

Patriot Dreams

**by
Katrina Devlin**

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DEDICATION

to my sisters,
bobo & mee,
always here
even when you're not

Chapter One

The Meeting

Bristol, England, Early March 1774

Sir Thomas Chisholm found himself in the unenviable position of having to extricate himself tactfully from an awkward situation with the daughter of his most honored colleague.

Dr. William Gaines, Captain in his Majesty King George's Royal Regiment and an eminent physician in the city of London had only one daughter, and the Mistress Arabella Gaines was a definite force to be reckoned with, especially among her many young beaus. Thomas was not one of those youthful fellows, yet the fulsome beauty with the thick blond curls and light blue eyes had decided that he should be.

"Really, Thomas," the young lady said in a cajoling tone as she planted a delicate hand on his arm. "How can you be so cruel. You're dreadfully mean to me. Papa would be ever so upset with you."

Thomas looked down at the fairylike sprite at his side. There was the barest trace of tears on her cheek, and for a moment he thought he had actually caused her some pain. Then he spied the gleam of satisfaction in her eyes, and he straightened his back. The little minx was playing with him.

"Bella, don't pretend to feelings you don't have," he told her sternly. "I mean no more to you than this piece of stone here." He jerked his thumb toward a boulder that stood near the path.

"But, Thomas, why can't you take me with you?" The big blue eyes filled as she tilted back her head.

"Basically, because I respect your father and have no need of a baggage, however pretty, on this voyage."

"You all but promised to marry me," she pouted.

"I think not, Bella, but there are plenty of candidates for marriage among your entourage," he said dryly. "Choose one of them."

"Ohhh," she squealed, stamping her foot. "I hate you. And, I hate the government for sending you to the heathen colonies."

"It isn't the government that's sending me, Bella," he corrected. "It's my father, that heathen lord with the family in those same heathen colonies."

"Well, I wish you a bad journey," she snapped, tossing her head and sending a barrage of curls into his chest "And, I hope you fall in love with one of those awful colonists, and she dances barefoot at your wedding."

"Thank you, Arabella," Thomas said as he inclined his head. "I do so appreciate your kind words. And, if my barefoot bride steps on my foot, it won't hurt at all. I'll probably enjoy it." Turning on his heel, he set off toward the dock where the vessel awaited that would transport him to America, to his stepmother's sister in the Kinderhook region of New York Colony and to his young sister Mariah, who had once again embroiled him in one of her escapades, albeit unwittingly.

Arabella Gaines watched him leave with vexation etched across her pretty features. His tall figure was easy to follow as he mingled with the crowds on the wharf.

Big, boring oaf, she thought. But, he was so handsome, and his family was rich. She had hoped for an adventure.

Little chit, he thought. Where she ever got the idea that he was planning to take her with him across the ocean, he'd never know.

"Chisholm!" her shriek made him glance back up the sloping path.

Arabella stood there, arms akimbo, a wide, mocking smile on her face.

"Barefoot," she called. "A barefoot, savage bride." She stamped once for emphasis and winced

as a pebble pierced the sole of her delicate slipper.

Shaking his head ruefully, Thomas laughed back at the petulant girl and bowed deeply.

Barefoot bride, indeed.

The young nobleman enjoyed the comforts of his class, but he was also a skilled physician. He had studied medicine at Oxford, and since his eldest brother Toby was the heir to their father's estate, Thomas had felt free to pursue a profession in healing.

His father had not been averse to the idea.

"We Chisholms have always been dedicated folk," he would say. "Indeed, why not be a doctor? It is the most honorable act, to save a person's life. Never be ashamed of honest work, my boy, even if you need not earn a living."

Thus, the younger son had become a physician and set up a bustling country practice at Chisholmshire, the seat of the family manor. Thomas was content with his stone farmhouse and the few acres of park that surrounded it; he enjoyed the quiet life and preferred his fairly peaceful rural existence to that of a city doctor any time. He was happy in his isolated corner of the lake country, but still, he wouldn't have missed this golden opportunity to meet a possible barefoot bride in a heathen faraway land.

It was really Lord William Chisholm's fatherly concern that forced his hand. His father and stepmother's only child Mariah had accompanied her Aunt Anne back to the colonies. Now, with the threat of war imminent and colonial unrest everywhere, his father was worried about sixteen year old Mariah and had dispatched him to fetch her back to England.

The few maids and ladies on the ship surveyed the handsome young physician surreptitiously as he stood alone on the deck. Not one for fancy wigs or ostentatious clothing, he wore a simple brown frock coat with a fine linen shirt and smooth fawn colored

breeches. His boots were polished Italian leather, and his shoulder length mane of chestnut hair was tied back with a simple piece of cord. Sir Thomas Chisholm, twenty-nine years old and a most eligible bachelor, stood at the railing, oblivious to the admiring glances cast his way. He watched the lush green hills of his beloved English countryside recede as The Delphi Oracle sailed toward a new world and an untapped future.

The sea green of his eyes reflected the sparkling depths of the water as white spray flew against the bow, casting a sheen of wetness over his finely chiseled features. He was mesmerized by the cresting waves and rocking of the ship, and his heart quickened in anticipation. He had to admit it, he was looking forward to this adventure.

Upper New York, American Colonies, May 1774

The craggy hill overlooked a majestic valley that was blossoming with goldenrod, wild daisies, and mountain violets. It was a beautiful place. On the hilltop, a girl was lying on her back, her smoky gray eyes trained on the soaring shadow of an eagle in the skies above. She was thinking how beautiful the clouds were and how much she loved the spring of the year. She was also thinking about Aaron and the recent bad luck that had befallen him. Her reckless twin brother had been thrown from an untamed horse and had suffered a broken arm, a twisted ankle, and several cracked ribs. He was bedridden.

While Abigail Mason was concerned for her brother, she was also worried about the cause. Aaron was an integral part of the Kinderhook Resistance, an underground cabal that was designed to bring hardship to the Redcoats quartered only twenty miles north of the valley. Mostly, they instigated petty annoyances, meant to build up toward major problems as the frustrations

persisted and tempers flared among the arrogant Tory officers. Loosed horses, waylaid grain and food wagons, overturned barrels of water and ale, stolen clothes, utensils and pans. The Resistance sent scouting parties of a few to wreak havoc in the various campsites around the towns. With Aaron laid up, who would take his place, she mused.

Bartholomew Tyler was expecting Aaron at a KR meeting later that afternoon. Aaron was morose, lying in his comfortable bed with his swollen ankle elevated on a mound of silken cushions and his pupils dilated by a dose of laudanum administered with loving care by his mother. Abigail knew that Bart would understand her brother's predicament, but Aaron had stubbornly refused to send word to his comrade.

"Abby, they'll think I'm just another spoiled rich landowner," he had muttered that afternoon.

"Aaron, you don't own any land," she pointed out dryly. "You're merely working Father's land."

"You know what I mean," he snapped, insulted by her bald truthfulness. "Bart will have to make excuses for me, God, I hate that."

"Rest now," she murmured as his eyes drooped closed.

Her brother was a spitfire. Long and lanky with a mop of copper colored curls, he looked like the flame of resistance that he was. Although somewhat volatile, he had a good and honest heart and was madly in love with Mary Harrison, a Kinderhook girl with long dark curls and brown eyes whose father was the local magistrate. Aaron was very handsome, as Mariah was wont to say in coquettish whispers. Mama had just brought their cousin back from England for a visit and while Abby loved the younger girl's enthusiasm for everything under the sun, she was getting tired of the teenaged idolatry for her twin.

"Ooooh, he looks like Adonis," Mariah would squeal.

"He looks like me," Abby said flatly. "I'm two

minutes older, and he looks like me, and I do not resemble a Greek god in any way, Mariah."

At eighteen, Abby Mason had a good head on her shoulders and a reputation for being outspoken. And, if the truth were told, she did look much more like a Greek goddess than a god.

Her long, fire-colored curls were swept back with a wide ribbon that matched the azure sky above. Her eyes were the deep hue of smoke on a wintry day fringed with long sooty lashes that were the envy of her three sisters and every girl around. Her blue linen dress was accented with a soft cream muslin scarf around her shoulders, and she wore an embroidered apron around her waist that she had thrown on during bread baking that afternoon. Actually, there was still a smudge of flour on her freckled nose.

She didn't usually like domestic chores, but today they had baked bread for the poor folk who lived in the shantytown on the other end of the valley. Their housekeeper, Emma McDougal, had enlisted all of their help, even Mariah had tried her hand at what clearly was a foreign act to her. Abby had seen the deplorable condition of some of the shacks when she accompanied her father on his rounds. For the sake of those poor people, she had gladly donned an apron and tried her best to knead a proper loaf.

Mariah was sitting with Aaron now. The younger girl was only too happy to read to her captive cousin.

Abby wondered what she should do about Bart and the scheduled meeting? Papa was at the Apothecary, and Mama was sewing with her lady friends. She gazed up into the unruffled azure sky, and her eyes followed the path of the soaring eagle.

The eagle is free, she thought. And so are we. Deep sentiments filled her being, and she wanted to rise up, to fly like the bird of prey, his quarry sighted and within striking reach – to glide and to transmute the boundaries of ordinary, normal life.

She, as well as Aaron, embraced the spirit of independence that was the undercurrent of their world.

"I'll do it," she said fiercely to the sky. "I'll be my brother."

In a moment, she was up and running toward Rebel, her gelding that was grazing peacefully in the meadow.

"Here, boy," she whistled as she ran. With a whoop, she was flying up onto his back, her skirts billowing behind her.

Bart Tyler surveyed the faces of the men before him. In the dim light of the barn, it was hard to see their expressions, but they all cheered when he gave them the results of last week's raids.

"That redcoat Perry is planning to reconnoiter the areas above Albany, closer to Saratoga for a possible camp. We've roused them good, lads!"

Aaron Mason slammed his fist into the air with the others but his characteristic banshee yell was curiously missing.

Bart raised his eyebrow, but then shrugged, maybe the younger man was still mooning for Mary Beth Harrison who had recently been seen in the company of young Devon McNeil.

"We've learned that a British doctor is on his way to our parts, no offense to the medical profession, but we don't need no doctors fixing up them we want gone from here."

The three faces looked at him expectantly.

"Make his journey less than comfortable, mates," Bart bellowed. "If he's heading toward the camp, be sure he gets there a few pounds lighter in his purse."

"Rob him?" Aaron's voice sounded like a squeak.

"Yes, rob him, Mason," Bart shook his head.

"Got a problem with that?"

The younger man shook his head, looking down.

Damn, thought Abby, this was not going to be

easy. Stealing seemed so criminal; she had always thought the KR did noble things for the cause of independence.

She followed the other two men silently. Their ride down the valley was mostly quiet, she laughed gruffly when her companions' ribald humor warranted it and answered in low monosyllables when necessary. It was nearly dusk when she spotted the coach.

"We'll take the driver and anyone else, you take the good doctor, Mason," said Emmett Homer, the older of the two.

It happened so quickly. Emmett and Jake Knowles surprised the driver and groom and knocked them off the swiftly moving coach. The last thing Abby saw was the driver lying on the dirt road while his young servant cowered before the masked horsemen.

God damn me, she cursed like a sailor in her mind as her heart pounded out of control. She swung onto the driver's seat from Rebel's back and seized the reins, expertly slowing down the agitated team. Abby knew how to handle horses. The pair of beasts stopped in a dark copse of trees, and she hopped off to confront the inhabitant.

"Throw your valuables out the window," she growled in her deepest voice through the coach window. "I'm armed and dangerous."

Her mouth was dry with fear, and she squealed when the coach door slammed open into her chest, knocking her back onto the ground.

"What the devil is going on," an aristocratic voice preceded one fine leather boot. And then the other appeared to stand right on top of her, pinning her to the ground. She looked up into the face of one of the most handsome men she had ever seen.

"You, boy, what goes on here?" the boot nudged her in the side, and she blushed at the indignity of her position. She was a prisoner of his boots. The intelligent green eyes squinted as he leaned over her. "You're no boy. And, I daresay you're not

armed and dangerous either, eh?"

Again, he nudged her.

She sneered at him as best she could under the circumstances.

She was mortified. She vowed to kill her brother for somehow being responsible for this whole mess.

"Little chit of a girl," he laughed, bending down and lifting her up as though she were a feather. "Someone ought to take a strap to you for this bit of tomfoolery. What's your name, lawbreaker?"

She glared at him, mutinously keeping her mouth shut. When she didn't answer him, he shook her and yanked the wide brimmed hat off her head. A cascade of red curls tumbled down her back, and he whistled.

"Little firebrand, I see. Well, have you noticed that your comrades in crime have abandoned you? You seem to be quite alone with a stranger on a dark road. Doesn't seem very safe, does it?"

Abby looked into his face. He sounded as though he was joking, but his eyes were very serious and stern.

Steeling herself against the underlying tone of concern in his voice, she spat into the dirt with all the hostility and disdain she could muster and at the same time thrust one hard fist into his stomach.

He merely winced at her blow. His eyes narrowed as he yanked her closer.

"Young ladies who behave like ruffians should be treated as such. You need a lesson in deportment, lass."

She was confused when he dragged her over to the bushes on the side of the road and broke off a long, limber switch. She recoiled in dread when she realized he was stripping off the leaves. She knew exactly what he was doing; she had seen her father do it enough times.

"You can't," she cried, breaking her silence. "You mustn't."

"Ahh, Princess Silence has a tongue."

"Leave me be," she snapped, trying to pull out

of his iron grip.

"You shouldn't try to rob people. They don't like it," he said dryly.

Abby's stomach was flipping over with dread, but she couldn't tear her gaze away from her assailant's handsome face. His eyes were the color of the moss that covered the rocks in the stream near her house; there were crinkles in the corners, and she knew without a doubt that he had a wonderful smile. Her legs felt weak.

Before she could guess his intentions, he had swung his foot up on a rock and bent her over one powerful thigh.

"Please," she cried, getting frightened. "Please, sir, don't do this. I didn't mean it, I'm sorry."

"Yes, you will be," he replied implacably.

He wasn't finished preparing her yet. She yelped when he reached around and yanked open the rope that was holding her trousers up. She felt the cool air on her bared bottom, and she nearly fainted with embarrassment.

Thomas quirked an eyebrow in appreciation at the plump white backside that was currently draped over his leg. She was an incredibly beautiful criminal, he thought; his hand itched to reach out and caress the delectable curve of her hip. His heart pounded with both outrage and a desire that threatened to paralyze him. He sucked in his breath as he felt a wave of longing shoot through his body. He was already hard. She was no ordinary wench, that much was certain. But she had inconvenienced him, hit him and put both of their lives in danger. Punishment must follow such irresponsible actions. Resolutely, he swung back his arm.

Abby gasped when she heard the whistle of the switch approaching. A line of hot fire spread across her backside.

"Bastard," she cried. "Tory pig bastard."

"That isn't nice," he said softly. "Perhaps you should apologize."

The switch hissed again and again in quick

succession, stinging her flesh with the might of a hundred bees.

"Never," she yelled. "You can go suck eggs."

She was rewarded with a half dozen strokes that branded her with a hot fire that alternately felt icy cold. He swung the switch like a seasoned disciplinarian; she wondered if he had children. For some reason, she hoped he didn't. When he wasn't abusing her, he was very good-looking. And she was partial to green eyes and brown hair with glints of golden highlights.

"I don't like eggs," he replied, flicking the switch across the very bottom of her buttocks where the skin was most tender.

She screamed. Her position was tenuous; she was dangling above the ground and had to rely on the bastard doctor not to drop her flat on her face. Her arms were pinned beneath her, and she couldn't reach back to protect her bottom from his wicked switch. His legs were muscular and hard as granite beneath her belly.

"Suck eggs and die," she shouted as a tear rolled into her mouth.

"How rude," he murmured. "But I think not, as I said, I don't like them, I find them often poorly cooked and runny." His tone was conversational as he continued whipping her, several times across the very center of her bottom and then twice on her thighs.

She was crying uncontrollably when he laid one very hard blow across the center of her backside.

"Oww," she howled. "Please stop, I said I was sorry."

"And so you are," he said quietly, almost gently.

She was whimpering when he finally tossed the stick into the underbrush. She jerked when he placed a cool hand on her burning skin. There was an intimacy in his touch that she found harder to bear than the agony of his switch.

"You might find it hard to sit for awhile," he told her. "But there's no permanent damage."

When he let go of her, she scrambled to her feet, hastily pulling her trousers up over a cherry red behind.

"I'll kill you for this," she hissed.

"Doubtful," he drawled. "Remember, not armed, not dangerous."

"Oooh, you!" she muttered, stamping her foot in impotent rage.

"You are a little heathen aren't you?" he asked, smiling at her childish behavior.

"You English want to run everything, but all you do is ruin things. You bring heartache to this land," she cried passionately.

"Spare me your histrionics, miss," he chided her. "This land is English land, pray remember where you come from."

"I come from my mother and my father," she said fiercely. "And I am an American, not a detestable, English pig like you."

Tears streaked the porcelain beauty of her face, and he was shocked when he saw for the first time into the clear depths of her gorgeous gray eyes. Gray eyes that were sparkling with anger and outrage. He looked down at the ground, half expecting to find her bare feet in the dirt. But she was wearing boots.

He smiled. So much for Bella's curse.

Abby looked up at the English devil. His handsome face was smiling at her. Smirking, she thought.

She was getting tired of being laughed at. She swung her foot back and kicked him in the shins with all of her might.

He bellowed in pain and reached down to rub his afflicted body part. She took that opportunity to scoot away into the forest. When she was far enough away, she stepped into the pasture and whistled for Rebel. She sobbed with relief when her beloved horse cantered over to collect her. She carefully rode toward her house, with her legs straight in the stirrups and her burning bottom

elevated off the saddle. She didn't look back once.

All the way home, she saw his handsome face again in her mind, felt the agony of his gentle touch on her throbbing skin. Her stomach churned with an odd sickness mingled with want and hatred, and she wondered if she would ever see him again.

Chapter Two

Family Dinner

Dr. Jacob Mason was in the process of locking up his business for the night when he heard a soft footfall on the path next to him.

"Dr. Mason?" the Englishman's voice was deep and smooth. "I hope I didn't startle you. I am Thomas Chisholm, your niece Mariah's half-brother. My father had no time to send word prior to my departure, but I do bring a letter from him for you."

Jacob Mason spun around, both hands extended to clasp the newcomer's arms. He hugged and shook both hands and clapped the younger fellow on the shoulder.

"Thomas, my word, how wonderful!" Beaming, he pulled his step-nephew along the path toward the stables. "We will all be quite happy to have you visit our home. Family is certainly welcome at Hilltop. We have ample room and always look forward to seeing loved ones."

Thomas bowed, shaking the older man's hand.

"I thank you for your hospitality, sir."

"We have much to discuss," Jacob enthused. "It will be marvelous having another doctor in the house. At present, only one of my offspring shows a propensity toward the healing arts and that only unwittingly. My Abby is a natural healer, you'll discover."

By then, they had reached the stables, and Dr. Mason signaled his groom to bring the carriage round. While they waited, he took a moment to study the young Englishman and leaned forward, eyebrows quirked quizzically.

"Had a bit of a spill, did you?" he asked good-naturedly.

Thomas flushed as he realized he must have still been wearing souvenirs from his earlier tangle with the brambles. Curse that impudent chit. As they climbed into the carriage, Jacob Mason was

speaking of his family.

"Annie and I have been blessed with eight healthy children, Thomas," he said proudly. "Two sets of twins included. The oldest is nineteen and married, a daughter, living down the road. But all seven of the rest are at the Hill. Loud brood," he muttered, shaking his head.

Thomas took a moment to point out his bags, which were still in the Livery yard.

"May I please retrieve my belongings, Doctor," he interrupted.

Jacob tapped on the glass and pointed toward the satchels propped against the low stone fence. When the carriage stopped, Thomas jumped out and hoisted his bags into the coach before the driver could step down.

He noticed a young man lounging against the side of the livery building, his narrowed eyes following his progress across the yard.

"Evening, Bart," Jacob leaned his head out the carriage door and nodded to the seemingly sullen fellow.

"Doc," The man doffed his cap and nodded.

Thomas looked curiously at the younger gentleman. He seemed overly concerned with a stranger's arrival in this quiet town.

Something to ponder, Thomas mused as he settled himself across from his step-uncle.

"Did you pass on that remarkable hair to your children?" Thomas asked, remembering where last he had seen that shade of golden red that was most like the color of a brilliant flame.

Long fiery curls and gray eyes, fringed with the most amazing lashes. Eyes that were glistening with unshed tears and reproach.

"To three of them, yes, much to their mother's dismay," Jacob nodded. "And those three have the devil's own temper, but they're all good at heart."

"Children are indeed a blessing," Thomas said solemnly.

"Damn raucous blessing if you ask me," Jacob

bellowed. "I love 'em all. But they are loud buggers, I must say. Especially the girls. Or maybe it's the boys. You'll find out soon enough."

Thomas wondered why they were home at all and not away at school. He reckoned the colonists had some strange ways.

"I had a curious experience on my way into your lovely valley," he told Jacob. "I believe I was the target of a band of thieves."

"What's that?" Jacob cried, frowning. "Were you hurt?"

"No, not at all," Thomas said gently. "They meant to rob me, but the foolish one they set on me was quite inept. They all ran away."

"Hmm," Jacob rubbed his chin. "Mostly, they concern themselves with the soldiers, can't imagine why they would bother you."

"You know these bandits?"

"No, no," Jacob assured him hurriedly. "Never mind, all's well now. And here we are."

Hilltop Manor was a large stone home situated atop a grassy bluff that overlooked a gorgeous, peaceful valley. In the deepening twilight, the house glimmered with candlelight in most of the windows. Thomas was impressed by the sturdiness of the manor building and the beauty of the surrounding grounds. Although the farmland was lovely, it was simply farmland, but the gardens near the manor were breathtaking, lushly meandering yet obviously strictly tended. Somebody loved flowers, he thought.

Anne Mason was a vivacious blond in her late thirties. She was very petite and pretty although tiny lines fanned out from her eyes, from laughing often or smiling.

"Thomas, it is good to see you again," she exclaimed, embracing him.

Anne and his stepmother Judith were both kind and good-hearted women. His own mother had died when he was a toddler, and he had no real memories of her except a lemon colored skirt and

lacy handkerchiefs scented with lavender. His father had married Judith in Thomas' first year at Eton, and he never really knew her or the blond button of a baby that followed. Mariah Chisholm was too young to be interesting to a young man immersed in his studies, but Thomas had always kept an eye on his mischievous little half-sister. They scuffled perfunctorily during his visits home until he assumed a guardian type attitude toward her in later years. The unofficial guardianship had included rescuing his sister from several scrapes where he had been driven to wallop the tar out of her poor but totally deserving rear-end.

Riah would sniff with resentment and shriek her outrage during such sessions, but she would much rather have Thomas deal with her than her father or eldest brother Toby. Once Thomas dealt with an episode, it was forgotten, not regurgitated at home for the sake of her parents like Toby would do. Then her father would reach for a switch, and she would find herself punished twice as hard for the same offense. Her father had the most unfailing switch arm in the county, so she was usually better off when Thomas was first to discover her transgressions.

Still, he was a loving and caring older brother, and Mariah adored him as he did her.

"Come inside and meet the children," Anne was saying as she placed a gentle hand on his arm. "I know Mariah will be so happy to see you."

Thomas had barely reached the parlor when the object of their conversation skipped down the stairs and saw him.

"Tommy!" the shriek echoed throughout the whole house as a wild tangle of blond curls and silk skirts erupted into him. "Thomas, I've missed you dreadfully." Mariah Chisholm held onto her brother as though she would never let him go.

"Come now, moppet," he chuckled, kissing her soundly and trying to extricate himself from her fierce embrace.

"Oh, Tommy, I have so much to tell you," Mariah chattered excitedly as she pulled her sibling into the cozy sitting room. "Sit with me over here. Aunt Annie won't mind."

Anne Mason laughed and waved her hand toward the sofa.

"I'll have some tea sent in," she told them. "Take him up to the chamber next to yours when you've finished wearing off his ears."

Thomas spent a happy half an hour listening to Mariah's bubbling tales of this cousin and that one.

A stolid looking woman carried in a tray with a teapot and a plate of biscuits.

"Thank you, Emma," Mariah said with a broad smile.

"Mind you warn him," the older woman mumbled cryptically as she left the room.

Mariah giggled.

"The tea is awful," Mariah whispered once the door closed behind the hefty matron. "The Americans won't buy real tea from us any longer, and they drink this dreadful, Dutch bilge. You'll see. Put lots of sugar in it, Tom."

"Americans?" Thomas lifted an eyebrow. "I daresay you mean, British colonists."

"Oh, Thomas, you'll discover soon enough, this is not Britain," Mariah laughed. "Aaron says before long they'll rule themselves with a government and everything."

"They?"

"The Americans, silly, you know what I mean."

Thomas shook his head at his sister's fanciful speech. When he took a swallow of tea, his grimace caused his sister to almost fall off the sofa; her peals of laughter filled the room.

"You'll get used to it," she assured him.

Then Mariah pulled him upstairs to the room her aunt had arranged for him.

"Dinner will be ready soon," she told him. "They don't dress in the evening here so you don't have to change. You might want to take the bush out of

your hair, though."

"Sassy wench," he laughed. "Do it for me like a good sister." He turned his head and waited for Mariah to pull the remaining burrs and twigs from his hair and collar.

"All nice now," she said. "I'll wait for you to wash up. Maybe you'll tell me what happened while I wait."

"Thank you, miss," Thomas told her. "But, I think I'd prefer to do more than wash up, and I don't need an audience."

"Tommy!" Mariah squealed. "But, actually, maybe I should..."

"Out!" he turned her around and delivered a swat to her bottom.

"I'm going, but, oh, it is so lovely to have you here," she jumped up and hugged him again before leaving the room.

"I love you too," he laughed, pushing her out the door.

When she had skipped away, he closed the door and turned to study the small but comfortable chamber. The oak four-poster bed was draped in a plush eiderdown comforter that invited him to stretch his weary bones across it. Instead, he walked over to the large window and leaned his head out in the deepening dusk to survey the countryside that stretched like soft green velvet toward a gently flowing river. It was a very pretty land, he conceded.

There was a great clatter of footsteps in the hall punctuated with squeals and shouts that served as his summons to the table. He hastily readied himself and returned downstairs.

Dinner was indeed an informal event with the whole family gathered in the dining room at the long mahogany table near the open glass doors to the terrace. The sweet, soft air of spring wafted into the big room from the garden. There was so much laughter and conversation flying about the room; Thomas felt his ears buzz.

He sat between Mariah and Anne Mason. There were two empty spots across from him.

"Quiet now!" Jacob commanded his noisy brood, holding up a hand.

"Thomas," he called from his seat at the other end of the table. "Allow me to introduce the family. This lad here is Charles Samuel, we call him Charlie, and that one there is Samuel Charles and we call him Sam."

The ten-year old twins stood up, pummeled each other happily, and offered their hands simultaneously. Thomas took a hand in each of his own and winked at the lads.

"This good looking fellow here is James Paul, also known as Jamie, as you can see, he's one of the redheads."

Jamie was a tall, lanky sixteen-year-old who unfolded himself gracefully and quietly greeted his cousin.

"Judith Anne is fifteen and the belle of the valley as you can see."

The pretty girl with blond curls on the other side of Mariah tipped her head toward him and giggled.

"Me next, Father, me next!" the little one with blond braids jumped up to curtsy before the handsome stranger.

"Our Hannah is seven years old and the prettiest girl this side of Albany," Jacob laughed.

"I can see that she is," Thomas said as he bowed solemnly to the tiny, dancing child; she tittered happily back to her chair.

"Elizabeth, our married daughter, lives down the road as I told you." Jacob Mason said, frowning at the two empty seats. "My son Aaron was injured in a fall the other day, and he's laid up in Annie's parlor where he's most comfortable, and I'm certain his twin Abigail is probably hovering somewhere near him. But that's no excuse for missing dinner."

He pushed back his chair and stood up. Going to the doorway, he stuck his head into the hallway and bellowed.

"Abigail!"

"Coming," came the distant reply.

"Girl never knows what time it is," he said, shaking his head irritably as he returned to his seat.

She entered breathlessly and curtseyed quickly, a mop of red curls shielding her face.

Thomas wasn't surprised to see her. He had already put it together when he saw Jacob Mason for the first time. That firebrand hair was too distinctive a color for there to be any doubt of the relationship.

"Sorry, Father," she murmured as she slipped gingerly into her seat.

Thomas swallowed a smile as he watched her squirm uncomfortably on the hard maple chair.

"Say hello to your cousin, Abby," Jacob instructed.

She lifted her eyes and for the first time noticed the man sitting across from her.

"This is Thomas Chisholm, Mariah's brother," her father said. "And this is my Abby."

"Bloody hell!"

Abigail jumped up from her chair and clapped a hand to her mouth as she looked into the amused eyes of the bastard doctor.

Thomas stood also and coughed politely at her unladylike epithet. He offered her his hand, and when she automatically extended her own, he squeezed her palm warningly.

"Did you sit on a pin?" he asked innocently.

"I did not, curse you," she stammered. "Damn!"

"Abigail Judith Mason," Anne said sternly. "As old as you are, I will wash your mouth out with soap if I hear one more disrespectful word from you."

Her siblings were staring at her, their mouths agape at her uncivilized behavior.

"I'm sorry, Mother," she apologized, plopping down in her seat, completely bewildered by this turn of events. Unfortunately, she forgot about her tender posterior and sat down too hard on the unforgiving wood.

"Devil take it," she cried, jumping back up as though scalded.

Thomas burst out laughing. Her language was atrocious, but she was adorable in her discomfiture. Although she had tried to rob him, he was already half in love with her. He saw again the creamy, satin skin before he turned it cherry red. Those enchanting gray eyes. She was beautiful, that much was certain, but he also found her exciting and refreshing. The women of his circle were sophisticated, beautiful, and aristocratic, and they played a game of flirtation that he usually found repugnant. He was completely unprepared for the directness of Abigail's speech and her charming lack of artifice.

He also found the whole situation funny as hell.

Anne Mason didn't find it amusing at all, and the diminutive blond woman flew up in a flash and pulled her eighteen-year old daughter out of her chair by her ear.

"Ouch, Mama, you're going to rip my ear off," Abby cried, blushing to the roots of her hair. "It was nice to meet you," she called back to the helplessly chuckling Thomas.

"Likewise," he called.

"Don't envy her," Jacob said calmly. "Mutton never tastes as well after a mouthful of suds."

Thomas laughed until Mariah thought he was bewitched, and she was obliged to punch him in the leg. He couldn't contain his mirth; the last thing he noticed about Miss Abigail Judith Mason were her dusty, bare feet as she was dragged over her mother's good dining room carpet into the kitchen for a soapy punishment.

He had to admit it, he was glad he had come to this wonderful, heathen place, and he looked forward to getting to know the redheaded vixen better.

Chapter Three

The Spitfire

Thomas Chisholm's first meal with the Masons of Kinderhook was certainly a memorable one. Anne returned to the dining room before her wayward daughter and made her own apologies for her second eldest's deplorable lack of manners. Shortly after, Abigail returned to her seat, much subdued and extremely careful with her speech.

"I beg your pardon, Thomas," she said softly as she glanced across the table at the handsome doctor.

He smiled kindly, and somehow she knew he wasn't going to tell her secret about how she had tried to rob him that afternoon.

"Tis nothing to fret about," he assured her. "We all have these kind of days. Why I was telling your father earlier, I was myself set upon by bandits when I entered your valley today."

So much for the idea that he would keep her secret. Her nostrils flared as she shot him a furtive frown.

"Bandits!" exclaimed Hannah, her eyes opening wide.

"Bandits," snorted Judith in disgust. "Like as not, we all know who it was."

"Hush," murmured Jamie, lifting his eyebrow reprovingly at his sister.

Judith rolled her eyes but held her tongue.

Chisholm was taunting her; Abigail knew that. She wanted to erase the smugness from his face.

"Were you injured at all?" she asked innocently.

"Nay," he said quickly. "But I did manage to thrash one of the fellows before he got away."

"However did you do that? Did you draw your sword or perhaps a musket? Maybe just your fists?" Although she still had the faint but awful taste of soap in her mouth, she didn't bother to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

"Abigail," Anne admonished gently. "I'm sure Thomas does not need to explain his actions to you. It must have been a terrible experience."

"Far more terrible for my bandit than for me," Thomas laughed.

Oh, his arrogance made her seethe. She wished she could take him down a notch.

"Abby," Jamie interrupted. "I ran into Mistress Warner, and she says to thank you for the poultice. She says to tell you the swelling went down, and the pain is all but gone."

"That is good news," Abigail said smiling. She turned to her father. "I made Meg Warner one of my herbal poultices for that touch of inflammation she had."

Jacob Mason nodded thoughtfully.

"Excellent," he said approvingly. "I probably wouldn't have tried that. But, you have a natural touch, Abby."

"What is this medicine?" Thomas asked, eagerly leaning across the table toward her. "I am always interested in new cures or just old palliatives."

"Tis nothing," she said stiffly. "Just an herbal cure for an old woman's pain. Very backwoods, very, how do you say, ah yes, colonial."

"Don't pay her any mind, Thomas. She is always this rude," Judith said haughtily.

"But, I find her rudeness very, how do you say, ah yes, enchanting," Thomas said as he sipped a rather excellent red wine.

Abigail blushed at his words. There was an underlying hint of sensuality in his voice that had nothing to do with medicinal poultices.

He lifted an eyebrow at her, and she felt a quiver race through her loins.

"Tommy, exactly why have you come?" Mariah blurted out, drawing the attention away from the now visible current running between Abigail and Thomas.

"Thank you, Riah, for the warm welcome," he said dryly. "Earlier this day, you were full of kisses

and embraces."

"Yes, well, I've had time to think since then, and I must admit, I am perplexed by this high handed action of Father's. To not even send a letter of his intent but to send you instead seems somewhat drastic. I am completely flummoxed by it and not a little perturbed," she said in an annoyed voice.

"Our Father is merely concerned about your safety," Thomas said stiffly. "And watch your tone, Miss Mariah, I will act in his stead, and I think you know what that means." There was no mistaking the warning in his glance.

"Dash it, Thomas, you cannot beat the curiosity out of me. Nor the interest I have in this country." Mariah tossed her blond curls at his increasing severity, glaring at him mutinously.

"I never thought to try," he informed her. "But, Father does not want you in danger. In case you haven't noticed, there most likely will be a war in these parts. Already, the troops are mustering, on both sides."

"But, we are on both sides," Mariah exclaimed. "How can there be a war when we are related, we are sisters, brothers and cousins with the Americans."

"Who are these infernal Americans?" Thomas said impatiently. "Do you mistake good Englishmen for savages?"

Abby gasped at his harsh words, but her mother waved a pacifying hand.

"Times have changed, Thomas," Anne Mason began in a gentle but firm voice. "We are all Americans here. This is not England."

"Annie," Jacob remonstrated. "Our guest does not need to hear a lecture on his first night here."

"Tis hardly a lecture, Jake," she retorted. "It's plain and simple truth, and well you know it."

"Anne," his voice had just the slightest hint of steel in it.

Abigail jumped to her mother's defense by slamming down her glass, sloshing some wine over

onto her hand. She glared at Thomas.

"You, sir, would do well to remember that you are in the home of such savages," Abigail shot out, springing to her feet. "You are the most arrogant, pigheaded excuse for a..."

"Abigail!" her father's voice was not loud, but it drew her attention immediately. She knew the tone of that voice. She knew her yet aching posterior was in dire trouble. Her father, for all his mellow quirks, was a strict enforcer of familial obedience and manners. He would not excuse this blatant disregard of good breeding.

But, she didn't care.

"I apologize," she said shortly. "Obviously, the good doctor is not equipped to handle progressive idealism. I don't know what I was thinking. I'll remember to keep my sentences short and easy to understand in future."

"MY study, Abigail, at once," Jacob Mason ordered. He turned to their guest. "I'm sorry that Abby's tongue got in the way of her better judgment."

Abigail threw her napkin to her chair in a swift motion that managed to convey both outrage and disgust and stalked out of the room.

Thomas felt a mingling of emotions. He thoroughly believed the chit deserved chastisement for her disrespect and sassiness, but he also knew she had already suffered one thrashing today. He didn't think she should have to endure another, especially on his account.

"Sir, may I speak to you for a moment," he asked Jacob quietly as the other man was preparing to leave the table. He wasn't sure, but it seemed that he had interrupted a silent exchange between husband and wife that boded ill for Mistress Anne Mason.

"Certainly, my boy," Jacob said affably enough. The two withdrew to the terrace through the open glass doors.

"You must excuse Abby, Thomas," Jacob began

once they were out of earshot of the suddenly silent dining room. "She is headstrong, I know, however, that is partly my fault. I raised her to know her own mind and speak it, but she indeed knows better than to be rude, especially to family guests. She's earned herself a session with my strap, and that's for certain."

They were walking along a path that led to the more formal gardens behind the house. The path took them right in front of the open windows to Jacob's study.

They were unaware of a certain redheaded eavesdropper who was leaning against the wall, listening eagerly to every word that passed between them.

"Jacob, I would deem it a very big favor if you would perhaps overlook this transgression just this once by your delightfully outspoken daughter," Thomas said. "In truth, the lass is not much at fault here. I actually find her opinionated views quite enlightening. Perhaps, I am too much an outsider to your world here to offer my own views." The deep sea green eyes twinkled, and he smiled.

Jacob grasped the other man's hand and pumped it heartily. He had been loath to whip his daughter for that very trait which he had indeed instilled in her.

"My good fellow, you are indeed a noble man, and although Abby deserves a blistering for her rudeness, she will not get it this day. Copying Bible verses will be the extent of her punishment, and that is due only to your good will."

In the study, Abby inwardly heaved a sigh of relief, and her hand involuntarily rubbed her backside. She hated writing Bible verses, but the alternative was so dreadful, she felt almost reprieved. It wasn't the pain of the strapping she feared, although that was a substantial factor. Her biggest fear had been that her father would discover evidence of the switching that Chisholm had delivered earlier. She would have been lost then.

Her father was not an advocate of the Resistance. He believed in Independence of the Colonies, but he was completely cerebral and monetary in its support. He would not have been pleased, to say the least, if he knew of Aaron's or her own clandestine involvement. So, Chisholm had saved her.

Thomas Chisholm her benefactor?

The thought was both irritating and comforting, and she knew not why. He was, of course, a handsome man, but he was a Tory and was therefore responsible for their current predicament and heartache, and everyone knew that Tories were not to be trusted.

Still, he had saved her backside and her secret, and that in itself deserved thanks.

The murmur of their voices disappeared, and she knew they were winding their way back toward the dining room. She hurried over to sit in the chair near her father's desk where the Mason offspring customarily sat in waiting to explain their errant behavior to their sire and judge.

When Jacob walked through the door a moment later, he found a meekly contrite Abigail studying the bouquet of her clasped fingers in her lap.

"Abby," he said sternly. "You will explain yourself, daughter."

He sat heavily in the plush leather chair behind his oversized mahogany desk. She really meant to just apologize, but then she had an image of Chisholm's laughing green eyes.

"Father," she began as she rose to stand before him. "I am sorry, but he irritates me. He is so supercilious and arrogant. I did not mean to answer him thus, but my passion got the better of me."

"You must needs control that passion, Abigail," he told her. "I understand the fire that runs through your veins. I had it myself when I was your age. But, you must be respectful of your elders and to your own father who loves you very much and wishes only your happiness."

Abby felt the blow of his heartfelt words more keenly than if it were fifty strokes of his strap.

"I am sorry, Father," she cried as she ran around his desk to fall into his arms.

He embraced her and patted her back.

"It is a turbulent time, Abby," he murmured. "But, we must remember that a person's worth is only as good as her words, her actions and her beliefs."

She sniffed. Her father was so good, and she didn't think she would ever be as good a person as he was. She had too much anger and unrest in her blood. Although their life was very comfortable, and she had never lacked the basic amenities of life, she had seen many who were destitute and made even poorer by the British sanctions. As one whose heart was dedicated to healing, she found her blood boiling with rage whenever she encountered the horror of those unfortunate souls encaged in an unrelenting hardship through no fault of their own.

"Father, although he infuriates me, I must confess, I also find him interesting," she said honestly. "I think I would like to get to know this Thomas Chisholm better."

"I believe that is a wise decision," he said. "Now, you will copy the Psalm of Solomon for your punishment, to be left on my desk tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir," she replied. She hugged him heartily so he would know she was grateful for his leniency.

As his daughter left his study, Jacob Mason thoughtfully pulled at his auburn beard. There was something going on between those two that they weren't aware of yet. A spark of anger, a sudden smile, the blushes of his headstrong daughter. It all added up.

There was something there. He didn't know the whole of it. Perhaps they didn't even recognize the signals yet. But he could tell.

Smiling, he shut his eyes and leaned back in his chair. He invoked the memory of when he had first

laid eyes on his own sweet Annie.

He was twenty-six years old. He was studying medicine at Oxford while his parents, wealthy residents of Boston, stayed at their lavish town home in London, busily intent on his only sister Elizabeth's coming out season. They had decided to let her make her debut in London simply because they gave in to almost everything she wanted, and she wanted to be near her favorite brother Jacob. Elizabeth Mason was a beautiful young woman and soon had half the young London swains eating out of her delicate hands.

Jacob had his own rooms at Oxford and was deeply engrossed in his studies. Still, he had answered the pleas of his spoiled little sister to attend every one of the tedious balls given in her honor that entire ghastly season.

It was the third such event at his parent's elegant home, and he was getting tired of the flirtatious minxes and dull as dishwater debs that frequented such soirees. He had sensed at the earlier affairs that there was an undercurrent of reserve directed toward his family from the stiffer matriarchs and young girls, mainly because they lived mostly in the Massachusetts Colony city of Boston. The English purebreds had to assert their own brand of snobbery to anyone who didn't fit in the perfect mold of their expectations. Jacob was fed up with the imagined and the very real slights his sister was enduring during her coming out season. He had resolved to challenge the very next person who acted less than courteous toward him. As he stepped into the sumptuous ballroom that evening, he was an impressive figure in a dashing frock coat that barely covered his muscular torso. His gleaming red hair was caught back in a small ribbon, and he wore it un-powdered, which was his usual preference. As he smiled at several acquaintances, he was assaulted by a batch of girlish tittering that had the ring of maliciousness to it.

Wheeling about he almost collided with a wee bit of a girl, who appeared to be mimicking him, her blond curls nearly sweeping her waist and her sparkling green eyes laughing devilishly.

"And what, Miss, is so amazingly droll?" he queried dryly, catching her about the waist with his two large hands.

"Excuse me, sir," she said haughtily, trying to draw back. "Kindly unhand me if you know what that means."

"Pardon?" he said quietly.

"If you understand English, I mean," she said snippily. "Proper English, I mean to say."

"I would love to teach you a thing or two about being proper, Miss Golden Locks with the sharp tongue," he snarled. "You seem to be in dire need of a lesson in manners. Perhaps I should seek out your father. He could administer the tanning you need."

"My father would thrash you for even suggesting such a thing," she said in a stiff, indignant voice. "Come girls, we must seek out gentler and more noble company. This one, I think, is a savage." She turned to her cohorts and tried to flounce away, forgetting that she was still in his grasp.

"Not so fast, my pretty one," he said in a dangerously soft voice. "If I am a savage, then I do not understand the common courtesies that one should accord a lady. Not that I think you are indeed a lady."

"Oooh," she stamped her foot. She stamped it again when she noticed that her friends were disappearing, like pretty rats scuttling off a sinking ship.

"What's the matter, not so brave when you are alone," he asked.

"You don't scare me," she rebutted, trying vainly to wiggle out of his iron tight grip.

"You are a feisty little baggage," he said pleasantly. "Too bad you have such a nasty mouth. Your father should have walloped your backside a few times to curb your unladylike rudeness."

"Rudeness!" she shrieked in his face like a fishwife. "You big, uncivilized, Colonial, oaf. Let me go, ruffian!"

Several heads turned toward them as her shrill tones snaked into the room.

"You're embarrassing yourself," he said. "Don't you want to say you're sorry and let me get you some punch?"

"Yes," she agreed too quickly, in a meek voice. "I am sorry. Let us get some refreshments. I am so thirsty."

Her voice broke just a little, and he felt a sudden pang of remorse. She was such a delicate little thing. She barely reached his chest. He let go of her at once.

"Bastard," she hissed, drawing back her foot and kicking him hard in the shins.

"You little hellion," he gasped in pain, hopping on one leg and reaching out to grab her by her sash before she could escape into the crowd.

"Let go of me, you big lummoX," she cried. "Do you know who I am? My father will have your head." She flailed against him and managed to smash him in the nose, which caused stars to dance before his eyes.

"Let me guess," he said calmly, biting his lip. "By your shrewishness, I'd say this is not your first nor even your second season out." He was surprised by the accuracy of his guess when her face screwed up in anger, and she tried to claw him. "I can only assume that no man would have you before. But, I think maybe I will. With the right discipline, you might just make a proper wife. And, I like pepper in a woman."

He found that he was speaking the truth; he was indeed incredibly attracted to the tiny virago who was determined to dodge his grip at any cost, but was failing miserably.

"You can go to hell," she whispered harshly. "I'd sooner take the veil than have you as husband, you big buffoon."

"Hmm," he paused thoughtfully. "I don't think the nunneries are accepting spoiled brats this year, especially such foul-mouthed little wildcat brats."

"Arggh," she tried to kick him again, but he was holding her at arm's length, and she was powerless to reach him.

"Let's get better acquainted," he said, pulling her toward the small salon off to the right where his parents often played whist with their friends. As he had hoped, it was deserted, and he carefully shut the door and turned the key.

His blonde nemesis was speechless during this, but she very quickly found her tongue as he yanked her toward the small sofa.

"Hush," he said sternly. "You are the most infuriating little hellcat I've ever encountered. You kicked me, you maligned me, and you ridiculed me to your friends. I think that deserves retribution of some kind."

"Leave me alone," she cried. "My father is the Earl of Levinshire, and he will not be trifled with."

"Your father is Lord Damien Lester?" Jacob asked curiously.

"Yes, he is, now will you unhand me, sir?"

"Not at all," Jacob laughed. "I know your Uncle Charles. We are at Oxford together."

"You are at Oxford?" she asked in a small voice.

"I am in my final year of Medical school," he informed her. "Now that I know who you are, it will be easier to ask for your hand."

"You don't want my hand," she told him, trying to pull away from him as he settled himself on the sofa. "It is a very bad hand, often involved in wicked doings. You don't want that in a wife."

"Ah, but I do."

With that, he yanked her over his knees and pushed her forward until she was dangling precariously above the floor. Without further ceremony, he flipped up her skirts and brought his hand down hard on the silky white pantaloons. She squealed in outrage and humiliation as he continued

the assault on her delicate little derriere.

"Stop," she cried. "You brute, let me up. Stop this at once. I'll murder you for this."

"I don't think you will," Jacob said as he slowed the tempo of the smacks to one every ten seconds or so. He spanked her hard and relentlessly, enjoying the feel of her squirming bottom under his palm. She was in need of taming, this one.

"Big oaf, country yokel, let me up, you despicable cad," she was weeping angrily.

"Not until you say you're sorry and thank me for your spanking."

"Not likely, bastard pig," she cried. "Pig. Pig. Pig," she chanted in rhythm to his descending hand.

He spanked her hard and furiously without stopping until his hand began to sting. The litany of curses finally dwindled to short, wordless gasps.

Jacob felt the softening in her body when she finally gave up and dissolved into sobs.

"I'm sorry," she choked out. "I'm sorry I was so dreadful. Th..thank you for spanking me. I deserved it."

He stopped immediately and carefully turned her around on his lap.

She winced when her backside settled on his thigh. He gently wiped the tears from her face and shook his head in bemusement. Her face was flushed, and her eyes shone with wetness but there was just the ghost of a smile in the corners of her lips. She was a spirited lass, that was certain.

"I lied. I'm not really sorry," she muttered. "I should have you jailed."

"But, you won't," he said confidently. "You're going to want me around for the wedding."

"Are you always so arrogant?" she asked, tipping back her head to glare at him.

"I think you bring out the best in me."

"I must admit, I should hate you, but surprisingly, I don't," she said honestly. "Maybe I am partial to redheaded country yokels."

"I just know," he said. "I'm going to love the hell

out of you."

"Is it always going to hurt this much?" she asked impishly.

"I'm Jacob Mason," he said, extending his hand.

"I'm Annie Lester," she took his big hand and smiled for real, as she raised it to her lips for an unorthodox kiss. "Charmed, I'm sure."

He was enchanted.

He still was.

But, tonight, the look he gave her over the dinner table was very clear. It told her in no uncertain terms that she was to report to his study just as soon as everything was set to rights for the night.

She knew better than to defy him, and she would be along shortly.

Chapter Four

Down the Garden Path

Abby didn't go straight to her room when she left her father's study. Dinner was over. She heard a murmur of voices in the parlor and peeked in to see Jamie and Mariah engrossed in a match of chess while Judith was stretched out on the sofa, her nose buried in a book.

"So, did you get a licking?" her twin's amused voice was only loud enough for her ears.

Spinning about, she saw him sitting up on the sofa through the open door of her mother's small sewing parlor. She stuck her tongue out at Aaron's knowing smirk.

"No, I did not," she retorted, slipping in to sit in the easy chair beside his makeshift bed. "How are you?"

"Confused," he said dryly. "I'm trying to figure out how I botched a simple assignment that I evidently undertook in my drug induced sleep since I sure as hell don't remember leaving this room."

He looked at her meaningfully, anger sparkling in his dark blue eyes.

"Don't give me that look," she snapped. "I was only helping you out – so your comrades wouldn't think you were a lily livered Mama's boy."

"Those were not my words, Abigail," he hissed. "And now the fellows simply think I'm inept."

"So, tell them it was me and convince them to let me join," she said eagerly.

"Except, I won't attempt to rob anyone again. I hated that." She remembered the feeling of dismay that had washed over her at Bart Tyler's orders. Her parents had instilled a healthy respect for other people's property and safety in all their children, and she couldn't reconcile committing a criminal act with that upbringing.

"So, what did he do to you, sis?"

"Something he never would have done to you,"

she said. "Can you believe the bad luck of him being Mariah's brother? I nearly died."

"My reliable sources tell me you cursed like a banshee, got your mouth washed out by Mother and then returned to insult the good doctor quite profusely and got Father in a fine mettle."

"In a nutshell, yes."

"You always were better at diplomacy than me," he laughed.

She chuckled along with her brother.

"How did you ever escape a whipping?" he asked. "My informants tell me that the vein on Father's neck was bulging, and his hair was standing on end. Sure sign of a trip to the study."

"Trust Sam and Charlie to exaggerate," she laughed.

"I've personally seen his hair stand on end and not been able to sit a horse for a week afterward, so what magic did you pull?"

"It was actually him," she whispered. "I heard them talking on the terrace, and he convinced Papa to be lenient, God bless his arrogant, black soul."

"Is there a trace of liking in your tone, Abby? Has the firebrand been seared by love's own blaze?"

"Oh, shut up, Aaron," she said. "There's no talking to you when you go all poetical on me."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," he quoted, snickering softly.

She glowered at him and flounced out of the room.

Like Thomas Chisholm? Indeed. Her brother must have gone soft in the head from his injuries.

She was on her way upstairs to begin the required copying when she noticed a flash of white outside the open dining room doors.

Sneaking across the room to avoid detection by her mother, who was still helping Emma in the kitchen, she slipped outside.

He was strolling through the gardens, pausing here or there to inspect a rose bush or flower; he seemed completely oblivious. She padded silently

over the slate path behind him, staying in the shadows of the hedges. When she rounded the corner near the small duck pond, he was gone.

Chisholm had disappeared.

She jumped when he took her arm.

"You may as well join me, or I'm likely to think you're playing assassin again, skulking about in the bushes behind me."

"Hell's bells," she exclaimed. "You scared the life out of me."

"You really do have a problem with your language, don't you?" he shook his head sadly, mocking her latest lapse.

"It's the red hair," she confessed, grinning. "My father makes allowances for me because he, too, has the affliction, but my mother has no tolerance at all."

"Actually, I don't mind it," he told her, grinning back. "It suits you."

Abby's heart thudded wildly when he smiled down at her. His eyes twinkled warmly and more than anything, she wanted to snuggle up against his crisp white shirt and feel those large, powerful hands around her body.

She shook herself at the wanton thoughts that were snaking through her mind. She was clearly going crazy.

"I was admiring your garden," he told her, retaining his hold on her arm and leading her down the path toward the water's edge. "The roses are quite beautiful. Who tends it?"

Abby would never tell him that she loved the feel of dirt under her fingers, cultivating and nurturing the plants and herbs she needed for her healing. She had worked miracles in this garden, coaxing blooms where none would grow before, gathering manure herself from the stables to feed the soil and make it richer. Gardening was her refuge, but she would not let this handsome stranger think her a weak, beauty-loving female who dallied in the garden all day.

"Oh, Judith likes to putter about with flowers," she said carelessly. And that much was true, her younger sister loved to decorate the table and her beautiful blond curls with the creamy blossoms.

"I see," he said. Inexplicably, she felt she had somehow disappointed him with her answer.

"Thank you for speaking to my father," she mumbled, embarrassed to find that she was blushing. "It was kind of you, considering... well, you know..."

"Yes, well, if you were mine, I probably wouldn't have been so kind," he stated. "But, since I had already lessoned you once today..."

Abby jerked away from him, planting both hands on her hips as she glared up at him.

"What do you mean if I were yours?" she yelled. "Are you daft enough to suggest you're old enough to be my father?"

He couldn't help chuckling at her outrage. And he couldn't explain the proprietary urge he suddenly felt to scoop her up into his arms and kiss the living daylights out of her.

He gently took her hand again and tucked it in his arm before continuing.

"You are clearly a most undisciplined little baggage," he said smoothly. "And what I meant was that if I were responsible for you, then most likely you would spend much time learning manners - over my knee!"

"Bully," she said, making a face at him in the relative darkness of the garden. "Thank goodness that you are not and never will be responsible for me." But, her stomach was doing flips at the mere notion of lying over his powerful knees, again.

"I saw that, Red, watch yourself." His elbow squeezed her fingers just slightly.

"I merely wanted to say thank you and look how disagreeable you are," she cried. "We are destined to come to loggerheads every time I fear."

"You're welcome," he murmured.

She smiled. Aaron was quite right; she was

completely besotted with this handsome newcomer.

They walked in a companionable silence back toward the house.

"Which Bible verse do you have to copy?" he asked as they stepped toward the terrace.

"A Psalm," she told him. "'Tis easy enough. We have all copied so many verses here, Papa must have two full Bibles scribed by his own children."

"I assume you are an unruly bunch?" he looked down at her, his eyebrow quirked upward as he smiled at her.

Her heart again!

"Suffice it to say we make life interesting for my parents," she conceded. "Surely, you were not always perfect? Shall I quiz Mariah for tales?"

"Sadly, there is remarkably little to tell," he said jokingly. "I am the proverbial bore. Always did my lessons, never got into scrapes."

"Somehow, I doubt that," she replied. "More like you never got caught."

He threw back his head and laughed. The little minx was half right. He never got caught, at first, but the hiding he received when his father finally found him out was always twice as bad as it would have been originally.

"Well, you better get to work on your penance before you are discovered traipsing about in the dark with this English pig."

Even in the dim light, she knew he could see the flush on her face as he threw her hateful words back at her.

"Yes, well, I am sorry about that," she told him. "Thank you again for your kindness. Tomorrow, we can start over. Perhaps, I'll even like you then."

"You like me now," he chuckled, helping her up the stone steps into the dining room.

"Arrogant swine," she hissed, shaking his hand off her arm. "Go to the devil."

"Tsk ts," he said softly. "Temper, temper, Red."

She smirked at him before disappearing noiselessly upstairs.

He shook his head ruefully. To be honest, he was totally delighted by her. She was clearly outlandishly ill-tempered and opinionated, but he found an honest, warm-hearted glow in her impish smile, a world of grace in the beautiful gray depths of her eyes. His fingers itched to hold her, and he longed to discover the riches of her luscious lips in a kiss. It appeared that Thomas Chisholm had indeed found his adventure.

Smiling, he wandered into the parlor to challenge the winner of the chess game.

From her position outside her husband's study, Anne Mason watched her daughter tiptoe up the wide staircase. A moment later, Thomas Chisholm appeared in the hall and stepped into the parlor.

Odd, she thought. But she had no time to puzzle out these strange clues. She was in trouble.

She had delayed long enough. Jacob would be coming to look for her if she didn't go to him now. It was hard to make her legs move.

She softly tapped on the door and waited for his command to enter. When it came, she scooted into the room quickly, pulling the door shut and latching it.

He was writing at his desk. He looked at her with a mixture of anger and sorrow. She hated that expression, and he was so good at it.

"Well?" he asked sternly.

The look she turned on her handsome husband would have melted an iceberg. His heart did skip a beat, but he managed to keep a grim expression on his face.

"Oh, Jacob, don't be a stick in the mud," she exclaimed. "You know as well as I do that Thomas wasn't even remotely insulted by my words."

"Maybe it wasn't him that was insulted," Jacob said. "But rather me. How do you think I feel when it looks like I can't control my own wife or my own daughter?"

"Do you want to control me?" she asked, fire sparking from her green eyes. "Is that what this is about? You controlling me?"

"Anne Elizabeth Mason! You prepare yourself and get to the corner," he ordered. "You know me better than to even suggest such rubbish. But, I will not be shown disrespect."

"Damn, Jacob," she muttered. "This is so unfair. I am protesting this, sir, you are entirely too high handed, and this reeks of oafishness."

"Go!" he said simply, pointing.

She bent over and unlaced her tiny kid boots, muttering curses all the while. When she had pulled off her stockings and laid them in a neat pile on the chair, she reached back and untied the large white pinafore that was protecting her silk gown. She undid the fastenings at the back of her dress and stepped out of the shimmering peach folds of material.

At thirty-nine, she was a beautiful woman, not as tiny as she was at nineteen, but still slender of waist. Her breasts had ripened with each of her eight babies, and now they nearly burst from her linen shift. Mumbling incoherent obscenities, she stomped over to the usual corner where she was ordered to await her husband's chastisements.

"Mistress Mason," he warned. "Keep up the language, and I'll go fetch the soap you used on Abby tonight."

That quieted her.

She stood with her nose to the corner, her thin muslin petticoat rolled up and held above her bare buttocks.

Jacob looked at the straight, proud back and felt his heart swell with love for his wife. She was still a hellcat, but she was also tender and gentle and kinder than anyone he had ever known. Occasionally, she bit off his nose with that spiteful tongue for no reason and then found herself upended over his knee, catching the well-oiled leather of his strap on her rear end until she cried

and pleaded, but to no avail, for she went to bed with a rosy butt on those days.

"Right then, over here, Madame," he ordered, patting his lap.

"Please, Jacob," she entreated as she placed herself over his knees. She massaged his calves with her fingers and kissed the hand that suddenly appeared before her face. Once or twice in the past, she had managed to cajole him out of his determination with such overtures of affection.

"A little late, Annie," he said. He caressed her bottom with his hand for just a moment, loving the silkiness of her skin. It was so cool. It would soon be fiery hot.

He brought his open palm down on her flesh quickly in hard succession. She squealed and whimpered with each blow.

"Damn you, Jacob," she muttered. "Have you no heart?"

"That bought you the strap, Anne," he told her. "It was only going to be a quick little spanking to teach you about respect. Now, you're going to learn about submission to your husband."

"Please, I'm sorry, Jake, my love. Don't."

"Fetch it," he told her implacably. They all had to go and fetch it if he was going to use it.

Anne slipped off his knees and hurried over to the wall near the door where he kept the bloody thing on a hook all its own.

She handed it to her husband and quickly returned to her former position over his lap. She knew from past experience what a stickler he was for immediate obedience.

SWISH! THWAP!

"Ouch," she yelped. He repeated the motion.

THWACK! THWACK!

He was merciless with the leather, and her bottom shook under his ministrations. There were angry red streaks over the rosy glow from the earlier smacks from his hand.

"Please, Jacob, please, my husband, please

stop. I will obey you," she wailed. He ignored her pleas.

He laid twelve stripes across her backside and then abruptly stopped.

Gently, he lifted her, sobbing and limp, from his lap and wrapped his arms around her.

"Go stand in the corner, Annie," he told her. "I love you more than my life, but I will be respected in my own house."

"I'm sorry I was so foul to you," she whispered. "Forgive me?"

"Of course, you're forgiven," he murmured into her hair. "You're the queen of my heart."

Smiling through her tears, she shuffled back to the corner, rubbing her throbbing backside as she walked.

Jacob studied his wife's cherry red bottom while she stood before him. She would never change, he thought, glad that he had been the object of her ridicule so many years before.

Later, as she lay curled up against his broad, strong chest in their big four-poster bed, he drew back his head so he could look in her eyes.

"Do you remember what happened the first night I met you?" he asked.

She blushed and laughed.

"As if I could ever forget. You met your match, and I met mine. You also whaled the tar out of me, if I remember correctly."

"Well, I think that Abby has met her match in Thomas," he said, grinning. "It's just a feeling, but I'm certain I'm right about this."

"Jacob," she gasped. "Do you really think so? I mean, it's well, it's not like they are blood related, but still, it is rather unseemly." The proximity of their arrival in the hall earlier made sense suddenly. The strange antipathy between them that was obvious to everyone and the way they looked at each other when they thought no one was looking. In merely minutes, they had laid bare some hidden desire within each of them. There was a mystery

there, certainly, but she knew that Jacob was right.

"Bah," he said, pulling her into his arms. "Now, let me show you what is really unseemly, Mistress Mason."

With one hand, he stroked her red-hot bottom while the other dove into her sex and massaged her clitoris, dipping often into the moist well of her desire. He bent and suckled her breast, tonguing first one nipple and then the other until she was moaning and digging her nails into his shoulders. She clutched his head to her swollen nipples and squirmed wildly beneath him.

It was always such, their lovemaking after a thrashing was more intense, more moving for both of them.

"Come, you big oaf," she murmured, kissing him and feeling the first reeling of her pleasures.

"I am coming, hellcat," he chuckled.

Chapter Five

Morning's Promise

In the cool early morning just before dawn, Abigail crept into her father's study and laid the sheets of parchment with her carefully copied Bible verses on his desk. Shaking her head ruefully, she lifted the strap that was casually tossed across the shiny mahogany. So, she hadn't imagined the mewling sounds of a female in distress late last night.

Poor Mama. Even though she was a grown woman and a strong partner, Anne Mason was not exempt from her husband's discipline. It just seemed so unfair, Abby thought bitterly, that a wife was subject to such treatment.

Not that it happened often. Her parents were lovers before anything else. All eight Mason children could bear witness to the abiding sense of love and appreciation that was woven into the fabric of their home life by the example of their parents' union. But, Abby hated the idea that it seemed to be a man's right to chastise the one he loved.

She knew in her heart that Thomas Chisholm would be the same toward his wife. She could tell from the steadiness of his sea green eyes and the hint of steel in his smile, but there was also the incredible tenderness in his warm, strong hands. She remembered how delightful it was to have his hand on her arm as they strolled through the garden last night. He was built of the identical stern material as her father, but perhaps with the same kindness, too.

Smiling at the thought of the handsome Englishman, she replaced the strap on its hook near the door and headed toward the kitchen to sneak an apple.

Her fiery hair was caught back in a thick braid that nearly reached her backside, and she wore a pair of Aaron's old trousers and an oversized

cambric shirt that she left open at the neck, the laces dangling down over her breasts. She was riding first and then spending the morning in her herb garden planting the seedlings she had spirited away from Old Ned, the mountain man across the valley who grew the best medicinal plants in the colonies. He was truly a miracle grower, and he had gifted Abby with some of his best plants when she paid him a visit the other day. He owed a debt of gratitude for when she had sewn up his wounded hound some weeks back. Abby liked Old Ned, and she had learned most of what she knew about herbal remedies at his side during her many illicit visits across the valley. Truly, the esoteric knowledge she gleaned from the hermit's taciturn teachings was well worth the many thrashings she had incurred over the years for disobeying her parents' edicts about solitary rides of such distance.

"You're up early, Missy," Emma said tartly as she looked up from setting the long table for breakfast.

"Going for a ride," Abby said, pausing to give the older woman a quick hug. "Save me some flapjacks."

"What makes you think we're having flapjacks?"

"Oh, come now, Emma, handsome visitor, and you're the best flapjack maker this side of the Atlantic Ocean," she laughed. "Must I spell it out?"

"Think you're a clever miss, don't you?" Emma shook a spoon at the young woman she had rocked in her cradle.

Abby poked around the bowl of apples for a nice unblemished piece of fruit and pocketed two before stepping outside.

"How many flapjacks do you want?" Emma called, chuckling.

"Six," Abby said. "And don't let Jamie eat all the bacon."

The world was decked in the white dust of early morning frost, and Abby saw plumes of smoke as she exhaled. But it was going to be a beautiful day.

The first crinkles of sunlight were already dancing over the silvery fields.

"Good Morning, Will," she called happily to the groom who was putting feedbags on the horses. "Rebel ready for a ride?"

"He's always ready for you, Miss Abby," the man said, grinning. "But, you watch where you go this morning, heard tell a regiment of redcoats was on the way up to Albany. Your pa wouldn't want you riding into harm's way. Maybe ye should take young Patrick along."

"I'll be fine, Will," she said firmly. "I'll take the trail west to the old sheep meadow. There won't be any redcoats climbing through the valley, not if they have any smarts at all."

"Now, Miss Abby, you be real careful and don't go overestimat' the enemy." He led the frisky gelding out of the stall and knowing she would demand it, quickly saddled him with one of Aaron's old saddles for his young mistress.

Abby caught the reins and swung herself up onto the powerful chestnut animal. She walked the horse out of the barn and across the stable yard. She could feel the dance in his step before she unleashed the reins and let him canter down the road toward the trail that would take them into a beautiful meadow that overlooked the meandering Kinderhook Creek.

The sun was gently creeping upward, laying a sheen of light like the palest of butter over the checkerboard of colors spread out before her. The valley was aglow with morning, and the smell of fresh dew saturated her senses. It was a day to be grateful for God's bounty. A thrill of wonder and delight shot through her body, and she involuntarily shivered.

She rounded the last corner from the trail and stood still for a moment, breathless with awe. She would never tire of this panorama, the majestic mountains like huge green shoulders in the distance, the velvet unfolding of the valley and blue

ripple of the ribbon of water down below.

Everything was changing now, she thought on a note of mingled excitement and sorrow. Soldiers would forge their way through this indescribable beauty; those same soldiers would lay waste to dreams of peace and tranquility. She hoped they would be strong enough to survive it.

She set off in a gentle trot down the worn path through the meadow.

With the breeze at her back and the aroma of sweet meadow grass filling her nostrils, she let out a cry of delight as she traversed the gentle swell of ground toward the stream.

She loved this land!

She gave Rebel his lead and let him gallop hard to the water's edge. Before she could dismount, she heard a sound that made her heart stop.

The thundering of hooves coming up behind her caused her to rein in and twist about in the saddle to see who was in such an all-fired hurry to catch up to her.

Damn.

Thomas Chisholm was descending upon her in a flurry of hoof beats and frowns.

She lifted one eyebrow and tilted her head back speculatively when he wheeled to a stop directly beside her.

"Going somewhere?" she asked mockingly.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded. "Hasn't anyone informed you that there are soldiers about?"

"As a matter of fact, Will did mention it," she said glibly. "He was just as much a worrywart as you seem to be."

"Worrywart?"

She would have giggled at the black outrage that passed over his expression, making it even darker than it was, but it didn't seem prudent.

"Give over, Master Chisholm," she said pertly. "I am a big girl and can take care of myself."

"Miss Abigail, you may be able to take care of

yourself during normal times, but I doubt even you can take on His Majesty King George's regiments and skip away untouched." He reached out to snatch the reins out of her hands. "Does your father know you ride like an Indian across these fields?"

"How do you know how an Indian rides?" she asked mockingly, trying unsuccessfully to grab the reins back.

"I can imagine," he said dryly. In fact, he had seen a few parties of Indians on his journey from Boston to Kinderhook, and they had actually been riding quite tamely compared to the young hellion before him. He was amused when he noticed her trousers; he had wondered how she was riding so expertly astride. But her attire was the only thing that amused him about Abigail Mason this morning.

"Will you please let go of my horse?" she said.

"No, not until you promise to stay right here by my side," he told her, scowling down at her.

Abby shrugged. She wasn't going anywhere until Rebel had his drink anyway.

"I promise," she said nonchalantly.

He immediately handed her the loops of leather.

"Are you always so grumpy?" she asked, grinning suddenly. "Or is it just with me?"

He shook his head ruefully.

"Tis true you have a special talent for bringing out my ire."

"Humph," she snorted, as she vaulted out of the saddle and led her horse down the gentle slope to the river. "Perhaps you should let Picnic have a drink of water after riding him as hard as you did."

"I intend to," he said haughtily, flushing slightly at her implied criticism. "Picnic?" he almost choked. "This fine piece of horseflesh has the ignominious label of a lunch on the lawn?" He quickly jumped out of the saddle and led the magnificent beast toward the water.

"It was either that or Buttercup," she said. "Hannah named him."

"I see."

"Probably not," she laughed. "But, Papa believes in nurturing his children regardless of their silly ideas."

"Ideas like rebellion?" he asked meaningfully.

"It's not rebellion! It's independence," she retorted. "And, we're talking about my little sister now, and her name for that stallion you're riding."

"And what about the name of your own horse?" he chuckled.

"That's the whole point," she insisted. "It's my choice. Perhaps, I like the name Rebel, doesn't mean I am one. I simply believe in free will."

Shaking his head, he smiled at her.

"Of course, you're a rebel. Fire-haired criminal that you are."

"Old, stodgy doctor," she countered.

"Not that old," he said.

"That stodgy?" she queried, laughing at him.

His green eyes glinted in the sunlight, and he smiled back, completely unraveling her world. She inhaled sharply and would have stepped back, but her legs were frozen.

Spurred to action by her irreverent mockery, he captured her face in his hands and drew her closer. Neither one of them was prepared for the mesmerizing current that linked them inexplicably and spun the world around them into chaos.

His mouth descended on hers greedily, lapping the soft curves of her lips while his tongue darted possessively over her own. She sighed happily as he wrapped his arms around her, his masterful hands caressing her back and buttocks as he pressed her hard against his powerful thighs.

"Abby," he groaned. "You are a wonder to me."

Her heart was flip-flopping, and she knew deep in her soul that they were meant for each other. She didn't understand it, but she needed this man, and she wasn't ready to tell him that yet.

"You're a stranger," she told him. "I can't do this."

"I don't know you," he murmured into her neck.

"But, I love you, and I think I've always known you."

"Contradicting yourself," she whispered, digging her fingers into his rich chestnut curls. "You can't abide me, how can you think to love me?"

"I can and will abide you," he insisted imperiously. "You're going to marry me."

She pulled away from him and glared at him.

"You can't be serious," she cried. "Bloody hell, we only met yesterday!"

"Watch it, Red," he chided, lifting one arrogant eyebrow. "You will marry me because you recognize it too. This magic between us."

"Ah," she exclaimed. "The magic. Is that what we're calling it now?" She glanced down at the very evident swell in his trousers.

"Abigail, do not act common. It isn't like you."

"Yes, well," she said in a quieter tone. "It is like me. I am quite common while you; you're a bloody, English lord. And, you're a damn fool to imagine I'd ever marry a smug, Tory, snob like you." She spun out of his grasp and whistled through her teeth.

Rebel veered about and cantered immediately to her side, effectively dividing her from Thomas and his affections.

She leapt onto her horse's back and kicked her heels into his sides, galloping away from Thomas Chisholm, who stood in a state of incredulity, his mouth slightly ajar as she rode off. It didn't take long for a resolute anger to settle on his brow and a determined gleam to appear in his eyes.

He whistled for Picnic and quickly jumped into the saddle. He didn't hope to overtake the redheaded beauty riding like a wild wind toward the house on the hill, but he did have a score to settle, and he would catch her eventually.

Humming grimly, he set off for Hilltop Manor and Miss Abigail Mason, who was going to be very sorry that she broke her promise this fine morning.

Chapter Six

Kiss & Tell

Abby rode hard into the stable yard, a foam of sweat flying from her horse's back as she yanked up hard on the reins and leapt from the saddle. She all but thrust the reins into Will's hands.

"Can you please comb him down, Will," she entreated. "I really have to hurry and just don't have the time."

She was afraid to turn around to see if Chisholm had finally overtaken her. All the way home, she had heard the pounding of his horse's hooves as he followed her from the streambed. His words of passion echoing in her ears madly. What craziness was this?

"Sure, Miss Abby," the groom answered good-naturedly. "Did your cousin's brother find you okay?"

"Oh, yes," she called back, skipping toward the house. "He found me just fine."

She disappeared around the corner of the barn and scooted through the gardens towards the house.

The family was in the middle of breakfast when she slipped into the dining room from the kitchen.

"Abigail," her father bellowed. "You're late, girl, what have you to say for yourself?"

"The meadow was green and the sky blue, father," she said peacefully.

"You were out riding this morn?" Anne Mason looked at her daughter askance, the forkful of food halted midway between her mouth and plate.

"Yes, mother, I was, and it was a truly bountiful morning."

"Thomas went riding," Mariah offered.

"I sent him after you," Jacob said to Abby.

"You knew she was riding?" Now Anne was looking at Jacob, her eyes narrowed into slits.

"Yes, wife, I knew she was riding," Jacob said

pleasantly. "It is ever our daughter's custom to go riding each morn, though verily, she does try to be back afore breakfast."

"I'm sorry, father," Abby apologized. "'Twas just more difficult this morn."

Jacob Mason chuckled dryly.

"Sit and eat, Abigail," he replied. "We'll say no more about your tardiness."

Anne Mason pushed herself back from the table and stood abruptly.

"Say no more, indeed," she sputtered. "Abby, I vow I will flay the skin off your backside myself if ever you ride into the face of such danger again. I didn't go through sixteen hours of hell on earth to birth you only to lose you to your own foolishness."

Anne stormed into the kitchen.

Abby bit her lip in consternation at her mother's obvious distress.

"It appears you owe your mother an apology, Miss Abigail," Thomas Chisholm's silky voice startled them all, and everyone turned to see him lounging against the open doorway to the garden.

"Is Abby in trouble?" Hannah squealed, clapping her hands together, oblivious to the buttered bread in them.

"Hush," whispered Judith, wiping her little sister's hands with a napkin.

Jacob Mason stood up, pushing his chair back as he looked toward the kitchen, a worried frown across his brow.

"No, Father," Abby said. "I'll go. 'Tis me she's upset with, anyway." She ignored Thomas as she back traced her steps to the kitchen in search of her mother.

Anne Mason was in the garden, furiously weeding the vegetable patch.

"Mother?"

"Go away," Anne barked.

"Mother, I'm sorry," Abby said. "I didn't think there was any danger. I would never have gone riding if I thought it was dangerous."

"You love danger, don't deny it," Anne said in a low voice.

"What danger?" Abby scoffed. "Some British soldiers riding north? That hardly constitutes a worry let alone a danger."

"Abigail, heed me well," her mother said in a fierce voice. "I will not have you riding about the countryside when there are soldiers afoot. I care not if they are British or militia, do you understand me?" Anne shook a trowel at her, forcefully punctuating her concern.

"Yes," answered a chastened Abigail. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"You weren't thinking," her mother said. "As I said before, Abby, you love danger."

"Maybe I do," Abby admitted. "But, I would never put myself in harm's path, Mama. I am not that stupid."

"Abigail, promise me that you will listen to your father and me regarding what you may and may not do in these troubled times." Anne reached out a hand toward her daughter, imploringly.

Abby grabbed Anne's hand and tumbled into her embrace, content to rest her cheek against her mama's shoulder.

"I do promise, Mother, I do," she whispered.

"And what goes on with the young and handsome Thomas Chisholm, my dear one?" asked Anne, as she continued weeding.

"Nothing," Abby murmured, coloring deeply. "Indeed, I know not what you speak of, Mama."

"Indeed?"

"No," Abby said vehemently. "But, Mother, you have just succeeded in weeding the vegetable garden of most of its vegetables. Those are turnips and carrots you have pulled out of their nesting space."

"Damn me," Anne muttered. "Go eat your breakfast, dear."

"Yes, Mother," Abby said dutifully, trying hard not to laugh.

"Don't tell your father about my nonsensical work here, daughter. 'Tis well I hate carrots and turnips. And trust me, we will speak again about Master Chisholm." She shook her head, and her blond braid slapped against her waist.

Abby grimaced at her mother's determined tone and disappeared quickly back inside.

But, she was smiling when she returned to the dining room, secure in her parent's good graces once again.

Thomas Chisholm was seated at the table, a plate heaped high with flapjacks in front of him and a clearly flustered Emma hovering behind his chair with a steaming pot of coffee.

"I'll have some of that, Emmy," Abigail said as she slipped into her chair. "It smells divine, I might add."

Emma beamed at her and quickly hastened to her side of the table, filling her mug with the fragrant brew.

"Your flapjacks and bacon are setting in the kitchen, I'll bring them right out to you, dearie," she whispered in Abby's ear. "My word, it's a good thing I saved you out some, seeing how the doctor has such a fine appetite this morning."

"Yes, isn't it," Abby said dryly.

"I missed you on the ride back, Abigail," Thomas said pleasantly as he bit into a forkful of velvety sweet hotcakes. "I seem to recall a promise...made by a certain red-headed miss..." his voice trailed off meaningfully as he smiled dangerously across the table.

"Promises in the morning are sweet as the dew but just as fleeting," Abby said cryptically. "Rebel needed to gallop, and I had to give him his lead and how did you find Picnic?"

"Magnificent, but he just couldn't manage to catch up after that unfair head start you took."

"You were racing, Abigail?" her father asked disapprovingly. "How many times have I told you children not to race the horses up the valley, what

good is a lame horse, I ask you?"

"We were not racing, Father," Abby answered indignantly. "I was merely trying to get home in time for breakfast."

"Ahh," Jacob Mason smiled understandingly. "I see."

"Really, Abby, if you must race, at least do it properly so we can make wagers on it," Jamie said, laughing.

Abby glared at her brother.

"Must you ever act the hoyden, Abby?" sniffed Judith. "Wearing trousers like a boy."

"Now then, that's enough of that talk," her father said sharply. "You children finish up your breakfast and get to the schoolroom. Lessons will start in ten minutes. And, I don't want to hear a bad report from your tutor this day."

Thomas understood now why all the Mason children were still at home. Evidently, they underwent home schooling under the guidance of a tutor.

"When can we go to the village school, Papa?" cried Hannah. "I want to go and show off my pretty new ribbons, when can we go?"

"Master Curtis is doing a fine job educating your mind and expanding your horizons, child," Jacob said gently. "I see no reason for you to go and accept a mediocre education in exchange for a few baubles of friendship which will come to you at any rate."

"I just want to show my new ribbons," wailed Hannah, absolutely confused by her father's words.

"And show them you will," Jacob declared jovially. "At the very next grange hall dance, you will show your pretty colored ribbons and wear your finest dress while you dance the first reel with me," he said tenderly as he steered his youngest toward the door and the schoolroom.

"As long as Mary Ann Larkin is there to see my ribbons," Hannah grumbled. "She is not a nice girl and I am so tired of her infernal high and mighty

airs, I want to slap her."

Abby choked on a laugh as she swallowed a sip of coffee.

Jacob frowned at his older daughter before gently reproving his youngest.

"Hannah, we cannot go around slapping people just because they annoy us," he said. "Now attend Master Curtis."

"Yes, sir." Hannah smiled as she scooted through the hall toward the large, sunny room where all the Mason children learned their lessons.

Mariah was loitering about the table, munching on a sweet roll as she lingered by her brother's side.

"Don't you have lessons, Riah?" asked Thomas, pointedly glancing toward the door.

"I thought... well, actually, I assumed you'd want to spend some time with me today, Thomas," his sister stammered.

"Attend to your schoolwork now, Mariah," Thomas told her. "We'll have plenty of time this afternoon."

Mariah's mouth dropped open at his offhand tone. She had thought he would excuse her from lessons at least for today. What good was having a handsome brother if he didn't rescue her from the interminable boredom of lessons?

"Fine," she snapped. "I don't need to spend any time with an oaf like you." She flounced toward the hallway, piqued at his apparent indifference.

"Mariah!" Thomas bellowed, causing the girl to falter midway to the door.

"What is it?" she demanded, not bothering to turn around.

"You will show some respect if you know what's good for you," he warned. "Come back here!"

Mariah reluctantly turned and faced her older brother.

"Honestly, Thomas, it's fine that you come here, across an ocean during a war to retrieve me like some piece of baggage and then to completely ignore me as though I were really an inanimate

object. Honestly, it's all I expect of you," she said bitterly. "Do you want me to pack myself into a trunk to make it just a little easier for you, Thomas? So you won't have to see or hear me?"

Damn, she was good, thought Abby, looking up from her coffee.

Thomas smiled ruefully and crooked his finger at his little sister.

"Now," he commanded. "And enough with the histrionics, Miss."

Mariah dragged her feet over to stand in front of the frowning man. She seemed oblivious to the interested stares of those family members still seated at the table, namely Abigail and her father and Emma, who suddenly seemed intrigued with the large bowl of fruit in the center of the table.

"What?" Mariah asked sullenly, not bothering to erase the pout from her lips.

"Have a care with your tone, sister," he said icily. "I do not wish to start any day in such a manner with you. Therefore, amend your attitude and treat me with just a trifle more respect. 'Tis true I came to fetch you, but merely out of love and respect for both you and your parents. I would sooner lose a body part than to see you in danger, Mariah, and would that you understood that."

"And if I do?" came the surly reply.

"Then maybe a kinder demeanor would be appropriate, Riah, and better obedience, in truth, to those who love you."

"Hmmpf," Mariah snorted. "I apologize for being rude. But that is all, I will not apologize for my feelings, and you cannot make me. I have to go. I don't want to be late for my tutor."

The young girl swept from the room without another word, and Abby almost felt sorry for the handsome English gentleman. His face looked crestfallen for just a moment, and she felt rather than saw his pain and remorse.

This was an interesting and strange man. A man who felt the pangs of a young girl's angry hurt. Yet,

he was also a man who would not tolerate disrespect.

"That is quite a crime," Abby said solemnly. "Being late for Master Curtis is to be avoided at all costs. I know, for I was once in her stead and often late."

"What does he do?" Thomas asked curiously.

"Oh, he scolds dreadfully," Abby retorted. "'Tis enough to make you want to go deaf."

Thomas shook his head, chuckling.

"You are a scalawag, I fear," he said, looking at Jacob Mason for help.

"Yes, that's true, she is," Jacob said.

"While all these compliments are sweet to hear, I'm afraid I must leave you to your ruminations as I have work to do. Good day." Abby stood, holding her napkin in one hand as she layered her mug on her plate and scooped up the basket of rolls on her way to the kitchen.

"Remember, we've still a score to settle, Abby," Thomas called after her.

She ran up the back stairs to her room so that she could change into one of her old dresses. Her parents didn't mind her wearing her brother's trousers for her ride, but neither one of them liked her wearing them as a rule.

She tried to ignore the fluttering of her stomach when she recollected Thomas's words as she snatched her apron from the peg by the back door.

A score to settle, indeed.

She would do her gardening and do her best to forget all about Thomas Chisholm.

The morning sun was hot and delicious on her head, and she basked happily for a while before the May heat rose from the ground and caused her braid to unravel and small beads of perspiration to form on her forehead.

She was engrossed in her planting before long, carefully implanting the seedlings from Old Ned in the patch of turned soil she had prepared. The idea of having these healing herbs at her very fingertips

was completely delightful to her, and she was humming as she dug into the dirt.

"Won't Judith be angry with you for interfering with her gardens?" asked Thomas sarcastically from somewhere behind her.

She didn't look up from the new bed she was patting maternally.

"I never said Judith was a gardener," she said flatly. "I simply said she liked to fuss about the flowers, and that much is true."

"You have a habit for sculpting the truth as you see fit. What's that you've planted?" he asked curiously, bending over her shoulder. "It looks like a berry shrub."

"It is," she told him. "A friend from across the valley gave me the seedlings for several of the best medicinal plants I've ever used. This berry will cure stomach cramps if taken with the right solution of hot water and honey."

He crouched beside her, excitement in his voice as he gingerly touched the leaves of the plant.

"This is just what I want to learn," he said reverently. "I want the folk remedies that people believe in, that cure their ailments for some inexplicable reason. The real herbals that are growing right below our noses."

"I keep forgetting you're a doctor," Abby murmured.

"Why is that?" he queried. "Are you so determined to hate me, simply because of my circumstances?"

"Not at all," she said loftily. "I don't waste my time hating anybody, only injustice."

"Well, I hate lying," he said sternly.

Abby leaned back on her heels and tilted her head back to look into his face.

"What does that mean?" she asked huskily, her heart flipping awfully against her ribcage as she gazed at his foreboding expression.

"It means I'm angry that you lied to me this morning," he stated. "You promised to stay with

me, and then you bolted off like one of the Furies toward God knows what haven."

"So, you're angry," she shrugged. "I'm not concerned with your anger, Thomas. It means nothing to me," she lied, trying to keep her hands steady as she reached for the next plant.

"It should mean something," he whispered, catching her dirty fingers in his own hand. "I think it does mean something. I think you are just as aware of this thing between us as I am. I am drawn to you, Abby, and I know not why."

"Well, thank you very much, Dr. Chisholm," she hissed, jerking her hand from his loose grip. "Perhaps, you should get your head examined for this mysterious delirium. I know I think you are quite deranged."

She pushed against him and felt a sweet satisfaction when he sprawled back into the dirt on his backside.

"Abby," he warned. "Don't dare run from me again, or I swear I will hunt you down and thrash you myself with my own hand."

"You've already done that. Now, listen here, Chisholm," she spat. "I will not be taken as some charity case for your emotions. If you have honest intentions, speak them but bore me not with this arrogant drivel that makes me want to tear your hair out."

"Tear my hair out!" he ground through gritted teeth. "In case you haven't noticed, I find my hands itching to paddle that backside of yours into rosy oblivion, you red-haired hellion."

"Pshaw," she snorted, dismissing his passionate tirade. "You're just a big bully, and I warn you, I'll fight you to hell and back. Telling me you want to marry me as though I'd be pleased as punch by your noble intentions. Fah!"

"Fine," he snapped. "As long as we understand each other. Now, I'm going to kiss you, so prepare your ill-tempered mouth for my touch."

"Ooooooh," she growled. "Go to hell, you

damned, Tory bastard."

He grabbed her before she could turn on her heel and stalk off. She was surprised when he slapped her backside hard twice before enfolding her in his strong arms.

"You are determined to feel my hand on your bottom, aren't you?" he murmured as he nuzzled her neck.

She was furious at herself for the weakness in her legs as he stroked her hair and pulled her closer.

"Give over, Abigail," he whispered. "You know you're going to be mine."

And then his mouth descended on her lips, claiming her in a kiss that felt more like a branding. She was completely powerless to fight back as his tongue plundered her mouth, twinning her own tongue in a deep seductive motion. Her thighs were quivering and her groin trembling with desire when he finally pulled back and gazed down at her lazily.

"That wasn't so bad, was it," he quested gently, caressing her cheek softly with his finger.

She didn't take time to think. She simply drew back slightly and rammed her knee into his crotch with all of the anger and despair she was feeling.

"I am a person, damn you," she whispered as she turned about and left him, open mouthed and gasping for air.

At the door that led into the kitchen, she paused and faced him.

"And, by the way, I'm looking for more than not so bad, thank you anyway."

He wasn't able to speak, but the look he gave her spoke volumes. She gasped and hurried inside. She had an appointment to keep this morning and didn't need any distractions.

Chapter Seven

Sisters in Revolt

Abby scurried through the kitchen, heading toward her mother's parlor where Aaron was still reclining on the daybed.

"Wake up, lazybones," she called, tossing a pillow toward her brother's head.

Aaron snatched the pillow in midair and tossed it back at his twin.

"Lazybones," he grumbled. "Bite your tongue, sister, I am merely indisposed at the moment."

"My sources tell me that Bart Tyler knows it was me and not you who failed so miserably at your last assignment," she said.

"Your source is going to get his tail kicked when I am free of this infernal bed," Aaron snapped. "Jamie has a bigger mouth than brain."

"I have decided that I'm going to speak to Bart," Abby told him. "Surely, he will understand that I am committed to the cause, now."

"Abby," Aaron protested, sitting up against the cushions. "Don't do that. Bart can be a rough fellow. He won't thank you for sticking your nose into his affairs."

"Oh, a blight on that, Aaron Mason," she exclaimed. "I don't give a fig for his thanks. I am as much a patriot as that lackwit Emmett Homer, whom Bart seems to respect so readily."

"Abigail, do not speak to Bart Tyler," Aaron said, his face turning red with both frustration at his hapless situation and his twin's stubbornness. "The man can be a self-serving bully, not intentionally mind you, but he worries not about the niceties of life when it comes to the cause. He may be the leader of the resistance, but he is also a man without a woman, with children in need of a woman's care. He is rough and cares not about fine words or good intentions." The knowledge that Bart

Tyler also fancied his sister as an eligible mama prospect caused him to speak more sharply than he intended.

"You're lying," Abby spat out, turning on her heel. "You simply cannot bear the fact that I am actually able to do that which you want to do."

"Abby, I forbid you to go!"

Groaning, Aaron sank back down on the daybed. Wrong choice of words.

"You?" Abby laughed scornfully. "You think to forbid me to do anything? I would remind you, Master Aaron, I am the elder, and it is I who forbid you to meddle in my affairs."

"Ab, please," Aaron pleaded. "I didn't mean to say that, but you have to understand, Tyler isn't playing a game here. This can be dangerous."

"Hmmmph!"

"Abigail Mason, you don't know what you're doing," Aaron yelled. "You never stop to think!"

But, Abby closed her ears to her brother's voice. 'Twas not fair that he have all the adventures.

"Have a good and restful day, Aaron," she called back airily as she scooted out the front door. She needed to put some distance between herself and Thomas Chisholm since she had a feeling he was still wroth with her over her minor physical assault of him in the garden.

Thinking of Thomas made her seethe. His manner of wooing her was so condescending. As though she should be grateful for the boon of his favors. His kiss had been as unyielding as it was demanding, and in truth, she wasn't ready for such a powerful emotion.

In one day, her world had turned upside down.

He was so arrogant.

And, he was so handsome. The image of his large hands, tanned from the months spent on deck during the voyage from England, flashed across her mind. She could tell a lot about a person from their hands. Thomas had hands like her father; they were strong and capable, gentle and caring, yet she had

already felt the steel of their harshness.

Her heart melted a little as she remembered the caress of those hands as he cradled her face before the kiss in the garden. A chill fluttered across her belly, and she suddenly realized the subject of her reverie was standing beside the garden wall, arms folded, watching her as she crossed the yard toward the stables. His fawn colored breeches were snug on thighs that looked powerful even across the yard, and his knee high leather boots shone richly in the sunlight; he wore only his shirtsleeves, his cravat and waistcoat discarded somewhere between the garden and the gate. Abby's felt a kernel of longing that was lodged deep in her chest when she saw again his handsome face. She actually felt sick with the aching emotion.

She quickened her step.

His eyes followed her silently, his mouth tight with grim displeasure. Involuntarily, she reached back as though to guard her backside from his narrowed gaze. The corner of his lips lifted in a brief smirk.

Glaring at him, she hurried into the barn and whistled a warning to Rebel.

Will ambled over, her saddle hooked on his shoulder.

"If you're fixin' to catch up with your cousin, Miss Abby, you have a mite bit of riding ahead of you. That one was riding hell-bent for sunny skies when she left here."

"What do you mean?" Abby glanced over and noticed that Sweetpea's stall was empty. When she rode, Mariah always chose the sorrel mare Hannah had dubbed Sweetpea because of her gentle nature.

"Miss Mariah," Will said. "She kicked some dust up when she rode out, I'll tell you that much."

"When did she leave, Will?"

"Bout half an hour ago," the groom told her. "I figured her lessons was over for the day, looked like she was carrying a picnic lunch."

"Which direction did she go?" asked Abby.

"Toward town, I reckon," he scratched his head. "Leastways, that's where she was heading when she rode out of the yard." He helped her cinch the saddle.

"Thanks, Will," Abby deftly leapt onto Rebel's back and gathered the reins as she cantered out of the barn toward the road. She thought she heard a shout as she turned her horse toward town, but she didn't glance back.

Her mother was not going to be happy with her. Since she was no longer studying with Master Curtis, she was supposed to spend a portion of each day with her mother, learning and perfecting household duties. According to the slate in the kitchen where Annie Mason left the days instructions, today was sewing day, and there was a full basket of darning to be addressed.

Abby hated sewing. She much preferred to be outside with the sun on her head and the soft clumps of dirt that spun out from Rebel's hooves as they skimmed over the road in the late May morning. She lifted her face to the delicious warmth of sunlight and tried not to think about her mother's impending anger.

Annie Mason would not be the only one irritated with her unannounced excursion.

Her father also expected her to spend a portion of each day studying a chapter in the huge Anatomy book in his study. Jacob Mason wanted his daughter to be as well educated as any man, and her propensity toward healing convinced him that some way, some how, she would eventually study medicine. He wanted her to be well prepared for that day. Aaron was happier working the farm, and when he was ready to settle down, Jacob had some property he intended to bestow as a gift to his oldest son.

Jacob would not be pleased with her flighty behavior today.

But, she really did need to find Mariah. After all, there were soldiers about the roads north of

Kinderhook.

Riding as fast as Rebel would go, it wasn't long before she reached the white clapboard buildings on the outskirts of town. She slowed down, searching the lanes and meadows for Sweetpea's butterscotch coat. The road ambled past the blacksmith shop, and Abby noticed a familiar dark head out of the corner of her eye. She tugged on the reins and gently nudged Rebel's flanks toward the barn.

Bartholomew Tyler glanced up as she trotted over to where he was conferring with Michael Powers, the smithy. He hurriedly rolled up the sheaf of papers they were examining and tucked the thick roll into his knapsack. He slapped Powers on the back, laughing at something the other man was saying. The blacksmith disappeared into the building, and Tyler approached Abby.

His dark hair gleamed like a crow's wing, pulled back in a long ponytail that was so black it was almost purple. Abby was also reminded of a bird of prey when she saw his fierce, aquiline features. There was a sharpness about him that was almost a form of beauty, but Aaron was correct about one thing—he was a harsh man.

"Mistress Abigail," Bart Tyler called out. "It's a fine day for riding is it not?"

"Indeed, Mr. Tyler," she replied politely. "I wonder if you've seen my cousin riding by today?"

"That would be Miss Mariah Chisholm?" Bart asked. "The pretty blond girl from that land steeped in tyranny—England?"

"The very same," Abby said dryly.

"I believe I saw her heading out toward Iron Lake," he told her. "She seemed to be in a hurry."

"What do you hear of the redcoats that passed near here this morn?" she asked in a low voice.

He lifted his eyebrows.

"Redcoats?" he murmured. "Shouldn't you be in your nursery, playing with dolls, Miss Abigail, not concerning yourself with such things?"

Abby frowned, unable to stop the rude noise

that burst from her lips.

"I assure you, Mr. Tyler, I do not play with dolls, and when I did, they were always tin soldiers."

Bart Tyler narrowed his eyes at the girl on horseback. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

"I apologize, Miss Abby, perhaps I was thinking of your younger sister."

"Yes," she agreed. "I think perhaps you were."

"Speaking of cousins," he continued. "I understand you have a British doctor staying in your home?" There was an accusation in his voice.

Abby lifted one delicately arched eyebrow. How dare he use that censorious tone with her?

"That is correct, Mr. Tyler," she said haughtily. "Mariah's brother arrived yesterday to accompany her when she returns to England."

"So the pretty blond miss is running home? Just so her brother stays clear of the bloody British regiments," Tyler snarled. "We don't need any unwanted attention on our sleepy little village. If you catch my meaning, Abby?" he said familiarly.

When she didn't answer, he reached out and squeezed her wrist. "Or should I say Aaron?"

Her face flushed under his mocking scrutiny. She gave him a withering look and glanced down at his long fingers, which gripped her skin painfully.

"Release my arm, sir," she said disdainfully. "Just see to your own and leave my family alone."

When he let go, she made a point of wiping her wrist clean with the hem of her apron. He couldn't mistake the contempt of her action.

"Quite the fussy miss," he said scornfully. "Are you ashamed of honest American ideals?"

"Manhandling women is one of your ideals?" she scoffed. "You shame common decency, Mr. Tyler." She wrinkled her nose, as he loomed closer to glare at her.

"I think what you need, Mistress Abigail, is a good hiding. It's time a husband took you in hand. Perhaps, I should visit your father the doctor. He

will probably be quite happy to marry you off to me, and my younguns do need a Ma." He grinned at her discomfiture.

"Heaven forefend," she gasped before she could help herself.

He laughed evilly.

"Heaven has nothing to do with marriage, little girl," he said.

Miranda Tyler had died from complications while giving birth to twin boys several years earlier. In truth, the little raven-haired boys looked like angels, but they were rambunctious imps who ran wild on their father's farm.

"I think you need a different bride," she said flatly. "We would never suit, and I will only marry him who pleases me."

He shrugged, rolling his eyes at her speech.

He was an extremely handsome man, Abby thought, if you liked the dark, Machiavellian and ominous type. She didn't.

"Now that you have threatened me, assaulted me and belittled my patriotism, I think I'll be on my way, Mr. Tyler," she said caustically.

With exaggerated gallantry, he swept her a deep bow and winked at her.

"Good day, Mistress Abby," he murmured. "Do your duty and keep the visitor occupied."

"Maybe I'll just marry him," she replied flippantly. "It seems I need a husband."

Shaking his head wryly, Bart Tyler clapped his calloused hands together and rubbed them back and forth, leaving her with no doubt about how he'd love to deal with her.

Men! She galloped out of the smith yard and set off toward Iron Lake. First, she had to contend with Thomas Chisholm's arrogant declarations of desire, then Aaron's clumsy orders and now Bartholomew Tyler's thinly veiled threats to spank her.

Mariah had better not give her any trouble, or there was going to be hell to pay.

The deep blue of the glacier lake glimmered in

the distance, and Abby felt herself relax. She could never stay mad when she was riding to the lake. The cool depths of the waters stretched across a mile of valley, to the distant foothills of the Green Sage Hills. It was a beautiful spot, and the Masons and other townsfolk often picnicked on the grassy shores. Around the bend, there was a small, sandy beach where a hearty lad or a certain brave red-haired lass might venture into the frigid waters on the hottest summer day. There was no question about swimming today; the sun was warm but the air still cool.

Sweetpea was grazing along the water's edge.

Mariah was lying on her back, studying the clouds, oblivious to the approaching rider.

"Riah," Abby hailed her cousin.

The younger girl propped herself up on her elbow and waited for Abigail to tether her horse.

"I'm playing hooky," she confessed when Abby plopped down in the grass beside her.

"I gathered," said Abby. "Only Will knows that you've gone. Maybe you can get back before Curtis tells."

"Doubtful."

"That's true," Abby said honestly. "He generally tells at the soonest possible moment. I would assume everyone's knowledge by the noon meal."

"Thomas will kill me," Mariah said dully.

"Does he make a habit of killing you?"

"You can't possibly know, Abby," Mariah said forlornly. "I have two older brothers who never ever give me an inch. Thomas is dreadfully strict, and since he is acting in Papa's stead, he will certainly give me an awful thrashing."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because I will not let him treat me like I am his duty," she cried. "He could have spent some time with me today, we haven't seen each other for months and months, and he is so mean."

"Mariah," Abby began, "I think you have to face the fact that he will always see you as his duty. But,

I am sure it's a duty he embraces with all his heart. It's very clear to see that he loves you very much."

Mariah sniffed.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course, I know so," Abby smiled. "I understand brothers, Riah, and I can tell that yours is completely devoted to you."

Try as she might, Mariah couldn't stop the big grin from spreading across her face.

"He is rather the best brother ever," she admitted. "I've behaved stupidly. But, I do have food. Care for some apples, cheese and buttered bread?"

"Any cookies?"

"Several."

"Let's eat," laughed Abby.

The two girls spread the embroidered cloth over a soft table of grass and set out the contents of the basket. Mariah had even thought to bring a flask of sweet red wine. They took turns passing the silver container back and forth.

The afternoon lazed by as they ate their fill of thick, crusty bread, smeared liberally with Emma's sweet creamy butter. They broke off pieces from the hunk of sharp cheddar cheese and sliced sections of apples with Abby's pocketknife.

The sun and wine created a sweet lethargy, and they both giggled happily as they shared tales of childhoods spent an ocean apart.

"I wish you were my sister, Abby," Mariah exclaimed. "'Tis ever so lovely to have someone to talk to."

"I enjoy your company also," Abby said. "I'm afraid Judith has never liked me much as a sister, and Lizzie is married and gone. I miss having a friend at home."

The sun was dipping low across the blue sky when they heard the rumble of approaching horses.

"The soldiers," Abby whispered, clapping her hand to her mouth. "We have to hide."

"British soldiers?" asked Mariah.

"I think so," Abby nodded.

They gathered the picnic items and hastily stuffed everything back in the basket. Abby surveyed their surroundings; there was no place to hide. The road that stretched beside the lake ended in the sandy cove just ahead. Over the ridge of the dirt road, there was a shady copse of crabapple trees, and she grabbed Mariah's hand and led her into the leafy bower.

"Climb up," she directed as they stopped beneath a huge, sprawling tree.

"But," Mariah protested. "I can't, I..."

"Climb," Abby insisted. "I'll give you a boost."

She pushed, prodded and prayed her cousin up into the haven of branches and then tucked her skirts up and shimmied up the bark to a lofty perch, the picnic basket slung over her shoulder.

It was only two horses, not an army.

Jamie rode Lancelot, the black gelding while Thomas was again astride Picnic.

Mariah gasped, and Abby reached out and placed her hand over her mouth.

"Shhh," she put her finger before her lips soundlessly.

"The horses are over there," Jamie was pointing toward the lake.

"Damn," Abby hissed.

"Those two girls are in a heap of trouble," Jamie remarked over his shoulder as he set off to attend to their mounts.

"Yes, indeed, a heap of trouble," Thomas said in a voice that sent chills up Abby's spine.

He was directly beneath them, glancing left and right for any telltale signs.

Mariah reached out and clutched Abby's arm, her eyes wide with fear and suppressed laughter.

"Don't!" Abby mouthed silently. But, the other girl was rocking on the tree limb, teetering precariously as she tried to maintain her balance. Finally, she was able to steady herself but not before hopelessly unseating Abby, who dropped the

basket while grabbing frantically at the leafy boughs. Mariah shrieked as both the basket and redhead went tumbling down through the branches; the basket glanced off his head but Abby landed unceremoniously across Thomas Chisholm's lap.

"What the devil!"

Then the two of them went flying off of Picnic as the steed wheeled about in panic at the sudden weight of a flying girl on his back.

Fortunately for Abby, she landed second, straddling Thomas' stomach, as he lay flat in the dirt.

"You seem determined to unman me, today," he remarked dryly, wincing as she shifted her bottom over his groin area.

"What?" Abby frowned at him and when the implication of her landing position dawned, she blushed furiously. "Unfortunately, you were in the wrong place at the worst possible moment, Dr. Chisholm. I don't usually throw myself at men in such a fashion, however, your sister chose a most inopportune moment to have a fit of the giggles."

"Mariah is up that tree?" his incredulous voice matched the look of confounded surprise on his face. "She hates climbing trees."

"Yes, well, she didn't like it much, but you see, we thought you were the British army."

"You planned to catapult yourself onto the British army?" he inquired, lifting one brow ominously.

"Don't be obtuse," she chided. "I just told you that falling was an accident."

"Yes, well, I think it would be better for you if I were to remain obtuse," he said softly as he reached his hands up to cup her buttocks warningly. "You don't want to know what I'd think if I had my wits about me."

"Why?" she couldn't resist goading him.

"Because I would think that there were two irresponsible, disobedient girls who put themselves in unnecessary danger who now deserve to be

thoroughly chastised." He squeezed her bottom cheeks through the folds of her skirt. "I think you've earned my belt this time," he whispered, for her ears only.

"Shall we help you look for those girls, Thomas?" Mariah called cheekily from her precarious seat on the tree branch above their heads.

"You shall come down out of that tree, immediately, imp," he ordered.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Mariah said on a wild note. "Don't you remember why I don't like climbing trees? It's because I absolutely detest climbing down from trees."

Carefully, but firmly, Thomas lifted Abigail off his belly as he got to his feet. He stood directly under the branch where Mariah perched.

"Jump down into my arms," he told his sister.

"No." Mariah shook her head frantically, hugging the tree trunk.

"Mariah Anne Chisholm, you are to jump out of that tree at once," he commanded in a voice that brooked no defiance.

"No, sorry, can't do it," Mariah called back stubbornly. "I'm staying put."

"You are going to get the hiding of your life when I get my hands on you," he threatened.

"Oh, that'll make her jump right down," Abby said sarcastically.

"Excuse me," Thomas held up his finger to his sister and then turned around to glower at the young woman beside him. "I don't need your comments," he informed her in a voice lined with steel.

"You're not the boss of me," Abby said sulkily. She was completely unprepared when he grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her close; she gasped at the stinging swat he landed on her backside.

"I will be," he told her in a tone that held both a promise and a threat. "Now, you will be a good girl and wait your turn, Abigail, while I attend to my

sister."

He continued to hold her tightly until she swallowed hard and nodded.

Big brute, she thought as he returned to bark orders up the tree at an unyielding Mariah.

Mariah had watched the interchange between her brother and her cousin with eyes as big as saucers.

"You really shouldn't just go about walloping people, Tommy," she chided from her relatively safe haven.

"Silence!" he hissed. "Get your tail out of that tree, Mariah, and I mean NOW!"

The silence that followed was ominous.

"Having a little trouble?" the normally sardonic voice was simply curious now.

Behind them, Bart Tyler was mounted on a huge white stallion.

"Hey, Sultan," Abby greeted the magnificent beast, who had been one of their Daisy's foals. "Yes, well, my cousin's stuck in a tree."

"How inconvenient," Bart said. "Aren't you going to introduce me, Abby?"

Abby made a face at his underlying arrogance.

"Bartholomew Tyler, Sir Thomas Chisholm," she said perfunctorily. "And in the tree, Miss Mariah Chisholm."

The men shook hands, warily sizing each other up.

"Doctor, isn't it?" Bart said as he nudged Sultan and moved beneath the tree.

"It is," Thomas replied evenly, watching the other man.

"Miss Mariah," Bart called up into the leaves and was rewarded with a giggle.

"Pleased to meet you," she peeped.

"Come out of the tree now, sweetheart," he smiled winningly. "I've got the white steed right here, all ready to save you."

Another giggle.

Bart turned around and winked at Thomas.

"Seems you've got your hands full with this one," he laughed.

"You've no idea," said Thomas.

Jamie had returned with the horses tethered behind him.

"Aw, c'mon, Mariah," he called. "You weren't too scared to climb Old Man Nelson's maple tree last week and that was three times as big as this little old thing."

"Damn," muttered the girl up the tree. "Jamie, you have got the biggest mouth this side of the Atlantic Ocean."

"Mariah!" shouted Thomas.

"Coming!"

First one petite boot appeared and then another as the blond girl swung from the lowest limb.

"Catch me!" she called impishly to her would-be rescuer.

Bart, happy to oblige, opened his arms wide and caught a light bundle of striped skirts and tousled curls.

He couldn't help laughing at the giggling sprite in his arms, but his mood sobered when he noticed the dour expression on the older man's face.

"I guess you're in a mite bit of trouble, sweetheart," he told her.

"That she is," stated Thomas. "Thank you for your help. I'll relieve you of your burden, now."

Bart gathered the young lady around her waist and gently handed her to her waiting brother.

"It was a pleasure catching you," he told the blushing girl. "Maybe we'll see you at the Grange Hall Dance next week? We're holding it despite the current situation, seeing as how the lads and the lasses all need a bit of revelry in these hard times."

"I hope I'll be allowed to go," Mariah said wishfully.

"Of course, she'll go," Abby blurted. "We always go to the Grange, and she's part of the family."

"Abby, you better hope you're allowed to go," Jamie laughed. "Mother and Father may not let you

go anywhere after today. Last I heard, Mother was soliciting ripped clothing from the neighbors for you to mend as punishment, Mistress Thimble."

Abby groaned. She had forgotten all about the missed chores.

Thomas set his sister down and handed her a small pocketknife.

"Fetch a switch and be quick about it, else you'll feel my belt on your legs for your deceitful games," he ordered in a low, furious voice.

Mariah hurried toward the thicket of bushes, her head bent in embarrassment and dread.

Bart nodded, apparently in agreement with the Englishman. He wheeled about and continued on the road to the lake.

"I'm off," he called. "Nice making your acquaintance. Abby, Jamie, my best to your brother Aaron. I hear he took a nasty spill. Strange, I didn't know about it before." He looked directly at Abby and nodded meaningfully.

She averted her eyes and then trained her gaze on her cousin's progress among the bushes.

Mariah turned around once, her bright blue eyes following the man on horseback as he disappeared down the track toward the water.

Abby noticed both the glance and the determined gleam in her cousin's eyes.

"Damn," she mumbled. "This could be difficult."

"Did you say something, Abigail?" asked Thomas.

"No, sir," she retorted, biting back the choice epithet that sprang to her lips.

He smiled at her sarcasm. Her time would come. And, in time, he was determined that this little firebrand would come to accept him.

Mariah approached her brother with dragging feet and a heavy heart, a sturdy switch already skimmed of its twigs and leaves in her outstretched hand.

As he reached out to take it from her, a deafening report cracked into the grove where they

stood.

Abby ducked in reflex.

"That was musket fire," cried Jamie. "And close."

"Get on your horses," Thomas commanded, tucking the switch under his saddle as he vaulted onto Picnic. "And wait here. Jamie, you stay and watch over them."

The young redhead looked as though he would complain at being delegated to remain with the women, but one look at Chisholm's grim expression, and he nodded.

Thomas reached out and covered Abby's hand with his large, warm palm.

"Stay with your brother and Riah," he told her, his green eyes locking with her smoky grays.

"I will," she promised.

There was a tiny skein of smoke rising above the trees by the lake.

Thomas walked his horse stealthily toward the water's edge, unsure of what he would find there.

Abby tried to keep her promise. She really did. But she couldn't bear the fact that Thomas could be walking into danger. Three minutes hadn't passed before she pressed her heels into Rebel's flanks and noiselessly headed to the road.

"Abby!" her brother hissed. "Get back here!"

She held her finger over her lips and shook her head.

"I'll be back," she whispered to Jamie.

She wasn't prepared for the sight that met her eyes when she rounded the bend toward the lake.

Chapter Eight

Wounded Bear

Abby silently walked Rebel down the path toward the lake, ducking her head as they moved beneath the low branches of some maple trees. Then her stomach lurched sickly from the sight confronting her. Thomas was kneeling beside Bart Tyler who was sprawled on the grass, blood seeping from gashes across his neck and face while a deep crimson stain blossomed across his cambric shirt, his rifle still smoking next to him on the ground.

In a moment of suspended reaction, she felt oddly detached and filled with an uneasy anticipation. There was something she didn't understand or recognize.

Then she saw the bear. At least eight feet of matted black fur and snarling wildly, the creature teetered toward her on hind legs as she stepped further into the clearing. Rebel whinnied frantically, backing into the prickly bushes that lined the path.

"Abby, get back!" Thomas bellowed.

At that moment, Abby noticed that the animal was limping from a gaping wound in the right thigh. The bear dropped onto all fours and suddenly veered to the left, lumbering past her toward the lake. It sloshed noisily through the shallows away from the clearing and disappeared.

Abby watched it go and then turned back to the ghastly tableau in the clearing.

She vaulted neatly off her horse and patted the skittish animal, gently soothing his tense muscles as she rubbed him down, murmuring softly all the while.

When Rebel was calm, she hurried to Thomas's side.

"How is he?" she asked. She whipped off her soft white apron and deftly passed it to the crouching man who was glowering at her. "Use this, it's clean."

"The scratches on his face and neck are superficial," Thomas explained, taking the offered material and fashioning a bandage from it. "I'm afraid this nasty bit of business on his chest is another story. It's deep and ragged."

"Damn thing surprised me," Bart whispered. "Just came raging out from the bushes while I was leading the horse over for a drink."

"Wasn't a grizzly," Abby said in puzzlement. "Never saw a black bear act like that before. Must be some kind of rogue."

"Mmm," Bart nodded, moaning under his breath at the pain.

Thomas was neatly binding the largest wound with Abby's apron, trying to be as quick as possible when he noticed the other man wincing.

"Abigail," he said. "Go get your brother and Mariah. "I'm going to need help getting him up on a horse. We'll take him to your father's office, it's closest."

Abby nodded as she quickly leapt onto her horse and took off down the trail toward the grove where the others waited.

Jamie helped Thomas lift Bart, careful not to disturb his makeshift bandage.

"Put him up here with me," Mariah said imperiously. "He can't possibly ride alone, and Sweetpea's strong and gentle enough for the extra weight."

"He's severely injured, Riah," Thomas argued.

"No, she's right," said Abby. "Sultan would snort and buck with two riders, and Picnic is still too spirited."

So, they placed Bart Tyler in front of Mariah who wrapped her arms around the lean, dark-haired man and held him gently but with all her strength.

They rode in a slow procession back to town. Once there, Jamie took off for the blacksmith shop to enlist some aid in hunting down the bear.

"Be careful, Jamie," Abby called after him. "A wounded animal will bite your head off without a

second thought."

"Exactly," said Thomas ominously. "An event I was fortunate enough not to witness firsthand, Mistress Disobedience."

"Pshaw," Abby muttered rudely. "I repeat. You're not the boss of me."

Thomas reached out and gripped her wrist, effectively keeping her chained to his side. "And, I repeat, you are an impudent little baggage who needs a good tanning."

"That's what you say," she snapped crossly.

"It's what I know," he said in a low, furious voice.

"Thomas," she began earnestly. "I cannot understand why you are so filled with ire. We are merely cousins, you have no duty toward me."

"We are not cousins, Abigail, except by marriage," he said dryly. "And, I have told you that I do feel a duty toward you. After all, it was I who saved you from a life of crime. I feel compelled to continue."

"Bah!" she said. "I need no guardian! Leave off, sir!"

She snatched her wrist out of his grip and galloped off toward her father's office.

Thomas chuckled softly as he watched her go. She would soon learn that he was no callow youth to be dismissed so easily. He wanted Mistress Abigail Mason, and he meant to have her, by fair means or foul.

When Thomas rode up to the gate in front of Jacob Mason's surgery, he was surprised to find no one there to greet them. After all, Abby would have arrived five minutes earlier.

"Thomas," Abby called from the open front doorway. "Father is gone on his visitations. We must tend Bart ourselves."

"The wound needs stitching," Thomas said.

"First, he needs a cleansing poultice," Abby countered. "I have it prepared, we'll bring him in this way."

She hurried to help him, knowing that he would need assistance since Jamie was no longer with them.

Abby was perspiring from the strain of maneuvering Bart's limp body; they were just able to lift the barely conscious man down from the horse, a deed made easier because he was so out of his mind with the pain.

They settled him on Dr. Mason's old leather table, and Thomas carefully began to cut his shirt away.

"Tis deeper than I feared," he murmured as he inspected the bear's maul.

"Let me pack the wound with these herbs while we set about making him comfortable," Abby said.

"What herbs are these?" asked Thomas.

"Simply some soothing herbals with non-inflammatory qualities," she replied. "I also have a tea that will make him drowsy and forget the pain."

"Give it to him at once," Thomas conceded. "He will need all the help he can get at this moment."

Dr. Thomas Chisholm started the vast task of stitching up the gaping wound left by the bear's paw, but in the end, it was Abby who completed it.

Thomas was almost finished when he had to stop and take a brief trip to the necessity out back.

"I apologize," he said, his face flushed with embarrassment as he headed toward the door. "I am in dire need, please hold the needle for me."

"Go," she waved him away.

Abby did more than hold the needle. She was accustomed to aiding her father in this surgery whenever he needed help, and her hand was steady. She immediately set to the task of stitching the skin and had succeeded in sewing up Bart's wound when Thomas returned.

"Nice work," said the physician. "Your stitches are far neater than mine."

"Tell my mother," said Abby dryly. "She is the one concerned with my stitches."

"Shall we keep him here," asked Thomas. "Or

bring him to his home to recover?"

"Perhaps, we should allow him to rest here overnight," said Abby thoughtfully. "But, Bart does have two small sons. Someone should go and let them know."

"I can go," the voice made them jump as they turned toward the door. Jamie stood there, grinning sheepishly. "We didn't get the bear. He was long gone."

"Then go and let them know at the farm," said Abby. "Those little ones will be frantic with fear, so be gentle with them, Jamie, and make sure the housekeeper will stay the night at the farm."

"I will be as gentle as you, sister," said Jamie.

"James Mason!" Abby said smartly. "No tomfoolery here, get out to the Tyler place and be quick!"

"By that remark, one would surmise that you are not noted for your gentleness? Yet I am witnessing both skill and tenderness in your ministrations to this fellow." Thomas commented, smiling. "It seems to me that you are inordinately gentle indeed."

"Did anyone ever tell you that you talk a lot?" Abby asked bluntly, neatly snipping the thread and knotting it. "And to answer your question, no, I am not noted for gentleness in my family. I believe they think I'm rather difficult."

"Do you need any help?" Mariah asked from the doorway.

Abby noticed her avid inspection of Bart's naked torso until Thomas effectively blocked her view by moving a few inches closer to Abby.

"No, thank you, Mariah," he said firmly. "I think you had better spend some time sitting quietly out in the other room, thinking about how to change your willful behavior. And don't forget, you have a thrashing coming ere this day is done."

"I know," Mariah mumbled, crestfallen. She slipped back into the waiting area before her brother could remonstrate further.

"Let's use the bindings I have prepared," Abby said. "I will keep the wound from festering and dull the ache of the stitches."

"Yes," Thomas agreed readily. "But, you must promise to show me where you cultivate these miracle herbs. Your father speaks so glowingly of your ability to heal. I know you must have a natural gift of curing."

Abby blushed under his admiring gaze.

"Perhaps, I will show you," she said. "But only if you promise to behave and not act like a besotted suitor."

The admiring look was immediately replaced with an impatient scowl.

He finished dressing the wound with the fragrant cloths she handed him and pulled a clean sheet over him to keep him warm in the encroaching chill of late afternoon.

A loud commotion in the waiting area broke into the careful silence between the two tending Bartholomew Tyler.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

Two small fists of energy shot into the operating room as Nat and Nick Tyler erupted upon the scene.

"Did my Papa eat a bear?" cried Nathaniel, standing under Thomas's nose, arms akimbo.

"He did not," the amused man answered calmly.

"Told you so," Nat sneered to his brother who thanked him by kicking him hard in the shins.

"Nicky, stop that!" Abby scolded. "Nat, stop yelling! And yes, a bear did hurt your papa, and you boys must be very quiet and let him rest. Out!" She shoos them through the doorway and glared at her brother who was lounging against the wall.

"Mrs. Ryan had to get home," he explained. "Her husband is laid up with the gout and can't stir from his chair. I figured you'd think of something."

She looked helplessly at the tiny, black haired

boys who were playing a game of tag over Mariah's lap and sighed. What did she know about three year old boys?

"We'll bring them all home," Abby decided. "Mother will take care of it."

"Should we take them now?" asked Mariah, laughing when one of the twins scrambled up and slid down her like a seal trying to escape the other.

"Yes," Abby said. "You take one and Jamie will take the other. Thomas and I will wait for Father so we can bring Bart in the carriage. Make sure you let Mother know exactly what happened," she instructed her brother.

"Yes, Mistress Bossy," Jamie was furious. "Just so you know, not everyone who's not you is a complete idiot!"

"Shut up, James," she hissed, embarrassed by her own overbearing behavior.

"Abigail," Thomas's voice was suddenly right in her ear. "A moment, please."

Without waiting for her consent, he yanked her back into the surgery and quietly shut the door.

"That was uncalled for," he said in a low voice.

"So," she blustered. "Jamie can be an idiot."

"And you can be a rude, opinionated spitfire," he said icily.

"Why do you think you can censure me?" she demanded. "You are naught to me, Chisholm!"

"I am something to you," he said ominously. "And best you know it."

"So what did I do anyway?" she said sullenly, hating both his proprietary tone and the fact that he was right.

He grabbed her by the arm and held her close as he upbraided her.

"Your brother rode out to find you, then he guarded you and my sister, then set out to seek a dangerous, wounded bear," Thomas said. "And at your behest, he rode a good distance to Tyler's farm and then brought the children here and what do you do? How do you treat him, Abigail?"

Abby was squirming now and trying to escape his punishing grip.

In truth, she felt horrible about her nastiness to Jamie, but pride forced her to hold her tongue.

"Release me," she ordered, pulling with all her strength but to no avail.

"Indeed, you do need a thrashing," he told her in that intimate, silky voice she found so disturbing.

Her legs felt weak, and a rush of warmth flooded her body. The tingly sensation in her legs was but a prelude to the fierce stinging in her backside as Thomas Chisholm swung back with a good portion of his strength and walloped her skirted bottom.

"Stop it!" she whispered, humiliated that he would dare touch her in such a manner with his sister and her brother right in the other room. "Everyone will hear you."

"That is the least of your problems, Mistress," he chided her. "You are simply the most stubborn chit I have ever met."

The brute then proceeded to smack her again. And again! Even through her muslin skirt and petticoats, she felt the burn of his palm.

"Ouch!" she yelped at the next blow and tried desperately to wiggle away, but he maintained his grip of stone, pinning her close to his side. Not only was she forced to bear his chastisement; she was also forced to withstand the agony of his body pressed against her own so intimately. The pain she felt on her bottom soon yielded to the delicious thrill of his nearness, and she bit her lip, tears springing to her lashes as he continued the relentless punishment. She was afraid she would make a fool of herself if he didn't stop. "Please, Thomas," she whimpered.

He landed one more spank and then turned her around to face him. He was surprised to see the tears.

"Abby," he began. "I didn't mean to be so harsh, but, girl, you do try my patience." He reached out and wiped the wetness from her cheeks with his

large thumbs. "Haven't you realized that I love you? Is it so hard to believe in love at first sight?"

She felt a niggling annoyance, which she realized was her conscience.

"You weren't that harsh," she finally admitted. "'Twas my own feelings that caused me to cry."

He shook his head and smiled. He knew the admission was dearly bought – he had begun to realize how discerning she was with her affection. It startled him to realize how precious she had become to him. He enfolded the shaking girl in his arms and hugged her tightly. They stood locked in each other's embrace for what seemed like eons although it was mere minutes.

Abby inhaled deeply, reveling in the musky spice of his neck and the faint scent of masculine perspiration that lingered beneath his shirt. He was a magnificent man, she thought. His gentleness and intelligence conspired to make her forget his strictness, and the fact that he was a dreaded Englishman. Sighing, she dug her fingers into his rich chestnut hair, making a mess of his respectable queue.

The door banged open in the other room and they heard Jacob Mason's deep voice.

Guiltily she stepped away from Thomas and set about adjusting the sheet over Bart Tyler.

When the older doctor knocked and then entered his operating room, both Chisholm and Abby were studiously involved with tending their patient.

"Father," Abby said. "I'm sure Jamie told you about Bart. We were waiting for you to take him home in the carriage."

"Yes, I see," Jacob dropped a kiss on Abby's forehead and hugged her briefly. "Although I'm not happy to see any man mauled by a bear, 'tis relieved I am that it isn't you there on my table, daughter. Could have been either you or Mariah the way I see it." He turned to the other man and heartily shook his hand. "Thank you, Tom, for

bringing my treasure to safety."

"Father, I was never in danger," Abigail protested. "Certainly, Mariah and I would have escaped this fate."

Both men cocked their heads and looked at her skeptically. She realized how ludicrous she sounded.

"All right, then, maybe we would have been startled some or scared perhaps," she stammered. The cold hard truth was that they would have been mauled in Bart's place if Jamie and Thomas hadn't come along when they did. Bart was injured not fifty feet from where they had been picnicking. The realization was like a fist in her stomach.

"You're right," she whispered, her face ashen. "Thank God Thomas and Jamie came along when they did."

Jacob was inspecting the wound and checking Bart's vital signs while Thomas filled him in on their treatment.

Abby chose that moment to escape into the other room.

Jamie was trying to scoop up one of the twins while Mariah cajoled the other with one of the cookies from their lunch.

Abby strode over and retrieved the imp from the tiny space behind the desk and held the flailing youngster in the tight jacket of her arms.

"Jamie, I am sorry I was so nasty before," she apologized, carrying Master Nathaniel Tyler over to her younger brother. "You were so brave and helpful today, and I acted like a shrewish ass. I hope you forgive me." She ducked her head as she handed off her squirming package, dimples flashing at her brother's discomfiture.

"It's okay, sis," he said, tossing the boy over his shoulders like a shepherd with his lamb. "Let's go to Hilltop, Nat my boy, because my mother makes the best biscuits in all of this fine land."

"I'm hungry," wailed the urchin.

"Good, 'cause Emma is probably frying a chicken as we speak," Jamie said jovially. "Let's get you two

home. We'll take Sultan with us, Abby. Ready, Riah?"

Mariah was holding Nicky's hand and chatting amicably about the prospect of more cookies after dinner.

"We're ready," Mariah said. "Make sure the ride is gentle for him," she said over her shoulder to Abby. And then she blushed.

"We'll take care of him," Abby called out reassuringly.

"Take care of whom?" Thomas said in her ear.

"Bart," she told him. "Your sister is concerned about his journey to our house. She seems to have developed a tendre of feeling for him."

"She is a child," he said impatiently. "She fashions herself a romantic heroine to his dark-haired pirating marauder."

"Hush," she whispered fiercely. "Bart Tyler may be many things but he is not a marauder. He is a Patriot, true as gold."

"Patriot, bah," Thomas scoffed. "Where does this defense come from, Abigail? He sent a girl into the wilds to rob a coach. A thief and thug, that's what your hero is made of."

"He didn't send me to rob you," she argued. "I pretended to be Aaron. Bart would never let me join the Resistance, so I grabbed my chance when my brother hurt himself."

Thomas shook his head, rolling his eyes.

"I'll tell you what I think," he told her. "You need a keeper – someone to protect you from yourself, Abby."

Before she could respond to his outrageous remark, her father's voice interrupted them.

"He's ready to be moved," Jacob told them, shrugging into his waistcoat as he joined them. "I'll just go ask Sam to bring the carriage around."

Abby avoided looking at Thomas for the few moments as they waited alone in the office. Her mind was churning with a hundred thoughts of him, and she didn't know how to sort it out.

"All right, then," Thomas finally said. "We'll talk later. We will definitely talk later." The way he emphasized the word brought a blush to her cheeks.

It only took Jacob and Thomas a few minutes to carry Bart outside and settle him comfortably across one seat in the carriage.

"Shall I ride inside with you, Father?" she asked. "Do you need help?"

"Twill not be necessary, daughter," he told her. "You and Thomas might as well ride the horses home, no sense taking the time to tie them behind the rig."

"We'll see you there," she said, waving as Sam slapped the reins down across the team. She turned to Thomas. "Let's go."

They rode off, soon overtaking the carriage and waving again.

Twilight was settling over the fields as they cantered up the road toward Hilltop Manor. The gentle ringing of the crickets surrounded them in a chirping chorus, and the evening dew was like a fragrant perfume in the air.

"I love springtime," Abby said happily. Thomas reached over the space between their mounts and covered her hand with his large, now gentle palm.

"I love you," he whispered. "I don't understand the way it happened, but you, Abigail Mason, have suddenly filled my world. I can't imagine springtime without you. I want you to come home with me."

The words hit her like a cleaver, tearing her asunder.

She jerked her hand away from his.

"I am home, sir," she said stiffly. Digging her heels into Rebel's flanks, she galloped the last hundred yards to the gate that always stood open to Hilltop Manor.

Thomas rode after her, mentally cursing his choice of words. He didn't mean that he wanted to take her from her own home; he merely wished she would come see his own beautiful green homeland.

In his heart, he knew that their future would be rooted in the colonies. She was too much the patriot to leave these shores forever. And, surprisingly, he found this land to be both beautiful and exciting, and the people were honest and hardworking. He would just have to be more careful in his choice of language.

By the time he rode up to the stables, both Annie Mason and Emma were standing in the front yard. Abby was nowhere to be seen. He handed Picnic's reins to the stable boy and thanked him as he strode out of the barn. Mariah hovered by the steps leading up to the wide verandah. He reckoned the carriage would arrive in ten minutes. That was plenty of time for the correction of one disobedient sister.

"Mariah," he called. "Come here, please."

He wanted to smile at the way she dragged her feet over to where he stood.

"Let's take care of this unpleasant business," he said sternly but kindly.

"Tommy," she cried. "Don't do this, now!"

"Don't make a fuss, Miss," he chided. "You know you have this one coming, and I mean to see that you get it. 'Tis my duty as your brother." He took her arm and led her firmly to the area behind the barn, ignoring the others' curious stares. It was isolated back there and only faintly illumined from the lanterns out front.

"Why must you always be such a bore?" she snapped. "Duty this and duty that. You are ever an infernal bore, Thomas, and you don't know anything about life and love."

"Hush," he said. "If I am a bore, so be it. But, you are a willful puss with no regard for family or truth. Your behavior was disgraceful. Think how I felt to discover that you, my own sister, had deceitfully run off after I explicitly requested your attendance to your lessons?"

"I don't care how you felt, Thomas," she said resentfully. "But, I felt betrayed by my own flesh

and blood. As though I didn't even matter."

"Hopefully, this lesson will let you know that you do matter, very much," he said softly, retrieving the switch she had cut earlier from his belt.

He pulled her closer and set her in front of him.

"Hands on the wall, Mariah," he ordered.

She didn't bother to struggle or disobey him, now.

When she had both palms flush against the rough boards of the barn, he lifted her skirts carefully and held them up against the small of her back. He swung his arm back and let the switch down across her frilly white pantaloons.

"Aghhhh!" she yelled.

He repeated the punishment. She cried out again.

"You're getting two dozen, Mariah, so I would suggest you restrain yourself, or you will certainly have an audience, sister."

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!
THWACK!

She whimpered softly.

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!
THWACK!

As the punishment continued, both Chisholms were unaware of the eavesdropper within the barn who heard every cry, every swish of the switch.

Mariah was sobbing before Thomas was finished.

"I'm sorry," she wailed. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to defy you, but I just felt so bad that you didn't want to spend time with me." She hiccupped woefully as he laid the last two licks across her burning backside.

Inside the barn, Abby heard Thomas throw down the switch, and she felt rather than knew how he reached for his sister and comforted her, patting her back while he murmured soothingly to her.

"There, now. Of course, I want to spend time with you, Riah," he murmured. "But, everything in its own time, we have plenty of time to be with each other."

Abby shook her head, biting her lip at his callousness. What a fool, she thought. He didn't understand his own importance to his sister.

"And, your disobedience could have landed you in big trouble," he continued. "You do realize it might have been you and Abby instead of Bart Tyler meeting up with that bear?"

Abby inwardly groaned, her stomach plummeting as she relived again the moment when she saw Bart Tyler sprawled out in the grass, a bloody carpet beneath him.

"Come now," she heard him say. "Let's make Bart comfortable when he arrives."

Well, at least, that was the perfect thing to say. Mariah quickly murmured her agreement, and Abby listened to their footsteps as they walked around the barn.

She finished combing down Rebel and briefly hugged her horse.

"Nice and uncomplicated," she whispered into his velvet coat.

The carriage was just pulling into the yard when she slipped from the barn.

Thomas and her brothers helped her father carry Bartholomew into the house. Annie had fixed up a bed on the sofa in Jacob's study. Everyone crammed into the room to see to the arrival of Bart Tyler; his little boys scampered over the furniture and finally settled on the foot of the sofa, tugging at the blanket that covered their father.

"Papa!" they clamored. "Wake up, we're here!"

Masons, Chisholms and Tylers alike were gratified when Bart Tyler's long, ebony lashes fluttered briefly before opening.

"Now, that hurts like a son of a... gun," he muttered. "I know I'm not in heaven cause it's too damn noisy."

"Papa, we're at Hillpot," Nicky bellowed. "And, they gots cookies here."

"It's Helltop," corrected Nathaniel. "And, the lady makes crispy chicken just like you, Pa!"

Bart Tyler glanced around at the crowd of people and smiled wryly.

"I know I have a lot of people to thank," he murmured. "But, before I think I've gone completely crazy, can you tell me whether I actually saw Abigail Mason getting her bottom thrashed by the Englishman here? Maybe I have died or just gone daft."

Abby blushed to the roots of her fiery red hair.

Thomas simply chuckled.

"You ain't dead, Papa!" yelled Nathaniel.

"But, I wish I were," mumbled Abby.

"Somebody has some explaining to do," Jacob Mason said in his sternest voice.

Everyone looked at Thomas Chisholm.

Chapter Nine

Double Trouble

Everyone stared at Thomas and Abby, waiting for someone to speak.

Thomas was happy to oblige.

"No, you're not daft, Bart," he said with a glint in his green eyes. "And, you definitely saw me correcting Mistress Abigail. She had been rude to her brother and sassy to me. I care too much about her to let her get away with such nonsense. In fact, you all might as well know, I'm in love with this beautiful redhead, and I mean to marry her."

Abby gasped at his bluntness.

"Chisholm!" she shrieked. "What in blazes are you thinking? We've only just met."

"Abigail," her mother remonstrated. "Watch your language, there are babies in the room."

"Mother," snapped Abby. "Somehow, I think these particular babies have heard worse."

"What's that supposed to mean," growled Bart Tyler.

"What babies?" squeaked Hannah indignantly. "You better not be talking about me."

"Mind your business, Miss Hannah Nosybody," chirped Sam.

"You're all babies," chided Jamie.

"Tall drink-a-water," teased Charlie.

"Short sip-a-rum," Judith countered, leaping to Jamie's defense.

"Hellpot's fun," cried Nat, jumping up and down and clapping his hands.

"It's Hellpit, stupid," argued Nicky.

An ear-screaming whistle suddenly erupted throughout the room, and everyone turned to see Mistress Anne Mason, arms akimbo and fire flashing from blue eyes.

"Not another word," she said forcefully.

"Ma, he kicked me," yelled Charlie, dancing away from Jamie.

"Yes, but he knocked into me on purpose," rebutted Jamie, sparring jokingly with his little brother.

"Everyone out," bellowed Jacob, jumping to his wife's side. "Abby, Thomas and Annie, meet me in the parlor, please. Mariah, you stay and watch over Bart and the boys. Everyone else to their rooms until I tell you otherwise."

The Mason children knew better than to argue when their father spoke in that tone of voice. They shuffled quietly out of the study while the Tyler boys looked at each other with open mouths.

Abby strode furiously into the parlor. She paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, not even deigning to glance at Thomas Chisholm who sat calmly on the settee facing her.

"Abigail," her father said softly. "Sit down, daughter, and stop acting like a tiger, pray wipe that fierce frown off your face."

"Nay, I cannot, Father," she answered. "I am too angry to stop. For, if I did, I might have to kill this bloody Englishman."

"Abigail!" Annie said harshly. "You will listen to your father and stop this willfulness at once. And, keep a civil tongue in your mouth, miss, unless you wish a trip to the kitchen."

Abby looked at her mother and laughed bitterly.

"Is it willfulness to express my feelings, Mother?" She blinked back angry tears at what she felt was her mother's betrayal. "When did you become so old-fashioned, so indifferent to my feelings? When did that happen?"

"Don't be disrespectful, Abby," her father said. "You will please sit so that we can discuss this rationally."

Abigail plopped ungraciously into a chair beside the fireplace.

"May I say something?" Thomas Chisholm asked gently.

The older Masons nodded agreeably.

"Perhaps, I did not have to divulge my feelings

for Abby so suddenly, but I will tell you now and forever that I am in love with your daughter, and I will not rest until I am her husband. We all know there is no blood relation between us to impede this marriage. I know she loves me too, for love must always be reciprocal, and my feelings for her are too strong to be anything other than love." He sat back against the sofa cushions. "I am just as perplexed by this as you all are. However, I will not lose this wonderful, exceptional and infuriating woman. She makes me feel alive in a way I never dreamed possible."

Annie was smiling widely when he finished his speech, and even Jacob Mason was nodding as if he understood perfectly. Only Abby seemed to be alone in her disbelief.

How could he say such things? As though she meant so much to him in only one day? It was ridiculous to think a man could be so altered in the course of two sunsets.

"I make you feel alive?" she muttered. "Then, pray tell, why do you want to kill me whenever we are alone?"

"You've interesting ways about you, Abby, but rest assured, I am completely besotted by those very ways," he explained sweetly, throwing back her own word.

"Hmmpf," she finally said.

"At least, try to be polite," Thomas said somewhat sharply. "You should apologize to your mother. Your rudeness before was uncalled for and hurtful."

"He has a point," her father interjected.

Abby realized she had nothing to gain by alienating her parents. She turned to her mother and took her hand, pressing it to her cheek before kissing the work-roughened knuckles.

Annie Mason smiled at the childish gesture. Her children were used to showing their devotion in such ways.

"I am sorry, Mother," Abigail whispered. "But,

he makes me crazy."

"I know, daughter," she soothed softly. "It's the way of men. But, give him a chance."

The men couldn't hear this quiet exchange, and Thomas looked at her quizzically when she returned to her post by the fireplace.

"Jake," Annie said. "Let's leave these young folk alone until dinner. They need some privacy."

Jacob Mason grumbled good-naturedly, but he allowed his wife to lead him from the room.

He paused at the archway leading into the hall.

"Abigail," her father said jovially. "I know you've heard the story many a time, but I met and fell in love with your mother in the course of one evening. Nay, in the moment I met her." Jacob Mason smiled lovingly at his bride of twenty years.

Annie grinned back.

"Tis true you were a big lout," she laughed. "I merely chose to overlook your obvious buffoonery and flaws."

"Flaws?" Jacob lifted one auburn eyebrow. "What flaws?"

"Come, love," she answered softly. "Let the young ones be."

Abby couldn't help but smile at her parents' teasing. It was true that they fell in love at first sight on the night of her Aunt Elizabeth's coming out party. Maybe it was possible.

But, Thomas didn't fall in love with her at first sight. He had thrashed her backside. The memory of that awful switching made her scowl anew at her suitor.

"If you fell in love at first sight, Milord Chisholm," she said. "You have a most disagreeable way of showing it!"

"Abigail," he warned in a low voice. "Don't even think about it."

She blushed again and fumed under his highhanded manner. But, he was right, dash it all; she could not mention the circumstances of their first meeting in front of her parents.

Her parents disappeared in the direction of the stairs. Abby surmised that some time would pass before the other Mason children got the reprieve to come out of their rooms.

"Abby, I don't mean to scare you," Thomas said gently. "I really do love you, and I fear I always shall, so you'd best get used to it. Believe your father, these things do happen."

"Let us get to know each other first," she finally conceded. "Before any more such declarations."

"Tis a bargain," he agreed, rising to his feet to tower over her, thrusting out one large, tanned hand.

She took it reluctantly, blushing as they shook each other's hand formally.

Then he pulled her captive hand to his lips and pressed the most gentle of kisses to her palm. His soft lips felt like velvet on her skin. She shivered.

"Let's take a walk," he murmured, leading her toward the door to the terrace. "You can show me your garden before dinner."

"I'd be happy to," she replied, taking his arm and stepping into the sweet smelling dusk.

Bartholomew Tyler watched the pretty blond Englishwoman as she crooned softly to his sons. He noticed how she shifted sideways in her seat every minute or so as though she was perched on a hot coal. The gentle curve of her smile made her as beautiful as a Madonna in the soft lamplight that painted rays of gold over her skin. He felt a stirring beneath the thick quilt that covered him that had nothing to do with paternal devotion.

He was letting himself get smitten with the foreigner.

Nathaniel suddenly reached up and tugged hard on one of Mariah's curls.

"Ouch," she yelped, clutching her scalp.

"Jes' wanted to see ifn it was real," chirped the young scalawag with a grin.

"'Tis real, 'tis attached to my head," she cried. "You have a horrid sense of curiosity, Master Nat."

"Looked like it was made from the sun," he explained.

"What do I say about pulling hair, Nat," asked Bart sternly, pulling himself up against the pillows.

"That iss wrong to do," said Nat crestfallen.

"Aye, 'tis wrong and what happens when you do wrong?"

"I get a lickin'," stated Master Nathaniel Tyler. "But, you got ate by a bear and can't do it!"

"Not at present," growled Bart. "But as soon as I can stand, you won't be sitting, boy."

"Oh, please," murmured Mariah. "Don't bother about it. No sense making a little one fear tomorrow or worse to dread your recovery."

"He knows better, Mistress Mariah, than to pull a lady's hair."

"Since it is my hair, I should determine the punishment," she said firmly.

"And, what would that be?" asked Bart, amused by the sparkle in her green eyes.

"He shall sit by my side tonight and hold my skeins while I sew," she said emphatically. "And, he must not complain or fidget."

"That's worse than a lickin'," cried Nat. "No fair!" Nicky laughed at his twin's predicament.

"Glad I didn't pull no hair," he muttered.

"Seems you are quite skilled at this, Mistress," said Bart. "I yield to your superior punishment."

"Thank you," giggled Mariah with a short bow. "I was taught by the best. My brothers were worse than the Spanish Inquisition."

"Aye, well since your brother did save my hide, I can't very well be talking him down," said Bart. "And, I guess he's a decent man, though he is a damned Englishman."

Mariah studied her clasped fingers, anger coursing through her blood at his careless words. Thomas was strict in so many ways, but he was truly one of the kindest men she had ever known.

He deserved the respect of this dark haired barbarian.

"Of course, he is a decent man," she finally declared haughtily. "My brother is the most honorable person ever. He saves lives all the time, even wretched lives like yours!" She jumped up from the chair by his side and stood wringing her hands in vexation.

"Calm down, Lady," soothed Bart. "I do not malign your brother. If you recall, I did say I thought he was decent."

"You curse him, but you don't know him," she argued. "Thomas is proud, but he is a doctor of human life before anything else. Before England. Before family. He is a man of healing."

When he didn't say anything more offensive, she sat again, gingerly.

"Well, I reckon he's a lucky man to have such a supporter in you," Bart murmured. "I'm wondering now if he ever skinned you for playing hooky?"

Mariah blushed to the roots of her fair hair.

"That's no business of yours," she hissed, involuntarily shifting on her seat.

"Aye, I can see he did do his duty by you, Lady. He gets my wholehearted support, now," said Bart. "'Tis well, you deserved it for disrupting so much with your flighty behavior."

Mariah was mortified by his words. He must think her the worst possible person. She was so humiliated.

"I do not see how it concerns you," she said stiffly.

"Well now, to me, I see us all being somehow connected," he drawled slowly. "I stopped to help him fetch you from the tree, then I went to the lakeside and got mauled by a bear. You think about that and then wonder about my concern."

She had thought about it. Thoughts of his ill-timed arrival at the clearing had plagued her all afternoon. He was an odd man, fierce in his beliefs yet tender with his sons. She sensed a strong

resolve for justice in the man lying on the couch before her. She could not withstand the intense scrutiny of his deep blue eyes.

"Yes, well, perhaps you are right," she murmured, acquiescing. "If it pleases you, my brother whaled the blessed tar out of me. Happy?"

"Blissful." He grinned, and her heart jumped at the warmth that lit his face. "If I can stand, Mistress Chisholm, would you do me the honor of attending the Grange Dance with me a week from tomorrow night?"

Mariah felt a glow of excitement. She smiled back.

"I would love to attend the dance with you, Master Tyler," she said. "I sincerely hope I will be allowed to go."

"Can we go too, Pa?" clamored Nat, scrambling over the sofa, oblivious to his father's grimaces of pain.

"None of that, Natty my boy," Mariah stated, scooping up the boy and tucking him under her arm. "You and Nicky must come with me to get cleaned up for dinner."

"I hate getting cleaned up," said Nick. "Can't I jes' stay dirty? We's only eatin', anyway. And, we always get even more dirty when we eat."

"No, you may not stay dirty," Mariah said firmly, grasping his little hand and tugging him toward the door. "We'll be back with some supper for you, Bartholomew," she said shyly.

"Thank you, Mariah," he replied gently, his eyelids drooping. "I surely appreciate it."

Mariah carried and pulled her young charges upstairs to her chamber, ignoring their squawks of outrage.

Dinner was a spirited affair that evening at Hilltop Manor. At first, the little Tyler boys were in awe as they sat at the big table in the dining room, under Mariah's watchful eye.

"Lookit!" Nat demanded, elbowing his twin in the ribs as he pointed toward the baskets of steaming biscuits. "They look good!"

"Thinkee they got butter too?" asked Nick in awe.

"Prolly," said Nathaniel with assurance.

"Seems odd that there are three sets of twins under one roof," said Jamie, looking at the little lads and his older sister.

"Tis lucky," said Abby. "How often would such a thing happen?"

"I fathom you're right," Jamie chuckled. "Not very often indeed."

Thomas Chisholm was late to dinner. When he arrived, his eyes immediately sought out Abigail's, and he nodded to her before sitting.

"I apologize," he said. "I was checking on our patient. He is doing very well."

"Is he hungry? Does he need anything? Should I go to him?" exclaimed Mariah nervously. "I mean, go bring him some food," she stammered.

"He's fine," said Thomas. "Bring him a plate in a little while."

"I think I'll have my plate here, tonight," said a familiar voice.

Everyone turned to see Aaron standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe.

"Aaron!" shouted Abby.

The Mason children climbed out of their chairs, clamoring over each other to get to their brother.

His family surrounded Aaron within seconds. He allowed them to lead him to his chair beside Abby and his mother.

"Tis good to be back," Aaron said, as he settled back against the hard wooden slats of his chair. "Thank you for the welcome, family. I think I must say thank you to you too, sir," he turned to Thomas Chisholm. "My flighty twin would nary tell me if something were amiss, so I must bespeak my gratitude for your help today."

"Think naught of it," said Thomas. "It's good to

meet you finally, Aaron." He grasped the younger man's hand and pumped it vigorously.

Abby was aware of Aaron's covert inspection of Thomas Chisholm. She nudged his leg, and he glanced at her, amusement in his eyes.

She lifted her brows in silent question.

"Not bad," he whispered. "A little tall."

"He's not too tall," she whispered back indignantly, then made a face when she noticed his big grin.

"Caught you," he hissed.

"Sneaky," she ground out through gritted teeth.

"Infatuated," he retaliated.

Abigail blushed at the truth in her brother's assessment.

"Hey, mister, did you get ate by a bear too, like my papa?" cried Nathaniel as he swiped a hot biscuit from the basket.

Mariah retrieved the muffin from the culprit's lips with a smile.

"Not until Uncle Jacob says the blessing, Natty," she reproved gently. "Don't you say grace in your home?"

"My pa says grace is what the good Lord bought us into the world wif," chimed Nicky. "And, we gots to leave wif it too, so don't go wastin' it on earth!"

"Yep, we jes' eat at home," said Nat. "We don't have no grace."

Abby had to hide her smile in her napkin. Her shoulders shook as she laughed helplessly at the look on her cousin's face.

Mariah looked absolutely appalled.

"Well, we say grace here," she said firmly. "Take my hand."

She reached for the chubby little fingers on either side of her, but they suddenly became as slippery as eels.

"Don't hold my hand," shrieked Nat. "I hate hand holding."

Nick simply brought Mariah's hand to his mouth and gnawed at it a bit.

The blond girl yelped and yanked her hand out of the little boy's teeth.

"Nicholas," said Jacob Mason sternly. "We do not bite people in this house. We do say a blessing before the food, and we take each other's hands to share our love for humankind and God. However, you boys need not hold hands if you don't want to seeing as you are guests in our home."

"Saints be praised," chirped Nat. "Missus Ryan always says that when she's happy."

"Yes, well, saints be praised indeed," said Mariah, reaching over him to take Judith's hand.

Jacob said a mercifully short blessing, and the meal began in earnest.

"To answer your question, Nat," Aaron said. "I did not get ate by a bear. Nope, it was a horse that got me."

"More like terrible riding," quipped Abigail. "That poor mustang never had a chance. I told you to leave him for me."

"As if you could have done better," snapped Aaron.

"In my sleep, I could have," she retorted.

"Abigail," Thomas interrupted. "You don't break horses do you?" His voice had a hopeful ring to it, and everyone at the table burst out laughing.

"Sometimes," she answered truthfully. "But, sometimes, they break me." She turned to Aaron. "Remember that time Picnic tossed me into the creek? I broke my ankle and nearly killed ole Grampa."

"You nearly killed your grandfather?" asked Thomas in shock.

"Of course not," she replied. "Old Grampa is this ancient carp in the creek. I landed on him, and he nearly passed that time. He was right nearly flattened. But, he survived."

"And how, pray tell, Madame, did you?" Thomas turned to his aunt-in-law and raised his eyebrow. "I imagine this daredevil little baggage would have a mother in apoplectic fits whenever she left the

house."

"I trust my daughter, sir," said Annie sweetly. "And, if she hurts herself, she has only herself to blame. She did, however, get a thrashing from her father for trying to ride Picnic before he was broken."

"Mother," cried Abby, rolling her eyes. "Must you tell everything?"

"Why, of course, my darling, that's what mothers are for," Annie rejoined. "And, Thomas, I lied. I worry whenever this firebrand leaves the room, let alone the house. But, I save my apoplectic fits for her twin."

Abby couldn't help but join in the laughter that engulfed the table. The Mason children alternately dubbed the few gray hairs in their mother's blond tresses after either her escapades or Aaron's.

There was "Abby Rode Down the Valley One Night," and "Aaron Swam Across Glacier Lake," and "Abby Challenged Dutch Peterson to a Duel," and "Aaron Went Buggy Racing Down Peril's Pike."

"Don't tell anymore, Mother," Abby urged. "He might change his mind. And then you'll be stuck with me."

The moment the words left her mouth, she knew she had irrevocably given herself away. She flushed and quickly looked away, trying to draw Aaron into a casual conversation about the upcoming Grange dance.

Aaron wasn't having any of it.

"What's going on?" he asked baldly.

Aaron Mason was confused as hell. His family seemed to have gone mad in the short time he was sequestered in the front parlor.

Chisholm was smiling inanely as though he had just discovered a remarkable treasure. Abby was nattering on about music and reels; his parents looked pleased as punch, and he didn't know what happened.

"Will someone tell me what is going on?" he repeated, enunciating slowly as though he were

speaking to a room of daft witted fools.

Nathaniel Tyler was only too happy to oblige. He wiped a buttery fist across his mouth and took a deep breath.

"Well, you see, it started when my pa tole everyone that the man that sewed him up spanked the lady that sewed him up. And then the damned English doc said he was gonna marry her, and he was in love with her hair. All the people here started yelling and the other doc tole us all to go away. Then we went to see my pa and I pulled the blond lady's hair to see ifn it was made of sun and instead of getting a lickin' I gotta hold her thread when she sews tonight which I think is not fair. Thass what happened, mister. Can I have your biscuit?"

Aaron sat quietly for a few seconds, digesting the information given to him.

Mutely he handed the reward to the little biscuit monger across the table.

"So did anything else happen today?" he asked with a grin.

Chapter Ten

The Dance

Every year in early June, the Kinderhook Grange held a spring festival to honor the farmers whose harvests kept the small town a fairly prosperous place. The informal outdoor festival had evolved into a dance where everyone wore their fancy clothes and brought their best-baked goods and smoothest ale. If the Franciscan monks at Hook Abbey attended, they were sure to bring a cask of their delicious homemade wine and a wheel of good New York cheddar cheese. Courtships both started and culminated at the festive event held in the big Grange Hall.

The fates had gifted them with an evening of honeyed warmth and gentle breezes. There would be a full moon later, but the sun was still low in the western sky as the inhabitants of Hilltop Manor made ready for the night.

Mariah Chisholm twirled around in front of the mirror in her room, spreading out the shimmering apricot folds of her taffeta dress like a fan. A thin ribbon of the same fabric was threaded through her loose golden curls. She looked both beautiful and scared to death.

Bartholomew Tyler would arrive in just a few moments to escort her to the dance. At sixteen, she was in love for the first time in her life. She shivered when she thought of the fierce blue eyes, the silky black hair and muscular forearms. The scars from his recent ordeal only added to his dashing appeal, in her estimation. He was a strong and passionate man, and she knew she was already madly in love with the man her brother referred to as a colonial brigand. But what did Thomas know of these people?

Mariah had lived here for six months; she had watched the peaceful landscape change as more and more British soldiers trooped through it. Her

home was England, but it could be here too; in truth, she was captivated by the Americans and their fervent desire for liberty. She was like her Aunt Anne, completely at ease in this second homeland.

Bart Tyler was the epitome of this dream. She had watched him with the twins – a stern but loving father, a man who wanted his sons to experiment and fail rather than sit comfortably in success. He was most proud of the little tykes when they discovered something new.

Mariah bit her lip, worried suddenly at how this man would view her. He had made little secret of the fact that he despised the English. He might hate her.

Facing her mirror in the soft June dusk, she decided then and there; she would woo Bartholomew Tyler and win him.

She turned from her reflection with a determined gleam in her green eyes.

Abby barely glanced in the mirror at the almost iridescent sparkle of her blue-gray ball gown. The fabric complimented her smoke colored eyes, she knew, and it didn't clash horribly with the copper of her hair. And that made her happy with her dress, and she didn't bother examining herself closer. Or, she would have noticed the slender waist, fullness of the bodice and the attractive way the fabric slid off her shapely hips. Nonchalantly, she fastened the silver chain bearing the locket from her grandmother around her sparsely freckled porcelain neck. It was the final touch to an exquisite accoutrement. That Abigail Mason looked like a princess in her gray gown and simple jewelry was not astounding, but it was fitting to her unconscious noble bearing.

Her sisters chose that moment to barge through her door.

"Abby," breathed Hannah. "You look more

beautiful than anyone, even Mama."

"She does look nice," admitted Judith. "Just try not to fight with anyone or challenge any of the men to a duel."

"You both look lovely," said Abby. "And I never duel challenge at dances."

"Thomas is going to be happy," sang Hannah. "He's in love with you!"

For some reason, the mention of Chisholm's name sent a damper over her spirits. Abby suddenly realized that she felt lacking with the handsome English doctor. As though she were not perfect enough for him.

The realization niggled at her, and she felt an inexplicable anger.

"I'll be down in a moment," she said shortly.

Her sisters tripped out of her room, barely noticing the curtness of her tone.

The whole family was waiting for her when she descended the staircase. Aaron was wearing his best suit, and his russet locks were powdered into a respectable queue. On his best behavior, she noted dryly, pitying Mary Harrison who was sure to be persistently courted ere this eve was over. Thankfully, Thomas Chisholm was unpowdered and as plainly dressed as she in a gray frock coat and navy trousers tucked into his gleaming leather boots. She loved the look of his chestnut hair pulled back in a short tail and the rugged magnetism to his features. It was hard to believe he was an English lord and gentleman; he certainly fit in well enough in the American colonies, although there was still that haughty tilt to his brows.

Bart Tyler was standing beside Mariah looking devilishly handsome in all black. In contrast to Thomas Chisholm's almost homespun handsomeness, the beauty in Bart's sharply chiseled features was startling. For all that, he was a loyally fierce patriot, he looked more the noble patrician, with his prominent nose and pale skin. His sons stood beside him, angelic in their Sunday best suits

and for once neither fighting nor hollering.

Thomas reached out and took her hand, and she smiled faintly at him. They had spent the last week getting to know each other, and she was beginning to feel uncomfortably close to the enigmatic Englishman. But in the muted light of the hall at Hilltop, she felt a stirring of unfamiliar pique. He could be so stuffy sometimes; it irritated her.

"Abigail, you look enchanting," Chisholm murmured in a gentle voice, a condescendingly sweet voice, Abby thought. His overly considerate demeanor was beginning to suffocate her.

Abigail felt a churning within her that was the equal to a magnificent waterfall frothing over the rocks below.

"I need air," she muttered, pushing past his solicitous arm into the night, wrapping her silk shawl about her shoulders as she went.

As she stood under the pale lavender sky, she felt the sweet breeze upon her breast, and she swallowed deeply, knowing her would-be lover had followed her out into the delicious musk of evening. She felt his looming presence behind her.

"What you need is a lesson in manners," he whispered dangerously in her ear. "Don't think I will excuse such churlish behavior simply because I'm in love with you."

"A pox on what you think of my behavior," she snapped peevishly. "I need to be able to breathe, Master Chisholm, and that requires a little room. If you love me, you'd best get used to it. Breathing is what I do quite regularly."

She was startled when he took her by the arm and dragged her away from the open door, to the other side of the horses.

"Don't mistake love for blind leniency," he hissed back at her. "I do love you and for that reason I will not tolerate blatant disrespect."

"You have to earn my respect, sir," she answered haughtily.

"Then I will do so," he promised softly.

The others were starting to filter out toward the waiting wagons and carriage.

"I wanna ride with Bart and Riah in their wagon," cried Hannah.

"We don't want no girl near us," shouted Nathaniel. "Go away, girl!"

"Hush now, son," said Bart. "The little one is welcome in our wagon."

Abby wasn't able to hear the rest of the conversation. Thomas had imprisoned her within his arms, and he was towering over her, frowning down at her. Her heart flipped over at the harshness of his expression.

"Wh...what?" she demanded shakily.

"Mistress Abigail, you had best get used to the fact that I will not be scared away by bad behavior, and such willfulness on your part will only serve to get your little bottom warmed." He tilted her chin up as he spoke and forced her to look into his serious green eyes.

"Were you born this dull and serious, milord?" she asked flippantly. "Or did you have to work hard to achieve this level of pomposity?"

She was surprised as he pretended to mull over her question.

"Of course, I work at it," he announced solemnly, a twinkle in his eyes. "You think it's easy being this tediously proper?" he continued with a lowering of his eyebrows. "I'll have you know I practice frowning every night."

Abby burst into laughter, and Thomas joined in.

"Pax," she whispered. "I'm sorry I was such a beast."

"Forgiven," he said gently. "I'll try not to act the besotted ass, and you try to keep a civil tongue in your head."

It was her turn to pretend to ponder his words.

Impishly, she stuck the offending tongue out.

"I suppose this doesn't qualify as keeping it in my head," she quipped.

"Let's go," he growled, tugging her toward the

carriage. "Your parents invited us to ride with them, and I accepted."

"Good," she said simply, happy for her hair's sake that he hadn't accepted a ride in one of the wagons.

The Grange Hall was festooned with lanterns and flowers, and it looked more like a pretty ballroom than a meeting hall. Tables along the walls were laden with platters of pies, cakes and cookies.

Abby carefully set down her tray of berry tarts and snuck a sweet wafer from one of the overfilled plates.

"Yum," she mumbled with a mouthful of sweetness. "Here, taste." She offered the other half of her cookie to Thomas.

He swallowed the pastry in a second.

"Thank you," he told her, licking his lips. "Although I think I would prefer a taste of your tart."

Abby felt a moment of delicious pleasure that he enjoyed sharing her food. That he had no qualms about placing his teeth over her own tooth prints. She smiled widely at his compliment as she allowed him to lead her over to where her mother stood in the back of the room.

The trio of musicians was already playing a lively reel, and they had to skirt a dozen pair of dancers to reach the quieter recesses of the long hall.

"Ahh, yes, here they are," Annie Mason was saying to Charlotte Drummond, one of the chattiest ladies of Kinderhook. "Allow me to introduce my nephew by marriage and our Abigail's betrothed, Sir Thomas Chisholm."

Abby's face flushed as red as her hair at her mother's words.

"Mother," she exclaimed fiercely, ignoring the warning glance from her betrothed. "We haven't formally made any decisions, you know."

"Pleased to meet you," murmured Thomas,

bowing over the older woman's hand and creating quite a flurry of gossip among the townsfolk by firmly hooking his arm around Miss Abigail Mason's waist, yanking her close and effectively imprisoning her at his side as he made the acquaintance of the various people Annie Mason presented to him.

"You're cutting off my breath," Abby muttered after yet another of the endless introductions to older women and young, awestruck girls. "Kindly remove your arm."

"Not a chance," he muttered, bowing pleasantly as a floridly dressed woman curtsied before him.

"Tory pig," she shot back sotto voce.

"Colonist brat," he replied in the same voice. "Stop wiggling," he ordered sternly.

Abby didn't think about repercussions. She had withstood over thirty minutes of mindless prattle from the women of her town as they simpered and preened before the handsome English doctor. In truth, she didn't think at all.

She simply brought her heel down with all her might on her betrothed's foot. Even through the burnished Italian leather, Thomas felt the sting of the heel of her boot. Why could she not be barefoot, he wondered, remembering Arabella's long ago curse.

"Be right back," Abigail cried brightly as his momentary reflex to the pain released her. "Mother, I think I see the Widow Creighton approaching. Make sure you tell her about Thomas's interest in herb gardens."

Once free, Abby didn't linger and as she skittered back toward the front doors, she fought hard to ignore the furious expression on Thomas Chisholm's face. 'Twas well he was wroth with her; she decided, tired of his complacent acceptance of her family and all the aspects of her world. The man didn't know her at all, she thought, chuckling at the prospect of Mistress Creighton's interminable gardening stories.

"Have you seen Bartholomew?" Mariah was

suddenly at her elbow.

"No, I've been chained to Thomas and my mother forever," Abby groaned. "But I'm free at last."

"I just brought the twins to Jamie and begged him to watch them," Mariah told her. "I'm so angry at Bart Tyler, I'd like to kick him right in the..."

"Ass far as I know, he would deserve it," placated Abby. "Shall we explore, cous?"

"Let's," Mariah agreed, linking her arm in Abby's and stepping outside into the sweetly cool spring night. "I've spent the last eon plucking either one twin or the other from someone's hair, drink or plate of food. I am so furious, I want to spit."

"Spit away, Riah," urged Abby. "But wouldn't it be more fun to get even?"

"How?" the blond girl wrinkled her brow as she studied her cousin.

"We'll figure it out as we go," Abby said. "Let's see if we can find Bart first."

They were walking towards the low stables beside the Grange Hall as they spoke. Abby quickened her pace when she noticed a curl of smoke rising from the open door of the farthest stall.

"Shhhh," she motioned for her cousin to follow her, placing one finger before her lips.

They noiselessly approached the open door and crouched silently against the wall of the stables.

Inside, Bart Tyler was speaking.

"The militia is organizing, lads, and eventually we'll want to join them," he said. "But there is one more opportunity to needle the English troops. I have it on good authority that a regiment is being deployed to Albany."

"So what?" a voice rang out. "What can we really do, anyway? We're useless." Abby was convinced it was Aaron who spoke so bitterly.

"We're not useless," Bart countered passionately. "Whatever we do, we do for the cause of America's independence. If we can make

one Englishman doubt his purpose, we have succeeded."

"What is this?" questioned Mariah, soundlessly moving her lips.

Abby simply put her finger in front of her lips.

"Later," she mimed to her cousin.

"Tomorrow morning, the regiment will pass through the valley," Bart was saying. "Our task is to make it uncomfortable for them to do so. In fact, if some of them do not arrive at all, we will have done a very good job."

"What are you saying Tyler?" Emmett Homer demanded hotly. "Are we supposed to kill the bloody British? Are we to put the price of hanging on our heads?"

"Do you suppose there is not already the price of hanging on our heads?" asked Bart Tyler softly. "Lads, we're in the thick of it. 'Tis the cost of liberty."

Abby was mute with the horror of his words. Her brother being ordered to kill?

"'Tis treason," whispered Mariah.

"Hush," Abby hissed sharply.

There was the sound of shuffling within the stall, and Abby grabbed Mariah's hand and yanked her across the path behind a large boulder. She forced her cousin to flatten herself as she was against the cool stone and covered her mouth with her hand.

They heard the sound of the men filing past on the other side of the large rock. Abby counted at least eight shadows passing furtively past their hiding spot. With Aaron, Bart, Emmet and Jake Knowles, that left four unknown followers.

At last there was silence. She dropped her hand from her cousin's mouth.

"Bart is a renegade," Mariah whispered. "Thomas was right."

"Yes, well, so is Aaron," Abby murmured. "So am I for that matter."

"He cares so much about this land," Mariah whispered, awe tingeing her throat. "I think he

would die for it."

"Of course," Abby retorted. "They would. We all would. We are patriots, Mariah, we believe in this land. We believe in the people, and we are the people."

"I love him, Abby," the younger girl blurted. "I would do anything for him."

"Keep your silence then," Abby instructed. "They don't need outside troubles now. They are always vulnerable."

"But what can we do? Aren't we going to do something?" Mariah asked in an anguished voice. "I think we have to do something."

"Mariah, you are speaking as a colonist, as a patriot," Abby whispered. "I fear your brother will not want me when he understands what I am, but he surely will not want you to be the same."

"My brother is not my conscience," Mariah said firmly. "I am myself and will not be under anyone's strictures."

"What about Bart's?" Abby quizzed.

Mariah colored prettily.

"Bart Tyler is not just anyone," Mariah said, blushing deeper. "I told you, I love him and would do aught for him."

"And if I love Thomas and would do aught for him?" Abby teased gently.

"We are well and truly flummoxed, Abby," Mariah exhaled. "God help us, we are in a quandary."

"Let's go dance," Abby said. "Your brother sorely needs rescuing, and I believe you should grab hold of Bart Tyler and give him a piece of your mind. Abandoning you to his twins, indeed!"

Mariah laughed as she linked her arm in her cousin's, and they strode down the path and through the open doors into the bright, festively decorated hall.

They hadn't gone far when a deep, masculine voice interrupted them.

"Care to dance?"

There was no mistaking the command in his voice and even Abby's knees weakened without volition.

"Of course," the young woman said, detaching herself from her cousin's suddenly possessive grip.

The music started up, and he swept her away to the center of the dance floor.

"Where's Mariah?" asked Thomas, suddenly appearing at Abby's side.

"There," Abby pointed to the dance floor. "With Bart." She didn't mean to sound so scared for her cousin but after what they had learned by eavesdropping, she was scared – there was no helping it.

"If you must worry," Thomas instructed. "Worry about yourself, Mistress Boot Heel."

Abby felt a sinking in her stomach at the grim implacable tone. Certainly, he was not so priggish as to hold a little harmless prank against her. She hoped.

"Pshaw," she sputtered. "Let's dance," she held out her hands to the man who claimed he would be her husband.

"Maybe later," he told her, talking her offered hands and leading her toward the open doors.

"Thomas!" she wailed, digging in her heels and trying to stay him.

"Abigail," he reprimanded. "I would speak with you, leave off this incessant bratting."

Abby gulped, not knowing what he was referring to. She could only dread his mood as he pulled her inexorably into the dark night.

Chapter Eleven

Duels

"Unhand me, sir!" Abby cried indignantly as Thomas guided her non-too-gently toward the fence that bordered the road. Truth to tell, his silent manhandling was making her genuinely worried. Instinctively, she reached back and guarded her bottom with her free hand. He was too much like her father when it came to discipline.

The full moon shone a path of silver over his hair and suddenly she wanted to reach up and touch the shining silk.

He didn't bother answering her. When he reached the fence, he sat on a piece of the old stone wall that used to surround the property, holding her captive between his knees, his hands still gripping her wrists.

"Step on my foot, will you?" he thundered. "Leave me in a nonstop prison of perennials, herbal remedies that really don't work and flowering shrubs from Madame Boring Botanical, will you? Where's your loyalty, girl?"

Abby couldn't tell if he was serious. She decided she would have to brave it. Leaning forward, she held his face with both hands and tilted upwards so she could study his eyes.

There was no anger in the agate green. A little irritation mixed with a gleam of amusement. He was teasing her!

The Englishman did have a sense of humor after all.

"With you, milord," she whispered demurely. "Where else would my loyalty be, except with my dearest betrothed?"

He exhaled sharply and drew her into his arms.

"You are ever the minx, Mistress Abigail," he murmured into her neck. "I find myself completely bewitched by your every movement."

"And, I find myself wary of your every

movement, Lord Chisholm," she countered.

"You do indeed deserve a hiding for behaving so atrociously," he remarked pleasantly. "But, I would much rather cuddle you than wallop you."

"You are too kind," she said dryly.

He just chuckled, holding her closer and wrapping his hands around her slender waist as he inhaled the fragrant scent of her hair.

"When can we marry, Abby?" he said in a choked whisper. "I want you."

Abby could barely stand, the sensations of desire were flooding her limbs, and she felt hot and weak at the same time. Proper recriminations sprang to her lips at his quite improper behavior, but she said not a word, biting her lip instead.

She could no longer deny it, she had fallen in love with Thomas Chisholm the first moment she saw him. Even after he switched her for trying to rob him, she loved him. There was a connection with him that was so strong, so perfect – she felt a golden glow throughout her entire body. If only he weren't a bloody Englishman.

But, she was willing to overlook even that.

"Soon," she murmured huskily. "Now. I want you too, Thomas."

"God," he groaned as he captured her mouth with his soft lips.

Their kiss was sweet and endless. Abby felt that she could stay just where she was forever. She loved the taste of him and his warm hard body pressed against hers in the cooling June night. She loved the fact that he was stern and funny, handsome and talented, caring and dedicated and hers.

Finally, he drew back his head and gazed up at her with all the desire and love he felt deep in his heart.

"I'll speak to your father tomorrow," he promised. "We will be wed as soon as it's possible, my love."

"Tis good," she said. "Now can we please

dance?"

"There is still the matter of your heel on my foot..." he lifted her from his lap and turned her around, landing a stinging swat to her skirted bottom.

"Ouch!" she yelped. "Fiend!"

"Save the dramatics," he told her, catching her fingers and pulling her toward the lighted doorway.

The musicians were playing an energetic tune when they rejoined the party. Jacob and Annie Mason were at the head of a long double line of dancers.

"Let's dance," Abby cried, squeezing Thomas's hand as they took their place at the end of the lines. It was only a simple country reel, but Abigail's heart jumped whenever her partner took her hands and twirled her around; and she felt like a countess when he bowed to her at the end of the music.

"You dance like a butterfly," he whispered in her ear as he led her over to the punch table.

"You're very nimble yourself," she retorted.

"I think my father is going to fall in love with you," Thomas laughed. "In fact, I know my brother Toby will."

"Where is Toby, now?"

"Oh, he decided to irritate my father almost to the point of disinheritance by joining the Regiment."

"He is one of King George's infernal redcoats?" she asked in astonishment. "A lackey to tyranny? A mere prop of England's ignominious nobility?"

Thomas snorted lightly.

"He's more likely trying to impress and meet a woman in his dashing uniform," he said dryly. "And, dear one, it's not tyranny if you live at home and support it."

"I live at home," she said flatly.

He smiled at her benignly.

"Do you support it?" she asked with dread in her voice.

"I used to," Thomas said simply. "I was never a soldier, but I believed in King and home. Now, I

believe in other things, too."

"What things?" she asked.

"You." He leaned down and kissed her nose. "Punch?" He offered her a mug of the spiced cider.

"Is that an invitation," she asked slyly, swinging her tiny fist in front of his face.

"It's a refreshment, brat," he told her.

"Then I accept." She took the cup from him and held her hand against his warm fingers for a moment. There was such comfort in the touch of him.

The hours sped past as she enjoyed every moment of her newly discovered love. She danced with her father, two of her brothers, even Bart Tyler took a brief respite from Mariah's side to twirl her around the hall.

Abby danced every other dance with Thomas. It was a simply delightful, magical night.

The magical enchantment of the evening was broken in a decisive manner.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

On the dance floor, Abby turned from her safe haven in Thomas's arms and saw Nat Tyler in a belligerent stance beside the dessert table. Reuben Harrison was in an equally antagonistic mood in front of him.

"Yer a liar, Nat Tyler, and yer daddy's on a lost cause and nuthin but a common outlaw!" The chubby little boy stuck out his chin in a particularly unattractive fashion. "I know, cause my papa tole me so!"

"Well, yer nuthin but a piss-ant King George-lovin piece of no account worthless horse MAN-YURE!" Nat finished his expansive tirade with an obscene gesture that would have done any self-respecting sailor proud.

"Nathaniel!" Bart stormed off the dance floor, fully intending to yank his son out of the fray. He wasn't counting on his dance partner. Mariah shot in front of Bart and confronted the pudgy child who

was a stranger to her.

"Excuse me, little obnoxious rude boy," Mariah said in a deceptively calm voice. "Just where is the poor misguided libelous fool who is your papa?"

Reuben Harrison pointed a stubby finger toward the Magistrate of the town, Joshua Harrison.

"Mariah, hush now," said Bart.

"Bartholomew, this clearly is not a matter to be hushed. That man is spreading dreadful rumors about you, and he should not get away with it." Mariah tossed her silky blond curls in a manner that resembled a spirited filly. "Indeed, he should be roundly chastised for it," she snorted.

"He is the magistrate, Mariah, now hush up," Bart hissed.

Josh Harrison had imbibed rather freely from the casks of the monks' wine. He was completely unprepared for the blond virago who presented herself in his path.

"Uh oh," Thomas muttered in Abby's ear, taking the opportunity to press a warm kiss on the silky patch of skin below her ear. "Here comes trouble."

"She's quite a bulldog," Abby murmured.

"Yes, I believe she gets that from her mother's side," Thomas said. "I have seen that very look on my stepmother's face when she is seriously perturbed at my father."

"My mother, too," Abby told him.

"Should I be worried?" he asked seriously.

"Just don't try to take my bone. Or hurt my family. Or threaten those weaker." Abby said fiercely into his ear.

"You are precious to my heart," Thomas whispered as he gently patted her rear end and led her off the dance floor.

"Madame, perhaps another time," Harrison was blustering in the face of Mariah's diatribe.

"Sir, I think that Mr. Tyler is owed an apology. Clearly, you have been slandering him to your rather detestable offspring and to God knows who else."

"Mariah, don't concern yourself, darling," Bart said in a loud voice. "The honorable Mr. Harrison does not like those who dare to think differently than him."

"Did he just refer to my sister as darling?" mused Thomas.

"Oh, give over, Thomas, they're clearly in love," snapped Abby. "Don't you notice anything in that aristocratic cocoon of yours?"

"What?" Thomas squeezed her buttocks in his distraction.

"Yikes," squeaked Abigail. "Pray, watch yourself, sir."

"Er, Thomas, do you think that's really appropriate," Jacob Mason had suddenly moved to stand beside them. "You are only betrothed, after all."

"Oh, really, Father," Abby hissed, contradicting her earlier outrage. "He's going to be my husband. And, soon, I might add!"

"Abigail, please don't disrespect your father," Thomas reprimanded gently.

"Thomas, my father knows I love him, and it's none of your business anyway," she said haughtily.

The two men looked at each other somewhat helplessly.

"She's yours," Jacob said serenely. "I love my daughter, but I bow to your superior guardianship."

"Coward," muttered Thomas with a wry laugh. "Aye, she is my lady," he added. "I love her and will strive for her perfection in all things." His eyebrows arched evilly.

"I hate the sound of that," Abby whispered.

"Yer lady there's a nasty lady," young Reuben Harrison was telling Nat. "She may look like an angel but she's a devil from hell isself."

"She ain't no lady," cried Nathaniel. "That's Mariah, and she's better than ye'll ever know. And, she ain't from hell neither." Nat punctuated his emphatic statement with a rather precise punch to the nose of young Master Harrison. "She's from

bloody England!"

A little ribbon of crimson trickled from the rapidly reddening nostrils of young Reuben.

"Thank you, Natty, my hero," Mariah bent down and kissed the flustered little pugilist on the forehead.

"S'nuthin," the towheaded rascal mumbled as he squirmed away.

"Don't move an inch!" Bart Tyler ordered in a voice that was colder than all the ice in Iron Lake.

"What?" Mariah asked impatiently. "He wants to go finish playing with his nice friends, now that the nasty one is crying in his shirtsleeves."

"You will be silent," Bart said implacably, grabbing hold of her hand and tugging her close to his side. "I will deal with my son first and then you."

Nat scuffed over to stand in front of his father, head bowed reluctantly.

"Nathaniel, you will apologize to Reuben for this ungentlemanly behavior. I do not care about the provocation. When you act like a ruffian, you have become one. And, you will pay for such behavior over my knee when we get home."

"But, Bart," stammered Mariah in her haste to defend Nathaniel. The child was only defending his father and her. "He was merely trying to help. Surely, you won't punish him for that!"

"Nat, I'm waiting," Bart snapped, glaring at Mariah with an implicit order to hush up in his piercing blue eyes.

"Yessir," the little boy said. He shuffled forward toward his nemesis who was being attended to by a young woman.

Mariah followed the tyke, escaping from Bart's loose grip. She would just keep a safe distance to be sure the youngster wasn't persecuted any further.

"Reuben, I'm sorry for my ungentlemanly behavior," said Nat. "Wasn't nice of me."

The other boy looked up from the cold cloth that was being pressed to his nose by the pretty brown

haired girl.

"S'okay. Wanna play catch?"

"Kay."

The two disappeared toward the front doors, and Mariah's mouth dropped open.

"You like the taste of flies?" Abby asked as she passed her cousin while walking to the table in the back of the room where Annie Mason was sitting. "Hello, Mary Beth," she said to young woman who had been ministering to Reuben Harrison.

"Evening, Abby," the brunette called. "Have you seen Aaron?"

"He's here somewhere," Abby said. "Probably sneaking a smoke out back if I know him." She waved as she continued walking to her mother's table.

Mary Beth Harrison smiled, wandering off toward the open back door where the young men were congregated, smoking their pipes and flirting with whatever girls ventured near. She wasn't sure Aaron would even speak to her. Weeks ago, she had tried to make Aaron jealous by pretending affection for Devon McNeil, hoping to spur the handsome redhead into declaring his intentions; it had all gone wrong and then Aaron had gotten hurt and she had been too mortified to visit him. She wanted to apologize.

"Mariah, take a walk with me," Bart said in a silky voice as he appeared beside her. "It's such a lovely evening."

Mariah glanced toward Abby somewhat helplessly, but her cousin had already reached the table where Annie Mason was washing a cherry tart stain from Hannah's frock.

Thomas suddenly stopped in front of her. She smiled eagerly at this unexpected respite and grabbed her brother's arm.

"They're starting another song," she cried. "Dance with me, Tommy."

Without waiting for an answer, she tugged him onto the dance floor, ignoring the angry glint in

Bartholomew's eyes.

"Seems like you've irritated someone, Riah," Thomas said solemnly. "What is going on with you two? Do you imagine your parents would be happy with such a match?"

"Will they be happy with yours?" she countered.

"My business is my own affair," he said smoothly. "I am not a sixteen year old chit with less sense than a newborn kitten."

"I have plenty of sense," she snapped. "Don't you make me out to be some helpless infant, Thomas. If I love Bartholomew Tyler, that's my own affair also!"

"Be careful, kitten," Thomas said softly. "Your claws are showing."

"Oh, you..." Mariah sputtered. "Big, impossible, infuriating man!"

"I love you too, sister," Thomas crooned in her ear as he swung her to the music. "Have a care with your new friend, though. He seems a bit harder to handle than an over-protective brother."

Thomas lifted one eyebrow and rolled his eyes to one side.

Mariah hadn't noticed the lean, dark haired man who had suddenly materialized at her shoulder.

"May I, Chisholm?" Bart Tyler asked in a deceptively calm voice.

"I suppose, if you must," Thomas acquiesced, handing his sister's small fingers to the other man. "Just remember this hand is precious to me."

"As to me," Tyler reiterated softly, taking Mariah's tiny hand in his own large alabaster palm. "More than you'll ever know, I'm thinking."

Before leaving, Thomas patted the younger man on the shoulder.

"As your physician, I must caution you to take care with every movement," Thomas said quietly with a sparkle of amusement in his green eyes. "Please do not over exert yourself tonight."

"I'll be careful," muttered Bart.

Thomas strode off the dance floor, his eyes

searching the room for his own flame-haired ladylove.

"You ran away, Mistress," Bart said in a voice edged with steel.

"You were being completely unreasonable, sir," Mariah said arrogantly, although her heart was pounding.

"Is it unreasonable to expect my child to behave and be obedient?" Bart asked gruffly.

"I am not your child," Mariah protested stridently.

"I am speaking about Nathaniel," Bart answered with just a glimmer of smile in his stern expression.

"Oh," she said, a wave of red suffusing her pale cheeks. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"You are pleasing to me," he said in a quiet voice. "I wish we were able to... but never mind. There is the matter of your terrible willfulness and disregard for other's wishes to attend. Walk with me, Mariah."

There was a purposeful tone to his voice but also a tenderness that she found unable to resist. Demurely, she allowed him to lead her off the dance floor and out the open front doors into the night air perfumed with early summer.

"Mariah," he began as he led her slowly down the path toward the stables. "I have no right to act as though you were mine unless you give me that right. I make no secret of my feelings, and I think you know my heart, lass. I love you truly and want nothing more than to be with you for the rest of our lives."

"Bart," she whispered fervently as she stopped suddenly, pulling him close. "I love you with my entire being. I only want you forever."

"You don't really know what that means," he told her ominously.

"What then," she demanded. "What do you think it means?"

"If you were mine," he said huskily. "I would lesson you right quick on proper behavior, girl."

"I wish I were yours," Mariah announced boldly, despite the quivering in her stomach.

"Oh, you do, do you," he murmured gruffly.

She nodded, smiling.

"Even if it means answering to me, darling?"

"I only want to answer to you," she whispered, blushing at the intensity of his gaze.

His eyes melted into hers, and he swept her into his long, sinewy arms.

They kissed passionately in the skeins of moonlight, ignoring the lowing of the cattle in the near-by pasture, the gentle whinnying of the horses in the stables.

For an instant, Mariah felt the flickering of her girlhood as the candle of her youth dwindled. Without knowing it, without much preparation, she had become a woman. As Bartholomew Tyler's demanding mouth sought her welcoming lips, she felt a burgeoning wonder – a delicious awakening in her soul that was painted on both sides – both new and old.

Pain twisted her insides, knowing as she did that she and Bart were destined to fight on opposite sides; her allegiances to home and family were forged in the stone of her heart. She would build new alliances, new loyalties but still a wave of sadness at what was passing by swept over her.

"Can we marry?" she asked tremulously. "I don't think I can bear being apart from you."

"Mariah, I love you and will be your husband if you'll have me truly, but surely you must know there are obstacles to this union. Your brother was looking daggers at me when we left the Hall."

"My brother is a good man and can recognize honest feelings and true love, Bart," she told him. "I will follow my heart and my mind in this matter. I am sixteen, I know what I want."

"You are a willful baggage, that is true," he said dryly. He lifted a lock of her flaxen hair and touched it with his lips. "I promise you, sunshine, I will speak to both your brother and uncle at their

earliest convenience."

"Tomorrow," she said. "Tell me you'll speak to them tomorrow, first thing in the morning."

"Can't do it then, sweetheart," he told her.

"Why not?"

"I have business," he said evasively. "Tomorrow evening possibly."

"Definitely," she insisted, squeezing his arm.

"I think I mentioned this before," he said lightly, clasping her about the hips with his large hands. "You are a most willful lady."

"I think I mentioned this before," she countered. "I know what I want, and I usually get it!" She leaned into his warm chest and snuggled against his neck, pressing her lips against the strong column of flesh. She could taste the pulse beneath his Adam's apple and the tangy, slightly salty flavor of his skin.

"None of that, Miss, or you will get it!" he said sharply, landing a ringing swat on her backside. "You must learn when enough is enough."

"Eeek!" she cried. "Dash it all, Bart, that stung!"

"It was meant to," he said sternly. "You are begging for a sound spanking, Mariah Chisholm." He swung back his hand, ready to oblige.

"Enough is never enough, haven't you learned that, Master Tyler," she laughed playfully as she dodged his second blow by dancing sideways. But, he proved to be too swift and strong for her. He caught her in his arms and landed three quick smacks on her bottom before turning her about and capturing her in his arms.

"Sometimes the man likes to be the one in control, little girl," he whispered into her ear, causing a delightful ripple of apprehension beneath her skin. "Best you learn that. Now, let's get back inside before you make a dishonest man of me."

"Sounds like perfect fun," she quipped, leaning her head briefly against his lips.

He inhaled the springtime sweet scent of her blond curls and vowed that he would make this lass the happiest woman on earth. He would spend the

rest of his life making her life a thing of joy and beauty. She moved him more than anyone had ever done before, even his poor dead Miranda, who had always seemed too fragile for this world. Mariah Chisholm was a sprite, a piece of grace that had gentled down onto his rough hardscrabble life, but she had a backbone and courage. He would cherish her always.

"I love you, girl," he whispered.

"I love you too," she murmured.

They strolled inside, oblivious to the radiance that had settled on their mutual expressions, oblivious to the curious glances shooting toward them like bullets in the muted light of the Grange Hall.

Tomorrow would begin many things, thought Bart, wrapping an arm around his beloved's soft shoulders.

Tomorrow, she would make a stand, Mariah thought, a smile curving over her lips.

Chapter Twelve

The Stand

Morning dawned in a breathtaking array of silvery sunlight on the dew-bedecked emerald grass. Abby stood behind the barn and watched the unfurling of day in the valley below her home.

Today was a day for many changes, she mused. The men of the Kinderhook Resistance had planned a specific foray into this blossoming war with the Redcoat tyrants. They were ready to do more than cause mild inconvenience; they were perched at the edge of the precipice, willing to tumble headfirst into the unknown danger. She feared for her brother Aaron, for Bart Tyler and most of all, for Thomas Chisholm and their fragile love, for she knew somehow that this day would not end without some risk for all she held dear.

According to Bart's clandestine meeting the previous night, a small regiment of British troops would be passing through the valley before noon. She had much to do, to ready both herself and Mariah for their own plans, which were sketchy at best. They had decided last night that they would not allow their loved ones to embark unaccompanied into danger, however, they had not formulated a sound, foolproof plan as of yet.

Abby said a silent, fervent prayer for God to bless her endeavors and grant her creativity as she turned back toward the quiet, as yet sleeping, house to awaken her cousin. Luckily for her, the entire Mason clan had slept long past usual because of last night's festivities at the dance.

"Mornin' Abby," called Will as he meandered from the kitchen, heading toward the barn, one of Emma's flaky biscuits in his hand.

"Good morning, Will," she greeted the farmhand. "It's a glorious day, isn't it?"

"That it is, that it is," he agreed with a wide smile. "You're up early today."

Abby didn't tell the young man that she couldn't sleep for the pounding of her heart, for the thrill of realizing that she was truly in love with the handsome British doctor who was her cousin's half-brother. She didn't tell him how her face wouldn't stop smiling all night after the tender promise of his kiss last night. She had no words to describe the warmth that flooded her skin just from thinking about Thomas Chisholm. There was no easy way to explain the sublime sweetness of his mouth on her mouth, his words nestling in the corners of her lips, evoking strains of poignant longing that felt more volatile than an earthquake and lighter than a sparrow's feather. There was no way to describe newfound love.

She just grinned at him.

"I am enjoying the day, William," she said.

"Well, Abigail, I think the day enjoys you as well," he laughed, doffing his cap as he entered the large barn to begin his morning chores.

"Let us hope that the day is kind to me yet," she murmured as she winded her way through the gardens to the house.

Captain Reginald White led a small contingent of his Majesty's finest troops north toward Albany where they would be reinforcements for the tired regiment at Fort William and Henry, their old encampment from the French and Indian Wars. There was much laughter and ribaldry among the men, and he knew why. He was starting to get annoyed at the rollicking atmosphere that surrounded his newly assigned Lieutenant. The fellow was dashing good-looking – a spoiled nobleman just arrived from England – the worst kind of soldier, thought Reginald. They only looked for glory and petticoats, cocky with their own power and sense of entitlement. This Sir Tobias looked to be about thirty or so and was cursed with a wicked sense of humor in addition to his dark blond good

looks and gold-flecked hazel eyes. The colonial misses would surely find him irresistible as would the tavern wenches and regiment whores.

"Lieutenant," he said crisply, as his new officer regaled the column of foot soldiers with yet another bawdy tale. "This is not the local pub where you must needs entertain your cronies with your tasteless parodies of gentle life and homeland."

"I would never parody gentle life, Captain," replied the Lieutenant. "I would know neither where nor how to begin. I am quite ungente, as you shall discover."

"That is enough," exclaimed the exasperated officer. "I would remind you we are not in a Bath drawing room where soldiers are elevated to ridiculous levels of admiration. This is the real frontier of battle where we will separate the foppish boys from the true men."

"I have never been elevated at Bath or elsewhere, rest assured," replied Sir Tobias Chisholm. "And I gave away all my foppery when I accepted my commission, sir."

White narrowed his eyes and glared at his handsome subordinate. He could not continue in this vein of conversation without losing his tenuous grasp on his position of power as senior officer. Damn all rich sons of rich men who entered the King's army as though it were their personal playground. He knew this particular chap was an elder son, destined to be Lord of a huge holding back home at some point in the future. He just wished it could have already happened, thus sparing him from the younger man's disrupting presence. He returned to his place at the head of the horsemen and spurred his horse forward, trying to ignore the sporadic rumbles of laughter that yet erupted from the men in the marching regiment.

"We shall stop for a meal and rest in yonder valley," he commanded his adjutant.

"Aye, Captain," the young man replied. "I shall relay the message." The soldier saluted and dug his

heels into his mount's flanks, spinning around to give the signal.

"I need a rest," sighed Reginald White, for he had been traveling since North Carolina and was weary beyond belief of this infernal countryside. There were mountains and hills and rude villages and the larger cities were filled with antagonistic colonials and organized groups that seemed very much like militia although his informants told him there was no militia. His orders were precise and non-negotiable; he was simply to arrive at Fort William and Henry and he was not to engage in any skirmishes on the way. Captain Reginald White had been sucking in his anger and his pride for the better part of a month. Aye, he was weary. He longed for even the rough comforts of a barracks bunk in a rudimentary fort.

At Hilltop Manor, Abby cursed under her breath when her mother dropped another pile of mending in her basket.

"Mother," she wailed, "I was nearly done with this. You will kill my fingers with this never-ending heap of clothing. Do we not throw anything out?"

"Abigail," Annie Mason said reprovingly. "You are soon to be a married woman, the wife of a country doctor. You had best learn how to mend, I speak from experience, my dear."

Abby grit her teeth and bit back an epithet. She glanced up from her seat at the long kitchen table and couldn't help but giggle at her mother's wry smile. It was true that Annie Mason had never relied on servants to do that which she was perfectly capable of doing. And with eight children, there had always been plenty of mending.

"Wise choice, my dear," Annie said gently as she tapped her own lips warningly.

Abigail blushed. Her mother always could read her thoughts. Thank the Good Lord she didn't get her brain washed out with soap.

"Where are you in such a hurry to go?" asked Judith as she spitefully made a big show of folding the last pair of trousers in her basket. "I am finished, Mother."

"Excellent, Judith," Annie told her. "Now you can help Abigail with her basket."

"Mother," cried Judith. "That's not fair. Abby lollygags along, that's why she's so slow. I finished twice as much as she did."

"Judith Anne, you will be silent and do as you're told," her mother said firmly. "Idle hands make idle minds."

Judith made a rude clicking noise with her teeth and churlishly grabbed one of Jamie's torn shirts from her older sister's pile.

"I will not say this again, Judith," Annie leaned over the table to stare down into her younger daughter's face. "I care not for this sullen attitude of yours, and if it continues, you will be taking a trip to your father's study."

Judith swallowed hard and grudgingly lowered her eyes.

"I am sorry," she said into the crumpled blue cambric of her brother's shirt.

Mariah had been watching the exchange between her cousins and aunt with interest. She was busy embroidering small flowers on the edges of fine lawn handkerchiefs. Some of the finely worked pieces would go to the church to be distributed among the widows of the town. Several others were earmarked for Abigail's trousseau.

When Annie left the room, carrying an armload of neatly folded linens, Mariah scooted closer to her co-conspirator.

"When can we leave, Abby?" she whispered. "We planned to be gone hours ago. What if Bart and the boys have already made their move?"

"They'll wait until the British are leaving the valley," Abby whispered back. "There are perfect hiding spots among the rocks and hills as you head up Kinder Pass."

"Are you certain that Thomas will stay with your father on his rounds today? For we would surely be well and truly flummoxed if he finds out what we're up to."

"And, what are you up to?" hissed Judith as she stuck her head in the middle of the two whispering girls.

"Nothing, Judith, don't fret your pretty blond curls about it."

"I won't fret, Abigail Mason, but I will tell," she said sharply. "I do think you two are dreadfully mean to me. I shall tell mother what you're up to."

"Please, Judith, don't say anything," Mariah pleaded. "We must try to keep Bart from attacking the British soldiers. For surely he'll be killed."

Judith's mouth dropped open.

Abby glared at her cousin.

"Thank you, Mariah, for keeping the secret. Now, our plans are for naught once Madame Loose Tongue talks."

Mariah clapped her hand to her mouth and groaned.

Judith wanted to pinch her sister but knew that such an action would only serve to get them both in trouble.

"I have a plan," Judith said slowly.

"Yes?" Abby and Mariah both turned to her expectantly.

"I will go with you and help."

"Judith, you would never," began Abby. "You do not believe in the cause of the Resistance. Why not let them be captured or killed by the soldiers?"

"Let my brother be captured, Abby?" Judith snorted. "You must think me a fine sister if you believe that."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know that Aaron rides with the KR and I also know that you did too, once," Judith couldn't keep the glint of triumph from her eyes as she flashed a superior, knowing smile.

"Damn me," muttered Abby. "Well, then

somehow contrive to get us released from this infernal mending now, Judith or we will be too late."

"I can do it," Judith promised. "Leave it to me."

Abby rolled her eyes but nodded. They heard Annie Mason's footsteps as she descended the stairs into the main hall.

"Don't say a word," hissed Judith fiercely.

When Annie returned to the kitchen if she was surprised by the sight of three diligent heads bent over their sewing chores, she said nothing.

"Mother," Judith called sweetly. "I have promised Abby that I will help her complete her mending this evening afore supper, may we go now to bring the poultice of vinegar and mustard to Marianne Hannon?"

"All of you?" Annie asked in surprise.

"Aye, Mama, for I promised Marianne that I would bring her some books to study while she's recuperating. And Abby needs to examine her ankle. Please may we all go, it's only our charitable duty, after all, and you did want Mariah to learn about that during her stay with us."

Annie smiled at her blond daughter's earnest request. 'Twas true she had wanted to impart these very humanitarian attributes to her somewhat spoiled niece, and she was both surprised and delighted at Judith's sudden, humble attitude.

"Yes, do run along, my dears," she said gently. "And pray give Mistress Hannon my best regards when you visit with Marianne."

"We will," said Judith sweetly. "Come, girls, let us fetch our cloaks."

Annie smiled as the trio of girls swept from the room. Her daughters were finally getting along and teaching their cousin to care for others; 'twas a good thing indeed.

"That was simply brilliant," commended Abby as the three scrambled out the front door after retrieving their cloaks from the hooks in the closet. "How ever did you think so quickly, Jude?"

"I am always thinking, Abby," her younger sister

told her. "You just don't pay any attention to me."

"I will from this day forward," Abby promised, quickly hugging her little sister as the three girls hurried to the barn to saddle their horses.

"I hope we are not too late," Mariah exclaimed as she vaulted into the saddle on Picnic's back. "I should never forgive myself if Bartholomew is injured in any way."

Abby made a quick silencing motion to her cousin as she noticed Will look up sharply from the harness he was mending.

"I hope that Marianne enjoys that book of tales you have for her, Judith," Abby said loudly.

"I'm certain she will," Judith played along expertly. "She was wont to bite my head off with envy when I told her Papa had bought it home from Albany for me. She does so love to read. I feel sure it is just the thing to cheer her spirits while she is laid up."

Mariah bit her lip nervously as she studied her cousins.

"We are off to the Hannon's farm, Will," Abby called nonchalantly as the three girls walked their horses sedately toward the barn door. The hired man stood and followed them to the door.

"Aye, you be careful, Abby," he said soberly as he leaned against the doorframe, watching them go.

Sir Tobias Chisholm was less than enamored with the cold victuals that comprised his dinner. "Is this beef?" he asked his dining companion, a Mr. Andrew Nicholls. "Or is it a piece of my boot?"

"Could be either one, I'm thinking, sir," said young Andrew.

"It's quite an acquired taste is what I'm thinking," Toby commented, between chewing. "I feel that my jaw is engaged in a losing wrestling match with this piece of mystery substance."

"Yes, sir," said young Andrew. "The rations are mostly dreadful. But, it will do no good to

complain."

"No adequate cuisine, long hours, mountainous country," mused Tobias. "Perhaps, I made one of my infamous errors in judgment in deciding on a military campaign at this time."

"Pardon me, sir," Andrew interjected. "The word among the troops is that you are an elder son, why would you join the regiment when you are destined to inherit and live the life of a nobleman?"

Toby threw back his head and laughed.

"I wondered if that bit of news was floating around," he guffawed. "That explains the looks of bewilderment that I keep encountering. My dear Nicholls, my father is in robust health, thank the good Lord, my brother is a respected physician, and my younger half-sister is an endless source of joy and amusement to all of us."

"Yes sir?" questioned the younger man.

"Well, it just seemed that I was rather superfluous. My dear pater is handling his estates admirably, my younger brother is handling his life and our sister's life and aside from debauchery and gaming, the regiment seemed the only proper livelihood for me, since I can't write worth a fig and can only seem to grow weeds."

"Quite right, sir," agreed Andrew. "And it's a fine life at that!"

"You're a liar, sir, but I like that in a friend," chuckled Sir Tobias.

"Then you'll love this," continued Andrew. "Dessert's even better than dinner."

"God Save the King," muttered Sir Tobias. "I know He's not saving me!"

Bart Tyler huddled beside an outcropping of granite, eyes trained on the regiment of four score men or more encamped in the valley below, enjoying their noon meal it seemed. He rapidly improvised the original plans based on the unexpected size of the regiment. Were they a group

of forty or less, then the Kinderhook boys could make some sort of impact, but with the larger numbers of the British troops, Bart knew it would be futile to launch an outright attack.

"Can we take them?" whispered Aaron.

"Not in this lifetime, young Mason," said Bart softly. "But, we will lead them on a fine dance."

"What do you mean?"

"I would never endanger my men on a lost cause mission," Bart said solemnly. "Although I am a patriot to the death, I will not send my men to their certain end be it not justified."

"Let us decide for ourselves, Bart," cried Aaron. "Many of us would rather die than live under tyranny."

"It is not a choice I would let you make at this time," Bart sighed. "Your lands are not in jeopardy, your kin is not in danger."

"But, we can at least stop these particular tyrants," Aaron exclaimed. "And these American Colonies are worth fighting for, freedom is worth it."

"You will follow my orders, Mason," Bart growled.

"Yes, sir," snapped Aaron.

"Aaron," Bart sighed. "The Resistance would be ill served if I were to charge into every fray with such a reckless disregard for self preservation that you seem to possess. We will be needed in the militia very soon; we owe our country our full measure. " He patted the younger man on the shoulder. "Let us tell the others our plan for ruining the redcoats' day."

Bart leaned over and whispered something that soon had the redhead chuckling.

"Aye," Aaron laughed. "That should do it. Let's just hope we can convince the shepherd."

"Never fear," said Bart. "The shepherd is my cousin Ezekial and nothing Zeke likes more than a bit of fun."

"But, Bart," Aaron said seriously. "If there were not such a large number of British down there in the

valley, we were planning something else, isn't that so?"

"Yes, Aaron, we were," Bart answered gravely. "For we are all men true to our country, and we will have our say and make our stand. But, we will not offer ourselves as human sacrifices to do it, we are Americans. We are smarter than that!"

"Aye, that we are," Aaron concurred. "Thank you for explaining it to me."

"You're a good man, Mason," Bart said, slapping the younger man's back with affection. "And we are likely to be related at a point in the near future, so it is good we are friends."

"Bart," Aaron began with some trepidation. "I must tell you, Abby is betrothed to Chisholm. It happened suddenly, but they are quite happy."

"I was there, man," Bart laughed. "No, my heart belongs to young Mistress Chisholm, and I believe she feels the same. I plan to speak to her brother at the first opportunity. I will have the lass, I love her beyond reason. He must sanction the match or answer to me."

"It will be fine, Bart," Aaron said reluctantly, certain of the opposite. Surely, his comrade must see the unlikelihood of such an alliance. Mariah was the daughter of an English nobleman. Bart was a rebel. Thomas Chisholm was not going to give his blessing to this joining.

"Yes, it will be, Aaron," Bart said finally. The two men retreated to where the horses were tethered and the rest of their group waited.

"Really, Thomas, it won't take but a moment to return to the office for that liniment," Jacob Mason said calmly as he wheeled about the carriage and turned it back toward Kinderhook. "I know the Widow Thompson will have my head if I don't have it for her. Why not make an old woman happy and spare my head at the same time?"

"I find that to be an admirable accomplishment,

Jake," Thomas laughed. "I am enjoying this beautiful day and think a little added diversion is fine."

"It is good we are in agreement, then," Jacob said heartily as he slapped the reins down on his pair of fine Morgans. "Besides, 'tis a good day for travel."

"This is a delightful country, I must admit," Thomas said, inhaling the sweet scent of meadow grasses and warm air soft enough to feel like a caress on his face but not hot enough to be bothersome. "I had no idea what I was hoping to find here, but this is beyond everything."

"Will we be able to convince you to hang your shingle here in New York," Jacob asked earnestly. "I know that Abigail loves you, I can see that, but Tom, she also loves her family and this country. She would enjoy England for a time, but then she would wither, dying inside for her home. She belongs to this land."

Thomas was silent, understanding exactly what the older man was saying. He had wondered at first how he would manage to convince Abby to live in England. He thought she would perhaps agree to go at first, but how could he cut her off from the very lifeblood that flowed through her veins. She was fiercely planted in this world. He was not so rooted to England.

"I think we will live here, Jake," Thomas said. "I believe we would do admirably if we could have even half what you and Anne have. Of course, we would have to go home to see to my house and tell my father. But, I think we could return within half a year."

Jacob Mason grinned unabashedly. He reached out and patted the younger man's shoulder.

"It does my heart good to hear your words, Thomas," he said happily. "We would have been sore aggrieved to have our dearest Abby an ocean away. Annie will be pleased more than I can say. Thank you."

Thomas laughed.

"Tis I who thank you, Jacob," he said. "For you are giving me a new life with an angel I would never have known unless I ventured to these green hills. Or perhaps I should thank Bart for sending a redheaded girl to do a bandit's job in the first place."

Jacob did not look as confused as he should have looked, and Thomas wondered if he had always known about the fiasco wherein he had first met his daughter.

When he was tending to Bart's injuries, he had learned of many of the secret activities known only to the few known as the Kinderhook Resistance. Laudanum and pain had loosened the other man's tongue when only Thomas was there to receive the knowledge.

"Their hearts mean well," was all Jacob would say.

"You know I might be returning here with your daughter to a full-fledged war, Jacob," Thomas said seriously.

"It is a war that needs fighting, Thomas," Jacob Mason told him. "It is long overdue. Mankind will twist like sunflowers to freedom as though it were the sun. And men will fight for what they need." They had reached the office. Jacob handed the reins over to Thomas and jumped quickly from the carriage.

"I'll be back in a flash of lightning," he promised.

He returned a short minute later, clutching the apothecary jar of liniment.

"Lydia Thompson will be a happy woman this day," he said. "We can make up time by going across the valley rather than the long way around it."

"Fine," said Thomas, wondering what Abigail was doing at that moment, missing her sparkling gray eyes and long fiery curls. He wanted nothing more than to hold her sweet, freckled hand and lose himself in the lush explosion of her lips. He

marveled at her passion, at the integrity of her gaze and the foolish way she threw herself at every venture.

He loved the intensity of her principles. He loved her, all of her.

"Come, ladies," Abby cried. "Let us go entertain the troops."

Mariah and Judith looked askance at the older girl. What was she thinking? They were crouched on the ridge of the valley, overlooking a small contingent of British soldiers, who were evidently just mustering, about to set forth from their camp.

"Abby, are you mad?" asked Judith. "Those are real soldiers. We cannot go down there."

"I agree," said Mariah. "What are we to do? Why would they even notice us?"

"They would notice," Abby said resolutely. "And we would be buying time for the men of the Resistance. I say we go down there and do what we can to delay their journey north to Albany."

"What are you thinking?" asked Mariah.

"I thought that one of you could have a fit," Abby explained simply. "I would implore their aid and hopefully, we would be able to waylay them just a bit."

"Waylay them for what?" asked Judith scornfully. "We would be just an inconvenience. I am certain they would ignore us, Abby, or perhaps do something worse."

"Jude, listen," began Abigail earnestly. "I think we can make a difference. It might be nothing, but it will be a difference. Let's take a chance. Let's be an inconvenience."

Judith looked at the fire that was sparkling from her older sister's gray eyes. Abby always was one for dramatics and extremes. But, she also would never hesitate to make a stand for what she believed in; Judith admired that, feared it, but wished she had that same courage.

"All right," she said cautiously. "Let's do it, girls. I'll be the one suffering from the fit. I can do helpless yet scary pretty well."

"Bless you, sister," cried Abigail. "Wait until we're in the midst of them, Judith, and then give it your whole effort."

"Yes, I will," said Judith, her heart beating erratically.

The three urged their horses down the gradual slope toward the soldiers. As they came into the valley, the British watched their approach curiously.

Tobias Chisholm was already astride his horse when he noticed the trio of girls making their way toward the troops. Narrowing his eyes, he studied one of the two blond chits more closely.

"What the deuce," he exclaimed as he kicked his horse's flanks and pressed through the ranks of military.

"Now," Abby muttered, pasting a bright smile on her face as they entered a sprawling semi-circle of men. Judith threw herself off her mare onto the ground, screaming convulsively and rolling her eyes.

Mariah slipped to the ground, crouching over her cousin, making soft keening noises as though in great distress.

Abby found herself nose to nose with a handsome, golden-haired, sharp-eyed officer. He looked at her wryly, and she felt a momentary kinship with him before she shook herself from such fanciful thoughts.

"Looks like a grand mal seizure," he said gently. "Should we lance her? Perhaps apply leeches?"

"Sir," cried Abby. "Such drastic measures are not called for, let us just fan her gently and pray for the best."

"Nonsense," cried Toby. "We should exorcise the wound by burning her hair, that's what I think."

"You think like a Puritanical fool is what I think, sir," cried Abby. "Shall we hang her up by the thumbs to see if she needs some air?"

"You, my dear, sound like a bit of a troublemaker," said Toby as he circled the ground where Judith was lying in state, jerking occasionally as the mood hit her. He recognized without a doubt the bent golden head of the other girl on the ground but he waited to see if she would acknowledge him.

Toby bent over Judith and lifted her chin with one long finger.

"I think we may need to apply a firm hand to her backside," he drawled. "Usually, that cures a fit of the mischief-making, isn't that so, Riah?" he spun about and crooked a hand about the crouching blond girl, drawing her closer to his side. "Not even a kiss for your eldest brother?"

Mariah looked up with tears in her eyes. She flung her arms over Toby's shoulders, kissing her brother energetically.

"I'm sorry," she wailed. "Toby, it is so good to see you, but I was afraid. I didn't know what to do. Of course, I do love you, and I am so happy to see you."

"I am happy to see you too," he said gravely.

"I am happy to see both of you," ventured Abby. "But, I would be happier if there was not such a cloud of activity even now venturing down from the upper valley. I am afraid that we have company."

They looked up at her words and saw at least a hundred sheep streaking down the hillside toward them.

"That's a lot of sweaters," said Toby.

"The soldiers are tripping," said Abby, trying not to laugh. "Look at the way they clutch each other."

"Because animals are trying to knock them over," Toby said dryly.

"Oh no," moaned Mariah.

Bart was leading a procession of men down the valley toward their side. One of them ran toward the sheep, trying to herd them away from the soldiers.

"Let's run," said Abby. "Let's just run away now and see if we can make it all stop."

"Yes, that might work," said Judith as she scrambled to her feet, foregoing her lackadaisical fit. She joined her sister and cousin, and the three women stood facing the oncoming surge of men. "Except, that Thomas is also there, and he doesn't look happy."

Abby glanced up the slope, and her heart stopped when she saw her lover atop the hill, standing arms akimbo, eyes narrowed in a fierce frown. She backed up nervously when he started down the incline towards them.

"Ooops," she said. "Hell and damnation."

"First my sister and now my brother," Toby drawled. "Is my father coming for tea?"

"No, but it looks like mine is," Abby groaned as she saw Jacob Mason striding purposely toward them.

"Bartholomew looks a trifle angry, don't you think?" Mariah ventured as she saw the dark expression on her beloved's face.

"I think we are not in a good position," Abby said glumly. "I think we are in for a bit of rough weather, as it were."

"Definitely," quipped Sir Toby. "Gale forces by the looks of these three blokes. Looks like you're in for quite a battering."

He began to chuckle.

"Lieutenant?" Captain White appeared on his large chestnut mare. "What's amiss?"

"It's nothing, sir," said Toby. "It's just my family come to welcome me to their country. This little bit of fluff is my sister Mariah," he said, drawing Mariah into the crook of his arms. "And the pretty redhead is my cousin Abigail and the other blond is dear little Judith."

Reginald White looked as though he had swallowed a bad pudding.

"Give us just a moment, sir," Toby said gaily. "I think my brother and uncle are also coming down to say hello and what, can this be Bartholomew?" He quickly stuck out his hand just as Bart reached their

side.

Bartholomew Tyler took the proffered hand, a look of puzzlement replacing the anger on his face.

"Make it quick, Chisholm," the Captain said grudgingly. "You can catch up to us." If he thought it odd that a retinue of twenty men had accompanied the welcome party, he didn't mention it. His orders were to get to Fort William and Henry. He just wanted to sleep in a bunk that night. He raised his hand and gave the order to proceed.

The regiment filed past the disparate group of people and the milling sheep.

Thomas had reached them by then.

Abigail sidled away from him when he fixed his cold, stern eyes on her.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," he said shortly.

"Shall I have another fit, Abby?" asked Judith.

"I don't think it would help, Jude," said Abby. "But, I can explain, Thomas. It's really very simple, you see."

"Do tell," he said in that silky voice she dreaded.

"Yes, do tell," said Bart as he pierced Mariah's composure with his icy blue eyes.

"I also want to hear this story," Jacob Mason lifted one bushy red eyebrow at his daughters.

Abby glanced about wildly at the uncompromising faces turned toward her, gratefully resting her eyes finally on her twin's amused countenance.

Aaron rolled his eyes at his sister and winked.

"Abigail, we are waiting!" Thomas said harshly, drawing her attention back to his concerned features.

"Oh, hang it all," she said. "Don't be such a stick in the mud, milord Doctor."

"Stick in the mud?" he growled, moving menacingly closer.

"Perhaps, I misspoke," Abby quavered.

"Perhaps," he agreed richly, capturing her within the prison of his arms. "Perhaps, you'd like to begin

again?"

Abby felt the iron band of his grasp on her skin and sighed. This wasn't going to be good.

Chapter Thirteen

The Reckoning

Abigail Mason felt surrounded by disapproving eyes; censure lapped over her in frigid waves as cold as the waters of Iron Lake. Her arm was caught firmly in the inflexible clutches of Dr. Thomas Chisholm and try as she might, she could not shrug him loose.

"Please tell me that you did not just ride into an encampment of British soldiers," Thomas began angrily, shaking her briefly. "Have you any sense at all in that firebrand head of yours?"

Abby stiffened her spine, yanking herself free as she tossed her head dismissively. "I knew what I was doing," she snapped, hurt by his pejorative tone.

"Clearly, you did not!" Chisholm snapped back. "The fact is, Abigail, that you acted recklessly, with little thought to the possible outcome. That you are not now imprisoned or facing interrogation is a miracle."

Abigail sucked in her breath and thought about a possible explanation to give to her betrothed. Nothing plausible came to mind. With a sense of doom, she realized she would have to just tell him the truth and pray for the best.

For the first time, Thomas Chisholm noticed the blond British officer who was hovering about Abby and holding Mariah's hand.

"Toby!" he exclaimed in disbelief, shaking his head as though he saw an apparition. He clasped his older brother by the arm and embraced him affectionately. "'Tis good to see you, brother. What in the world are you doing here? Did you leave our parents well?"

"I'm here on business," the elder Chisholm explained dryly. "I left our parents in delirium that they are now seemingly on their second honeymoon. A big manor house with nary an

offspring in sight."

"You two visit for awhile," Abby prodded the dashing officer toward her brooding fiancé. "I must tell father about a delightful herbal remedy I have discovered whilst on this little outing."

Jacob Mason furrowed his bushy red eyebrows at the child that favored him most closely.

"Outing, my foot, Mistress Abigail," he bellowed. "I'd tan your tail for you if I didn't know my future son-in-law would do it for me."

Abigail's sparkling gray eyes snapped with outrage. Toby Chisholm looked toward the Bart fellow he had just pretended to know. However, the Bart fellow wasn't looking at Abigail at all, instead he had his smoldering blue eyes fixed on Mariah. These colonists were all daft, he thought.

"Father!" Abby cried. "I am not a child to be placated or punished at a man's whim. I am a woman, a patriot true, who was only trying to aid our cause against the insufferable British pigs."

A silence fell over the entire group. Judith's mouth dropped open.

"That was harsh," Mariah commented.

Jacob Mason frowned at his daughter while firmly leading her back over to Thomas's side.

"Abigail," Jacob said sternly. "We do not call our relations pigs in their presence." The pigs in question lifted their collective aristocratic brows at the good doctor's remark. "That was an uncalled for lapse in both manners and judgment. And, while I do indeed think of you as a child, since you are constantly acting more immature than your little sister Hannah, I am very certain that Thomas does not. And, for this bit of unmindful, dangerous behavior, I sincerely hope he blisters your backside but good!"

"Hey, what British pig?" Toby finally blinked. "You are referring to me, I assume? And, Thomas, not the Bart fellow, is the lover? What a royal pudding this is."

"What's a royal pudding?" Judith asked

innocently, clasping her hands before her. "Is it a big ball of shit?"

"Judith Anne!" her father barked. "We do not refer to anything as a ball of shit, least of all that which most closely resembles a ball of shit. Mind your manners, girl, or I will tan your hide!"

"Yes, papa," she said dutifully, making a face when her father turned away.

"I find this particular Mason daughter most refreshing," Toby remarked. "And, she is quite right, a royal pudding is in fact a big ball of shite, I just didn't want to state the obvious. I am quite enchanted by Mistress Judith Anne Mason's delightful lack of diplomacy."

"Wait 'til you meet the rest of the family," Thomas muttered. "If it's lack of diplomacy you treasure."

"Splendid," Toby said. "I will endeavor to get some leave time to come visit once I can insinuate myself into the captain's good graces."

"That's an unlikely event," Aaron interjected. "That Tory officer looked more like to strangle you than reward you."

"Au contraire, coz, I am assuming you are my coz by that head of hair, " Toby laughed. "Our dear pompous Reggie White is quite taken with me, and why not?" He tossed his mop of blond curls and winked at Judith and Mariah who giggled in return.

"Why not indeed," Judith declared. She blushed furiously when she realized what she had said. But it was too late; Aaron had caught her words.

"Careful, Jude," her older brother smirked. "Don't go mooning after your own cousin, can't be proper."

"No more improper than Abby and Thomas," Judith retaliated. "There's no blood between us and the Chisholm boys, just Mariah and well you know it, Aaron Mason, so shut up."

"Judith, mind your language," Jacob intervened, separating the siblings when Aaron went to pull his sister's fat blond braid. "Aaron, grow up and stop

teasing your sister."

Toby watched the exchange with amusement. He found himself drawn to the pretty young girl who was his cousin simply by the good fortune of his father's marriage, but was certainly too young to woo in any event; she didn't look Mariah's age. He vowed to himself to keep in touch with his colonial relations; God willing they wouldn't actually embark upon a war with them. Drat and damnation, he was no soldier. He rather fancied the uniform but the whole sordid march through this land had left a bitter taste in his mouth. These people were not the enemy. They were family or could be friends.

"I must go," he told them. "But, before I go, one small matter concerns me, Tom. Since the good Lord Chisholm, our esteemed Pater, is not likely to venture this far west, whom will the Bart fellow turn to when he seeks our sister's hand and are we even willing to give it?"

Thomas glanced from his sister to the brooding Bartholomew Tyler. In the time since he had first met the belligerent younger man, a grudging respect had arisen between the two men, and Thomas was loath to disturb the uneasy truce with his brotherly indignation. Truth be told, Bart was good for Mariah, and Thomas acknowledged this fact despite his own misgivings.

"You, I expect," Thomas said wryly. "And, she loves the fellow. Yes, we are willing."

Mariah jumped up at her brother's accepting speech; she never thought he would give in so easily. She stifled her excited squeal and tried to look demure as she squeezed Abby's hand.

"Just what I feared," Toby said mournfully. "I shall probably muck it up terribly."

"Undoubtedly," the younger man said.

Thomas and Toby drew apart from the others and spoke quietly for a few moments, sharing the events of the last months with each other. The elder Chisholm seemed serious until he finally nodded and slapped his physician brother on the back.

"Hopefully, I will be with you all again very soon," Tobias Chisholm said. He stepped up to Abigail and wrapped the redheaded girl in his exuberant embrace. "Welcome to our part of the family, Abby and congratulations, I surmise, are in order. Thank you for taking on the miserable curmudgeonly bachelor who is my little brother. All of England thanks you!" He swept her a gallant bow, and Abby laughed, forgetting entirely about the curmudgeon in question who was watching the proceedings with a dour expression on his handsome face.

Mariah was next, and Sir Toby lifted the little blond off her feet completely, letting out a whoop of joy as he affectionately kissed his sister and tossed her in the air.

"Mind Tommy, and your uncle, Riah," he cautioned. "We'll discuss the future next time we meet, is that clear, sister? No running off to Gretna Green, miss, is there even such a place here?"

Mariah shook her head wordlessly. A tiny smile appeared when Toby clapped Bart on the shoulder and offered his condolences. She loved her brothers so much, and having both Toby and Thomas here was like a dream.

Jacob Mason received a bear hug, as did Aaron. Mistress Judith was awarded a chaste kiss on her small hand and a twinkle from those blue eyes. Toby hugged his brother and kissed his cheeks with sincere affection before vaulting neatly into his saddle and doffing his hat as he cantered off in pursuit of his regiment.

They waved and watched him disappear into the dusk.

"I must know," Thomas said in an ominously quiet voice, drawing Abby away from the others to speak privately before returning to the Mason home. "What, really, were you thinking? What, Abigail? To tumble down into a valley filled with armed soldiers. Pray, what were you doing?"

Abby blushed. Her plans did not ever go so

completely awry as they did in this man's presence. From the moment when she had attempted to hijack his carriage to this dreadful unfolding in the Kinderhook Valley, she had made one ghastly mistake after another. She was an ardent patriot; and that was her undoing, for her sins were all of a careless, headstrong variety. She never thought; she acted. She did not pause to consider consequences; she rushed passionately ahead.

"In truth, Thomas, I thought I was helping," she said sincerely. "These men are my kin, my friends and neighbors. This country is my country. I will fight for it."

"And, I am your betrothed, Abby, that makes you my kin," he told her soberly. "Perhaps, these colonies will be a country, 'tis a definite possibility, but at the moment they are under the sovereign rule of King George. England is your country, " he paused, reaching for her hand.

"Never!" Abby cried, shaking off his touch as though it burned. "I will never call that cauldron of tyrants my country." She tossed back her fiery curls and added stubbornly, "And, I defy you to make me!"

"Let me finish," he demanded, reaching out to keep her from running away. He held her fingers in his tight grip. "I was going to say that England is your country too, because you will have a home there."

Thomas would have continued to explain that although they would maintain his farm in the quiet English countryside, they would reside in Abigail's beloved Kinderhook, but Abby didn't give him a chance. When he would not release her hand, she drew back her foot and kicked his shin hard.

Howling, he dropped her hand to rub his throbbing ankle. Suddenly free, Abigail flew to Rebel and leapt to the chestnut gelding's back.

"I will never leave my home," she cried; unshed tears shining from her gray eyes. "I was wrong to love you, Chisholm, you are not who I thought you

were. Consider us unbetrothed!" She spurred her heels into Rebel's flanks and galloped out of the valley, heading north.

"Damn," hissed Aaron Mason as he watched his twin ride like a flame past them. "Hope she don't break her neck."

Thomas Chisholm's green eyes narrowed as they followed the red-haired, red-tempered love of his life as she rode like a hellion over the rocky ground. His palm itched as he strode toward the horse tethered closest to him. He intended to lesson the chit into some decent manners and safe behavior if it was the last thing he did.

"May I borrow your horse?" he shouted to Jacob, as he started to untie Picnic.

"Take mine, she's faster," Bart Tyler handed over the reins to his new, enormous black mare.

"What's her name?" Thomas said as he neatly mounted the huge animal.

"Libby," Bart called. "Short for Liberty!"

"Figures," Thomas said. "Thanks!" He dug his boots into the horse's muscled haunches and cantered gracefully after his errant fiancée.

Toby Chisholm felt the presence of someone behind him. He was still a mile or so behind his regiment. He thought he'd catch up to them before night fell if he took his time as he intended to. Perhaps they would reach Fort William and Henry tonight. He had studied the geography of the area before they set out from Port Elizabeth. But the neatly scaled depictions on the map were nothing like the enormous country they were traversing. This was God's land indeed, he thought poetically.

So who the devil was behind him?

He pulled to the side of the trail and urged his horse behind a large outcropping of rock and a tangle of wild berry bushes.

He should have been surprised to see Abigail Mason riding wildly in his wake, hair like fire

streaming down her back, but he wasn't. Stealthily he followed her and whistled loudly, causing her horse to prick his ears and slow down.

"Abigail!" he called.

She spun around and turned Rebel to wait, facing him.

When they met, Toby reached out and took the reins from her hands.

"Let's talk, cousin," he said imperiously, and Abby heard Thomas in his arrogant tone. "I cannot imagine what my brother is about, letting you ride like a gypsy through these woodlands."

"Thomas Chisholm has nothing to say about where or how I ride," Abby said haughtily. "I do as I will and that man is nothing to me!"

"Oh, I should rather think he is," Toby said. Without another word, he dismounted and also lifted the slender girl from her saddle. "And, Thomas has something to say about everything."

"He is just a despicable, arrogant, overbearing, disgusting, horrible pig!" Abby cried. "I hate him. He is a loathsome creature. He is just a damn Tory!"

"Yes, I know," Toby consoled her. "He is all that and even more. I can vouch for it. I'm his brother. So, what did he do to take the glow from your eyes and turn you into this shrill, but absolutely deservedly shrill, I'm sure, virago?"

Abby blushed. She was indeed behaving quite badly. She only hoped no one else would learn of her lack of control regarding Dr. Thomas Chisholm, the handsome fiend from hell. Annie Mason, for one, would be enraged if she were to learn of her daughter's colorful diatribe. However, Annie was not here.

"That miscreant actually had the nerve to tell me that England was my home, that I must learn to love it, that it was my duty to love it as we would live there forever, away from my family and all I love." Abigail choked on her tears as she cried unabashedly in front of this man who she thought was going to be her brother-in-law just a short time

ago. "I love him, Toby, but I cannot leave my home. How could he ask me to do this? How could he profess to love me and demand such a sacrifice from me?"

Toby held the girl in his arms as she broke down, weeping uncontrollably. He was confused. In their short conversation, Thomas had told him of his plans to live in the New York colony, very nearby the Masons in Kinderhook. He was already looking into farms and houses that might suit his young bride.

"There, there," he comforted her. "Abby girl, do you honestly think Thomas would take you away from all you love? Why, he told me that he was planning to take you home to see our folks and settle his affairs and then just as quickly bring you back to your own new home here. Didn't you ask him about this?"

Abby stiffened in his arms. She jerked her head up, shocked by Toby's words.

"What?" she whispered.

"Thomas told me himself that he planned to find or build a house here for you."

"Damn him," she cried. "Why didn't he tell me so? Why did he let me think he would take me to England?"

"Did he say that?" Toby asked. "He actually told you that you were going to live back home?"

Abigail thought back to the brief conversation they had before she had gone and kicked Chisholm in the shins. "Oh no," she groaned.

"What's the matter, lass?" Toby was genuinely concerned. The redhead had turned so pale; he feared that she might faint in his arms.

"My dear betrothed is just realizing that she made a big, big mistake," Thomas Chisholm's cool, silky voice dripped over them like a skein of icy water.

"Thomas?" Abby twisted in Toby's arms, knocking into her cousin's chin with her head.

"Ouch! Hey, bro," Toby said cheerfully. "Your

Abby is a handful for certain, a delightful, sweet armful of a handful."

"You can release her now," Thomas said, dismounting from the horse called Liberty. "She'll be coming with me. Abigail Mason, you are going to have to learn how to trust your kin!"

His moss colored eyes shone with love for her even though his mouth was grim with determination. He must have ridden hard to catch her. His normally well-groomed queue was loose and damp strands of his chestnut hair clung to skin moist with perspiration. His shirt was smudged with sweat and dirt from the trail, his collar open, exposing a golden triangle of skin and the tangle of dark hair that grew there. Abby's heart pounded as her eyes feasted on him. She longed to lay her head against the powerful column of his tanned neck, to hear the erratic beat of his strong life pulse. She didn't know how it had happened so quickly, but she loved this man from the core of her being.

"I'm sorry, Thomas," she whispered as she rushed into his arms. He held her tightly as she clutched him. "I love you. I'm so sorry for everything."

"Tis fine, sweeting," he murmured into her ear. "I understand your behavior but not the motivation for it. How could you think me such a brute, Abby?" he asked her, stroking her hair back and dropping kisses into her fresh smelling scalp.

"To be honest, it was easy," she said frankly. "You seem quite capable of being a brute, look at how you have treated me in the past!" A dimple peeped out from beneath the curtain of red curls.

"When you deserved it," he amended. "Speaking of which, don't imagine that you are not going to pay the piper for your appalling behavior this day."

Abby's heart sank at his words. She was hoping he would just forget about it all and love her.

"Can't you just skip to the part where you forgive me and hold me tight?" she quipped.

"Mistress Abigail, you really don't know me, do

you?"

Abby groaned. She did know him. That was the problem.

"Well, children, much as I'd love to stay and chat, I must be off to find my mates. I'm sure we'll be having a tasteless dry shingle of some brown substance for supper, and I certainly don't want to miss it," Toby said. "Meals are a source of much amusement and speculation for me. I should hate to forego the entertainment."

"Ride carefully, Toby," Abby told him, hugging the blond officer fiercely. "Be safe and come visit us soon."

"That, I will," he laughed. "If only to make sure my brother is behaving himself and that you haven't stampeded any more British battalions with sheep or pigs even, seeing that you have a penchant for that breed of livestock."

He tipped his cap and straightened up in the saddle. Flashing one more smile, he rode off, calling back plaintively.

"Don't forget to invite me to the wedding..."

Thomas and Abigail were alone in the small clearing.

Abby backed away from the stern expression on Thomas' face. He approached her purposefully and reached for her hand.

"Do not fight me, Abigail," he told her.

"Clearly, you don't know me, Dr. Chisholm," she told him.

"You are more precious to me than air, Abby," he began tenderly. "I think my life truly began that day when you jumped onto my coach, thinking to relieve me of my purse. I will not lose you. Not to your foolish acts of bravery or to my damnable pride. And I intend to lesson you right now about your responsibility to me. I will be obeyed on this issue – that you will not endanger yourself thusly again!"

Abby cringed at his words. She was ashamed of the way she had kicked out at him, believing the

worst of him while discounting his love, and he wasn't even mentioning that.

"Do I make myself clear?" he asked sternly.

"Yes, Thomas," she said in a small voice. "I promise I will never do such a thing again."

"You will never act the patriot again? And put your life in jeopardy?" He wanted her assurances.

"It is no act," she said simply. "I am a patriot," she told him. "I will always answer to the call of my heart, which belongs not just to you but to this country. But for you, I will try never to do anything dangerous to myself or my family."

Thomas frowned. But as he looked down at the willful, beautiful woman, he realized it was part of her. He loved her because she was a patriot, she was loyal and fierce and alive, and he cherished that. He was going to whale the tar out of her, but he loved her!

"Fair enough, I suppose," he told her. "Now I must answer to my heart, which is the fierce guardian of my love for you."

Slowly, he unclasped the buckle on his leather belt and watched her eyes widen. The hiss of leather stung her ears as he slid the belt from his waist and looped it over, forming a short, wide strap.

"No, Thomas, don't!" she cried, attempting to twist behind him. He grasped her and pulled her back in front of him.

"You will think twice before putting yourself in harm's way again," he demanded. He propped his foot up on a boulder on the side of the clearing and pressed Abigail over his powerful thigh. With one deft movement, he tossed first her skirts and then her petticoats above her head and separated the slit in her muslin bloomers to bare her buttocks.

"Thomas!" Abby shrieked, mortified to her toes that he was seeing her naked bottom for the first time in such a manner. "Please don't!"

WHACK! The supple leather bit into her tender flesh and she yelped.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

Her bottom was on fire, and she squirmed over his leg, trying to dive into the brambles to escape the burning punishment.

"None of that," he said as he pulled her back by a handful of her dress.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

Her buttocks were glowing under his ministrations. He tossed the belt to the ground and pressed his palm into her fiery cheeks.

She arched under his touch. A strange bolt of sensation tingled beneath his hand and she felt a surge of desire saturate her loins. Her bottom throbbed from the strap but a warm wetness trickled from her sex as he rubbed her stinging flesh. She groaned.

Thomas watched her ass contract as he stroked the hot, welted skin. He felt the tightness in his breeches as his desire for her exploded. Love and lust coursed through his body and at the same time fear hit him like a bullet. Fear for her, for the reckless passion that defined her. That fear translated into anger, and he drew back his hand and walloped her already crimson bottom.

"Owwwww!!" she shrieked. "Damn you, Chisholm!"

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! He rained a staccato of sharp slaps onto her already burning flesh.

"So you remember," he said simply. "And don't swear."

She was weeping when he turned her tenderly in his arms and held her close to his pounding chest.

"I won't lose you," he told her fiercely.

"No, you won't," she agreed. "You might kill me, but you won't lose me."

"Let's go home," Thomas said.

"Want to walk?" Abby asked hopefully.

"Not a chance." He carried her over to Rebel and plopped her in the saddle, ignoring her cries of protest.

"Brute." She stuck her tongue out at him when he turned to mount his horse.

"I saw that."

Chapter Fourteen

The Joining

Bartholomew Tyler was silent as he rode beside Jacob Mason on the way back to Hilltop. His anger was simmering just below the surface of his tightly controlled emotions. What was the girl thinking? She could have been shot or stabbed or fallen from her horse or worse.

And the part that really stuck in his craw, the part that gnawed at him was the fact that she had not even acknowledged him. He wondered not for the first time if she were ashamed of him. His little English lady was going to have to drop her fine airs if she wanted to be part of his world.

"I reckon Judith has a trip to my study coming," Jacob said calmly. "I suppose Mariah also deserves a good talking-to."

"Oh, she's going to get a talking-to," Bart said through gritted teeth.

"Now, Bart, don't be going off half-cocked about this," Jacob cautioned. "I know you have your cap set for my niece and 'tis a fine match in my mind, but you're looking a mite harsh and women need more than harsh words."

"Mariah can expect more than harsh words from me," Bart said shortly. "She can expect a damn good thrashing is what she can expect."

Jacob rolled his eyes. Young men, he thought. But then he pictured his Annie in the same predicament and he sighed. Bart was right. Some points were better made in action rather than talk.

"You might have a point," Jacob said grudgingly. "But have a care with her, she is precious to us."

"Not nearly as precious as she is to me," Bart mumbled.

Jacob smiled as he snapped the reins sharply. The lad was in love. He frowned when he noticed the jar on the floor of the carriage.

"Poor Lydia Thompson will get no liniment for

her pains this day," he said. "I will have to make a trip tomorrow."

Mariah rode glumly behind the carriage.

"Bart didn't even look at me," she complained to Judith. "Do you think he hates me?"

"He looked at you," said the younger girl.

"But he didn't speak to me," Mariah whined. "He ignored me completely, the cad. Do you think he regrets his words of love?"

"He looked at you," Judith said again. "He looked like he was going to burst a vein. His neck was bulging all over and his lip was twitching. And he kept slapping his leg. How come you didn't see that?"

"But he didn't even ask if I was all right," Mariah exclaimed. "He never once inquired after my health."

"He knew you were all right," Judith persisted. "When he first came into the valley, he looked into your face and saw that you were fine. First, he looked surprised but after he looked relieved and even thankful. Then he just looked mad."

"You think he's still angry?" Mariah asked in surprise. "Why wouldn't he say something then? Am I supposed to read his mind?"

"Why didn't you say something before?" Judith countered. "Why didn't you explain to Toby about him. Not that Toby needed explanations, he figured everything out nicely."

"Yes, that's my brother," Mariah laughed. "He is such a wonderful dear."

"Well, then why didn't you tell your brother outright that Bart was your fellow?" Judith looked confused. "If you love him, I would think you'd want to tell everyone that he was your man. I would," she said simply. "I mean if he was my beau," she added, blushing.

"He is quite gorgeous, isn't he?" Mariah asked softly. "I can barely catch my breath when I look at

him. I wonder why he fancies me when he can have any girl. Isn't he more handsome than Lord Byron even, Jude?"

"Luscious," Judith exclaimed, not having a clue what Lord Byron looked like. "Those beautiful curls, like sunlight."

"Bart has hair blacker than coal and nary a curl though it is lustrous as silk," Mariah snorted. "Are you daft, cousin?"

Judith blushed again. She was letting her imagination get the better of her. Oh, were she only sixteen, she thought, then Master Tobias Chisholm would meet his match...

She turned to face the older girl. "Bart is indeed as fine-looking as a prince, but for all that, he's a trifle coarse in his manners," she told her cousin. "His wife was a timid thing and too meek for him, most folks said. But Bart Tyler always does right by his boys, even if he is a harsh one."

"Harsh?" Mariah said, frowning. "I know he has strong principles, which I admire in him, albeit we are of different universes. But he seems not overly harsh, Jude."

"Wait and see," Judith bade her.

Will took the reins of the team and held the horses while Jacob Mason and Bart jumped from the carriage.

"Looks like the girls are right behind you," the stable-hand told them as he walked toward the barn.

Jacob continued to head toward the house, pausing only briefly to call over his shoulder.

"Send Judith inside, Bart, if you would."

Bartholomew Tyler stood in front of the gate to the pasture beside the horse barn. He lounged languidly against the wood pickets and narrowed his gaze at the blond Englishwoman as she carelessly leapt from the saddle and tossed her reins at the already busy William.

"Mariah Chisholm," he called softly. "Better you stable your own horse now. Will has his hands full. Judith, your father wants you, I'll tend your horse."

Judith shrugged and handed over the reins, an expression of dread on her face. Her feet dragged as she walked toward the house and certain punishment. Mariah stamped her foot and snatched the leather leads from the hired man's outstretched hands.

Bart ignored her petulance and led Judith's mare into an empty stall and began to curry the velvety flanks with a brush he took from the bench.

When she realized he wasn't going to pay her any mind, Mariah yanked her horse roughly into the adjoining stall. She was startled when she felt a cool, smooth hand close over her impatient fingers.

"Do not punish the horse with your bad temper, Mistress Chisholm," Bart told her softly. "'Tis not fair to the poor creature."

"Leave me be," she muttered in a surly voice, shaking off his hand.

"No, I will not," Bart said solemnly, instead holding tightly to her small fingers. He pulled her around so that her chest was flattened to his stomach. Mariah could feel the throb of his heart against her neck.

For a moment, she relished the closeness of him, the sheer ripe scent of his clothes and skin was like an elixir to her. Letting her head fall down, she inhaled his shoulder and sighed deeply. He was such a man. She was unused to this delicious, overwhelming stirring of love in her blood, and her knees nearly buckled as a flood of desire swept over her. She stretched her fingers, lacing them through his own as she tugged him even closer to her pounding chest. Then she remembered how distant he had acted toward her. A wave of shame reddened her cheeks at her own forward behavior.

"You are not a gentleman, sir," she chided, trying to pull away.

"Maybe not. But I'm not pond scum, which is

how you're looking at me now," he laughed, keeping her close. "I don't aim to be more than I am." He leaned back to gaze into her hazel eyes. "And what I am is plenty perturbed, young lady, first at your foolhardy, dangerous behavior and now with your uppity attitude."

Mariah flinched at the steel in his voice. Was he regretting his proposal?

"Then release me," she demanded, squirming in his arms. "If I don't please you, let me go."

"Little girl, you please me plenty," he said. "In fact, I don't know when a woman has made me feel so upside down before that I can't keep my heart from pounding near out of my chest and my palms from sweating, but looking at you makes me happier than a man has any right to be and crazy in love and madder than hell go hand in hand, unfortunately for you."

That was one of the truest declarations Bartholomew Tyler had ever made to a woman, and Mariah seemed awed by the raw passion in his ice blue eyes.

"Remember how I told you I'd lesson you proper like if you were mine?" he asked softly.

Mariah nodded mutely.

"Well, you are mine, and I intend to lesson you in just a few minutes and you may not like it a bit, Mariah honey, but you best get used to it, because I am one ornery man and I keep my loved ones in line!"

Mariah's heart jumped at his words. He loved her still. And then the bottom of her stomach dropped when she realized the intent behind his words.

"What do you mean?" she hedged.

"You know what I mean, Mariah. Now, you finish tending that animal and then you come here," he told her sternly. "I have to finish with Judith's mare. No reason for the horses to suffer just because you're getting a whipping."

Mariah flushed. She opened her mouth to

protest but then shut it again. Her knees actually went weak at the look on his face. She hurriedly returned to Sweetpea and began to unbridle the animal.

A good fifteen minutes later and there was not another tangle she could comb from the sorrel mare's mane. Bart was tapping his foot outside the stall. When she finally dared to look at him, he crooked his finger at her and slowly beckoned her over.

"Now, Bart, don't be hasty," she said gently, in a belated attempt to placate him as she reluctantly went to stand before him. "You know I only went with Abby because I was concerned about you."

"You didn't think at all, just like that heedless cousin of yours," he told her. "You are getting this lickin' because you might have been seriously wounded or even killed today. You may not value your hide, but I do, mistress, I do!"

Mariah wrapped her arms around Tyler's neck and kissed his cheek.

"For that I thank you, Bartholomew," she whispered.

"You may not thank me for this," he countered and before she knew what was happening, Mariah found herself upended over her beloved's knee, her skirts whipped aside and a hand that felt like a wooden slab crashing into her buttocks.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"Ow!" she bellowed, trying to squirm off his thighs. "Fie, sir, you mean to murder not lesson me!"

"Not at all," said Bart calmly. "I will, however, make an impression on you about the seriousness of your behavior. Just to ensure that it does not happen again." He never stopped the onslaught on her bottom.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK!

Mariah could not take a breath as her rear end caught fire beneath her man's palm. Bart Tyler had a harder hand than Thomas, Toby and her father. He was unrelenting. She sobbed into his breeches, holding tightly to his legs.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!
SMACK!

"Please, Bart," she cried. "I beg you, 'tis enough. I have learned the lesson!"

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!
SMACK!

Finally, he stopped. He let his hand rest on her pantalets for just the briefest of moments in what she suspected was a caress.

She whimpered.

"There now," he finally said, lifting her gently and smoothing down her skirts. She swayed into his arms, and he held her lovingly.

"That's my girl," he murmured into her hair as he held her tenderly. "I know you've learned your lesson. Which is not to go scaring ten years off my life by pulling foolish stunts like you did today."

"I won't do it again," sniffed Mariah. "I promise."

She felt oddly at peace, as though she were in the safest place she would ever know.

Bart tipped her chin up with his forefinger and fastened his gaze on her soft hazel eyes. She smiled awkwardly, and he captured her lips in an exploring, sensuous kiss. She felt the tiny bristles of whiskers that hadn't yet started above the plushness of his upper lip and nearly giggled at the tickling sensation. Mariah sighed happily as her tongue joined with his in a deep, plundering voyage to a sensual awakening. To taste a man's breath was a heady pleasure, and Mariah Chisholm surrendered to the experience, eager for more.

She pressed up to him, welcoming his hardness against her soft loins. She knew it had to be indecent or holy – this overwhelming desire that had her quaking, trembling with want. She inhaled

him, the musk of his body filled her nostrils, and she breathed in the perfume of his flesh, the delightful crispness of his clothes and the sultry air of the warm evening. She thought she would faint. Her bottom burned from his punishment, her sex throbbed with their mutual need, and her senses were intoxicated with all of him.

"I need you to take me right now," she whispered, pressing her teeth into his neck.

Bart pulled away.

"Hush," he murmured. "We mustn't let ourselves get carried away. I want you too, girl, more than you can even imagine. But not now, not yet."

"Why not?" Mariah demanded. "We are all but betrothed. You just walloped my behind! I think that makes us officially betrothed."

"It isn't right, Mariah," he insisted, kissing her forehead, her cheeks and nose. "I won't take you in the barn like some callow schoolboy. We will come together when we are joined in God's eyes, when I take you for my wife and you take me for your husband. Then it will be right."

"It's not right now?" she queried, wounded by his resolve. She wondered how he could stay aloof from the river of emotion she felt flowing between them.

"We're letting the passion take over," he said. "What I feel for you is stronger, more pure than any tumble in the hay would be."

"I believe it's called fucking," she snapped, acutely embarrassed that she had exposed her own raw desire for him.

Bart stiffened at her crudeness.

"Mariah Chisholm, if I ever hear such language from you again, you will not only get a lathering in your mouth but on your backside! You understand?"

Mariah nodded silently, still peeved.

"Answer me!" he barked.

"Yes, I understand," she shouted back. "I understand that you are a royal pain in the arse, Master Tyler. And, I reckon I won't be begging you

for any tumble in the hay this friggin' year!"

She turned her back on him and would have flounced off in a huff had he not stepped on the hem of her skirt.

"Arghhhhh!" she screamed as she went face down in the straw on the barn floor. Mariah tasted dirt and stable as she stumbled to her knees.

"Oh, here," Bart said graciously. "Allow me to clean that off for you."

Mariah felt herself yanked upright and dragged to the trough where Will filled the water buckets for the animals.

"Stop it, Tyler, you wretch!" she cried, spitting out a mouthful of hay.

Bart saw what he was looking for in the grooved corner of the low wooden basin, a small lump of soap that Will used for washing up.

He scooped up a handful of water and moistened the tallowy clump between his thumb and fingers. Mariah clenched her lips together, realizing his intent.

"Open!" he ordered.

She clamped down harder.

Bart suddenly tickled the side of her midriff, causing her mouth to snap open in protest. He thrust his sudsy fingers into her mouth and began to lave her tongue with the foul-tasting substance.

Tears filled her eyes, and she gagged as her mouth began to burn.

He held her firmly when she would have dunked her face into the trough of water and he began to lecture her sternly.

"You will learn that I mean what I say, Mariah," he said. "I don't think it's fitting for a woman to use such language, and you're my woman so you'll mind me. That's all the reason you need. I told you what would happen so you can't say you weren't warned."

She nodded mutely, her mouth filled with the disgusting suds.

"Rinse," he told her, handing her a dipper of

clear water.

Mariah eagerly took the cup and swished the water around her mouth, spitting several times before finally swallowing a bit.

She was totally unprepared for the swiftness of his attack. He scooped her up under his arm and plopped down on the bench beside the barn door and for the second time that day, upended her across his lap.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

Her already burning bottom exploded in pain, and she wailed helplessly.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

Mariah held her breath, waiting for the next barrage of blows. When nothing came, she twisted around to see his face.

He didn't look angry. He seemed almost sad.

"I'm sorry, Bart," she said. "I won't curse anymore. It's just that I was... well, I..."

"I know, sweetheart," he said. "Don't be embarrassed by your feelings. I feel the same way, I just want us to have the right start to our life together. I don't think either one of us wants your family upset by our actions."

"Are you done now?" she whispered. "Because I'm really sorry and very sore."

"I'm done," he told her.

"Can I get up?"

He was still holding her across his knees, his hand pressed into the small of her back.

"In a minute," he said. His fingers began to stroke her bottom, gently rubbing the sting away as he massaged in soft circles.

Mariah's face was redder than the roses that were blooming in Abby's garden. When Bart Tyler finally set her on her feet before him, she was a well and truly chastened young woman.

"I love you," she said. "I hope we marry soon, so that I can show you how much I love you, my own sweet patriot. My dearest Bartholomew."

His eyes shone with love as he smiled at her.

She was so young and so sure of herself; she inspired him.

"It will be soon," he promised. "I can't live without you, my own sweet Tory brat. My English flower."

She fell into his arms and tucked her face into his chest, smiling as she buried her cheek into the wild, pounding beat of his heart.

She knew everything would be all right. No matter how much the world changed, love would prevail. It always did.

Epilogue

Abigail Chisholm raced Rebel across the meadow, her hair cascading like a fiery river behind her. Rage, hurt and disbelief filled her, and she did not care that her feet were bare and burrs clung to the dirty hem of her skirt. She had been berry picking when Emmett Homer had stopped his wagon to share a bit of news with her.

"Is it true, Abby?" Emmett asked. "I caint reckon it would be, but then, Bart Tyler done tole me hisself."

"Hold this," Abby said to Emmett, thrusting the pail of blackberries into his hand. She whistled for Rebel and leapt onto his back as the gelding looped around beside her.

"What about the berries?" Emmett called.

"Eat 'em!" Abby yelled back.

She found him at the apothecary. He was just locking up for the day, stepping onto the brand new porch of raw lumber that skirted the wide two-storied addition to Jacob Mason's original building.

"Abby," he said, smiling at his wife, happy that she had come to ride home with him. Their house was just a mile up the road, halfway to Hilltop, on the crest of a small rise that overlooked the Kinderhook Valley on one side and Iron Lake on the other. It was truly a piece of heaven, he thought,

grateful beyond belief for that day two years ago when the red-haired bandit standing in front of him had tried to rob his coach.

In the next second he was reeling from the blow she landed on his chin.

His adorable wife swung back her fist and would have hit him again had he not restrained her.

"What ails you, woman?" he demanded, rubbing his jaw with one hand and holding her at bay with the other.

"Fiend," she cried. "You're a lying bastard, Thomas Chisholm. I hate you! I hate you!"

"Calm yourself, Abigail," he said firmly. "And explain this outburst, immediately, if you please."

"I don't please," she countered. "You can't order me to talk," she yelled into his face. "I will not explain anything to you, despicable, sneaky, horrible lying beast!"

"Silence, Abigail!" he commanded in a terrible voice, glaring at her.

She cringed. Even her anger wouldn't bolster her when her husband gave her that look. Instinctively, she rubbed her backside as she tried to squirm away from him.

"Now, speak to me," he ordered. "And I mean speak, not shriek like a fishwife."

She had the grace to blush at his mild admonition.

"Emmett Homer told me that Bart told him that you were joining General Craig's New York battalion to fight the British at Tarrytown. I won't have it, Tom, not when Jake is barely six months old."

Thomas shook his head in disbelief.

"You would deny me my right to be a patriot, Abby?"

"I would deny God himself when it comes to taking you from me," she said fiercely.

Thomas smiled ruefully. She was a spirited lass, his Abby.

"What exactly did Bart tell Emmett, wife?"

"He told him that his brother-in-law was finally

turning his back on the redcoats and joining the cause for good," she explained.

"And, he mentioned my name?"

"He said his brother-in-law, Thomas," she snapped impatiently.

"And am I Mariah's only brother?" Thomas lifted one aristocratic eyebrow and frowned down at his bride.

"But, Toby is a British officer," she said in confusion. "Why would he turn his back on that? His regiment would have him shot. Would he endanger himself so?"

"Toby is also in love with your sister Judith and seeks to become part of this land, and this family," Thomas told her gently. "He will dare much to accomplish that. And, he is very clever and will never get caught, my love. In fact, I guarantee he will become an important asset to patriots everywhere. I will continue to doctor these good folk alongside my esteemed father-in-law and my talented wife. I think I will do better work for the cause doing what I can to keep life going on."

"So, you have not joined the militia?" she asked in a small voice.

"I have not," he assured her.

"I would be proud of you if you had, just as I am proud of you now," she admitted. "I was just scared and angered thinking that you had made such a decision without me."

"I would never," he promised. "You are not only in my heart and soul but in my mind, Abigail. I could no sooner act without you than breathe without lungs."

"I feel better," she whispered, sidling up beside him and threading her fingers behind his neck, into the silk of his hair.

"I am so relieved," he said dryly.

SMACK!

Her bottom quivered under the force of his blow.

He smiled into her astonished face and rubbed his hands together.

"One good turn deserves another," he quoted piously as she rubbed her aching bottom.

"I think Jake said Mama today," she said as they walked across the yard.

"Abigail, babies do not say anything at 5 and ½ months. I believe it was gas."

"Thomas," she exclaimed. "My Jacob did not fart or belch the word Mama, he spoke it true as the day is bright."

"You're besotted," he told her. "But only in a good way. Come, wench, let's go home. I think I owe you one more turn once we get home. I do believe my jaw is swollen shut."

Abby looked at the purplish shadow on her husband's face and stifled a giggle.

"I apologize, Dr. Chisholm," she said demurely. "I do know of a wonderful poultice that will cure that right away."

"Made of what?" he asked suspiciously.

"Pig shit and skunk weed," she quipped, hopping onto Rebel's back. "The only problem is, no kissing for at least a decade!"

Abigail laughed as she cantered down the path.

Growling, he mounted his own horse and chased after her.

"You better run," he warned.

"I'll beat you home," she called over her shoulder.

The sight of him riding foolishly in hot pursuit made her stop in her tracks. She watched the fading sunlight play on the rich brown waves of his hair, and she thought about how their baby son looked so much like him and was such a wonderful addition to their life. She was so happy that Thomas had embraced not only her family but also her dreams, her loves. She wanted him too much to leave him behind, so she waited at the bend in the road for him to join her.

When he reached her, he noticed her bare feet and shook his head helplessly.

"You will never learn until you step on a wasps'

nest, Abigail Judith Chisholm," he chided her.

In the same moment, he remembered that long ago curse made by the spoiled daughter of a colleague.

"Arabella ended up being right," he murmured.

"Arabella who?" Abby asked. "What?"

"Nothing," he told her. "It was just nothing."

"I do believe you're a daft one, milord Doctor Honorable Thomas Joseph Alexander Chisholm," she laughed.

He laughed back at her, and they clasped hands as they rode side by side toward home, toward the stone house on the edge of the world they called "Patriot's Dream."

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