

# LIBERTY'S BELLE

A movie poster for 'Liberty's Belle'. The central figure is a man in a SWAT uniform, including a cap and a vest with a 'SWAT' patch, looking down at a large, fluffy red bear. The background is a collage: an American flag in the top right, handwritten text in the top left, a portrait of a man in a top hat on the left, and a city skyline at night in the bottom right. The overall color palette is dominated by blue and red.

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Liberty's Belle: A Paranormal Romance  
*by Marissa St. James*

**LIBERTY'S BELLE**

**By**

**MARISSA ST. JAMES**

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## PROLOGUE

"Move it, Ellsworth," the sergeant shouted above the gunfire. Across the road, the last of his men waited for the right moment to make a mad dash for the barricade. There were only four men left of a dozen to do this job and Sarge couldn't afford to lose any more. Gunfire seemed to be flying in all directions, making forward progress difficult, if not impossible.

Peter knelt behind the rubble, hoping for a brief lull in the firefight. Even thirty seconds would do it for him. When it seemed to stop for a moment, he ran the twenty yards across the road to the fallen wall that served as a barricade. Snipers fired on him as he ran a zig zag pattern, making himself a more difficult target to hit. The run reminded him of his college football days. Was that so long ago? It seemed like an eternity.

If this had been shown on TV, viewers would have thought it was a Middle East war zone. In fact, it was a section of Corinth undergoing changes. A large old factory was recently demolished, and a second one was scheduled for demolition in a couple days, before cleanup crews came in. The rubble reminded Peter of old news stories he'd seen of the 1970s riots throughout the country. Seemed like most of the country had been placed under martial law. Apparently some folks hadn't learned much since then. Snipers were on the top floor of the factory, and another was on the roof, firing randomly into traffic on the highway below. They'd already shot out a

couple of windshields. Corinth's town council wasn't going to be happy when they got the repair bills. He hadn't heard if anyone had been shot, or injured from shattered glass. Peter had a sick feeling it was just a couple of kids trying to prove something. This was going to cost them big time.

He dove into a trench behind a pile of rubble and closed his eyes, just missing the shots that were suddenly fired at him, keeping him pinned down. That was too close for comfort. Every few minutes, the sniper took potshots in their direction, just to keep them back. Several stones were shaken loose from their resting place, and clacked and clattered as they rolled and bounced over others. "Think we got only a couple snipers, Sarge," Peter commented cynically after catching his breath. He glanced back at the building behind him. Many years ago the factory windows had been painted over to hide the view from workers. It was working to the SWAT team's disadvantage, at the moment. The snipers knocked out a couple panes of glass to give them an unimpeded view of the highway below.

"Ya think?" the team leader shot back and surveyed the area. "Feels like a lot more." It'd be hard to find them amidst all the rubble. There were too many convenient places to hide. Several minutes earlier, four team members had gone around to the back of the building, flanking the snipers, but there had been an explosion and nothing more was heard from them. Team leader had cussed a blue streak. Snipers must have been expecting SWAT, and set up some traps to keep them at bay.

"Whatever happened to the cease fire while waiting for a negotiator?" The sniper with the cell phone managed to find his way up to the roof. After a few minutes of trying to reason with him, trying to talk him down, the idiot sent his cell flying over the edge of the building onto the highway. The cell hit the windshield of a passing car, sending spider cracks throughout the glass. The driver swerved and barely avoided causing a major accident. Where were the state police, who were supposed to be blocking off this section of the highway?

One of the team members had been close enough to the highway to see the incident take place, and reported backed to Sarge what had happened. He heard the sniper laughing. Two other team members with Sarge glared at Peter after he made the remark. A truce while waiting for a negotiator to show up? They seemed to think he'd lost his mind. It didn't matter that Peter was the most experienced on the team although he'd transferred in only a couple months ago. The fact he wasn't new to SWAT made them wonder if he'd lost a few marbles. Maybe he'd been on the job too long. Anyone would have thought where he came from, folks paid attention to rules. Yeah, right. Miller shook his head then turned his attention to the sniper.

Peter had been a member of San Diego SWAT. He had put in a request for transfer. The last news he'd had was that his older brother, Dan, wasn't well. It was enough to send the younger Ellsworth packing and heading east. Dan was the only family left to him. Peter shook his head and mentally berated himself for letting his thoughts drift from his job. It wasn't the time to be considering his personal life. He couldn't

afford the distraction. The snipers were still sending occasional shots onto the team while others continued to pepper the highway. He wasn't so far away that he couldn't hear the distant braking and squealing of tires. Drivers were doing their best to avoid accidents. Again, he wondered where the officers were who were supposed to close this part of the highway? He thought once more of the snipers and considered the possibility this might be some kind of gang initiation. Gangs were getting more powerful, both in membership and the weapons they managed to confiscate.

"What cease fire?" Miller replied, a hint of sarcasm in his voice as he glanced at Peter. "You know these gang members never mean anything they say. They expect us to believe it and get careless."

"Whatever happened to honoring your word?"

"What century you been livin' in?" Miller chuckled.

Peter's question was rhetorical but made a point. He recalled the information that started this particular incident. Gunfire had erupted out in the open, weapons fired into the air terrorizing the tenants of a nearby housing project. Apparently some of the gang members had chased their club wannabes into the rubble-strewn edge of town. Having been destroyed by a gas explosion a couple years earlier, the area resembled a war zone. It took the town long enough to start demolition proceedings. Most of the gang, perhaps deciding they'd rather not be arrested today, ran when the SWAT team showed up, leaving the new guys pinned down to find their own way out. It was a variation of the same old story being played out all over the country. Peter turned and peered over

the wall, then ducked when a single shot zinged over his head. One sniper kept the team pinned down, while the other one had fun, firing over the moving cars below.

"Who said war was honorable?" Sarge asked a moment later while trying to locate the sniper. They seemed to be running back and forth between windows, trying to create an impression of more than one shooter, while a third kept everyone occupied from the roof. "And it is a war ... us against them. More often than not we're all that stands between them and normal people." He turned and carefully searched along the top of the wreckage that was once a warehouse, hoping a head would pop up as a target. Whoever it was, had them neatly pinned down and was systematically picking off their chosen targets—or at least keeping them at bay.

Peter didn't miss the sarcasm in the team leader's words. "You know what I mean, Sarge. There was a time when warriors honored a truce. They fought in the open and didn't hide anything. Now one side or the other breaks a truce before it even takes place."

"These jokers are not warriors, and they don't honor truces. Maybe you'd rather be in a more 'honorable' time?" Sarge glanced at him. "Ain't gonna happen, son. What you see is what you get." After that little speech, Ellsworth would have to be crazy enough to believe his own words and try to play the hero, or manage to get himself caught in the open. Either move was suicide. "Get ready to move out. Miller, you go first. Ellsworth, you follow him. I'll follow Brinkman and



bring up the rear. We have to fall back and find another way, try to circle around them."

Peter crouched low, ready to make another run when Sarge gave the word. Yeah, maybe he *would* rather be in another time and place. He was having second thoughts about staying with SWAT. If he felt as if he were burning out on the job, maybe it was time to get out while he was still alive and whole.

He was jolted back to the present when Sarge fired a few rounds in the sniper's direction and shouted, "Go! Go! Go!" Miller ducked and ran for the wall of rubble several yards behind them. They had to retreat a short distance to be able to go around. A moment after Miller found safety, Peter followed, with the third man close behind. Sarge was last to make the run. He vaulted over a pile of stone and landed safely behind the wall. The sniper fired down on them, too late.

Sarge glanced to either side of him, counting heads. "Where's Ellsworth?"

"He was right behind me," Miller replied glancing at the others. Only Ellsworth would be fool enough to think about playing hero, or manage to get himself lost in open terrain with a sniper firing at them.

Sarge stuck his head above the ruined half wall and glanced about the area. There was only destruction as far as he could see, and a sniper still intent on getting them. He ducked quickly, his features turning pale while he tried to make sense of it. He had to be wrong.

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*by Marissa St. James*

Police Officer and SWAT team member, Peter Samuel Ellsworth had vanished into thin air.

## CHAPTER ONE

Peter staggered, trying to catch his balance, then stood wobbly in the middle of nowhere. How had his surroundings changed so drastically? He waited a moment or two for his head to clear of the feeling he was hung over. No, the dizziness was more like having taken a hit from a joint, but he hadn't touched the stuff since he was a kid. He tried to recall what had happened. The last thing he remembered was ducking behind a partial wall next to Miller. Miller's attention was riveted in the sniper's direction. After that, everything went from fuzzy to black.

When the road finally deigned to stop wriggling like a slithering snake, he straightened his stance and carefully surveyed the area. Trees lined both sides of what apparently passed for a road here—wherever 'here' was. "You're not in Corinth anymore," he muttered, looking around. The first thing he had to do was get his bearings. He heard voices, deep with laughter. Peter backed into the woods behind him, his semi-automatic weapon at the ready. Until he knew what was going on, it was better to err on the side of caution.

He leaned against the backside of a sturdy, thick oak tree, then peered around it for the source of voices approaching his position. Three men, dressed in historical outfits, were laughing and joking as they passed his position. He stared at them, and thought he saw his teammates, but couldn't move to go after them. "Okay guys," he said softly when they were beyond hearing him, "good joke on the old guy, but enough's

enough." The trio was gone far down the road when Peter emerged from his hiding place. "I know. I'm gonna wake up in the shower and realize this is all a dream." He listened for familiar snickering. He heard nothing but normal woodland sounds. "I don't recognize the terrain. Wherever I am, the guys aren't."

Peter turned sharply and his weapon trained in the direction of a wuffling sound. He took several careful steps back beyond the treeline, where he'd been hiding. "Well, well. What've we got here?" He reached out and rubbed the horse's muzzle. "Where did you come from?" Peter glanced about, but saw nothing else suspicious. The fading light hindered further surveillance. What he wouldn't give for a pair of night goggles right now.

Peter kept his voice low while he checked out the animal. It paid attention to him as if it knew him well. He hadn't been near a horse since his childhood—at least he didn't think he had. There were some strange thoughts gathering on the edge of his memory, as if he'd been here before. He shook his head and pushed them away. The animal was saddled and had apparently wandered away from its owner. Maybe the rider had been thrown and lay injured somewhere. He put a mental brake to his thoughts as they skittered through his brain, a mile a minute. Okay, one thing at a time.

A leather bag hung from the back of the saddle, its soft sides bulging with mysterious contents. Peter unbuckled the straps and dug in. What he pulled out amounted to a set of clothes similar to what the three passers-by had been wearing. White stockings, knee breeches, scuffed leather

shoes with dull brass buckles. There was a linen shirt, a long buttoned vest and a mid-thigh coat that matched the breeches in color. The last item was a slightly battered tricorn. He punched the crown back into shape and rubbed the sides of the hat's dusty texture. In the pocket of the coat was a small portrait of a young woman. Lainie. How did that ever get here? Peter had no idea, but it did answer his previous question—there was no other rider. Somehow the horse was his, along with the change of clothing. Justice. That was the mount's name. It was fitting, considering Peter's line of work. It was almost as if he'd been here before, but if that were the case, why couldn't he recall any of it? The mystery deepened. "When in Rome..." he sighed.

Peter backed the horse further into the trees and glanced about. Everything was quiet. He changed his clothes to what he assumed was more appropriate for the setting. A full length mirror would have been welcome at the moment, but you couldn't always have what you wanted. Rather than regret the situation he found himself in, he determined to make the best of it. He took his weapon and broke it down to its component parts and tucked them into the bag, wrapped in his black fatigues. Only one modern item he kept on, at least for now. He rubbed his chest, grateful for the protection of his Kevlar vest. The linen shirt and long vest kept it hidden.

The sudden change in his circumstance should have bothered him, but it didn't. He felt as if he'd been dropped into someone's idea of a play. The thought made him grin with sudden amusement. He'd been reading about time travel lately, and although it was fascinating, he merely saw it as a

form of entertainment. He looked around again at the thick woods on either side of what passed for a road. On further consideration, time travel seemed to be the only possible answer, but he wasn't ready to acknowledge it until he'd exhausted all other possible solutions and was left with only that one. Peter had almost always been one to take things in stride no matter how bizarre they seemed—except for Lainie—and she was best forgotten.

Peter glanced upward, wondering what time of day it was, but an overcast sky hid the sunset position. *Figures*. It didn't matter, he couldn't stand in this spot indefinitely and risk drawing attention to himself. He pulled a dark cloak from where it lay over the saddle and tossed it about his shoulders. In the other pocket of his coat, he'd found a small leather pouch that jingled when he shook it. "Hellooooo," he commented when he realized what the pouch held. The coins would come in handy. Peter reached into the pocket to continue his search, and felt something hard and thin. When he pulled it out, he stared at the laminated identification, proclaiming Peter Samuel Ellsworth a member of San Diego's police force and SWAT team. Along with the ID, he pulled up an envelope addressed to him—in his own handwriting. Peter stared at it, then reached into the pocket again and pulled out a driver's license—California. The light was insufficient to read to read the envelope's contents. He shoved it and the identifications back into the bag with his clothes.

This was really weird—to be dressed in period clothing, and yet have proof at hand he belonged to another time. And it wasn't the time he'd just come from. The IDs were invalid

since he'd moved back to the east coast. It was more odd still, to find them in the saddlebag to begin with. Something seemed to twitch in his memory before disappearing again. Peter blinked, momentarily confused. If he couldn't remember whatever it was flashed into his mind, then it couldn't have been important.

Some sixth sense told him he didn't have much further to go to reach his destination. In the meantime, information seemed to fall into place from out of nowhere, and he had no doubt he should trust it. It felt right somehow.

Peter mounted the horse and set to a canter, raising a lazy cloud of dust on the dry road. The first order of business was to find out where he was, exactly. From the style of dress, he assumed he was in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Where, was another matter again. He could be on an English country road, half way round the world for all he knew. The road was bordered on either side by thick woods, and had the feel of a wilderness. That wasn't quite right either. Peter shrugged and concluded he'd get answers eventually. He let the animal have its head, knowing the first place it would go was home, to a warm barn and some supper.

Busy evening, he thought when four soldiers galloped past him, laughing, as if they raced one another to their destination. British uniforms didn't change much. They were still brilliant targets and deserved the slang term 'lobster backs.' Peter dismissed the soldiers from his mind and concentrated on the problem at hand. He had to assume there was a reason he was here, and that it wasn't happenstance—which again begged the question ... Where

was here? A feeling of déjà vu plagued him, but that didn't make sense either. How could it feel familiar when he didn't recognize anything? That one was going to be a lot harder to answer. Asking the wrong questions of anyone he came across would raise suspicion. The last part of the century was filled with turbulent years. Looking again at the green countryside, he couldn't be far from one of the colonies. The country wasn't at war with England. At least, he didn't think it was, yet—it was too busy fighting internally. A lot of important things came out of that timeline.

Who was he kidding? This was just an unusually vivid dream, the result of having tied one on with his buddies, and it was time to wake up.

The alternative brought him back to his ideas of time travel, which he didn't really believe in—or did he? Things like that just didn't happen to a guy like him. The idea of this being a dream made a lot more sense. He could imagine the bewildered looks on his buddies' faces. Sarge would probably put him on report for not showing up for his shift, or calling in. The team would never believe him. They'd all think he'd lost his mind. He was sure they were all just waiting for an excuse to send him off to a shrink. He was going to have the devil of a time trying to explain this one when he got back—if he could find his way back. That was going to be his biggest problem.

Peter didn't know how long it was since Justice had slowed down to a rocking walk, when the horse came to an unexpected halt. He looked up quickly, pulled out of his thoughts. Daylight was waning, making it hard to see any



details. What looked to be a ghost stood before him, some three feet away. It was a good thing he didn't believe in the supernatural.

An old woman stood in the middle of the dusty road, looking bewildered. She was dressed only in a nightgown and mobcap, with a large shawl draped carelessly about her shoulders. Peter was curious to know where she'd been when she'd wandered off. Seeing the fright in her eyes, he dismounted slowly and approached her with caution. Strands of gray hair had escaped her cap. Her skin looked soft and creased with age. Seventies maybe, he guessed. She raised a thin hand and touched her fingertips to her lips. "It was there a moment ago." She spoke softly and hesitantly as if trying to make sense of her surroundings. She looked to either side of her, but didn't seem to notice Peter.

"What was there, Mistress?" Peter slowly removed his cloak and carefully shook it out. He approached, cautiously, in an effort not to startle the woman, then draped the long garment over her shoulders and tied it in place. He pulled the edges together to envelop her in its warmth. She continued to glance about and Peter followed her motion.

Peter could tell better now, that the trees lining the road were red maples and oaks. There were no houses or any structures to speak of. There had to be something along this road, perhaps the inn. Someone had to know who she was and where she came from. A name came to him ... Cooper? It seemed to fit. He couldn't shake the feeling he'd seen her before, that somehow he knew her. Dressed as she was, she

couldn't have wandered far. He felt a surge of anger, that someone in her condition wasn't watched more carefully.

"What was there?" he asked again, gently, and she looked up at him. He saw the confusion in her eyes.

"Papa ordered the coach made ready to take us to the ball. It was here a moment ago. I hope Papa didn't leave without me. Tonight he is announcing my betrothal to Henry. He and mama wouldn't go without me."

Peter took one of her frail hands in his. "May I have the honor of escorting you, my lady?" he asked gallantly. The circumstances were too eerily familiar to him.

The old woman giggled, as if she were a young girl again. "Henry, where did you come from? Did Papa send you?"

"Your father asked me to escort you. We should be on our way. We don't want to be late, or have your father worrying about you." Peter lifted her easily and sat her in the saddle, then mounted behind her. "Hold on, my lady." He overlapped the folds of the cloak about her thin body to keep her warm, then slipped his arm about her waist and urged the horse to a walk. Peter hoped, for her sake, she lived nearby. When he returned her safely to her home, he intended to give her family a piece of his mind. Justice didn't need to be told it was past his supertime, and began a steady plodding on the road, as if realizing it carried a fragile rider.

For the next few minutes, the woman hummed an old tune. Peter thought she must have had a lovely voice when she was young. Despite her age, she still held a hint of the beauty she must have been as a young woman. He kept an eye on their surroundings, not wanting to be surprised, or

have anything startle her. Someone had to be looking for her—he hoped. Moments later he wondered why he hadn't come across anyone on the road who might be looking for her. Didn't anyone realize she'd wandered off? The woods gradually thinned until Peter reached a pond with a two-story building beside it. It was obvious how the inn got its name. Several large birds drifted majestically on the water, heads bowed. Without warning, they dove down leaving their feet and bottoms sticking up in the air. The swans' plumage fluttered in the evening breeze while they searched for the last of their supper. A moment or two later they straightened, then dove again. His own stomach rumbled with the thought of food. Was it early this morning when he'd last eaten? He couldn't recall, but the idea of a hot meal sounded pretty good right about now.

The horse stopped a short distance from the inn door and Peter dismounted, then easily helped down his traveling companion. He glanced about but saw no one except the boy who ran up to take his horse. The boy's eyes widened at the sight of the old woman. "You know her?" Peter asked.

The boy said nothing, only nodded and glanced toward the inn, and Peter followed the direction of the boy's attention. Above the door was a long sign, painted with black letters, Swan's Down Inn, with a pair of white swans decorating the right side of the sign. Two birds with one stone, he figured. He reached for the bags hanging from the saddle then took the old woman's arm. They stepped back long enough for the boy to lead the horse to the stable. Easing his arm around her, Peter guided his companion into the semi dark inn.

Several men were eating supper, and all had mugs set before them. Voices were low for the most part, but an occasional burst of laughter disturbed the overall quiet. At one table sat the three men who had first passed him by. They kept their voices low. If he were a superstitious man ... Near the fireplace were the four redcoats who had also passed him on the road. They were still loud and didn't seem to notice the dark stares sent in their direction.

Peter stood inside the large room, surveying his surroundings, when all conversation came to a halt. Attention focused on him and what seemed to be his elderly prisoner. Peter relaxed his grip on the old woman's arm as he glanced from one hostile stare to another. One man, dressed in buckskins, stood and made a threatening move toward them, but suddenly stopped. Intimidated by a woman? That was something new.

A middle-aged woman hurried forward. "Maggie!" she exclaimed and took the older woman's hands in hers. "Where have you been? I've been frantic with worry."

"Apparently not frantic enough to search for her," Peter retorted, keeping his voice low. "I found her about a quarter mile from here."

"She was supposed to be in her room napping. I was getting her supper. She must have awakened early. I assure you, Mr. Ellsworth, I am not in the habit of allowing Mistress Cooper to wander about alone."

Peter was surprised to hear his name. Then again, with the little tidbits of information popping up in his memory, he shouldn't be. He eased up on his accusations. He should have

recalled how it had been with his own grandmother, how she was constantly wandering off, worrying everyone. "Forgive me, Gladys," he apologized, wondering how he knew her name. "It isn't my place to pass judgement on your actions. I can only say the circumstances are ones I'm familiar with. The situation brought back some painful memories for me."

"I am sorry as well, sir. It's just ... In future I will see to it there is someone to stay with Mistress Cooper at all times." She turned away for a moment to address one of the maids. "Mary, please take Mistress Cooper to her room and stay with her until I return."

The girl mumbled something unintelligible about the duty, then led away the old woman, the maid turned to Peter. "Is there something I can get for you, sir?"

Peter glanced about to see what was on the menu, but for good or bad, the lighting was poor, and he couldn't tell what others were eating. "I could do with a hot meal, and something to drink. Whatever you have." He moved toward a solitary table near the opposite end of the hearth from where the British soldiers sat. He would love to know what they were discussing.

Gladys gave him an odd look before setting a mug of ale before him. "There's some roast chicken, potatoes, and fresh bread. I'll have a plate ready for you in a few minutes." She turned away from him and entered the nearest doorway, but not before stopping briefly and glancing back at him.

Peter saw the puzzled look on Gladys's face and wondered what he had done to put it there. He shared her confusion. Why would everyone be staring at him as if they knew him?

Why would his surroundings seem so familiar when he'd never been here before? He listened to muffled sounds coming from the room he assumed to be a kitchen. The voices stopped, followed by the clatter of crockery being dropped on a solid surface. Someone was in a bad mood.

He dropped his bags on a nearby chair and placed his hat on top of them, then sat with his back against the wall, and sipped his ale. He casually, but carefully checked out the room. The open taproom might be almost empty, but it didn't pay to get careless. Peter rubbed at his eyes. He was bone tired. He couldn't wait to get some supper and get to his rooms for the night. He wanted to reexamine the letter he'd found before doing anything about it. He surreptitiously felt the pocket of his coat, noting the item in question still lay deep within. He was tempted to read it now, but decided it would be better to wait until he was alone. His handwriting on the outside of it puzzled him, since he couldn't recall having written anything like it. It was another mystery to add to the growing list.

While he studied his surroundings, a feeling of familiarity assailed him. It was crazy to think he'd been here before. He looked up to find the soldiers who had, earlier, passed him on the road, now turning their attention to him, as if they knew him. One nudged the man to his left, and they both laughed, still watching him. Peter returned the stare, until they turned back to finish their ale. Good. He hoped he made them uncomfortable enough to want to leave the inn. He didn't want to put himself in harm's way by silently defying them.

Peter's bland expression didn't change as he wondered if Sarge had reported his disappearance yet. He was going to have some tall explaining to do, but nobody was going to believe this one. This was too fantastic even for him to believe—and he was living it.

He turned his gaze away from the customers and stared at one of two branch candleholders sitting on either end of the mantle. Their shape was similar to a Jewish menorah, but with four candles each, rather than the religious seven. A small fire burned merrily in the hearth, chasing away the damp seeping into the room. The steady flames could put him to sleep. He was that tired. Another door, leading to what Peter assumed—no, he somehow knew—was one of two private parlors, opened abruptly and two people exited the room, arguing. Peter raised his mug but his hand stopped in mid air when he got a look at the young woman.

She wasn't tall, probably no more than five foot two. Her hair appeared to be mahogany in color, judging from the way the light reflected on the wisps that had escaped her white mobcap. He imagined it to be long, thick and wavy. Her gray gown was covered with a neat white apron. Gladys approached her, putting an end to the heated discussion the woman was having with the man behind her. "Beggin' your pardon, Mistress Carson," The man stomped out of the inn, anger coloring his features. Peter watched the man leave, wondering who he might be, then turned his attention back to the women.

The young woman gave her attention to Gladys and glanced past the open door in Peter's direction. Any

distraction at the moment would be a godsend for putting an end to the ongoing argument. Mistress Carson, gently laid a hand on Gladys' arm, and listened a moment. She glanced toward the table near the hearth, said something then moved away.

Mistress Elizabeth Carson stopped before the table and looked down at Peter. "Mr. Ellsworth, Gladys tells me I have you to thank for bringing my mother home."

Peter stood when the young woman approached him. He studied her, surprised to have her address him by name. How did these people know him when he'd never been here before—or had he? That one question continually nagged at him. The gold flecks in her green eyes seemed to sparkle in the candlelight as she stared back at him. "I'm glad she came to no harm. Anything could have happened to her out there." It was a polite hint he hoped she was intuitive enough to understand. The innkeeper might be named Elizabeth, but Peter knew she preferred being called Libby.

"Yes, I know, but she has never wandered off like that before. She's always stayed inside, or remained close when someone is with her. I don't know what made her go off like that."

"She was saying something about not being late for some ball. Said her father was announcing her betrothal."

"Oh, lord," Libby sank into a nearby chair. She covered her face with her hands for only a moment, then looked up at him. The look in her eyes bordered on frustration and defeat. "I feared her mind was going," she said softly. "That only



confirms it. If Elias should find out, I don't know what he would do."

"Elias?" Peter repeated hesitantly as he sat down. He crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward. He was curious to know about her. Was Elias her husband?

"Elias is my brother," she explained, as if having read his mind. She gave him an odd look but shrugged it off. She hesitated before speaking again, trying to make out the muffled angry words that were coming from one of the private parlors. "He has been a thorn in my side since my husband died last year. The loss has been hard, but more so on my son, Tommy." As she finished speaking, a small child ran up to her and laid his head on her lap.

"Mama," he cried softly, not paying any attention to the stranger sitting at the table with his mother.

Peter smiled at the show of affection. It wasn't done for his sake, as he'd seen so many women do. "I see. I'm sorry for your loss, and I do understand what you're facing. My own grandmother suffered similar trouble."

Libby smoothed down the boy's hair as he sobbed into her apron. Elias would pay for upsetting her young son, yet again. There was no excuse for it. In her brother's eyes, the boy lacked discipline, but at five years of age, she thought differently. Secretly, she was glad he had no children of his own. She could only imagine how they would turn out. She silently chided herself for her uncharitable thoughts, and directed her attention to the man sitting across the table from her. "If there is anything I can do to show my gratitude..." Libby stopped stroking her son's head and blushed, suddenly

realizing what her words could imply. "Within reason, of course," she tried to clarify and realized she'd only make things worse if she continued.

Peter chuckled, aware of her blunder. He had no intention of making anything of it, but she didn't have to know that. For reasons unknown to him, he enjoyed her embarrassment, or perhaps it was the fact that the rose blush in her cheeks was rather attractive.

"Gladys, see that Mr. Ellsworth has a good meal, and his room is ready." Peter found it amusing the way people around here seemed to appear at the moment they were needed. It was too much like a rehearsed play. Maybe that was the answer to this whole charade—Not. Couldn't be that easy. It was never that easy. Libby nodded to Gladys and the woman went about her work. Libby turned her attention back to Peter. "I'm sure you're tired from your journey." Gladys reappeared a few moments later, with a full meal and placed another mug of ale on the table as well. "Enjoy your meal, Mr. Ellsworth, and thank you again for your kindness toward my mother. I assure you, we will take special care to see she doesn't wander off again."

Libby didn't walk away from the table so much as glide. Her son remained close by her side, clasping her hand. Peter watched her, entranced by her gracefulness and gentleness. He definitely wanted to get to know her better, then wondered just how well he did know her.

Peter casually watched Libby and her son going around the bar when she sighed and stopped a moment. The name Jasper popped into his mind.

"What are you doing up there?" Libby asked, and picked up the huge orange cat. "You know you don't belong up there."

"Bad Jasper," Tommy piped up, then continued on to the kitchen with his mother, after she put the cat on the floor.

Peter chuckled. The cat sauntered over to the corner and stopped by Peter's feet. "What are you up to?" Peter asked, sitting back to make room for the mouser. Jasper jumped onto Peter's lap and purred contentedly.

The four soldiers distracted him for a moment when they got up to leave. Their voices were louder, as if they wanted the attention. They tossed a few coins on their table and one turned toward Peter. Jasper's ears went back and he hissed menacingly. The soldier took a quick step backward, surprised at the warning. Even Peter was momentarily startled by the cat's sudden change in demeanor. The soldiers left and the cat settled down. Peter stroked the soft orange fur. "Got good taste, old man." He scratched behind the cat's ears a moment longer, then put the animal on the floor. Jasper seemed insulted for a moment, but strode away, as if being put on the floor had been his idea.

Peter dug into the meal sitting before him, enjoying the plain cooking. Others in the taproom occasionally glanced his way, making low comments, and asking questions Peter had no intention of answering. When he finished, his coins were kindly refused, and he instinctively made his way up the stairs to a room midway down the hall.

He lit a candle, then sat on the bed, his posture slumped. He finally realized just how tired he was. It wasn't every day

you were avoiding a couple of snipers and ended up in another time and place. This whole time travel thing was weird, but it was the only thing to make any sense. This wasn't like that movie his Jeanie loved. What was it called? Oh, yeah. *Somewhere in Time*. Chris Reeve was able to manipulate his surroundings to send himself back in time to be with Jane Seymour. That got Peter considering his situation, again. Had he done something to send himself back in time? He shrugged, but didn't think so.

Well, he wasn't Chris Reeve and this wasn't a movie—although he thought Mistress Carson would have made a lovely replacement for Jane Seymour—but this was reality. Peter lay back on the hard bed, reminding him of his army days and the cot in the barracks. His thoughts jumped to the SWAT assignment. Would he have survived the round the sniper had been firing at him, just before he vanished? Maybe that was the answer. He'd been shot and now he was unconscious and dreaming. Yeah, right. Sarge was probably ready to file paperwork for not showing up for his shift or calling in. This was one time the choice hadn't been his, but there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. Right now, he had to consider the situation he was in and the options opened to him.

## CHAPTER TWO

He tossed two duffelbags and a special backpack onto the queen-sized bed. The next two weeks belonged to the National Guard, a two-week vacation from the rest of the world while the military put him through their paces. This was the first time he was actually looking forward to going.

*"What are you doing?" The tall slender woman looked askance at the assorted clothing on the bed. She put her purse and coat neatly on the chair beside the door and moved into the room, standing opposite Peter, with the bed between them. Peter continued packing, folding clothes, stuffing them into the bags. "I asked you a question, Peter."*

"Did you forget I have two weeks training? That's why I'm packing."

"But you don't need all that." Lainie frowned. "There's something going on. Talk to me, Peter."

Peter stopped and looked up at her—Lainie Cameron, top fashion model. She was elegantly dressed in a tawny pantsuit that showed off her perfect figure, and perfectly coifed hair. She was always perfect—until last night.

She had been away on a shoot—or so she claimed. Peter, in gathering his things, found the letter and tickets. "When were you going to tell me?" he asked and tossed the incriminating evidence across the king sized bed, to land before her.

Lainie's perfect complexion paled. "Where did you find that?" she asked quietly.

"Never mind. Were you going to tell me at all?"

"Peter—"

"I won't be back after training." He stuck his laptop into its special backpack, added personal folders and other small items to the various pockets, then closed and buckled the straps.

"Peter, let me explain..."

"There's nothing to explain, Lainie. Apparently I wasn't good enough for you."

Lainie's face flushed with anger. "You're right. You're a dud, Peter. You never gave me what I wanted. He does. He gives me everything I want and more." As she continued her tirade, her voice rose, its pitch and volume rising to a shrill unbecoming someone who doted on perfection.

Peter zipped the duffle bag and buckled the straps, then glanced around the room to be sure he hadn't left anything behind of consequence. He shut out her tirade, always amazed how someone with such a cultured voice could sound like such a shrew. He collected his bags and headed for the bedroom door, but stopped short when something hit the doorframe and shattered. He ducked, reflexively, but didn't turn to look at her, then continued out of the room.

"Don't you dare walk away from me, Peter Ellsworth," she screeched and something else hit the same spot. A moment later the penthouse door closed quietly behind him. He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of hearing or seeing his temper. Her screeching might be muffled but it continued, loud enough for the neighbors to hear. How did they put up with it? Artistic temperament? He doubted it. A third thud and

shattering pottery disrupted his thoughts for a moment. He vaguely wondered who would be unlucky enough to be ordered to clean up the mess. Why hadn't he left long before this? Ah, well, it didn't matter now. He had no intention of going back.

*He intended to bunk overnight with one of his buddies then head out straight after work. One night of peace before his annual two-week stint with the Guard, would do him a world of good.*

Peter woke at dawn feeling groggy and felt a heavy weight on his chest. Reaching up, he found Jasper sound asleep. "How did you get in here?" he asked, rubbing the cat's fur. Jasper didn't move but began purring. "Your motor's running, old man." It was a sound of contentment. Peter slowly looked around to reorient himself with his surroundings, before easing the cat to the mattress. He stumbled out of bed to a table on the other side of the small room. Cold water in the ewer quickly brought him to alertness. Well, yesterday certainly wasn't a dream—he was still here. What was he supposed to do now? Someone was expecting him in Boston, he realized. He felt as if he had jumped into another person's skin, with something of a schedule to keep. Peter decided to follow the plan that popped into his head, and see where it took him.

When he opened the door to leave the room, an orange blur dashed around him and out of sight. Peter shook his head, amused, then went downstairs and entered the taproom, carrying his saddlebags. He sat at the same table he'd occupied the previous evening. A fuming Mistress Carson

headed for the kitchen, unaware of his presence. What had got her riled so early in the morning? A moment later he was aware of a pair of eyes staring up at him.

Peter sat back in his chair and returned the intense look. "Good morning, Tommy," he greeted the boy, and got a half-smile for his effort. The boy was far too serious for his age.

"You brought my grandma back." Tommy stared at him, with eyes the same color as that of Mistress Carson's. He set an elbow on the table then rested his chin in his cupped palm. Being small, the pose looked rather uncomfortable.

Peter grinned. "I guess so. How is she doing this morning?"

"She's still asleep, thank goodness," Gladys cut in. She whispered something to the boy and gave him a light swat on his backside, sending him off to the kitchen for his breakfast. She watched him disappear through the door, then turned back to Peter. "I wanted to thank you again for bringing Mistress Cooper back. I'll have to make a point to see she's not left alone again." She studied him for a moment. "You told Mistress Carson your own grandmother was the same way?"

"Yes. Unfortunately it's a very long illness and it only gets worse."

"Is there no way to treat it?" she asked, placing breakfast before him, ham and eggs, hot rolls and a mug of ale.

He reached for one of the rolls, broke it in half and slathered on fresh butter. "I wish there were, but even in my time, there's no cure, no medicines. No one knows for sure what causes it."



Gladys looked at him quizzically. Again.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh ... no. Nothing is wrong. I just thought I heard..."

Peter suddenly realized what he'd said, but could think of no quick way to cover his blunder. The next best thing was to pretend ignorance. He could kick himself for that small slip of the tongue. He'd have to watch what he said from now on, or he'd find himself on the wrong end of some big trouble.

Gladys paused, as if waiting for some kind of explanation for the slip. When none was forthcoming, she turned and left him to his meal. She went about her chores, glancing back at him now and again, but Peter had no intention of explaining himself.

He quickly finished his breakfast and prepared to leave the inn. "Gladys," he paused in the doorway and called to the housekeeper, "I'll be gone a few days, hold my room for me?"

"Of course, Mr. Ellsworth. Do we not always hold it for you when you go away on business?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes, of course you do. Thank you. See you in a few days." The woman was gone.

Gladys stared at him as he stepped through the inn's doorway. He was acting particularly strange this morning. She shook her head and returned to her chores. She would never understand that man.

Peter sighed. He was definitely going to get himself into big trouble. Why did they look at him, as if they knew him—or maybe they thought he'd lost his mind? He'd gained a better understanding of the situation ... at least he hoped so. Last night, while rummaging through his things, he pulled out the

letter and studied the outside of the packet. It was sealed with wax, and had his name on it, in his handwriting. It had piqued his curiosity, but he'd been too tired to do anything about it. This morning, before stopping in the taproom, he'd opened the letter and skimmed through its contents. It explained a great deal and gave him direction. It also gave him peace of mind, knowing he hadn't lost his. He knew what he had to do when he got back to the inn.

The morning was warm and bright, and Peter decided to take his time and enjoy the ride. Except for yesterday, it'd been quite a while since he'd been on horseback, and he wanted to enjoy the scenery. Corinth was too small to be called a town or even a village. He could still imagine the buildings that would replace much of the woodland in a couple hundred years. It was a good thing someone had decided to put the brakes on development in the area, or the forests would have been lost completely to so-called progress. He didn't like the idea of building on every scrap of land that looked good. Neither was it an advisable plan. Sure, the developers tried hard to get the townsfolk to agree to a mall, several department stores, a cinema complex and the like, but who needed that when you weren't far from Boston? It was a short car ride, and buses passed through a few times a day. Granted it wasn't every twenty minutes, like in the city, but who needed it? No, Peter liked Corinth just the way it was now, small, and a bit wild.

In his mind he tried to picture Libby in his world, but kept seeing Lainie instead. As far as he was concerned, he and Lainie were through. He never could figure out what he saw in

her, besides the great figure and her popularity. There had been nothing on which to build a solid relationship. Lainie wanted someone to escort her around, but that wore thin after a while. He realized that until he could get her out of his head, he couldn't give any serious thought to anyone in general ... or maybe Libby in particular. He could see himself spending the rest of his life with a woman like her. No, not like her, but Libby herself. In reality, she didn't seem to need anyone, but he thought about trying to get her to see things differently.

The late afternoon was quiet as he rode past the Boston Common. He knew the city like the back of his hand, but this was so different—the twenty-first century Boston ... not this one. This was history in the making and he felt a kind of awe as he looked around. He couldn't picture the Prudential or John Hancock buildings. What would that man say if he were told that two hundred years from now there would be a building named for him? What would he think to hear someone say to put their *John Hancock* on a document? That thought proved to be amusing.

Rather than tall buildings, he passed single family brick homes and he wondered how many would survive the ravages of time, intact. Not many, that was for sure. When he had time, he fully intended to take himself on a tour, examine history in the making, but at the moment he had an appointment of sorts to keep.

All day, his thoughts kept returning to the owner of the Swan's Down Inn. Libby was a feisty woman who wouldn't let a few unruly men stop her from running the inn. He thought

of her handling the business and rearing a child alone. That wasn't easy to do in these times, especially when by law, women weren't allowed to own property. Legally it belonged to her son, but somebody was running interference. He wouldn't be surprised if her brother was running roughshod over her, trying to gain control of her and the inn. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he had a strange and uncomfortable feeling that Libby Carson was somehow involved in more than he realized. That was the last thing he wanted. He didn't need this trip back in time to become any more complicated than it already was.

\* \* \* \*

The coach sat in front of the inn, while fresh horses were being hitched up. Libby had a small trunk tied securely to the back. "Be sure Mary keeps a careful watch on my mother," she told Gladys while she searched her reticule.

Libby didn't want to go into Boston today, but she couldn't trust Elias not to show up and force her there. She might be an independent woman, but her brother usually found a way to exert control over her, and get her to do what he wanted. He was up to something and she knew she wouldn't like it. And where was Peter ... Mr. Ellsworth? He returns to the inn after a longer than usual absence, and the next morning he's gone again. Maybe it was just as well. She had to redirect her thoughts, away from the Swan's Down Inn's only guest. Tommy could talk of nothing else the night before, but the fact Mr. Ellsworth had returned. When she got back, she'd have to find something for Tommy to do, to keep his contact

with their guest to a minimum. Her son had suffered more than enough loss in his young life, and he didn't need someone in and out like a ... like a...

Libby sighed. She realized her son was only an excuse so she wouldn't have to examine her own feelings too closely. She shuffled around what little she had in her reticule. Whatever it was she was looking for, she couldn't find it. Then again, how did you find something when you didn't know what you were looking for? She sighed and accepted it for the delaying tactic it was, then turned and climbed into the waiting coach.

Tonight was her brother's ball, being given in honor of Major William Mayhew—or was it colonel? Once again Libby questioned Elias' motives, and his insistence she be there. She had others speak of the titled British officer and what little she'd heard, caused her to take an instant dislike to the man. Libby could only hope she wouldn't be forced to keep company with him tonight. She sighed as the coach lurched out of the inn yard and onto the road. She'd know soon enough what her brother was up to.

### CHAPTER THREE

Staying with her brother and his wife was more of a trial than Libby could stand. Constance was soft spoken—most of the time—and her appearance was always meticulous. Brown hair was artfully coifed and powdered, her eyes sometimes seemed blue, and other times, more green, depending on what she wore. Her slender figure was still youthful, never having borne a child. Yes, she was a beautiful woman, until something aroused her anger and set her to screeching like a fishwife. It didn't take much.

Nothing was ever good enough. Libby faced constant criticism from the moment she arrived. Constance's severe perusal of Libby's less than perfect appearance set the younger woman's teeth on edge. Was this why Elias insisted she stay in his home, to be constantly bombarded with criticism? Libby could certainly do without the harassment. If Elias thought staying in his house for a time, and enjoying the amenities offered, would be a way to convince her she and Tommy would be happier in the city, he would be sadly disappointed. She wasn't about to force her young son into confinement with these two people. Tommy would be deprived of the freedom he had now. Constance would never tolerate the boy's exuberance. There was more to Elias's scheme than trying to convince her that her son belonged in Boston.

Libby's attention was drawn away from her thoughts by the noise from downstairs. Guests had begun to arrive, and

she dreaded having to meet them. They were all Elias's friends, and Constance's devotees. Despite her married status, Libby's sister-in-law drew men to her like moths to a flame. *Only tonight*, Libby thought, *and tomorrow I can return to the inn and my family, and forget about this abysmal night.*

\* \* \* \*

A footman stood just inside the door in the foyer, taking cloaks and hats, and handing them off to the maid standing beside him. She'd been scurrying back and forth for the last hour, while he remained at his station, greeting the guests.

A second footman stood at the top of a long staircase, accepting cards from people who paused before him. He quickly read each card, then announced the guest's arrival. Matrons continued to gossip, seemingly paying no heed to the announcements. Several young ladies stood in a small group, glancing about and giggling behind their fans.

Libby was appalled to see so many British uniforms, but chided herself that she shouldn't be surprised. Elias' loyalist support had garnered him many favors, but it was never enough. After all, Elias's real purpose for holding this ball was to make more contacts and ingratiate himself with those having the greatest influence. When Libby stepped into the grand ballroom, she realized Elias and his current companion were staring, watching her every move. She pretended not to see them, and let her gaze wander over the guests. Most people she didn't know, not having lived in Boston for several years. She'd left the city when she married Thomas Carson.

When he died, Libby gave no thought to returning to Boston. She refused to look in her brother's direction, but she could guess whom it was Elias was talking with.

Her brother smiled broadly and approached her, and taking her arm, led her back to the officer. "Elizabeth, may I present Colonel William Mayhem. Colonel, this is my sister, Elizabeth Cooper Carson. Her husband was killed a year ago, while returning to the Swan's Down Inn."

"I'm sorry to hear of your loss, Mistress Carson. He was a Loyalist, I hope."

"No, Colonel Mayhem, he wasn't. He was a colonial rebel, shot in the back by a British soldier." A hint of anger colored Libby's response.

"He must have done something to have been shot down. British troops do not shoot civilians in the back."

"Then you don't know your men. My husband was returning home from Boston after purchasing supplies for our inn." Libby didn't like the officer, didn't like his smug assumption.

"Perhaps I should take you around, to meet other of our guests," Elias suggested to his sister, when the silence became uncomfortable. "We will talk again later, William," he said as he once more took his sister's arm.

When they were out of earshot of the colonel, Elias spun Libby around to face him. "How dare you speak like that to an officer," he hissed.

"And how dare he belittle my loss," she retorted in kind. "No matter his political beliefs, Tom was still my husband and my son's father."



"Be that as it may. You will watch your tongue in front of the colonel. I hope to have some profitable dealings with him, and I'll thank you not to sabotage my efforts. For that matter..." Elias' face lit up with a sudden idea. Two ladies strolled past them, nodding and fluttering their fans coquettishly at him. Their glances at Libby were sly, as if they thought she might be some kind of competition for Elias' attention. Nothing could be further from the truth.

He nodded to them, but kept his grip on his sister's arm. A moment later he continued. "I don't have time to introduce you to my guests. I'm sure you can do that yourself." He stood straight for a moment and glanced around as if looking for someone in particular, then leaned toward her. "There *is* one person whom I'm certain would enjoy making your acquaintance. Come with me."

Elias headed toward the far side of the room.

Libby pulled back on his grasp, angry that he thought he could drag her about the room like a dog on a leash.

Elias relented and moved more slowly, as if they were strolling across the room.

Ahead of them, Libby groaned at the sight of another British officer. The man stood in the open doorway, looking out over the gardens. His back was to the ballroom. His hands were clasped behind him, but his stance seemed anything but relaxed.

"Ah! There you are!" Elias called out as they moved closer. "Elizabeth, dear sister, may I introduce you to Major Peter Ellsworth."

At the mention of his name, Peter turned, his face void of all expression. He nodded to Elias, then took Libby's hands in his. Libby's surprise turned to fury, but he knew she wouldn't create a scene before her brother's guests. She tried to pull free of his grasp, but Peter raised one of her hands and just before placing a kiss on her fingers he whispered, "Things are not as they seem."

Elias, having missed the softly spoken remark, took great pleasure in his sister's shock. "It seems you had no idea your guest was in the British army," he gloated. "Perhaps you two would like some time to talk. I will see you at supper." He turned on his heel and strode away, fully pleased with himself. He was all ready planning the next step in his campaign to achieve his goals.

As soon as he'd gone, Libby made a point of leaving the traitor as well, and hurried to a corner of the room where she could remain partially out of sight. She refused to give him the satisfaction of looking back. Once they returned to the inn, she intended to tell him to leave. She had no idea what he meant by his cryptic statement when Elias was there, and she didn't care. How could she have been so foolish as to believe in him? He was no different than any other man in the settlement of Corinth—or Boston for that matter. She faced the corner for a moment until she regained her composure, then turned to watch the dancers.

Despite the subtle breeze coming through the French doors, the ballroom was slowing becoming rather warm with the crush of people. A flurry of ladies' fans barely moved the perfume-laden air within the room. Peter thought he'd

eventually choke on the assorted scents if he didn't get outside for a while. He glanced about the room and found Libby, backing into the wall. Five gentlemen, crowded about her and she'd stepped back to put what distance she could between them. For every step she took backward, they moved closer, until she no longer had any room to move.

Peter tugged on the hated red coat he wore, and realized that once in a great while it did have its advantages. He made his way to the small group, and eased between two men. When they realized who had joined their ranks, they reluctantly parted to let him through. Peter stood before Libby. "Mistress Carson, it's become rather close in here, and you did promise to take a turn with me about the garden..." He offered her his arm waited a moment for her to accept. A flicker of distrust crossed her delicate features, and vanished. She was grateful for his appearance, but thought briefly he might have set them on her so he could play the gallant hero. Either way, she hadn't changed her mind about his treachery.

Libby tucked her hand under his arm. "So I did, Major. Forgive me, gentlemen," she apologized with a hint of relief in her voice. A hint of a chill was obvious to Peter when she glanced up at him. "The major did ask earlier..." She felt their stares as Peter guided her through the open French doors, and down the steps into the garden.

"Thank you for your timely rescue, Major, but don't think I've forgiven you for your dishonesty." She pulled her hand away, but stayed close by his side, in case anyone else had ideas of monopolizing her attention.

"You're quite welcome." Peter immediately missed the warmth of her hand on his sleeve. When they had gone a distance from the house, he glanced about to be sure no one could eavesdrop on their conversation. "Libby, I meant what I said earlier. Things are not what they seem."

"Well, you're here, wearing a uniform. To my knowledge it *is* that of a British officer."

"Libby—"

"Mister Ellsworth ... excuse me ... Major Ellsworth, you have been a guest at my inn for nigh on a year. Never before was there so much as a hint of any loyalty to the British army or the crown. Was your purpose in keeping it secret so you could spy on my customers? Did you expect to overhear secrets and plans?"

There was fire in her eyes, and Peter loved it, but he kept those thoughts to himself. Her accusations didn't sit at all well with him. "I don't need to spy on anyone, or eavesdrop on hurried conversations. I already know what's going to happen, when and where it'll happen, and how it'll turn out."

Libby gasped and stared up at him. Did he think he was some kind of fortune teller to know exactly what the future held?"

As if reading her mind he explained briefly. "I'm not any kind of fortune teller to know results from this war. For you to understand, I need to show you some things, but there's something else going on I think you should know about."

Before he could say another word, a servant appeared. "Supper is being served, Major. If you and Mistress Carson would like to join the rest of the guests..."

"Tell you what. Why don't you go back into the house, fix a couple plates for us and bring it out here, with something to drink."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

Peter waited until the servant had gone inside. "This isn't exactly the most secure place to discuss suspicions," he commented, glancing around the garden. He listened carefully for any telltale sounds that might warn him someone was too close. He heard nothing but the usual evening sounds.

"What is there to be suspicious about, beyond what Elias may be up to?" Libby asked after an uncomfortable few moments of silence.

Before Peter could reply, the servant returned bearing a large tray, while a second servant placed a small table before them. The tray was set down and silverware wrapped in napkins, handed to the couple. "Thank you," Peter responded, after the first servant removed the cover to show the choices he had selected for them. Peter was pleased.

Wine was poured into two glasses and placed on the table. "Will there be anything else, Major?" the servant asked after taking a step back from them and standing at attention.

Peter would almost have believed the man had served in the military at some point, but considering the state of affairs throughout the colonies, the servant would most likely still be there. It didn't matter to Peter one way or another. "This is fine, thank you," he replied dismissing both servants. They bowed, turned sharply and left. Peter wasn't worried about being alone with Libby. Being a widow, he realized she had more leeway in her choices than did a young girl. Still, they

were in a respectable spot, and she was free to leave any time she felt she might be compromised. He hoped she'd stay long enough to hear him out.

After a sip of wine, Peter dug into the meal. He cut into the roast beef on his plate, then took a bite. It was medium rare, just the way he liked it. He closed his eyes and smiled, savoring the flavor of meat and spices. He cut another piece and offered it to Libby, surprised and pleased she'd allow him to feed her a bite. Her eyes seemed darker, but he put it down to dim torchlight set around the garden. A corner of his mind toyed with a simple question. Could she be attracted to him? He could only bide his time and hope she might have some kernel of feeling for him.

"What is there to be suspicious about?" Libby asked again, flustered by what she saw in his eyes. Despite her anger over his betrayal, did he feel the same as she did right now? It had to be the sultry night air, the sweet fragrances surrounding them, while faint strains of music floated out to them from the ballroom. Every now and again the music grew a bit louder as the breeze shifted direction. What would it be like to be held by him? She shook her head determined to dismiss her traitorous thoughts. She had responsibilities to her mother and her son. Libby had no time in her life to spare for flights of fancy. Tomorrow, she was sure, would find them back at the inn, everything going on as it had for months.

"Let's save serious matters for tomorrow, and enjoy tonight while we can." Having finished his meal, Peter sipped his wine, then got up from the garden bench, slipping around

the table to stand by Libby's side. "May I have this dance?" he asked and held out his hand to her.

Strains of a minuet did nothing to induce her to join him. "This is unseemly, Major Ellsworth, not at all proper." She kept her hands in her lap, her palms damp with sudden nervousness.

"Neither is our being out here alone." He paused, as if assessing her mood. "Are you suddenly afraid of me, Libby?" he asked softly. "You should know I would never deliberately hurt you." He drew her up from the bench. With his free hand he placed hers on his shoulder then lightly rested his hand against her waist.

"Major Ellsworth!" she squeaked.

"Shh. Feel the music and follow me. No. Look at me," he told her when she clumsily tried to watch his steps. Libby trembled, but did as he asked, and soon found herself following him effortlessly. He improvised, matching his steps to the music playing. It wasn't easy, but he managed to find the proper beat. "This is known as a waltz," he explained. "It won't be around yet for another forty years or so. It's considered quite scandalous."

"I wonder why," she remarked and smiled shyly as she looked up at him. She bit back a nervous giggle and a light blush colored her cheeks. She never giggled. "Forty years from now? How would you know..."

"I'll explain another time. It's part of what I need to tell you. Right now, let yourself go and enjoy the moment. Pretend we're dancing on clouds."

Libby laughed, then caught her breath when he whirled her around the garden path. Peter loved the sound of her laughter, a response he rarely heard. He drew her closer, then slowed their steps until they finally came to a stop. Libby felt right in his arms. She belonged there, with him. Suddenly, everything in the letter he'd written to himself became clear. He knew why he was here, what he was supposed to do, and the sooner he accomplished his goal, the better for all involved.

"We should go in," Libby said, finally, breaking the spell. "I can imagine all sorts of terrible things being said about our being gone so long." She turned and started walking toward the house and the ballroom.

"Libby," Peter called. He moved to her side and tucked her hand inside his arm. "Do you think you can get away tomorrow?"

"I think so. I came to town to get a few needed supplies. You don't think I would spend the day in that house with Elias and his wife?"

Peter chuckled. "No, I don't think so. Can you meet me in the North Church? We need to talk, and that's about the safest place I can think of until we return to the inn. Anyway, I'd like to see what a future historical site looks like when it's practically new."

Libby looked at him strangely. Seemed everyone was doing that at one time or another. He couldn't help it if he kept slipping and saying strange things, but maybe tomorrow he could explain a few things. He shrugged and grinned boyishly.



"I had intended to leave in the morning, but Elias has found an excuse to keep me here a bit longer. I will return to the inn in two days' time. Yes, I can meet you there, early afternoon."

"Good. Now that's settled, shall we return to the ballroom?"

When they entered the ballroom, Elias hurried over to them, his face scarlet with fury. "Where have you been? How dare you embarrass me this way, disappearing and casting aspersions on my good name." He glared at Peter, as if the officer were totally to blame for something he, himself, had set into motion.

Peter opened his mouth to respond, but a gentle squeeze of his arm stopped him. Libby looked up at her brother. "Do you think so little of me, Elias, that you would believe all manner of gossip? We had supper in the garden and chatted for a bit. Major Ellsworth was the perfect gentleman."

"Perfect or not, in future you will go nowhere without a chaperone."

"I am not a child, Elias, neither am I a young girl being paid court for the first time. I am a widow, with certain rights. You may be patriarch of this family, but you no longer have any say over me. As long as I conduct myself in a proper manner, you will let me be. I am not yours to command. Do I make myself clear?"

Elias sputtered with indignation. His usually soft-spoken sister had never before threatened to defy him. "We will see about that," he warned softly, then stalked away to join Colonel Mayhew.

Peter gazed down at the woman standing next to him. She surprised him—again. The lady was a tigress. What he wouldn't give to have her by his side always. Maybe when all this was over...

Who was he kidding? He could be here indefinitely or vanish from this time and place as quickly and easily as he'd arrived. In spite of not knowing what his future held, Peter was willing to take a chance.

\* \* \* \*

Peter closed his cloak over the homespun he wore, and hurried after Libby. He'd just spotted her strolling toward the church, as if enjoying the day. Despite the cloak with its concealing hood, he would know her anywhere. Thankfully, no one was around, else who knew what might happen if he were caught pursuing her. He couldn't tell everyone the truth—then again, he didn't care if they knew it or not. Did they still burn people for witchcraft, he wondered. It only mattered what Libby thought, as unbelievable as it was, and she'd believe the worst if he didn't get a chance to explain.

He stopped a moment when he heard a door close. It sounded heavy. Glancing about, he realized the only door to fit that sound belonged to the Old North Church. Not only was it suitable for their meeting, but it was also the one place he wanted to see. Maybe she didn't expect him to show up in a church of all places. He'd been truthful with her when he said he wanted to see a future historical building while it was still new. History in the making was a fascinating thing. Peter glanced about, and checked once more to be sure no one was

within shouting distance, spying. He slipped into the building and eased the door closed behind him.

Peter stopped just inside the door to give his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light. The gray daylight filtering through the windows wasn't much help. He found Libby sitting near the front, her bowed head still covered by her hood. He pulled off his tricorn and tapped it against his thigh. In all fairness, Libby had every right to know what was going on, what her brother had planned for her. He could turn away and let things happen, let her take her chances like anyone else. The need to explain warred with caution. Despite Lainie's betrayal, he realized he was willing to take a chance on Libby. The two women were as different as night and day. Lainie was winter, while Libby was a warm and welcoming summer day. *Stop with the cliches*, he chided himself. *You came here to set things right with her. She deserves to know exactly what her brother is up to. Give her the chance to make her own decisions. Heaven knows Elias won't.*

Footsteps, almost silent, moved down the aisle toward the front of the church. Peter stopped by the row behind Libby, and reached over the half door to release the latch. The end of every row had a door to block out draughts in the winter. He was aware of other amenities used to stave off the cold, but he wasn't interested at the moment. Maybe later, he'd have some time for sight seeing. Peter was more concerned with making things right with Libby. The truth was the only way—fantastic as it would sound—but how much to tell her. What would she believe?

Peter slowly rubbed his fingers back and forth along the edge of the tricorn, then laid it on the seat next to him. "I meant what I said last night," he began hesitantly. There was no response. He tried again. "Things aren't as they seem."

"Can you not leave me in peace, Major Ellsworth?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

What had happened after the ball to make her so angry?

Had Elias started in on her again about going off alone? If that were the case, she must have ditched his appointed chaperone somewhere. Peter felt a sudden urge to strangle the man—brother or no.

"Libby—" Peter stopped abruptly when Libby turned sharply and glared at him.

"I did not give you leave to use my Christian name, sir."

"I don't know what bee got into your bonnet since last night, but I apologize ... Mistress Carson." A tinge of sarcasm colored her name. "I only wanted a few moments to explain, but now, I don't know how to tell you so you would understand. I don't understand it all, myself."

"Unfortunately, I don't have time for long-winded explanations."

"Fine. I'll get to the point." Peter's words were tinged with his own anger at her attitude. "You know Elias is looking for a way to expand his shipping business with the British."

Libby nodded.

"What you don't know, is that Mayhew won't consider your brother's proposition, unless there is something added to sweeten the pot, so to speak. While the army would benefit from a deal, he wants something for himself."

"What has this to do with me?"

"Everything. Mayhew wants you, and Elias is more than willing to turn you over to him. I have to warn you, Libby. Mayhew has Elias thinking he seeks marriage with you, but his intentions aren't honorable. He wants a mistress, and he is far from gentle when it comes to women. He has a reputation for abusing them, then when he gets bored, he tosses them aside in favor of the next one to catch his eye."

"I have heard nothing to support what you claim."

"Of course you wouldn't. For one thing, ladies aren't supposed to know of such things. He'd try to keep it as quiet as possible. If people were to find out, he could lose his commission, possibly face a court martial. He has too much to lose if word got around of his proclivities."

From where he sat at an angle behind her, Peter saw her cheek go pale, in spite of the filtered light. "How can he do this? He intends selling me off as if I were no better than a slave."

"They're both in it for what they can get for themselves. You're just goods to be bought and sold." Peter didn't like being so brusque with her, but she needed to understand now. "Elias will try to gain your confidence and convince you to agree to the arrangement. He'll probably tell you it's for your own good, as well as Tommy's, but I don't trust him, or his motives. What he says now, won't be the same as what he does later, once he's got you in agreement."

"I-I can't believe he would do something so despicable." Libby turned sharply. "How do I know you're not making this up to deepen the rift between my brother and me?"

"Because I don't work that way," he hissed, not pleased with her accusation. He grabbed the back of the pew where she sat and held the wood tightly in his grasp until his knuckles turned white.

Libby got up and moved into the aisle. "I have to think about this for a while." She began moving away from him, toward the back of the church.

"Don't think too long, or you won't have any choices left to make." Peter remained seated, turning to watch Libby retreat to the church door and leave the building. He turned back and studied the raised pulpit. He didn't think Elias would wait very long before springing his trap. No, she didn't have much time at all.

## CHAPTER FOUR

After leaving the church, Libby took her time in the completion of her errands. She didn't want to think about what Peter had just told her. The idea was too shocking. Despite trying to shut them out, his words kept repeating themselves in her mind. *Elias will try to gain your confidence and convince you to agree to the arrangement.* Peter was wrong in that respect. There was nothing Elias could do to gain her confidence. He'd lost that ability years ago. When they were young, he'd taken one of their father's horses without permission and recklessly rode it until the animal pulled up lame and useless. Rather than face his father's wrath, Elias had talked her into covering for him. Then, she'd loved her brother dearly, but his treachery gained her severe punishment, while he, the real perpetrator of the crime, got off scot free. From that day forward, she never trusted him again.

Errands done, Libby returned to her brother's house and packed her purchases into her valise. The bag was shoved back under the bed, then she went downstairs to the drawing room. She needed something to keep her mind occupied. There was no telling how long her brother intended to keep her here. She perused the bindings of the limited book collection, then pulled one off the shelf she thought might be interesting.

Libby sat on the sofa, tucking her feet under her and began reading. How much time had passed, she had no idea.

She started when Constance sashayed into the room, followed by a servant bearing a tray with cups and a pot of tea.

"Oh! I wondered where you had gone off to," the woman exclaimed trying to be pleasant. "I had no idea you were here."

Libby glanced at the tray and seeing two cups, had no doubt in her mind Constance knew all along she was here.

"Reading, I see. It answers the question why you have never remarried." Her words were light and flippant. She poured tea into the cups. "Sugar, my dear?" she asked too sweetly.

Libby thought if this kept up for too long, she might end up with a toothache. "One lump and a little bit of cream." The only way to get rid of her sister-in-law was to be overly polite and sickeningly sweet. That second part, she thought, might be harder to do. She accepted the cup handed her and sipped slowly at the hot brew.

Constance sipped her tea then looked at her houseguest. "Last night was an absolute success. Everyone had a marvelous time. I must say you were the belle of the ball. The gentlemen couldn't take their gazes from you all night long." Constance tried not to grit her teeth at the admission. She should have been the center of attention—not her mousy sister-in-law.

"Pity, that," Libby replied between sips. "I'll try harder next time to not become the center of attraction." Indeed, Libby would have preferred to stay at the inn. She was only trying to keep some semblance of peace between herself and her



brother. Had it not been for Peter she would have been thoroughly bored—not that she would ever make such a confession to him, real or imagined.

"I noticed the good colonel was interested," Constance prattled on. "He is such a handsome man. If I weren't a respectable married woman..." She let the inference hang unfinished, but waited a moment for some kind of response. None was forthcoming. "Had you not been surrounded by so many young gentlemen, he might have partnered with you for the evening."

"Thank heaven for small favors," Libby mumbled into her tea, and wished Constance would leave her in peace.

"What was that, my dear?" Constance played the role of matron for all it was worth, when it suited her. If it meant having control of a given situation ... "By the by, the good colonel will be joining us for dinner. I do hope you will be kind and give him your undivided attention."

Libby glanced up, and watched her sister-in-law needlessly pat her blond curls, a faraway look in her eyes. Libby could only wonder what was running through the woman's mind, then decided she really didn't care. The thought of having to be nice to the colonel turned her stomach. She was tempted to plead a headache and have a tray sent to her room.

Having lost interest in her book, Libby replaced it in its space on the shelf. "If you will excuse me, Constance, I believe I will go to my room and lie down for a bit. I slept poorly last night and I fear the lack of sleep has caused me to have a headache. A nap should help immensely."

"Of course dear. I'll have the maid wake you in time to get ready for dinner." Constance saw Libby's expression for the excuse it was. "Oh, I almost forgot. Major Ellsworth will be joining us as well."

Libby's back stiffened, and her heart beat wildly. Her heart and mind were at war over thoughts of the good major. She didn't need to see Peter after last night, then the words they had in the church earlier today, but he could act as a buffer with the colonel. Given a choice between the two, she would have preferred Peter's company. "Thank you for that," she said without turning to Constance. "I'm sure I'll be feeling better by then." She left the drawing room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Constance stared at the door, a smug expression on her face. So that was the way of it. Wouldn't Libby be surprised when she found out that Elias would be away, leaving her to entertain the colonel, while Constance, herself, did her best to endear herself to the handsome major. Oh, yes. It was going to be an interesting evening.

\* \* \* \*

"Ah, Mistress Carson." William Mayhew was the first to greet Libby when she entered the drawing room. He hurried forward, and quickly took her hand, kissing her knuckles. Then taking her elbow, he escorted her into the room.

Libby subtly moved a step away from him. Peter barely nodded, and swirled the brandy about in the glass he held, before taking a sip. His eyes were dark, and slightly narrowed. Was he jealous of Mayhew's attention? She rather

liked the idea, but considered it too fanciful to give it further thought.

"You looked particularly lovely, at the ball, Mistress Carson. I hope you enjoyed yourself," Mayhew complimented, hoping to get Libby into conversation.

"Yes," she said simply. "It was interesting." She dared glance at Peter. He was no help, staring at her as if she were somehow odd looking.

It was going to be a long evening.

Libby sipped her sherry and kept her eyes lowered. One man she wanted nothing to do with, while the other she could almost wish to perdition for making the evening more difficult than it need be.

"You say your husband is away on business?" Mayhew asked politely of Constance.

"Oh, yes, Colonel. My husband is constantly seeking out business opportunities. He is always saying those who fail to search out opportunities are doomed to failure." Constance glanced at Libby, as if directing her response to her sister-in-law rather than the colonel.

Libby kept her features neutral. It was going to be a very long evening.

When the butler announced dinner, Constance latched on to Peter's arm. "Shall we go in?"

Peter nodded, then escorted his hostess to the dining room, while Mayhew offered his arm to a silently fuming Libby.

Once seated, one of the servants brought out a clear broth for the first course. Peter stared at it for a moment,

wondering where the soup stock had disappeared. He was used to the hearty soups Caroline made for Dan, the kind that satisfied a man's appetite. If this was fancy cooking, he could do without, but he was too well mannered to make any comment.

Conversation was light, and centered around the current gossip, until Mayhew brought up his reasons for being in the colonies. He sat back while the main course of roast duck was being served, along with roasted potatoes, an egg custard on the side, and wine. Various vegetables were placed on a platter in the center of the table.

Peter was careful not to pay Libby too much attention. Knowing Mayhew's interest in her, he didn't want to force the colonel's hand and rush matters. He did glance at her now and again, and was concerned at her lack of appetite. He was aware of her dislike for Constance and the colonel, and hoped those feelings didn't extend to him. She was a very special lady, and one day soon, he intended to show her just how special she was.

"How long do you suppose this war will go on?" Constance asked. "I find it intolerable that people would forsake their rightful ruler over a whim ... a tantrum to have their own way.

"Neither whim nor tantrum," Libby replied quietly.

"Then what would you call it?" Constance turned to her sister-in-law.

"The freedom to govern ourselves."

"We have always had a king."

"Yes, but with an ocean between us and the monarchy, do you really think he knows or cares what goes on here? How can he rule fairly with such a great distance between."

"Taxation without representation?" Mayhew asked, looking pointedly at Libby.

"Exactly," she continued. "You propose we live by English law when we have no say in the House of Commons. All Englishmen, in England have someone to represent them, yet here, you expect us to be blindly obedient and accept whatever taxes you wish to lay upon us. At the same time, you refuse to listen to our leaders. You cannot have it both ways."

"You are one of these ... rebels?" Mayhew was intent on a confession.

"I am just a person who would see things done properly."

Peter silently applauded Libby's forthrightness, although he himself remained silent.

"I like a woman who isn't afraid to speak her mind," Mayhew concluded. His blue eyes darkened with want and need.

Libby quickly looked away.

They got through the rest of the meal amicably, and returned to the drawing room for sherry and brandy.

"Elizabeth, perhaps you would be kind enough to play something for us," Constance encouraged.

"Oh, Constance, I couldn't. I haven't played since I met my husband several years ago. I fear I'm woefully out of practice."

"That's a pity. Then I should provide the entertainment. Major Ellsworth, would you be so kind as to turn pages for me?" she asked slyly.

There was no graceful way Peter could refuse, so he followed Constance to the pianoforte and sat beside her. "I'm afraid I don't read music," he half whispered.

"That's quite all right, Major. Just turn the page when I nod. That will suffice."

Constance began playing a minuet, concentrating on the notes and keys. Her playing wasn't the best Peter had ever heard. She struck wrong notes, then tended to go back and replay the passage. Even Mayhew squirmed restlessly, waiting for her to finish. Soon enough she completed the score, and curtsied to the polite applause.

"Perhaps you would allow me to take you out for a ride in my carriage, Mistress Carson," Mayhew suggested, hopefully. Elias was moving too slowly to suit him. He had to find a way to separate Libby from everyone she knew, especially the major who was behaving like a guard dog. If he could get her alone in his carriage ... he wanted to see how long it would take him to bend her to his will. She would be an interesting plaything for a while, until he tired of her, but he had a feeling it would be some time before that happened.

Libby stood and smoothed her skirts. "I'm afraid I must leave for Corinth in the morning. I don't like leaving my son for very long."

"Well, if you must, my dear. I would be sorry to miss your charming company. Then perhaps you would allow me to escort you."

"That won't be necessary, sir," Peter cut in. "I'll be escorting Mistress Carson, since I have business there anyway. No need to inconvenience yourself."

"It would be no inconvenience at all," Mayhew insisted politely.

"Excuse me, sir," Peter continued, "but you have those reports you wanted to read first thing in the morning."

"Reports. Yes," he replied sourly. "Must you leave first thing, Mistress? Surely you might wait an hour or two, until I can provide you with a proper escort." As he spoke, he cut Peter a dark look, daring him to speak up again.

Libby thought the posturing was foolish, to say the least, but she had no intention of waiting until Mayhew was available to see her home—neither did she trust him. "I'm sorry, Colonel, but I've stayed overly long as it is. I have a young son waiting for my return. I wouldn't want to abuse my welcome here nor interfere with your duties." She heard an almost silent snicker and glanced at Peter then quickly looked away. "Major Ellsworth, since you are returning to the inn, I would be glad of your company. Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, Constance, I will retire to my room. I have much to do tomorrow. Good night." Libby nodded in respect, then turned and left the drawing room.

"I, too, should be returning to my rooms if I'm to make an early start."

"Must you, Major? Can you not stay a while longer? I have so been enjoying the company of two handsome men."

He turned to Constance, and took her hand in his. "I regret having to leave, but duty calls and I must answer." He kissed

her hand then gently released it. He didn't like the predatory look in her eyes, and left the Cooper house for his own rooms. He hoped Libby would lock her door. He didn't trust Mayhew either.

Early the next morning, he saw Libby comfortably settled in Elias' carriage, and rode Justice, keeping pace with the vehicle. Little was said between them, each keeping their own thoughts.

When they arrived at the Swan's Down Inn, Tommy ran outside, anxious to see his mother after what must have seemed to him, like a long separation. Peter smiled at the reunion, and was surprised when Tommy threw himself at him. "Where you been, Peter? I know Mama was with Uncle Elias and Aunt Constance."

Peter picked up the five-year-old and held him snugly in his arms. "And I was there with your mother. She couldn't wait to come home to you." Peter tightened his hug on the boy, for just a moment, then put him down again. Holding Tommy, made Peter realize what it was he really wanted, what he'd been missing—a family of his own—and wondered if he would ever find that kind of happiness.

Libby caught his gaze and gave him a shy smile. Seeing her son take to Peter warmed her heart, yet she still felt some doubts on his reasons for staying at the inn. She could forgive him his political leanings, but if he ever hurt her son ... that was something she would never forgive.

The three of them went into the inn where Gladys had breakfast ready for them. Even Jasper greeted Peter with a friendly purr. Tommy was filled with questions, and barely



waited for an answer before asking the next one. "Are you going to marry my mama?" he asked innocently.

Peter choked on his ale, and Libby turned a bright crimson. Gladys had just set a basket of rolls on the table, when she heard the question. She hurried away, barely able to control her laughter.

"Thomas Edward Carson! You never ask such questions. We hardly know Mr. Ellsworth."

Tommy appeared chastised for a moment, then asked again.

Peter shrugged, not knowing what to answer. If it were up to him, he'd take them both away, somewhere where the war wouldn't touch them, if that were possible. "It isn't in the cards, pal, at least not right now."

"Oh." The boy looked puzzled, then a bit downcast but quickly brightened. "We got some new kittens in the stable. Want to see them?"

"In a little while, sport. Right now, I'd like to finish my breakfast and I have a couple things to do."

"You're not going to leave again, are you?"

"No, I'm not leaving for a while."

"Good. You have to marry my mama first." He no sooner spoke, then he was out the door, racing to the stable.

"I apologize for my son's bad manners," Libby offered, a crimson glow in her cheeks.

"Don't apologize for something done in innocence. Tommy's happy to see us together. There's nothing wrong in that."

"I don't want him to get the wrong idea."

Liberty's Belle: A Paranormal Romance  
*by Marissa St. James*

"Don't worry about. Everything will fall into place the way it's meant to be."

"I hope you're right."

Peter leaned forward and covered Libby's hand with his own. "I know I am," he replied quietly. "It's just a matter of time."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Something woke him. Peter tried to roll over, looking for his bedside alarm clock, out of habit, before he recalled where he was. Something heavy lay on his chest, preventing him from moving. He stared into the blackness, trying to make out the shape. It was warm and purring softly. "Not a good idea, old man," he said, wondering what time it was, then came fully alert when he realized what had awakened him. Muffled voices drifted up from the taproom. He'd gone to bed directly after supper, having spent most of the day making repairs around the inn. He did know it was late for a coach to be stopping. There was something furtive about the tone, and Peter's curiosity got the better of him.

Dressed in dark shirt and trousers, he pulled on his coat and stealthily descended the stairs. Peter stayed in the shadows, listening to conversation that became more animated by the moment. It was fortunate for him that few folk had bothered to make his acquaintance. He felt comfortable pretending to be invisible. He slipped into a chair in the nearest corner and studied the goings on.

Peter was under the impression the men were marking time. If he thought it wouldn't start something, he would have joined in the conversation, but he recognized a couple of men who had been at the ball in Boston and saw him wearing that hated British uniform. He watched Libby move about the taproom, refilling mugs, and removing plates. She spoke

quietly and occasionally laughed with them. The tension was palpable.

Two and three at a time, the men left the inn. That surprised Peter. He paused for a moment and realized the day. If it was after midnight, it was the sixteenth of June. They were about to fight for possession of Bunker Hill. If he remembered his history correctly, the colonials got wind of a British plan to take possession of the hill, since it was about the best spot to watch the harbor, and a good part of the coast.

Apparently the men had been drifting in and out of the inn for several hours, eventually making their clandestine way to Breed's hill to dig in. Peter waited until the last man left, then gave it a few more minutes. He watched Libby finish clearing and wiping down tables. "So it goes," he said quietly as she hurried past him, missing him in the shadows.

Libby jumped and almost dropped her tray. "What are you doing here?" she demanded once her heartbeat had slowed to normal. "I thought you were in Boston."

"What! And miss all the fun?" he teased in return. He reached out and took the tray from her still shaking hands. He was silent a moment, then became serious. "This is just the beginning, you know."

"What do you know of it?" Libby stared at him, hands resting on her hips. "What *are* you doing here, *Major* Ellsworth? Spying on us for the British Army?"

"I don't have to spy to know what's going on, Libby."

"No, you just eavesdrop on private conversations. I haven't decided yet which side you've taken." Libby finished

wiping down a table then took the tray from Peter, not wanting any help from him. He confused her. The greater the distance between them, the better she liked it. "I have work to finish. I would be grateful if you would leave me to it."

Peter held up his hands, palms outward in a sign of truce. "As my lady wishes," he laughed and bowed to her.

"I am *not* your lady," she responded indignantly, and sniffed.

"I will take myself out and leave you to your tasks. I bid you good night ... or is it morning?" He laughed again and ducked to avoid the cleaning rag she threw at him. He left the inn, grinning.

The road was quiet, and the only light to show his way came from the stars. Peter started walking in the direction of the hills where battle would take place in a matter of hours. How often did someone get to see history in the making, knowing how it would turn out before it was done?

When he arrived at his destination, Peter stayed in the shadows. As far as he could see in either direction, silhouettes of men were quietly digging trenches, stacking bales of cotton and hay. Twelve hundred men were preparing to defend Bunker Hill. No one knew the real reason why the men took their stand and fought on Breed's Hill. There were several theories. Maybe he could find the answers to that sometime today. Peter didn't know if his presence would create any change in the historical event about to be played out. If the British gained control, there was no telling what would happen to the colonials.

The sun rose above the harbor, the pastel colors heralding a new day. Peter sat on the ground and leaned against a tree. Watching the men still digging and stacking, made him tired. Time seemed to pass slowly, until he looked up and found the sun half way to mid-sky overhead. He must have dozed and not realized it. Peter got up and stretched his legs. The muscles were stiff from sitting so long in one position. Keeping to the shadows, he looked over to Breed's Hill, and found the men taking part in the battle. With all the gunfire, shouting cursing, he was surprised the noise hadn't awakened him earlier.

There was a loud distant boom, followed by another, and a third. The English navy was firing on them but with no success. Peter realized he'd heard the occasional canon fire while he slept. That would account for the strange dreams he'd had when he dozed off. The colonials were ready for battle as they watched the English march up the hill, still in their telltale scarlet coats. The rebels' supplies were limited, and they held their fire until the enemy was close enough that every shot would count. The front line was cut down but the redcoats kept coming, like mindless fools, until they were forced to retreat and leave their dead.

A short time later, they were reorganized and charging up the hill again, only to be repelled by the rebels. It took longer to regroup for a third assault, but the advantage had turned their way. Peter realized the rebels were out of powder and shot, and watched in awe while they used their muskets as clubs, and threw anything they could get their hands on. The

redcoats used their bayonets to gain the field and rout the rebels.

Peter stood at the ready when retreat was sounded and the rebels made their escape. Several men came his way, and he ran toward them to help support their wounded comrades. "This way," he said as he gripped one man round the waist to keep him from falling.

"Hold it right there," one colonial rebel warned, standing in Peter's way, a bloodied hunting knife in his hand. "You're one of them redcoats. I remember seeing you at Elias Cooper's home, in an English uniform. You had the markings of a major." The others began grumbling and closing in, while they stared warily at Peter.

"Yeah, I saw you there, too," another voice called out. "You here to spy on us, to tell Mayhew where we're hiding?"

"You're Josiah Martin, right?" Peter saw the man, forgot caution and continued. "I wouldn't give Mayhew the time of day, but yes, I was there. There's no point in denying it, but my agenda isn't what you think. Look, we can stand around here till the cows come home and let your friends bleed to death, or we can dress their wounds and get them over to the inn, where Libby ... Mistress Carson can tend to them. It's your choice."

Josiah stared at him, squinty-eyed, then put up his knife into its sheath. "Lead the way. Don't give me a reason to use this. I just need an excuse. A false move from you, and I won't think twice about using it."

Peter nodded in understanding and led the way toward the inn.

\* \* \* \*

Taking a roundabout route to avoid the hastily put together British patrol, Peter and five more men, three of whom were wounded, arrived some thirty yards away from the inn. The men were exhausted, barely standing. Peter glanced up and stopped.

Twilight made it difficult to see, but there appeared to be a dozen horses, and several soldiers milling about. "Wait!" he whispered hoarsely when Josiah pushed ahead of him. The older man stopped and gave Peter a warning glance. "They're looking for anyone who ran from the battle when retreat was called," Peter explained. "We'll have to wait here until they're gone." The man he was supporting was carefully eased to the ground.

"Why should we trust you?" Josiah asked after gulping down some water from his canteen. "You show up in a British uniform, but stay in the shadows and don't declare for one side or the other. You could be spying on us for all we know."

"There are reasons for my not actively taking sides. Good reasons," Peter quietly defended himself. He was in no mood to get into it with the old man. There was only one person whose opinion mattered to him, and he'd have to give her some kind of explanation soon. The problem was, how much truth did he tell her?

The men got comfortable as best they could and waited. It was almost dark before the patrol left, but Peter didn't move. He wouldn't put it past the troops to wait elsewhere then double back to catch the colonials off guard. The other men's



wounds weren't life threatening—yet. Peter rubbed at his eyes and felt exhaustion tug at him. What he wouldn't give for a nice soft bed and a couple days of uninterrupted sleep, but that wasn't going to happen any time soon.

Full dark had settled around them before Peter got up. There were no candles lit inside the inn. He could only hope Libby and her family were all right. He turned and hauled up the man next to him, and once on his feet, Peter offered support once again. The small group struggled to make it the rest of the way, grateful the inn was as far from Boston as it was. Having found nothing, Peter didn't think the redcoats would be back any time soon.

"Where have you been?" Libby demanded when the door was thrown open, and the men staggered in. "I was worried sick." She helped Peter settle his burden onto the nearest stool.

"Nice to know someone cares," Peter quipped.

"This isn't a game!" she retorted. "There are soldiers on the roads, looking for stray rebels to arrest for treason. Colonel Mayhew warned he'd be back."

"For what? Fenster, here, was accidentally shot while out hunting just before twilight. Those two have superficial wounds, nothing that can be tied to the battle. There is nothing for you to worry about, Libby." He touched her arm lightly, then drew back.

"Perhaps I should find some rooms in Boston and stay there until this is over. My presence here seems to make you uncomfortable."

"No!" she replied hastily, then caught herself. "What would Tommy do? He's grown quite attached to you."

Peter arched one eyebrow in question. That wasn't what she was going to say. She was covering. Could it be, she was beginning to care for him? According to the letter he'd written to himself, they had the beginnings of a shaky relationship. Maybe there was hope for them yet. "You trust your son to a supposed traitor?"

"No. I trust my son to a good man."

## CHAPTER SIX

Peter was too keyed up to sleep, despite his exhaustion. After getting cleaned up he reentered the taproom to find its few patrons almost silent. Striding through the room, he found Libby serving a man and his wife. He waited a moment, then gently grasped her wrist and led her into one of the private rooms. A small fire burned merrily in the hearth and offered the only light.

"It's done," he told her quietly. "In a way both sides lost." His words were spoken straightforward and held a cool tone, as if he didn't care. "The British lost over a thousand men, but the colonials were forced to retreat."

"What were our losses?" Libby asked, afraid to hear his answer. She turned to an empty table and gave it a quick wipe down—anything to take her attention away from the man who seemed to loom over her.

"Over four hundred, a good deal less than the other side. Most got away after retreat was called, but some were captured."

Peter felt the bitter disappointment, and thought it strange, considering the battle ended as history had—or would—record it. He should be grateful nothing changed during the battle that would affect the course of history.

Slowly, he wrapped his arms about Libby's waist and drew her closer. He rubbed his stubbled cheek against her hair and sighed. "You are quite a woman, Mistress Carson. If only..." His words trailed off and a barely audible sigh escaped. For

the first time, he found someone with whom he'd consider a long-term relationship. A life long relationship. Was it possible he could disappear as unexpectedly as he'd landed in this time? There was no one waiting for him in the future—except maybe Sarge.

Shoe soles scraped deliberately against the hearthstone, and Libby jumped away, putting a respectful distance between herself and Peter.

With hands pressing down on the arms of the overstuffed chair, Elias struggled to push his bulk out of the seat. For a moment, he stood unsteadily, then slowly turned, a smirk on his placid features. He tugged on the edges of his satin coat. "How touching, *Major* Ellsworth. One must wonder which side of this little 'disagreement' you truly support. Are you a British officer, or a colonial rebel? Or are you a spy for whichever side will pay more for information?" He waved a hand, signifying he expected no answer, but his sarcasm was evident.

Libby kept her features neutral, knowing how easily Elias seemed able to read her thoughts. She hid the tremor in her hands within the folds of her apron, and stepped back when Elias moved closer.

"Whatever could be wrong, my dear Elizabeth? Surely you do not fear me? This one, you should be afraid of," he continued, mocking, and glanced at Peter so there would be no doubt cast on his meaning. "He would sell his friends' trust for personal gain."

"And you wouldn't," she replied, a hint of sarcasm coloring her words.

"Business is business, my dear, but I don't sell the trust of others for gain. Although I am not above a little persuasion." A sudden draught whirled through the private room, like a malevolent spirit, leaving Peter and Libby feeling chilled, but Elias seemed unaware. "Perhaps we can come to an arrangement that would allow me to forget what I have seen and heard." He gazed meaningfully at the others, waiting.

"What do you want, Cooper?" Peter asked. "I'll do what you want if you agree to keep Libby and her son out of it."

Elias shrugged. "Elizabeth, tend to your son." He saw the glance between them, and Peter's subtle nod, but managed to keep his features neutral. He had his own plans for his dear widowed sister.

Libby approached the door and stopped long enough to glance back at the men. She appeared defeated as she left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

A small muscle twitched in Peter's jaw as he watched Libby leave. The feistiness in her seemed to have drained away, and he hated Elias for doing that to her. He turned sharply to face the man. Peter regretted the fact that Major Ellsworth was still required to spend time in Boston, in this businessman's home, dancing attendance on Colonel Mayhew. "You had no call to belittle her that way. Do it again and I'll—"

"You'll what? You are in no position to dictate terms to me. You are a spy. Of that I'm sure. I would not have my sister form an attachment to the likes of you. You live a very precarious life at the moment, my dear fellow, one that could come to an abrupt end." Elias strolled over to a small side table where he'd been sitting, and poured some wine into one

of two cups. "Where are my manners? Would you care for some wine?" he asked smugly, holding up the carafe.

"No, thank you," Peter replied tersely. His patience was wearing thin. He wanted to get out of the room and go after Libby, wanted to be sure she and her son were all right. First he had to deal with Elias, to know what he was up against.

"Let's get to it, shall we, Cooper?"

Elias glanced at Peter again, just before setting down the carafe and taking up the filled cup. Eyebrows raised in question, he gave the appearance of being surprised with Peter's impatience. A slow smile crept across his puffy face.

"This little disagreement—"

"This little disagreement as you call it, is only the beginning. War is coming and there is nothing that can be done to stop it."

"This little disagreement," Elias started again, with a negligent wave of his hand, "has interfered with my business for a while now, and has created opportunities where none previously existed."

"Where do I fit into this?" Peter stood in a relaxed stance, with his arms folded across his chest. He schooled his features, but kept a wary eye on the other man. He was careful to not give away any thoughts.

"I have been trying to get some contracts with the British, but have met with little success. You will speak to the colonel on my behalf. Convince him it would be profitable for us both that he agree to the arrangements we discussed."

"If I don't?"

Elias stared at the closed door. A piece of wood fell in the grate and sent sparks soaring up the chimney. "I can easily put out Libby and her brat. After all, by law she doesn't own this miserable inn. It may be in her son's name, but he is far too young to inherit, which leaves it to me to make decisions for them. It's quite well known women do not have a head for business."

"You would evict a helpless woman with a small boy, and an incapacitated old woman?"

"Libby is far from helpless—or perhaps you have been too besotted with her to notice." Elias noted the brief look of surprise in Peter's eyes and saw it vanish just as quickly. "Oh yes. I have seen how you look at her, but that will stop. I could also have you arrested for treason. You seem to be playing on both sides of the fence."

"Unless I get you what you want..." Peter felt the fight go out of him. If he'd been the only one threatened, he thought he might dig in his heels. Defying so called authority, especially one as contemptuous as Mister Elias Cooper, was one of Peter's favorite hobbies. It was the reason he and Sarge had often not seen eye to eye. No one cared if he had a good reason for his actions, but when someone made a threat against Libby and her son, that was a horse of a different color. He went on the offensive.

Peter wondered if there was some way to get around the mess, maybe turn it back on Elias without hurting Libby's family. If he thought about it hard enough he was sure he could come up with something.

Elias turned to leave the private room and stopped a moment, as if there were something further he wished to say. Thinking better of it, he continued on his way, smirking, assuring himself he'd finally gained the upper hand. He hesitated by the door to gather his cloak and had it about his shoulders as he entered the taproom. He stopped long enough to draw attention to himself. He grabbed Libby's arm as she hurried past, swinging her around to face him. "I will expect you and your son to present yourselves in my home no later than Thursday evening. You will be staying for a few days."

"I was in your home less than a week past. I have work to do, Elias. An inn to run."

"You will be there," he warned in a softer tone. His grip on her arm tightened, making her wince with pain. There would be bruises tomorrow.

Peter had been leaning against the doorframe of the private room, watching Elias. He stalked over to them when the man applied more pressure. "There is no need to be abusive to the lady," he warned in an undertone. Peter's hand covered Elias' wrist and applied subtle pressure to the joint, forcing him to release his grip on Libby.

Elias flushed at the sudden quiet in the room, as everyone's attention riveted on the little scene. "I was only issuing an invitation to my sister," he said in defense of his actions. He shook out his hand to relieve the numbness. "I extend the same invitation to you, sir." Elias gave Peter a knowing look, then stepped back and offered a slight bow before leaving the inn.



"Are you all right?" Peter asked Libby after she breathed a sigh of relief and watched the door close behind her brother's back. Peter escorted her to an empty table in the corner of the taproom where they could speak without being overheard.

"What did he want?" Libby asked.

"Nothing for you to concern yourself about."

"Peter," Libby pleaded, "please, tell me." She placed her hand over his and looked into his dark eyes.

She had never used his first name before, and he liked the sound of it from her lips. Peter looked down and traced small circles on the back of her hand with his fingertips. "He wants me to do something for him. In return, he'll leave you and Tommy alone." Peter glanced up and saw the tears glistening on her lashes. It hurt him to see his brave Libby at a loss. "Do as he asks, Libby." He cut her off realizing she was about to protest. "You have yourself, your son, and his grandmother to look after. You can't afford to have Elias raise havoc in your life, and that's just what he'll do. I think he intends to force you to spend some time with Colonel Mayhew. Go along with it for now.

"From the day I arrived, landed on the road that brought me to your inn, I've wondered why I was sent here. I'm out of time and place, but now I think I understand why I'm here. It has nothing to do with history, as I thought. I'm here because of you ... for you.

"You put up a brave front, Mistress Carson, for the sake of your little family, but there's only so much you can do to stand against men like Elias. Let me deal with him. I promise

you, he's not going to hurt you or Tommy again. Will you trust me, Libby?"

"Out of time and place? What does that mean?"

Peter leaned back against the wall and mentally kicked himself. He should never have said those words, and he was doing that too often lately. Maybe it was a Freudian slip and he wanted her to know. Whatever the reason, he had no choice but to explain himself, although now was not the time. If word got out, they'd probably burn or drown him for witchcraft ... if they still did that sort of thing. He wasn't sure.

Several people kept glancing back at the couple, wondering what was going on, perhaps looking for tidbits to toss into the rumor mill. Peter didn't like the way they kept staring, pretending to be unconcerned, but straining to hear whatever they could. He leaned closer toward her and turned his back to the room. "Come to my room later tonight, and I'll explain everything—at least as much as I can. There are some things I need to show you, as proof of my story."

Libby nodded, and felt a sense of security in his presence. The welfare of Tommy and his grandmother were more important to her than what others thought of her. "I'll see it's taken care of," she told him as she got up, then forced herself to go to the kitchen, unhurried.

Peter watched her disappear into the next room. Her tear filled eyes were his undoing. His brave Libby? This was a first for him. Never had he felt so protective of a woman, and never one with a child. "What have I got myself into?" he asked himself, and was not surprised when there was no answer.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Mama! Mama! There's a bloody redcoat in the stables fighting with Peter!" Tommy ran through the kitchen garden doorway, and couldn't stop himself until he'd run into his mother.

"Thomas Edward Carson! Watch you language." Libby held her son's shoulders for a moment, until the boy regained his balance and looked up at her stern features. His breathing gradually returned to normal.

"You say it, Mama. I've heard you. Lots of times," he replied defensively.

The corner of Libby's mouth twitched as she tried to suppress an amused smile. "I suppose I should take better care of my choice of words. Now, what were you saying about Peter?"

"There's a blo ... a redcoat in the stables fighting with him.

"Is that so?" Libby straightened the egg basket on her arm, a chore she was about to take care of when her son came dashing into the kitchen. When the barn had been put up, the chickens had claimed a far stall for themselves. Libby's husband had remodeled it, adding a small door that could be latched from the inside to keep out the foxes, and give the birds some freedom to scratch for bugs and grain close by. The hinged gate had been replaced with a solid door, where several items hung on hooks. Shallow troughs were attached to three walls and filled with straw, creating safe areas where the birds could nest.

Libby hurried toward the stable but stopped short to catch her breath. She didn't want the men to make any more of her appearance than was necessary. She took a deep breath to steady herself then strolled purposefully into the building. One voice was raised in anger and she stopped to listen. She could make out the stranger's words rather clearly, but heard only a mumbled response from Peter—at least she thought it was Peter. Since neither man had noticed her arrival, she slipped into the shadows to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"Colonel Lord Mayhew assigned you to this godforsaken place to rout out the rebel traitors. Have you nothing to report?"

There was a mumbled response, leaving Libby to wonder what Peter was doing.

"What about the Carson woman? Surely she knows better than most what goes on hereabouts. Has she let nothing slip? I've heard she can be quite the font of information if plied in the right way. That would explain Mayhew's interest in her," he added. "Wouldn't mind tasting a sample myself."

A dull thud followed a loud, sharp crack. A horse backed up against the rear of the stall and tossed its head.

"Don't ever again, speak of Elizabeth Carson in that way. She's a good woman and doesn't deserve your innuendoes—unless you have solid proof to back you up."

Libby flinched at the accusation, then thought it best to make her presence known. Slipping into the light of the open doorway, she made her way down the center aisle toward the men. She stopped, as if surprised to see the soldier getting up from the floor. He stumbled a step or two, then regained

his balance as he rubbed at his jaw. Libby noticed the beginnings of a bruise, and hid a smile. No one had defended her honor since her husband's death. The lieutenant flinched from her touch as she offered a helping hand to brush straw from his coat. "I hope I haven't interrupted anything important," she apologized, an innocent expression on her face.

Peter caught the amused gleam in her eyes and chose to ignore it for the moment. "You haven't interrupted anything, Mistress Carson," he replied formally. "Lieutenant Foster has delivered his message and was just leaving." He gave the soldier a subtle warning look, and watched him leave. Foster gave a single backward glance over his shoulder before exiting the building.

Libby shivered involuntarily, then turned her attention to Peter. "What pray tell, is going on?"

"Come to my room later tonight, and I can explain most everything to you. Then you should have a better understanding—at least I hope you will. If you had come a few nights ago, I could have avoided all this."

"Going to your room would only prove true what the lieutenant was saying."

"If we could just talk, I'd say the taproom after hours, but it isn't so much what I have to say, as what I have to show you."

"I don't understand."

"You will."

"All right," she said reluctantly. "I'll bring a supper tray to your room later this evening, after I've got Tommy settled for

the night. I hope this isn't some foolish game of yours to gain my attention or my affections. I heard your conversation with Lieutenant Foster. I won't be used.

"We can discuss that particular problem later."

Libby turned her attention to the task at hand, collecting eggs and cleaning out the chicken's coop. When she finished, she scattered fresh straw on the floor, closed and latched the door, then leaned against it.

After clearing out the mess for her, Peter had left Libby to her work. What would it be like to be loved by him. She knew what it did to her to have him hold her. His nearness always set her heart to pounding, just as it had a few moments earlier. Peter Ellsworth was an attractive man, for all that he was a British officer, and yet he more often dressed in homespun, like the colonials. Was he trying to get into their good graces, to be accepted as one of them so he could extract information? Somehow she didn't think so. For the most part, Peter kept to himself. He was polite enough to other travelers, and had defended her honor on several occasions. His time spent with Tommy was appreciated, and the boy had taken to him. Libby sighed. Speculating and daydreaming didn't get her chores done. She pushed against the door and reluctantly headed back to the inn and her work.

\* \* \* \*

Being only a few miles from Boston, it wasn't very often coaches stopped for the night. Tonight seemed to be the exception. The coach driver explained, with profuse apologies, that his master had started out late in the day. Libby glanced

at the man in question. He was waiting to be shown to a private room, eyeing the more common customers with disdain. Thank heaven she didn't have to deal with that sort very often, or depend on them for her livelihood. "Grace, see that our guest is settled in the east wing."

Grace nodded and turned to the stranger. "This way, if you please, sir. We have a private room where you may dine."

"No, that will not do at all. Can't abide the riffraff," he mumbled, glancing at the departing customers. I'll have a tray in my room."

"As you wish, sir."

Libby watched them climb the stair, then sighed in relief after they'd turned a corner in the hallway. Grace was a few years older than she was, and attractive, and Libby didn't miss the way the stranger stared at the woman as Grace went ahead of him. Thank goodness Grace wasn't the kind to fall for pretty words or empty promises.

Libby went into the kitchen and fixed two trays, one for the new arrival and one for Peter, making sure to put generous servings on the second plate. All afternoon, she wondered what he could have to tell her that must be said in secret. Maybe he was about to admit he was a spy—but for which side? Perhaps he was running from the law? Was he being coerced into serving the British? That made no sense. Anyone forced to serve would never hold the rank of major. She sighed, and put a lid on her overactive imagination. In a few moments she would know what all the secrecy was about. The closer she got to his room, the more she doubted the wisdom of her actions.

Libby hesitated a moment outside his room, and pushed the doubts out of her mind. He'd know if she had any. She shifted the tray to her hip and raised her hand, but was startled when Peter opened the door before she had a chance to knock. "I brought you a supper tray, Mr. Ellsworth. I'll be back in a moment with fresh sheets for the bed."

Feeling flustered, Libby hurried to the end of the hall where a chest sat in the corner. She rummaged through it and pulled out everything she needed, then hurried back. Her heart began to pound as Peter glanced about the hall before quietly closing the door. Libby tried to ignore him when he sat at the small table to eat the meal she'd brought him. She pulled off the bedding and put on the fresh sheets, always aware of his gaze on her. She didn't have to look at him to know where his concentration was focused. She felt it. When she'd finished, she folded down a corner of the coverlet, then carefully took a deep breath.

Since he occupied the only chair in the room, she gingerly sat on the edge of the bed, ready to flee if he'd lured her here under false pretenses. Her mind and will conveyed conflicting emotion and she didn't know what to do. *Put up a brave front*, she told herself. Her fingers were laced together as if in prayer, but her stare remained on Peter. "You said you had something to tell me," she began, wanting to get this over with quickly.

Peter silently finished his ale, and wiped his mouth with the linen napkin, before carefully laying it on the side of the tray. "How to begin," he said, suddenly feeling unsure of himself.



"The beginning is always a good place," she responded cryptically.

"Yeah, it is ... okay." He took a deep breath and slowly let it go. "I come from another time and place ... but I mentioned that to you all ready."

"How can you come from another time? Another place I can understand. England, Scotland, France ... but another time?"

Peter went around to the far side of the bed and got down on his hands and knees. "Watch your feet," he warned, as he pushed the trundle out toward her. "Move your butt, old man, before you get hurt."

"Where did you come from?" Libby asked when Peter reached under the bed then backed out, his hands filled with one large orange cat. He easily dropped Jasper on the coverlet, and grinned at the indignant yowl. Libby smoothed down his fur and soothed his bruised ego, while Peter reached under the bed again.

Libby heard the pulling and scraping and leaned over to see what all the noise was about. "What are you doing? Pulling up the floorboards? Do you intend to take down my inn a board at a time?" she demanded of him, thinking only of the damage to the room.

Peter tossed a sack onto the bed. "Don't worry. This hiding place was here long before I was." He glanced up at her again. "I'm trusting you not to say anything to anyone about what you see here tonight."

"I don't think anyone would believe me if I did say something." She felt her legs jerked forward. "Ouch," she cried. "Will you stop shoving that thing. It hurts."

"Sorry, didn't mean to push so hard." Peter's voice was muffled. He climbed to his knees and dropped a few things onto the coverlet. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Sometimes I don't know my own strength."

Libby thought she heard a giggle on the other side of the door, but when Peter failed to respond, she thought it was her imagination.

Jasper sniffed and pawed at the new items on the bed. When they failed to move, he lost interest and jumped to the floor then onto the narrow windowsill to watch the night.

Libby watched while a pile of strange clothing was placed on the bed's comforter. Peter disappeared again looking for something more. Everything was black. She touched the neatly folded clothing, and judged the fabric to be rather stiff. It felt thick which meant it should be strong and durable. She'd never seen anything like it. She pulled her hand away when something heavy was dropped onto the bed, next to the clothes. It had a stiff, solid shape to it, similar to a vest, and white letters were sprawled across the back. "S-W-A ... What is Swat?" she asked him, keeping her voice low. "Does it mean you want someone to hit you?" The idea sounded ludicrous to her.

"Strategic Weapons and Tactics..." His voice was muffled again, coming from under the bed.

Without thinking, Libby lay on her stomach and stretched to look over the far side of the bed to see what he was about.

Partially hidden as he was, he reminded her of Tommy when his toys ended up beneath her bed and he'd dive under to get them out.

Peter backed out and raised his head, surprised to see her so close. The temptation was too great to ignore and he planted a brief kiss on her full mouth, startling her. "Sorry," he apologized, after seeing the confused look in her eyes. "I suppose I shouldn't have done that. Actually, I'm not sorry. I've been wanting to do that for a long time."

Libby didn't know what to say, but she didn't want his apology. She quickly changed the subject, drawing his attention to the things he was bringing out for her inspection. "What are these things?"

"My uniform. My *real* uniform—not that lobsterback coat we both hate. I'm from your future, Libby." He watched her eyes widen as he continued. "I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. Take a look at this. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

Libby took the plastic identification card from him, and turning onto her back she held it up, studying it with wonder. The small picture on it looked just like him, but his features held a stern expression. On his head was an odd shaped cap, the front of which shaded his eyes. The likeness was different from the painted miniatures she was used to seeing. The print was tiny but she could read it, at least the words she recognized. She sat up and rapped the edge of the ID against the bedpost, and marveled at the hardness of the small card. "How did you make this?" she asked.

"I didn't. It was made for me."

"It's strange, but what does it prove?"

He leaned against the bed and looked up at the card. "It proves I'm not from this time. See this?" He pointed to a series of numbers. "I was born in Boston, in the year 1975, June nineteenth. I'm thirty years old. In less than two hundred years from now, most everyone will be carrying some sort of identification with them. In fact, there won't be much a person can do without one.

"Libby, I don't know for sure, how I ended up with a British uniform. I have no good answers to that—yet. Everything that's happening now is history to me, Bunker Hill, the British in Boston. I know what's going to happen. That's why I can't get actively involved. Anything I do could change the course of history as I know it. I've come to the conclusion I didn't come here because of impending war. I'm here because of you."

"Me? But why?"

"I haven't figured that out yet, but I will. You're a special lady, Libby, and I'll do whatever is needed to protect you and your son."

Libby flushed at his words, and turned her attention back to the things he'd placed on the bed. "What's this?" She picked up a small black case and opened it to find another ID, and a badge, this one for a police officer. She glanced up at him.

Peter shrugged as if the find were nothing. "Law enforcement. That's my police badge. See here? Every officer has an identification number."

Next to the clothes lay the strange looking vest. She barely glanced at the letters this time, more interested in examining the garment. She reached over and held it up, surprised at its weight.

"It's made of some stuff called Kevlar. It's lighter in weight than the old flack vests we used to have, but they're stronger."

"What are they for?"

"It's a kind of body armor. They protect us from getting shot at—at least, vital organs are protected. There are helmets to protect us from getting shot in the head, but our limbs are still vulnerable. Despite that, it cuts down on the number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. The military uses it as well." Peter stopped and stared at her, realizing her response to his admission was nothing like he'd expected. At the very least, he expected to be told he was out of his mind. "You don't seem surprised. Why is that?"

Libby carefully replaced the vest on the bed, and ran her hand over its textured surface. "When I was young and still living in England, my mother and father took me to a village fair. There was a group of gypsies, selling trinkets, telling fortunes. The old woman stopped me and after studying my palm, she said one day I would meet a man who would claim to be from a place no one knew, and he would show me things ... strange things. My parents hurried me away, but I kept looking back until I couldn't see her anymore. I'd forgotten her words, until just now, when you showed me these things."

She looked up at him. "Shortly after that, my father brought us to the colonies. He was interested in establishing a shipping company here. That was how I met Thomas. Our fathers became partners. After Thomas and his father died, Elias took over the company. He was the biggest investor, besides Thomas' father."

"Didn't Thomas invest in it?"

"Yes, but I don't know how much or how little. Elias says the small investors were wiped out with the beginning of this war."

"I doubt that. He could find a way to absorb all the small blocks of stock, make himself wealthy and leave nothing for the small investors. Nothing changes."

"And now he has the company, but he wants you to play nice with the colonel to get new contracts with the British military," Peter interjected.

"Play nice ... If I understand your meaning, yes, but I believe Elias has something more devious in mind, something permanent. For the last half year, he has been trying to convince me of the wisdom to remarry. He uses my son as an excuse, but I have good reason to believe he's looking for a way to make this inn his own. It could be a profitable business. With the British army here, most of my business has been frightened away. I will not sell the inn or give it up to my brother."

Libby got up and grabbed the bedding, balling it up for the laundry. "There are things I must do before I retire for the night." She reached for the tray, intending to balance it on the bundle in her arms.

Peter caught the tray before it fell to the floor. "Leave it here. I'll take it down, shortly." His fingers glided over her soft, flushed cheek and her gaze darted downward, embarrassed by his attention.

"Do you recall what I told you about Colonel Mayhew?"

Libby nodded but refused to look up at him.

"Elias wants you to spend a couple weeks with him. I believe his sole purpose is to have you in Mayhew's constant company. Put together with what you just told me, it makes sense. Eventually, Elias can convince Mayhew to have you sent back to England and free himself of your fate, as well as keep the inn." Peter gazed down at the innkeeper. "There is a way out of this mess."

"How?" she snapped. "Knowing Elias' impatience to get things done, I'm sure he's had the contracts drawn up and all that's needed is to fill in the proper names. He still insists I need a guiding hand, and says Colonel Mayhew would be perfect for me." Sarcasm filled every word.

"Do you think Elias or the colonel cares a whit about your son? The only thing Mayhew cares about is having you, while Elias takes control of the inn and supplying the British army. That has nothing to do with Tommy, therefore he is of no value to them. Your son is worth more than a hundred Mayhews and Coopers. I know I was sent here for a reason, Libby, and it wasn't to spy on anyone. Your brother thinks he can manipulate me to achieve his goals, and I let him believe what he likes. He'll get what he wants without my help. My interest in you has nothing whatsoever to do with his greed, the war, or Mayhew's designs." Peter hesitated a moment,

gathering courage to tell her his plan. He'd given it careful consideration and concluded it was the best solution for those concerned. "There is one solution that would protect you and Tommy."

"But Elias..."

"I'll deal with Elias when the time comes."

"I ... I don't know that I can believe you," she responded weakly, looking for any excuse to deny what she saw in his gaze. She was crazy to think he was hinting at a proposal. They didn't know each other nearly well enough to give that consideration. Yet, it was more than she dared dream. A glance into his darkened eyes told her more than she was willing to acknowledge for the moment.

Peter took the tray and bedding from her and set it down. "Elizabeth Carson," he said, quietly, as he removed her mobcap and gently brushed back loose tendrils of hair. He loved the color of her glorious, thick hair. "You are a beautiful, caring woman. Don't ever let anyone tell you different. The colonies are on the brink of full out war, but here you are, running an inn, caring for an ill mother and an active child, and still you have the audacity to stand up to your overbearing brother. That takes strength and courage."

She looked up at him, anger in her gaze. "Where is this so-called courage you say I have? My brother schemes to marry me off to some British officer. I know that's what he plans to do. He's spoken to Colonel Mayhew about a possible alliance. Mayhew would bring contracts to the table, shipping business with the British Elias so desperately wants. He needs me to be amenable to the deal. If Mayhew doesn't accept the terms



soon, Elias will look elsewhere, but still use me as a bargaining point. My brother is not a patient man, but I haven't the courage to stand up to him and tell him no."

"Mayhew has interests other than marriage. He wouldn't treat you kindly. You're right that you're a bargaining point. You would be a means to an end for either party, and neither would be concerned with your welfare."

"Really. Why has no one dared mention it before now, confirm their scheming, or made it an alternative to Elias' plan?"

Peter's voice became softer, with a huskiness she'd never heard before. It set her heart to thumping harder. "You have another choice, one they wouldn't expect. You can marry me, Libby. You know I think of Tommy as if he were my own. I would be honored if you would allow me to make us a family."

"I can't..."

"Why not? As far as Elias is concerned, he believes I'm a British officer, spying on the colonials. Let him continue thinking that. I have some influence with Mayhew, and perhaps I can use that to change Elias' plans a bit. Your son seems to like me, and I think he's a great kid. As for his mother, I'd like nothing better than to spend more time with her, get to know her better. I won't let Elias hurt you anymore. He's done more than enough damage to you and Tommy."

Peter took her hands and sat her in the only chair, while he took a seat on the edge of his bed, facing her. For the next hour they tossed around ideas, trying to find a workable scheme. When their plans were finally solidified, Peter sat

back, satisfied, at least for the time being. "Once we've put our plan into action, you and Tommy should be safe from harm."

Libby's cheeks flushed at the idea. Could he read her mind? "I suppose we could ... pretend a marriage of convenience, for Tommy's sake—but it could only be pretense. We could have no future."

"Don't turn me down out of hand, Libby. I may know how this battle turns out, but I don't know what becomes of me. I could end up in a loop and keep repeating this time, until I get it right. I do know, I want you by my side for all time."

A flash of ... something ... crossed his features and vanished—so quickly, Libby wasn't sure she really saw it. It was quickly forgotten when Peter drew her close to seal their agreement with a kiss.

Libby couldn't deny the attraction she felt for the man, but she could fight it. Getting involved with him would only bring heartache. It was never safe, becoming involved with a spy. That's all he could be, playing both sides of the war. If either side caught him, he'd be arrested for treason and hung. She had to think of Tommy. Better to rear the boy alone than to have someone become a part of their lives, only to vanish again.

Libby had sensed something odd about Peter from the moment they met the previous year. It was nothing she could pinpoint, but intuition told her not to get too close. Yet now, at this moment, being in his arms felt so right. She had been alone too long and her judgement was unreliable. That had to be the upshot of what she was feeling.

Liberty's Belle: A Paranormal Romance  
*by Marissa St. James*

Looking at it from the other side, maybe his plan could work, maybe he could keep her out of the clutches of the British colonel and her brother. If they succeeded in outwitting Mayhew, who would be next on Elias' list of potential husbands? Elias would never accept her marriage to a colonial. Libby shuddered to think of the possibilities. Peter's arms tightened around her in response, and she let his warmth flood her being.

This was the right thing to do, she concluded. After all, she lied to herself, she was doing this solely for her son.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Peter made himself available as often as he could, to help Libby with the inn. He took over the heavier work, rather than have her ask for help from the trappers when they came in. He did menial chores, just to be able to be near her, and her son. He didn't know how much time he'd have before Elias decided to summon his sister. Peter needed a better plan before then, something to put an end to a brother harassing his sister for personal gain. What he and Libby had discussed were only rough ideas. Refining the plan was slow in coming to him, because they always had too many vulnerable points. He needed patience to work something out, but patience was never one of his strong suits. He'd learn the trait if it killed him ... and it probably would.

Mary, having been relieved of duty watching Mistress Cooper, had been sent to help in the kitchen. She hurried over to a table by the hearth and took a plate from the tray she carried. She filled the mug with ale, then glanced up furtively at Peter who stood staring into the flames. A vague feeling had Peter wondering if something were wrong. She appeared to be afraid of something. Him? She had no reason to fear him. Since his arrival, he'd tried to keep his presence low-key. He was usually successful, except where Elias was concerned. That man had a way of getting under Peter's skin. It didn't matter that the businessman and his wife had tried to play host when he was in Boston. Since Colonel Mayhew's

arrival, Peter chose to stay at the local inn. The less time they spent together, the better he liked it.

That was another thing he didn't like—the dual role he was forced to play. It no longer mattered how he'd ended up in this mess. It was more important to figure out what he was doing here, besides his attraction to Libby, and how he was going to get back to his own time. Libby was right. A relationship between them, a marriage of convenience, could only be temporary at best. The reasons he gave Libby for even considering such a move were valid—he did care about mother and son. If there were a way he could see himself staying ... Sarge must be ripped, not being able to find him. Well, Sarge was the least of his problems, and nothing he could do about it now.

"Is there anything else you'll be needin'?" the pretty young maid asked, anxious to get away. She forced herself to look up at him, then quickly glanced away.

"No, Mary. Thank you." Peter watched the girl's quick curtsy and saw her scurry off to the kitchen, where she probably felt much safer out of his sight. He sighed.

Peter removed his heavy apron and tossed it on another stool, out of his way, then leaned back against the wall for a few moments before he turned his attention to the meal Mary had left for him. He felt someone's attention concentrated on him. Peter looked up from his plate to find a pair of green eyes staring back at him. Who would blink first, he pondered with amusement while he watched the orange cat watching him. More to the point, Jasper's interest focused on what lay on Peter's plate. "You know Libby doesn't like anyone feeding

you, old man," he half whispered and reached out to stroke the cat's soft fur. "She doesn't want anyone spoiling her mouser." Peter grinned. "I won't tell if you don't." He picked up a bit of beef and fed it to the little beggar.

Peter glanced in the direction of the closed door to the private parlor where two voices rose in anger. He had advised Libby to say nothing to her brother about her plans. "Sounds like they're at it again." He pressed his hands against the edge of the table to maintain control of his anger. He had a specific reason for being in this place, no longer feeling at loose ends as to his purpose. As much as he wanted to, he didn't dare make a move to help Libby, at least not yet. She'd agreed to let him court her, but no one knew about that.

*Patience.*

Although he couldn't make out any of the conversation, he had a pretty good idea what the argument was about. It was the same thing every time Elias showed up. Peter promised himself that in due time he would personally deal with the man, but until then, he could only hope one day soon, Elias would lose his voice—permanently silent would be a nice touch.

Something crashed against the door and Peter grabbed Jasper from the top of the table, where he'd jumped up to get a more interesting take on what he smelled. "Better make a run for it, my friend. They'll be out here any second." The cat was easily dropped to the floor.

Jasper stood still a moment, as if insulted, then sauntered away in time for his mistress to enter the taproom and pick him up. Elias grabbed Libby's arm to stop her. Big mistake.

Jasper's ears went back and he hissed a warning, forcing Elias to step back. "That animal is a menace. It should be put down for your protection. One day he will turn on you, too. There, you see? It hissed at me again! It's dangerous."

"Maybe he doesn't like you, Elias, which means he has good taste." Libby's parting shot did the trick.

Elias' lips formed a tight, thin line, and there was a calculating look in his eyes. He seemed to think better of making any further remarks and marched out of the inn, leaving a fuming woman and an amused helper watching him from the far side of the taproom. Jasper looked from one human to the other and seemed almost amused by the situation—if a cat could look amused. "What are you grinning at?" Libby snapped, turning suddenly to face Peter. "Have you nothing to do, no one else to spy on? If not, I'm sure I can find something to keep you busy." It embarrassed her to have her brother seen treating her as if she were of no consequence. Her face turned crimson when she realized she had turned on a guest, and not one of the servants.

Peter's grin never faltered. He had to give her credit—Libby was no shrinking violet when it came to trouble. Heaven help him if her anger were ever really turned on him. He held up his hands in surrender before heading outside for a breath of air and to find a nice dark corner, to relax for a short time. Peter didn't want to go upstairs in case he was needed here, but it had already been a long day and he'd volunteered to stay on till closing. The evening shift had yet to begin.

Libby Carson stared daggers at the man who winked at her as he disappeared into the kitchen and out the back door.

How dare he! She'd been grudgingly grateful for his help, but if she didn't have need of him to look after the taproom when it got boisterous, she would have done everything in her power to avoid him. When he was finally gone from sight, she sighed in resignation, rubbed Jasper's head then set him on the floor. "Just like all men," she commented while watching him stroll into the kitchen, then out into the warm evening air. "You all pretend to be kind and considerate until you've got what you want. Then you go your own way till you need something again."

Libby sighed and looked across the taproom where she imagined she could still see her husband, Tom, striding through the doorway, a wide dimpled smile on his face. Pity she never learned to love him the way he'd hoped, but that was the way of arranged marriages. A dutiful daughter never argued with her parents over decisions they made for her life. If he hadn't been killed on the road to Boston, if they'd had more time together, she might have learned to love him. Tom had been a good man despite his stubborn ways, and she'd always held a great respect for him, but too much time had passed to settle the many 'ifs' that might have proven true.

Libby sighed again and thought about Elias' offer to buy the inn. There were days when she felt completely overwhelmed by her responsibilities and other days there were few if any paying customers. She had to keep reminding herself of the promise she'd made to her husband to keep the place running on her own if anything happened to him. If she did sell, what would become of her and her son? What of her mother? Elias had offered an allowance and a place for Libby



and Tommy to stay in his home, but of their mother, he'd said nothing, as if she were no longer among the living. "And pigs will fly," Libby concluded. Either she would continue as she had since Tom's death, or an agreement would be made that would include her mother. If Elias didn't like it, he could go hang.

\* \* \* \*

The customers were gone and the inn door was locked for the night. It was an early night, probably due to the rain that moved in. The empty flour sack snapped one last time just outside the kitchen door and Libby watched the remains of the fine powder float away on the wind. She turned quickly to the pitiful sound of the cat's meow and glanced about the dim room. Jasper's small face slowly lifted up toward her, begging for attention as he always did, but something about it was wrong this time. Jasper stood unsteadily and looked to her for help.

Libby leaned against the nearest wall and slid down the rough surface until she sat on the floor. Her gaze never wandered from her beloved pet. Jasper's wobbly steps were like those of a newborn kitten when they first gained their balance. In a few short hours his burnt orange fur, once shiny, had lost its rich appearance. He cried softly. If Libby hadn't been watching him, she would have thought one of the kittens had escaped from the stable. It broke her heart to watch him struggle toward her, to hear him cry out pitifully, but barely make a sound. What had happened to him in the last few hours?

She reached out and carefully lifted him, eased the once large cat onto her lap where, without thinking, she had laid out the sack. Jasper cried out in pain and Libby could no longer hold back tears. Her fingertips stroked the still soft fur, with deliberate slowness. His legs stretched out stiffly and, for a moment, kicked furiously, as if he were trying to escape his fate. Then, they stilled. Libby gently folded one end of the sack, like a blanket, over the thin legs. Through blurred vision, she watched his side heave as he struggled for breath before it slowed to an almost normal pace. It was anything but normal.

Libby stroked the top of his head and the side of his face with a tender caress, then fought back a sob when neither his whiskers nor his ears flinched at her touch. He stared at her through half closed eyes. "Close your eyes and go to sleep, Jasper. Everything will be fine. It won't hurt anymore." Her soft words seemed to calm him. A stressful sound escaped her throat. She wished he could tell her who had done this horrible thing to him. His dying gaze sought peace from the only human he trusted completely. Jasper let go one last sigh and lay still.

Libby folded over the other end of the sack, covering the cat completely, then managed to get up from the floor. Cradling the wasted little body of her pet in one arm, she grasped the long handled spade by the kitchen door and walked out into the garden, heedless of the mist now falling more heavily. She placed Jasper gently on the ground and adjusted the sack to protect him from the worsening weather ... as if anything could harm him now. She knelt beside him,

ignoring the wet discomfort. The tip of the spade bit into the soggy earth and she let her anger replace the loss she felt.

"Libby, where are you?" a male voice called out.

She regretted having left the taproom door open to the kitchen. Footsteps sounded across the kitchen floor and Peter stood in the doorway looking out at her. Libby ignored the summons and continued to dig, her fury growing with every bit of dirt she dug up. What was the man doing wandering around the taproom at this hour of the night? She quickly dismissed the thought, and him, as not being important enough to occupy her attention at the moment.

Peter remained in the kitchen doorway a moment, staring at the bedraggled figure digging in the mud. He hurried forward, reached out and stilled her digging. He glanced down at the soaked bundle and understood. "Libby," he began again, his voice softened. For whatever reason he'd sought her, it was forgotten. "You're soaked to the skin. Let me finish this for you."

"No. I have to do this myself." Libby looked up at him, her eyes filled with bitterness and hatred. Her tears mixed with the rain running down her cheeks.

Was the hatred in her eyes meant for him? He wasn't sure, but if they were, he thought he deserved it. After all, he had a pretty good idea what had happened. He'd spent a miserable evening, sick to his stomach. "Go inside, Libby. Please. I understand what Jasper meant to you, but let me finish this before you catch your death."

Libby stared into Peter's dark brown eyes and saw guilt, coupled with something more. Was he responsible for Jasper's

untimely death? She didn't know, but meant to find out. She reluctantly released the spade into his hand. There was something different, a compassion she'd not seen before. She bowed her head in acquiescence, then headed for the kitchen door where she stood and watched him until the task was finished.

Peter dug the small grave and carefully laid the rain soaked bundle into it. Water dripped from his hair and into his eyes. He wiped his eyes on his wet sleeve, a useless gesture, then concentrated on finishing the job. The mud was carefully replaced and firmly patted down. When he was satisfied, Peter returned to the kitchen, closed the door behind him and handed her the spade. She hastily set it away with a muffled, "Thank you." A trail of water dripped from his clothing and puddled on the floor, but his only concern was for Libby.

Taking her hand, he led the reluctant innkeeper into the taproom. He sat her at a table near the hearth, then knelt and lit fresh kindling. The earlier fire had been allowed to go out. Peter sat back on his heels waited for the kindling to catch, occasionally poking at it. When a small flame burst forth, he carefully placed a log on it. After the blaze caught he stood, anxious to go on another search. "Where do you keep extra blankets?" he asked while he watched the fire slowly gnaw at the wood. He followed Libby's gesture and found a storage chest on the far side of the room. Peter pulled out two quilts and closed the lid. One quilt, he dropped onto the back of one chair and the other he draped around a shivering Libby.

He left her once more, went behind the bar and poured brandy into two snifters. He could no longer ignore the chill from his own wet clothes. The rainstorm was typical for this time of year. Cool air seeped through soaked fabric and clung to his damp skin making him shiver. Peter set one of the snifters on the table before Libby and encouraged her to drink. The tempting scent beckoned to him to indulge, but he forced himself to wait. Why, he thought fleetingly, should he be worried about making a bad impression on Libby. He was well aware she was still undecided about his proposal, despite her words to the contrary. Sometimes he thought she didn't think much of him. He took the second quilt and wrapped it about his shoulders, using a corner of it to wipe his face.

Peter sat at the table and watched Libby make a face after sipping her drink. He wanted to laugh but thought better of it, and took a healthy swallow from his own glass. The potent liquid blazed a fiery path to his stomach and ignited a furnace within him, but did nothing to settle the remaining upset. The shivering lessened. He reached out and placed a callused hand over Libby's smaller one. Why should it bother him to feel their roughness? Her hands should have been smooth and soft, used to delicate work, not red and rough from washing floors and laundry, or cooking meals for unappreciative people—certainly not blistered from burying a cat. Libby eased her hand out from under his and hid it within her own quilt. He could accept the rejection, for now. "I'm sorry about your cat, Libby."

"What is it to you?" she snapped back. "You didn't like him."

"I didn't mind him, really." He paused. "Actually, I did like him," he added truthfully. Jasper had even amused him at times. He held back a smile, not wanting Libby to misinterpret it and think him uncaring of her grief. "Jasper was an amusing character. I think it was more a matter of his not being too fond of me. Perhaps it was the red coat. Maybe he was like his mistress, not sure what side I'm on." Peter referred to the uniform jacket that he refrained from wearing in the vicinity of the inn. He hated that coat, but was forced to use it.

"He was poisoned," she replied bluntly.

"I was afraid that might be the case." Peter leaned forward in his chair and studied her expressive face. Even the angry expression took nothing away from her features, but added a delicate blush. "Are you certain it was poison, and not something else he got hold of?" He had to be sure.

"He was fine this morning. An hour or two before he died, his behavior seemed a bit odd, as if he'd got into something bad. I didn't think much of it at the time. I suppose I thought it might have been due to a mouse in the stable. You never know what they get into." Libby sniffed and rubbed the edge of the blanket against her nose. "He did that now and again, but quickly got over it. Suddenly he could barely stand, or make a sound. I know of nothing to kill an animal as quickly as poison." She rolled the snifter back and forth between her still cold hands and studied its contents.

"Six hours ago," he murmured, suddenly realizing what must have happened. "It wasn't meant for Jasper."

"What?" Libby stared at him, trying to understand.

"Mary brought me a tray and I had her leave it on the table. Jasper came around, jumped up on the table, and I gave him a couple of tidbits. I went back to my supper, but a customer came in wanting ale, and I forgot about the meal. I put Jasper back on the floor when I heard you and your brother arguing, and went over to see if I could help you. When I returned, I didn't really notice anything, but now I think about it ... Jasper was cleaning up and stalked away..." Peter stopped a moment, recalling the scene to his memory. "Jasper ate almost everything left on the plate," he concluded softly. "Whatever was put in the food was meant for me. I've been sick to my stomach all evening with what little I ate, but I didn't put the two events together until now."

"You said it was Mary?"

"Yes." Peter realized what she intended. "Libby, no. If someone else is responsible, we won't find out who it is by confronting her."

"No. If she's done it to you, whether or not she was solely responsible, she could take it into her head to do the same with other guests or customers. The military is the only law here about. We don't need troops encamped in the taproom."

"You're right."

"Mary!" Libby called to the girl entering the kitchen.

Mary turned sharply at the sound of her name. Her fair skin paled at the sight of Libby and Peter sitting together by the hearth, wrapped in quilts and looking bedraggled. She stepped back as if to run.

"Don't you dare leave," Libby warned as she stood and moved toward the serving girl. She pulled the quilt tighter

about her shoulders and stepped closer. "What did you mix into Mr. Ellsworth's supper?"

"I did nothing, Mistress Carson." Mary spoke softly, cautiously, glancing from Libby to Peter and back again. She rubbed her hands slowly on her stained apron.

"Mr. Ellsworth could have died from whatever you put in that food. It was fortunate he only became ill. Instead, Jasper was poisoned. Why, Mary?"

"He will kill me if I say anything. He said he would do it, said all I had to do was keep my mouth shut. He said it would make you sick enough to leave, to go back where you came from. He made no sense to me."

"Who is he? Who is this man you fear?"

"I can't. I can't tell you."

"Collect your things immediately and leave. You are no longer welcome here."

"Where will I go?" Mary asked tearfully, wringing the corner of her apron in her small hands.

"The problem is yours, not mine. Go to whomever it was convinced you to do this thing. Let them find a place for you."

Peter said nothing while Libby confronted her servant. He heard a sob escape from Mary as she glanced at him, hoping for some kind of understanding, if not forgiveness. Peter shrugged, but remained silent. Mary ran from the taproom, toward the servants' quarters at the back of the inn.

When Libby turned to face him, her eyes were suspiciously wet. Still he said nothing.



"Do not interfere," Libby turned a warning look in his direction. "I run this inn and I will deal with my people as I see fit."

Peter leaned back in his chair and sipped his brandy. "Mistress Carson," he began, but realized formality was a farce. "Libby ... I'm not the enemy here, despite the color of my coat. There are things I could try to explain to you, but you wouldn't understand ... things I don't understand." Peter toyed with the snifter, watching the thick liquid coat the glass as he slowly spun it. "When we were formally introduced in Boston, I told you things were not what they seemed, showed you things not of this time. I still stand by the fact we lack answers. There is more we don't understand."

Libby pulled the quilt tighter about her shoulders and sipped the dark liquid. She closed her eyes and savored the warmth the drink sent through her. She needed it to chase away the chills, not so much from the soaking in the rain, but to distance the chills she got when considering the way Jasper died. She was sure it was a painful death for the poor thing. Jasper might not have been completely independent, but he'd had a fondness for one particular person.

As if he'd been called, Tommy shambled into the taproom, rubbing his eyes. "Mama..." His voice was laced with sleep, and barely audible.

Libby and Peter turned to the boy, quilts slipping over wet clothing. Libby wanted to hold her son, but refrained, not wanting to chill him, and took his hand instead. "You should be sound asleep in your bed. It's late."

"Where's Jasper? I can't find him." The boy was obviously upset over his missing feline companion.

Libby exchanged a glance with Peter, wondering how best to handle telling her young son. The cat was particularly fond of the boy, and often slipped into their room to sleep at the foot of Tommy's trundle bed.

"Jasper's gone, sweetheart."

"Gone? He ran away?" Tommy looked up at his mother in alarm. "Jasper wouldn't run away," he insisted.

"No, he didn't run away."

"Somebody hurt him, didn't they? I bet it was Uncle Elias. He hates Jasper." Tommy's dark eyes narrowed. "I don't like Uncle Elias."

Peter continued to study the boy, while suspicions whirled around in his mind. Could the boy be right? Why would Elias do something so stupid as kill a cat? After all, Peter was the one he threatened. Then again, it could have been a small warning to show how easily he could harm his sister and nephew. Peter believed the cat was an unexpected victim. There did seem to be a method to Elias' 'madness.' Peter decided the man bore closer watching.

"Jasper didn't run away, but we don't know that someone hurt him, either. It isn't right to make accusations we can't prove."

"Jasper went away, like Papa did?"

"Yes, like Papa." Libby let the quilt fall from her shoulders and stood. Her damp clothing stuck to her slender body, making her aware of how she must look. Her face turned a shade of crimson. She pulled the skirts away from her legs,

and took her son's small hand in hers. "Come along, Tommy. It's past time you were asleep in your bed." Her voice was quiet and soothing. As she stepped away from the hearth, she glanced over her shoulder. "Thank you," she mouthed to Peter.

Peter called to her as she turned away. "Wait a minute, Libby—please."

Libby turned slowly, a look of dejection in her face.

Peter left his quilt on his chair and it slid to the floor when he got up. He went to Libby and stood before her. "Don't worry about anything," he told her quietly. "We'll get to the bottom of this and put an end to it." He leaned forward and kissed her, soft and slow. A kiss that hinted of many things. "I promise."

\* \* \* \*

Libby stepped back, her eyes filled with wonder, then followed her son into the room they shared, and taking him by the hand, tucked him into his trundle bed. "It's past time you were asleep," she told him softly, and kissed his cheek. "Tomorrow will be another busy day, and I'll need your help."

"What about Mr. Ellsworth? Can't he help too?"

Libby didn't know why she should be surprised at the question. Tommy ran straight for the man whenever he showed up at the inn after his trips to Boston and who knew where. Peter seemed to enjoy the boy's company. Maybe he had children of his own, and missed being with them. The thought of Peter Ellsworth having a wife and children somewhere in England or perhaps the colonies, bothered her.

If he'd had a wife here, would she not have been presented to Elias' guests at the ball? And if a wife did exist and had been there, Libby thought Peter wouldn't have made a point of following her out to the garden.

*You are a foolish woman, Elizabeth Anne Carson. He is the king's man, and not intended for the likes of you. Your place is here, running your late husband's inn and looking after his son. You have enough to worry about without thinking on him as well.*

Libby tucked the comforter about her son's shoulders, keeping out the chill in the room. She brushed a lock of hair from his face and for a few moments gazed down on him, as he settled back to sleep. She slipped behind the privacy screen set in a corner of the room and wriggled out of her wet gown. She slipped a cotton nightgown over her head and smoothed it down over her hips. After donning a robe, she moved to a footstool and sat on it, reaching for a hairbrush, her mind wandering again.

Libby slowly passed the brush through her long hair, thinking about Jasper and who might have wanted to see the cat dead. There were a few people who didn't like the cat, but no one who hated the mouser so much they would feel the need to poison it. It certainly wasn't Peter. She'd secretly caught him once or twice, feeding Jasper little tidbits from his own meal, talking to the cat as if Jasper were a person. Libby sighed, then quickly plaited her hair and climbed into bed. She snuffed out the flame of the candle by the bedside, leaving the room in darkness. Tomorrow was soon enough to worry about new problems.

\* \* \* \*

Peter watched mother and son disappear into a room past the kitchen. A pleasant heat flowed through him, warming him in a way the brandy couldn't, making him feel better physically. He tossed back the rest of his drink and rose slowly from his chair. Kneeling before the hearth, he used one of the pokers to push the small log aside, and carefully scattered the ashes. When he was satisfied it wouldn't create any undo problems, he stood and glanced about the room. Except for a bit of moonlight wavering in and out from behind scattered clouds, the room lay in almost total darkness. With the hearth fire put out, Peter felt a damp chill and was suddenly anxious to get out of the wet clothes. There were no candles around to light the way to his room. A pair of night vision goggles would come in handy right about now. He chuckled at the thought and carefully made his way upstairs.

The hearth fire in his room burned merrily, and his clothes lay spread out on a chair and table to best advantage for drying. Peter lay in the narrow bed, suddenly wide awake. Rope supports creaked annoyingly every time he moved. He could imagine what it was like to make love to a woman and have the ropes creaking with every telltale movement. He chuckled. It couldn't be much worse than a mattress with springs. With the comforter halfway up his chest, Peter laced his fingers together and let his hands rest on the edge of the comforter while he stared up at the ceiling. Beams lay in shadow, dark and ominous, but Peter thought how much more pleasant this was than the one-room apartment he was

used to. After ten years on the police force, and four of them in SWAT, he was back where he'd begun, busted for insubordination. It wasn't his fault his previous CO was an idiot, and thought nothing of putting his team in jeopardy. His brother needing him couldn't have been better timed. Peter had been given the choice of either transferring to another SWAT team, or being suspended without pay. Moving cross country seemed the best answer. He was fortunate not to have been arrested.

That was how he'd lost Jeanine. Dark haired, gray eyed—she was a feisty cop. The CO had placed her and several others in an unwarranted dangerous situation. His judgement had been impaired because he refused to listen to recon information, insisting it was faulty. It cost Jeanine her life. Nothing happened to the team leader, but Peter had been busted for going after him.

The worst part of it was, she was going to leave the force and they were going to be married. Now she was gone and he had nothing. Hooking up with Lainie had been a big mistake. His hopes and dreams for the future died with Jeanine. Peter was more than ready for a transfer after her death, and he was sure they were happy to make him somebody else's problem. He'd got his request, then this happened.

This tour into the past startled him—not only the journey itself, but seeing Jeanine again. At least on first sight he'd thought it was Jeanine. Libby had the same mahogany colored hair and gray eyes, the same determined manner. About the only difference he could see was that Libby had a young son, and a moron for a brother.

That thought brought him back to his own situation. What was he doing here? He thought back to the moments just before the scenery had changed. What was it he'd said to Sarge? Something about there being no honor in cease fires? Had somebody heard him and sent him back to a time when a man's word meant something? That didn't fit. He wasn't involved in this upcoming war—despite the fact he'd found a red coat in a trunk that supposedly belonged to him. No there was something else going on. It could only be Libby. Maybe this was a second chance at something he'd almost had. It felt right.

Thoughts and ideas whirled around in Peter's head, bringing no conclusions, but everything kept coming back to Libby. Given a different time and set of circumstances he would probably take the time to plan a strategy to woo and win her. After being introduced to her as a British officer, she didn't particularly trust him. The more he thought about it, the more he realized there *was* no reason for her to trust him. Could he change her mind? Did he want to? He'd have to start over—and that meant telling her the whole truth.

Peter turned over onto his side and stared out the window. No use speculating on other people's opinions and motives. It was time he got some sleep. His eyes drifted close with weariness, and while thoughts faded, images of Jeanine and Libby merged in his mind to become one woman.

## CHAPTER NINE

The next morning, Peter woke to bright sunshine lighting his small room. For a moment his mind was blank as he tried to recall events of the previous night. He recalled finding Libby in the pouring rain, digging a hole to bury her beloved Jasper. It was an uncomfortable situation, made more so because Peter felt responsible for the cat's death. Well, he wasn't directly responsible, but he might as well have been. Someone had added poison to his supper. He knew Mary hadn't been solely responsible, though refusing to give him the name of her co-conspirator. He'd love to know who had put her up to it, but Libby had sent her packing. At least for the moment, he had no way of finding out who was ultimately responsible, but he was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery.

Peter finished dressing and went to the window. The morning looked and felt bright and fresh, washed clean of last night's loss—almost as if it had never happened. Libby was laughing, a sound he couldn't recalling having heard before. He smiled at the pleasure of hearing it. Her life wasn't an easy one, running the inn, looking after her mother and a small boy. He watched her, out there, playing with her son. He envied children their ability to bounce back from most unpleasant situations. The morning air was still a bit cool, but comfortable. In some spots, he could still see dew sitting on blades of grass, like so many miniature crystals. The moisture collected around the hem of her dress as she made a game of



chasing Tommy about the grass. Pond water sparkled in the early morning sunlight and a pair of swans paddled regally about the water, diving beneath the surface for breakfast. Peter rarely paid attention to his surroundings, when they didn't affect what he was doing. There was something special about this morning. It couldn't be the lovely lady and her rambunctious son. Nah ... He grinned.

Several ducks, not far from the shore, kept a wary eye on the noisy humans. Tommy took a chunk of, what looked to Peter, a loaf of stale bread. The boy tried to toss pieces of it to the birds, only to fall short of his mark. The ducks scrambled to get the treat, careful not to get too close to their visitor. Libby tossed a few pieces of bread onto the pond where they soaked up water and sank before the birds got to it. The swans immediately dove after the tidbits, tail feathers fluttering in the morning breeze.

Peter could barely hear the boy's laughter carried away from them on the morning breeze. He should stay away from them, and let Libby give more consideration to his proposal, but something compelled him to join them. Maybe, if he took his time, they'd be gone by the time he got out there. *Stop kidding yourself and stop making excuses for not acting. You know you want to be with them. You'd give almost anything to make it permanent. They make your day.* A small part of him hoped they'd still be there.

"Good morning," he called out when he was only a couple yards away.

"Peter!" Tommy ran to him. If Peter hadn't reached out, the boy would have bounced off him. As it was, Peter caught

the lively boy before momentum had a chance to keep him going. "I was feeding the ducks," he announced proudly.

"So, I see. They must be hungry fellahs to keep following you about." Peter knelt beside the boy. Two ducks remained a short distance from Tommy, turning their heads and eyeing the grass, hoping to find more bread.

"They're gluttons," Libby commented when she joined them.

"Morning." Peter stood and greeted her. Libby looked radiant, despite everything she'd been through lately. Tommy's exuberance led Peter to believe the loss of his best friend had been forgotten. Only a child had the true ability to let go and move on. Peter envied him that.

An awkward moment seemed to lodge between Peter and Libby. Tommy, tiring of their game, ran back to the inn. "Stay out of mischief," Libby called after him.

"No fun, Mama," he called back over his shoulder and laughed.

"That seems to be an ageless admonition and response," Peter commented with a grin. "Libby," he began awkwardly, after a moment's silence. "I'm sorry about last night, and how upset you were over it. I feel responsible."

"You couldn't have known, and I don't hold you to blame. If it had to be one or the other, I'm relieved it turned out as it did. You can replace a cat, but it's very hard to replace a human."

"Is there anyone who might wish you harm?"

"Why would someone want to hurt me?" she asked, surprised at the question. "I seldom go to town, and the

people I meet here are only passing through. Elias would be more likely to see you as a threat, although I feel that to be a silly idea."

"Tell me about your brother. What sort of businessman—merchant—is he?"

Libby shrugged then turned back toward the pond. She tossed out the rest of the stale bread, then dusted off her hands. "He can be ruthless when it suits his need. He doesn't like competition."

"Does he believe poisoning a cat will get him what he wants?"

"You forget," she replied, looking up at him. "You were meant to be poisoned. It was in your food, not Jasper's. It was an accident that got him instead."

"Sounds like you wish I had eaten that meal."

"No!" She seemed horrified by the idea. "I'm glad you're safe. I didn't mean you to think otherwise." They were silent for a few moments, as if all had been said on the matter, but Libby knew better. Neither would forget the events of the previous night. She turned and began walking slowly, back to the inn.

"I'm sorry about last night," he said by way of apology. "I was out of line. I should never have kissed you."

Libby blushed, ashamed to think he regretted that moment. "Don't worry. I haven't given it second thought."

*Liar.* It was all she thought about most of the night, and when she fell asleep, she dreamed of him. Was it a betrayal of her late husband? Or even her son? The only thing Libby was sure of, was that Peter made her feel alive again, and

now he was sorry he'd kissed her? Then he couldn't be serious about his proposal, to make them a family. She should have known better. There was no doubt about her answer now. Well, almost none. That little niggle of doubt would have to be ignored. If he thought he could wed with her, make them a family, out of a sense of 'duty', then she wanted no part of it. Libby refused to marry anyone, for anything less than love. She made up her mind she wouldn't let him get close enough to kiss her again. Keeping her distance was the smartest thing she could do, until he left for good.

## CHAPTER TEN

Peter dressed with care, wanting to make this contact successful, and keep it clandestine as it was meant to be. Dressed in brown, he buttoned the long vest over matching breeches, then pulled on the coat. A half moon tonight would show his white linen shirt and give him away. There was nothing to be done about it. He tossed his cloak about his shoulders and tied it in place, hoping the garment would hide the shirt.

He went downstairs into the taproom, hoping no one would pay him any heed. He didn't need to be stared at by the soldiers who frequented the inn and knew him through his association with Mayhew and Elias. Peter had the advantage of knowing who would win this war, but it still raised his adrenaline to be a part of the action. He could only hope he didn't do anything that might change the course of history.

He was thankful when no one paid him any mind when he left the inn and headed toward the stable. Justice nickered softly, acknowledging his presence. Peter greeted Justice, rubbing the animal's velvety muzzle. "We have an appointment to keep," he whispered, then saddled his mount. Officers didn't saddle their own horses, but no one knew about the redcoat and Peter didn't need questioning looks from anyone. There was something about Daniels, the stable master, he didn't trust, but he couldn't just ignore the man—it would look too suspicious. Daniels was an attentive servant, but far too interested in Peter's personal business.

As if summoned, Daniels stepped out of the little tack room and stared at Peter. "You should have called me, sir," he said, slightly irked. "I would have saddled the horse for you."

"Not a problem," Peter responded. "Sometimes I prefer saddling my horse, myself. No reflection on your services."

Justice trotted out of the stable and headed north on the main road. Two miles along the road, Peter found the marker he'd been told to look for, and dismounted. Taking Justice's reins, he led the gelding into the woods, just beyond the tree line, where they wouldn't be seen from the road. There was no such thing as being too cautious in these troubled times.

It was rather quiet, with only occasional rustlings of nocturnal animals, looking for a meal in the underbrush. Peter looked upward between tree branches. The trees weren't as dense as he'd thought. The moon had yet to rise, but the stars shone brilliantly against the vast dark canopy of the night sky. It was an amazing sight, and he was able to pick out several constellations. Back in his own time, he would never have been able to see the sky this clearly, unless he was out on weekend or annual maneuvers. City lights cast a harsh glow, refusing to yield to natural beauty.

Horse's hoofs thudding dully on the road demanded his attention. It was about time his contact arrived. Peter rubbed Justice's muzzle as the horse tossed its head. Given the chance he'd call to the other mount, but Peter didn't want his contact to know he was there, watching. The rider tossed back a hood and Peter stared in shock. It couldn't be. Libby Carson? Strange place and time for an attractive widow to

rendezvous with someone. Then again, with that brother of hers constantly showing up. Peter wondered when the man had time to attend to his own wife. Thinking of Constance, even in passing, made him shudder.

Libby dismounted and waited by the side of the road, glancing occasionally in both directions. The moon was on the rise, casting night shadows ahead of it. Libby paced impatiently, while her mare tossed its head, anxious to return to a warm stall. The night was growing chill as a damp breeze blew gently.

Peter continued to watch the attractive innkeeper. His own meeting was a bust, but curiosity kept him in place. He wanted to know the identity of the lucky guy she waited for. Did she love someone, and wanted to keep it from her brother? He felt a surge of jealousy rush through him. Was she about to toss over his proposal in favor of someone else? She never led him to believe there was anyone else ... unless she wanted to be with Mayhew and her attention elsewhere was all a ruse. Peter shrugged. If that's how she truly was, then she wasn't much better than Lainie. Better to find out now. Technically, it was none of his business, and yet it titillated his curiosity. To leave now would force him to admit he'd been spying on her, when that was never his intention, and Peter wasn't about to spoil his bit of fun.

Was his intention to court her, a smoke screen on her part? If that was the case, Libby would find he could be imposing, charming or irresistible, depending on what he wanted and if he wanted something badly enough. He waited

quietly, until she left, then waiting a few more minutes, took a long route back to the inn.

When Peter entered the taproom, he found Gladys hurrying about, clearing tables and wiping them down. "Slow down, Gladys," he said, grasping her arm and forcing her to stop. "The dishes aren't going anywhere, and there's no one coming in. What's the rush?"

"Mariah's child is ill and she had to go home. There's on one else to sit with Mistress Cooper."

Peter took the tray from Gladys and set it on the nearest table. "Tell you what. Leave the cleaning up to me. I'll see the tables get cleared and wiped down. You go in to Mistress Cooper, have a nice chat, read a book, or whatever you do with her, and don't worry about anything out here."

"Are you sure?" she asked, running the back of her hand across her forehead. She could do with a break now.

"What! You don't think I can clean up around here?" He chuckled. "Don't worry, everything will be shipshape come morning. You need some time to relax."

Gladys hesitated, not sure of his offer. Despite being a guest of the inn, he did do work for Libby now and again.

"Go," he said again, and gave her a gentle nudge in toward the stairs.

"You're a guest here, Mr. Ellsworth. You shouldn't be doing the cleaning up."

"Well, don't tell anyone, and they won't know the difference." He grinned at the woman and watched her trudge tiredly up the stairs. Gladys glanced over her shoulder, and



Peter made a shooping gesture with his hand. She smiled wanly, then continued up the stairs.

Peter tossed his cloak on the back of his favorite chair, then set about picking up dishes and wiping down tables. There was no one left in the taproom, but he heard voices in a quiet argument, coming from the private room closest to the kitchen. Peter took the dirty dishes into the kitchen then stopped at the closed door of the private room to listen. It wasn't like him. The first voice was male, and one he didn't recognize, but he was pretty sure the other voice was Libby's.

While Peter didn't make it a habit to eavesdrop on other's conversations, he wanted to be sure, Libby was all right.

"I tell you, he didn't show up."

"He must have. He has information that could help our cause. If he proves to be as lazy as he seems, I will personally beat him to a pulp. He may play both sides, but he knows better than to cross me."

"What are we to do?"

"You will do nothing more. I need people I can rely on. If I cannot get information in a timely fashion, then I have wasted my time."

"I can't be of any help if I don't know who to expect."

"Doesn't matter now, Mistress. I'll have to go ahead with our plans and hope for the best."

"I'm sorry he didn't make himself known, but I have no control over that."

"It was a risk to begin with. This man has yet to decide what side he's on. In the meantime, he provides us with helpful information, and we give him half truths."

"I expect we get the same from him."

"You understand, I will not do this again. I have my son to think of, and my mother has been ill. If there is any other way I can be of help, I'll do what I can."

He nodded in reply.

The conversation continued for a few more minutes, but in a quieter tone. Peter could no longer make out what was being said. He quickly moved away and headed for the kitchen when he heard boots scuffling on the floor toward the door. He couldn't afford to get caught, but going into the kitchen, he grinned. How ironic that Libby should have been looking for him. He heard the stranger's shuffling footsteps halt in the taproom.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, startled, when she entered the kitchen. Peter was the last person she expected to find here. Her heart thumped wildly.

"Just giving Gladys a helping hand. She was supposed to stay with your mother, and she had to finish her work here. So I sent her up and I'm finishing the cleaning up for her."

Libby eyed him suspiciously. Neither said a word when they heard the inn door close quietly.

"I'll lock up," he commented easily and made his way around her. After the door was barred against the night, he turned to her once more. "It's been a long day. I'm going to turn in. Good night, Libby."

Libby stared at him, following his every move as he climbed the stairs, and wondered after all, if he could be trusted. She had a sneaking suspicion he was the one who should have appeared on that road. Another thought struck

her. What better way to handle a potential spy than to marry him. The fact he'd been after her to go along with his proposal to protect her from Mayhew, had some bearing on her decision. She liked the man, even if she didn't know much about him, and her instincts were seldom wrong. He might be as secretive now as he'd been a year ago, but in other ways he proved caring and reliable. She could do worse. Having finally made up her mind on that score, Libby checked on her son, then went to her mother's room to sit with her for a while.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

A few days later, Elias' coach stood before the inn. Its four dark horses tossed their heads, impatient to be on the move. The black coach with its gold trim looked out of place in the simple surroundings. Libby had grown to hate the sight of it, for it always meant trouble was in the making.

Peter remained silent while he gave Libby a hand up into the conveyance. Tommy chattered incessantly about the horses and the grand coach that would take them into Boston. Peter lifted the boy and set him beside his mother. Just before climbing in himself, he glanced back at the armed escort, assigned to follow them. Justice was tied to the back of the coach.

Lieutenant Foster gave Peter an unfriendly nudge to get him moving. When the men settled inside, Foster rapped on the ceiling signaling the coachman to get underway.

Moments later Tommy ceased his chattering. Peter wasn't sure if it was the lack of response, or the look on Foster's face. His smug expression had turned to one of annoyance. Peter felt sorry for the boy, but showing concern would only make trouble. He watched the Tommy snuggle against his mother, saw his eyes slowly close, until the boy drifted off to sleep. *So much for your big adventure*, Peter thought sympathetically. One day, he'd make sure Tommy had the chance to enjoy his adventures.

Since getting into the coach, Libby had refused to so much as glance in his direction. She wrapped her arm about her

son's shoulders, but continued to gaze out the window. If only Foster weren't sitting beside him, he fumed silently. He kept his features bland as if he didn't care. If Foster hadn't been there, Peter would have done his best to assure Libby everything would be all right. He couldn't say anything without giving himself away. Somehow, he'd find a way to get through to her. Until then, he'd have to bide his time.

Two hours later, the coach stopped before Elias' home in a wealthy section of Boston. Peter stepped down from the coach and gazed at the building before him. The night of the ball, he hadn't given much consideration to the red brick, two story house. Now, he gazed at the white trim around the windows. The wide oak door with its gargoyle of a brass knocker seemed more forbidding today, almost daring him to enter. The sight of the house, as a whole, left no impression on him, and Peter figured it had something to do with the owner. Maybe a lot to do with him.

After having been helped down by the footman who rode atop the coach, Libby joined Peter. Tommy ran to the couple and into his mother. She took a quick step back to keep her balance. Peter grasped her arm and held her steady. "Take it easy there, partner," he quietly admonished the boy. "Don't want to upset your mother."

"Yes, sir," Tommy responded, then looked up. "I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't mean to run into you."

"Don't worry about it, Tommy. It was an accident, and I'm quite all right."

Peter's hand on her arm eased its grasp, and glided downward until his fingers intertwined with hers. Neither said

a word, but the sadness in her eyes was easy to read. "There is a way out of this, Libby," he said softly so no one would overhear. "We just have to have patience." *Yeah, look who's talking.* The advice was rather ironic, coming from him. "We will find a way."

The front door opened and the butler stood to one side as Elias and Colonel Mayhew stepped outside. Elias' attention riveted on the clasped hands. A look of anger flitted across his narrow features, then disappeared.

Libby wondered if she'd seen it at all—or if it was her imagination. She surreptitiously withdrew her hand from Peter's and reached for Tommy instead. The boy ran ahead, around the two men and into the house, leaving her to muse over what might have demanded his attention. A yipping from inside, answered her question.

Peter lightly rested his hand against the small of Libby's back and escorted her toward the house. When they reached the front door, Elias took her arm, and pulled her inside, leaving Peter where he stood.

Mayhew stepped in front of him, barring his way. "Your services are no longer needed. You should have remained at the inn. My men are quite capable of guarding one woman and a small boy. You will return to the inn and await orders."

Peter's gaze traveled upward from the hateful red uniform coat to Mayhew's cold stare. He didn't like the inflection in Mayhew's voice when he referred to Libby and Tommy, nor did he like the idea of leaving the two in the hands of her brother and the colonel. At the moment he had no choice. There was only one thing he could do. "Don't get too

comfortable in your role, Mayhew. I will be back." Peter hesitated a moment, then turned away to fetch Justice from behind the carriage before the conveyance was driven away. He refused to look back, but felt the colonel's black stare drilling a hole into his back.

His horse ambled along the road while Peter seethed with anger. What game was Mayhew playing at? Had he and Elias all ready signed an agreement? Somehow he didn't think so, and yet he wouldn't put it past either man to push up the signing of contracts and try to force Libby's compliance. Elias was more devious and had a lot to lose if he couldn't finalize the contracts he wanted with the British army. Did the man really believe he could barter Libby and her son? Yeah, Elias had more than enough ego to try. Peter didn't know what he could do to diffuse the situation until he was ready to make his move, but he'd do whatever was necessary to get Libby and Tommy back where they belonged at the inn and out of the clutches of the two men.

Peter rode back to the inn, anger seething just beneath the surface. His mind sorted and discarded a plethora of ideas. Most were too reckless and he wasn't about to do anything to jeopardize Libby or her son—unless it came down to no other choices. In that case, he'd have to plan very carefully.

Without realizing it, he'd arrived in front of the inn and young Harry had run from the stable to take the horse. He held the bridle and spoke quietly to Justice while waiting for Peter to dismount. After a couple moments he spoke up. "Did you want to stay, sir?"

His attention jerked back to the present, Peter was surprised to see the stable lad standing there, staring up at him. "What? Sorry, Harry. Got a sticky problem, to figure out." Peter dismounted and handed over the reins.

"Might help to talk to somebody about it," Harry said, without thinking. "At least that's what me mum says." His face was slightly flushed. "Sorry sir. Sometimes I forget myself. It won't happen again, sir."

Peter laughed. "Don't worry about it, Harry, but your mother is right. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone. I'll keep it in mind." That idea also presented a problem. He came to the conclusion he couldn't pull this off alone, but who could he trust to help him rescue Libby and Tommy?

He watched Harry lead the horse away and decided he could use a drink. Peter stopped inside the inn's doorway and let his eyes adjust to the dimness. Shutters had been pulled open to let in the graying daylight, but it didn't seem to make much difference. The dimness fit his rapidly declining mood. The same three soldiers sat at their usual table and turned as one to smirk at him, as if they knew what was going on. Did they know something he didn't? The colonials pretty much ignored him, but they wouldn't for long, once they knew what was about to happen to Libby. If Elias and the colonel had their way, Libby wouldn't be coming back. Elias would see to that. Once the colonel tired of Libby, Mayhew would undoubtedly put her and Tommy on a ship and send them off to England, to some isolated country estate. Out of sight, out of mind. Not if he had anything to say about it.



Peter was determined to keep that from happening, no matter what it took. He admired Libby's courage, and said a silent prayer Mayhew wouldn't eventually wear her down, before a plan could be cobbled together to rescue her. He thought about that for a moment. No, Mayhew wouldn't wear her down. Nothing less than breaking her would satisfy that man. To break Libby's spirit, would be to destroy her completely.

Peter went up to his room to change his clothes for something more comfortable and less obvious. Satin was definitely not to his taste and the sooner he could be shed of them, the better he liked it. The coat, embroidered vest, and breeches were neatly folded and stuck into the wardrobe where he wouldn't have to look at them again. The homespun was much more comfortable and more to his liking. When he was done, he went down to the taproom to find it full, and a harried Gladys trying to keep up with demand.

Half the room was taken up by British soldiers, their red coats prominent, like freshly cooked lobster. "We asked for ale," one demanded, stepping into Gladys' path and bringing her up short. The tray she carried almost found itself on the floor.

Peter knew from past experience that Gladys wasn't one to shy away from trouble, but he saw her trembling. Whether it was fear or anger, he couldn't be sure. He went behind the bar, grabbed a few pewter mugs and quickly filled them with foaming ale. He took the tray to the soldiers' table, stepping between Gladys and the demanding trooper. The man was forced to step back, giving Gladys some breathing room.

"Sorry about the wait, fellahs," he said as he placed a mug before each man. "It's unusually busy tonight and we've been short handed lately. I'm sure you'll understand." He glanced from one face to the next, almost daring someone to try something. He could only be thankful that no one from this group recognized him from town. If they did, and said something, he'd be in a heap of trouble with the natives.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

He waited for the soldiers to leave, but tonight they seemed to want to linger over their drinks. They often rode patrol in the area and stopped at the inn for a meal and a few mugs of ale. Things must have been fairly quiet for them to spend so much time at the Swan's Down Inn. Maybe they were keeping tabs on him, waiting for him to slip up. He knew Mayhew didn't really trust him. "Be a cold day in hell before they catch me passing information," Peter muttered to himself while the mug he held before the ale cask developed a thick, foamy head. His thoughts wandered and the foam spilled over the edge before his attention was jerked back to the present. He cursed softly and wiped the outside of the mug with a clean bar rag.

The soldiers hoisted one mug after another, growing louder, the more they drank. Peter was glad he wasn't one of them. Most, if not all, would wake in the morning with hangovers. The inn door suddenly opened with such force it flew against the wall, shaking half the building. Peter was surprised the inn didn't come tumbling down around their ears.

DeWitt Johnson barreled his way through the taproom like a guided missile. Peter would have laughed at everyone jumping out of the way, if he hadn't been the target. At over six feet tall and some two hundred fifty pounds, Johnson looked like a buckskin clad bear. He was definitely angry, and Peter didn't realize the trouble he was in until the burly man

grabbed the front of his shirt and vest and nearly dragged him over the bar. "What have you done with Libby?" he demanded, ignoring the attention he'd gained with his entrance.

"Libby's fine," Peter managed hoarsely. Johnson's hand was fisted at Peter's throat pulling his shirt taut. Johnson's eyes were wide, like a madman, and Peter felt a shred of apprehension. Johnson loosened his grip allowing Peter to take a deep breath. "Later," he said quietly, "we can talk." He glanced at the soldiers, hoping Johnson was smart enough to realize what he was trying to convey to him.

Johnson's eyes narrowed in warning before he finally released his captive. Both men stepped back from the bar. Peter grabbed a mug and filled it with ale, and slid it to the big man, before getting one for himself. His plan to get Libby flashed through his mind and he knew for a certainty he'd need help. Could he trust DeWitt or any of the other men? He wasn't so sure. Not one of them particularly trusted him, and he couldn't say he blamed them. Except for that one night ... While he drank his ale, he watched Gladys scurrying around, collecting mugs and bowls from empty tables. It seemed a number of customers, including the soldiers, had made a quick exit when an angry DeWitt arrived. Peter could only wait until the taproom closed for the night. Once more he mulled over his plan, making sure every important detail was in place, leaving just enough room, in case something went wrong and they had to improvise.

Peter had a bad feeling when late in the evening DeWitt spoke quietly to Gladys, then left the taproom. So much for

help Peter thought. Maybe Libby wasn't as important to the man as he had hoped. Feelings of frustration and anger surged through him. He didn't have much time to put his plan into action.

About an hour later DeWitt returned with a half dozen men, all of whom had fought on Breed's Hill. Peter had helped them that day, and they owed him, but if he meant any harm to Libby, they'd deal with him instead. DeWitt must have known where Libby was before he came bellowing into the inn.

The rest of the evening's customers were leaving when the men arrived. "Taproom is closed, gentlemen," Peter announced as he finished cleaning up around the bar. Gladys wiped down the last table and took her tray into the kitchen. The last man to enter barred the door.

No one paid any attention to him, but instead took seats about the taproom. Candles were burning low, and Gladys made a point of replacing the smallest ones. Peter was beginning to feel hemmed in. He glanced about the room trying to keep everyone in sight. It wasn't easy. He backed up and stepped behind the bar. It would afford him some protection—unless someone decided to take a short cut and leapfrog over it.

"What is Mistress Carson doing in Boston?" DeWitt demanded. He didn't seem like the half wit others insinuated earlier. His voice was deep, calm and subtly threatening.

Peter wondered briefly if this was a tactic on the trapper's part, a means to intimidate. The man's size alone was intimidation enough. Peter rubbed his sweaty palms against

his breeches. Would DeWitt help or hinder him where Libby and Tommy were concerned? There was only one way to find out.

Mistress Carson was summoned to her brother's home in Boston for a two week visit."

"Two week visit. Didn't think you'd be stupid enough to accept that explanation," DeWitt responded with contempt.

"I didn't accept it—not really. I'm forced to bide my time for now."

"Gossip has it, she's to wed the colonel. Mistress Carson would never do that."

"No, she wouldn't," Peter agreed as he glanced about the room again, then picked up a bar rag and mopped up around a lower shelf. A decision had to be made, here and now. With his plans all ready made, he wondered about the wisdom of taking on partners. The fewer people who knew what he was up to, the less chance of betrayal.

DeWitt carefully studied Peter. As if reading the other man's mind, he spoke quietly. "You need help with your plan."

"I could use some help, yes."

"How many, and what do you want to do?"

Peter breathed a sigh of relief. Until now, he wasn't sure he could pull it off. "Before Libby ... Mistress Carson ... went to her brother's, I offered to marry her, look after her and her son. I guess I startled her, because she never really answered one way or the other."

"What makes you think she would have you?"

Peter turned to face the speaker whom he recognized as challenging him following the battle on Breed's Hill. "The lesser of two evils, I suppose. Given the choice, or ... no ... Faced with the possibility of being married to someone like Mayhew, what would you do?"

"She's weddin' with the colonel?" Justin asked incredulously. "That's ... that's almost as bad as committing treason." The others nodded in agreement.

Where had the man been when DeWitt first mentioned the proposed marriage. "She doesn't want to marry him. Her brother set it up. He's probably got the contracts signed by now," Peter replied.

"He'd trade his sister's happiness for a few coins?"

"More than a few coins. It should be rather profitable for him." Peter brought out several pewter mugs and filled them with ale, then lined them up along the top of the bar.

Gladys returned to the taproom, after cleaning up the kitchen. She'd been listening to the men talk. "Emily Collins left a few minutes ago with her husband. He said the news in Boston is that Mistress Carson and Colonel Mayhew are to be wed on Saturday."

"Are you sure, Gladys?" Peter asked, stunned by the news. Elias wasn't wasting any time in pushing his plans to fruition and securing a more profitable future for himself.

"Quite. If you intend to do something about it, you'd best do it quickly. She'll have nothing but heartache wed to that man. What was that brother of hers thinking?" Gladys slowly shook her head.

"Dollar signs." Peter glanced at the puzzled looks. "He wasn't thinking. Thank you, Gladys. That little bit of information will help immensely."

Gladys opened her mouth to speak again but after glancing at the half dozen men staring back at her, she seemed to think better of it. She wiped her hands on her apron, quickly bid the men a goodnight and hurried away up the stairs to check on Mistress Cooper, before going to her own room.

"This new information means we don't have much time, so this is what we're going to do..."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Libby wandered about the drawing room, feeling restless and bored. She should be at the inn supervising the servants, looking after her mother. Every time she attempted to leave the house, either Elias or the colonel found an excuse to keep her inside, away from other people. The night before, one of Elias' friends had held a musicale, and Libby had been invited. The evening proved to be a disaster with either her brother or her unwanted betrothed, constantly hovering over her. If this was what her life with the colonel was to be like ... What should have been a pleasant evening was ultimately ruined by the announcement of their engagement. Mayhew wanted to be sure she didn't find a way out. By backing out now, she would not only embarrass the colonel, but also dishonor her brother, at least in the eyes of others. That, she guessed, was what they were counting on to keep her in line. If only Peter were here. He would have found a way to squelch their plans. If only there were still time to do so, but Saturday was only a few days away, not enough time to plan and act.

"Ah, there you are," Mayhew sounded pleased as he entered the drawing room, closing the door behind him.

Libby stood by the windows, wishing Mayhew would go away, but that wasn't going to happen. She didn't like being alone in the room with the arrogant colonel, with the door closed. Libby didn't trust him, but no one would dare enter without permission. Maybe Tommy would come running in, demanding her attention. Closed, unlocked doors meant little

to him. Something clicked in her memory. What kind of mother was she not to realize sooner? Tommy hadn't made an appearance since luncheon the day before. One of the maids said he was in the nursery, taking his meals there, as Elias had ordered. Libby always tucked him in at night, but last night ... Last night Elias made a point of keeping her occupied, sharing stories with a handful of supper guests, who later accompanied them to the musicale. Elias deliberately kept her distracted. Libby looked up at Mayhew. "Colonel, have you seen my son this morning? Elias said Tommy would be down to breakfast, but..."

"But you haven't seen him." Mayhew stepped closer and saw the dark smudges beneath her eyes. "You really need to sleep, Mistress Carson," he commented. "Can't have my bride-to-be looking exhausted. After all, people would think this was not the joyous occasion it is meant to be." His hands slowly glided up her arms in a too familiar way. His eyes narrowed briefly when she flinched at his touch. "You shouldn't worry about your son. He's safe and being cared for. I have made a decision, though," he continued, abruptly changing the subject. "I don't think we'll wait until Saturday. We'll be wed in two days."

Libby shrugged her shoulders and slipped from his grasp. "Two days isn't enough to make preparations." She glanced frantically about the room, wanting to escape his presence. *What has he done with my son?*

Mayhew's features darkened with displeasure. "The sooner we are married, the sooner your son will be returned to you. Until then, you will behave as if nothing is wrong. After all,

nothing is wrong. The boy will only be a distraction while you make your preparations. One of the maids will accompany you until you are ready for the ceremony."

"What have you done with my son?" she demanded and went after the officer, fists flying. He's only a little boy."

Mayhew took a few moments to capture her hands. "Perhaps you were not listening, my dear. Play me false and you'll not see the brat again."

Libby forced the officer to release her, then quickly stepped back out of his reach. "I can't trust you not to hurt him."

"I give you my word. Follow through with this wedding and your son will be returned to you before that day is through. Think it over. Tomorrow, you will make the purchases you think necessary for the occasion. I think I'll have one of my men escort you, rather than a maid. My men are well disciplined and will ignore any feminine wiles you might try to use. I cannot trust the maids to do their duty in this instance."

"As you wish," Libby nodded and seemed to acquiesce, but her features remained neutral. She knew when to back off from a battle and regroup. Mayhew bowed and left the room, looking satisfied, like a well-fed cat. The door closed quietly, leaving Libby alone. She turned to the window again and stared out at the gardens. The graying day reflected what she was feeling. There was no way out of this situation that she could see. She had no choice but to go along with Elias' plans for her, if it was the only way to get her son back. Her lashes grew wet and tears slowly drifted down her pale cheeks.

If only Peter had spoken sooner. She would have accepted his proposal in a thrice. Now it was too late. With her marriage to the colonel taking place in two days, there was nothing to be done. Libby had to consider her son's safety above all else. Her own happiness was no longer a consideration.

Libby rubbed her palms on her cheeks to wipe away the tears. She took a deep breath and slowly released it in an effort to regain her composure. With her back ramrod straight, and her chin up, she walked across the room to the door. She hesitated, then left the room to go upstairs to her own room.

Half-way up the staircase she stopped one of the maids. "I'm rather tired. Please have Cook send a try to my room."

"Yes, ma'am," the maid replied and hurried on her way.

In her room, Lilly changed out of her dress and slipped on a nightgown and dressing gown. She sat in the chair by the window and stared outside. Sometime during the evening the maid arrived with a tray, then returned later to light candles and turn down the bedding. Libby took no notice. When she did finally notice, she removed the silver covers to find a congealed mass of gravy over something she couldn't identify. The covers were quietly replaced and the tray ignored.

As hard as she tried, she could come up with no workable plan to rescue Tommy and get them both home. What would her son's future be, with the likes of Mayhew for a stepfather? Would he even have a future? She shuddered at the thought of the man's intolerance for the little boy—and if they should

have other children? No! The situation was untenable. Libby had to come up with some plan to find her son and get them both out of Boston. Time was of the essence. The wedding was only two days away.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Libby was allowed to go shopping, and went from one shop to another, making no purchases. Douglas, a young Scottish soldier assigned to Mayhew, was definitely uncomfortable in his role of escort. Libby felt a little sorry for him, stuck with this sort of duty. "What made you decide to join the British army?" she asked out of curiosity, and an effort to make him feel more at ease.

"After Culloden, we highlanders didn't have anything left. Surviving families were put out of their homes. My grandfather was executed after the battle. Mayhew promised to leave my family where they were, if I joined the army. I didn't want to see them lose their home, but shortly afterward, they were transported just the same. They're here in the colonies, in Virginia. I had no choice but to stay in the army. The pay isn't much but it helps my mum."

"I'd heard something about the battle. It seems the British are worse than worrisome terriers. They never know when to let go of something. They have to keep after it until it's been completely destroyed, whether it be things or people."

"I fear you may be right, Mistress Carson. They deem highlanders to be uncivilized and would just as soon destroy ever last trace of us, as they will the colonies."

Libby sighed. "Enough of that talk. There's nothing to be gained visiting old wounds. Shall we have some lunch? There's an inn. Perhaps we can get a bite to eat, and speak of more pleasant things." She smiled wistfully when Douglas offered his arm and escorted her to the inn. She would give almost anything to have Peter by her side, but that wasn't going to happen.

\* \* \* \*

Libby and Douglas chatted throughout their meal, of inconsequential things, and she found herself laughing at his stories. Time passed quickly and soon it was necessary to end the pleasantries. When was the last time she felt like laughing? She'd done her best to keep Peter out of her thoughts, not because she didn't care, but because she realized she most certainly did care. She'd had the whole night long to realize just what she felt for him, and for the first time she recognized the ache around her heart for what it was. She had to stop thinking about him, because such thoughts brought only pain. He would never hear the confession she finally made to herself. It was no use thinking on what they might have had together. Her love for him was something she would have to lock away in her heart. Perhaps on cold, dreary nights, she could take it out, and revisit it, but she could never act on it. She and Peter had no future. He was lost to her.

Libby and Douglas left the inn and continued on their way, as if out for a leisurely stroll. She listened intently to one of

his tales when a hand clamped over her mouth and a heavy arm encircled her waist, yanking her into the nearby alley.

"Please don't scream, Mistress Carson," a gruff voice pleaded. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Libby stopped fighting her assailant when she recognized his voice. "Mr. Johnson!" she exclaimed when he released her. "What do you think you're doing? Colonel Mayhew will have your head!" she exclaimed softly, not wanting to be overheard.

She turned quickly when she heard a groan and knelt beside Douglas. "What have you done to him?" she demanded. "He's hurt no one."

"He's Mayhew's man," a second man rebuffed. "He deserves that and worse for touching you."

Libby recognized Ben Simpson, one of the local farmers. "Not by choice," she fired back at him, then turned to her downed escort. "Douglas, are you all right?" she asked softly.

"I ... be fine, Mistress Carson," he responded. He managed, with Libby's help to get to his feet, but stumbled a moment trying to regain his balance. He rubbed the back of his head and winced.

"What is going on?" Libby demanded emphatically as she stood before DeWitt, staring up at him. Her hands clenched at her sides, while she controlled her anger. "Do you realize what will happen to you when Colonel Mayhew finds out what you've done?"

"Are you going to tell him?" DeWitt challenged, returning her stare. "Doesn't matter anyway," he added. "Ellsworth is waiting for us."

"Peter? Where is he?" Suddenly the day seemed brighter to her and a gleam of hope flashed in her eyes.

"He's at the North Church. We don't have much time."

"What we do with this one?" Ben Simpson asked nodding in Douglas' direction. "Can't have him running back to the colonel."

"I suppose I'll have to go with you," Douglas grinned. "Anything that will get Mistress Carson out of the colonel's grasp, is fine with me."

DeWitt and Simpson exchanged concerned glances. This was something they hadn't counted on.

"He goes with us," Libby announced and faced both glaring men. "You know what the colonel will do to him if he returns alone."

"Aye." DeWitt was reluctant to agree, but they needed all the time they had. He glanced about the road but saw no one at the moment. "We'd best leave before someone realizes you're not where you should be." With that warning, they headed toward the far end of the alley and made their way around the back of buildings, heading toward the North Church.

Simpson took off his cloak and grudgingly tossed it at Douglas. "Put it on," he ordered. "Don't need anybody spotting that red coat of yours."

"You're right," Douglas agreed and slipped the cloak about his shoulders to hide the hated red coat. He pulled the edges together in the front. If they were caught, he didn't want to be the one responsible.



"Pull up your hood," DeWitt told Libby as they headed back to the main thoroughfare. His next orders were for his men. "When we get to the road, stay in a tight group and keep Mistress Carson in the middle. The less seen of her the better. Soldiers will be looking at faces, not clothing."

Two soldiers arguing good-naturedly stopped to let the group of colonials pass. It gave them a brief opportunity to study the upstarts. The one in the middle appeared to be of a slight build, and seemed suspicious with his face hidden in shadow. "You there," one soldier called.

DeWitt was the only one to turn to the soldiers. "Did you say something?" he asked lazily, with a hint of defiance. It was what the soldiers would expect.

"What's wrong with him?" the first soldier asked, pointing to the center figure.

"Just my sister. Thought she could sneak away to meet her lover. Beat him right proper. They won't be trying that again." DeWitt rapped Libby on the back of the head for good measure. "She'll get what she deserves when I get her home."

Libby stumbled forward, into the man in front of her, but caught herself before she fell. One soldier stepped forward. "Here now. You shouldn't—" His companion grabbed his arm.

"What do you care what he does to her? Man has the right to treat a woman in whatever manner he sees fit, especially if that woman is his wayward sister."

DeWitt stared at the soldier, as if committing his face to memory. He grinned at the remark, appearing to agree, but kept his disgust to himself. He decided to make a point of

searching out the soldier some time in the near future. At the moment he had something more important to see to—getting Libby to the church in short order.

The one soldier laughed, and seemed satisfied with DeWitt's explanation. His companion began arguing with him as they turned and went on their way. Eventually their voices faded.

DeWitt pretended to be talking to his own companions before moving on. The last thing he needed was to have the soldiers return and question them of their destination.

"Thank you, much," Libby groused.

"It sent them away, didn't it?" the big man replied defensively.

"Yes, it did," she sighed. "Shall we move on before they decide to return?" She didn't appreciate the slur on her character, but whatever helped to get her away was worth enduring.

DeWitt glanced about, and seeing no one else, hurried his companions into the North Church.

Once inside, Libby removed her hood and looked around, not sure they should have brought her here. Peter stepped out of the late afternoon shadows. "Mistress Carson ... Libby. I see they got you here without mishap."

"Not quite," she replied, containing her pleasure at the sight of him, "but Mr. Johnson managed to deflect their interest."

Peter glanced over the group of men and focused on the youngest. "Good to see you, Douglas. How did you manage to get involved in this?"

"Mayhew ordered me to escort Mistress Carson about her errands. I suppose I was the only one he trusted not to make any advances."

Peter laughed. "He doesn't know to watch out for the quiet ones."

"I would never have done anything improper," he replied indignantly.

DeWitt's confused glanced moved back and forth between the two men. "You know him?"

"Of course. He's my spy, of sorts, in Mayhew's command. He has no more respect for the colonel than I do."

"Why didn't you say something?" he asked the man in question, and slapped him on the back. Douglas, like Libby, lost his balance under the contact, but caught himself. He glowered at the giant.

Peter took Libby's hand and led her away from the group. When they'd gone half-way down the aisle, he turned to the woman and took both her hands in his. "I was told Mayhew intends to wed you on Saturday."

"More like tomorrow." Her voice was quiet, but filled with disgust.

"Tomorrow. I'm glad we found you sooner, rather than later. Libby, I've given this a great deal of thought, and I believe it's the only way for you. Marry me, and neither Mayhew, nor Elias will ever use you again as a pawn."

"Is that the only reason you make this proposal?"

"Well..."

"I'm sorry, Peter, I can't. DeWitt didn't know all the facts before he took me away. Mayhew has hidden Tommy

somewhere, to insure I go through with this marriage. He said he'd return my son directly after the ceremony."

As if on cue, a burly trapper strode up the aisle from where Peter thought the sacristy might be, or something similar. He carried something in his arms. "Look at what I found," he announced, then put down his squirming bundle.

"Mama!" Tommy ran to his mother.

Libby knelt and caught her son. Tears of happiness and relief spilled down her cheeks as she hugged him tightly to her.

"Where did you find him?" Peter asked, surprised.

"Saw Mary with him, and he wasn't happy about it. He was giving her a hard time, demanding to see his mother. That's why I didn't join the rest of you as planned. Had my own little rescue mission to take care of."

"How did you get him from her?"

"Wasn't hard to distract her. Actually, one of the footmen got her full attention and she forgot what she was supposed to be doing. She never did care much for the boy, so it was easy to spirit him away. She'll have a hard time explaining this to Mayhew."

"I'm sure she will. Mayhew isn't the forgiving sort." Peter turned to Libby.

"Your son is back, safe and sound. Will you reconsider my proposal?"

Libby stood, but didn't relinquish hold of her son. She studied Peter's features a moment. Caught in shadow, he was hard to read. "I'm not sure, Peter. You haven't given me the

one reason that would convince me you truly want this. I will not have you do the 'noble' thing, when ... Well, I just won't."

Peter appeared puzzle a moment by her meaning, then understood. "It isn't a 'noble' gesture, Libby. Well, that's a small part of it, but there is something more. In the short time I've known you, I've come to care very much for you and Tommy." Peter took Libby's hands within his own, and thoughtfully rubbed the back of them with his thumbs. "It's hard for me to say the words you want to hear. The last time I spoke them to a woman, she was killed in action." Peter looked into Libby's eyes and saw the need for an explanation. "Now isn't the time to explain. But I promise, my reasons are more than just doing the right thing."

Libby smiled with understanding. In time the words would come, but for now, she trusted them to be there. "Yes, Peter. I accept your proposal."

Peter whooped with glee, as he wrapped his arms about Libby's waist and swung her around. He gave her a smacking kiss, a wide grin on his face.

"Here now," DeWitt exclaimed, laughing, "there'll be none of that until the words are said. You know Mayhew won't dawdle when he figures out Mistress Carson won't be returning."

"That shouldn't be for a while yet," Peter replied, not taking his gaze from the lady. "You are right, though. Let's do this now, then we can head out of town, to some place safer for you and Tommy."

"You mean leave the inn?"

"We have no choice, Libby. I know it belongs to Tommy, but if we stay, there's no telling what Mayhew and your brother will do. They won't let you go without a fight, and I won't see you or your son hurt."

"I understand, but we can't leave my mother there. Elias considers her a burden."

"We won't leave her, I promise."

An elderly man approached them and nodded. "Are we ready to begin?"

"That we are," Peter responded happily. He stood next to Libby, until Tommy wedged his way between them. Peter grinned and ruffled the boy's unruly hair, while six scruffy men surrounded the couple, intent on seeing the deed done.

When a few minutes later, the minister pronounced them husband and wife, Peter turned to his bride. There was a sparkle in her eyes he'd never seen before. He leaned toward her and gave her a light kiss. "More of that later," he whispered, knowing time was short.

"Thank you, sir," he said while reaching into a vest pocket.

"No need," DeWitt told him. "We took care of that little matter." He glanced at the minister and caught the wide grin on his face. The supplies they brought the man and his wife would serve them well.

"We have to hurry back to the inn, get packed. We'll get on the road after dark. No one travels after nightfall so we should be safe."

"Lord be with you, Mistress Ellsworth," the minister called out as the group hurried away.

*Mistress Ellsworth.* Libby liked the sound of her new name. The last thing she ever expected to do was remarry, but she didn't think Thomas would mind. Peter would be good to her son, and she would remind the boy of his own father.

"What will you do, Douglas?" Libby asked, turning to her one time escort.

The Scottish trooper shrugged. "I can't go back," he replied thoughtfully. "Do you suppose I could accompany you on your journey for a space of time? I expect you'll have your hands full, and another pair of eyes wouldn't go amiss."

Libby glanced at her new husband. "I see no reason why not," Peter told the man. "It's the least I can do to thank you for looking after Libby."

"It was no problem at all. She's a great lady and deserves more respect than some of the social creatures around Boston."

Libby blushed with the compliment and couldn't wait for them to be on their way. Elias' anger would know no bounds once he realized how his plans had been cleverly thwarted. His plans had been brought to nothing—and she felt no remorse for having helped do so. From this moment on, Elias Cooper no longer had any control over her or her son's life. She sighed with relief at that thought, then hurried after her husband.

The inn yard was filled with horses, by the time the wedding party arrived. Peter thought it might be the regular patrol, with a few extra men, but quickly discarded the idea when Mayhew stood in the doorway, his features bland. Peter dismounted slowly, then helped Libby down. DeWitt had kept

Tommy with him, and held on to the boy when he dismounted. "I understand congratulations are in order," Mayhew commented evenly. "Perhaps you'll allow me to give you a wedding present, to show there are no hard feelings that you stole my bride. The minister's wife couldn't say enough about the simple ceremony she witnessed."

"You can keep your wedding gift, Colonel. We don't want anything from you." Mayhew must have exerted a nasty threat for her to have given up this secret.

"Oh, but I insist." While Mayhew glared, his men slowly encircled the newly arrived group.

Peter felt hemmed in. The circle of red-coated soldiers drew tighter about him and his bride. The men who had helped him with Libby, were neatly and subtly separated from them by other soldiers. Mayhew wasn't taking any chances this time.

"Major Ellsworth, you are under arrest for treason." Mayhew grinned, his victory almost complete.

"How do you figure that?" Peter asked as two men grabbed his arms.

"Why, interfering with an officer of the crown in the course of his duty. What else would it be?" Mayhew's features turned dark. "Since you haven't had time to consummate your marriage, there is time to have it annulled. You'll have no use for a wife where you're going," he gloated. "Lock him in his room. Post guards at the door and window. If he escapes again, you will all pay."

The soldiers dragged Peter into the inn, and Mayhew felt a great satisfaction as he stepped aside. He grabbed Libby's



arm when she hurried past, intent on causing any interference she could manage. "No need to follow," Mayhew insisted. "There is nothing you can do for him. He will hang." He rudely stared at Libby, making her uncomfortable. "As soon as your husband is hung, you will be my wife. Your brother and I signed the contracts this morning. They supercede any foolish actions on your part. You had no right wedding that traitor."

"Having been married and widowed before, I had the right to make my own decisions. Elias fancies him my guardian. He's the one who had no right to sign anything concerning me."

"What's done will soon be undone," Mayhew countered, referring once more to her new marriage.

"Yes, it will," Libby agreed, her thoughts differing from the colonel's, but she had to wonder just how much pressure was brought to bear on the minister's wife.

\* \* \* \*

Peter was shoved into his room and the door securely locked behind him. He strode across the room and looked out the window. Three guards were set below. Mayhew wasn't taking any chances. "How you gonna get out of this one, Ellsworth?" he asked himself, aloud. He was filled with self-disgust. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment, realizing for the first time just how tired he was. The last couple days he'd been running on sheer adrenaline and he was finally coming down. Somehow, he had to concoct a plan, but he was too tired to think at the moment. He listened

to sounds of the inn, but everything was muffled. He should have acted sooner, not wasted precious time. They could have been on their way by now, maybe out of Mayhew's reach. Peter kicked off his shoes and fell backward on the bed. This wasn't what he'd envisioned for his wedding night. His eyes drifted close and his thoughts faded to nothing.

How long he slept, he had no idea, but the muffled sounds were long silenced. Peter got up and listened at the door. The guards were still out there. When he faced the room he saw a covered tray on the small table. "Bless you, my darling wife," he murmured. He was famished. Roasted chicken, boiled potatoes, and a couple rolls, with a mug of ale to wash it all down. The tray was still warm, so it couldn't have been left all that long ago. No knife or fork. Mayhew didn't trust him. For once the man did something right. He wasn't about to underestimate his prisoner—again.

It had been the silence that let him drift off to sleep. Someone was screaming—screaming out words. Was it Libby? Peter hurried to the door in time to hear glass shatter.

"You stupid wench!" a male voice cried out. "Can you do nothing right? Get something to clean this up!" Footsteps scurried along the hall and down the steps to the taproom.

Peter shrugged. It was probably a disgruntled patron, stopped for the night ... or it might have been Mayhew himself. Peter went back to the small table and dug into the cold meal. When he'd finished, he sat back and sipped the warm ale. He got up and went to the window again. The guards were still there, strategically placed, giving him no chance of escape. Even if he could get out of the room, there

was nowhere to go. He wouldn't leave Libby and Tommy to fend for themselves against her brother and the colonel. They wouldn't stand a chance against the men.

Now that Mayhew knew Peter had married Libby, there would be hell to pay. There was only one decisive way to rectify the problem. Mayhew would have to prove the charges of treason and have Peter executed. The colonel was very good at making phony charges stick. He had to figure out some way to stop that from happening.

Peter felt grungy and used the water in the ewer for a quick wash. The only other clothes he had here, were his SWAT fatigues. The black outfit was better than what he was wearing. He donned his kevlar vest over the tee-shirt, then added the long sleeved black shirt. He wasn't about to trust Mayhew not to send in an assassin. That would be the simplest and quickest answer to the colonel's problem.

After lacing up his boots, Peter lay back on his bed, his fingers laced together behind his head. It wasn't assassins he was worried about, but something else he couldn't put his finger on.

The serving girl screamed again and more glass shattered. "You promised!" Something hard smashed against a wall. "Stupid girl, are you trying to kill me?"

Peter would have tuned out the annoying, angry voices, but with his room almost in darkness, his attention was drawn to the flickering orange light reflected on the glass of the open window. Something crackled ominously and he realized curtains in the next room were in flames. "You let me take the blame for your trying to poison Mister Ellsworth. If I'm to

be blamed for something, then I may as well do the deed." She laughed, a high pitched cackling sound, like someone demented in one of those horror movies he loved to watch as a kid. The shrieking had to be Mary, and it sounded like she'd lost it.

Peter had to get out before the fire spread to his room. This could be his chance to escape. With enough confusion he could get to Libby, her mother and Tommy, and get them away. He glanced outside only to find the guards below had their muskets aimed at the window, expecting him to jump. He heard the two guards outside his door, shouting, fighting. If the fire didn't get him, musket shots would. He'd rather be shot than burn.

His room went totally dark, but the crackling grew louder for a moment, then suddenly faded. The air was being sucked out of the room, out of his lungs. He'd felt like this only once before, and he cried out at the ill timing of it. Some part of him realized the fire was quickly spreading, but he could do nothing. Everything went black.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Peter heard the sarcasm in his voice. "You know what I mean, Sarge. There was a time when warriors honored a truce. They fought in the open and didn't hide anything. Now a cease fire's broken before it even takes place."

"They're not warriors and they don't honor truces. Maybe you'd rather be in a more 'honorable' time?" Sarge glanced at him.

Peter shook his head, willing the sudden dizziness to disappear. Looking around he was back in the war zone, trying to take out a sniper, abandoned by one of the gangs. Sarge was talking, but Peter made no sense of the one-sided conversation.

Sarge glanced at his man. "You look a little green around the gills, Ellsworth. Was it something you ate?" he asked sarcastically.

There was a sense of déjà vu about the conversation, and Peter wondered if he'd really gone back in time, or if it had been his imagination working overtime, at the wrong time.

Two more shots pinged on the rocks before them, sending stone fragments flying. Peter ducked his head to avoid getting sprayed with the sharp bits.

"Miller, see if you can get a bead on that jerk and take him out," Sarge ordered.

"Sure, Sarge," Miller replied and peered into his weapon's scope to find the sniper. When he found the gang member, still on the far roof, he took careful aim, then gently squeezed

the trigger to fire off a single shot. He looked up from his rifle to see the sniper stiffen then fall from the building. Miller breathed a soft sigh of relief, turned away from the building and leaned back against the partial wall, his eyes closed.

"Wasn't sure you could make that shot, Miller. End of the shift, drinks are on me." Sarge rapped twice on Miller's helmet in congratulations. He turned to the others, then was surprised to see the men he believed lost, strolling toward him. "Where the blazes you guys been. We thought you were goners." His voice was gruff, hiding his relief. He stood slowly and winced at his protesting bones. At forty, he was getting too old for this job.

"Sorry about that, Sarge. Something around the back of the building cut out the signal. We couldn't contact anybody. We took out a sniper on the other side of the building."

"Well, at least your alive." Sarge turned away from them. "Okay!" he shouted. "Stow the weapons on the truck and let's get back. The regular cops will take it from here."

"Something wrong, Ellsworth?" Sarge asked as he stared at the confused expression on Peter's face.

"I have to ask this, Sarge, even though it's gonna sound stupid."

"Sooner or later, everything sounds stupid, but ask anyway."

Peter hesitated, then glanced up to find Sarge staring at him, waiting for him to say something, anything. He blew out a quick breath. "Did I ... um ... disappear at any time?"

"Did you..." Sarge blinked, then laughed heartily. He'd heard it all, now. "Ellsworth, I think it's long past time you took a vacation. This work is getting to you."

"Come on, Sarge, just answer the question." Peter flushed. He felt embarrassed asking what sounded like a really stupid question, but after what he thought he'd experienced, he had to know.

"No," the SWAT leader answered flatly. "You did not disappear at any time. Before you get off shift, I want to see a request on my desk for time off." He leaned in closer to Peter. "If I don't see said request on my desk at the end of the shift, I will be filling out paperwork, *ordering* you to schedule some time with the department psychologist. Am I clear, Ellsworth?"

"Yeah, Sarge. Very." Peter stopped long enough to let Sarge go ahead of him, then took his time going back to the van. He was the last one to stow his weapon and gear, then climbed into the van with the rest of his team.

Peter slouched and leaned against the van wall, his hands tucked into his pants pockets, and closed his eyes. His pockets should have been empty, but he pulled out a coin. It was gold and had a date stamped on it, of the late 1700s. He stared at it closely, wondering where he could have picked it up. A little face flashed in his mind, with innocent gray eyes, and brown hair. Peter continued to study the coin, letting his mind dwell on memories. He became aware of someone looking over his arm, staring at the coin.

"Hey, Pete, what's that? Looks like a collector's piece ... a gold coin? Where'd you get it?"

"I guess the kid slipped it into my pocket when I wasn't looking." Peter grinned and leaned back again, this time feeling more comfortable with himself. It was a relief to know his sanity wasn't slipping. He hadn't imagined the Swans' Down Inn or its lovely owner and her young son. It had all been real. Try to explain that to someone who wouldn't understand.

\* \* \* \*

After he completed the form, Peter skimmed through all the information to be sure everything was done, I's dotted and t's crossed. Doing everything in triplicate was bad enough—he didn't need someone telling him he'd forgotten to cross some dumb t's. At first, Sarge's 'order' to take a vacation didn't sit well with him, but the more he thought about it, the better he liked the idea. He and Dan hadn't had much time together since his transfer and he had to admit, he did feel guilty about that. Besides, the time off would allow him to do some research.

Peter knocked on the office door and entered when Sarge waved him in.

Sarge hung up the phone and sat back in the leather chair. The battered desk before him looked as if it'd been through a couple wars. Sarge refused to have it replaced for something newer, a decision Peter never understood. Sarge studied Peter for a moment. "Which is it going to be, Ellsworth? The psych or time off?"



Peter stared at the form in his hands, as if he still couldn't make up his mind, then placed the request on the desk.

"Time off."

"Good choice. Now, get out of here. I don't want to see your mug anywhere around this office for the next couple weeks."

"Yes, sir," Peter replied, grinning, and offered Sarge a mock salute. Turning sharply on his heel, he left the office and headed for his desk to collect his things.

Sarge studied the request a moment longer, then sat back, remembering. He knew exactly what had happened to Peter.

While the rest of his men never sensed the change, he'd been aware of Ellsworth's 'blinking out,' and returning seconds later. From personal experience, he knew the disappearance was a lot longer than the few seconds it seemed to be. For him, it had been quite an experience and his only regret was not going back for good. Maybe one of these days, after he retired, he'd go hunting for a way to go back in time. "Ellsworth, you better be sure you make the right decision. Don't be an idiot, like I was." The old leather chair creaked in protest when Sarge leaned closer to the desk. He picked up a pen, wrote a couple remarks on the form, and added a recommendation. After signing it in the appropriate places, he tossed it into the out box on his desk. Time to go home.

\* \* \* \*

Peter had been staying with his brother since transferring back to the east coast. He meant to find an apartment, but

had yet to find the time. With the next couple weeks off, he supposed he could take care of that little problem. Dan didn't seem to mind having him around. Peter stowed his gear in the guest room and went in search of Dan.

"Saw you on the news," Dan announced as he maneuvered his electric chair through the doorway.

"Really. Did they catch my good side?" Peter asked lightly. He glanced at his older brother, and looked away again. He still felt guilty about Dan being stuck in that chair and he was healthy.

"I know that look, Pete. Get over it. I did. You have nothing to feel guilty about. I was the stupid one, to not be wearing my seatbelt that night.

"It should have been me, Dan. You had a promising career. I was the screwup. If it hadn't been for me, you'd be walking around, and you'd be married with a family by now."

Dan rolled his chair forward and stopped directly in front of his brother. He brushed back a white lock that contrasted with the rest of his dark hair—another souvenir of the accident that left him with paralyzed legs. "I don't ever want to hear that kind of talk again, you hear me? Just because my legs don't work anymore, it doesn't mean other parts are non-functional. I still get around. I would have had to give up football sooner or later." His eyes narrowed and his voice became low and menacing. "I may be confined to this chair, but there are lots of ways to get to you—many you would never suspect."

"You know I'm right, Dan. It should have been me thrown from the car."

"For once, you were wearing your seatbelt, and I wasn't. Anyway, the way I look at it, you did me a favor."

"How do you figure that?"

"I found out just how shallow Angie really was. She couldn't abide the thought of a crippled husband. She never came to the hospital, never called. Next thing I knew she was engaged to Steve Dawson. She got everything she deserved.

"Now stop this foolishness and let's get some supper. Caroline's made your favorite."

"Pork loin marinated in Italian dressing?" Peter grinned.

"Yeah, and roast potatoes, too."

"Supper's ready," Caroline called from the kitchen. She brought out a platter with the meat surrounded by potatoes."

Peter thought he'd died and gone to heaven. He sat at the table and closed his eyes. The aroma wafted his way and he wanted to enjoy every bit of it. A bowl of salad sat at each place setting, while bowls of buttered green beans, a basket of hot rolls, and a dish of chilled, sliced cranberry sauce were in the middle of the table. Peter noticed the sauce had whole cranberries in it—his favorite. He glanced at Dan and Caroline, curious. It wasn't his birthday, not a holiday—so what was going on? He appreciated the effort that went into the preparation, but nothing happened around Dan's house without a good reason behind it.

Dan rolled his chair to the side of the table where there were no chairs. He drank from his water glass while his live-in assistant served the meal.

Peter watched the silent play between the two. They didn't need words for the attraction to be obvious. In the three

months he'd been living with them, he tried to stay out of their way as much as possible. Dan had insisted on Peter moving in and staying as long as he liked. They hadn't seen each other since Dan had been released from the rehab center, but despite the fact this was their family home, Peter felt out of place. After all, this was Dan's and Caroline's home now, and he was a temporary guest.

He'd been vaguely aware of the vibes between them and wondered how long this had been going on. It surprised him, but at the same time he was happy for his brother. Almost two years earlier, no one held out much hope for Dan's recovery when he was ill. It had been too soon after the accident, which compromised his immune system and made recovery almost impossible. Peter remembered the long nights, staying awake, sitting by Dan's side, while he struggled to survive. Nurses came and went, refusing to tolerate Peter's dark moods, and never questioning the why of them—until Caroline. If he thought Sarge was a stickler for orders, he discovered she was even more so. Caroline convinced him to go back to work, that she could handle her patient.

Peter didn't want to go, but she didn't give him a choice. He insisted on holding on to the guilt he carried, and didn't want to go. It finally came down to being blunt with him. Dan would never recover if Peter kept hovering over him. He didn't want to admit she was right, and allowed her to push him away.

He was reluctant, since the guilt he felt was still strong, but he understood, packed his things and went back to his job

on the west coast. When he heard about the opening on the SWAT team back home, he immediately applied for it and was hired. It wasn't hard, since he'd started out here and knew most of the guys. The transfer had come through three months earlier. *Stop dwelling in the past, Pete, ol' boy, or Caroline will kick your butt all over the house.* He knew she could do it.

\* \* \* \*

"What's on your mind, Pete? You've been unusually quiet all evening."

Peter sat on the top step of the porch, then looked back at the darkening sky, but said nothing. After helping Caroline with the dishes, he'd come out here, to sit a while, like he and Dan used to do on hot summer nights when they were kids.

Dan continued. "We didn't say anything earlier, but I want you to be the first to know. I've asked Caroline to marry me."

"About time," Peter replied without looking back. "I wondered if you'd be smart enough to hold on to her. Now maybe the heat in the kitchen will be just from the cooking."

Dan was startled by the crack, then laughed. "Yeah," he agreed, "it was getting kind of hot in there, wasn't it. Sorry about that."

"Don't be sorry." Peter glanced over at his older brother. "I'm happy for you both, and I wish you all good things."

"What about you?" Dan's question was rather hesitant, as if he felt like he was meddling where he shouldn't, but he didn't let that stop him completely. "Is there anyone special?"

What could he say? Did he take a chance and tell Dan the truth, or pretend he didn't hear the questions? Dan's face was cast in shadow, making it impossible for Peter to read his expression. It took Peter a few minutes to decide what he should say, but realized he had to talk to someone. "I'm married," he said quietly, as if he still couldn't believe he'd done the deed. He tossed a pebble out onto the street and decided to confess everything.

Peter wasn't sure he liked the way Dan stared at him. Crickets chirped near the shrubs and a cat streaked across the lawn, chasing something small. The overall quiet was distracting, something Peter appreciated at the moment. He needed to collect his thoughts while he waited for a response.

Dan sputtered at the unexpected admission, then finally found his voice. "When were you going to tell us? Why isn't she here with you?" He sat back in his chair, almost afraid of what he was thinking. "Tell me you didn't go back to that model witch."

Peter chuckled and side pitched another pebble into the street. It skittered along the dirt before resting on the blacktop. "No, definitely not Lainie."

"That's a relief, but I have to say, you look like a man who's regretting it."

Peter turned to his brother and looked up at him. "No, nothing like that. I have no regrets about marrying Libby. It's the circumstances that don't sit well. I might have given her the wrong impression." Another pebble went skittering across the street.

"Do you believe in time travel?" The question seemed to come out of nowhere, unconnected to their conversation.

"I never gave it much thought. What's this got to do with your marriage?"

"You know about the call we got, that sniper down on the east end of town."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I'm getting to that. We were pinned down, trying to get closer to take him out. We'd lost contact with the guys who went around back and thought they were dead. There had been some explosion back there. I made some comment about honor in truces. The sniper had agreed to stop shooting and wait for a negotiator. Anyway, Sarge kind of laughed at my comment. Guess he thought it was naïve." Peter paused long enough to stretch his long legs and rest his feet on the porch's bottom step. "Sarge had us move up, and he was going to bring up the rear. I moved up behind Miller, then suddenly everything was different. I was still in Corinth but it changed drastically. There were more trees, and the pavement was gone—just dirt roads. I'd gone back in time to the early days of the American Revolution."

Peter gave his brother an abbreviated version of his adventures in the past, treating lightly certain details. When he finished, he took a deep breath and slowly released it. All that was left was Dan's reaction.

"And when you got back..."

"When I got back, it was as if no time had passed, and I'd been gone for weeks."

"Where did you go?"

"I was back and forth to Boston, playing a duel role. It seems some people knew me as Major Ellsworth, a British officer. I had the red jacket and all." Peter glanced up at his brother and grinned. "I spent most of my time at an inn out on Chester Road. The place didn't do much business except for the occasional overnight coach, which made having overnight guests sporadic at best. A few of the locals went there regularly for supper. I don't know how it survived as long as it did. The place was kept clean, and the cooking was plain, but good."

"Why did you marry her, if you can't get back there or stay with her?"

"At first, it was to protect her from Mayhew. He's not the nicest guy around women." Peter glanced at his brother, then went back to side tossing pebbles into the street, before continuing. "I would have done anything to keep her out of his grasp. By that time I'd developed a deep respect for her and almost thought of Tommy as my own. When we married, I realized I loved her, and wanted more out of the relationship than just a marriage in name only. As to staying there, I would if I could. She and her son mean the world to me. I knew it could happen, but I never really expected to be taken away from there."

Dan gave his brother's explanation a bit of consideration, but thought the idea a little too absurd to be true. Nobody traveled through time. The concept of time travel was something created for science fiction. "Peter, isn't there a chance you dreamed all this, and the dream seemed real?" he finally asked his brother.



Peter's frustration was evident. He leaned back and dug into his jeans pocket, pulled out a coin and tossed it to his brother. "Tell me I dreamed that."

Dan reached out to catch the small shiny object and turned it to the light from the study window. "Is this what I think..."

"Yeah, a gold coin from the 1770s. Now do you believe me?"

"I guess I'd have to. You better hold on to that. It's in mint condition and worth a lot. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I want to go back to her and the boy, but I don't know how I got there in the first place. If I could figure that out, then I could go back for both of them." Peter's only goal was to get back to early Boston to protect his bride and stepson. He had to find a way back to them. Tomorrow he planned to start doing some research to see what information he could find on the Swans' Down Inn and its attractive owner.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Peter was up early the next morning, after a restless night. Feeling groggy, he sat on the side of his bed. He was going to have a nagging headache before long, but only sleep would solve that problem, and he didn't see himself indulging. Thoughts of Libby kept him awake, he couldn't get her out of his mind. Did she miss him? Was she worried? Did she even wonder what had become of him? For all he knew, she wasn't aware he was gone. With her brother trying to marry her off to Mayhew, or any British officer for his personal benefit ... Peter happened to be available, but he didn't have the connections Elias wanted. More importantly, Peter finally admitted to himself that he loved Libby. He shook his head at that—he hadn't counted on actually falling for the young widow.

What if he did imagine her, and everything he believed he'd experienced was just a dream? Not in a million years would he accept that premise. He went back in time and met the lovely Mistress Carson. He never thought about kids in his life, but he realized what young Tommy had come to mean to him. Peter knew without a doubt that Tommy was like his own child. If he couldn't find a way back, what would become of the boy and his mother? He didn't trust good ol' Elias to look after their best interests. Elias' interests came first, and everyone else, well...

Peter got dressed, then took his laptop downstairs and made himself a cup of coffee. He set the laptop on the kitchen

table and logged on, checking his email first thing. Nothing interesting there. He cleared his mailbox. Where to begin. Registry of Deeds seemed like a good place to start. Peter brought up the website and typed in Swan's Down Inn, then waited. *Records not found*. Peter sat back and stared at the screen. That was odd. How could that be? The Registry would have records on all properties in and around Corinth, going back to when the community was first established. So why didn't they have anything now?

There was one more place to try. Thanks to the local high school, the town had its own website, but after going through it, he realized it didn't have the records he needed. Where to go next ... He was referred to the Registry of Deeds website again, but this time he typed in the year, 1775. It was risky at best. Now that he thought about it, a good many records from that time were gone. When the page came up he typed in Swan's Down Inn and waited for a search of the name. *Records not found*. Of course the name had to be in the lists. He was there. He double checked the date. He'd typed it in correctly. He'd have to do his search the old-fashion way and head for the library. It looked like a history lesson was in order. Peter logged off and closed the laptop. He gulped down the rest of his cold coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste.

Leaving a note with the laptop, *Gone to the library. Be back later*. Wouldn't Dan get a kick out of that. Peter headed out before Dan or Caroline could stop and ask questions, and realized Caroline would probably shoot him for taking off. He'd promised to help her store some things in the basement.

"Sorry, Caroline, but I have to do this," he mumbled. He grabbed his jacket and headed out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Locked. Peter checked his watch. It was 8:50. He had another ten minutes to wait before the library opened. He paced back and forth, then stepped back to take a good look at the building. Three stories high, the gray stone building once housed the post office, as well as town hall. The government offices moved out some years ago, leaving the library room for expansion. He couldn't recall how long ago that had been, maybe ten years?

There was a click and the heavy door was pushed open. Peter made his way inside and headed for the card catalog. They were in the process of updating their system, or so the small notice on the community bulletin board announced. It took him some ten minutes to find what he hoped would provide the information he was looking for, scribbled it on a piece of paper, then headed to the desk.

A middle-aged woman squinted at the scribbles then looked up at him. "I'm sorry, but I can't read your writing."

Peter glanced at the paper and interpreted his notes, then looked up at her, hoping she could help.

"I'll have to check the stacks for these books. They haven't been in circulation for some time.

Peter waited impatiently, and when the librarian returned he searched the index but found no listing. Nothing. He was beginning to think he'd imagined the whole thing. *Think, Ellsworth, where else could you go to find the information?*

*Boston.* Peter thanked the librarian and headed out the door. The Swan's Down Inn was beginning to feel more like Brigadoon, showing up once every hundred years or so. If that was the case, then he didn't stand a chance of finding his way back to Libby. He had no idea what he'd find, if anything, but he had to keep trying, until all avenues of information were exhausted.

Peter exited the library and went down the outer stairs, trying to decide what to do next. There had to be some record, some information. He just hadn't figured out where to look.

"Excuse me," the young woman said, breathlessly when she caught up to him. Her steps were quick, trying to keep up with Peter. "Excuse me," she said again.

"Sorry, I don't know you," he said, "and I'm in something of a hurry."

"You're looking for information about the Swan's Down Inn."

Peter stopped short, leaving them standing in the middle of the sidewalk. The young lady facing him was rather plain, mouse brown hair, brown eyes set in plain features. Her Ben Franklin style glasses sat near the end of her nose, and she consciously pushed them back up where they belonged.

"Look, miss, I don't have time for games. I've got a lot to do and little time to do it in."

"Could we go over to that diner for coffee," she asked. "I have something, I think you might be interested in."

Peter doubted it, but to humor her, he agreed.

They settled into a booth next to the window, and ordered coffee from the gum snapping waitress. When she returned with the beverages, the girl seemed a bit more comfortable. Peter added cream and sugar to his coffee, then stirred it slowly, waiting for her to say something. She was rummaging through an oversized bag, putting all sorts of odd stuff on the table.

"Look, lady, I don't have time for this..." Peter said, his frustration growing.

"My name is Anne Hathaway." She glanced up at him. "I've heard all the Shakespeare jokes." Glancing down again at her bag, she pulled out a manilla envelope and set it aside, then quickly brushed everything else from the table back into her bag.

"I couldn't help overhearing you ask about the Swan's Down Inn. I did some research on it a while back, and like you came up with nothing. It's as if no one is supposed to know about the place." She stopped a moment to sip her drink and sighed with pleasure. "I needed that. Anyway, my grandmother passed away a few months ago, and recently I've been cleaning out her house, getting it ready for sale. I came across this. It was a page from a dilapidated journal. I have no idea how it came to be in her attic. I thought it might help you in your research." She handed him the envelope. "Unfortunately it was about the only page left that was still legible."

Peter eyed the envelope warily, and glanced up at her.

"Go ahead, read it. I have a feeling it could help you."

Peter took the envelope and slowly withdrew a couple sheets of paper and glanced at the typing. It was dated in 1790. He started to skim the contents, but went back and read it carefully, after seeing the signature.

*May 24th, 1790*

*I buried Mama this morning. This was a long time coming, but it's finally over and I believe she has finally found some peace.*

Near the beginning of the war, there was a man who seemed to have come out of nowhere. Most folk thought he was a spy for the British, but not being old enough to know better at the time, I took a liking to him. I could barely recall my father, but I felt the newcomer was like my sire in many ways.

He stayed at our inn for over a year, before being imprisoned in his own room by the local British colonel. Maybe he deserved to be locked up, I don't know. I never learned all the facts of his arrest, and I was too young to understand what the colonel was about. I only know I didn't like the colonel..

I do recall him saying something about the previous day. That was when the supposed spy married my mother, to protect her and me. So, he said.

Later that evening when we returned to the inn, he was arrested. There was a fire in the inn, soldiers were fighting and I recall someone screaming in pain. Mother and I were able to escape, but my grandmother didn't. She died in the fire.

The inn burned to the ground, leaving us with nothing and nowhere to go. Mother decided it was time to go to Philadelphia. She'd been planning to go there for some time. After we settled in our new home, she found work at one of the inns, and while she was kept busy working, and caring for me, she never forgot the major. It's strange that I cannot recall his name, considering I looked up to him.

Many nights I woke to hear Mother weeping, asking why he had to leave us. It was taken for granted that he'd died in the fire as well, since he'd been locked in his room. I recall the soldiers guarding the lawn below his window. I used to think it an odd place to stand guard, until I realized they expected him to try to escape that way. He never did. It was either burn to death or be shot. I don't believe he stood a chance either way.

From what I'd heard later, the fire started in the room next to his. Uncle Elias had taken a room for the night, and Mary was arguing with him, throwing things in her anger. (I recall her vividly, for she had taken me from my uncle's house, on the colonel's orders. At that age, I had good reason to hate her, not only for taking me away from my mother, but she was responsible for Jasper's death. She intended to murder the major with poison, but our cat got hold of it instead.)

Mother never married again. I have good reason to believe she died of a broken heart. She respected my father, but she loved the soldier who came to stay at the inn. I wish I could recall more about him, but I was still quite young at that time.

I shall miss Mother very much.



Thomas Edward Carson.

Peter sat back, stunned. "Where did you say you got this?"

"From my grandmother's attic. She was descended from Thomas Edward Carson. Seems he married a year or so later. He bought an inn somewhere around Philadelphia, and raised a family there. One of his sons returned to Boston and started a business there. These pages," she gestured toward the papers Peter held, "were all I could copy of a journal I found. Everything else was in such poor condition."

"So Libby died of a broken heart."

Anne saw the pain in his eyes and found it odd. "You speak of her as if you knew her."

"Can you keep a secret?" Peter stood suddenly and dropped a couple of bills on the table, then leaned over the young woman. She nodded. "I did know her ... and she's not going to die broken-hearted if I can help it."

Anne gave him a strange look as he started to walk away, but he turned suddenly and returned to the table. "Mind if I keep these?" he asked, picking up the pages.

"Keep them," she replied. "I have a couple more copies."

"Thank you, Anne Hathaway. You've been a great help." He gave her a peck on the cheek and hurried out of the café, leaving behind a blushing young lady.

\* \* \* \*

Peter exited the bus at the Boston terminal and looked around. He wasn't sure what he would find here. He didn't think it had anything to do with finding records of the inn, but something had prompted him to make the trip. He wandered

into the downtown area, not sure what he was looking for. His research had garnered nothing. So why was he here?

He stared at the insane traffic. If he didn't know where he was, he might have thought he was in Times Square. This wasn't Times Square and he wasn't in New York. Who would have thought Boston traffic could rival that of the Big Apple on any given day.

Peter looked upward along the façade of the Prudential building, where sunlight reflected off the dark tinted glass. Passing clouds seemed to scrape the roof. Peter had something else on his mind. Tucking his hands into his jacket pockets, he made his way along the busy street approaching the Prudential. The building was a combination residential and business tenants. On the ground level nearby, was a shopping mall. Shoppers hurried in and out of stores and shops as if Christmas were just around the corner. Last he looked at a calendar, it was June. Shrugging, he continued walking, and entered the shopping center, wondering what he was looking for, but knowing he'd recognize it when he found it.

A short time later, he stood in front of a jewelry store window and studied the bracelets and necklaces on display. They ranged from some of the gaudiest pieces he'd ever seen to the simplest. Garish colors and settings held no appeal for him. He realized what he was looking for. In his haste to wed with Libby, for her protection, he never got her a proper ring. She had no outward sign of her commitment to him, and he wanted to change that. He wanted the world to know she was his bride, the love of his life.

*Love of his life.* That was a startling revelation. He knew he cared for her, and was fiercely protective of her safety and well being, but until now, he hadn't realized how deeply he cared. Yeah, love of his life was a perfect description.

"I'd like to see those rings," he told the jeweler, pointing to a tray of wedding band sets. The velvet lined tray was gently placed on the glass case top, and Peter leaned over slightly to get a better look at the different styles. One set, unusual in both design and color, caught his attention. He picked up the smaller, lady's ring and examined the work. The open knotwork was done in a rose gold color. "That's different all right," he commented, half to himself. He smiled, thinking how it would look on Libby's slender finger, then took out the larger ring and tried it on for size. It fit perfectly. Somehow, he knew these rings were created just for him and his Libby.

"That is a one-of-a-kind set," the jeweler told him. "The style was originally created over two hundred years ago, and is recast once every hundred years or so. Only one set is made whenever the design is cast.

"Sounds rather mysterious, but that's the one," he told the jeweler."

"The story goes that a man appeared in a small community, seeming to come out of nowhere. He met and fell in love with the widowed innkeeper, and had a set of rings specially made. Shortly after their hurried marriage, he disappeared and was never seen again. No one knew what happened to him. Since then, when the design is cast, it's for one set at a time, no exceptions. The say the vanished groom

keeps coming back to purchase the rings, hoping to find her again."

Peter held his breath for a moment, stunned. The story was too much like his own situation. Had he been here before, to purchase this same set? His hesitation made the jeweler chuckle. "It's only a story, like any ghost story you might come across. The ladies think it's rather romantic. If you prefer something else..."

"No, this set is perfect." Peter pulled out his wallet and handed over a credit card.

"The lady's ring?"

"If there's a problem with the size..."

"I don't expect a problem. Looks like it'll fit her perfectly." If there were a problem with the size, he'd have to find another solution. He wasn't going to come back to this time just to resize a ring.

Peter froze, and for the first time, realized what his intentions truly were. Yes, he wanted to find Libby and ensure her safety and that of her son, but once there, he didn't want to come back to his own time—assuming he could figure out how to return to her.

"Very good," the jeweler responded and turned away to record the sale. After returning Peter's credit card to him a few minutes later, the jeweler took the rings and set them into a small ring box and handed it to Peter. "Our best wishes for a happy marriage, sir."

Peter grinned. "Thanks."

The shop keeper smiled, watching Peter walk out the door. He had a feeling this time, the lost groom was going to find his way back to his bride.

When he left the store, his step was lighter, and he held more hope of returning to Libby and Tommy. All he had to do was find them, and a way to get back. Everything hinged on his being able to figure out how he got to old Boston, in the first place. Peter realized he was famished and looked around, setting his sights on a sandwich shop across the way.

The shop was bright and airy, and Peter found a seat near the window, where he could watch the traffic while waiting for his order. Since the shop wasn't busy, it didn't take long before the waitress returned with a bacon cheeseburger sub and a large cup of soda. He chuckled at the thought of having Caroline catching him with the cholesterol/calorie laden meal. *May be my last one*, he thought, with a grin, and bit into the forbidden sandwich. He'd have to teach Libby how to make these. Tommy would like them. What boy didn't like cheeseburgers?

Peter finished the last bite, and washed it down with the rest of his soda. Sitting back in his chair, he pulled out the small ring box, opened it, and tried to imagine what Libby would say. Mayhew believed they were married, but there were no outward signs, and he wanted the world to know that Libby was his. He was startled from his thoughts when he became aware of a woman sitting across from him. Peter looked up and groaned inwardly when he recognized his ex-girlfriend. "What do you want, Lainie?" She was the last person he wanted to see.

"Nice to see you, too." She leaned forward and peeked over the top of the box Peter held. "Somebody getting married?" She wrinkled her nose with distaste at what she saw, and had the box snapped shut in her face. She sat back in her seat.

"What are you doing here?" Peter slipped the ring box into his pocket and waited for an answer.

"I'm in town on a shoot. Didn't expect to find you here. Just as well, I wanted to talk to you. When you left, I didn't know where to call. Now that you're here..."

He scrunched up the sandwich wrapper, and sat back slouched in his seat and finished his drink. He didn't need this, not now when hope of finding Libby was somehow brighter than it had been in days. "Go away, Lainie." Peter picked up his trash and tossed it into a bin as he left the shop.

\* \* \* \*

He couldn't believe she followed him back to Corinth. She had no way of knowing that was where he was headed, but when he got back, she parked near the house and waited for him. This was like a bad play, never getting out of rehearsal because it wasn't being played out properly. He was actually fed up with this feeling of *déjà vu*. He was feeling more and more like Bill Murray in *Ground Hog Day*.

Lainie followed him into the house, angry he had the gall to ignore her. "Peter, stop. You can't leave me. I'm..."

Peter whirled about oblivious of Dan and Caroline just entering the room. "What! You going to tell me you're

pregnant and it's mine? Won't work, Lainie. The timing is all wrong. Even if it were right, how could I believe you? You stepped out on me once too often. Go back to your current boyfriend, whoever he is."

"I'm sorry, Peter. I don't know why I did it. I was stupid to hurt you. I love you." She paused long enough to see the look of disbelief in his eyes. "Don't you understand that? Can't you find it in yourself to forgive me. I swear it will never happen again." Lainie was doing something now, she swore she would never do—she was begging for his forgiveness.

Peter started to turn away from her and pull off his jacket, then stopped short when he saw his brother. He couldn't stop the angry retort on the tip of his tongue. "Save it for the next chump, Lainie, I'm through."

"You can't mean that, Peter. You love me. I know you do." Lainie stopped abruptly, as if she'd just realized they had an audience. Here was the perfect opportunity. Peter wouldn't act like an ogre in front of his own brother. She remembered meeting Dan when she and Peter first started dating. Lainie tried gathering her dignity about her like a cloak and stared at the dark haired woman who stared back. "What are you looking at?" she snarled.

"You're wasting your time, Lainie," Dan said quietly. "Peter's married. You blew it big time."

"Married? He can't be. He loves me." She couldn't believe any man would leave her. She did the leaving. She was a top model, used to getting what she wanted. "No, you're just saying that," she replied defensively.

"Believe it," Caroline confirmed, and stepped forward to take Peter's jacket.

"Thanks, hon." Peter had no idea why he'd responded to Caroline with those words, but it felt right. Anything to get rid of Lainie. He glanced at Dan and saw his brother's grin. Dan understood what he was doing.

"What are you, the housekeeper?" Lainie stepped closer to Caroline, eyes narrowed. "Hired help has no business listening in on their employer's private conversation. Get back to work and mind your position here, before I see that you lose it."

"You're out of line, Lainie," Peter snapped.

"I'm not the hired help," Caroline retorted, ignoring Peter.

"Then you must be the little wife." Lainie arrogantly stared at Caroline, as if the woman were something not worthy of her attention. "He will never love you. You have nothing to offer him. You're pitiful."

Peter listened, stunned. *Where did this woman get off telling Caroline what to do?*

Caroline draped Peter's jacket over the nearest chair, and paused, as if giving great thought to her next choice of words. As she turned to face Lainie, she casually drew her arm back and let fly with a right hook, hitting Lainie in the eye. She took a step backward, pleased with herself. "Nobody tries to make a fool of Peter and get away with it." She looked down at the other woman. "I've always wanted to do that," she said, and shook out her hand.

Caroline started to turn away, then stopped and glanced back at their unwelcome visitor. "By the way, I'm not married to Peter. I'm engaged to Dan."



Lainie glanced from one to another, confused. "You said you were married."

"Yeah," Peter spoke up. "I am newly married. That was no lie. My wife's not here." Peter reached down and grabbed Lainie's arm to help her up from the floor where Caroline had put her. "You better leave now, while you can. Caroline loves to beat up on people. No telling what she might get in her head to do to you if you stick around."

A look of fear flashed in Lainie's eyes and vanished. "This isn't done by a longshot," she warned before letting the door slam closed behind her. Peter had never seen fear in her eyes before, but he breathed a sigh of relief to have her gone.

Dan winced as the front door slammed shut. "I'd hate to have to explain to her boss tomorrow, why she has a black eye."

"Yeah," Peter laughed. "I'd love to be bug on the wall of the studio to hear what she says."

The three laughed, relieved the situation hadn't got too serious and that it was over. Peter hoped she wouldn't come back to make trouble for Dan. He wondered what he'd ever seen in her. Compared to Libby, Lainie was the sorry one.

What time he'd had with Libby, had been the happiest moments in a long time. This 'little' incident made Peter realize where he wanted to be, permanently. Getting yanked out of the inn, out of that locked room, hadn't done him any favors in the long run, except maybe help him avoid burning to death or facing Mayhew's firing squad. That's undoubtedly what he faced if he returned.

He didn't need the police department shrink nosing into his thoughts, trying to interpret his feelings. For the first time in his life, there was no doubt in his mind. He knew exactly what he wanted. Looking down at his hand, he hadn't realized he taken out the gold coin. He slipped it back into his pocket and smiled. He could concentrate on the one problem left to be solved. How to get back to Libby and Tommy.

\* \* \* \*

The next few weeks, Peter took care of all the loose ends of his life, setting up any legal paperwork he thought might be necessary to cover his absence. He talked over his plans with Dan and Caroline. He had no idea if he would just vanish like the first time. He didn't want them to worry over any sudden disappearance. When everything was done, he waited impatiently, studied the time period. He wanted to be better prepared than he was the first time. When he thought about the letter he'd written to himself, the one he'd found in Justice's saddlebag, he wondered how many times he'd gone back and replayed those particular events. How many more times would they be replayed before it was finally right?

Libby was never far from his thoughts. He dreamed of her, of making her his wife in every sense of the word. He could only hope, Mayhew didn't force himself on her. If he did ... Peter only knew there would be hell to pay if anything happened to his sweet Libby.

Nothing happened. He often saw the looks exchanged between Dan and Caroline. They had married a few days earlier in a quiet ceremony, with only close friends and family

in attendance. In spite of his happiness for them, Peter was at his wits' end, trying to figure out how he'd gone into the past, the first time. He realized something he hadn't given thought to before. "That's it. That's got to be it." His face lit up with new hope and he hurried to his room to change his clothes. He didn't have any homespun clothing from the period, so his black SWAT fatigues would have to do.

"Dan! I think I figured it out. I don't know why I didn't think of it long before now. I'm going back to where it all started, going back to where that sniper attack took place. If I can reenact what we did there, maybe—just maybe—I can find my way back to Libby."

Dan looked up at his brother, a jumble of emotions engulfing him. "Are you sure this is what you want to do? She may not be there, assuming you can get back."

"I'm sure. It's where I belong, with Libby and Tommy."

"I'll miss you, Peter."

"You won't have time to miss me, Dan, but you're in good hands now. Caroline will keep you busy, and I won't have to worry about you."

"No, but I'll be worried about you."

"Don't be. If all goes well, I'll find a way to let you know." Peter turned to his sister-in-law who had just entered the living room. "Caroline, take good care of my brother." He hugged her, as if afraid to let go of the two most important people in his life here."

"You'd better get a move on. You don't know how this thing works." Caroline's eyes glistened with tears. She wanted

to remember him this way, despite all the photos that were taken in the last few weeks. "Do you have the rings?"

Peter tapped a side pocket on one pant leg, and made sure the flap was securely buttoned. "If I'm not back by suppertime, I guess you can safely assume it worked."

"Take care, Peter."

Suddenly he was reluctant to leave his family, but if he was successful, he had another family waiting for him. With nothing left to say, Peter quietly slipped out of the house and returned to the east end of Corinth, where the whole adventure had started.

\* \* \* \*

Peter climbed over rubble and broken walls, until he'd found the spot he'd been when he'd vanished from the present to the past. It was hard to tell for a certainty, because cleanup had begun of the area, a few days before. The old factory was gone, leaving only a mountain of shattered brick and broken pipes, and taking away any markers he might have been able to use to judge distance. He knelt on broken stone and brick, not far from the fence that kept anyone from falling onto the highway below. He could tell from the sound that traffic was heavy, people coming and going, on vacation, or headed for work. It was a sound he thought he wouldn't miss. He liked the quiet of the earlier times. Peter looked around, recalling the events of the day that changed his life. He couldn't recreate the efforts to take out the sniper except in his mind, and wondered if that would make a difference. Could his disappearance from this

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*by Marissa St. James*

time and place happen again? He didn't know for sure, but he certainly hoped so.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Peter dropped down onto the grassy bank, aware of every jarring pain in every inch of his body. He recognized the area, and the stream that fed the pond behind the inn. At the moment he felt more like a hundred years old rather than his own age of thirty. War with the British was inevitable now. The battle at Lexington Green made it a fact. He leaned over, scooped up a handful of water and drank thirstily, then rubbed his wet palm over his stubbled cheeks. His only thought was to return to Libby and young Tom. Libby might be an independent woman, but she still needed someone to protect her and her son. It no longer surprised him to realize he wanted to be that someone. The fiasco with Lainie only served to enforce his decision.

He barely had a chance to lean back against the nearest tree and get some needed rest, when something floating on the surface of the stream caught his attention. Light from the full moon glimmered on the water, illuminating a small burlap sack caught in the forked branches of a broken tree limb. Curiosity overcame weariness and Peter reached into the water, dragging the limb and half-sunken bag up onto the bank.

The leather tie was soaked and difficult to loosen. Where infinite patience came from, he had no idea, but he used it to work at the tight knot until he finally had it undone.

The light breeze shifted and carried with it the smell of smoke, once again distracting him. Its odor was strong. Peter

glanced about, getting his bearings and realized the fire was close, then suddenly recalled the journal entry he'd been shown. He had to get to Libby and Tom and see to their safety. Peter cursed under his breath, both for the circumstances forcing him to hurry, and the contents of the sack. He eased his hand out of the sack, glanced at its contents and carefully stuffed it inside his shirt.

Peter slowly rose to his feet. There'd be no rest for the weary this night, he sighed, and gave his clothing a cursory dusting off. The hour was late and the odor of burning wood and thick smoke still moved on the breeze. It continued to shift direction, making it more difficult to judge where it was coming from. His long stride brought him quickly to the vicinity of the road. Soot covered folks walked past but failed to notice him. They spoke in low voices, shaking their heads. "Too bad about the inn and Ellsworth," one man said.

"He seemed to be a good man, once you got to know him."

"Did I tell you he saved my life over by Breed's Hill?"

"At least he was good to that boy of hers." Their words barely carried in the night.

One man's wife clutched his arm tighter. "I offered her and her son a place to stay until she decided what she would do, but she refused. She isn't thinking clearly about her boy, or her mother."

Peter stepped out of the shadows as the last of the people on the road passed him by. *Ellsworth*? If he'd heard the man correctly, they believed he'd died in the fire. A barely perceptible sigh of relief escaped him, thankful Libby and her son were safe. Peter stayed just within the tree line to remain

out of sight of any more people who might be on the road. If there were any soldiers on the road, they'd grab him for sure, then he'd truly be dead. He wended his way through the trees, his footsteps almost silent in the late hours. He stopped for a moment in a clearing and glanced up at the night sky. The moon, with its fuzzy halo, was past its zenith and clouds were skittering across the star-laced expanse. There could be rain soon. He had to see Libby again, to be sure she and her son were all right. He had to get away before the true identity of the fire's victim became known—whoever that was. Would she and her family be willing to go with him? He feared the answer to that question. He was afraid she'd want to stay here.

Peter reached the backside of the inn where collapsed walls still smoldered. Neighbors had done their best to help put out the blaze, but now it had to finish burning itself out. He slowly made his way around to the front, staying out of sight of anyone who still lingered. The smell of charred wood was strong as he skirted the collapsed building. Smoke still floated upward and sailed along the breeze, announcing the devastation wrought this night. Libby stood a short distance away, hugging herself and staring into the debris. Peter was downwind and choked on wisps of smoke as they continued to rise on the night breeze. The smell of burned wood became a raw taste that lodged in his throat. A single lantern sat on a tree stump, offering poor illumination, but better than nothing. It cast a half shadow over her features.



Libby started when a shadowy figure quickly approached her. "Peter!" The name squeaked from her throat. Her heart thundered within her when she recognized him. "I thought..."

"You thought I died in the fire?"

"No! I know who died there." She looked back at the mess of fallen charred timbers. "It was Elias..."

"Where is your son?"

"He's wrapped in a quilt by the tree, sound asleep."

Peter turned in the direction of her gaze and saw a bundle lying in the grass near an oak tree. The boy was a safe distance from the inn.

"I heard people on the road talking. They thought I was the victim."

"I let them think that. Knowing what you were about, I thought it best to let them believe you died. If no one asks questions, then at least Colonel Mayhew will stop searching for you—"

"Don't be so sure, my dear," Libby and Peter turned sharply to face the redcoat. "My men are so incompetent," he gloated, "they leave me the pleasure of taking care of you." He moved a step closer to Libby. He wanted to reach out to her, to touch her, but not yet. He kept one hand by his side, the other held a pistol. He wanted his victory to be complete. "Can you understand the necessity of having Major Ellsworth face a firing squad? After all, he has been selling plans to the French. He's made quite a tidy little sum of it. Move away from him Elizabeth. When he is dead, I shall take you back to England with me. You will stay on one of my estates until I tire of you."

"What about my son, my mother."

He let out a sigh. "Take them if you must. I don't care about them. My only concern is for you. I have wanted you for some time, and your brother has promised you to me."

It shouldn't take long for him to get bored with her, Libby thought sourly, and concluded the man had gone mad. Did he really believe she would go willingly to his English estates? Did he honestly believe she would acquiesce to her brother's whims? Mayhew seemed too sure of himself and his ability to point a finger at Peter, to see Peter executed. She could think of no way to stop the man, to interfere with his plans.

Mayhew cautiously moved closer, not sure if Peter would try to rush him. In one hand the officer held a courier's pouch, and glanced into it before tossing it on the ground at Peter's feet. "Pick it up. Put the papers in one pocket, and the money in the other. I want you found with the incriminating evidence on you."

"You won't get away with this, Colonel," Peter warned, and carefully knelt to retrieve the pouch. Shoot me, and Libby will see to your arrest."

"Not if she wants to keep that brat of hers alive."

Peter tossed the pouch aside, then lunged at the officer and shoved his weapon out of the way. Both men landed on the ground, rolling over and over in the mud. Both men fought to get the upper hand. Fighting for possession of the pistol was like a deadly dance, with both men struggling to gain an advantage. Mayhew tried to lower his arm, which was held over his head for what seemed forever, but was really only a few seconds. Peter held a tight grasp on the officer's

wrist, trying to wrest the weapon out of his grasp. During the struggle, the pouch was kicked to one side, forgotten. Libby snatched it up, and hugged it tightly to her. Mayhew struggled, but slowly brought his arm closer to his body, ready to fire. Another moment and he could shoot Peter, with no doubt as to the outcome. With his arm finally wedged between their bodies, the pistol was fired. Both men stilled, and Libby held her breath, unable to tell who had received the deadly shot.

Peter lay still for a moment to catch his breath, then slowly pushed himself away and got up. He staggered a few steps trying to regain his balance. Churned up mud clung to his skin and clothing. Mayhew rolled onto his back, shock and surprise in his glazed eyes. A red stain blossomed on his chest, slowly spreading on his uniform coat, darkening the garment with its wetness. His fingers relaxed and the pistol fell from his grasp.

It was over.

Libby and Tommy were safe for now. Peter felt a sense of relief. He stumbled toward Libby, as if drunk, then pulled her close, and wrapped his arms about her small frame.

"We have to go, Peter. His men will hold you responsible. They won't be interested in a charge of self defense."

"That won't be a problem, sweetheart." Peter gently took the pouch from Libby's hands and rummaged through the papers. With the documents was a letter, reminding the recipient of the promise of money for the enclosed information. Mayhew had thoughtlessly signed his name to the note, which in itself was innocent enough. Coupled with

the military information, in the same handwriting, it would have been enough to see him hanged.

"How did you know he was a traitor?" Libby asked after stepping to Peter's side and wrapping her arms about his waist. She stared into his eyes, totally unaware of the slight wriggling beneath his shirt.

"Just as the fire was starting in the next room, I was returned to my own time. It was a heck of a time to be sent back. I think I would have found my way to you again, sooner, if I hadn't been held up with a couple problems that had to be dealt with immediately. While I was trying to figure out a way back to you, I came across an interesting footnote in a history book. The British were able to prove Mayhew was selling information. He was arrested a short time before the fire, on charges of treason, but managed to escape his guards. It seems he was collaborating with the French. Mary turned him in when he went back on his agreement with her. Even Elias couldn't believe the charges. Then Mary turned her anger on Elias, started the fire and they both were trapped in it. Neither one of them stood a chance to escape."

"How did you find your way back here?"

"As a last resort, I went to the place I had been originally, when I was first sent here. Although it seems to me, now that I think on it, I'd been here several times. I guess somebody wanted me to keep trying until I got it right." He chuckled, then turned serious after another glance at Mayhew.

"Libby, folk around here will wonder about—"

"They won't," she cut in, knowing where his thoughts were headed. "He had left for home earlier, but turned back to try

and convince me to sell to him. He wanted to ... I don't know what he wanted, but when he realized we were wed, he knew his contracts with Mayhew were worthless. I don't think anyone else realized he'd come back, then he decided to stay the night. I didn't know he was bedding Mary. Somehow she was allowed inside the inn. When Mary saw him she began screaming something about being betrayed and flung the brace of candles she was carrying. The fire spread so quickly when the flames struck the curtains. I had all I could do to get to Tommy and escape with him. Gladys was able to get my mother out in time."

"What about his wife?"

"Constance won't miss him. All she ever wanted was whatever he could buy her. With Elias gone, his business and everything else goes to her, since there are no male relatives..." She glanced to the tree where her son lay sleeping. "Except Tommy. She would fight my son for everything, had Elias accepted him as his heir, which he didn't. Everything is gone now. There is no reason to stay here any longer."

"Everything you had was here. What will you do now, Libby?" Peter asked as he carefully wrapped one arm about her slender waist. "A little bit of history has been changed, but I have no regrets," her murmured as he pulled her close.

The night was still. For a moment, all he heard was the nonsensical ramblings of an elderly lady. He glanced over to where Gladys sat beside the older woman, speaking softly to her. The wind, having been stilled for a while, picked up again, slightly, taking with it the odor of the fire.

"There's nothing left here for us now," she said, as if she hadn't heard him, then continued to stare into the debris. "I was just thinking about going to Philadelphia."

Peter seemed to be deep in thought for a moment, staring at the fallen timbers. Their surfaces were black, with a burned, cracked pattern. He and Libby moved away from Mayhew's body. "Would you say we get along fairly well?"

"Yes..."

"And you agree Tommy likes me."

"Yes. Where is this going, Peter?"

"It took me the devil of the time to find my way back here, and I can't go home again. At least not now. It took me a long time to realize we are not meant to spend our lives alone, or in a marriage of convenience." As he spoke haltingly, Peter released his hold about her waist and took her hand in his, slowly rubbing his thumb against the back of her hand. "I guess I'm asking you to marry me—again?" It was more a question than a statement.

"I guess I'm saying ... yes." Libby grinned up at him, the disappearing moonlight making her eyes sparkle. She took a step back, then reached out to him when he clutched at his chest and groaned. "Peter, are you all right?"

For the first time she noticed the wriggling lump inside his vest, and looked up at him with raised brows.

He grimaced, then chuckled softly. He was amazed the little beastie hadn't been crushed during the fight, or managed to get free. He figured it had been too young to protect itself and was content to wait in its warm cocoon. "I didn't have a wedding gift to give you—besides myself—but

would this do?" He reached into his vest and slowly withdrew his hand. An orange ball mewed forlornly and Libby raised both hands to accept the gangly kitten. Around its neck was the set of rose gold wedding bands, hanging on a string from the sack. It shook its head frantically, trying to rid itself of the string round its neck. Peter quickly removed the annoying object from around the kitten's neck and handed it to Libby. "When I found these in Boston, the jeweler told me an interesting tale about them. I don't think the rings or the story will ever again be seen or repeated." He paused a moment, thoughtful. "I guess in some small ways, I may have changed history. I don't know if that was meant to be, or if it'll cause some unpredictable ripples in time."

"Oh, Peter," she cried, not hearing his last words. Tommy would be more than pleased to have a new companion of sorts. She glanced at the rings, and held the kitten close, stroking its soft fur, "this will more than do."

## EPILOGUE

"How long has it been now?" Caroline asked her husband, glancing up from the patterned sweater she was knitting. She took her time straightening the strands of yarn, and put them in back of the work, out of the way.

Dan gazed down at the small bundle he held. Barely a month old, the baby slept peacefully in his father's arms. Dan gently stroked the soft cheek and watched his son wriggle slightly, responding to his touch without waking. "About a year, I guess. Yeah, just about a year. He disappeared shortly after our wedding."

"I hope he's happy," she said. "It's long past time he got over the guilt of your accident, and moved on with his life." She wrapped her knitting around the needles and stuck the whole mess into her knitting basket. Caroline wasn't exactly thrilled with her work, but it was her first attempt at a complex pattern. If she were honest with herself, it wasn't half bad. She had everything she'd ever wanted, and smiled at her husband, her own sense of contentment filling her.

"Hey, Dan, Caroline." The newcomer entered the yard, carefully closing the picket gate behind him.

"Hey, Ken, what brings you out here on a weekend?" Dan was surprised to see his attorney and long time friend.

Ken, leaned over to admire the baby. "Looks more like you every day," he laughed. "Poor kid." He stepped back when Dan playfully punched his shoulder. "Ow," he complained lightly and grinned.



"Wait till Jen has this one. Hopefully it looks like her." Dan grinned. "When's she due anyway?"

"Couple more months. She's at the point she can't wait to get it over with. Keeps complaining about carrying around a watermelon. She's pretty uncomfortable, with the heat and all." Ken straightened and shifted the envelope he carried, from one hand to the other.

"Tell me about it," Caroline added, recalling her own pregnancy. As far as she was concerned the results were well worth the discomfort. She wouldn't mind doing it again, and gave her husband a knowing glance.

"Listen, Dan, I was going through a lot of old files of my father's and I came across this. It's addressed to you, but the weird thing is, it looks like it's been around for quite a while. I don't recall ever seeing it, and my father never mentioned it. There was a note on it, with instructions that it should be delivered on this date. I have no idea why, but here I am and here you are."

"What is it?"

"Haven't the foggiest. Here." Ken held out the envelope to his friend.

Dan lay the baby on his lap, then reached out and cautiously took the envelope from his friend. He opened it to find another, older envelope inside. He paled when he recognized the handwriting.

"Is something wrong?" Ken looked concerned, thinking it might be bad news, long overdue in its delivery.

"No, nothing is wrong," Dan replied after quickly regaining his composure. "I'll take a look at it later." He tucked it down the side of the chair out of sight.

Ken felt a kernel of disappointment, wanting nothing more at the moment than to know what the slim package contained. He sensed there was something rather unusual and special about the contents. Maybe later, Dan would satisfy his curiosity.

"Thanks for bringing it by." Dan hated the way he sounded abrupt, but the handwriting startled him.

"Sure. Anytime." Ken stepped away from the porch.

"Give our love to Jen," Caroline called after the attorney as he walked away.

"Will do," he replied over his shoulder and waved as he got into his car. They watched him pull away from the curb and drive down the street, until he was out of sight.

Dan waited until Ken had left, before again picking up the envelope. He stared at the writing, not daring to believe what he was seeing was real. After handing the baby to his wife, he carefully opened the envelope and eased out the contents. Within the folded sheets of paper was a painting about the size of an eight by ten photo.

Caroline got up to take the baby, and stood looking over Dan's shoulder, while she rocked the infant. She gasped at the portrait. It was of Peter and an attractive, dark haired woman. Two children were with them. The boy looked to be about ten years old, with dark hair and mischievous eyes. The little girl was about two, and the image of her mother.

Dan's eyes glistened with happiness and relief. His brother was all right, and from the clothes they wore in the portrait, he'd gone back in time, just as he said. This time, apparently he was there for good.

"She's lovely," Caroline commented.

"That she is." Dan carefully unfolded the fragile sheets of paper and scanned the beginning, then began reading aloud.

*Hey, Bro...*

*As you can tell from the date on this letter, I managed to go back in time and find Libby. As a matter of fact, she was still where I'd left her. It seemed only a couple hours had passed from the time I disappeared until I managed to rejoin her.*

If you recall, I told you Libby and I were married, before I popped back into the twentieth century. I debated saying anything to you, because I figured you'd think I'd finally lost it. With my decision to try to find my way back, I decided it was best you know what was going on. I wasn't sure how you'd react. I mean, how do you explain a wife who's from the eighteenth century, and has, for all intents and purposes, been dead for some two hundred years. I wasn't sure I could find her again, but I'm glad I made the effort. We married again, and I have the family I always wanted. You don't know how I envied you, that you had Caroline. Now I have Libby, and the envy is gone.

The boy is Libby's son, Tommy. Unfortunately his inheritance went up in smoke and flame just before I got back here. By coming back, I changed a small bit of history. I didn't tell you about the journal entry someone showed me. It

seems, according to the entry, that after I disappeared, and the inn burned down, Libby's mother died in the fire, and some years later, Libby died of a broken heart. That's not going to happen now. Her mother is fine, considering, and Libby is happy and relieved I came back for her.

I'm doing what I can to build a new future for the boy. Tommy has a sister, Caroline. I hope you don't mind—my naming her after your wife—not that we have a daughter. Haha. It's my way of saying thanks for your support when I couldn't get past my own guilt trip. I'm over it now, finally. I have the love of a good woman to keep me going, and the joy of being a father.

As you can see from the date, the war is pretty much over, but there's still a lot going on here in Philadelphia. I wanted to start a security service, but of course that's unheard of, so I've gone into lock smithing. It's gratifying work, and I can still use my hard earned knowledge of locks and keys. If you can pick them, you can build better ones.

Hope you and Caroline are well. Don't worry about me. I'm more than happy here. Take care of yourselves, and if you should have a couple of kids, tell them about their Uncle Peter. They should have a great time trying to figure out relationships and time.

Love,

Peter Samuel Ellsworth

*PS. I've enclosed a gold coin for your firstborn. Hope it brings him/her luck.*

Dan tipped the envelope and shook out the coin Peter mentioned. He carefully inserted the papers and portrait back

into the envelope for safe keeping and took the baby from his wife. "Well, Peter, looks like your uncle has made you very rich. Maybe one day you'll follow in his footsteps."

"Lord, I hope not," Caroline half whispered. "One time traveler in the family is enough."

Little Peter looked up at his mother, who knelt beside his father's wheelchair and one corner of his mouth turned up in a tiny smile, as if he knew something they didn't.

\* \* \* \*

In the Corinth library, Anne Hathaway glanced at the open books surrounding her. The research she was doing, was going well, but she needed one more bit of information.

Reaching into her oversized bag, she pulled out the manilla envelope, now a bit ragged from constantly rubbing against the other items in her bag. She pulled out the sheets of paper and skimmed over them, not surprised with what she read. He'd done it. A small part of history was changed according to the page in Thomas' journal. Anne didn't think it would matter in the overall scheme of things. She carefully replaced the pages and tucked them away, a small smile on her plain features. She silently cheered for the couple. Libby didn't die of a broken heart after all.

For all intents and purposes Mr and Mrs Peter Samuel Ellsworth lived happily ever after.

THE END

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