



1. LONG NIGHT OF THE BOMBS

MONDAY, MARCH 4, 1776

. . . SOON AFTER CANDLELIGHT, CAME ON A MOST TERRIBLE
BOMBARDMENT AND CANNONADE, ON BOTH SIDES, AS IF
HEAVEN AND EARTH WERE ENGAGED.

—BOSTON SELECTMAN TIMOTHY NEWELL'S JOURNAL

Take away this puke bucket, girl, and bring me a clean one!”

Judge Bellingham bellowed like an angry ox, but I did not move. I couldn't, not while the Patriot cannons boomed over and over with terrifying thunder. They were aimed at Boston, which meant they were aimed at me.

I was hiding, quite sensibly, under the table at the top of the stairs, in shouting distance of the judge's bedchamber and far away from any window, in case a cannonball or mortar shell came crashing in. For a helmet, I wore a wooden bowl that smelled of cinnamon. (I'd been mixing a sweet dough in it when the Patriots unleashed more lethal mischief.)

The judge made another loud contribution to his puke bucket.

I held my hand over my mouth and swallowed hard, for the sound of his retching made my own insides go funny.

My employer was suffering mightily with gout in the toes of his left foot. Adding to his woes, his stomach had turned sour at sunset, so he'd taken to his bed, groaning loudly about his afflictions. I brought him a pot of ginger tea, but he demanded a flask of wine and more of the mutton soup served at supper. I'd suggested toasted bread on account of his bellyache. He reminded me that I was a blockhead kitchen maid.

But I ask you, who was puking up the mutton soup now? "Did you hear me?" he roared.

Three nearby British cannons boomed, as if answering his question. The force of the sound rattled every window in the house and shattered the mirror that hung above the table. Shards of glass rained down around me and onto the dusty floorboards. I cringed, clutched my helmet, and counted: *one, two, three*. No cannonball crashed through the wall. No fire exploded through the front door.

"Get me a clean bucket now!" hollered the judge.

George Washington's Patriot army had kept ten thousand British soldiers pinned down in Boston for nearly a year now. This siege made the lives of the few ordinary folks trapped in the town (like me) a misery. Two nights earlier, the Patriot cannons had begun bombarding us, changing our circumstances from difficult to terrifying. I wished that the mothers of every soldier on both sides would magically

appear, grab their sons by the ear, and drag them home for a well-earned thrashing. Then we could dump all the cannons and guns into the sea and go about living our lives in a more sensible manner.

I sighed. Weaving dreams and fantasies produced a cloth of regret, that's what Pappa said.

"Answer me, you sniveling featherbrain!" the judge demanded. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, sir," I called, even though I was neither sniveling nor a featherbrain.

"Bring me that blasted bucket or I'll put you on the street!"

Losing my job meant losing a place to sleep and three meals a day, which scared me even more than the cannonballs. I dashed down the hall to an unused bedroom, grabbed a chamber pot, and cleaned the spiderwebs out of it with my apron as I ran.

The judge most closely resembled an ancient snapping turtle; one that wore a stained, purple silk robe over a night-shirt and an old-fashioned gray wig. His gout-plagued foot was propped up on a high stack of pillows, but the rest of him, thankfully, was hidden under the rumpled blankets. The judge had not washed in ages, which made the room reek of decay, like his anger was rotting him from the inside out.

He glared at me. "About time, you idle dolt."

I curtsied and replaced the disgusting puke bucket with the chamber pot. "Apologies, sir."

He pushed himself higher against the mahogany headboard. “I require the attention of Doctor Church. Fetch him immediately.”

“Beg pardon, sir?”

“Do you not understand English?” he snapped.

I took a half step backward to ensure that I was out of his reach. Contradicting my master was tricky work. “The rebels arrested Doctor Church for spying, sir, months ago,” I cautiously reminded him. “He’s jailed in Connecticut.”

“I know that!” His face flushed scarlet with embarrassment. “Do you imagine that I am ignorant?”

For a moment, Judge Abraham Trink Bellingham—wealthy merchant and member of the Royal Governor’s Council—did not look like a powerful owner of ships, shops, and houses. He was just an old man in need of much assistance, whose mind had begun to wander, mayhaps on account of the bombardment.

“Of course not, sir,” I said gently. “But I can see that you are not well. Should I brew some more ginger tea to soothe your belly? Or mayhaps mint?”

“Tea will not help my toes.” He lifted his chin and smoothed the front of his robe, trying to regain his dignity. “Send up Jane, or that other maid, what’s her name . . . Elizabeth.”

“I am Elsbeth, sir. Jane and Rose are sleeping with the other soldier wives in the barracks tonight. For their safety, sir.”

“Oh,” he muttered. “Why did you not go with them?”

“I’m not married, sir. I’m only sixteen,” I lied. (Adding three years to my true age made life simpler. I was already taller than most women, so no one questioned my claim.)

He looked me over, starting at my uncomfortable shoes, traveling up my form, and pausing on the smallpox scars that speckled my cheeks. “Quite a gollumpus, aren’t you? I wager you’ve been eating me out of house and home.”

The insult made me clutch my apron, and imagine the pleasure of emptying the puke bucket on his head.

“What is your surname?” he continued.

The unexpected question startled me. “Sir?”

“Cunningham?”

“Culpepper, sir.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Now I remember. Your father’s a sailor.”

“Sailmaker, sir, at Grenock and Withers’s sail loft. Missus Grenock recommended me to your former housekeeper when we arrived last year.”

He wiped his mouth on a grubby handkerchief. “When was that, exactly?”

“Just before the”—I chose my words carefully—“before the ungrateful rebels started this dreadful standoff.”

“Lexington and Concord.” He scratched the stubble on his chin. “An unfortunate moment to come to Boston.”

I nodded. “Pappa has the curse of ill timing.”

“And thus, I am cursed with his daughter.” He spat into

the chamber pot and looked me over again. “A pockmarked, slothful wench best suited for farmwork.”

His tone had turned sharp again. His wits were no longer wandering.

Ignoring his insults, I tried my best to appear meek, which was not my natural attitude. “We are deeply grateful for your generosity,” I said, gentling my voice, as if trying to calm a rabid dog. “Working in such a respected home is an honor, sir, particularly in this uncertain time.”

Judge Swinehead grabbed his glass. “Fetch me a doctor. I don’t care which one.” He took a big swig of wine. “But I warn you; do not return without a man who will help my toes.”