

The
Belle
of Chatham

LAURA FRANTZ

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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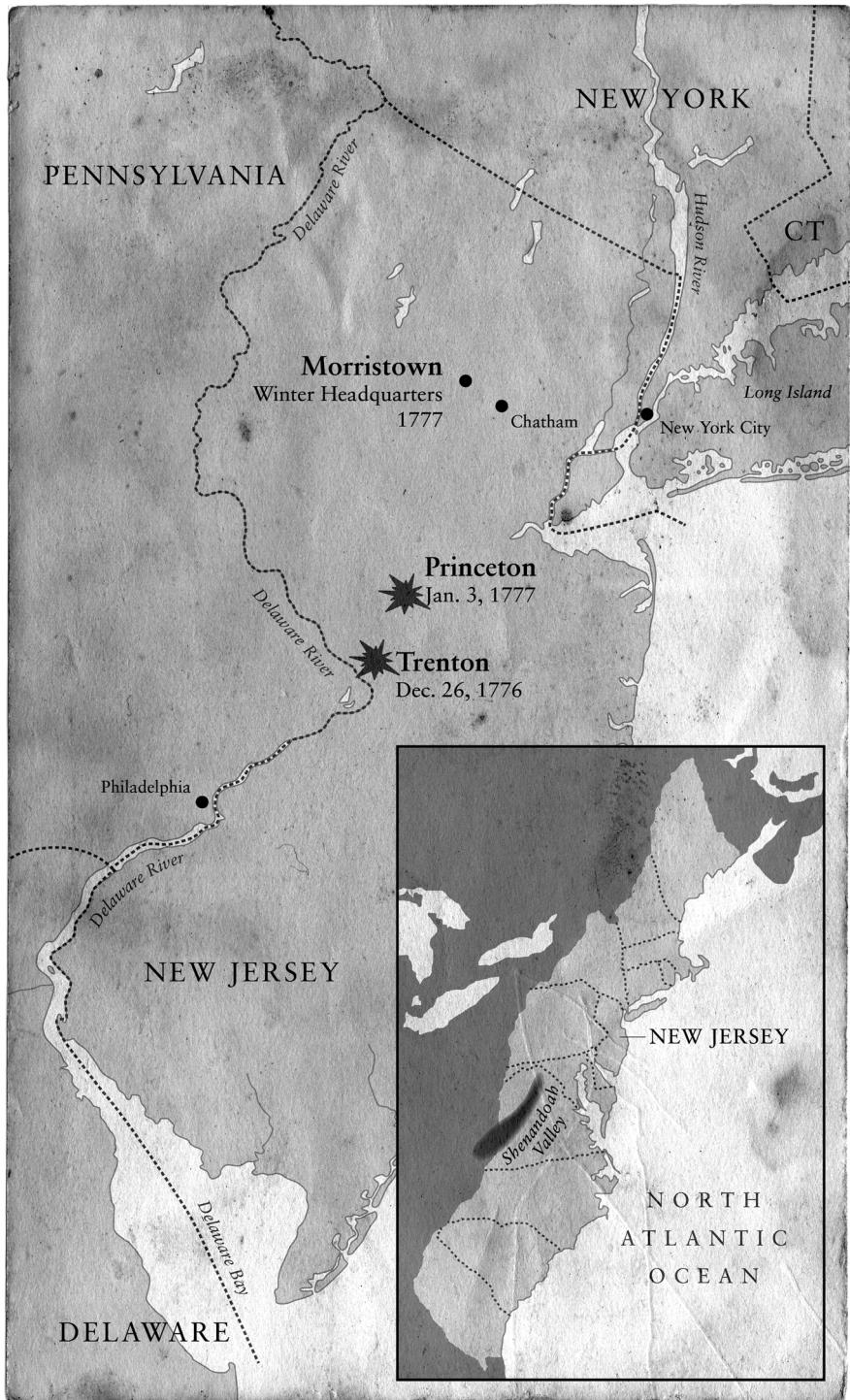
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To American soldiers from 1776 forward—
heroes of immense courage and incalculable sacrifices.
And to my own Patriot line. You are not forgotten.



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Prologue

JANUARY 1777
CHATHAM, NEW JERSEY

Her four-poster bed seemed made for winter. With the curtains drawn, Mae felt snug as a she-bear in its den, far removed from the turmoil of their colonial world. But sleep of late was often elusive. It took time to disentangle oneself from the day's moods and happenings. Tonight, once she did drift away, she dreamed of a dance—and a violet silk gown in the French polonaise style. The sheen of the silk struck her. They'd not had such sumptuous fabric since 1774.

The candlelit ballroom of her dream smelled of wax . . . and war. War had a distinct smell and sound. She knew that all too well, caught in the thick of it these last months. Tonight, war had woken her up.

The tread on the wooden bridge across the Passaic River nearby, the crunch of ice and creak of harnesses, the shuffling steps of soldiers and the officers' more sure-footed horses, and the thunder of the baggage wagons violated the usually hushed night. Mae sat up, drawing her knees to her chest beneath the blankets. Which army could it be?

The Americans or the British?

Was Coralie awake? Her sister was a light sleeper, though no sound issued from the open door adjoining their rooms. Coralie's bedchamber faced Chatham's village green while hers overlooked the dependencies at the back.

Mae stifled a yawn, roused further by a sound just beyond her frigid windowpane. The creak of the smokehouse door? Pushing aside the bed linens, she lowered her bare feet to the floor. Her icy soles sent a shiver to her spine as she hurried to Coralie's room and stared out the front-facing window. Snow spun down, obscuring her view. Dark silhouettes moved in rapid succession over river and bridge in the scant moonlight. A menacing presence whether friend or foe.

She returned to her room and looked out her rear window onto the fenced area below. Kitchen garden and well, stable and necessary were snow-drifted and undisturbed. Shadows moved toward the smokehouse. Thieves? They hadn't an abundance of meat to steal.

Wrapping herself in a shawl, Mae crept downstairs, clutching the banister with one hand and a lantern in the other. She pulled on her father's boots, retrieved his pistol, and tugged open the back door. A blast of wind nearly snuffed the lantern she hung from a hook beneath the porch's eave. Eyes on the smokehouse, she gathered her courage and bypassed the winter-bitten kitchen garden, no longer seeing shadows but sensing a distinct presence.

Snow spat at her, and the distant sound of an army on the march almost muffled the sounds within the smokehouse as she pointed her pistol at the door left ajar.

"Show yourselves and stop your thieving." Her voice rose above the wind. "If it's victuals you want, I'll supply them honestly, but leave our meat alone."

The smokehouse door groaned open and turned Mae more skittish. Two figures appeared, a rasher of filched bacon in hand. They seemed little more than children—waifs—their clothes in tatters, their scarecrow figures startling. The snow's brightness and the

lantern light illuminated more than she cared to see. Was that a drum the lad had slung about his neck? His bare feet, slashed by ice, left bloody footprints in the snow.

“We’re sorry, miss.” A woman’s voice, trembling with contrition and the cold, reached her. “We mean no harm. We’re half starved—worn down.”

“Are you rebels?” Mae pocketed her pistol. “Or redcoats?”

“Rebels,” the man said, his deep voice dispelling the notion he was a mere lad. “But General Washington don’t hold with stealing, so we might as well desert.”

Mae’s simmering turned to sympathy. Coralie had always chided her for being soft. The gift of mercy, others said. “Come inside,” she told them breathlessly, leading the way.

The pair followed somewhat reluctantly as if *she* were the enemy and they feared ambush. Once inside the low-beamed kitchen, where the hearth’s fire crackled in welcome, they sat on a settle facing the flames while Mae served them warm stew and coffee left over from supper. As they ate, she hurriedly shoved bread and cheese and bacon into a knapsack, fearful that if they tarried by the fire, they might miss the army’s route altogether. But given the numbers she’d spied coming over the river and bridge, the march was miles long.

Where was General Washington headed?

Once they’d eaten and more victuals were packed, Mae said, “Take these stockings and boots of my father’s—and here’s my mother’s warmest woolen shawl.” She draped the butter-colored wool around the young woman’s bent shoulders while the boyish-faced man pulled on the woolen stockings and shoes.

Now far more moved than nettled, Mae watched her unexpected guests depart. The snow was whirling harder now. The bloody footprints would soon be naught but a harsh memory. Would these two beleaguered souls rejoin the army or run?

She’d forgotten to ask them their names.

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one

We marched from Morristown at 3. PM, and arrived at Chatham at dark, in the suburbs of which we got very agreeable quarters. The young ladies here are very fond of the soldiers, but much more so of officers.

Lieutenant James McMichael's journal,
January 12, 1777

Drifted with snow, the village of Chatham was decidedly quaint. Tidy. Or once had been. Now it was infused with Patriots. Infested, some said. Countless rebel soldiers milled about, some of them almost leisurely, others purposefully. Since the Continental Army had no standardized uniform aside from the topmost officers, most of these Patriots were a ragtag, homespun sort, some even barefoot, reminding Mae of the couple she'd caught in the smokehouse.

Had it only been a fortnight ago she'd ushered them into the kitchen and supplied them? She'd told no one, not even Coralie. Try as she might, she couldn't scrub her mind clean of the bloody footprints in the snow. And she continued to wonder . . . Had the sad pair returned to the army? Or deserted?

Basket on one arm, Mae crossed the village green, her progress as slow as it was slippery, her scarlet cape furling and unfurling like

a flag in the wintry wind. Few would guess British-occupied New York City with its hordes of redcoated soldiers was only twenty-five miles away.

“Morning, miss.” One tattered soldier doffed his cocked hat to her in the middle of the green.

“Good morning to you, sir,” she returned, hastening past.

Tattered and ragtag, aye. But these men were unified in spirit if not dress, and she sensed their resiliency and resolve from a distance. Wrestling with admiration and pity, she fixed her eye on the trade sign that waved in a north wind. The words “Old Town Apothecary” lettered a wooden board where clusters of lavender, rosemary, and mint grew in painted profusion. Her youngest brother’s business, the shop was the handsomest building in Chatham save the Presbyterian church. Aaron Bohannon did them all proud.

If she’d expected an empty shop she was sorely mistaken. Winter’s agues and miasmas laid many low. A line of villagers snaked out the front door, sending her round to the side entrance. After letting herself in, she made her way to a back chamber, a cozy bower lined with medical books that boasted Aaron’s desk and an immense brick hearth roaring with heat.

She pulled off her mittens, extended cold fingers to the fire, and breathed in the earthy, medicinal scent while listening to the shop’s chatter. In minutes, her sister-in-law Hanna appeared, her lovely face pinched with concern.

“Morning, dear Mae.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “Is Coralie’s cold worse?”

“No better,” Mae replied. “And we’ve run out of herbs and simples.”

“I do worry, as she’s painfully thin.”

As painfully thin as I am plump, Mae thought.

“I recommend a decoction of peppermint leaves, dried ginger, a pinch of yarrow, and lemon balm with a small piece of willow bark.” Hanna disappeared again to fetch the needed ingredients

before returning and advising, “Add all to hot water and let rest for fifteen minutes, then strain. Have Coralie inhale the steam as she drinks to help clear her head.”

Thanking her, Mae turned her backside to the fire and took in her brother behind the counter as Hanna returned to help the next customer. Aaron bore a marked resemblance to their late father, though it was their mother she missed most.

Grief, still raw, pushed Mae out the door and past the First Presbyterian Church. Across the stone fence was her parents’ grave marker, hidden by snow. If only she could do the same with her emotions. Bury them. Banish them.

Armed with a fresh remedy for Coralie, she allowed herself a last, less practical stop. Down a side street stood the dressmaker’s shop, beckoning her inside with all its color and creature comforts. The pomaded, powdered owner was a French Huguenot, an independent woman of means who somehow seemed to be the only merchant immune to the war’s blockades and barriers. Some suspected her of smuggling, but who knew?

“Ah, Mademoiselle Bohannon.” Madame Jaquett’s heavily accented English gave no hint she’d been in Chatham for a decade. “My shop is all too quiet on account of the snow, so it is good to see you venture forth.”

Smiling and shivering, Mae set her market basket down. “I promised Coralie I’d ask about her gown.”

“Of course. You’ll be happy to know that I’ve nearly finished.” Escorting her to the rear of the shop, Madame Jaquett pointed to a wickerwork mannequin bedecked in exotic Indian chintz. “Voilà!”

Awed, Mae eyed the gown and tried to put down the envy that needled her. “My sister will look lovely.”

“Alors, mademoiselle! This dress is yours—her gift to you.”

Mae stared at her.

“For a very special occasion, she said.” Madame Jaquett smiled and lifted a lace sleeve ruffle made from the same delicate lace that

lined the bodice. “Would you like a decorative ladder of bows at the front? A flounce at the hem?”

Mae smiled and shook her head, even more appreciative of the colorful fabric now that she’d come out of mourning. “Nothing more is needed, thank you.”

“Then I shall finish it at once.” Madame Jaquett went to a chest of drawers and took out a length of silk ribbon. “Please take this to your sister and tell her I am trimming her gown with such.”

Mae took the ribbon, a marvel of embroidered flowers. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“I send my best wishes for her complete recovery”—she darted a wary look out the window, where snow masked the alley and surrounding structures—“and an end to all this inclement weather.”



Mae let herself into their clapboard house quietly, removed her damp cape, and hung it on a peg to dry. The center hall was quiet, the staircase empty as it wound upward to several bedchambers and an attic. She darted a look into the parlor, where a fire burned in a large hearth, bookended by shelves. A red-nosed Coralie dozed in a Windsor chair nearest the blaze, eyes closed, a handkerchief fisted atop her quilted petticoat.

Tiptoeing, Mae took her basket into the kitchen and began to prepare the apothecary tea. Above her head, the room’s oak beams, taken from a spice ship, held their own exotic scent and seemed to whisper of faraway ports. In summer the room hinted of pepper and mace, in winter cinnamon and cloves. Mae inhaled deeply, happy to be home.

When the kettle sang, she swung it off the fire and poured hot water over the herbals in a large stoneware mug. Mrs. Hurst, their longtime cook and housekeeper, had left a kettle of fish chowder in the ashes and a loaf of bread on the open door of the beehive oven. A widow, she lived across the alley behind their stable.

Night was falling fast, the wind rising.

“Mae?” Coralie’s hoarse voice reached out from the adjoining room. “Is that you?”

“Finally home,” Mae called, carrying in the aromatic, steaming mug.

“How I miss going out with you.” Coralie sat up straighter, then sneezed into her handkerchief. “Surely this sickness will pass with a little help from Aaron and Hanna.”

“They send their regards. Madame Jaquett too. I’d hug you if I could because of that lovely chintz gown.” Mae smiled her thanks and passed her sister the tea.

“So you discovered my surprise.” Coralie’s wan face brightened. “Isn’t it lush? Since you’re to be my bridesmaid, I wanted something colorful.”

“‘Tis vibrant as a garden in full bloom. And the skill with which Madame sews! My stitches shame me.”

“Seamstresses we are not.” Coralie sighed. “Though we do manage petticoats and aprons and caps admirably.”

Mae sat back in Father’s worn chair, wishing she had Mother’s warmest shawl to give Coralie. “Mrs. Hurst said she feels a blizzard in her bones.”

“She’s rarely wrong about the weather, but oh, what woe it brings.” Coralie stifled a cough and took another sip. “I pray my beloved is warm and dry up north.”

Coralie’s betrothed seemed far away. Last they’d heard, Eben Gibbs was serving as a British lieutenant under General Burgoyne at a remote garrison in New York.

“Eben doesn’t tell me much about his whereabouts or happenings. I suppose, being an officer, he fears anything he writes might be confiscated,” her sister lamented. “This weather will prevent any post riders from coming, anyway.”

“How long since you’ve had a letter?”

“Twenty-three days.”

So she *was* counting? “Take heart—you have an amazing array

of them to reread in the meantime.” Mae’s teasing was not far from the truth. She’d never seen a man pen so many letters. It made her wonder what officers did if they had the luxury of so much ink and pounce and paper.

“We must pray he gets leave to return this spring. After the wedding we hope to go to New York City to see his family, if they can rebuild after the terrible fire there. Then he’ll return to the fray, wherever that is.” Coralie sneezed again, jostling her tea. “Odd to think Eben might be fighting against our own brothers.”

“Whom we haven’t heard from in so long I’m beginning to wonder.”

The moment turned melancholy. All they knew was that James had joined the Continental Army following the bloody debacle in Boston, and Jon was a militia captain somewhere along New York’s Hudson River.

“Have you any fresh news from villagers?” Coralie pulled her shawl closer. “About the conflict?”

Conflict. Coralie refused to call it war, as if changing the wording would wish England’s and America’s ire away.

“There’s talk that General Washington may winter in Jersey.” Mae reached for her knitting, wanting to change the subject yet driven to keep abreast of matters as an older sister should.

“With all the Continental soldiers here lately being resupplied, I’m not surprised. Where, exactly?”

“Somewhere in the Watchung Mountains,” Mae said, eyes on her yarn. “General Washington’s troops need to recover after their recent victories at the battles of Trenton and Princeton.”

“Hollow victories, you mean.” Coralie made a face. “You’re not sympathizing with that turncoat, I hope.”

Turncoat? Mae tried to ignore her personal feelings and deal with facts. “How can I not sympathize with wounded soldiers on either side? A great many of Washington’s men have been lost with expiring enlistments. The Continental Army has been whittled

down to three thousand or less. Without fresh recruits I don't know how they'll continue."

"Eben's last letter indicated the British army's strength at five times that, given all the Hessians and Prussians, Brunswickers and Hanoverians coming to our shore in droves. They've even brought over a German general, if I recall."

"General Riedesel, yes. A fine commander, though German troops are said to be among the fastest deserters." All she'd heard and read crossed Mae's mind like buckshot. "I hardly blame them. Imagine being in a strange land with a different language and customs. It's not their battle to begin with, though I hear they're rewarded handsomely to fight—the officers, anyway."

"Heaven help us all. 'Tis so hopelessly complex and dangerous." Coralie dabbed her nose with her handkerchief. "How did it all go so wrong?"

"Matters have been coming to a head for years now with king and parliament. We just never thought it would amount to men taking up arms."

What they'd once considered a minor skirmish over tea and taxes had turned into something far more frightening and enduring. New Jersey seemed to be the very crossroads of the revolution. Lately most of the war's action seemed to play out on their very doorstep, making them wish themselves elsewhere.

"I want to be like Father and Mother, taking neither side," Mae told her. "Father always strove to keep the peace as pastor and stay far from any divisiveness."

Coralie breathed in the tonic's steam. "I'm glad they didn't live to see the conflict unfold and us in the midst of it."

"They certainly didn't want to leave us alone, two women rolling around this house like misplaced marbles."

"At least Aaron and Hanna are close at the apothecary. And Mrs. Hurst is near, as well as Adam."

Mrs. Hurst had been with them since their parents married. But aged and rheumatic as she was, how much longer could she keep

at her tasks? And Adam, their hired lad, was at an age where he could enlist in the army.

“We’re immensely blessed. The future is bright. Your future, anyway.” Mae tried to summon some joy. “I’m not at all sure about mine.”



two

Rifle Men that for their number make the most formidable light infantry in the world. . . . Men who from their amazing hardihood, their method of living so long in the woods without carrying provisions with them, the exceeding quickness with which they can march to distant parts, and above all, the dexterity to which they have arrived in the use of the Rifle Gun. . . . Every shot is fatal.

The Virginia Gazette

Within the smoky, dimly lit Day's Bridge Tavern along the Passaic River, General Rhys Harlow sat at a corner table. Spread over the spacious taproom were his company of riflemen—eighty enlisted men and sixteen officers. The slim profiles of ninety-six long rifles turned the tavern into a military garrison.

On the table before him lay a letter from General Washington, recommending him to the particular notice of Congress as a good and valuable officer. He'd been promoted to the rank of brigadier general in the Continental Army after being a prisoner of war in Quebec till recently. His time among the British was finally finished, at least in their custody. He'd far rather face them on the field.

"Here's to the Canadian expedition officially coming to a close." Major James Bohannon, his adjutant, raised his pint of ale. "I never

thought we'd escape the far north, but here we are, a stone's throw from my very home."

Captain Casper Sperry reached for a worn copy of *The New Jersey Gazette*. "So, General, bets are being placed on where the American army should winter. What's your preference?"

"The Lowantica Valley west of here seems a formidable defense with a brook for fresh water and sloping ground to ward off north winds. And near enough to keep a wary eye on Philadelphia and New York," Rhys said as the heated toddy stole through him and took the chill from his bones. "We've a fair supply of wood for covering and fuel, besides."

Bohannon nodded. "The enlisted men will winter in tents, God help them, though there's talk of building log huts. General Washington will likely headquartered at Jacob Arnold's Tavern on Morristown Green, large enough to hold his aides-de-camp, servants, and guard. Even Mrs. Washington, should she visit."

"Imagine that." Sperry grinned as a harried maid servant plopped down heaping pewter plates. "A little feminine company would be most welcome."

Bohannon surveyed the fried eggs and bacon and toast with obvious approval after months of scant rations. "I heard tell of a promised dance or two hosted by none other than the general himself."

"As for us officers, we're billeting here in Chatham, aye?" Sperry asked. "Or riding on to Morristown if it proves more accommodating?"

"New Jersey declared for independence last year, so hopefully the villagers will be obliging. Chatham's liberty pole marks them as firm Patriots," Rhys said. "Much like Morristown."

Nodding, Bohannon picked up a fork. "My parents, God rest them, left a large house on Chatham Green. There's room enough for a few of us officers . . . if my sisters are willing."

Rhys listened, hopeful. For a soldier on the run, a canvas tent seemed the best to be had, but a house? Though the winter had

been mild and muddy thus far aside from a spate of snow, he sensed it would soon turn brutal, as northeast winters often were.

Bohannon continued, "My brother is a staunch Patriot and apothecary and lives in his shop. He'd be a valuable resource should there be medical needs among the troops."

Sperry winked. "I'd rather talk about your sisters."

Bohannon grinned. "Well, they're not yet married, nor are they spinsters. One is known as the belle of Chatham."

Sperry's interest sharpened. "The *belle*? That bodes well."

"But can they cook?" Rhys asked wryly.

Sperry chuckled, but Bohannon turned sheepish. "Pampered pastor's daughters? A hired woman helps—and a lad who tends the horses and brings in wood and whatnot."

Rhys forked another bite. Pampered? Unable to do the most basic of tasks? He thought of his own mother and sister, the ordinary he was raised in, and the lack of the smallest luxuries at first. A few of his officers had been born and bred with a silver spoon while his was a humble wooden ladle. Yet they all were proven marksmen, having survived conditions most snuff-snorting men couldn't. All for the cause of liberty.

"I should like to meet these sisters of yours," Sperry said, taking a pinch of snuff, which was, to Rhys's reckoning, his only fault. "And billet with you Bohannons for the winter."



Leaving the tavern, Rhys surveyed the Bohannon home from a distance. Situated on Chatham's village green, it was a handsome house with a red sandstone foundation, pitched roof, puffing chimneys—four, to be exact—and large, elegantly proportioned windows. His own newly finished home in Virginia, though smaller, mirrored these sturdy Yankee dwellings.

Bohannon led them across the snow-slick green, avoiding the wagons, carts, and horses on the main streets. Sperry seemed high-spirited, confident the Bohannons would be their host. Rhys could

hardly believe their good fortune after so long and harsh a campaign. Would they really sleep atop a bed out of the weather? Sit down for a meal of something other than hardtack and dried peas? He craved coffee. Cake. Even chocolate.

As they came closer, he was suddenly mindful of how ragged he looked. An icy dawn plunge into the Passaic had cleansed him bodily, but his buckskins and linens could stand some mending. Did Bohannon's sisters sew? Or did the hired help do that too?

Hat in hand, Bohannon knocked on the door of his own house. An unfavorable sign? Rhys stood behind him with Sperry on the wide stone steps. Soon the well-made oak door swung open and a young woman stood before them, her mouth a perfect O. In a trice he took her in. Her indigo gown was edged with delicate lace. Her flaxen hair seemed a shade lighter than her paleness, which heightened her piercing eyes.

“Brother, can it be you?” Her shock led to an exuberant embrace that sent Bohannon backward on the slippery steps.

Amused, Rhys looked to his boots to allow them a moment's privacy, though Sperry continued his gawking. With good reason. Bohannon's sister was as comely as winter was long. Surely this was Chatham's belle. There couldn't be a prettier sister.

“Your Patriot brother, at long last, aye,” Bohannon finally said. “I've returned from Canada to winter over with General Washington and troops. Me and my two, um, compatriots.”

“Welcome, gentlemen.” Her eyes widened again as she took in all three of them. “Do come in out of the cold.”

“Gentlemen” was a stretch, but they all removed their cocked hats just the same.

“This is my oldest sister, Maebel—we call her Mae. Miss Bohannon to you,” Bohannon half jested, darting a look at Sperry. “And this is Captain Sperry and my commanding officer, General Harlow, of Harlow's Rifle Corps.”

“Honored.” She smiled at Sperry and then Rhys, a wide, dimpled smile as beguiling as her lively eyes.

They stood in the hall of the house now, midday light streaming through the open door behind them.

“And this is Coralie, the youngest of the clan.” Bohannon gestured toward the staircase another young woman was descending.

She was as plain as Maebel Bohannon was pretty. Or mayhap the stark black she wore made her seem so. Seemingly flustered by so many men, she uttered nothing in reply. Or did she simply rely on her sister to speak for her? Flushing, she gave Bohannon a quick peck on his cheek.

“Your timing is excellent.” Again, Mae smiled and gestured to the dining room, where a dozen different dishes sat upon the table. “Perhaps you can even guess what we’re having for dinner.”

Rhys held her gaze in question, hardly believing his good fortune. There was no mistaking that distinct scent. “Virginia ham?”

“You have a discerning palate, General Harlow.” Pleasure lit her pale features. “There’s also corn chowder, codfish, and gravy. Potatoes, bread, pickles, and preserves. Even molasses dumplings.”

His mouth watered as it hadn’t done for months.

“We don’t normally feast like this.” The younger Miss Bohannon’s hoarse voice bespoke a cold. “Tis our brother Aaron’s birthday.”

“If you’d like to wash up first, James can show you the way.” With that, Mae disappeared into what Rhys guessed was the kitchen to likely tell the hired help there’d be more guests at table. When she reappeared she said, “You’ll stay the night, of course, all three of you.”

“Nay, all the winter,” Bohannon corrected with a smile.

“Oh my, a billet of invitation, then.” Coralie Bohannon’s brow tightened. For a fleeting moment, Rhys detected resistance in her gaze. Then she pursed her lips and looked upstairs as if trying to parcel out bedchambers.

Mae took charge again. “We’ve unused beds that shall do nicely.”

“I’ll take my old attic room,” Bohannon told her. “The guest rooms should suit the general and captain.”

For now, his rifle stowed in the hall, Rhys became acquainted with the washbowls and linen towels in a small room adjoining the kitchen while Mae held court in the dining room. She signaled him and her brother to take the table's ends. The sisters sat opposite Sperry, who seemed none too troubled by the view.

Coralie placed a napkin in her lap. "Despite it being his birthday, our apothecary brother has been called away on an emergency."

Aaron Bohannon. Rhys tried to track the names. An elderly woman appeared, her white mobcap covering silvered hair, more dishes in each hand. The housekeeper?

"Good to see you again, Major James," she said briskly. "For a moment I mistook you for your brother, Colonel Jon."

"Understandable, Mrs. Hurst," Bohannon replied. "I may encounter him and the Albany County Militia in future should we move into New York."

"Then you must tell him he's missed here in Chatham." Eyes down, Mrs. Hurst poured them all cider, commencing the meal.

Nearly speechless at the bounty in wartime, Rhys counted eleven temptations adorning the linen tablecloth, serving spoons at the ready.

Folding her hands, Mae looked at Rhys. "Will you do us the honor of a mealtime prayer, General Harlow, given you're the foremost officer here?"

With a nod, Rhys obliged. "Grant, O God, Your protection, strength, understanding, knowledge, justice, our very existence, but foremost the love of God and all goodness."

At his "amen," not a person moved. Coralie looked perplexed while Mae regarded him with something he couldn't name. Were they Anglican? He thought Bohannon had told him Presbyterian.

"A Welsh prayer," Rhys said.

"General Harlow is from Virginia," Bohannon said by way of explanation. "His father is an English Quaker, his mother Welsh."

"I've read of the Welsh revivals, General Harlow." Mae sent Rhys a look of appreciation. "My late father kept abreast of spiri-

tual matters in Britain and often exchanged letters with ministers there.”

“I’m sorry to hear of your parents,” Rhys said, serving himself bread.

“Do you have family, General?” Coralie asked, helping pass dishes.

“My father and sister are in the Shenandoah Valley. My mother’s been buried three years now.”

Murmured condolences went round the table.

“I’ve never been further than Chatham,” Coralie said. “You’re a long ways from home, General.”

“And you, Captain Sperry?” Mae asked. “Where are you from?”

“Eastern Virginia. But I have my eye on New York’s Champlain Valley or even further southwest at Cherry Valley.”

“Indian lands,” Mae said. “Those in league with the British.”

Surprised, Rhys kept his eyes on his plate and continued eating. Miss Bohannon obviously kept abreast of the conflict. Not all women did.

“If we win the war, we’ll receive land grants for our service from the new American government,” Sperry told her. “Two hundred acres or more per man.”

“Our oldest brother, Colonel Jon, lives in New York,” Mae said. “After our parents passed last year he asked us to visit him along the Hudson River, where he’s farmed for almost a decade. But now with the war on . . .”

“As soon as peace is restored, perhaps.” Coralie smiled for the first time all evening. “I’m sure order will soon reign in all thirteen of His Majesty’s colonies.”