

The
MISTRESS
OF TALL ACRE



A NOVEL

LAURA
FRANTZ


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To the Isle of Mull
where this story was born
and the rivers of Living Water
I found there





These are the things which once Possess'd
Will make a life that's truly bless'd;
A good Estate on healthy Soil,
Not got by vice, nor yet by Toil;
Round a warm fire, a Pleasant Joke,
With Chimney ever free from smoke;
A Strength entire, a Sparkling Bowl,
A quiet Wife, a quiet Soul,
A Mind as well as body, whole;
Prudent simplicity, constant Friends,
A diet which no art Commends;
A Merry night without much Drinking,
A Happy Thought without much Thinking;
Each Night by Quiet Sleep made Short;
A Will to be but what thou art;
Possess'd of these, all else defy,
And neither wish nor fear to Die.

TRUE HAPPINESS, AUTHORSHIP UNKNOWN
FOUND IN GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
BOYHOOD COPYBOOK

1



We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our Sacred honor.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

On this day, 8 August, 1778, a child was safely delivered . . .

Nay, not safely. Anything but safely.

. . . to Anne Howard Ogilvy and Seamus Michael Ogilvy of Tall Acre, Roan County, Virginia.

Dropping his quill pen, Seamus ran callused hands through hair bereft of a queue ribbon and watched a stray droplet of ink soak into the scarred desktop. Steadying his breathing, he picked up the pen and pressed on as if time was against him.

The infant's name is . . .

The heavy scratch of the nib against the family Bible's fragile page was halted by a knock on his study door. A servant to tell him he could finally see his firstborn? Or that his wife was dead? Or the both of them?

He called out with a shaky voice, but it was Dr. Spurlock who appeared, shutting the door soundly behind him. "A word with you, General Ogilvy, if I may." At Seamus's taut expression, Spurlock gave him a slight smile. "At ease, man, at ease. I'm not the undertaker."

Pulling himself to his feet, Seamus came out from behind the desk. "A word and a glass of Madeira are in order, at least." He went to a near cabinet and filled two crystal goblets as a newborn's wail rent the summer stillness, sharp and sweet as birdsong.

"'Tis about Anne," Spurlock said, a careful note to his tone.

Seamus passed him a glass. The doctor looked haggard after the lengthy ordeal, silver hair standing on end, spectacles askew, to say nothing of his waistcoat. Seamus was sure he looked equally unfit, having spent the night in his study.

"I don't need to tell you what a trial this birth has been. You've nearly worn a trail in the floor with your pacing." Spurlock regarded him with bleary, apologetic eyes. "Your wife is very weak. The baby, being so large, took a toll. Anne is a very narrow woman and continues to bleed heavily."

Blood. Wounds. Life and death. Seamus was used to such things. These were the staples of a soldier's life. Childbirth was, in a very real sense, battle. "I trust she'll recover in time."

Spurlock frowned. "Mistress Menzies, the midwife, nearly lost her at one point. If not for her presence of mind and the use of my forceps, we'd be having a very different conversation." He removed his spectacles and began cleaning them

with a handkerchief. “On a brighter note, your wife’s sister is coming from Williamsburg to help care for her, though I do worry about you returning to duty so soon.”

“Orders,” Seamus said through a stitch of guilt. “General Washington wants me at reveille come morning.” As it was, he’d have to ride all night to reach camp by the appointed time.

“I speak not only out of concern for your wife but for you, General. I can tell from looking at you that your own health has been compromised.”

Seamus squared his shoulders. “A malaise of war, little more.”

“Spoken like a true soldier.” Spurlock fixed his gaze on an open window. “Very well, I’ll talk plain and fast. Your wife faces a long recovery. She’s always been a bit fragile, a true gentlewoman. And though it will be hard for you to hear, I’m duty bound to tell you her very life will be in danger if there’s a second birth. Mistress Menzies concurs.”

A second birth—and she’d barely withstood the first. The words spun round Seamus’s head but made no sense. Remembering his Madeira, he took a sip, listening as the doctor explained feminine things he didn’t know. Didn’t want to know. Things that made him itch under his uniform collar with a heat that had nothing to do with the humid Virginia afternoon.

“Of course, husbands have certain needs, certain rights, if you will . . .” The doctor’s words were becoming more labored, nearly lost as the babe’s cries reached a crescendo upstairs.

“Say no more,” Seamus replied. Spurlock’s warning was clear as a midsummer day. All marital intimacy was at an end. “As it stands, I’ll be away for the duration of the war.” His outward calm belied the storm breaking inside him. “I

won't—I mean, there won't be occasion to—” He stared at his boots. “I understand.”

Spurlock nodded and downed the rest of his Madeira. “I knew you'd take it like the officer and gentleman you are. Now, if you're ready, your wife would like to present you with your firstborn.”

Firstborn. Final born. And a robust daughter at that.



The bedchamber seemed strange since Seamus had been away so long. Stepping inside the elegant green and gilt room brought about unwanted, ill-timed memories—a crush of passionate encounters beginning on their wedding night. It was the eve of the war when he'd wed the belle of Williamsburg, three years later when their daughter was conceived on a hasty visit. He hardly remembered either. War had driven such sentimental things from his head, replacing them with the stench of smoke and powder instead.

To reorient himself, he latched onto the open corner cupboard where medicines were kept, the two wing chairs and tea table before the cold hearth. His gaze finally settled on the bed dressed with crewel embroidery.

“Seamus.” Anne lay back on the bank of downy pillows, looking exhausted but triumphant. “Come meet your new daughter.”

Spurs scraped the heart-pine floor before he stepped onto a lush rug and took a seat on the edge of the four-poster bed as carefully as he could. In light of the doctor's unwelcome words, the ever-delicate Anne seemed made of spun glass. If she was broken, he was to blame, at sixteen stone and over six feet.

As she settled the newborn in his arms, the catch in his

throat nearly stole all speech. One tiny hand peeked from the blanket, the plump face red and round as an orchard apple. He swallowed hard. “She’s . . . beautiful.”

Something wistful kindled in Anne’s eyes. “You were hoping for a boy, though you never said so.”

He gave a slight, dismissive shrug. “Soldiers always want sons.”

“There’ll be some, Lord willing. As soon as I’m well again . . .”

Her guileless words seared his heart. Spurlock hadn’t told her then, but had left it up to him. Well, he wouldn’t do it now. Let their dream of a large family be left intact a little longer.

Her lovely face turned entreating. “What shall we call her?”

The pride and expectancy in her eyes brought a wave of shame. He wouldn’t confess he’d only entertained male names and had given little thought to a girl. Even his men had wagered on a boy, placing bold bets about the campfire till he’d ridden home to settle the matter himself.

“A name . . .” Lowering his head, he nuzzled the baby’s ear, her downy neck and fuzz of dark hair. The decision came quick. He was used to thinking on his feet. As Washington’s newly appointed major general, he could do little else. “Why not Liliás Catherine?”

“After my mother and yours?” Surprise shone in Anne’s eyes. “Of course. ’Tis perfect.”

He hesitated, looking into his daughter’s face as if seeking answers. She seemed too little to merit such an onerous name. “We’ll call her Lily Cate.”

Nodding, Anne sank back on the pillows, her face so pale he could see the path of blue veins beneath. “I’m relieved. I didn’t want you riding away without knowing.”

He smiled. “Let me take her till you’ve slept for a few

hours. Doctor Spurlock said she won't be hungry yet, and—" He took a breath, fighting the lurch of leaving. "I don't know when I'll be back." The casual phrasing was more lie. He didn't know *if* he'd be back.

Her hazel eyes held his. "How is it on the field?"

The question wrenched him. She rarely asked. Their brief times together were too precious to be squandered on melancholy things.

"'Tis a strange war. We drill. We wait. We fight and fall back." He wouldn't tell her the biggest battle of his life was imminent, or that American forces were weak—deprived and diseased—and no match for Clinton's redcoats. Leaning forward, careful of the warm weight in his arms, he kissed her gently on the cheek. "I'll go below and introduce Miss Lily Cate to the household."

Yawning, eyes already half closed, Anne gave a last, lingering look at the baby. Down the wide, curving stair he went to a staff on tenterhooks since dawn. The birth had been—what had Spurlock said?—brutal. His people deserved a look, at least. The midwife was in the foyer preparing to leave, her daughter with her.

"Mistress Menzies, I'll settle up with you before you go." He glanced from her to her daughter, both of them looking far less disheveled than the doctor.

"There's no fee, General, not for a hero of the Revolution." Pulling on her gloves, Mistress Menzies smiled in her genteel, unruffled way, reminding him that she was no ordinary midwife.

"I have you to thank for calling in Spurlock when the situation became . . . untenable," he told her.

"You can thank my daughter for that, General. She is fleet of foot and a midwife in the making."

He took in Sophie Menzies in a glance. Dark. Plain. Clad in a fine crimson cape like her mother's.

"Then I thank you too, Miss Menzies," he said.

She smiled up at him, blue gaze fastening on the baby in his arms. "Have you named her, General Ogilvy?"

"Aye, she's to be called Lily Cate."

The pleasure in her expression seemed confirmation. "Lovely and memorable," she said with her mother's poise and a hint of her father's Scots burr. "I bid you and your wee daughter good day."

They withdrew out the front door while he went out the back, which was flung open to the river and leading to Tall Acre's dependencies. At his appearance, the steamy kitchen at the end of a shaded colonnade came to a standstill.

"Why, General Ogilvy, looks like you mustered up a fine baby." Ruby, his longtime cook, hastily left the hearth as the other servants looked on. She leaned near, and one ebony finger caressed a petal-soft cheek. "She's got your blue eyes and black hair, but I see the mistress in her pert nose and mouth."

The maids and housekeeper gathered round next on the rear veranda, cooing and sighing like the dove-cote's doves. Next he went to the stables, a fatherly pride swelling his chest. By the time he returned to his study, his daughter had slept through a brief meeting with his estate manager and a first look at a prize foal. Completely smitten, he crossed to a wing chair in his study, reluctant to let her go.

"You're only a few hours old and already you've worked your way into my heart." His voice was a ragged whisper. "But there are some things you need to know. I don't want to leave you. I'm willing to die for you . . . and if I don't come back, I want you to forgive me."

The choked words stanching none of the pain. His daughter opened wide indigo eyes and stared up at him, as if she understood every syllable. He pressed his damp, unshaven cheek to hers, savoring the feathering of her warm breath on his face. Her flawlessness turned him inside out.

“Till we meet again, Lily Cate Ogilvy of Tall Acre. Never forget your loving father’s words.”