

PRAISE FOR *THE CAPTURED BRIDE*

“*The Captured Bride* captured me with its fast-paced plot, flesh-and-bone characters, and gritty portrayal of the American frontier. But it was the can’t-turn-the-page-fast-enough romance between Mercy and Elias that sparked like gunpowder and won me over completely. Well done!”

—Laura Frantz, author of *The Lacemaker*

“Taut and timeless, the heart of liberty beats strong and sure in this breathless Colonial tale where the counterfeit marriage of two patriots is as divided as the fledgling nation for which they fight. Steeped in rich historical adventure, *The Captured Bride* will not only capture your heart and your sleep, but inspire your soul.”

—Julie Lessman, award-winning author of *The Daughters of Boston*, *Winds of Change*, and *Isle of Hope* series

“I’ve never met a Michelle Griep book I didn’t love! I felt like I was traveling through the colonial backwoods of New York State where dangers, adventures, and mystery confronted the characters at every turn. But the best part? The romance truly made me breathless. Another winner from this fabulous author!”

—MaryLu Tyndall, author of the bestselling *Legacy of the King’s Pirates* series

“Michelle Griep is at the top of her game with *The Captured Bride*, a riveting tale of divided loyalties and enduring love set in colonial America. The exciting plot is filled with intrigue and danger, and the characters so real, they practically jump off the page. This is one for the keeper shelf!”

—Margaret Brownley, *New York Times* bestselling author and author of *Cowboy Charm School*

“What an adventure! Michelle Griep’s beautifully written, intricately plotted story blends fascinating details of life during the French and Indian War with unforgettable characters and high-stakes adventure. *The Captured Bride* should come with a warning: Reading this book may lead to sleepless nights as you tell yourself, ‘Just one more chapter, just one more.’”

—Amanda Cabot, bestselling author of *A Borrowed Dream*

“Breathtaking. Unforgettable. Just two of my thoughts as I paused only a few pages into this magnificent story. From the gritty depths of a traitor’s prison to the pristine but dangerous beauty of the lush scenery along the trail, I tumbled into the tale of Mercy and Elias and did not want to put this book down. Griep has outdone herself with this historical masterpiece.”

–Kathleen Y’Barbo, author of *The Pirate Bride*
and the Fairweather Key series

“A heart-pounding read, Michelle Griep takes us deep into the New York wilderness where only the tough survive, and only by God’s grace. The characters spring to life from the first pages, keeping you spellbound through each peril while the romance captures your heart. With this epic novel, Griep has firmly established herself as a top frontier writer. A must-read!”

–Misty M. Beller, bestselling author of *This Treacherous Journey*

“Michelle Griep has done it again—sweeping adventure, a man of honor, a woman of strength, heart-stopping romance, and a pace that will not let you go! Venture with Mercy and Elias deep into the wilderness of Upstate New York during the French and Indian War, and taste the peril that so often defined the American colonial era, weathered by the courage and faith of those who went before us.”

–Shannon McNear, author of *The Counterfeit Tory* in
The Backcountry Brides Collection and 2014 RITA finalist

“Mercy Lytton may be a *Captured Bride*, but I was captured by her, Elias Dubois, and Matthew Prinn from page one. Griep’s eloquent style, masterful storytelling, and natural infused humor carry you through to the end before you realize it. Totally sigh-worthy!”

–Ane Mulligan, award-winning author of *Home to Chapel Springs*

*The
Captured
Bride*



MICHELLE
GRIEP

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Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.



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DEDICATION

To my wilderness-loving daughter
and her redheaded mountain man,
Callie and Ryan Leichty.
And, as always,
to the Lover and Keeper of my soul, *Iesos*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

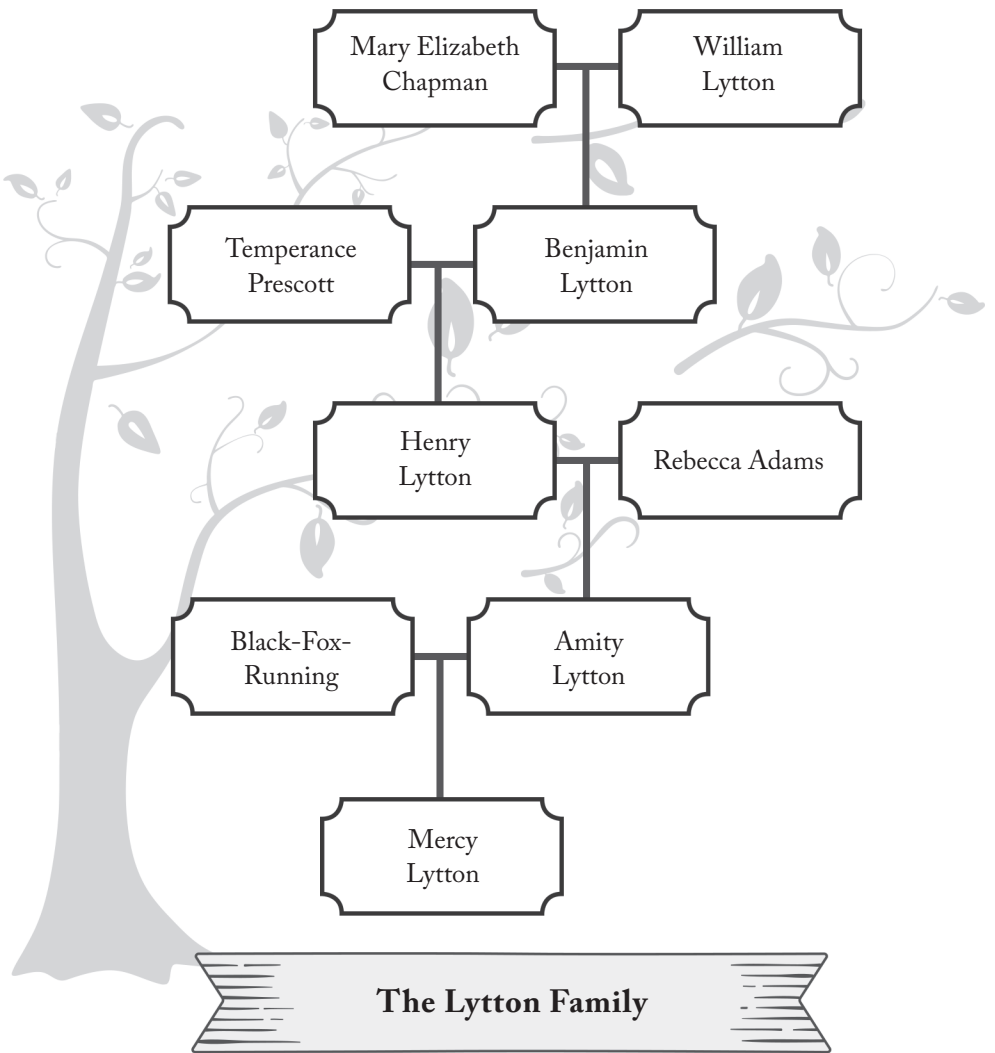
While writing is a solitary profession, a novel is never written alone. My hearty thanks go out to the critique partners who held my sweaty hands on this story: Yvonne Anderson, Laura Frantz, Mark Griep, Shannon McNear, Ane Mulligan, Chawna Schroeder, and MaryLu Tyndall. And also an honorable mention to Dani Snyder, my first-reader extraordinaire.

A huge thank-you to historical reenactors everywhere, but especially those who perform an awesome three-day event at Old Fort Niagara in upstate New York. If you ever get the chance to see the French and Indian War Encampment (usually held near the Fourth of July), it's totally worth the effort.

And as always, my gratitude to Barbour Publishing for taking a chance on a girl like me. Waving at you, Becky Germany.

Readers, you make this writing gig all worthwhile. And guess what? I love to hear from you! Follow my adventures and share yours with me at www.michellegriep.com.

Daughters of the Mayflower



William Lytton married Mary Elizabeth Chapman (Plymouth 1621)

Parents of 13 children (including Benjamin)

Benjamin Lytton married Temperance Prescott (Massachusetts 1668)

Children included Henry

Henry Lytton married Rebecca Adams (New York 1712)

Children were Goodwill and Amity

Amity Lytton married Black-Fox-Running, a Mohawk warrior (New York 1737)

Only child was Mercy Lytton (Kahente)

MOHAWK LANGUAGE GLOSSARY

Aktsi:'a: Older sister

Ebressaronon: Wyandot

Iesos: Jesus

Kahente: Before her time

Kahnnyen'kehàka: Mohawk nation

Kanien'keha: Native name for the Mohawk language

Kaia'takerahs: Goat

Ó:nen ki wáhi: Farewell for now

Ó:nen: Goodbye

Onontio: Big mountain

Rake'niba: My father

Sachem: Leader

Skennen: Peace

Skén:nen tsi satonrîshen: Rest in peace

Tsi Nen:we Enkonnoronhkhwake: I love you forever

MOHAWK LULLABY

Ho, ho, Watanay.

Ho, ho, Watanay.

Ho, ho, Watanay.

Ki-yo-ki-na.

Ki-yo-ki-na.

Sleep, sleep, my little one.

Sleep, sleep, my little one.

Sleep, sleep, my little one.

Sleep now.

Sleep now.

FRENCH LANGUAGE GLOSSARY

Chiens Anglais: English dogs

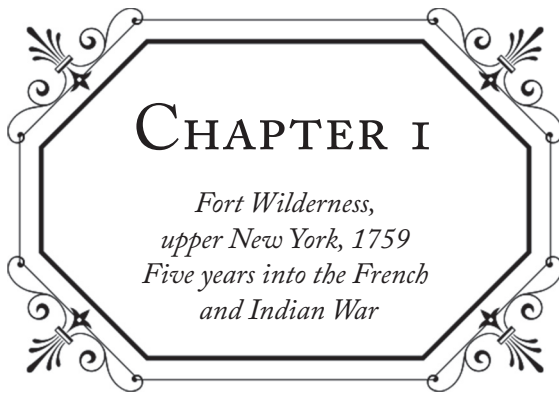
Démissionner: Stand down

La fin: The end

Merci: Thank you

Regardez: Look

Rien, monsieur: Nothing, sir



CHAPTER I

*Fort Wilderness,
upper New York, 1759
Five years into the French
and Indian War*

It ain't right. *You ain't right.*" Mercy Lytton brushed off Captain Matthew Prinn's comment as easily as she rubbed off the dried mud marring her buckskin leggings. Too bad she couldn't so easily rid herself of the bone-deep weariness dogging her steps. Matthew had a point—somewhat. Going from a scouting campaign and on to the next mission without a few hours of sleep wasn't right.

She glanced at her self-appointed protector as they crossed the Fort Wilderness parade ground. "Tain't about right. 'Tis about duty."

Despite the blood under his nails and bruises on his jaw, Matthew scratched at three weeks' worth of whiskers on his face. "Seems to me by now your duty ought to be raisin' a troop of your own littles."

And there it was. Again.

She bit back one of the many curses embedded in her head from a life amongst warriors. A bitter smile twisted her lips, yet she said nothing. It was a losing argument—and she'd had her fill of loss.

So they walked in silence, save for the guffaws of a group of soldiers nearby, smoking pipes just outside a casement doorway. A late March breeze skimmed over the top of the palisade surrounding the outpost, and she shivered. She could forgo rest for a few more hours, but changing out of the damp trade shirt beneath her hunting frock was mandatory.

As they neared the brigadier general's door, a grim-faced Mohawk strode out and stopped in front of her, blocking her path.

"There is ice in that one's veins." Black-Fox-Running spoke in *Kanien'keha*, tipping his head back toward the general's quarters. Afternoon sun flashed like lightning in his dark eyes. "Return home, *Kahente*. We are done here."

Captain Prinn bypassed them both and disappeared inside the rugged log building. Ever the quick-witted strategist when it came to fighting, he clearly sensed a coming battle between her and her father.

Mercy widened her stance yet bowed her head in deference. Searching for the right words, she studied the fine layer of gray dirt hardened on the toes of her moccasins. Appeasement was never a clever policy, but sometimes a necessary evil. “Your wisdom is unequalled, my father.”

He grabbed her chin and lifted her face. His black gaze bored into hers. Even so, a hint of a curve lifted the edges of his lips. “Wise counsel or not, you will do as you will.”

She stared at him but said nothing. A survival tactic—one her mother should have learned.

“The best *sachem* is not the one who persuades people to his point of view. He is the one in whose presence most people find truth.” Releasing her, he squared his shoulders. “There is no truth left in the English father Bragg.”

She sighed, long and low. He needn’t have told her what she already knew. But this wasn’t about General Bragg or Black-Fox-Running—and never had been. Reaching out, she placed her hand on her father’s arm, where hard muscle still knotted beneath four decades of scars. “I respect your insight, *Rake’niba*. I will consider it.”

His teeth bared with the closest semblance of a smile he ever gave. “That is the most I can expect from you, for you will land wherever the wind blows. *Ó:nen Kabente.*”

“No!” Her breath caught. Why use a forever goodbye? She tightened her grip on her father’s arm. “Only until we meet again.”

Shrugging out of her grasp, he stalked past her, leaving behind his familiar scent of bear grease and strength. She watched him go, tears blurring her sight. While she hated yielding to the will of any man, for him she would almost bend.

Proud head lifted high, Black-Fox-Running called to a group of warriors, her brother amongst them, clustered in front of the pen with their horses. Without a word, they mounted. She turned from the sight, unwilling to watch them ride off, and focused on the task at hand. Better that than second-guess her decision.

She shoved open the brigadier general’s door, and the peppery scent of sage greeted her. Across the small chamber, a few leftover leaves were scattered on the floor in front of the hearth. She bit her lip, fighting a sneeze. Did the man really think he duped anyone with this ruse? Even if she couldn’t detect the smell of whiskey on his breath, his red nose betrayed his daily

indulgence. He rose from his seat at her entrance.

She strode past a silent private on watch near the door and joined Captain Prinn, who stood in front of the commanding officer's desk. Matthew raised his brow at her—his silent way of inquiring after her conversation with Black-Fox-Running—but she ignored him and greeted the general instead.

“Pardon my appearance, sir. Captain Prinn and I only recently returned, and I had no time to make myself presentable.”

“No pardon needed. It is I who am keeping you from the comfort of a hot meal and a good rest. God knows you deserve it.” The general swept out his hand. “Please sit, the both of you.”

General Bragg fairly crashed into his seat, knocking loose a long blond hair that had been ornamenting the red wool of his sleeve. Apparently the man had visited the supply shed with Molly the laundress as well as imbibing until he wobbled.

He coughed into one hand, clearing his throat with an excessive amount of rattling. “Now then, Captain Prinn has filled me in on the intelligence the two of you gained. It is my understanding you had quite the adventure keeping hidden from a Wyandot war party. Between Prinn's tactical strategies and your keen eye, I daresay we will win this war.”

She shifted in her seat. Praise always prickled, for it usually meant she'd be asked for more than she was willing to give.

The general folded his hands on the desktop. No calluses thickened his skin. No ink stained his fingers. What did the man do all day besides chase skirts and drink?

“Normally I'd give you both some leave, but these are not normal days. There's been a recent development in your absence.” Reaching for a stack of papers, the general lifted the topmost parchment.

Next to her, Matthew stretched out one long leg and leaned forward. “What would that be, General?”

“The Frogs are running scared, and that is good. Many are scuttling back over the border. A sortie of our men captured a group of them shorthanded, traveling with a load of French gold. We've got hold of one of them now. . .or I should say one of ours.” He squinted at the parchment, then held it out to Matthew. “You recognize this name?”

Matthew's eyes scanned the paper before he handed it back. “No, sir. It means nothing to me. Congratulations on your fine catch, but what has any of this to do with us? Miss Lytton and I have done more than our fair share of *duty*.” Emphasizing the last word, he flashed her a look from the corner of his eye.

She flattened her lips to keep from smiling. The rascal. Using her own sentiment of duty.

“I needn’t tell you our position here is tenuous, especially now with Black-Fox-Running pulling his aid. Fickle natives.” Shoving back his chair, the general stood and planted his palms on the desk. “That gold’s got to be moved into secure British lands. I want you and Miss Lytton to be part of that team. You will leave first thing come morning.”

Matthew shook his head. “Why us? You have stronger, younger, more bloodthirsty men in the garrison. Why send a worn-out soldier like me and a young lady who spots trouble a mile away but can’t fire a gun to save her life?”

“It is precisely for those reasons I chose you.”

Mercy rubbed her eyes. Something wasn’t right here. She lifted her face to the general. “Excuse me, sir, but what’s to stop the French from simply taking back the gold as we move it, just as you took it from them?”

His wide mouth stretched ever wider, and a low chuckle rumbled in his chest. “That is the beauty of my plan. It won’t be a shipment of gold.”

Matthew cocked his head. “Come again?”

“We’ll hide the crates in plain sight, under the guise of two wagonloads carrying naught but homestead belongings. The longer this war drags on, the more families are pulling up stakes and escaping back to civilization. You shall simply be yet more of those tired settlers who’ve had their fill of frontier life.”

Matthew shifted in his chair, the scrape of his tomahawk handle against his seat as offsetting as the lowering of his voice. “You want us to move that gold overland instead of by river? Do you have any idea how long that will take?”

“A fortnight, if luck smiles on you.”

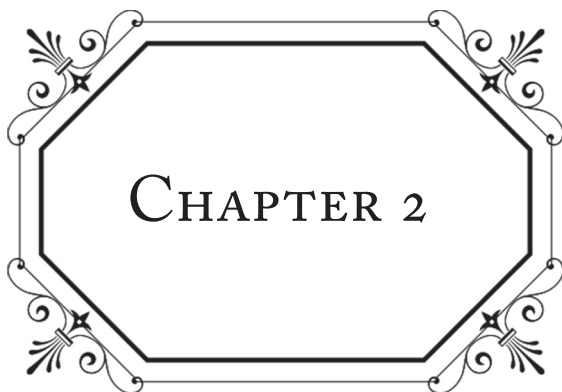
A frown weighted Mercy’s brow, and she glanced at Matthew. The hard lines on his face were unreadable. Scouting out danger from the safety of forest cover was one thing, but rolling along on a wagon in the open was quite another. Suddenly her words of duty tasted sour at the back of her throat.

She shot her gaze back to the general. “Captain Prinn and I hardly make up a family, sir.”

“Indeed. And so I’ve enlisted a few others to add to your numbers. You shall have a recruit to play the part of your nephew. Captain Prinn here”—he aimed his finger at Matthew—“will pose as the kindly father figure in your life, as he always does. And you, Miss Lytton, will no longer be a miss.”

She tensed. If she ran out the door now and saddled a horse, she could catch up to her father in no time. She gripped the chair arms to keep from fleeing. “Pardon me, General, but what are you saying?”

“Why, my dear Miss Lytton.” A grin spread on his face. “You will be wed by tomorrow.”



CHAPTER 2

Mercy bolted out the general's door, heedless of the stares of milling soldiers. Without slowing her stride, she crossed the parade ground and raced to the sanctity of the women's tents. This being an outpost garrison, the men were afforded timbered shelters. The women got canvas, unless they were an officer's wife. There were only six ladies living in the tents—three who refused to leave their husbands, herself, and two who stayed simply because they had nowhere else to go.

Flinging aside the door flap, she ducked inside and closed the stained canvas behind her. Three empty cots were lined up before her like fallen soldiers. The farthest one called her weary bones to lie down and forget the world. Pah! As if she could. The general's words boiled her blood hotter with each pump of her heart.

"You will be wed by tomorrow."

"We'll see about that," she muttered, glad her tentmates were either out washing regimentals or nursing sick soldiers. "Men! Pigheaded, the lot of them."

Reaching up, she fumbled at her collar and pulled out the locket she never took off. She ran her thumb over the center of a ruby heart, surrounded by gold filigree, and slowed her breathing. Years ago, she'd worn the necklace out of rebellion. Now the heavy stone was a weight of penance and—oddly enough—comfort.

Oh Mother. . .

Wind riffled the canvas walls. She felt more alone now than she had in years.

With a sigh, she shrugged off a man's trade shirt that hung to her knees, untied her leggings and peeled them off, and lastly loosened the breechclout at her waist. She'd have to hang them up to dry before packing them away, but for now, she gave the heap a good kick, tired of straddling the line

between male and female, native and white. Tired of everything, really.

Shivering, she knelt in front of her trunk and opened the lid. Pulling out a clean gown and undergarments, she frowned at the feminine attire as fiercely as she'd scowled at the hunting clothes. Why was she so different? Why could she not be like other women?

She blew out a sigh and slipped into a dry shift and front-lacing stays, knowing all the while there were no answers to be had. She'd been born different, and there was nothing to be done about that.

After retrieving a hairbrush, she closed the lid on her trunk and sank onto its top. For the moment, she set the brush in her lap, then began the arduous process of unpinning her long hair, her thoughts every bit as snarly. Why must everyone push her into marriage, as if she were some precious bauble that required protection? Little good it had done her mother. Brushing her hair with more force than necessary, she winced. In a man's world, survival came by acting and thinking like a man.

With deft fingers, she braided her hair into a long tail and was tying a leather lace at the end when footsteps pounded the ground outside her tent.

"Mercy, come on out." Matthew's voice leached through the weathered canvas. "We need to talk."

She dropped her hands to her lap. What was there to say? She'd given her answer. Not even a war party of Wyandots could make her change her mind.

"I know you're in there," he growled. "And I won't go away."

Of course he wouldn't. She rolled her eyes. The man was as determined as a river swollen by winter melt. Tucking up a stray strand, she rose and opened the flap. "You're wasting your time. I will not entertain the general's suggestion."

"At least hear me out. Then make up your mind." He held up a blackened tin pot. "Besides, I've brought stew. Don't tell me you're not hungry."

Her stomach growled, and she frowned. Of all the inopportune times to remind him—and her—that she was human.

Matthew smirked.

She sighed. Ignoring him would sure be a lot easier with a belly full of hot food. "Very well. Give me a moment."

Darting back inside, she retrieved a shawl, then grabbed a horn spoon and wooden bowl.

Outside, Matthew already sat on a log next to a smoldering fire, dipping his spoon into his own bowl. She joined him. The rich scent of broth curling up to her nose nearly made her weep. And the first bite. . . aah. There wasn't

much finer in the world than thick stew on a chill day—especially after going without for so long.

She shoveled in a mouthful before eyeing Matthew sideways. “What’d you trade for this?”

“Rum.”

“Your loss. Much as I’m obliged”—she paused for another big bite—“I won’t be bought for a bowl of pottage.”

“’Course not.” Afternoon sun glinted off the stew droplets collecting on Matthew’s beard as he spoke. “You’re worth far more than that.”

The soup in her mouth soured, and she swallowed it like a bitter medicine. The man was forever prattling on about God’s great love for her. “Don’t start, Matthew. I can’t bear a sermon right now.”

“Fair enough.” Lifting the bowl to his lips, Matthew tipped back his head and finished the rest of his meal. He swiped his mouth with his sleeve while setting down the dish, then angled to face her head-on. “Look, I don’t like this any more than you do, but despite the danger of it, General Bragg’s plan is solid. Like he said, with clear weather, it’ll take but a fortnight to get the load over to Fort Edward.”

“Fort Edward?” Her appetite suddenly stalled. The rangers were stationed out of that fort. Matthew’s former cohort. Was this his way of saying goodbye?

She swallowed, the stew having lost its appeal. “I see.”

His brows gathered together like a coming storm. “No, you don’t. When it comes to that falcon eyesight of yours, you are unequaled. But in matters of the heart, you are blind.”

“Matthew!” She spluttered and choked. After three years of scouting sorties with this man, surely he wasn’t pledging troth to her. He was old enough to be her father!

“Certainly you are not hinting at. . .” She cleared her throat once more, unable to force out any more words.

For a moment his eyes narrowed, then shot wide. His shoulders shook as he chuckled. “No, girl. Nothing like that. Look at me, Mercy. Really look. What do you see?”

Lowering her bowl, she focused first on her breaths. In. Out. Slower. And slower. Sound was next. One by one, she closed off the hum of the camp—the whickering of a horse, coarse laughter from afar. The thud of men tromping about. Even the beat of her own pulse quieted until silence took on a life of its own. Only then could she see, and in the seeing, her heart broke.

Where whiskers were absent, lines etched a life map on Matthew Prinn’s face. A chart of the years—decades—of toil and grief. Spent vigor peppered

his beard and hair that were once raven. Even his eyes were washed out and gray now. In the three years she'd known him, he'd earned a new scar near his temple and a larger bump on his nose—all in the service of the king.

And her.

She set her bowl on the log beside her, no longer hungry. "What I see is a great man who faithfully serves the crown, relentlessly brings back intelligence, and keeps me safe in the process."

He shook his head. "That is what you want to see. The truth of it is I'm tired. This fight is winding down, and so am I." Pausing, he looked up at a sky as sullen as the furrows on his forehead. "I aim to go to Fort Edward, then keep on going east till I find me a nice patch of land and put down stakes."

"You're going to quit? Just like that?"

"'Tis been a long time coming." His gaze found hers again. "You did not see it because you did not want to."

The accusation crept in like a rash, hot and uncomfortable. Of course she did not want to see it, because if she did, she'd have to look long and hard at her own life. She dropped her gaze and picked at the frayed hem of her shawl. He'd sacrificed time and again these past three years for her. Time now she returned the favor.

"I understand, Matthew. Truly."

A grunt resounded in his chest. "Good. Then we're agreed."

She jerked her face upward. "But that doesn't mean I will marry."

His teeth flashed white in his beard. "I did not say it did."

"But the general said—"

Matthew held up a hand. "If you'd have stayed long enough to hear the man out, you'd know we'll travel as a family unit in name only, not deed. Rufus and I—"

"Rufus *Bragg*?" She spit out the name like an unripe huckleberry.

"Aye. We will both have a cross to bear. He is to pose as my grandson, and he and I will man the rear wagon. You will ride the lead, scouting for trouble as always."

Picking up a stick, she stabbed at the coals in the fire, stirring them to life. "With my husband, no doubt."

"Like I said, in name only." His hand snaked out and stilled her frantic poking. "Why are you so skittish over this? I've never known you to back down from a request to serve. What of your high ideals of duty and honor?"

She pulled from his touch, wishing it could be as easy to shy from his question. But she couldn't, for truth once spoken could not be unheard. "You're right," she mumbled. Slowly, she lifted her face to his. "But what shall I do without you?"

“Time you took stock of your own future, girl. Where is it to be? What is it to be? With whom is it to be spent?”

She jumped to her feet, grabbing up her bowl and spoon. She’d rather run barelegged through a patch of poison oak than consider the answers to those inquiries, for she wanted nothing more than to remain unfettered and free. “If we are to leave at daybreak, I need to pack and get some rest.”

She whirled toward her tent, then turned back. “Tell me, Matthew, who is to be my, er. . .” The word stuck in her throat, and she forced it out past a clenched jaw. “Husband?”

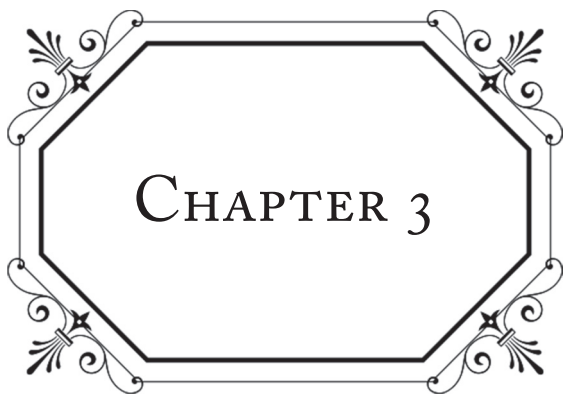
He stood, gathering the tin pot and his bowl. “Fellow by the name of Dubois, more than likely.”

“Dubois?” The French name festered like a raw boil, the food in her stomach churning. “Pah! I’m to be *married* to a Frenchman?”

“Oh, he is more than that.”

Her hands shot to her hips. “What aren’t you telling me, Matthew Prinn?”

“Dubois,” he drawled, leveling a cocked eyebrow at her, “is a condemned traitor.”



CHAPTER 3

Light crept in through the cracks between boards. Pale. Lethargic. Morning, but not quite. As if the sun hovered just below the horizon for the sole purpose of tormenting Elias Dubois, forcing him to live his last moments on this earth stuck between night and day. No matter. It felt like home, this in-between, the threat of death a familiar companion. But this time, more than his life would be on the line. Other men depended upon him if he did not make it back to Boston. And that single, bruising thought stuck in his craw, sharp as a wedged bone.

"You are a disappointment."

Lifting his hand, he shoved away his grandfather's words echoing from the grave and probed his swollen eye. The chains hanging from his wrist rattled like a skeleton—a reminder of what he'd soon become. A slow smile stretched his lips. At least he could see. Face the noose head-on and die with dignity. His smile bled into a frown. Was there anything dignified about the last beat of a heart?

"Dubois! You ready to die?" A voice, as chilling as the spring air, blasted against the storage shed door.

Elias pushed up from the crate he'd called a bed. "Now is as good a time as any." The lie flowed a little too easily, and he winced, regretting the falsehood. . .regretting his failure. Because of his error, a deadly French weapon would kill countless English and Colonials.

Unless he made it out of here—alive and with that weapon—the tide of the war could once again turn back to the French. Ah, but his grandfather surely must be rolling in his coffin to know that the fate of an entire war hinged on his prodigal grandson.

A key scraped against metal. A wooden bar lifted. The silhouette of a red-coated grim reaper darkened the door.

"Then let's be about it." Captain Scraling stepped aside, leaving enough

room for Elias to pass yet not escape, for another soldier stood outside, five paces away from the door.

His smile nearly returned. Where would he run to inside a palisade with guards at the ready?

Stretching a wicked kink out of his neck, he strolled ahead as if the request meant nothing more than a call to a hearty breakfast. But once past the threshold, he stopped and studied the sky—gray as a corpse drained of life. He shot the captain a scowl. “You are early. The sun is not up yet.”

Scraling shrugged. “I have many things to do today. You are the least of them. Follow the private, if you please.” He tipped his head toward the Colonial regular.

Elias smirked. “And if I do not?”

The captain’s fist shot out. Elias’s head exploded. Reeling, he plummeted backward, unable to stop himself from crashing to the ground. Blast! Just when his eye had started to open.

The next strike drove the air from his lungs. Groaning, he rolled over and gasped for air. An impossibility though when Scraling grabbed the back of his collar and yanked him to his feet.

“Move it!” The captain shoved him between the shoulder blades.

He stumbled forward, catching himself before ramming into the man in front of him. And a good thing too for the private stood ready to pummel him as well.

“Lead on, Private,” the captain ordered.

They marched across the parade ground. Two wagons were being loaded near the front gate, not far from the rough-hewn gallows—a reminder to those arriving and departing that justice would be meted out, even here in the New York wilderness. Each step stole a breath from the few he yet owned, but he couldn’t begrudge these men who prodded him onward. He was as guilty of the charges as Lucifer himself.

Birdsong trilled in the quiet of predawn, a pleasant accompaniment to the tramp of their feet. The shaking started then. First in his hands, working upward over arms and shoulders, diving in deep and spreading from gut to legs. It was always like this when the smell of death grew stronger—or was that his stench from being locked in a shed for two days without courtesy of a privy break?

He glanced skyward. *Is this it, Lord?*

A gentle morning breeze nudged the hanging rope. The movement was slight, barely noticeable, but enough to twist Elias’s throat into a sodden knot. The hairs at the back of his neck stood out like wire. Was he truly ready to die? Was anyone?

Spare the lives of those men, God. The ones I failed. And forgive me for my lack.

Just ten paces more and—

The private made a sharp right, pivoting away from the scaffold. Elias's step faltered. Was this some kind of trick? He looked back to the captain.

A fist smashed into his nose. Double blast! His head jerked aside, the force knocking him to his hands and knees. The ground spun. Blood dripped over his top lip. The captain taunted from behind, something about his manliness or lack thereof. Hard to tell. Sound buzzed like a beehive that had been whacked with a stick—but even louder was the anger inside him, pumping stronger with each heartbeat. His fury strained at the leash. Staggering to his feet, he bit back a curse and spit out the nasty taste in his mouth, then lifted his face to the sky.

“Forgive these men too, Lord, for I surely am not able to at this moment.” He spoke in French, not only to prevent the satisfaction the captain would feel at his admission, but more importantly to irritate the Englishman.

“Move along!”

Head pounding, he tromped after the private, unable to work up any more curiosity as to why they bypassed the noose and neared the officers' quarters. Likely a last interrogation—and his last chance to talk his way out of this mess.

Please, God. More than my life depends upon this. Have mercy.

The private knocked and, after a gruff “Enter” grumbled from inside, shoved open the door.

Elias advanced, swiping the blood from his nose and breathing in sage and rotgut rum.

Brigadier General Bragg did not so much as look up from his desk. He merely flicked out his hand as if the lot of them were blackflies to be swatted. “Captain, Private, wait outside.”

With a final scowl aimed at Elias, Captain Scraling stomped off. Clearly he was not happy for being told to wait like a dog—and the thought of his inconvenience made Elias smile, despite the way the movement stung.

The general pinched a document in his fingers and held it up, skewering him with a glower of his own. “This is a warrant for your death.”

Elias frowned. Why show him the document before draining the life from his eyes? This was not standard procedure. He'd fold his arms and stare the man down were his hands not weighted by irons.

“And this”—Bragg paused and held up a different parchment—“is a stay of execution.”

A stay? What in all of God's great glory? A muscle jumped in his jaw,

but he refused to gape, for surely the general expected such a response.

Though he'd regret it, the irony of the situation slowly unraveled inside him, and he chuckled. If only François could hear this. He laughed until the pounding of his skull could no longer be denied.

Bragg's brow darkened, as did the scarlet tip of his nose. "I fail to see the humor in this, Dubois."

"Are you seriously cutting a deal with a traitor?"

"I'd deal with the devil if I had to."

"Well, I suppose I am the closest thing you have to that." He angled his head. "What is your offer?"

Bragg leaned so far back in his chair, the wood creaked a grievance. "I have a shipment of gold needing safe delivery into British lands."

Elias advanced so quickly, Bragg reached for his pistol. Stopping short of lunging across the man's desk, Elias slammed his hands onto the wood, the chains adding to the startling effect. "Are you asking me to deliver the gold you stole from me?" The question echoed above the crackle of wood in the fire and the snort of the man in front of him.

"Yes."

Straightening, he lifted his face to the plank ceiling. "You never stop surprising me."

"We've only recently met."

He aimed his gaze back at Bragg like a loaded musket. "I was not talking to you."

The general shifted in his seat, laying his pistol in his lap. "My terms are these: You will be part of a four-person squad, traveling under the guise of a family moving back to civilization. Reach Fort Edward with the gold intact, and your execution will be pardoned, though the required jail time is nonnegotiable."

His stomach clenched—and not from lack of food. Something wasn't right about this. "Why me?"

"I don't think I need to tell you, soldier, that you will be crossing dangerous ground. The chances of making it alive to Fort Edward are slim. You're a condemned man anyway. Expendable. And if you don't make it. . ." He shrugged.

Interesting—but completely implausible. Elias grunted. "What is to stop me from killing my companions and running off?"

"They will be armed. You will not."

No one could survive in the wilderness without a gun or a knife. Elias shook his head. "Then I might as well die here."

"With good behavior, you shall walk free. Eventually." Bragg held up

both papers, shaking them so that the documents rippled like living things. “So, what will it be? Life. . .or death?”

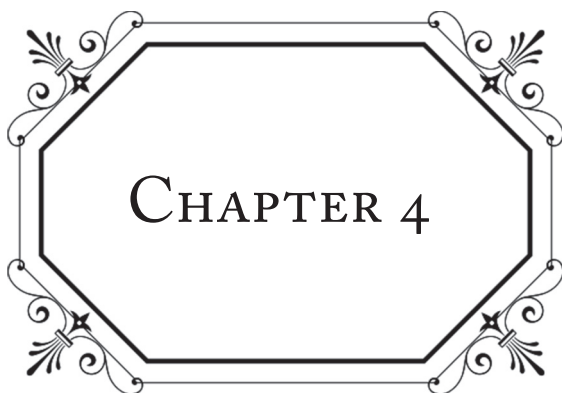
Elias shifted his gaze from one to the other. Was this an answer to his prayer? Or a fiendish jest?

Reaching out, he snatched the parchment sentencing him to the gallows. He could end this here and now. Stop the running. Finish the vagabond life that he’d come to hate. Just a quick jerk from a tight rope, then a blissfully peaceful eternity with the only Father he’d ever respected.

Bragg’s jaw dropped.

Elias smiled from the satisfaction of it.

Then ripped the document to pieces.



CHAPTER 4

Morning stretched with a gray yawn across the sky, unwilling to fully awaken. Mercy frowned as patches of rainwater, frozen to brittle sheets by last night's chill, crackled beneath her feet. If the cloud cover tarried and the earth held firm, at least they would make good time today. The sooner this journey was over, the better.

Across the parade ground, a curious sight snagged her attention. Three men filed past the gallows, then veered away from it. The raggedy one in the middle strode the proudest, shoulders back, gait sure, despite the shackles weighing him down. The man was so filthy it was impossible to see the true color of his coat or breeches. Was this the traitor who would play the part of her husband? But no, clearly he was in no condition to travel anywhere except back to the stocks.

The prisoner turned to the captain behind him, and a fist knocked him to the ground. Not an unusual sight given the nature of the fort, but what followed put a hitch in Mercy's step.

The man staggered up from the blow, turned aside and spit, and then, with as much grace as a buck, lifted his face to the sky. His sudden stillness reached across the distance and pulled her in. This far away she couldn't hear his words, but the sacredness of the moment stole her breath. Clearly he spoke to his God, and she got the distinct impression his God bent and listened with a keen ear. Growing up in a Mohawk camp, she was no stranger to the mystical ways of shamans, but this? Gooseflesh prickled down her arms, and she was unaccountably glad when the captain shoved the man forward into the brigadier general's quarters.

Shaking off the unsettling feeling, she shifted her hold on her bundle of belongings and upped her pace. The man was none of her concern. She had bigger wolves to slay this day, namely setting out on a journey with a husband she did not want—even if it were in name only. Maybe she could persuade

Matthew to let her ride with him instead. As a rule, she did not like working with strangers, and she especially did not pine for it when the man had a name like Dubois.

Drawing near the two wagons at the front gate, she caught Matthew's eye and hailed him with a tip of her chin. After so many years learning each other's ways, words were a hindrance.

He helped a soldier shove a crate up a ramp into the wagon, then strode her way. "Stow your pack. And you wanna check those supplies?" He hitched his thumb, indicating a box on the ground up near the other wagon. "Prob'ly ain't much."

"We've been through lean." She glanced past Matthew's shoulder to where another soldier had taken his place in the loading. Both men strained their muscles against the next trunk. She recognized one private, but not the other. Neither was a bowlegged effigy. "Where's Rufus?"

"I imagine he'll show when the work's done."

"No doubt. Is that man over there my. . ." The word *husband* crawled back down her throat. Thinking it was one thing. Speaking it into being, an impossibility.

Matthew shook his head. "He ain't showed yet either."

Relief hit her as sweet as the brisk morning air. It would be short-lived, but she savored it nonetheless. Her bundle clutched to her chest, she bypassed the length of the canvas-covered wagon with four horses hitched to the front of it and neared the back of the other wagon. She hefted her pack over the back gate and tucked it snug beside six fat trunks that rode shoulder to shoulder, close as friends huddled near a fire—clearly more comfortable at the prospect of the ride than she.

She turned from the sight and rifled through the contents of the remaining crate on the ground. A blackened tin pot. Several packets of hardtack. Dried beans and some strips of meat so old and shriveled as to be beyond recognition. There was one jug of watered ale and several handfuls of root vegetables, all as wrinkled as tribal elders. This far from civilization and after a winter spare of game, they were the best victuals to be had.

She secured the lid, then heaved the crate into the wagon, grunting from the effort. For such mean supplies, the box weighed heavy. Footsteps thudded on the hardened dirt, and she turned.

Rufus Bragg wasn't much of a man, for he barely held on to sixteen years. So gawkily built was he, his bones put up a fair fight to support his garments. Were it not for the knobs of his joints, he'd have to tie the shirt to his skin to keep it from falling off. Mouse-colored hair hung over one small, dark eye. The other one blinked at her. He said nothing. Not only did he own no