers slept. “You’re all my prisoners!” he cried, then slammed

the door again, laughing like the arch little fellow he was.

Prince, our butler, was not amused.

Carrying himself with a royal demeanor that defied his enslavement

and justified his name, Prince was a dark, stately man,

who was the most trusted servant in the household and whose

disapproving tone was almost more intimidating than Papa’s. “It

would reflect best upon you, Miss Betsy, to keep your brothers in

better order. And tell Miss Peggy I have my eyes on her.”

I swallowed. “What’s Peggy done?”

Prince tilted his head in the direction of the main hall. “She’s

flirting with the Redcoats. Flashing those dark eyes of hers. Don’t

either of you girls get in your heads that you can play the same

trick on me twice.”

I bit my lip, remembering how we’d lured Prince from his bed

near the back door so that Angelica could slip away to meet her

beau. He hadn’t forgotten, and might have been angrier about it

than either of my parents. Trying to reassure him, I said, “Don’t

worry. Neither of us have any use for these lobsterbacks.”

So imagine my surprise to find my pretty sister sitting next to

Burgoyne, the monster himself. The two of them, just sipping

coffee there amongst Mama’s silver, glass, and candles!

Peggy was laughing, having somehow charmed the British

general into giving her his silver shoe buckles as a token of esteem.

Worse, only a moment later, an unmarried British officer

asked if Peggy might take him for a turn in the nursery where we

grew Papa’s plums, and she agreed.

Pulling my sister aside under some pretext, I asked, “What can

you be thinking?”

“Papa said to be kind,” she replied, clasping the general’s sparkling

shoe buckles with no intention of giving them up. “Besides,

I don’t remember you shunning that handsome Lieutenant André

when he was here.”

“The war was different then.” More civilized, it had seemed.

And farther away. Besides, I didn’t have to shun men; they never

noticed me with my sisters flitting about. But André was the sort

of man who seemed to notice everything, and when he’d commented

favorably on my drawings, I’d beat down the stirrings of

attraction by reminding myself he was an enemy.

“The war is no different now,” Peggy argued. “After all, we’ve

only won a battle at Saratoga. If we should still lose the war, one

of us might have to marry a king’s man to save the family.”

I sputtered in exasperation and more than a little astonishment.

She should’ve known better than to behave in a way that

might confirm suspicions that our family sympathized with the

British. And as a general’s daughter, she should’ve known better

than to speak openly about defeat. But I was most horrified by

her apparent willingness to wed an enemy, no matter her reasons.

“I’d sooner marry a Barbary pirate!”

“Well, I wish you would,” Peggy called over her shoulder as

she flounced off. “Because I fear Papa will never consent to let me

marry until you do.”

I would’ve been more cross with her if it weren’t for the fact that

the kinder we were to the prisoners, the more it shamed them. A

lesson I learned that evening as we gathered in the blue parlor near

the fire and the British general offered my father an apology.

I wanted to think Burgoyne meant to apologize for the poor

people who had the misfortune to be caught before his advancing

army. Or even that he might apologize for the king, who

had forced us all to this war. But instead he said to Papa, “Your

hospitality is too much for a man who has ravaged your lands

and burned your home. I regret the event and the reasons that

occasioned it.”

All eyes turned to Papa, who regretted the loss of life and his

command more than the loss of his house—all

three of which

were occasioned, in part, by this man. And yet my father forced

himself to a nod of acknowledgment. “It is the fate of war. If I had

thought it necessary to save the lives of my men, I’d have done the

same. Say no more about it.”

This was, I thought, what it meant to be noble.

Not a title conveyed by a king. Not by birth or blood. But

through a learned and practiced strength of faith and character.

And insofar as our revolution was to teach that lesson to the

world, I prayed it would succeed.

I wished to be as noble as my father. And I was shamed anew

as I remembered the wounded Redcoat’s face. The one who had

asked me for water. The one from whom I had turned away. I’d

been wrong—worse,

driven by fear, I’d been cowardly.

And now I determined to be brave.

Papa’s little study at the back of the house, with its emerald

flock-papered

walls, and its books, maps, and calculations arranged

in orderly fashion, was a place forbidden to my younger

sisters and brothers. They never dared interrupt Papa’s work, but

because I had mastered the art of sitting with him without disturbing

his thoughts, he sometimes indulged me to stay while he

wrote his letters. So, bracing for the reprimand I deserved, I took

the liberty of knocking upon the door.

Papa summoned me inside, and I closed the door behind me.

But instead of slipping quietly into the window seat where I liked

to read, I waited for him to finish his letter.

Finally, he poured a circle of wax upon the folded page and

stamped it with his seal, then glanced up at me quizzically where

I leaned with my back against the door. “What is it, my child?”

“What are you working on?” I asked, not quite finding the

courage to tell him why I’d come.

He didn’t press me on the matter. “I’m preparing my defense

for the court-martial.”

“Good,” I said, guilt souring the dinner in my belly. “Then your

name can be cleared of wrongdoing once and for all.”

Papa wasn’t always a calm man—he’d

once threatened to

dash the brains of an incompetent underling upon the ground—but

he strove to conduct himself as a gentleman. And one of

the ways he attempted to discipline himself was by the working

of mathematical problems. He must have been struggling with

something now, because he absently scratched figures into a

notebook before saying, “Unlike you, my dear child, I am not

entirely confident that I will be exonerated. But at least I will

have a consolation which no one can deprive me of: the conscious

reflection that I have done my duty, even if I am to suffer

unjustly for my country.”

I followed his gaze as it cut to the silver falcon coat of arms

affixed above the fireplace.

Semper Fidelis. Always faithful. Always loyal.

That was our Schuyler family motto, one that had been flung

in my father’s face by our Tory neighbors when, in ’75, Papa

had exchanged his red officer’s coat for a blue general’s uniform

and declared himself a soldier for the American cause. And now,

because of me, he found himself accused of treason by some

patriots, too.

I swallowed around a knot in my throat and finally said what I

should have said months before. “I’m so sorry, Papa.”

When my mother discovered that we’d helped my eldest sister

run off, she’d said some very unhandsome words to Peggy and

me, in both English and Dutch. And yet, my father had never let

one word of blame pass his lips. Which somehow made it worse.

Tears now blurred my vision as I blurted, “I’m so sorry for

what I helped put in motion with Angelica . . .”

For my sister’s elopement had given the fractured and fractious

soldiers of the Northern Department yet another reason to

distrust Papa. My father should have been celebrated for cobbling

together an army of fur-trading,

river-going

New Yorkers and unruly

New England backwoodsmen. He should have been hailed

as the general who staved off the invasion by felling trees over

roads, destroying bridges, blocking rivers, and burning whole

fields of golden wheat so as to leave the British with nothing

but scorched earth. Instead, he’d been belittled as a general who

could not command his own daughters, much less hold Fort Ticonderoga.

I worried that my role in Angelica’s elopement had

cost Papa the confidence of his men, allowing them to believe

the very worst about his loyalties and competence. Perhaps it had

even cost him his command.

So I expected, at long last, that with my apology, my father

would bring down his wrath on me. But instead he simply said,

“That was Mr. Carter’s doing.”

As much as my father had resented his new son-in-

law,

at

least at first, I resented Jack Carter more. That’s why I wasn’t as

startled as I should have been when Papa added, “I considered

dispatching him with pistols, but I couldn’t kill a man your sister

saw fit to love. It also wasn’t in my heart to disown her. So, at

the end of the equation, there was no undoing this Gordion knot.

And, as you will find is so often the case in life, my dear Betsy,

the only prudent thing to do was frown, make them humble, and

forgive.”

I realized that he was frowning now.

That I was humbled.

And that I was also forgiven.

At least by Papa. And the love I felt for my father in that moment

was eclipsed only by admiration. Because I realized that it

was love that allowed my father to set aside the injuries done to

his reputation, security, and pride. For love of his family, and his

country, he swallowed down indignity as if immune to its poison.

And I wished I could be like him.

But if there is anything that marks my character, it’s that I

have never rested easily in the face of injustice. My father might

have been able to bear it, but I simply could not. If I’d been born

a son, I’d have joined the army to see our family honor restored.

I’d have trained to become an officer, testing my bravery and

seeking glory upon a battlefield in service of the cause. I’d have

challenged his detractors to a duel.

But how, I wondered, could a daughter make a difference?