

Chapter One

Day One, Sunday, Dec. 29, 1776

A muffled argument simmered in a house three miles east of Princeton, New Jersey. Maggie, the mother, yelled at her older son, Isaac, seventeen years old. “No, you can’t go. You can’t do that to me.”

“Becalm yourself, Ma. You’re getting hysterical again.”

Maggie was an attractive thirty-five-year-old woman, but strands of greasy hair hung down into her face. The living room was cluttered with pieces of cloth and half-sewn dresses strewn all over the tables and chairs.

“I have bills. Your father isn’t here any more. What am I to do with the children? You always do this to me, Isaac. You always want to go off and fight someone. Why, I know not.”

Isaac said, “I can’t stand working in that shop. All those old women. I’m going to get out.”

“No. You’ll be killed. What about your brother? Who will care for him? I don’t have time to run the shop and care for everyone.”

Maggie’s other son, Toby, heard the yelling from the kitchen and came into the room. Toby was a little small for his age.

Isaac said, “He’s fourteen, for the sake of Christ. Why do I have to care for him?”

“Because he’s your brother, that’s why. And don’t you use the Lord’s name like that. I won’t have you talk like that in my house.”

Isaac rolled his eyes. “I’m joining the Tories. The rebels are going to be destroyed. The Reverend says so.”

“No, no. There’s rebels everywhere, or British, or Hessians. Everyone’s gone mad.”

Maggie paced around the living room. Her dirty apron had large rips in it that caught the banged-up furniture as she walked by. She cried, turning away from the boys so that they wouldn't notice her eyes, and rubbed away the tears lightly.

Toby said, "Ma, don't cry."

Maggie said, "Hang those rebels. I had a home and a family. Now there's people with guns all over killing everybody. You'll get killed, Isaac, and Toby, too. No, you can't go."

Toby walked over to his mother. "Ma, it'll be all right. Isaac, you're staying here."

"Don't tell me what to do, you little runt."

Maggie turned toward Isaac, her eyes puffy from crying. She scolded, "You boys stop that. I didn't bring you up to fight with each other."

Isaac said, "Ah, Ma, he's such a baby."

"Am not." Toby looked at Isaac, who gave him an icy stare. Toby turned to his mother for support. "Ma, make him stay." He looked back at Isaac. "You're staying."

Isaac said, "Damn you," and rushed at Toby. Toby ran around the table and faked a dodge to get away, but Isaac didn't fall for it. Toby shouted, "Ma, Ma!" Isaac grabbed at his brother across the table and barely missed. Toby ran into another part of the room. Isaac caught up with him and clutched Toby around the neck, but not too hard.

Isaac said, "Hold your tongue."

Maggie wedged herself between her sons. "Stop that. Stop it! You're to take care of each other. You're brothers. This is a very bad time." Maggie cried again as she pulled Isaac and Toby apart. "You don't have a father anymore. You have to take care of each other." Isaac released Toby reluctantly.

Toby rubbed his neck. "Ma, he hurt my neck."

"Ah, hush up. Ma, I have to get out of here. I can't stand it."

Heavy footsteps stomped up the porch outside. Maggie, Isaac, and Toby turned toward the door at the violent knock. "Open up in there, ya blimey rebels. Open up, I say, or I'll break down this door."

Maggie whispered, "Isaac, get in the kitchen."

Isaac went into an adjacent room through a doorless opening. He stood around a corner, out of sight of the living room, and listened closely.

Maggie said, "Open the door, Toby, then get away."

Toby opened the door. A British soldier, Nigel Lawrence, entered quickly. With a black patch over his left eye, he sneered scornfully at Toby. "You a rebel?"

Toby was shocked at the sight of a one-eyed soldier. "No. Ma?"

"Got any more rebels in here?"

Maggie moved over to Toby and touched his shoulder. Facing Lawrence she said, "He's not a rebel. He's only fourteen."

"Old enough to die. I'll shoot you right now."

The soldier backed up two steps and leveled his musket at Toby's nose. Toby jumped back. Maggie shouted, "No, I told you, he's not a rebel." She reached into her pocket and felt for a small paring knife, and then looked threateningly at the soldier. "You put that down or you'll lose something you don't want to lose. Toby, move away from the officer and go into the kitchen."

Lawrence lowered his gun and glided up to Maggie. He eyed her lewdly with his one good eye and ran his hand through her hair and down her neck. His hand approached her breasts. "I ain't no officer, bitch." He smiled wickedly. "I ain't that polite."

Isaac peeked around the corner of the room and saw Lawrence close to his mother. Maggie spotted Isaac and shook her head slightly, "no."

Lawrence leered at Maggie, up and down, then glared at Toby. "Get out of here, rebel." He smiled back at Maggie. "Your mum and me want to be alone."

Toby's eyes welled up with horror. Isaac slinked out of the kitchen, crouched low, and slid into the living room, behind Lawrence and Maggie. She and Toby could see Isaac, but Lawrence faced the other way. Maggie tolerated the soldier's hands tearfully, but twirled the paring knife in her pocket to get a good grip. The soldier continued to run his hand lightly over Maggie's breasts.

Toby shouted, "Isaac."

Lawrence turned his head, searching for danger from an unexpected rebel, but he looked toward the living room, not the kitchen, and Isaac plowed into him hard, smashing Lawrence into the table. Lawrence wasn't able to judge distance well with one eye, so Isaac had a slight advantage. Isaac rushed again, but Lawrence held his fist in the air, and, as expected, Isaac ran right into it. Lawrence pushed Isaac against the wall with only one strong arm. Isaac tripped backward and fell forcefully against the door, which slammed shut with a loud smack, sending a message of conflict through the silent, Sunday-afternoon neighborhood.