



Rebellious HEART

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To my three beautiful daughters
Jenna, Jessica, and Joy

I pray that God will bless you with husbands who become
The Dearest of Friends



Chapter
1

BRAINTREE, MASSACHUSETTS
SEPTEMBER 1763

“He’s guilty of murder.” The judge’s voice echoed through the meetinghouse. “I hereby sentence him to be hanged.”

Murmurs of approval broke the tense silence.

But Susanna Smith’s chest constricted with something close to pity. From her spot in the gallery, she had a clear view of Hermit Crab Joe, of the flicker of surprise that rounded his eyes and cracked the weathered skin of his forehead.

He might be a murderer, but that didn’t stop her from feeling sorry for the lonely old recluse.

“Thank the Lord,” Mary whispered. “Now we can finally sleep peacefully at night.”

Her sister’s words gave breath to her own thoughts, to the worries that had plagued her since several local farmers had discovered the battered, lifeless body of the young maiden along the rocky coast of the bay. The surrounding parishes had been able to speak of nothing but the murder for the past week.

Now perhaps they could resume normal life again.

Susanna folded her hands in her lap. “We need to pray for his poor lost soul.” But even as the words left her mouth, her gaze strayed to the slumped shoulders of Mr. Benjamin Ross, sitting on the bench next to Hermit Crab Joe.

Mr. Ross had spoken eloquently and passionately on behalf of his client. His defense had been flawless, and he’d almost made her believe the aged seaman was innocent. Almost.

Yet no one else in their law-abiding community besides Hermit Crab Joe even came close to being a suspect. And it was too frightening to acknowledge the possibility that a murderer still roamed free, that perhaps one of the God-fearing men sitting in the box pews below was to blame instead.

“I hope we’ll have the hanging today and be done with this awful affair.” Mary tucked a loose golden curl back under the wide brim of her hat. Her usually pale cheeks were rosy from the stuffiness that had settled upon the square room. The clapboard building that also served as a place of worship was filled beyond capacity. Even with all three doors open, the crispness of the September afternoon had been unable to penetrate the interior of Braintree’s Middle Parish Meetinghouse, including the gallery where the women sat.

“Poor, poor Joe,” Grandmother Eve said, tears pooling in her usually merry eyes.

All along, Grandmother Eve had insisted Joe was innocent. If Susanna hadn’t known better, she would have been tempted to draw the conclusion that Grandmother Eve was acquainted with the man. But that was impossible. Stooped at the shoulders, with his long hair tangled across the hump of his back, Hermit Crab Joe had always kept to himself in his dilapidated hovel near the shore.

“I’m sorry, Grandmother.” Susanna reached for the wom-

an's hand and squeezed her plump fingers. "We don't have to stay for the hanging. If you'd rather return home—"

"Honorable Justice Niles." The strong voice of Mr. Ross rose above the clamor that had swept through the meeting-house. "I plead for mercy on behalf of my client."

The young lawyer stood. His face was flushed, and beads of perspiration speckled his brow beneath the gray wig he wore tied into a queue like most of the other men.

The judge, who'd been talking with the beadle and constable—likely making arrangements for the hanging—frowned at Mr. Ross and then raised his hand for silence. With the long ringlets of his white periwig, the bands at his throat, and his imposing black robe, Judge Niles was surely the picture of God himself.

The chattering among the crowd ceased, broken only by the distant call of a sea gull.

"Regardless of the sentiment toward my client," Mr. Ross said, his clear, clipped voice commanding Susanna's attention, as it did everyone's, "I plead *benefit of the clergy*. I would like to prove Joe Sewall can read the Bible and thus is a worthy candidate for reform."

The lawyer stepped forward. His back was stiff and unyielding, his expression earnest. But it was the penetrating keenness of his blue eyes that arrested Susanna more than anything else.

When she'd been a little girl visiting her grandparents at Mount Wollaston in Braintree, she'd seen Benjamin Ross on occasion. He'd delivered shoes to her grandparents' mansion for his cordwainer father, who like many of the other farmers plied a trade in order to provide for his family. And she'd always liked his blue eyes.

At the time, he had seemed so much older, and she'd been too young to pay him much notice. Except for one time . . .

She pressed a hand against her embroidered stomacher as if she could push away the embarrassing memory.

She hadn't seen him since that long-ago day—when she'd been such a silly, childish girl and said such silly, childish things. Not long afterward, she'd heard his father had sold ten acres of farmland in order to send him to Harvard.

Over the ensuing years she'd forgotten all about Benjamin Ross and his keen blue eyes, until she'd learned he was defending Hermit Crab Joe. Only then had Grandmother Eve informed her Mr. Ross had finished his education at Harvard, along with his lawyer training, and had recently returned to Braintree.

Mr. Ross turned to address the gathered crowd. “As God-fearing Christians, do we not have the obligation to reform a wayward soul? Would you live the rest of your earthly days with this man’s eternal death and condemnation overpowering your conscience? Would you not stay the execution and give this man a chance at reform first?”

He paused and looked over the wealthy gentlemen of the community—including her own grandfather Quincy—sitting in the front pews in their tailored suits and powdered coifs. Mr. Ross’s impassioned plea reached out to the farmers and laborers sitting in the free pews, and even to the Redcoat officer who stood as straight as a sword at the back of the meetinghouse, likely there to keep the peace.

Susanna was surprised when Mr. Ross looked up at the balcony to the women, almost as if their opinion was important too.

When his gaze flickered over her, Susanna’s breath caught in her throat. Did he recognize her? Did he remember the silly things she’d said to him those many years ago?

But his expression contained only his heartfelt passion for his client and his appeal for compassion.

Grandmother Eve clutched Susanna's fingers. "I think this might just work. I knew if any lawyer could help Joe, it would have to be Benjamin."

The dear woman scooted to the edge of the bench, inattentive to her fine satin petticoats imported all the way from London that had bunched together in an ungracious heap. Excitement flashed across her countenance and had obviously chased away her worry. And now she gripped the banister, ready to fly down and hug Mr. Ross if she could.

Susanna held Grandmother Eve's hand tighter, having no doubt her grandmother would find a way to fly if she could.

"Mr. Ross," Judge Niles finally said, "are you to have us believe this criminal can read?"

Mr. Ross nodded at Parson Wibird, who was sitting in the pew behind him.

The parson rose and tugged on the crisp tails of the white stock surrounding his neck before handing Mr. Ross a thick Bible.

"Honorable Justice, I would like my client to read the first lines of Psalm fifty-one." Mr. Ross opened the Bible and scraped through the pages. Then he slipped his hand under Hermit Crab Joe's elbow and assisted the man to his feet.

Everyone knew pleading benefit of the clergy was an acceptable and common method to avoid the gallows. If a criminal could prove his ability to read and thus his willingness to change, the judge might issue a lesser punishment.

Mr. Ross pointed a finger to the words on the page.

Susanna leaned forward, her stays pressing against her ribs and constricting her breath. Her thoughts jumbled together like tangled bobbins in a loom basket.

How was it possible that only moments ago, she'd been relieved Hermit Crab Joe was receiving the just dues of his

crime? And now she was holding her breath, hoping the murderer really could read and that Mr. Ross would find a way to save the man's life?

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness.” Hermit Crab Joe read smoothly and clearly like a learned man, not at all what she'd expected from a fisherman. “According unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.”

Susanna sat in stunned silence with the rest of the gathering, except Grandmother Eve, who beamed.

“As you can see,” Mr. Ross said, closing the Bible with a thump, “my client can read quite well and is a natural candidate for reform.”

Judge Niles studied Hermit Crab Joe, his expression clearly puzzled. Finally he spoke. “Mr. Ross, how can we be assured the criminal will reform his ways? We certainly don't want to set him free, only to have him kill another young woman.”

The judge's words blew at Susanna like a chilly fall breeze, pushing her back, reminding her of the heinous nature of the murder.

Judge Niles was right. They had no jail in their community. What if Hermit Crab Joe decided to strike again?

Mr. Ross cocked his head at Parson Wibird. “Our own Parson Wibird has agreed to take Mr. Sewall under his mentorship.”

The parson of Middle Parish squinted and smiled, revealing several blackened teeth.

“Not only will Parson Wibird study the Scriptures with Mr. Sewall, but he'll also provide accountability for Mr. Sewall's whereabouts.”

“Are these your true intentions, Parson?” asked the judge.

“Most ardently,” said the parson. “As the shepherd of this flock, I take my duty seriously. Since no one is beyond the

concern of our loving heavenly Father, how can I do anything less than extend my own arms in an embrace of love toward a lost sinner?"

The judge pursed his lips together, staring first at the parson, then at Mr. Ross before bending to confer with the beadle and constable.

The beadle nodded and started down the aisle.

Susanna watched him weave through the crowd to the west door of the building, so much like the meetinghouse her father pastored in Weymouth. The interior was simple and free of artifacts and decorations. Their Puritan ancestors had sacrificed their lives to break away from the ornate and ritualistic Church of England in order to settle in America. And in the tradition of those early founders, they'd kept their churches pure. Not even a cross hung on the wall.

"Mr. Ross." Judge Niles stood, his long robe rippling about him. "Based on your plea for benefit of the clergy on behalf of your client, I have decided to lessen the punishment for Mr. Sewall."

Grandmother Eve released a pent-up breath at the same time Mary sucked in a sharp one.

"Instead of the gallows," the judge continued, "I hereby sentence Joseph Sewall to have both ears cropped and his right hand and cheek branded with *M* for manslaughter."

At the pronouncement of judgment, the meetinghouse broke into a commotion of protests as well as assent at the new verdict.

Susanna didn't speak. She wasn't sure if she should be upset a murderer was being set free or relieved that Mr. Ross had found a way to help his client.

Mr. Ross patted Hermit Crab Joe on the back and offered him a smile that said they had won.

Hermit Crab Joe's forehead wrinkled and his brows pinched together in a moment of unguarded sadness, obviously not sharing Mr. Ross's satisfaction with the new sentence.

She didn't blame the old man. The judge had spared his life. But now he'd spend the rest of his life maimed with a ghastly brand upon his face and hand. Perhaps death by the gallows would have been preferable to having the guilt of his crimes forever embedded upon his personage. No one would ever be able to forgive or forget what he'd done—least of all himself.

"This is delightful." Grandmother Eve broke into one of her cheerful smiles. "I think we shall have a party tonight to celebrate Mr. Ross's triumph."

Mary could only shake her head, her fair-skinned face paler than normal. "But Grandmother Eve, what about the young maidens? Won't we still be in danger as long as Hermit Crab Joe is alive?"

"You'll still be in danger all right, darling." Grandmother Eve was already standing and peering over the balcony. "But it won't be because of Joe. You were never in any danger from Joe." The spritely woman leaned over the railing and flagged her arms at Mr. Ross.

"Careful, Grandmother." Susanna grasped the folds of Grandmother Eve's sacque-back gown.

"Mr. Ross!" Grandmother Eve waved her arms wider.

The young lawyer was immersed in an animated conversation with a gentleman wearing a fashionable melon-colored coat that fell to the knees of matching breeches. Everything about the gentleman spoke of wealth, from his face, clean-shaven in the English style, and his spotless white cravat to his embroidered socks and polished silver buckles. In contrast, Mr. Ross in his plain, well-worn suit had a ruggedness that hinted at his ties to the land.

At Grandmother Eve's greeting, Mr. Ross glanced toward the gallery.

"Splendid defense, Mr. Ross," Grandmother called, bestowing a smile upon him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Quincy." He bowed his head.

"You'll come to Mount Wollaston tonight for a party, will you not?" Grandmother Eve dangled over the edge like a brightly lit chandelier. Susanna rose and took hold of her grandmother's arm to prevent her from plummeting to the first floor. Thankfully, Mary had the sense to do likewise.

"My two beautiful granddaughters will be there."

The well-dressed gentleman spun, and his eyes widened at the sight of her and Mary on either side of Grandmother Eve, holding on to the woman. His gaze swung from Mary to her, then back to Mary.

And of course that's where his attention stayed. On Mary. On pretty, fair-haired, fair-skinned Mary.

Not on dark-haired, olive-skinned Susanna.

Why would anyone give the moon a second glance when it was next to the sun? Who would want the seriousness of the ocean depths when they could have the freshness of a tinkling brook?

At least Susanna could derive some satisfaction from the fact that Mr. Ross hadn't given in to the temptation to stare at Mary. He had quite ignored both of them.

"And, please, bring your friends." Grandmother Eve nodded at the wealthy-looking gentleman. "I always say, the more the merrier."

"Thank you for the invitation, Mrs. Quincy," started Mr. Ross, "but I'll be helping my father drag in salt hay on the morrow. Regrettably I'll need to—"

"Attend the party for some of the evening," cut in the

friend, slapping Mr. Ross on the back without breaking his concentration on Mary. “My good friend, Benjamin Ross, needs to loosen his top button and enjoy life a little more.”

Mary’s cheeks had bloomed a fetching shade of pink. She smiled at her new admirer and lowered her lashes demurely.

Hadn’t Mother recently lamented the lack of appropriate suitors? Mother had considered sending them both to Boston to live with wealthy Uncle Isaac for the sole purpose of finding husbands—men who had the degree of prestige and wealth suitable for Quincy blood.

And while Susanna never passed up an opportunity to travel the fourteen miles north to Boston to visit her aunt and uncle and all the friends she’d made there during her visits, she loathed having to go for the purpose of husband hunting.

The idea of flirting and flouncing and giggling in an attempt to attract a prestigious husband repulsed her. She detested when the local men pursued her with the hope of procuring a bride who could better their position. And she certainly didn’t want to have to do the same.

But even as her heart rebelled against the status and wealth-seeking mentality, the rational part of her knew marrying up was inevitable. She really had no choice in the matter.

If only she could flirt as effortlessly as Mary . . .

Her sister lifted her lashes again and glanced at the young gentleman, who wore an enormous foolish grin and obviously couldn’t tear his attention from her.

Susanna peeked at Mr. Ross. Had he noticed his friend’s pathetic enamoring of Mary?

As if sensing her question, Mr. Ross finally looked at her. An intensity within his eyes pierced beneath her polite façade. Did he recognize her?

One of his brows cocked, and the corner of his lips arched

into the beginning of a knowing grin. But it was the kind of smile devoid of any warmth. Rather, the half grin only seemed to turn his eyes into ice.

So he *did* remember her and all the vain words she'd spoken.

Heat crept up her neck and into her cheeks. She wanted to lower her lashes as Mary had done. But instead she forced herself to stare back.

"Excellent." Grandmother Eve watched the two men and the interest they were paying her granddaughters, and her smile widened like that of a cat satisfied with its catch. "Then we shall see you both tonight."

Mr. Ross started to shake his head. "Thank you, Mrs. Quincy, but—"

"Of course we'll see you tonight," the gentleman friend said.

Before Mr. Ross could protest further, the beadle burst through the door with the blacksmith behind him. The smith's woolen cap was askew, and his leather apron hung low over his round belly. As the only tradesman busy enough to maintain a full-time shop, he'd likely already worked a long day. But he strode to the front of the meetinghouse, his boots clunking an ominous rhythm. In one soot-covered hand he carried a chisel and small anvil, and in the other a long brand that glowed red at the end.

Susanna took a quick step away from the rail. She'd never found any amusement in watching the punishment or suffering of another mortal. She understood the reasoning behind making criminals suffer publicly. Their agony was meant to deter others from sinning.

Nevertheless, she could not bear to watch or listen, just as she'd tried not to listen to the rumors about the young

woman's death. But everyone had been talking about it for days. Of course no one had been able to identify the woman. She wasn't from Braintree or the surrounding countryside.

Some had said the young maiden looked like she'd been chased until she'd finally been unable to go any farther. Her bare feet had been mangled and bleeding and punctured with pieces of broken shell. But others said she'd been violated and choked to death.

Whichever way she'd died, it had obviously been painful.

Once again silence descended over the meetinghouse.

Susanna sidled around the bench and flattened against the wall of the gallery. Her body tensed for the first tortured scream.

The ring of the anvil against chisel was followed by a deep-throated moan of agony.

She pinched her eyes shut, but her mind conjured up the image of the bloody stump of ear that remained.

When the smith finally laid the hot iron against Hermit Crab Joe's flesh with the *M* that forever branded him a murderer, she clamped her hands against her ears. But she couldn't block out his hoarse screams, no matter how hard she tried.

Her stomach swirled with revulsion.

She tried to remind herself he'd deserved much worse—that he didn't deserve any mercy. Surely the young maiden he'd killed had screamed for mercy and been shown none.

Even so, when she finally drew the courage to take her hands away from her ears, she found that her heart ached and her cheeks were wet with tears.



Chapter
2

Ben slipped through the half-open door of the sitting room and soundlessly closed it behind him.

He desperately needed a break from the guests.

Although he liked Mrs. Quincy, her circle of wealthy friends and family wearied him. They had their noses stuck to the ceiling just like they always had. After only an hour of them talking down to him like he was still nothing more than a cordwainer's son, he'd had enough.

He was ready to leave.

Only he couldn't go yet.

Cranch was too busy flirting with one of Mrs. Quincy's granddaughters. And he'd give Ben untold grief if he tried to make him depart so early in the evening.

Ben crossed the room, the thick carpet muting his footsteps. He passed behind two high-backed wing chairs positioned in front of a comfortable fire and made his way to one of the windows. He peered through the dozen panes over the large groomed grounds that graced the Quincy mansion.

The stately home still reigned over Braintree at the top of

gently sloping Mount Wollaston, just as it had when he'd been a boy roaming the hills. The late evening sky was streaked with remnants of the sunset and had ignited the changing leaves so that the reds, yellows, and oranges glowed.

He took a deep breath, tugged off his wig, and tossed it onto the half-moon table that flanked the window. The two candles in sleek silver holders had already been lit, and they glowed against the glass in the darkening shadows.

It had been a very long day. And it hadn't helped that the British officer quartered in Braintree had shown up halfway through the trial and had stood in the back of the meeting-house, listening to his defense.

Why had Lieutenant Wolfe come? Ben didn't want to think about the possibility that the officer knew of his involvement with the Caucus Club. How could he? Not when he and the other dissenters had worked hard to keep their meetings and activities clandestine.

Ben ran his fingers through his hair, combing it into the cord at the back of his neck.

Every time he remembered the agony and confusion in Joseph Sewall's eyes when the brand had touched his cheek, Ben's body tightened with fresh protest.

He'd wanted to scream with old Joe. He'd wanted to scream at all those gathered in the meetinghouse. They were too set in their ways, too prejudiced, too quick to judge. And even though old Joe hadn't committed the murder, Ben had known from the start—when Mrs. Quincy had approached him about defending old Joe—that he was taking on a losing case.

At the very least, he'd been determined to save the old man's life. And he'd accomplished that. He should be happy Joe was still alive and not swinging from the gallows.

“I should have done more,” he whispered to his somber reflection. It didn’t matter that his father had come up to him after the trial and given him the kind of look that said he was proud of him.

He still should have found a way to prove Joe’s innocence.

He’d searched for alibis, anyone who had been with old Joe the night of the murder, someone who’d seen him elsewhere. But of course Joe had been home alone, like usual. Ben had also investigated clues that could lead him to the real murderer. But he’d come up empty-handed.

The problem was that everyone in Braintree was already afraid of old Joe. It was no surprise that when a strange young woman was murdered and dumped in front of Joe’s sea-battered home, the community had blamed him for the death.

Ben could only shake his head at their foolishness. What murderer would leave a body outside his home in plain view of everyone? A real murderer would try to cover up the evidence or frame someone else.

But of course they hadn’t listened to any of Ben’s arguments. He’d known they wouldn’t. Not poor Ben Ross, the son of a simple, uneducated farmer.

A movement in the reflection of the window cut short Ben’s inner tirade, and his muscles tensed. Was someone else in the room?

He spun.

A young woman was in the process of rising from one of the chairs in front of the fire. Her eyes were wide and fixed on him, and she’d been moving in slow motion as if trying to escape from the room without being seen.

She froze halfway out of the chair. A volume of Milton lay facedown on the round pedestal table that stood beside the chair.

“I beg your pardon,” she said. “I should have made my presence known the moment you stepped into the room.”

He knew her immediately, just as he had at the trial. Susanna Smith. Mrs. Quincy’s granddaughter. And she’d certainly grown into a striking young woman, hardly resembling the gangly, sick girl she’d once been.

In the growing dusk, the light from the fire cast a glow over her, illuminating her fine complexion and her eyes that were as dark as ink. Her raven hair fell in soft waves about her slender cheeks and was pulled loosely back by a ribbon.

She straightened to her full height, ironing the wrinkles from the silky layers of her skirt. The shimmering blue of the gown served to highlight the contrast with the darkness of her hair and eyes. And for a long moment he could only stare at her, completely speechless.

Her fingers fluttered to the triple strand of pearls at her neck.

The movement drew his attention to the pearls, to their perfection, to all they stood for. And that was all it took to break her spell over him. A chill slipped into his blood as it had earlier at the meetinghouse when he’d caught sight of her in the gallery.

“Susie Smith,” he said, disregarding proper etiquette and using her childhood nickname. Susanna Smith may have turned into a ravishing beauty of a woman, but he’d never forget that she’d once been a spoiled, snobby girl.

“Mr. Ross.” She tilted her head slightly, but it was enough to cause a tress of her hair to slide across her cheek. She brushed it back and tucked it behind her ear.

He couldn’t keep from admiring the elegant curve that ran from her ear to her chin. And when she offered him a tentative smile, he almost found it charming the way her lips cocked higher on one side into the beginning of a dimple.

“So,” he said, forcing himself to remember who she was, “I suppose you’re happily engaged to the rich prince you told me you would marry someday.”

Her half smile faded, taking the dimple with it, and a shadow of embarrassment flickered across her features.

For a moment, regret pricked him. After all this time, he didn’t have to hold a grudge, did he?

She shifted her concentration to the blazing fire as if drawing energy from it. Then she met his gaze head-on again. This time her eyes sparked. “Of course I have a line of princes just begging to marry me. What else would you expect?”

Alas, her tongue was still quick. “I’m sure you’ve perfected putting into place all the poor farm boys you meet.”

“I was already quite perfect at that, wasn’t I?” Even though her response was tart, there was something in her dark expression that hinted at remorse.

He stared deeper, trying to probe into her heart. Was there a chance that over the years Susanna Smith had changed as much on the inside as the out?

“As you can see”—she waved her hand around the room and gave another half-cocked smile—“I’m the most popular young lady at the party tonight.”

He didn’t break his gaze from hers. He couldn’t. He wanted to prove to her he wasn’t a simple, uneducated farm boy anymore. He was a grown man, Harvard-educated, and determined to do whatever it took to earn a prestigious reputation.

Maybe he wasn’t an important lawyer yet. Maybe he wasn’t the perfect catch for a husband. But he was on his way. He was already beginning to make a name for himself. And if he worked hard enough, one day he’d be able to set up a practice in Boston.

He'd show her—he'd show everyone—that he wasn't a nobody.

Under his unrelenting examination, her cheeks seemed to darken their hue even though she didn't have the complexion of a blushing woman.

Good. She deserved to be uncomfortable—for just a moment.

Her long dark lashes fluttered, then swept down and hid her eyes. She shifted and ran her finger over the fraying spine of the book she'd been reading.

He was being a bit hard on her, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. "I don't remember that particular volume of Milton having any illustrations."

"Then you've remembered correctly."

"If it has no pictures to entertain you, then what are you doing with it? Practicing your posture?"

"Is it so impossible to believe that a young lady could read Milton for enjoyment?"

"You? Read Milton?" His tone was more cynical than he intended. "What need does a woman have for *Paradise Lost*?"

"And just what need would a *man* have for such a book?"

"Plenty." He stepped away from the window and crossed toward her. "The great classics challenge our minds, help us think, and force us to evaluate life so that we can better ourselves."

"Then you have spelled out chiefly why I'm reading the book." Although she calmly traced the gold-embossed lettering on the cover, her eyes were a tempest. "I'm challenging my mind to better myself."

He stopped in front of the pedestal table. She was less than an arm's length away, close enough to catch the tang of apple cider lingering on her breath. He could almost picture

her when she'd been caught in the apple tree that last August before he'd left for Harvard.

She'd wedged the heel of her silk brocade shoe in the V of a branch and had twisted her ankle in trying to dislodge it. Of course she'd been too far from the mansion for anyone to hear her cries for help . . . until he'd come strolling through the orchard after making a delivery for his father.

Tears had streaked her thin face, her pinner cap had fallen away, and her hair had blown about her head in a tousled disarray. Her pink calico frock was dirty and torn in her unsuccessful efforts to free herself.

At first he'd taken pity on her. She'd appeared helpless and forlorn like a dainty injured dove.

He'd climbed the tree and quickly concluded the best way to pry her free of her prison was to first have her slip her foot out of her shoe.

She'd inhaled a sharp breath at his request as though he'd asked her to take off her gown instead of mere footwear. "I wouldn't dare bare my foot in front of you." Her voice contained all the haughtiness of a woman—not a frightened little girl.

"But it will allow me to twist the shoe without hurting your ankle." He wobbled on the branch next to her. Twigs poked his hat, knocking it askew, and bunches of ripening apples bumped his back.

"I won't give you leave to see my bare foot."

"But it won't be bare, will it?" He grinned, hoping to cheer her. "You're wearing stockings, aren't you?"

"Of course I am." Her dark eyes filled with the kind of look that said she thought he was ignorant for asking such a question. "But I'd much rather stay stuck up in this tree than give you a glimpse of my ankle."

He examined her finely crafted silk shoe, which was smaller than the length of his hand. She was only a girl of five, maybe six years, much younger than his fifteen. Did she really think he'd ogle over her ankle?

"Besides," she said, "I'm hiding here and I don't want to be found. Hence I'm never coming down."

He wiggled the stubborn heel of the shoe. "So you're planning to live in this tree?"

She nodded.

He prodded his clasp knife out of his pocket and bent closer to examine the branch. "And what has brought you to such despair that you'd resort to living in a tree like a bird?"

"My awful cousin said that no one would ever want to marry a skinny dark-haired girl like me." Her voice wobbled, and Ben glanced up just in time to see several glistening tears trickle down her cheeks.

He knew which *awful* cousin she was referring to. None other than the insufferable Elbridge Quincy. Every time the boy came visiting from Boston in his fancy ruby coach with the fine black horses, he stirred up trouble.

"Don't believe your awful cousin. He's the worst sort of liar I've ever met." Ben wedged the knife into the branch that held the heel captive. "If you were older, I'd marry you."

He didn't really mean it. He was just trying to say something that might make her big tears stop flowing. Having grown up in a family of all boys, what did he know about making little girls feel better?

She paused mid-sniffle. "Oh, I could never marry you." Her voice was low and serious and her eyes round with horror.

A chill breeze rippled through the leaves around him and then across his skin.

"You're a nobody." Her childish voice was once again

haughty. “You’re nothing but a farmer and a shoemaker’s son. I could never marry someone from the middling class. My mother would never allow it.”

“Of course not,” he said quickly, his muscles turning frigid. “I know *you* wouldn’t marry *me*. I was simply trying to make a point that *someone* will want to marry you someday.”

Suddenly anxious to be on his way, he dug the knife into the branch and worked faster at chipping away the bark. In fact, why should he help a little sour-milk pudding like her anyway? From what he could tell, she deserved to be stuck in the tree and rot away there.

“No matter what my cousin says,” she said, wiping her cheeks dry, “I’m going to marry a rich prince someday. Or a nobleman. Or at the very least, a wealthy merchant like my uncle in Boston.”

If he’d ever held any admiration for Mrs. Quincy’s granddaughter even just briefly from a distance, every ounce of goodwill had drained out of him completely at that moment.

And it had never returned.

He’d been gone for many years—first to Harvard, then teaching school in Worcester before finally studying law under Putnam for two years. And since his return to Braintree, he’d been too busy setting up his practice. He’d all but forgotten about Susie Smith . . . until today when she’d made her appearance next to Mrs. Quincy after the trial.

And now at his presumption to stand so close to her, the rapid beat of her pulse echoed between them.

Did she still think she was too good for a man like him?

He moved his hand onto her book, letting his fingers slide down the worn spine until they brushed against hers.

At the barest contact, she drew in a breath, and her inky eyes darkened.

He dared her—no, taunted her—to pull away.

“Why do you need to better yourself, Susie?” he asked in a half whisper.

She held herself motionless.

He took another step closer, testing her, helplessly driven by the hurts of the past to challenge her. Mere inches apart, he was taking liberties, but he couldn’t deny himself the chance to see if his lack of fortune and prestige still repulsed her.

With one hand against hers on the book, he lifted the other to the long slender line of her jaw. He skimmed his fingers along the curve, relishing the smoothness of her skin.

Her breathing turned softly ragged, the warmth of it spreading over his wrist, to his pulse. The darkness in her eyes was murky and unreadable, but there was the slightest flicker of something.

His own breath hitched in his chest. What passion simmered beneath the surface of a saucy woman like Susanna?

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, she took a small step backward, breaking their connection.

“Last I remember,” he said, “you already thought you were better than everyone.”

She stared at the elegant geometrical pattern of the carpet. “Time has a way of showing us our true condition, Mr. Ross.”

“Ben?” The door of the sitting room swung open, and Cranch peeked inside.

Susanna rapidly put several more feet between them. Her hand fluttered to her bodice and the lace that bordered her graceful curves.

A wicked grin spread over Cranch’s face. “Ah, just as I told everyone.” He sauntered into the room. “I figured you must have hidden yourself away with a pretty lady.”

“You’re quite mistaken, Mr. Cranch.” Susanna tossed the

man a cutting glare. “Mr. Ross and I are only together by accident.”

Was she embarrassed to be caught with him?

“Come now, Miss Smith,” Ben said. “Admit it. You were waiting for the chance to be alone with me so that you could whisper sweet verses of poetry into my ear.”

A retort formed on her lips, but before she could utter the witty response he’d hoped for, her sister glided into the room, followed by Elbridge Quincy—as insufferable as always.

Susanna’s rich cousin had sat through the proceedings that afternoon, and his mocking gaze had followed Ben’s every move.

Of course, Ben knew Elbridge was simply jealous. Even though the scoundrel had ranked higher in their graduating class at Harvard because of his family’s social standing, Ben had outscored him on all the tests. Academically, Ben had come out third in his class, and Elbridge had ranked far below him.

But Harvard refused to let go of its antiquated and prejudicial methods of arranging students—preferring to rank students according to family status rather than alphabetically or by academic achievements.

At the sight of him alone with Susanna, Elbridge’s eyebrows shot up, nearly disappearing under his wig. “Just what do you think you’re doing in the same room alone with my dear cousin?” Tall and athletic, Elbridge peered down at Ben over the tip of his long Roman nose.

During their time at Harvard together, Ben had always wanted to put a dent into Elbridge’s proud, straight nose. But he’d learned he was a better fighter with his words than with his fists. “Miss Smith and I were discussing the merits of Milton. It was quite the intimate conversation, if I might be so bold as to say so.”

Susanna grasped Mary's hand and whispered in her ear.

"I hardly think Susanna would want to share anything with you, Ross," Elbridge said, crossing toward Susanna, his sights focused solely upon her with a possessive glint that hinted at something more than familial affection.

Did Elbridge harbor aspirations toward the cousin he'd once tormented so religiously?

Cranch raised his tankard toward Ben. "I thought for sure you'd be trying to convince us again that Hermit Crab Joe is innocent."

Ben knew his friend well enough to guess his mug wasn't entirely filled with Mrs. Quincy's freshly pressed cider. Cranch had likely spiced his drink with rum as well.

Elbridge took his place next to Susanna and puffed out the silver-trimmed waistcoat that overlaid his fine linen ruffled shirt and pristine cravat. "I thought Ross would be trying to persuade us once again of the abomination of His Majesty's decision to prevent settlers west of the Appalachians."

"I don't need to do any more convincing." Ben forced arrogance to his words. During his years at Harvard, he'd had to learn to hold himself with more confidence than he felt inside. "Why would I need to entreat anyone when I've already done a substantial job?"

Susanna's bright eyes narrowed on him. "Then you disagree with King George's proclamation prohibiting colonists from moving farther west?"

"Of course I disagree. What freethinking intelligent man would agree with the king's decision?" He needed to choose his words carefully about King George and the new proclamation, especially around Elbridge, who was as loyal to the Crown as a native-born Englishman.

Nevertheless, over the past year since the end of the war

with France, Ben had been growing more disenchanted with the king and the policies directed toward the colonists. And he was having an increasingly difficult time keeping his seditious thoughts from having a voice.

“And just what about the king’s proclamation do you find offensive?” Susanna asked. She stood in front of the large fireplace, and the dancing light from the flames cast a sheen upon her ebony hair.

Was she like Elbridge, only trying to entrap him into saying something treasonous? Or did she truly care to hear his thoughts about the proclamation?

Her eyebrows arched, and her level gaze didn’t waver from his face. “The land west of the Appalachians is dangerous and the threat of Indian attacks constant. Do you not think the king is merely trying to protect men and their families?”

“I don’t think King George cares one whit for our protection,” he replied. “He’s trying to protect his holdings in America from the French. He knows if he spreads himself overly thin, he risks losing all he’s recently gained in the war.”

“Even so,” she said, “if the threat from France were to disappear altogether, the king would still prohibit expansion. The Indians are bloodthirsty. We’ve all heard stories of scalping and inhumane torturing of men, women, and children alike.”

His body had sagged with fatigue since the branding at the trial, but now at Susanna’s challenging comments, his pulse spurted forward with fresh energy. “Did the threat of danger from Indians and elements stop our Puritan forefathers from settling this very land we now call home, this land we hold so dear? Imagine if our ancestors had let the fear of the unknown dictate their decisions.”

Her lips stalled around her response.

Cranch took a swig from his tankard and started toward Ben. “See. This is exactly why I count you among my favorite friends.”

A glimmer in Cranch’s eyes warned Ben to stop, but the words inside him seemed to have a life of their own. “We’re here today in the colony of Massachusetts because of the courage of our relatives. I firmly conclude we can’t let fear deter us from pursuing what we believe is the right course of action.”

Cranch draped his arm across Ben’s shoulders. “This is why I am loath to be apart from you for even the briefest moment. You’re so talented at livening up a party.” He squeezed, and the pressure of his fingers was enough to remind Ben of where he was and to whom he was speaking.

And that Elbridge was in the room watching him with calculating eyes.

Mary giggled and leaned her blond head against Susanna’s dark one, whispering something into her sister’s ear.

The girl was much shyer than Susanna, but she’d had no problem flirting with Cranch. The young ladies never had any difficulty talking with the smooth-tongued Richard Cranch.

He was English-born, handsome, and good-natured. He’d moved to Boston with his prosperous father, who’d come like so many others to invest in land, along with the shipping of the rum produced in the colonies. What girl wouldn’t be impressed with him?

Certainly Mary’s family would have no reason to object if Cranch came calling.

Elbridge gave Susanna one of his winsome smiles and held out his arm to her. “We’d better make our escape now before Ross begins to regale us with tales of his recent treasonous trial in Boston.”

“There’s nothing treasonous about defending the innocent,” Ben said.

“And there’s nothing innocent about stealing a horse from a British regular.” Elbridge spoke as though he were an errant child.

Ben’s body tightened with old insecurities. He fought the pressure to slouch and fade into the background. Instead he pushed himself to his full height and reminded himself why he was fighting against injustice—to give the downtrodden, like himself, a fair chance in a world in which those with the most power and wealth made the rules.

Susanna slipped her hand into the crook of Elbridge’s arm, but she didn’t move forward with him. Instead she threw one more question at Ben. “Are you joining the ranks of the treasonous, Mr. Ross?”

He could see disappointment in the slant of her eyes, and he wished he could ignore it. “Treason can be a subjective issue, Miss Smith.”

“Obeying our ruling powers is hardly subjective,” she countered. “Scripture commands us to obey our leaders and submit to those in authority. God’s Word isn’t open to subjective interpretation.”

The intelligence and decisiveness of her responses were like a shot of energy in his veins. There was something entirely refreshing about a young woman who wasn’t afraid to voice her thoughts and spar intelligent words with a man. Most women he’d met didn’t have the slightest interest in the latest political situation involving the king, nor did they have any thoughts about treason or anything else important.

Elbridge tugged gently on her arm. “My dear cousin, I must advise against any more discourse with Ross. His

impassioned speeches will only lead him to serious trouble one of these days.”

“The greater the tyranny, the greater the treason.” Ben couldn’t prevent a parting retort.

“There you are, Mr. Ross” came a cheerful voice from the doorway.

In a glorious red gown, Hannah Quincy flounced into the room like a plump ripe apple ready for picking. She gave him the kind of smile that was meant to beckon him to her side.

He was all too willing to accommodate her.

“I came to congratulate you on your fine performance today at the trial.”

“Why, thank you, Miss Quincy.” *Performance?* He had in no way *performed* at the trial. Everything he’d done had been genuine and straight from all the passion in his heart. Nevertheless, he closeted his response into the recesses of his mind. He gave a slight bow and returned what he hoped was an adoring smile of his own.

Hannah Quincy was one of the most eligible young ladies inside and out of Boston. Not only was the Quincy family affluent, but they could trace their ancestry back to the founders of New England, to the landed gentry of England, and even to one of the signers of the Magna Carta.

That Hannah had taken an interest in him on the couple of occasions they’d been together recently was more than a little flattering.

It didn’t matter that she was Elbridge’s sister. She was as sweet as she was well-rounded. With her solid family connections and status, she was the kind of young woman he needed to marry if he wanted to increase his prestige.

As he approached her, she held out her hand to him. “I

don't care what Elbridge says, I think you have a very convincing way with words."

"Compared to your brother's oratory skills, mine do seem rather convincing."

Cranch guffawed and sputtered out a mouthful of cider.

Hannah only bobbed her pretty head while the hair coiffed high upon her brow remained perfectly still. Ben guessed she hadn't understood the jibe he'd leveled at her brother.

Surprisingly, Susanna's lips had twitched into a smile, which she promptly hid behind her hand.

Cranch wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "My stuffy old friend, I may hold out hope for you after all."

"Don't bother." Elbridge's nostrils flared. "Ross is such a bore that I'm afraid no matter how refined he tries to be, he'll always be nothing more than the son of a struggling farmer."

The words pummeled Ben in his gut just as Elbridge had likely intended.

"Oh, do stop being so cranky, you two," Hannah said, tugging Ben toward the door. "Let's go play. Aunt Eve always has such fun games at her parties."

Even though Ben wanted to toss another insult at Elbridge, he reined in his rebuttal. The firm pressure of Hannah's fleshy hand against his reminded him that he had too much at stake to alienate such a fine woman.

Sure, he'd had plenty of women show interest in him over the years. Yet he'd followed the advice of his friends and mentors who'd encouraged him to pursue his study of law with unequivocal devotion and without the encumbrance of an early marriage.

Now at twenty-eight years, with a growing practice, he'd decided it was time to find a wife. But not just any wife. He

needed one with the right connections and social standing. So far he hadn't found anyone quite as fitting as Hannah Quincy.

He didn't really care that she'd started showing interest in him only after he'd won the case in Boston regarding the young man accused of stealing a horse from a British regular. All that mattered was that she favored him and wanted to be with him.

He pressed her hand and smiled down at her.

She lifted her pert nose and gave him a promising smile in return. She hadn't disdained him the way Susanna had.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Susanna watching him.

He patted Hannah's hand and bestowed a look of endearment upon her.

At the very least, he could make Susanna realize that just because she hadn't thought him worthy didn't mean every wealthy young lady would feel the same.