

Chapter 1

Neigeville 1777

Nathanael Cooper crept slowly, staying as close as possible to the trunks of the larger trees. He moved silently, fearful of giving his presence away. His heart beat so heavily he thought his chest would burst. Fragrant pine needles and dead leaves, dry and crumbled from the summer heat, carpeted the forest floor. A small twig crackled beneath his feet. He uttered a curse under his breath and froze, terrified the sharp sound would give him away. There were watchers now – watchers everywhere – on both sides. The town of Neigeville had formed a committee of volunteers to monitor the roads and report all movement, particularly British, immediately. At the slightest alarm, the church bells would be rung to wake the countryside.

He had lain awake that night until he was certain everyone in the house was asleep – his mother, father and sisters. He hoped they'd sleep deeply and not wake to find him gone. He did not want to explain to anyone what he was about. Once certain it was safe, he crept softly down the stairs and out into the fragrant humid night. No one must know. He would never be forgiven. He would be killed, no doubt about that, and most likely his entire family as well. At the very least, their home and all their goods would be confiscated by the militia.

His feet were encased in gray homespun socks and soft leather boots that made little noise but even so, a chorus of cricket song quieted at each step he took. A small animal scurried away through the underbrush. It was the dark of the moon, just a day or two to the new moon. Hard to see anything at all, much less among the trees. He edged closer to the clearing where only thin saplings would offer him protection, careful not to step out of the shelter of the dark. A single lantern burned in the window of the tavern below where the British officer had approached him that very afternoon. Somehow the man knew about his brother, knew that Jonathan was missing. Nathanael had last seen his brother driving away in the family's horse drawn cart to deliver ale to a neighboring town. The family had asked everyone in town if they had seen Jonathan or heard any news of him. They had searched for him but had learned nothing. His mother was consumed with worry, sure her missing son had been shot by the British. At best, his brother had been taken prisoner. At the very worst, he was dead.

His family was terrified by the events unfolding around them, as were many others. Angry at the arrogance of the British regulars, the townspeople wanted to drive them out. Yet many believed that as British citizens they still owed allegiance to the King. Feelings had reached a boiling point and now there was no more time to debate. Everyone must choose a side. Nathanael's father was eager to fight, held in check only by his mother's fears. It was his father's hesitation that had caused the town to turn a suspicious eye in their direction. Against his mother's wishes Nathanael himself had joined the militia, more in an effort to protect his family than for any other reason. He had no desire to fight, to kill other men, even if they were British. Like his brother, he had little interest in politics and wished only to live the quiet life of a farmer. He hoped he'd never be forced to kill anyone, British or Yankee.

The strange man had worn the clothing of a local, short trousers and a coat of homespun cloth, in shades of brown, but there was no mistaking him for a colonial. His manner was highhanded and arrogant, used to giving orders. He hadn't fooled anyone in the tavern, not even the young boy who swept the floor. Another man followed in his footsteps and took orders from him -- a servant. Only a British officer would keep a servant. Perhaps the pastor was correct – if the town did not take up arms, if the rebellion were quashed, they'd be slaves to the crown forever. Nathanael was torn – stay loyal to the King and hope for peace, or join the rebels in their hatred of the King's authority? An iron fist was closing over all their land. The loyalists were called traitors and the rebels were at risk of their lives. To be hesitant to take a side might mean death at the hands of a neighbor.

The man had accosted him that afternoon outside the tavern. He had news. His brother Jonathan had been taken prisoner on the road to Bournemouth, his cart, ale and horses confiscated. The officer swore to Nathanael that Jonathan was still alive and promised to reveal where his brother was being held. In exchange, he wanted information. Young as he was, Nathanael was no fool. He knew there'd be a price to pay, but gasped when he learned what the man wanted. He demanded to know where in the town the gunpowder and arms were hidden. Even more, he wanted details about the stores at Bennington, and how many would march to defend the armory.

The Committee of Safety formed in Neigeville were certain the British, approaching from the north, planned to confiscate all the guns and ammunition that had been so carefully stockpiled, and ultimately gain control of the armory at Bennington. At meetings, townspeople had learned that the ranks of Burgoyne, the hated British general, were swelled with Hessians, loyalist Canadians, Indians and French. They knew their horses and cattle would be confiscated to feed the soldiers on their march. A fierce battle was coming, if not here in Neigeville, then closer to Bennington.

Nathanael knew that, with the blessing of their minister, guns and powder were hidden under the pulpit of the white steepled church on the Village Green, but he was not privy to any information about the armory at Bennington. Nathanael would happily give the lobsterback all the details he wanted, if only he could free his brother and bring him home. But did he know enough?

He shivered in spite of the warm night. Where was the man? He was terrified of the officer, but far more terrified of discovery by his fellow townsmen. He hated to think what would happen to him if it were known he had provided information to the enemy. A branch crackled and Nathanael jumped in terror. The man had come through the woods behind him and now had stepped out into the clearing. Nathanael watched and waited. His heart finally slowed its rhythm. He took a deep breath and stepped out of the trees. He recognized the linen shirt and brown vest, the wide-brimmed hat, but when the shadow turned toward him, his blood ran cold. This was a different man, shorter and stockier, not the officer he had promised to meet. The man raised his gun. A shot rang out. Nathanael reeled back, falling against a tree. More surprised than in pain, he looked down at his chest to see his life's blood flowing from a wound. The last word he heard was *'Traitor.'*

Chapter 2

"How did you ever manage it?"

Lucky stopped in her tracks, almost losing control of the dolly loaded with bottled and canned drinks. "Manage what?"

Sophie smiled. "Getting Pastor Wilson to host the demonstration. Unbelievable."

"Well, I don't know about hosting, but he's volunteered the meeting hall."

Sophie shook her head. "Amazing. I mean he's so stuck in another century, and you've virtually talked him into rabbleroxing."

Lucky smiled. "He's not a bad sort at all. I really like him."

Sophie wrinkled her nose. "He smells of mothballs."

Lucky laughed. "Maybe that's why I like him. I love the smell of mothballs."

"Nobody loves that smell. You must be kidding."

“I do. Really. Always makes me think of summertime . . . you know, when everyone puts away their wool clothes and stuffs mothballs into drawers and closets.”

Sophie guffawed. “Maybe you do. I sure never did. Just the same, you charmed him.”

Lucky smiled, shrugged her shoulders and grasped the handle of the dolly more firmly. She was thrilled that her friendship with Sophie had been renewed. Several years before when she had left their small Vermont hometown to attend college, Sophie had taken it very badly, reacting with coldness and cutting remarks. A serious rift had formed between them. Now, all that was past and Lucky couldn't have been happier. Months before, Sage DuBois, the chef at Lucky's restaurant, and the love of Sophie's life, had been arrested for the murder of a winter tourist. Lucky had uncovered the real murderer and Sage was freed. She and Sophie had mended their bridges and Lucky could count her a close friend once again.

“Pastor Wilson's just providing a space at the church for the demonstrators to take breaks. We'll bring over half sandwiches tomorrow and part of the profits will go to the church. But that's not why he agreed. He believes in the demonstration – no one wants to see a car wash built in the middle of town.”

Sophie shook her head. “I'd like to see all those town council people recalled. How they ever . . . why they ever voted for that disgusting thing, I'll never understand. It'd make much more sense to build it up at the Resort.”

In winter months Sophie was a top ski instructor at the Snowflake Resort perched halfway up the mountain from the town. During the summer, her schedule was much lighter – giving occasional swimming lessons to summer tourists. That left plenty of time for Sophie to visit the Spoonful, help Sage with his chores and spend more time with Lucky. Right now she was wheeling a dolly of her own, identical to Lucky's, loaded with drinks for the start of the demonstration the next day.

“I really appreciate your help with this.” Lucky paused to wipe her brow with the back of her hand. Temperatures had soared on the first day of August and the heat had shown no signs of abating. The morning had the stillness that comes when summer heat is at its peak, no crickets, no birds, the heat rising off the asphalt in waves. “Can you believe this weather? And it's still early in the day too.” She checked her bare arms quickly. She'd have to remember her sunblock when she was out running errands.

They had managed to maneuver their carts to the edge of the Village Green and now, single file, navigated the path to the Congregational Church, a white-steeped building erected in 1749 that sat at the head of the Green. Lucky took a deep breath, relishing the smell of freshly mown grass. “That's my other favorite summer smell.”

“What's that?” Sophie didn't look up. She was focused on making sure none of her crates slid to the ground.

“Grass – the way it smells when it's just been cut.”

“Hmmm. Okay. I'll buy that. I like that smell. So . . . cut grass and mothballs . . . anything else remind you of summer?”

“Remember that white cream we used to put all over us when we were kids whenever we got sunburned?”

Sophie laughed. “Oh, I remember. We'd always peel after we had worked so hard to get a tan. Don't tell me you liked the way that stuff smelled? It stunk. We used it 'cause it was all we could find in our parents' medicine cabinets.” Sophie stopped and looked toward the other end of the path. “And speaking of stinky . . .”

Lucky spotted a woman with bright strawberry blond hair leaving the church. Rowena Nash – her hair was unmistakable.

“What’s she doing here?” Sophie whispered. “I can’t stand her.”

“Shush . . . she’ll hear you.” Rowena looked in their direction and waved energetically. Changing course, she walked straight toward them. “We’re about to find out.”

Lucky and Sophie had both attended school with Rowena who now worked for the Snowflake Gazette. Rowena’s zeal in chasing down a story made it clear her sights were set far beyond the Gazette.

“Hey Lucky, hi Sophie. You setting up for tomorrow?” Rowena bestowed a large smile on Lucky while her gaze slid over Sophie.

“What are you doing here?” Sophie asked.

“Oh, I just came over to talk to Pastor Wilson but he’s busy right now. I saw Harry Hodges go into his office. I was thinking of writing something about the demonstration and hopefully getting an interview with Richard Rowland too -- you know, the developer of the car wash -- kind of airing both sides of the dispute.”

“That sounds interesting.” Lucky offered, sure that no one in town had one ounce of interest in hearing Richard Rowland’s point of view.

“Since you’re here Rowena, you want to give us a hand with this stuff?” Sophie smiled sweetly.

“Oh, sorry. Love to. But I can’t right now. I have a meeting with my editor. I’ll catch you later.” Rowena flounced off with a last beaming smile and continued across the Village Green.

Lucky turned to Sophie. “You’re incorrigible, you know that, don’t you?”

Sophie smiled impishly. “I thought the prospect of actual work might send her scurrying.” Sophie shook her head. “She hasn’t changed a bit since we were in school. She was a self important little snob then and she’s worse now.”

“Come on. Let’s get this stuff inside. I have to get back to the Spoonful before the lunch crowd hits.” They reached the church and navigated the pathway to the side door that led to the meeting hall. Lucky pushed open the heavy wooden door and held it while Sophie bumped her dolly over the threshold. The smell of polished floors and chalk covered erasers hovered in the air. Sophie held the door for Lucky in turn. They wheeled their carts through the meeting hall and into the large kitchen.

“Where should we put this stuff?”

“Hang on. There are some long tables in the storage room we can set up.” With Sophie’s help, she hauled out two long folding tables. Sophie lifted one end and together they pulled the retractable legs open, setting both tables up by the entry to the kitchen. Lucky searched the kitchen drawers and found long paper tablecloths in plastic wrappers. Ripping them open, she shook out the paper cloths and spread them over the long tables, placing stacks of paper napkins at one end. She opened the refrigerator. “Let’s cram as many drinks as we can in here, and I’ll bring a couple of big plastic bins tomorrow for the ice. Can you dig out the coffee urn?”

“Sure. I’ll find it.” Sophie replied, opening and closing cupboard doors in her search.

Lucky unloaded canned and bottled drinks from the carts until the refrigerator would hold no more. “That should do it for now. I should let Pastor Wilson know the drinks are here and the ice will be delivered early tomorrow.”

“I’ll rummage around and see what other supplies are on hand.”

“Be right back.” Lucky pushed through the door leading to the main part of the church. She followed the corridor to the end hoping to find the Pastor in his office. As she approached

the door, she halted. She heard voices. Pastor Wilson wasn't alone. She listened, certain she had heard the unmistakable sound of sobbing. Then silence. Someone was having a very emotional conversation with the Pastor. Was it Harry? She tiptoed back a few steps, but before she could retreat from the corridor, the office door opened. It was Harry Hodges, the town's auto mechanic and one of the major forces behind the demonstration. Harry's voice carried clearly through the partially open door. "I had to talk to someone."

The Pastor's voice was closer now. "You did the right thing. Be calm. We can talk again . . . whenever you're ready."

It was too late to retreat. Harry stepped into the corridor. He started visibly when he saw her standing nearby. His face darkened. Pastor Wilson peeked around the doorjamb. "Lucky! Hello. I didn't know you were here."

"I didn't mean to interrupt. We just came over to unload drinks. I wanted to alert you that an ice delivery would be coming tomorrow."

"Oh, good, good. That's wonderful. Harry and I . . . well, we were just discussing the plans. . ." Lucky suspected the Pastor was making an effort to cover for Harry, who seemed embarrassed she might have overheard his conversation.

Harry turned to the Pastor. "I'll call you very soon." Without a backward glance, he turned away and left by the door leading into the church.

Pastor Wilson cleared his throat and opened the office door wider. "I can't thank you enough. This is truly wonderful what the Spoonful is doing. It'll really help keep everyone's spirits up tomorrow."

"I am sorry if I interrupted anything."

"That's quite all right. Harry and I were just finishing our little chat. Anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you. I have a helper today. But you might want to lock that side door now that the drinks are there."

"Good idea. I'll just get my keys." Lucky stood in the doorway and watched the Pastor as he scanned his desk, littered with papers, books, a Bible and remnants of a piece of toast. Pastor Wilson was tall and thin with a prominent Adam's apple. His face was pale, his hair a shade between sand and gray. His movements were disjointed, as though confused by the objects around him -- as if the furniture of his life belonged to someone else. She detected a faint whiff of naphthalene. She smiled to herself. Sophie was right about the mothballs.

"Now what did I do with those keys?" Pastor Wilson brushed a few wisps of hair from his forehead and replastered them over a bald spot on the top of his head.

Realizing this search could take quite a while, Lucky said. "I'll be on my way then."

"Oh, yes, yes, my dear . . . you go on. I'll find them eventually."

Lucky headed back down the corridor to the meeting hall and pushed through the swinging doors. Sophie was leaning against one of the dollies, waiting for her. "Ready?" Lucky nodded, grabbed her dolly and followed Sophie out the door. She was silent as they headed across the Village Green to Broadway.

"Something wrong?" Sophie watched her critically.

"Oh, no. Nothing." Sophie waited, aware that something was on her friend's mind.

"Well, actually, I think I overheard something I wasn't supposed to hear." Lucky repeated the exchange between Harry Hodges and the Pastor as they walked.

Sophie shrugged. "Probably nothing at all. Maybe Harry wanted to confess he had dipped into the collection box."

Lucky didn't respond to Sophie's gibe. "It was more than that. There seemed to be a . . ." she hesitated, ". . . an emotional charge to the words I guess. I could have sworn Harry was crying. More than that -- Harry almost jumped out of his skin when he saw me standing in the corridor."

"Hard to imagine him being emotional. The most excited I've ever seen him was when he was staring under the hood of my car."

Lucky chewed her lip. Sophie was right of course. Harry definitely took more interest in the workings of internal combustion engines than in people. She pictured his shocked look when he saw her in the corridor -- as if afraid she might have overheard something. Harry was a man of few words, not rude but taciturn, definitely not forthcoming. All the same, Harry's tone hinted at a very painful subject -- something deeply buried.