

THE PATRIOT WITCH

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TRAITOR TO THE CROWN

THE PATRIOT WITCH

C. C. FINLAY



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For Rae

from start to finish

Chapter 1

April 1775

Proctor Brown stopped in the middle of bustling King Street, close enough to Boston's long wharf to smell the fishing boats, and wished he hadn't worn his best linen jacket. He rolled his shoulders to loosen the fit, but it still felt too tight. His mother had given him the linen jacket two years ago for his eighteenth birthday, and he'd already outgrown it. Taking over all the work on the farm hadn't made his shoulders any smaller.

The elegantly lettered sign of the British Coffee-House swayed over him, above the door of a narrow bay-windowed building squeezed between aged storefronts. Emily Rucke waited inside. He would be excited to see Emily again except her father was going to be there too. He'd figured—the first time he was to meet Emily's father, and he would show up in a jacket that was two years too small. A fine impression that was going to make.

He tugged the sleeves down one last time and stepped resolutely toward the door. A rattling cart loaded with barrels of molasses careened toward him, and Proctor jumped out of the way to keep his feet from being crushed by the wheels. His elbows bumped into someone behind him.

"I beg your pardon—" Proctor began to say as he turned.

A bright flash cut off Proctor's sentence and made him avert his eyes. When he blinked them clear, four men in the red coats of the British marines blocked his way, two bullies and two officers. The senior officer glared at Proctor; the flash had come from something at his throat, but the light faded and Proctor no longer saw it. The marines snickered, mistaking Proctor's averted eyes for fear. The largest one loomed over Proctor, shoved him.

"Watch where yee're goin', and watch yeer manners," he said in a thick Scots accent.

Proctor's urge to strike back surprised him by its violence, but he mastered the feeling in an instant, not wanting to ruin his best jacket before meeting Emily's father. He lifted his head and met the big Scot's eyes.

"Come, be good fellows now," the senior officer said, his accent similar but not as strong. "There was no harm done."

The marines brushed past Proctor as if he were nothing. Proctor stared at the senior officer's back. The light at the man's throat had faded as suddenly as it had flashed. Proctor couldn't even say what he'd seen, as there was nothing unusual about the officer's uniform or its embellishments.

As they entered the coffee house, he saw Emily wave to him through the panes of the window. She shimmered like a mirage through the uneven glass. A similar ripple rolled through his stomach when he returned the greeting. He tugged at his collar, which felt as tight as his jacket. Meeting Emily's father couldn't be any worse than dealing with his own mother, could it? He stepped up to the entrance and pulled on the handle.

The door opened onto laughter and clattering crockery and the scent of pipe tobacco. Dozens of chairs and benches crowded the long, narrow building, with brass candlesticks on

every table, though only a few of them were lit. The walls were bare, not that you could see much of them with all the people gathered—a variety of British officers, periwigged officials and ambitious merchants, all talking over one another. Two black slaves, one laden with cups, the other with platters, ran from table to table. The British marines Proctor had bumped into moved to the back of the room.

Emily sat at a table up front. She had arranged her cap so that her black curls spilled out over it; the yellow silk ribbon in the back matched the piece she had given Proctor as a keepsake. He reached into his pocket and brushed it with his thumb. Although she sat with her hands folded delicately in her lap, her large eyes were bright and mischievous. Proctor couldn't help himself and grinned back at her.

The man sitting at the table rose and cleared his throat. Thomas Rucke, sugar merchant and Emily's father. The resemblance was remarkable for the way it transmuted her own features: her black hair matched his in color, but her curls were his unruly tangle, her round face became jowls and a second chin, and her pink cheeks reddened into his veins and sunburn. Emily's butter-colored silk dress was even outmatched by her father's sumptuously tailored jacket and ornate lace cuffs.

Rucke's thick eyebrows curved down in a disapproval that mimicked the shape of his mouth. "Emily," he said. "You didn't tell me that you planned to introduce me to a mute."

Emily's cheeks flushed. Proctor tore off his hat and stepped forward, offering his hand. "I'm sorry, sir. My name is—"

"Proctor Brown. Yes, I know. I've heard entirely too much about you already." Rucke ignored the offer of a hand and sat down impatiently, waving his plump fingers at Proctor to take the third seat. "Let's get this over with."

Proctor bumped the chair against the table, shaking the candelabra as he sat.

"It's good to see you again, Mister Brown," Emily said, more formally than Proctor had ever heard her speak.

"And you also, Miss Rucke," he replied, in the same tone but with just a hint of mockery. He could see her suppress a grin.

"I'll be blunt with you, Brown," Rucke said. His hands were spread flat on the table and he stared at them as if he had a point of argument for every finger. "One of the reasons I sent my beloved Emily away from Boston to the more rural climate and estate in Lexington was that I wanted to remove her not only from the tumult and mobs of the city, from the precipitous actions of those pernicious Sons of Liberty, but also, with so many officers and other gentlemen about, from the temptation of liaisons that would be ill advised because of her relative youth. But for three months now, she's done nothing but talk about you until I finally agreed to arrange this dinner."

Not exactly the cheerful welcome Proctor had hoped for. He spread his own hands on the table. "I'm flattered that she thinks so well of me, sir."

"Daddy, I think once you get to know Proctor—"

Rucke's stern look made Emily wilt under her bonnet and fall silent. Turning back to Proctor, he said, "You understand that it will be best if we get this all out in the open and p

an immediate end to this unsuitable courtship.”

Proctor leaned forward and matched Rucke's expression. “Sir, I came down to Boston to visit my aunt and for the honor of meeting you. But for Emily's sake, I would have walked all the way to Georgia. I'm willing to undertake what ever is necessary to convince you of the seriousness of my intentions.”

Emily blushed again. Proctor would have given her a wink, but Rucke watched him directly, so he held the older man's gaze.

After a moment, Rucke looked away, raised his hand, and shouted across the room. “Hannah!”

An older woman made her way to their table, wiping her hands on her greasy apron. “Good afternoon, Mister Rucke, and the young gentleman, and the young lady,” she said. “What may I bring you?”

“What would you like to drink, dear?” Rucke asked his daughter.

“Since this is the Coffee-House, I would dearly love to have a cup of coffee,” Emily said brightly.

“The young lady will have tea,” Rucke grumbled. “Some Madeira for myself. What do you want, Brown?”

“Beer. Pale ale if they have it.”

Hannah ducked her head. “As you wish, sir.”

“Beer?” Rucke sneered when she had gone. “That's a farmer's drink.”

“That might be because I'm a farmer,” Proctor answered.

Rucke glanced at Emily and then leaned forward. “Which is exactly my problem with the youthful fancy.”

“Daddy!”

“No—I did not raise my daughter to become a farmer's wife.” Turning to Proctor, he said. “Do you think a farmer could keep her in the manner to which she has been raised?”

Proctor leaned forward in response. “Sir, she knows how I live and it doesn't seem to frighten her exactly.”

“Which is what I've already told him,” Emily said.

Rucke waved this off. “That's the foolishness and inexperience of youth. Your farm would start to look very small to her—like a cage, Emily—with the passage of time.”

“Oh, it won't always be such a small farm, sir,” Proctor said.

Rucke leaned back and studied Proctor again, as if there might be more to him than a too small jacket. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“We've got more than sixty acres. With only the three of us there—my father, my mother and myself—there's room to grow. Next year, I'll buy two heifers for the pastures. And with the fields fallow much of these past ten years, they'll yield a better harvest of corn to take them through the winter. The stand of trees at the back of the farm has been untouched for a long time too. They're big enough now that I can cut them down and mill them for a new

barn first, and then, in a few more years, a new house.”

“You can only get so far with sixty acres, boy, no matter how you use it,” Rucke said. But he was interested.

Proctor stole a glance at Emily, and she gave him a small, encouraging nod.

“I plan to sell the beef here in Boston and save the money,” Proctor said. “Old man Lear lives just over the hill, and his daughters moved off to Connecticut. Once I’ve saved enough he’ll sell his farm to me and go live with them. Then I can rent out his house and expand my herd into his fields. I’ll be the richest farmer in Lincoln inside five years.”

“Ten years at the least, with that plan,” Rucke said. He leaned out of the way as Hannah returned with their drinks. Rucke told her to bring them plates of chicken and what ever else was fresh in the kitchen.

Emily poured her tea, saying, “I’d much rather have a cup of coffee.”

“It’s a foul liquid. The colonials would never drink it if there wasn’t this nonsense over the tea stamps,” Rucke said. He patted her hand. “Coffee is beneath you,”

Proctor sipped his beer and found it dark and bitter. Voices rose in argument behind them chased by the scuff of feet and furniture. Proctor twisted in his seat to look, just in time to see a golden light flash so bright it made his head ache and his hand knot into a fist. The light faded the instant the scuffle broke up, and Proctor saw that it came from the same British officer he had encountered outside.

“Do you know who that man is?” Proctor asked.

“That’s Major Pitcairn, John Pitcairn,” Rucke said. “One of the best officers we have in the colonies. Completely and utterly fearless, would charge a line of bayonets with no more than a butter knife. His men love him. Why do you ask?”

“We bumped into each other once,” Proctor said absently. He could have sworn he’d seen a gold medallion flash at Pitcairn’s neck, but when he peered close, there was nothing. The British marine caught him staring, and Proctor glanced away.

Rucke refilled his glass of wine. “You’re thinking too small, Brown.”

Proctor was shaken out of his thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“With the cattle,” Rucke said. “Think bigger. Do you think Boston’s a big city, Brown?”

“Biggest I’ve ever seen, though I hear Philadelphia’s twice the size.”

Rucke laughed heartily. “Boston has fifteen, maybe twenty thousand people, and that includes every jack-tar who jumps off a boat to get drunk in the taverns. Now, London—London she’s a city—seven hundred thousand people living there, Brown. You could drop Boston down whole in the London docks and not find it again for three days.”

Emily caught Proctor’s attention and rolled her eyes. The greatness of London was one of her father’s favorite topics.

“You don’t say, sir?” Proctor replied.

“I do say. That’s why these Sons of Liberty are spouting nonsense when they talk about breaking free from England. The world’s a big place, but the empire makes it small. We’re all part of one big English family, and we’ll all profit more if we stand together.” He swallowed

his wine and thumped the glass on the table. "You're on to something with the cattle. Massachusetts already ships beef to Virginia and the Carolinas, even to Barbados and some of the other islands. They're too busy growing tobacco or sugar to raise beef, so they pay two pounds for it. That trade's going to grow, and a young man poised to take advantage could make himself a fortune."

"And end up richer than the richest farmer in Lincoln?" Proctor asked.

Rucke laughed heartily. "Perhaps." With that, he started in on everything he knew about the business end of beef, from butchering to salting to shipping to markets. Emily seemed pleased. She sneaked smiles at Proctor, which he returned as surreptitiously and enthusiastically as possible. His beer turned out not to be so bitter after all, and before he realized it the pint was gone and he excused himself to visit the necessary house, not just to relieve himself but to relax and collect his wits. If Rucke meant to help him trade beef, Proctor could advance his plan by years, and he and Emily could get married that much sooner. That was even better than making a fortune.

He pushed his way between sharp-elbowed men smoking long-stemmed pipes and junior officers quaffing rum or sipping bowls of chocolate. He smelled the privy as he passed through the back door.

"Look 'ere, it's the runaway apprentice," said a thick Scots voice behind him. Proctor spun. The four marines had followed him out the door.

"The one too big for his wee jacket," mocked the huge Scot.

They all laughed, except for Pitcairn, who said, "Bring him to me."

The huge Scot and another man with bushy red sideburns seized his arms. Proctor was strong—you didn't plow and cut wood and harvest grain without being able to take care of yourself—but he didn't react. The last thing he wanted was to return to Emily and her father after a dunk in the privy.

Pitcairn stepped in close. "Why were you staring at me inside?"

Proctor glanced at the spot on Pitcairn's chest where he thought he'd seen the medallion. He wondered who you were."

"He's one of His Majesty's officers," the big man grunted in his ear. "That's all ye need to know, ken."

"You have the general appearance," Pitcairn said, "and, dare I say, the particular arrogance of many of these so-called Sons of Liberty I've seen around Boston since my arrival."

"Sons of something is right," the huge Scot said.

"I'm the son of Prudence Brown, and no one else," Proctor replied.

"See, he's not shaking or trying to bargain for his freedom," Pitcairn told the others, almost respectfully. He pulled off his gloves. To Proctor, he said, "I want to show you something. A friendly demonstration."

Proctor tried to pull his arm free, on the chance he could escape inside, but the big man tightened his hold. The other grabbed his right arm with a grip like iron.

"William," Pitcairn said to the fourth marine, the pink-cheeked officer in the brand-new

coat, who had so far avoided Proctor. He bore a striking resemblance to the older man, with a similar widow's peak and aquiline nose—very likely they were father and son. “Be so good as to lend me your knife.”

“Sir?” William seemed surprised.

“Your knife, *damn* it.”

He reached inside his jacket and unsheathed six inches of steel. Proctor struggled to get away, but the huge Scot behind him clamped one hand over his mouth and squeezed him in a one-armed bear hug that pinned his left arm at his waist.

With a nervous glance at Proctor, William flipped the knife in his hand and passed it hilt first to his father. Pitcairn pressed the tip into his thumb until it drew blood, then held up his bloody thumb for Proctor to see.

“Don't worry,” he said. “The knife is for you to use.”

Fear knotted Proctor's stomach. He struggled to get away without striking the huge Scot or doing anything more to provoke the marines. He looked at William, who dropped his gaze and stepped away.

A cold smile crossed Pitcairn's lips. He pried Proctor's hand open and pressed the hilt into his palm, then squeezed Proctor's fingers closed around it. The marine with the red whiskers chuckled as he clamped his rough fist over Proctor's hand. The knife edge gleamed in the sunlight.

Pitcairn licked the blood off his thumb and held his arms open nonchalantly, stepping closer.

Twisting his head from side to side, Proctor tried to talk through the big Scot's suffocating paw. He tried to push himself away, but his toes barely touched the ground. No jury would convict him for attacking a British officer, not under these circumstances—but he doubted any jury would believe his version of events.

Pitcairn nodded to his men. The big Scot held him tight as Red-whiskers pulled Proctor's arm back and thrust the blade at Pitcairn's stomach. Proctor struggled to divert it, but the knife was already moving toward the officer's white waistcoat.

Proctor's forearm felt as if it had slammed into stone. The tip of the blade snapped off, flying away to nick the sleeve of Proctor's jacket.

Pitcairn stood there with his arms still open, one eyebrow curled up like a question mark.

Proctor panted through the big hand clamped over his mouth. What had just happened?

The circle of light glowed at Pitcairn's throat again. Proctor detected the outline of a chain at his neck and a medallion of some sort under his shirt.

Pitcairn pried the knife out of Proctor's hand and returned it to William. “I'll replace it with a better one,” he promised.

“There's no need, sir,” William mumbled.

The big Scot released Proctor from his bear hug and shoved him aside.

The door opened behind them, and Hannah stuck her head out into the alley. Seeing the expression on Proctor's face, she glanced quickly up at the marines and said, “Has there been

some trouble here?"

"No, ma'am," Proctor said. He tugged his coat back into place. "These gentlemen were just giving me a demonstration in the superiority of London knives."

She looked puzzled. Major Pitcairn said, "We were trading opinions. We both learned a few things."

"As long as all the gentlemen are satisfied and none of the other customers are disturbed," she said, and then she tossed a plate of bones and garbage over the side of a small fence where a pig roused itself from muddy slumber and starting rooting through it.

The door closed behind her. Pitcairn studied Proctor judiciously. "It's essential for you colonials to realize that you can't hurt us."

"I had no desire to hurt you," Proctor snapped. He would have added *before*, but he was still shaky.

"You're full of spirit, but that spirit ought to be aimed against the French and Spaniards and other godless papists, not against your fellow Englishmen."

"My father fought against the French in the last war," Proctor said. "We're not afraid of a fight."

"Don't be so eager for one either," Pitcairn replied. "You are fools to think that you'd be better off without the empire. Spread that word among your fellows."

The big marine shoved Proctor aside, and the four of them peeled away to exit through the gate. Proctor turned away to go inside when a hand gripped his arm. It was William, the young officer, and he held his other hand open in a gesture of peace.

"The knife was just tinfoil," he whispered.

Proctor snorted in disbelief. "Tinfoil?"

"Yes, that's all," he said. "A joke, no harm done."

Proctor shrugged his arm free from William's grip. "No, no harm done."

"We're all one people, Englishmen, no matter which side of the ocean saw our birth. There's no need for us to start fights with one another."

For people who didn't want a fight, they did an awful lot of provocation. "I don't recall starting anything," Proctor said. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

His blood was still racing as he returned to the coffee-house, squeezing up against the wall to let another man pass on his way to the privy. He threaded his way through the crowd and returned to the table where Emily sat alone.

"Where were you so long?" she asked. "And what's the matter? You look upset."

He slid into his seat. "I'm fine."

She reached under the table, her fingers finding his hand. He was looking over his shoulder at the back door when he felt her give his hand a little squeeze. "I think Daddy likes you," she said.

"Of course he likes me."

He had answered more than half distracted, still trying to understand what he had just

witnessed. He realized he'd made a mistake the instant Emily's hand yanked free of his. She pushed her chair back and sat up straight.

"It's nice to see that you're not *too* full of yourself," she said. "Humility is such a rare trait in young men."

"I'm sorry, Emily, it's just ... just ..."

"Just what, Mister Brown? Spit it out."

"It's just that it wasn't a tinfoil knife." There. He'd spit it out.

"What are you talking about?"

"The knife that British marine had, it wasn't tinfoil." It had nothing to do with the knife Proctor realized. Major Pitcairn had been wearing a protective charm about his throat. That was what Proctor had seen. It shone actively anytime the major was threatened, even by so little as a bump in the street. "It was magic."

"Magic?" Emily's face was puzzled, as though she were trying to figure out if he was joking.

Proctor opened his mouth, but no explanation formed on his lips. He'd said too much.

"Hannah said she saw you talking to Major Pitcairn," Rucke interrupted, returning to the table with a plate of roasted chicken, which he thumped down on the table. "Dig in. She thought there might have been a problem, but I see that you're fine."

"I bumped into the major again," Proctor said. "We talked about London and steel."

"Good." Rucke squeezed his large body into his seat. "That's a smart lad. Always make use of all your connections. If you can sell beef to the beefeaters, you're well on your way to making your fortune." He cleared his throat. "Emily tells me you serve in the colonial militia."

"Not just the militia, Daddy, but the minutemen," Emily said. Though her voice was cooler than it had been before.

"I don't understand the difference," Rucke said.

"The minutemen are required to do additional training," Proctor explained. "We have to be able to scout trails, run longer distances, reload and fire faster. And we have to be ready to fight at a moment's alarm."

"It sounds like the sort of foolishness that takes time away from honest work," Rucke said. "And it's the kind of thing that the rabble-rousers in this colony—Otis, Adams, Hancock, the sort—are using to raise up the folks against the royal governor. I'm concerned that you would be part of that, Brown."

Though she sat perfectly primly, Emily pressed her toe against Proctor's foot to let him know this was an important question to her father.

Proctor pulled a drumstick off the chicken, tearing off a piece of the meat. "My father served in the militia, during the last war with the French and their Indian allies. They didn't have the minutemen then, but he was a ranger, which is similar. If I'm going to do anything, I want to do it to the best of my abilities, just like he did. And he'd be disappointed in me if I didn't do my duty to the colony as he had done. So that's one reason."

"And the other?" Rucke asked, following Proctor's example and tearing off the other

drumstick.

Proctor put the meat in his mouth and chewed it a moment to give himself time to think. He swallowed, saying, "All the men in my community belong to the militia. Not just Lincoln, but in Concord and Lexington, and all the towns around. So it's a great means to reinforce connections. That's how I came to find out that old man Leary was interested in selling his farm."

Rucke chewed on his own food before he finally nodded, if not in approval then at least in understanding. Emily relaxed, taking her foot off Proctor's.

"When you get ready to move your cattle toward Boston market," Rucke said, "you might want to begin by contacting a man named Elihu Danvers. Danvers has a house near the mouth of the river, across from Cambridge. Though he's no great sailor anymore, he moves goods around the bay—"

As he continued with his advice, Proctor grinned at Emily around his mouthful of chicken. Of course her father liked him.

She smiled back, but with tighter lips; beneath that smile lingered worry over her father's unexplained comment about magic.

Eventually, Proctor would have to figure out a way to explain the magic. He wouldn't be able to keep it secret from her, not if they were going to be together. He reached under the table, wiped his fingers on his breeches, and then stretched his arm to try to touch her hand. A huge ripping sound stopped Rucke in the middle of his description of the harbor shipping lanes.

"What was that?" he said.

Proctor looked over his shoulder at the torn seam in his linen jacket and sighed. "That's what happens when you grow more than you expected."

Proctor dreamed he heard a gunshot and it woke him, or else a gunshot stirred him from his dreams.

Either way, he lay half awake in bed. The full moon was past its apex, shining down through the gap in his curtains, so it was a few hours before the break of dawn. He thought of Emily and the next chance he might have to see her. As he tugged up the wool blankets and rolled over to go back to sleep, a horse galloped down the Concord Road. The hoofbeats grew closer, and a voice shouted across the spring fields.

“The regulars are coming! The regulars are coming!”

The Redcoats were marching.

Sleep sloughed off him. When Proctor had returned from Boston a few days ago, his military captain had passed the word to be ready. The Redcoats were planning on taking the supplies from the armory in Concord. Proctor jumped from bed and dressed in an instant, tugging suspenders over his shoulders as the door creaked open below. He ducked his head when he came to the narrow steps and ran downstairs. Outside, the chickens cackled in their coop.

A candle flickered in the kitchen. His father sat shut-eyed in the corner, propped in a high-backed chair, wrapped in blankets. Light snagged on the pale scar across his forehead from when he'd been scalped and left for dead during the French and Indian wars.

There'd be no chance of anything like that to night. The regular army and the colonial militia, they were all Englishmen at root. A show of force would remind the royal government of that, just as it had in February at Salem.

Proctor retrieved his father's old doglock musket and tin canteen from the cupboard. Powder horn and hunting bag went over his left shoulder, hatchet in his belt, hat in hand. He reached for the door, but it swung open in his face.

His mother barged in with a lantern in her hand. She unloaded two eggs from her dress pocket into a bowl on the table. “Where're you off to in such a hurry?” she asked.

“To muster—the Redcoats are marching on the armory.”

“Not without a scrying first you aren't.”

“Mother, there isn't time.”

“I've been awake all night with worry, because I knew something was coming. Now that I know what it is, I'll not risk you dying from the guns of the Redcoats without a glimpse of the future first.” She blew on her hands and rubbed them together for warmth.

Prudence Brown was ten years younger than her husband, but years of labor had aged her like a tree on a cliff. She was deeply rooted and could withstand any storm, even if she was too weather-worn to bear much fruit. Nothing could dissuade her once she had a notion to do something.

Truth was, Proctor wanted to see what was coming too. He propped his musket against the

door and put down his hat. "Let's be quick about it."

She fetched another bowl, a pitcher of water, and moved the candle to the center of the table. Proctor held the chair for her. Wooden legs scuffed across the floor as he pulled his own seat catty-corner to hers.

She nudged the broad shallow bowl to the middle of the table and poured water in it. Drops splashed cold and sharp onto the back of Proctor's hand.

One by one, she retrieved five small candle stubs from her pocket and handed them to Proctor, who arranged them in a circle around the bowl. She frowned, made minor adjustments in their position, then lit them with the candle. A honeyed scent spread across the table.

Proctor tapped his shoe impatiently, then forced his foot to still. The other minutemen would be marching without him, and scrying didn't always require any candles or rituals.

His own talent had appeared by accident, no rituals required. He'd been carrying in the eggs and dropped one—it'd practically leapt out of his hands, an egg near to hatching that left the tiny chick inside sprawled dead, wet in the dirt. Without knowing why he said it, Proctor announced that his friend Samuel was dead. The next day they heard that Samuel had been shot by Redcoats during a riot in Boston. That's when Prudence Brown finally told her son about the family talent for witchcraft, passed down generation to generation from their room in Salem. His mother's maiden name was Proctor; one of her ancestors, John Proctor, had been hung as a witch during the trials.

He'd have to tell Emily about the magic too. He was determined to do it sooner rather than later, in case someday their children, if they should be blessed that way, showed the talent.

Prudence Brown turned the two brown eggs over in her hands, squinting at the specks.

"I'm surprised you could find any eggs this time of night," he said.

"The hens lay more at the full moon." She pursed her lips, selecting one, and had it poised to crack on the edge of the bowl.

Over in the corner, Proctor's father moaned and rocked so hard his chair banged against the wall. Proctor winced—his father hadn't been the same since his apoplexy.

His mother switched eggs. She tapped the second one on the edge of the bowl, letting the white drain from the cracked shell into the water.

Her free hand sought Proctor's, gave it a squeeze. "Holy Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name," she prayed.

Proctor leaned forward to study the picture formed by the egg white.

"If I have found grace in Thy sight, then show me a sign that Thou speakest with me. Be Thou a light in the darkness of days, showing us the way forward, that we might know the path Thou wishest us to take."

A shudder ran through her arm. The eggshell crunched in her palm, and the yolk splashed out into the middle of the bowl.

They both flinched. Proctor didn't know if it meant anything or was just an accidental spasm. She didn't say.

The yolk floated in the center like the sun reflected in a pond. Candlelight slicked off its thick bulge as egg white filmed over the surface, forming ghosts in the water. A streak of red blood trailed off the yolk into the white.

Hairs went up on Proctor's neck. He could feel a vision gathering, like bees to a hive, in the back of his head, but he wasn't ready for it yet.

His mother flicked the eggshell pieces onto the table and wiped her hand on her apron. She licked her right forefinger and traced the name of the angel Gabriel across the circle of water. Gabriel, the messenger, revealer of the future.

The yolk swirled around, off-center, as reflections from the candles danced with one another. A sharp intake of breath and his mother pulled her hand back to the edge of the bowl.

She swallowed, then tugged Proctor's finger up to the bowl. "Take a moment to sweep your mind clean," she said.

He nodded acquiescence, but the broom in his head chased futilely after the stray thoughts. The other minutemen would already be on their way, and he didn't want to look like Johnny-come-lately. Then a tightness formed in his chest, the way it always did when the sight was coming on.

"Heavenly Father," he said. "If it pleases Thee, give me a sign, so that I may better know Thy will."

His eyes drifted shut.

He saw a militiaman, an officer, on the green in the pale before dawn. A horse stamped through the grass—its flanks, the rider's boots, blocking his view of the militiaman's face. The vision was clearer, more vivid than any Proctor had ever scryed. He saw the mounted Redcoat officer's face flush with anger. A golden coin of fire burned at the Redcoat's throat.

Pitcairn.

Pitcairn leaned over and aimed a pistol at the militiaman's back. He was going to shoot—

A sudden bang made Proctor's eyes blink open, but it was only his father's chair cracking into the wall. The old man moaned as if he'd been wounded.

Proctor breathed deeply and fell back into the vision. At first everything was white, like fog, only dry and sharp—the smoke from musket fire. The bitter taste of black powder ran across his lips. A single line of red bled through the white haze. Then more lines of red slashing across the back of his lids until they resolved into shapes of men, marching—no, running—away. The backs of the Redcoats. A sense of their fear, of his own elation, flushed through him.

His eyes opened.

"And what did you see?" his mother asked quietly.

Pulling his hands away from the bowl, he said, "I saw the Redcoats, Mother. Marching back to Boston, in a fine hurry."

"Is that all?"

He nodded firmly.

Her mouth tightened and she jabbed a finger into the yolk, breaking it. She whipped the egg into the water, mixing it all together.

"I heard gunfire," she said. "And I think I saw men shot and dying."

"That last part is your fear talking. I didn't see anything like that, only the Redcoats marching off."

"It would gratify me deeply if you were not to muster," she said. "Let other mothers wish their children to spare send theirs, and not ask me to risk my only child."

Proctor couldn't blame her, not with his father all but gone. But he had to do his duty. "I'm on the roster, Mother, so I have to muster. Don't worry, we just need to show the government our resolve to stand up for our rights. It won't come to shooting."

Maybe a single round of warning fire, just for show, like in his vision, and the Redcoats would march back to Boston. If only he knew what the golden coin at the Redcoat officer's throat meant. If only he could be sure it was Pitcairn.

He rose to go. His mother leaned over and blew out the five candles in one breath. "Be cautious," she said. "The future is a blank road to me like it has never been before."

"I won't do anything to put myself in harm's way," he said, picking up his hat and musket. "Besides, you know what Miss Emily would do to me if I got myself hurt."

His mother smiled, just as he'd hoped. She was almost as fond of Emily Rucke as Proctor was. The two of them were a bit young to be getting married yet, at only twenty and nineteen. But in truth, he expected to rightfully take over the farm soon if his father's health continued to fade, and he and Emily could live there with his mother.

"You best hurry on then," his mother said. She wrapped an end of bread and a slice of cheese in cloth, and tucked it in his pocket. "You wouldn't want them to muster without you."

"No, ma'am," he answered. He paused at the door and looked back to see his mother fussing with the blankets around his father's shoulders. He tipped his hat to her and ran out into the night.

The wind gusted, the air chillier than he expected. He stopped at the well to fill his canteen. When he was done, he pulled Emily's yellow ribbon from his pocket and tied it to the canteen buckle. Smoothing the silk through his fingers made him eager to see her again.

He crossed the pasture toward the road, his path broken by boulders. Lights flickered like stars in distant windows, forming a constellation of his neighbors. Shadows moved through the moonlight on the road ahead.

"Hold up," he shouted.

Someone called back, and the shadows paused. Proctor ran across the pasture, his horse, bag, and canteen banging against his sides. He climbed the stone wall that lined the road. The moon was bright enough to illuminate the faces of the men. There was old Robert Munroe carrying the same heavy Queen's Arm musket that he carried during the last war when he fought beside Proctor's father. Square-jawed Everett Simes and his nephew Arthur were also there. Arthur had turned fifteen back in January, but he was small enough to pass for twelve. Although he was too young to be enrolled on the official militia rosters, he showed up to

every muster.

“Good morning, Proctor,” old Munroe said, tugging at his beard. “Your father not coming?”

“No, sir,” Proctor answered. “His health won't allow.”

“No, didn't think so. It's too bad. He was always a good un in the thick of it. Sure hope you take after him some.”

“I could do without seeing the sharp end of an Indian tomahawk,” Proctor said, and the other men chuckled. He started one way and they turned the other. “Shouldn't we be headed into Niptown to muster?” he asked.

The locals called the new town of Lincoln Niptown because it had been made from a nip of Concord, a nip of Lexington, and a nip of Bedford, sitting in a spot amid all three. Proctor still went to church at the meeting house in Concord, because that's where his family had always gone, and he served with the militia in Lincoln because that was where he was assigned. In a way he felt like part of all three towns, and like part of none of them. Someday he would have to choose a spot and make it his own.

“Cap'n Smith says that a few of us ought to fetch back a firsthand report of the situation from Lexington,” Arthur explained. “So that's where we're going.”

“Well, all right then,” Proctor said, and he started in the other direction.

“Say, Proctor, we'll march right past the Rucke place, won't we?” Everett asked.

“Hadn't really thought about it,” Proctor said, “but you may be right.” He tried to sound as if he were talking about the weather, but he was eager to change the subject before they started teasing him. Arthur carried a long fowling piece for his weapon, so Proctor said, “You going bird hunting there, Arthur?”

“Sure,” Arthur answered back, deadpan. “Plan to shoot some redbirds if I see 'em.”

Robert Munroe and Everett Simes laughed, so Proctor chuckled with them, but the remarks made him uncomfortable. Sure, there'd been some conflict between the soldiers and the colonists. Despite his unpleasant encounter with Pitcairn, though, they were all Englishmen in the end. Just like Emily's father said. They might squabble with one another the way a large family always did, but in the end they'd set aside their differences and make things right because it was better for everybody. It wouldn't come to shooting.

The other three began to chatter about how many Redcoats might be marching out of Boston, and how many militiamen would show up to fight them. Proctor walked in silence, slowly drawing ahead. As they passed through the swampy land west of Lexington, the wind played odd tricks with sounds, bringing snatches of voices from homes too far away to see. Every farm house between Cambridge and Salem was awake by now, having the same conversation about Redcoats and militia.

When Proctor rounded Concord Hill and came in sight of the rooftops of Lexington, the large, familiar house ahead was lit up bright as day. Even from a distance, he recognized the feminine silhouette in the main window.

As he ran ahead and up to the porch, the silhouette disappeared. He was reaching for the brass knocker when the door flew open. A heavy brown woman stood there in a dress thrown hastily over her shift.

“Sorry to come calling so late, Bess,” Proctor said, addressing the house slave Thomas Rucke had brought with him from a voyage to the West Indies. “I wondered, if Miss Emily was awake, if I might have a brief word with her.”

“She right here, be out in a second.” Sleep filled Bess's eyes, and she frowned as somebody behind her nudged her gently aside. It was Emily, in one of her best dresses, despite the hour. More dark curls than usual tumbled out from under the edges of her cap.

“Well, this is certainly an unexpected visit,” she said. She glanced at his weapons and her face turned cool. “I can't imagine what you're grinning at.”

Proctor dropped his gaze and his smile. “Might be because I'm looking at the sweetest woman I know.”

“You only say that because my father is in the sugar trade.”

“I'd think you were the sweetest woman in the colonies if your father traded lemon rinds.” She still wasn't smiling back. Bess pushed past them, a drowsy-eyed chaperone, shawl over her shift, carrying a basket of darning. She grunted as she eased herself into the porch rocking chair, spreading the work on her lap as the wood creaked rhythmically. Proctor said, “I think you made a good impression on your father.”

“You did,” she said. “The only thing that concerns him is the militia business.”

“Emily—”

A faint voice down the road called, “Brown?”

Proctor looked over his shoulder. Turning back to Emily, he said in a rush, “You must believe me, there's nothing to fear.”

“Oh, Proctor,” she said, wringing her hands. “There was another incident in Boston after you left. Father says those rebels, that mob behind that tea party and everything since, they want to start a war.”

He shook his head. “No, no one wants to start a war.”

“Brown!” The voice was stronger as the other three militiamen marched around the bend.

“I have to go, Emily.”

She stared meaningfully at the yellow ribbon tied to his canteen. “If my affections mean anything to you at all, Proctor Brown, you will not be part of any mob to night.”

The creaking on the porch had stopped. Bess sat with her chin on her chest, the darning egg naked in her lap. Impulsively, Proctor took Emily's hand and leaned close to her. “You remember how I mentioned magic to you, when we were at the Coffee-House,” he said in a low voice.

“Yes,” she said, more puzzled now than angry.

“Sometimes I can see a short ways into the future. You might call it scrying.”

“It sounds like you mean witchcraft.” She tried to pull her hand away, but he held on tightly.

“It's not like that,” he said. “It's like ... like the parable of the talents. God gave me the talent, and He meant me to use it, not bury it. I used it to night, and I saw the Redcoats marching back to Boston. So there won't be any shooting, and there won't be any war.”

Emily yanked her hand away. Her eyes were startled wide.

“You done courting there, Brown?” Everett Simes's voice said right behind him.

“Yes, sir, I am,” Proctor said. He straightened up, slid his thumb under his powder-horn strap to readjust it, and gave Emily a firm nod. “I was just telling Miss Rucke here there's nothing for her to worry about.”

“Good eve, Miss Rucke,” Everett said, squinting toward the east to see if dawn had poked its nose over the horizon. “Or maybe it's good day. It'd be best if your father didn't come on to visit you. With his support for the governor and all, he might find a welcome made of tobacco and feathers.”

“It's so pleasant to be threatened on my own front porch. I see the kind of company you've decided to keep, Mister Brown. Be so good as to call on me again when you can come alone. She went over to the rocker and shook the slave awake. “Come, Bess, we should go inside. It's too dangerous to be out here. Good day, gentlemen.”

“It won't come to shooting,” Proctor assured her.

She closed the door behind her without looking back.

Chapter 3

Proctor hopped off the porch and crossed the little yard to rejoin the militiamen. As they resumed their march toward Lexington Green, he considered whether he needed to go back to repair his understanding with Emily. She was high-spirited—he loved that trait in her, though it meant she upset easily. Likely she'd be fine in a day or two, once the current commotion had passed and she saw that he was right.

The conversation of the other men turned to the spring planting, and to Everett's trouble with one of his plow oxen, and from there to the milk trade with Boston. The air grew colder and the men's breath frosted as they spoke. When the conversation came back around to the British, it shoved Proctor's thoughts from Emily to Pitcairn. The scrying confirmed his earlier sense: the gold medallion was definitely some kind of protective charm. He didn't know how it worked or what it meant, but the rest of his vision was clear enough: the Redcoats would march back to Boston.

They passed the Lexington burying ground, with its grave markers thrust up from the darkness like tripstones. The four men fell into a natural silence. Cattle lowed uneasily in the common pen as they came to the green.

Lexington Green was a triangle where two roads combined to go into Boston. They passed the school house at the wide end of the triangle and crossed the open grass toward the meeting house that sat at the point. A few small groups of militiamen moved like shadows across the green. Maybe a dozen others, their faces lit by lanterns, were gathered around a cask of ale outside one of the houses that faced the green.

“Don't look like they're ready for the Redcoats,” Munroe muttered. “If the Redcoats are truly coming.”

“Don't look like there's more'n fifty men here total,” Everett said.

“And that's with a thousand Redcoats marching from Boston,” Arthur said. “How will we fight 'em?”

“There won't be any fighting—” Proctor started to say, but he was interrupted by a ragged volley of musket fire east of the green. He fumbled for his powder horn.

Old Munroe laughed at him, planted the butt-end of his weapon in the ground and leaned on it. “I think that's them as made up their minds to enter Buckman's tavern.”

That's when Proctor heard casual whoops and laughter from the same direction. But of course—you couldn't carry a loaded weapon into a tavern. He relaxed, laughing at himself.

“We could go to the tavern,” Arthur suggested hopefully, and his uncle glared at him.

“That'll be the best place to find Cap'n Parker,” Munroe said. “He uses it as his headquarters when the militia drills.”

They walked toward the tavern, passing the big oak tree and the bell tower. As they did so a man came out of the tavern and crossed the road toward the green. Proctor would've walked past him in the moonlight, but Monroe stopped and lifted his chin in greeting.

“Good evening to you, Cap'n. We were just coming in search of you.”

Parker stopped. He was a tall man in his mid-forties with a large head and high brow. He coughed into his fist, sick with consumption—his eyes and his cheeks were sunken from dark shadows even at night. “Good evening, Robert. Who're your friends?”

“These are the Simeses, cousins from up by Lincoln,” Munroe answered. “And this is Brown. We picked him up on the road in.”

“We're grateful for your hike, but it doesn't 'pear as though we'll see any Redcoats to night after all,” Parker told them. “I was just giving men permission to disperse to their homes, though a few decided to go into the tavern to warm themselves first.”

Everett sighed loudly. “But if I go home now, I'll have to plow, and my ox isn't fit for it.”

Parker chuckled and excused himself to take the same message over to the men gathered around the keg of ale. Arthur yawned and stared down the road toward Boston. “Guess we've wasted our time.”

“Not Proctor,” Munroe said. “At least he had the chance to visit his sweetheart.”

“And next time I see her, I can tell her I was right, that nothing happened,” Proctor said. He was relieved. With luck, he could stop by Emily's house for breakfast and find some way to make her understand what he was trying to tell her about the talents.

He was shifting the bag and horn on his shoulder for the march back home when a man ran onto the green from the Boston Road.

“The regulars have passed the Rocks,” the newcomer shouted. “They're only half a mile away!”

“What do we do?” Arthur asked.

“Keep a cool head,” Proctor told him. “This'll be peaceful.”

“Let's find Parker and see what he wants us to do,” Munroe said.

The warning spread faster than their conversation. Before they could find Parker, a man ran out of the tavern and sprinted to the belfry. In seconds the bells were clanging. The sound drew Captain Parker and everyone else.

“Cap'n,” Munroe shouted as he headed across the green. “Hey, Cap'n.”

“Seems I was mistaken after all,” Parker said, hurrying toward the noise. “The Redcoats are marching, and we mean to show them our resolve. Would you gentlemen be so good as to parade with my company?”

“That's why we came,” Munroe said, and Everett said, “Guess I'll miss that plowing after all.”

“What about the young gentleman?” Parker asked with a nod toward Arthur.

“I can stand in line,” Arthur said.

Everett put a hand on his shoulder. “And do exactly as he's told.”

“I thank you,” Parker said, turning immediately away and yelling, “Billy! Billy, get your drum and beat to arms!”

The other three ran off to join the rest of Parker's gathering company. Munroe stopped and

looked back at Proctor, who still hadn't moved. "You coming?"

There was still time for his scrying to come true, Proctor told himself. The Redcoats would march up, see the militia making their stand, and they'd turn around and go home, just like they had at Salem. If he was lucky, he'd still get to eat breakfast with Emily and make things right with her.

"I'm coming," he said, and he followed after them.

For the next few moments, Lexington Green reminded him of an anthill stirred up with a stick. Men ran in every direction at once. The coming dawn cast a pale gray twilight, so that everything took on the aspect of shapes emerging from a mist. Captain Parker shouted at the men to form a line at the wide end of the green. Men from the tavern reloaded their weapons as they ran to obey. Proctor and the other three took a spot on the far end of the line, close to the Concord Road.

Captain Parker paced up and down the line, shouting, "Form up, form up!" A young boy was beating the drums, the bells still sounded in the belfry, and families, drawn by the noise, gathered by the school house, where they called to their husbands and sons for an explanation.

One of the militiamen left the line to go speak to his wife. Parker ran him down and shoved him back in line. "The time for second thoughts is done," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear him. "Now form up, just like you trained."

Munroe loaded his musket and fitted the ramrod in place under the barrel. He nudged Proctor. "You might want to feed that weapon if you plan to empty its guts."

"I'll wait," Proctor said. He looked down the line of men and made a quick count. "If it's sixty of us against a thousand Redcoats, there won't be any shooting."

Arthur finished loading his fowling piece. "Here they come," he said, his voice shaking. "Here they come now."

The Lexington drum was drowned out by the sound of the approaching drummers, and the first Redcoats marched around the bend beyond the meeting house. To judge by the brogue, there was an Irishman who set the pace, his accent carrying across the green as he yelled the soldiers on. They came fast, for all their delay in getting this far, and once they started they seemed to keep on coming, a long line of red uniforms stretching as far as the eye could see. Proctor tried to count them too, but the dawn twilight blurred their numbers. His heart began to pound—there were hundreds, maybe even a thousand of them. In contrast with the militia they formed a line with startling alacrity, several ranks deep, as wide as the green, and not more than seventy yards away. A deadly range for massed fire.

They would march back to Boston. He had scryed it.

Three British officers on horses rode onto the green and galloped at the center of the colonial line. One of them waved a sword and yelled, "Throw down your arms! You rebels! Throw down your arms, damn you!"

Pitcairn's voice. Unmistakable.

A flame of anger jetted through Proctor, a reaction to the protective charm that Pitcairn wore. He reached into his hunting bag for a ball to load his musket. The militia might have

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