



*The End
of the Letter*

HAROLD R. THOMPSON

Last chance for freedom

“You are right to say that we have known difficult times before. We have kept our cause alive when others have predicted its doom. We have given our troops, our stalwarts, reason to keep up the fight, even when men of good reason have declared that it should cease, that they could never defeat the mightiest military power in the world.”

He paused, glancing at his coat where it hung from the central tent pole. The coat was blue, with a buff lining and facings. The colours had originated with the Whig party in England, the party that opposed the coercive policies of the king and his government under Lord North. The coat seemed the physical sum of Washington’s life.

As a young man he had wanted nothing more than to acquire a commission in the regular army, to wear the red coat of a British officer. He had long since divorced himself from that ancient dream. It no longer seemed to matter, just as he no longer cared that his elder brothers had attended fine English schools and he had not. The embarrassment over his poor colonial education had faded, just as his red coat had become blue.

“We must have a victory this summer,” he murmured.

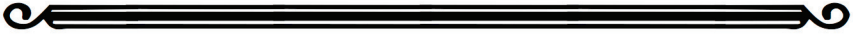
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Sword of the Mogul



The
End
of the
Tether

A Novel of the Battle of Yorktown

Harold R.
Thompson



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THE END OF THE TETHER

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To L, B, & M

[W]e must abandon New York and bring our whole force into Virginia; we then have a stake to fight for and a successful battle may give us America.

— Lord Charles Cornwallis, April 1781

We are at the end of our tether, and now or never our deliverance must come.

— George Washington, April 1781

Part One

MANEUVERS



Chapter 1

The Continental

*J*t was well past three o'clock, and the steamy heat of the Virginia Tidewater country was at its oppressive peak. Sweat pooled under Lieutenant Daniel Brattle's neck stock and heavy wool frock coat. His feet were in swollen agony, threatening to burst through the sides of his shoes; but he kept up with his battalion as it marched in a column of fours, the pounding of wooden field drums and the squealing of fifes driving it forward. He gave himself to the music, to the drums, denying the churning in his guts. Muskets were popping away far in his front, evidence that their advance troops had finally caught the enemy after two days of pursuit.

Success is within our grasp, he thought. *It is certain, unless we throw it away, as we have done before, so many times.*

He took a deep breath to steady himself. His commanding officer, the Marquis de Lafayette, had declared the English general, Lord Charles Cornwallis, was running from them, turning his back on the American rebels in a desperate bid to avoid combat. Daniel knew that was nonsense; but if they pushed Cornwallis up against the James River, they could destroy part of his army. Perhaps all of it.

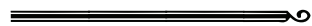
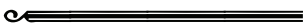
Daniel's brother Joshua, marching five paces ahead, turned with a grin.

"Still with us, little brother? You look a touch pale."

Daniel shook his head.

"I'm fine. It's these damned shoes of mine."

Joshua nodded. "Push on, then. We have the earl's army just where we want it, and maybe you'll find new shoes soon."



"I am aware of the situation," Daniel snapped. "Please remember that I have served a full day longer in this army than you have."

Joshua stared, then gave him a curt nod.

"True enough." He turned to the soldiers marching closest to him, raising his voice to call, "Push on, boys! We're about to catch half the lobsters still this side of the river, with the other half unable to cross back to help 'em."

"It's lobsters for supper," someone shouted in reply, and a dozen other voices joined in with cries of agreement.

Daniel fought to steady his anger. Joshua had no right to treat him like a child, a boy under his wing who needed encouragement. And in front of the men!

Yet that was how it had been since the beginning, since Daniel's mad rush to enlist in the new Continental Army following the spark of battle at Lexington and Concord, when the Massachusetts militia had exchanged shots with British regulars. Joshua had joined a day later, following their father's advice to "look after your brother." So, Joshua considered himself Daniel's protector, even when Daniel knew he had no need of protection.

He had proven himself time and again, had risen in the ranks until now he marched as an officer in his Massachusetts company of light infantry. It was true Joshua had earned his promotion first, and was senior lieutenant; but that was because he was older. Daniel was as much a seasoned veteran, part of the small core of Washington's army that had served since the New York campaign six years ago.

He adjusted his cap—a black leather dome with a small turned-up brim in the front—and examined the marching company beside him. These were *his* men to train as much as Joshua's, a collection of veterans and new recruits. In appearance, they were typical, the officers and sergeants wearing the new uniform coat of blue-and-buff, the enlisted men marching in fringed hunting shirts of gray linen, some with matching breeches and stockings, others with overalls, still others with buckskin leggings. Most were armed with new smoothbore muskets and bayonets from France, although a few still carried the long-barreled, slow-to-load rifles favoured by the frontiersman.

They will do well, Daniel thought. They will do well today.

The column neared the battle front, the crackle of musketry growing louder with every step. Each echoing shot sent a thrill through Daniel's chest, a vibration that traveled outward through his long limbs. Somewhere ahead through the pines, the advance force of Lafayette's second-in-command, Brigadier-General Anthony Wayne, had been battling the delaying tactics of Lord Cornwallis for hours, hoping to force the British to halt, to turn and face them in the open. Daniel's battalion had been sent forward as reinforcement while Lafayette remained behind with a rearguard at Green Spring Farm, where he had made his temporary headquarters.

Daniel trod on a stone, a lance of pain stabbing through the sole of his foot. He stifled a groan but didn't stumble. The forced march had been gru-

eling, the column leaving a wake of stragglers, exhausted men, victims of the heat, broken-down men with bruised, lacerated and bleeding feet. Daniel had endured, although his legs felt like India rubber, a numb contrast to the twin spikes of pain contained in his binding shoes.

The pain is nothing, he told himself. Ignore it. Keep up. Do not allow the men to see your discomfort. Do not allow your brother to see your weakness.

The battalion came to a narrow causeway that crossed a swamp, the road made of new corduroy, the split logs still green. Daniel removed his cap and wiped his brow. The swamp lay wide and flat on either side, a mire fed by meandering streams, impassable by either infantry or cavalry. Undulating grass glistened in the high afternoon sun, the intermittent pools shining like polished steel. At the far side of the swamp stood a belt of dark and scrubby pine trees. Within the pines, the fight raged.

Daniel gripped his sword hilt, the wire wrapping slippery under his palm. His father had sent him the sword upon his promotion to officer rank, and he seemed to draw strength from its reassuring presence as another fierce wave of anxiety shook him. He could not abide the slowness of the march, did not want to wait any longer. The enemy was there!

The army had been dodging and chasing Cornwallis for weeks, ever since the English earl had first entered Virginia. Now, here was their chance, the best opportunity for success they had yet encountered. Perhaps this day, July 6, 1781, would be remembered as a great turning point by future generations of independent Americans.

Once past the swamp, the battalion passed through the fragrant pines. The men ducked to avoid low branches that dripped pine tar down over their caps and shoulders. Farther on lay another clearing, a grassy meadow. In its center stood a long line of dark infantry, and Daniel realized he was looking at General Wayne's division. He counted half-a-dozen infantry regiments, a Massachusetts artillery battery in the center, some light cavalry moving about on the far left. He could see no sign of the enemy, no source for the continued musket fire; and for a moment, he worried the British had escaped after all, that this desperate drive would come to nothing.

The battalion wheeled right, stepping off the log road to take up position in the line. The fifes and drums became discordant as they mingled and conflicted with the music from the other regiments. At last, Daniel spied the enemy—a few flashes of red among some bushes, British infantry in extended order. Skirmishers, most likely crack shots selected for the task of rear-guard. These were the fellows who had resisted Wayne's advance. Behind them lay another belt of pines, even thicker than the first. That was all.

The battalion halted, changing formation from fours to a line of two ranks. The companies shuffled together to form at intervals on either side of the colour party. The heat seemed to have increased, for within the confines of the meadow there was no refreshing breath of wind. The Congressional and regimental flags hung limp in the still air.

Sweat ran into Daniel's eyes, and he wiped at it with a grimy knuckle, sighing as he took his position in the rear of his company, joining a dispersed third rank of sergeants and officers. He glanced to the right flank, found Joshua, who stood with Captain Putnam, then turned at last to face his front.

The last of the redcoat skirmishers vanished into the dense woods, and the firing died away. The men in front of Daniel grumbled in anger.

"Silence, there!" he barked, and realized at once that he had put too much force into his words. The men were frustrated. They knew that beyond the trees lay the James River, and probably a small enemy detachment still attempting to cross. This is what they had come for, why they had marched all day.

"We should make a general advance," he said, turning to Joshua. "There's not much time. It must be nearly five o'clock."

"Even so, we won't go away empty-handed," Joshua called back. He pointed ahead and a bit to the left. "Look! The lobsters have seen fit to leave us with a little present."

A hundred yards distant, just in front of the tree line, stood a bronze cannon, a six-pounder. It teetered on the edge of the corduroy road, abandoned with its black muzzle facing the Americans.

"There's an easy prize of war, boys!" Daniel cried, hoping to ease some of the tension, the sense of an opportunity gone.

As they watched, American skirmishers, men who had been fighting hard all day, rose from their positions in the long grass and sprinted toward the gun. Others spread out on either side of the road, facing the forest. Daniel gritted his teeth, wanting to go forward with them. There seemed no point in waiting here, standing in this field. The capture of one gun was not the victory he had anticipated.

"Well, we have chased Cornwallis across the James," he murmured. "That is success in itself."

He watched as the skirmishers surrounded the gun, taking hold of its wheels, lifting the heavy oak trail. They began rolling it backward.

There were sudden flashes of movement among the pines, and Daniel caught another glimpse of red. He froze, staring. A company of British infantry suddenly emerged from the woods, marching at quick-step along the corduroy road.

"It seems they haven't all departed," he remarked.

Perhaps the enemy rearguard had reformed for an attempt to rescue the gun. In that case, there would be a fight after all, although it would be a small one, and one-sided. He suddenly chuckled, some of his anger and frustration giving way to excitement. Let them try to take the gun back! Let them try it!

There was more movement within the trees as another British company appeared, then another, then another until an entire battalion had come onto the field. Daniel's laughter died, and he stared in wonder and alarm as a second battalion appeared behind the first.

The American skirmishers had already dropped the trail of the gun and snatched up their muskets as the redcoat skirmishers reappeared, dashing for shelter among the few bushes the meadow provided. A musket cracked, and an American fell.

The two British regiments wheeled left, turning from file into line. Faster than Daniel could have imagined, more battalions were emerging from the pine woods, drums beating and fifes squealing to announce their terrifying presence.

The American skirmishers began to run back toward their main line. Others dropped to the ground to fire at the unexpected threat facing them. Daniel spied the silent figure of General Wayne high on his horse behind the division.

The British line was growing and spreading, becoming a wall of red coats, white crossbelts, and black cocked hats. Daniel swallowed, his throat thick. Within minutes, the British force had grown so wide that it overlapped the Americans on both flanks. It was obvious that here was Lord Cornwallis's entire command. He had not crossed the river at all.

"It was a trap," he muttered, and his heart sank. Cornwallis had led them on a chase, and they had taken the bait.

"Steady, lads," he heard Joshua say.

The British regiment in their immediate front was a unit of Highlanders, men in diced Kilmarnock bonnets and dark belted plaids. The Scottish Highland battalions were the fiercest in the British Army.

Shouted commands at last rose in the close summer air, the voice of Colonel Wyllys, the battalion commander, crying, "Prime and load!" Daniel's men pulled open their cartridge boxes, fumbling for the paper cartridges that could mean life or death, all the while keeping their eyes pinned on the enemy.

Then the drill training took over, each man biting a cartridge open, pouring a pinch of gunpowder into his musket pan, dropping his musket butt to the ground, drawing his ramrod, and thrusting the cartridge and ball home. For one fleeting moment, Daniel felt a burst of admiration that his men would stand and load and not run in the face of such a cunning and dangerous enemy.

The British were still dressing their lines, the battalions in front forming two ranks at open order, with eighteen-inch intervals between every man. The battalions in the second line assumed a denser formation, packing together so that every man touched the elbow of his neighbor.

The American fifes and drums struck up again in a fierce challenge. Daniel listened, realizing with astonishment that the fifes were playing the signal to attack. General Wayne would not run. Perhaps that was why his men called him "Mad Anthony."

A few seconds later they advanced, shortening the distance to bring the enemy within close musket range. The British line drew closer, every man

in its ranks staring straight to his front like a statue. Success seemed impossible. Nothing could ever break that wall.

The American line halted less than seventy yards from the enemy. Only a few minutes had passed since the skirmishers had discovered the cannon in the road. Daniel peered into the faces of the Highlanders opposite, saw the sharp tips of their bayonets stab toward him as they raised their muskets, aiming directly into his men.

A white cloud of smoke burst along the enemy front. The sound of a thunderclap followed, and a ball hummed past Daniel's ear. The air filled with the sharp crack of lead balls striking flesh. Daniel glanced quickly toward Joshua, just in time to witness the spray of blood and teeth from Captain Putnam's jaw. The captain's hand came up to the wound as his body pitched to the grass. His sword spun away from him.

Daniel looked down as the captain writhed on the ground, blood pouring from his mouth. Time seemed to stand still, the men around him moving slowly, as if in a dream. He could smell the grass, the swamp to their rear, the sharpness of the pines...

Joshua's raised voice broke the spell, bringing him back to his duty.

"Make ready!" Joshua shouted.

There followed a metallic rattling as his men cocked their muskets.

Joshua cried, "Take aim!"

The men aimed.

Joshua paused, then shouted, "Fire!"

A volley blasted from the company, smoke jetting outward. At once, the men reloaded, not waiting to see the effect of their fire; and now other companies had joined the fight, trading volleys with their opponents in the meadow. Sulfurous smoke began to settle in the space between the combatants, a white haze that turned the British into pale apparitions.

"We will fight," Daniel muttered as he drew his sword.

They had been surprised, but General Wayne believed in his men enough to send them against superior numbers of trained troops. Daniel listened to the commands of the colonel, and those of his brother, as the volleys thundered. The churning in his stomach and the pain in his feet were both forgotten. In front of him, men fell, bleeding and wounded.

His hopes for victory had been dispersed, blasted away, but they would fight, for there was no alternative. They would fight as they had fought for so many years, in situations just as desperate. They would fight as they always did, although Daniel knew in his heart they would lose this day.



Chapter 2

The Redcoat

Smoke roiled in dense clouds, the air shattered by flying missiles, but Sergeant Tom Martin paid no mind to the chaos of battle. He marched with his regiment, the 1st Light Infantry Battalion, as they left the concealment of the woods, and kept his eye on the men in his company, ensuring they did their duty.

I was born for this, he thought, as he had thought so many times since taking the King's shilling.

The approach of battle always produced in him a strange calm. He had stood without fidgeting as they waited within the trees, preparing to spring their trap; and he had only smiled when he saw the army of Lafayette standing in stupefaction, pinned with its back to the swamp. When, in their panic, the enemy had attacked rather than withdrawn, Tom had felt no shock, no surprise. Perhaps to attack was the best course open to the rebels; he neither knew nor cared.

He moved to the right of his company and dressed the line, shouting, "Dress to the right at open order! Dress!" The men reacted as on the parade ground, just as they should. They were professionals, British regulars. Tom felt they could withstand anything, and this mad enemy charge would not raise even a single hair on a single man's neck.

He faced his front. A volley thundered on his left, then another as, one by one, the British regiments opened fire; his left ear went numb from the concussion. Through a hollow ringing, as if from a long distance, he heard men



and horses screaming in pain. It was a chilling sound, but one he had grown accustomed to long ago; and he maintained his steadiness, his example to the others.

His regiment was positioned on the extreme right of the British line, and they faced nothing but empty meadow. With no one to fight, they stood still, a wall of men with shouldered arms. It was their duty to wait as the volley fire merged into a single unending crackle of musketry, now and then punctuated by the deeper-toned thump of a field gun.

The wait was not a long one.

“Battalion will advance,” the Regimental Sergeant-Major suddenly cried, his high-pitched voice clear above the din. Tom gripped his beloved fusil, his short light-infantry musket, preparing himself for the next command in the sequence. It soon came, the sergeant-major bellowing, “Quick...*march!*”

The battalion stepped off, moving at the new quick-step of one hundred-and-eight beats per minute. Under the sergeant-major’s directions, their line wheeled slightly left toward the enemy’s left flank. Tom caught a glimpse of horsemen—American dragoons, by the look of them—looming from the smoke then turning and withdrawing into the next belt of pine trees. He gritted his teeth, stifling a small cheer that burst from his lips as a grunt. The American dragoons had run without firing a shot, leaving the entire rebel flank exposed.

“Battalion,” the sergeant-major shouted, “charge...bayonets!”

The men in the front rank swept their muskets down, the golden light of late afternoon rippling along the ridge of steel. Tom held his own weapon at the charge and cried, “Steady, lads! Steady!” He would not have anyone rush forward, breaking the alignment.

The distance compressed to fifty yards, then forty. A few American muskets jetted smoke in their direction, a scattering of rebels firing from their line at an oblique angle. A single rebel broke ranks, turning and running. Another followed, then another. The rest held their ground, edging back, trying to refuse their line to meet the new threat.

“Steady, lads!” Tom repeated. “Wait for the word!”

It was then the word came, from Colonel Abercrombie himself, leaning forward in his saddle and pointing with his sword. Tom heard the long-drawn-out cry to charge, a cry that let loose the fury and tension of battle. As one, the 1st Light Infantry leapt forward with their sister regiment, the 2nd Light Infantry, in close support on their left.

Tom ran on the right of his company, screaming with the rest as his feet pounded the grassy turf. He leapt a stunted pine then dodged the body of a wounded man in a hunting shirt. Nothing could stop him. He was a sergeant in the British Army. He was a redcoat. His enemies derided him as a Bloody-back, a lobster; but his company had served in the battles in the north and in the south, and they were unbeaten in the field from Brooklyn Heights to

Brandywine, Camden to Guildford. They would remain unbeaten after today.

Tom had lost friends and comrades in those battles. He had lost them at the hands of the rebels. He was determined to see that they had not died in vain, to be buried here in this increasingly foreign continent without anything to show for their ultimate sacrifice. He screamed and charged on behalf of those dead men, and for the comrades who charged with him.

The enemy did not wait to meet the charge. The American ranks disintegrated. A few brave souls lingered, making their individual stands for pride or patriotism; but most fled back through the trees. The British light infantry stormed after them.

Tom darted between the thick pine trunks. His shirt was soaked with sweat under his short wool jacket, but his breathing came in long even draughts. The battalion had lost its coherence, but they were light infantry and accustomed to a looser formation. Ahead loomed the open ground of the swamp. Americans in gray hunting shirts and blue coats were struggling to cross in ones and twos. Some had sunk in the bog, shrieking in terror as they tried to swim, their legs entangled in weeds or encased in quicksand. A few British muskets boomed as the redcoats chose specific targets.

Tom halted on the edge of the swamp. His comrades milled around, some firing but most just staring, unable to continue the pursuit through the mire and stagnant pools.

From behind them rose the piercing music of the fifes, shaping the call for the battalion to reform and rejoin the fight. The battle still raged. Some of the rebel units were holding, their volleys ringing through the piney woods.

“Right, lads,” Tom said, although he was a mere lad himself. “Form up and get ready. We’ve crushed their flank. Now we’ll roll up their line.”



Chapter 3

The Continental

The broken regiments intermingled as they made their way through the trees to the causeway. The exchange of musketry had lasted barely fifteen minutes. Daniel's company had fought, men falling with every British volley. Then the Highlanders had advanced. Daniel was certain his men would have stood to meet the kilted soldiers had the company on his left, a company of fresh levees, not turned and fled. Through the smoke, he had sensed the gap, the emptiness, the lack of support. So, they had broken.

At least we are walking, he thought. Walking and not flying in terror. This is no rout.

He stared at the burning sky. Powder smoke still drifted in batches, and his sword hung limp in his hand. He stumbled but quickly recovered. Pain seared his right heel, but it seemed meaningless now.

He glanced over his shoulder but did not see the British, just the powder-stained and vacant faces of his fellow patriots, their hats at odd angles, their muskets carried in a variety of poses. Exhausted men.

There was no sign of Joshua.

He halted on the edge of the corduroy road, standing aside to allow the straggling column to move past him, searching the faces of all those who wore regulation blue coats. He recognized several from his regiment, and others from his brigade, still others from more distant units. He was shocked to see General Wayne himself limping along on foot.



A few paces behind the general, his features indistinguishable in the fading light, was a familiar figure, his gait unmistakable.

“Joshua!” Daniel called, raising his sword like a standard, a rallying point.

Joshua glanced in his direction then moved toward him. A slight smile played about his grimy features, but Daniel saw pain there as well. He held his right arm bent against his chest; and when he came to a staggering halt, he reached out to grasp Daniel’s shoulder with his left hand, steadying himself.

“Our day has not ended well, eh, little brother?” he said, chuckling. His fingers clutched at Daniel’s coat, and beads of sweat stood out on his pale forehead. “We thought we would capture their gun, but we left three six-pounders on the field.”

Daniel glanced at his brother’s crooked right arm, at the bright blood soaking the blue sleeve.

“You’re wounded.”

Joshua’s face twitched. “I met the service end of a Highland bayonet.”

“How bad is it?”

Joshua shook his head, then nodded toward the north, at the line of retreat.

“It doesn’t matter. Help me along the causeway.”

His left arm slid over Daniel’s shoulder, his legs almost buckling. Daniel held him, supporting him until he regained his balance. They began walking in step, picking their way slowly along the edge of the swamp.

“Where is the wound?” Daniel asked. “Don’t let the surgeons take your arm, Joshua! You have a right to refuse!”

Joshua was slow to respond, finally murmuring, “It is not my arm. My arm is holding the wound. It is in my chest. I think the bastard missed my vitals, but I feel my strength ebbing. Get me to the farm.”

“I will. I’ll carry you if I have to!”

They wound between the fugitives and stragglers, past the swamp and into the farmland beyond. When Joshua began to drag his feet, Daniel held him up, pausing for a moment to rest. At last, they reached the shelter of Green Spring Farm, which had once been the home of one of Virginia’s first governors and was now a rallying point for the defeated army.

Daniel eased his brother down, placing him on the ground with his back against a stone wall. Joshua closed his eyes. The shadows were long, and Daniel realized the sun had already set. His brother’s skin glistened in the light of a few standing torches, and strands of blond hair were plastered to his forehead with sweat. His arm had dropped to his side, and Daniel saw the wound, an ugly wet rent four inches below the collarbone.

Daniel stared about him. Injured already filled the yard, lying in rows on the soft ground. The surgeons and their mates were moving from one supine

figure to another. Daniel waited, wanting to insist on immediate help but understanding that other men were as bad or worse. All had to wait their turn.

When a surgeon finally reached Joshua, Daniel showed him the wound. The man examined it in the light of a candle lantern.

“His chest has been punctured with a bayonet,” the surgeon declared, as if revealing some great medical secret. He probed the wound with a blood-stained finger, and Joshua stiffened and moaned. “It runs deep, but his heart is obviously safe, and he has not coughed blood, so I do not think the lung was injured, either. I see no foreign matter, no bits of shirt or coat. I can stitch and bind the injury, but only time and God may heal him. Or they may not.”

“Do what you can, sir,” Daniel said. “I will look after him from then onward.”

The surgeon performed his task, fumbling with his needle and gut. It did not take long. When he had finished, he simply nodded and moved on to the next patient.

Daniel slid down beside his brother. His feet still throbbed. A few spoke in quiet conversation, and he recognized the voices of men from his battalion. They had gathered in this corner of the yard as if drawn together by some unseen force. He met the eye of one of his senior officers, Major Stephen Osborne. The major approached, then knelt at Daniel’s side.

“We have nearly a hundred wounded,” Osborne announced. “We must leave the worst cases here, under a guard. Wagons have been procured for the others. You must place your brother in one. The army moves in thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes, sir?” Daniel echoed.

“Aye.” Osborne’s long face resembled the caricature of a melancholy hound. “We’ll be moving on to Bird’s Tavern to join General von Steuben’s division. There has been no indication that Cornwallis means to pursue, but he may still send Tarleton to harry our retreat.”

Daniel nodded at the mention of Tarleton, the hated Tory dragoon commander. He would not be caught by the likes of him, and would never allow his wounded brother to fall into the hands of such an enemy. He pushed to his feet.

The army was formed and ready even before thirty minutes had elapsed. With the help of two lads from his company, Daniel lifted Joshua into a rough wagon that already held about a dozen wounded men. Joshua lay in his blood-soaked shirt and waistcoat, his coat draped over him like a blanket. The wagon jerked as it started rumbling behind its team of oxen toward the road.

Daniel hobbled close behind. The darkness was now complete, and he kept his eyes on the blurred forms that marched in front, the backs of the men in his regiment. Major Osborne’s horse was close by, a dark outrider.

Lafayette’s army was moving north, back the way it had come.

Daniel reached out to grasp the tailgate, steadying himself. The wagon bucked and jolted with every imperfection in the road. With every jolt, Joshua groaned.

Hours seemed to pass. Daniel shuffled along, dozing, his bruised feet moving of their own volition. Then the wagon lurched, its wheels dropping into a pothole, and through his sleep he again heard Joshua cry out. The sound jarred him awake.

He coughed, rubbing his eyes. To the right of the road, he spied the dim glow of candlelit windows. A house.

“Stop,” he told the driver, but his voice was a croak and the man did not hear him. The wagon carried on.

“Stop!” he shouted. “I command you to stop!”

The driver turned, but his face was lost in darkness. Daniel shouted again, and the driver at last tugged the reins and brought his team to a halt.

Daniel pulled the pins to open the tailgate.

“I’m taking you to a house,” he said to his brother, uncertain whether Joshua could hear or understand. “I would not have you suffer any longer.”

Joshua’s eyes opened, and he rolled his head from side to side, gasping, “Every movement is like a knife tearing my chest and shoulder apart.”

Daniel turned to the file of soldiers passing the stalled wagon and snapped, “You there! Help me take a wounded man to that farmhouse.”

The stern tone of an officer was enough to compel three soldiers to break ranks. As the wagon driver watched in silence, two of the men lifted Joshua, then set him on his feet, his arms draped over their shoulders.

“Mind his injury,” Daniel barked. He spied Major Osborne sitting on horseback, watching from the far side of the road, staring over the top of the moving ranks. The major made no move to interfere.

The third man grasped Joshua’s ankles, lifting his legs. Together, the soldiers carried him like a large sack of meal, crossing a field toward the glowing lights.

The farmhouse stood within the dark shelter of a grove of elms, a solid structure of fieldstone and mortar. The lower windows were shuttered, the candles glowing from the upper story. As the three men set the wounded officer down, Daniel advanced to the door and beat on it with his fist. Behind him, the army continued to pass with a shuffling of many feet on the darkened highway.

Daniel beat on the door again, this time shouting, “Open up in the name of the Congress! Open up!” His voice had risen to a shriek, and he stood gasping, fist still raised. At last he heard movement, a dull thump, and the door opened a crack. A golden spear of light fell across his sleeve. He saw blood on the cloth. His brother’s blood.

He looked away, to the space in the doorway. A woman’s face stared out at him. The woman glanced at his sleeve, then turned to where Joshua leaned, ashen, in the arms of the three soldiers.

“My brother is wounded,” Daniel said, fighting to keep the edge of hysteria from his voice. “There was a battle...he needs a place to rest.”

“Bring him in,” the woman said without hesitation.

“Thank you, madam,” Daniel said, then almost sobbed as he repeated, “Thank you.”

The door opened wide. In the hall stood two women, both young, each wearing only a chemise, shawls over their shoulders, their hair down. The taller one had answered the door, and she held a cocked pistol in her hand. Behind her stood a Negro with a fowling gun. The black man eyed the soldiers with open suspicion as they brought in the wounded officer. Daniel had left his brother’s coat in the wagon, and the blood on Joshua’s waistcoat and shirt was dark and brown like rust, with a fresh patch of scarlet at its center.

“We heard the army passing in the road,” the taller woman said. “You can take him to the study...” She shook her head. “No. There is nowhere to place him. Take him upstairs, if you are able. I’ll show you.” She turned to the other woman, a wide-eyed girl with golden hair. “Abigail, light a fire in the kitchen, then draw some water.”

“I’ll fetch the water, Missus,” said the man with the gun. “Miss Abigail can get some bandages.”

“Very well, Adam.” She turned away, took a candle from a sconce on the wall. “Follow me.”

Daniel’s shoes were loud on the floorboards as he trailed behind the others. They struggled up the stairs, Joshua complaining with every step, then to a room on the left side of the landing. In the room stood a low poster bed with no canopy. On the bed lay two bright quilts and a feather bolster. The woman set her candle in another sconce, placed her pistol on the mantel, then pulled back the quilts. Bits of straw fluttered on the edge of the mattress. The soldiers set Joshua down on the bed. They were not gentle, and he cried out again.

“Be careful, damn you!” Daniel barked. One of the men glared at him with indignation, but another, whom Daniel suddenly noticed was a sergeant, said, “Our apologies, loo-tenant.”

Daniel snatched off his cap and ran his fingers through his hair.

“It’s all right, Sergeant. You may go. Thank you.”

The men nodded to their unknown hostess, then tramped out of the room. Daniel knelt at his brother’s side. He sensed the woman standing next to him, felt her warmth.

“Has a doctor seen to the wound?” she asked.

“Yes. It has been stitched and bandaged.”

She pointed to the bright fresh blood on Joshua’s torn shirt. “Perhaps the stitching has broken. I can see to it. I have some knowledge of these matters.”

The younger woman, Abigail, and the Negro, Adam, had returned with a basin of water and a tray. On the tray were scissors and some strips of

linen. Daniel found a stool, pulled it toward the bed and sat. He reached for his brother's hand. It was clammy in his grip.

Joshua had said nothing during the journey from the wagon. Now, he turned to look at Daniel and gasped, "The pain is inside, Daniel. In my chest, and my neck."

"The muscles have stiffened," Daniel insisted. "That's all, from the pain."

"No. My nerves are on fire."

The older woman was now cutting away Joshua's waistcoat and shirt, revealing the loosened bandage, the protruding bit of bloody stitch. Joshua ignored her as she worked.

"I fear that bayonet went deep, and I'm done for this time, Daniel."

"Don't say that! Conserve your strength."

"I'll say what I like." Joshua released Daniel's hand and snatched at his sleeve. Trembling, he pulled himself up to stare into his brother's eyes. The woman stepped away, watching but not interfering. "Promise me, Daniel! My life may not be worth a Continental dollar compared with our cause. Promise me that, if I should die, you will not give up the fight! Promise me!"

"I promise!" Daniel insisted. "I promise! But you won't die! The wound isn't serious."

Joshua held his brother's arm for a few more heartbeats, then nodded. He slumped back in the bed.

The woman took the scissors from the tray and said, "I can replace the stitch with ordinary thread, clean the old blood away and dress the wound. Abigail, did you boil the water?"

"There wasn't time!" the girl squeaked.

"It doesn't matter. You and Adam must hold him as I work."

Daniel kept his eyes fixed on the wall as the woman pulled out the torn stitch, then dabbed at the wound with a bit of wet linen. Joshua stiffened, and she said, "There is something here. A piece of cloth."

Joshua grunted, but Adam pressed him down to the bed, saying, "Don't you move one bit." The woman held up a dark scrap of bloody cloth, turning it in the dim light.

"A shred of his coat, perhaps," she said. "Or his shirt."

Daniel clutched at his forehead. The surgeon had missed that.

The woman tossed the scrap on the tray, continued cleaning the wound. Abigail had fetched a sewing box with spools of thread, needles and beeswax as the older woman worked. There was blood on the sheets. Joshua's breathing was heavy, his neck and jaw stiff.

When the wound was stitched and dressed, the woman said, "Our concern now is fever. We will see how he fares tomorrow."

"He will not die," Daniel insisted. "Listen to me, Joshua! If the fever comes, you must hold on!"

There was another stamping of heavy boots on the stairs, then on the floor outside. The door creaked open, and a deep voice said, "Lieutenant Brattle."

Daniel turned at the sound. Major Osborne stood in the doorway. With him was the sergeant who had helped carry Joshua from the wagon. The major's expression was grim as he repeated, "Lieutenant Brattle. Daniel. The army is withdrawing, and you must see to your duty. You must leave your brother here and return to the regiment."

"Leave my brother?" Daniel echoed. "I will not leave him! He is the only brother I have left to me!"

The major bristled, his eyes blazing wide, but then his stance softened just as quickly.

"Daniel, Tarleton's men may come."

"If they were coming they would have been here already. You said there was no pursuit." Daniel was shaking his head. "I cannot leave him. I cannot."

"You must think of your country, sir, and put it above all things."

Daniel rounded on him.

"No, sir! We have done our share, and more. We will come back."

He saw the war of emotions on the major's face, outrage mixed with disappointment, sorrow with sympathy. For a moment, Daniel was ashamed, and wondered if at last he had lost faith in the cause, that this newest defeat, coming so close after high hopes of victory, had been too much, and that something inside him had broken.

He again rubbed his forehead.

"Forgive me, sir. I spoke out of turn. Forgive me."

Osborne cleared his throat. "Perhaps I may obtain permission to allow you to remain for a short spell, to catch the army later."

Daniel just nodded, suddenly unable to speak. He had been a good officer, until now. Had he not?

"Lieutenant, I know that Joshua is the only brother left to you," Major Osborne continued. "I will speak to Colonel Wyllys on your behalf, but you must take care. Though the enemy has crossed over the James, they may return. I would not wish to lose you and Joshua both." He clamped his cap down on his head, nodded to the older woman, who did not look at him, and said, "Madam."

He and the sergeant left the room.

Daniel perched on his stool as Joshua began muttering something unintelligible. The wound was free of the debris the surgeon had somehow missed and bandaged anew. Abigail was stroking Joshua's forehead like a loving sister. His eyes were closed.

Daniel turned to the older woman, who was cleaning her hands with a bit of rag.

"What regiment are you with?" she asked, some wariness in her voice.

“We are with Gimat’s Light Infantry Battalion,” Daniel said. “With Lafayette’s division of the Continental Army.”

“The Continental Army,” she repeated.

“Yes. Forgive me, ma’am. We have taken advantage of your hospitality, and without introductions. My name is Daniel Brattle, of Boston.” He rose to his feet and bowed. “The patient is my brother, Joshua Brattle.”

“I am Catherine Seawell,” she replied. “That is...Catherine Seawell. This is my younger sister Abigail, and this is Adam...” She nodded to the black man, who stood in the corner, both hands clasped about the muzzle of his gun. “...the retainer of this property. He serves the owner.”

“I had assumed that you were the owner. Or your husband.”

“My husband is dead, and my cousin is the master of this place, but he is not here.” She paused, then added, “My mother was a Virginian by birth, though my sister and I are also come from Boston.”

“You astonish me, Miss Seawell.” Daniel tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a gasping cough. He took a breath. “How strange that four Bostonians should meet in the Virginia countryside,” he added, “and under such strange circumstances.”

“Strange, indeed.” Catherine turned to her sister and the retainer. “Abigail, you may go and get some sleep. Adam, if you would, watch the door. There may be others about. Perhaps redcoat stragglers. I will stay with our patient.”

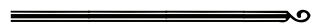
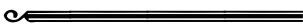
They left without protest. Daniel kept to his stool. He studied Joshua’s pale face, the beads of sweat now glowing orange and yellow in the candlelight. Catherine pulled a wheat-sheave chair to the opposite side of the bed and sat. Joshua clutched his wound and grimaced but kept his eyes firmly shut. His breathing was now even and unlaboured.

“I must extend my thanks again,” Daniel said at length. Weariness, stiffness, and pain had begun to flood his limbs. His dark hair had come loose from its ribbon, and stubble covered his chin. He felt wretched and unkempt. “You have shown us great hospitality, great sympathy.”

“I could never refuse to help someone in need, Mister Brattle. We will know if your brother is safe in a day or two.”

Her voice was soft. He looked at her. So concerned was he for his brother that he had not actually seen her, and now he noticed her smooth skin, her perfect teeth. She had a long English face, a noble nose. She was not much older than he, perhaps younger. The shawl had fallen away to reveal her long smooth neck. Her hair seemed to have an auburn sheen, although in the light from the candle he could not be certain of any colour. He thought that she was beautiful, and for some reason that filled him with sadness. At once, grief and worry overcame him, and he held his head with one hand and began to repeat in an anguished murmur, “Oh, God, oh, God, my brother...”

She came to kneel beside him, cradling his head. He did not know her, but she let him weep into her breast like a child.





Chapter 4

The General

General George Washington stood under the tent awning, a gold locket clutched in one hand. He had removed his coat and waistcoat, but found no relief from the summer heat. His personal headquarters colour, his flag as Commander-in-Chief, hung limp against the linen canvas wall to his left. The flag was a field of deep blue with thirteen white stars, each with six slender points, now obscured within the silk folds: hidden, the general realized, like the thirteen states they represented. Unrevealed to the world.

Behind him, inside the shade of the large oval marquee tent, his chief aide and military secretary, Lieutenant Colonel Tench Tilghman, cleared his throat for the second time, perhaps impatient for Washington to continue his dictation. The general had been composing a letter to the youthful Marquis de Lafayette, his commander in the south; but Washington was in no rush. He fingered the gold locket, stroking its smooth surface. Inside was a tiny likeness of Martha, his wife. The locket was a memento of home, of Mount Vernon. Home was never far from his thoughts.

“General?” Tilghman said. “Are you well, sir?”

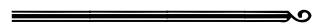
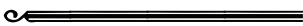
Washington turned.

“Forgive me, I was lost in thought. I find a forked path lies before us.”

Tilghman sat at the general’s camp desk, a quill poised in his right hand. A faint smile touched his lips.

“We are well versed in choosing our paths, sir,” he said.

“And so, we must choose again.” Washington entered the tent and folded his hands behind his back. “Write this. ‘You must follow Cornwallis closely,



but do not allow him to bring you to open battle. Watch his movements and report them to me.' That is all."

The aide's quill scratched across the page. When he was done, he passed it to Washington. The general hung the locket to its usual place around his neck, then took the quill and signed the bottom of the paper with his customary scrawl.

"I have great faith in our Lafayette," he stated. "It is men such as he who will see that we succeed in our struggle."

"His constancy reflects your own, sir," Tilghman said.

"And yours." Washington did not take his aide's comment for idle flattery, for Tilghman was bound to the cause of independence. His father had sided with the Tories, and two of his brothers were serving with the redcoats. He had given much, had lost family and friends, and the cause was all he had left.

His fate is my hands, the general thought. My failure, or my success, will be his as well.

He glanced up as Billy Lee, his mulatto manservant, entered with a silver tray bearing a coffee pot and two china cups with saucers. Hot coffee in this heat seemed an odd choice, but sometimes it helped. Washington knew to trust Billy in these things, for he was a servant but also a friend.

"Thank you, Billy," Washington said as Billy placed the tray on a scissor-legged camp table. Billy nodded, smiling one of his enigmatic smiles then bowing and ducking out of the tent. The general watched him go. Billy was a friend, yes, but also a slave. Slavery was another enigma, a problem so huge it seemed a mountain to climb, a mountain that would have to wait until after the war, after they had achieved success.

Washington turned back to Tilghman, but for a moment he could not speak. All he could see now were many such mountains—his problems and his failures, military and otherwise. He was the Commander-In-Chief, and thus responsible for this stalemate in the north, and for two years of British victories in the Carolinas and Georgia. Lord Charles Cornwallis's destruction of the American army of General Gates at Camden. Savannah and Charleston both in enemy hands, all attempts to reclaim them disasters.

Meanwhile, morale in the ranks had plummeted, although he had done all he could to sustain it. In January, a group of Pennsylvania regiments had mutinied, demanding better rations and back pay. Desertions, each a small betrayal, had been common. Then there had been the shock of Benedict Arnold's treason last autumn. Arnold had been Washington's favorite general, a fighter, the best tactical leader in the army. And he had been a friend.

"It is important that Lafayette maintain his game of cat-and-mouse," he said. "Cornwallis is waging the only active campaign of the war for the moment."

He touched a finger to his jaw, pressing to thwart a sudden stab of pain. A toothache, a tiny insult in trying times. Such aches had plagued him for years, but he always refused to have the infected tooth pulled. One day he would have nothing left but his gums, but he had no wish to hasten that moment.

“A minor inconvenience,” he muttered. The pain was something to accept, something to rise above, just as he knew he must accept and rise above the obstacles he now faced.

He began to pace the floor of the tent.

“You are right to say that we have known difficult times before. We have kept our cause alive when others have predicted its doom. We have given our troops, our stalwarts, reason to keep up the fight, even when men of good reason have declared that it should cease, that they could never defeat the mightiest military power in the world.”

He paused, glancing at his coat where it hung from the central tent pole. The coat was blue, with a buff lining and facings. The colours had originated with the Whig party in England, the party that opposed the coercive policies of the king and his government under Lord North. The coat seemed the physical sum of Washington’s life.

As a young man he had wanted nothing more than to acquire a commission in the regular army, to wear the red coat of a British officer. He had long since divorced himself from that ancient dream. It no longer seemed to matter, just as he no longer cared that his elder brothers had attended fine English schools and he had not. The embarrassment over his poor colonial education had faded, just as his red coat had become blue.

“We must have a victory this summer,” he murmured.

“What was that, sir?” Tilghman asked, rising from his seat.

“A victory,” the general repeated. “Now more than at any time. If we do not achieve something soon, I do not believe I can hold this army together through another winter.”

Tilghman’s face was bleak.

“We have a great many wants just now, sir. Meat and flour, arms, horses, wagons, some sort of permanent transport corps. Leather for shoes, broadcloth for new uniforms. Gunpowder...even fresh recruits to make up for losses caused by mutinies and desertions.”

“Yes, yes. My desk is littered with letters from officers, demanding all of these things. And others complaining about their lack of promotion. Promotion! When our country itself nears dissolution.”

Tilghman nodded. “It is an army, General.”

“An army which needs a success, however small.”

He moved to the camp desk, shuffled through the stacks of routine orders that waited for his signature. A victory, like his first small triumph at Trenton, would raise the morale of the troops, would give the people an-

other reason to support the war, to justify the presence of the soldiers who pilfered the produce of their farms and slept in their fields. It would give the people a reason to have faith.

“The coming operation will require the support of our allies, the French,” he said. “I would make use of their navy.”

“You still seek to convince them of your plan to assault New York?”

“That is my intention.” He found the paper he sought, a copy of the dispatch he had received more than three years ago when the forces of the British general Johnny Burgoyne had surrendered to the Continentals at Saratoga. That victory had convinced the French to enter the war on the American side, bringing ships, troops, and much needed supplies.

Washington knew the French simply wished to redress their losses in the last war, but he had at once dismissed their motives as irrelevant. And it was true that many of the French officers, men like Lafayette, had also come to grasp and love the American ideals of liberty.

So far, French and American efforts, such as a costly assault on Savannah, had been dismal failures; but the General liked and trusted the new French commander, the Comte de Rochambeau. They had met again last month, at Newport, Rhode Island. Rochambeau had made it clear that he would subordinate himself to American command, that his role would be to offer advice. In that, he had shown respect, a trait Washington believed essential in any useful ally. Without it he would never have agreed to cooperate.

The generals had then discussed plans for an offensive operation. Washington had advanced his notion to assault New York, the scene of his greatest defeat in 1776, but Rochambeau had not agreed. The help of the navy was paramount, the Frenchman had explained, and the navy did not favour New York. The French Admiral de Grasse, would come from the West Indies to aid in an attack, would join his forces with Admiral de Barras’s fleet at Newport; but in his letters, he insisted the waters off Sandy Hook were too shallow. Both de Grasse and Rochambeau preferred to stage an operation somewhere in Chesapeake Bay. The bay offered easily navigable waters and a variety of possible campaigns.

Washington had acknowledged the merits of Rochambeau’s reasoning, but feared the French would succumb to fever in the heat of the south. His New England troops also hated the region for its climate, poisonous snakes, bothersome mosquitoes. And the main enemy force, under General Clinton, was in New York. It irked him the French could not see that an attack there was more logical.

The Newport meeting had ended without resolution. Rochambeau’s only promise had been to move his forces to join the Continentals here at Peekskill.

“When the Comte de Rochambeau arrives,” he said now, “there will be no time for further disagreement. The people are weary of the long war, its lack of conclusion. These next few months are crucial. The Emperor and Empress of Russia have offered to mediate a settlement between America and Britain, but any such mediation will only lead to a compromise with which no one will be pleased. It will not allow for American independence.”

He knew he must bring the enemy to battle somewhere.

Tilghman had folded and sealed the letter to General Lafayette, then set it aside on the desk. Washington stared at it. If there was to be an operation in the Chesapeake, one option was to strike at Cornwallis in Virginia. For now, Lafayette would watch him, just as Washington would watch General Clinton in New York.

New York or the Chesapeake, the general mused, once again choosing to ignore a stab of pain in his jaw. That was the choice before him now.



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