

The snow was coming down in flakes as big as shillings as Alice hurried along the deserted street toward the boarding house where she shared a room with Anne. As she passed the church on Knightsbridge Road, candles glowing from illuminated windows only heightened her misery, making her feel lonely for winter nights past when she sat with her family warmed by the fire in the kitchen hearth. Her heart ached with remembering.

Into her mind sprang the vision of her family the night before the attack. Her grandfather had been reading in his rocker, spectacles perched at the end of his nose. He was no stranger to hardship and tragedy, having wielded a broad axe for more than half his life, serving seven years of indenture in Virginia, soldiering in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, clearing forest in the mountain country of New Hampshire, losing his wife more than fifty years ago in the massacre at Deerfield and his son at Fort Duquesne. At times he had survived on nothing but blackberries, wild hickory nuts and pure tenacity. Yet he was also old and cynical and had argued against going after Billy, claiming there was no chance of getting him back.

She pictured her mother standing before the hearth, prodding the fire with the iron poker grasped in her thin, veined hand. Since her husband's death at Fort Duquesne she moved outside of herself, as if some giant hand manipulated the strings that set her in motion. A joyless woman, hardened and muted by pain, she had uttered not a word about the dispatch and Billy's fate, until she lay dying in the grass and disclosed the secret cache of money in the harness shed.

Fourteen-year-old Ethan had been cleaning his musket that night, his rangy deer hound asleep at his feet, arguing that he should be the one to go north in search of Billy. But with Robbie dead and their grandfather weakened by a mild stroke the previous winter, Ethan had become the man of the house. To him fell the hard chores of splitting birch, haying, milking, and repairing the stone walls. Alice helped as much as she could with berry crocking, cooking, weaving new rushes into the chairs, shoveling the wood ash for soap and sanding and scrubbing the tables and floors, but that left only her to undertake the impossible journey. It was from her grandfather that she inherited her indomitable will and a streak of stubbornness as wide as the Merrimac. It was that very will which bound her to her vow to get Billy back. But she could not do it alone. The conversation she overheard at the tavern convinced her that the one man who could help her was one no one had ever actually seen. Did he even exist? Was she pinning her hopes on a local legend?

The grief she had not allowed herself to feel wedged now in her throat and her eyes blurred with tears as she clutched her cloak tighter about her slender form, fighting against the stinging bite of the snow. She had used some of the money she found in the harness shed to get to Albany. What remained, and the little she had saved from her wages, was sewn into the hem of her cloak. Silently, she vowed that somehow, with or without help, she *would* get to Montreal.

As she hurried along the snow-swept street, a cold instinct caused her to draw the hood of her cloak in closer about her face and look over her shoulder. A frozen breath caught in her throat at the sight of a dark form following her.

Before she could react, a pair of rough hands seized her, shoving her into a narrow alley between the church and a stable. Powerful fingers splayed over her mouth from behind, forcing the scream back down her throat. Behind her a voice hissed, "Quiet, miss."

It was a strong, resonant voice, loosing an unexpected rush of warmth into the cold night air. With it came a familiar scent. Into Alice's frightened mind sprang the vision of the forest surrounding her home in New Hampshire. It was the same deep, dark verdant scent that clung to him, as if he had just stepped out of the forest.

His body pressed against her back was warm and unyielding. She could feel the steady thump, thump of his heart, and the hardness that bit into her from his loins. Cheeks burning scarlet, she struggled to get away.

With a low growl he swung her around to face him. Her strength was no match for his. In moments she was trapped again, this time against the tanned hide of the jacket that covered his immovable chest. In the darkness she could see only glimpses of dark hair and eyes.

"I have no money," she managed to blurt, even now daring to lie to save the coins sewn in her cloak.

Those powerful fingers locked on her shoulders. "I ain't no damned thief." His voice was like a growl against the wind, his speech rough and unrefined.

Alice's face bled white at the alternative, but still she struggled. She'd not be taken by some nameless heathen in a dark alley. "No! Not that! Let me go!"

His grip tightened with anger. "I ain't that either."

Breathless, Alice stammered, "Wh—what do you want then?"

"Yer being followed."

Again she caught the scent of the forest. The familiar aroma coming from this dark stranger confused her. Something about that scent, so like home, brought her struggles to a gradual halt until she stood panting before him.

"Who follows me?"

"Don't know. But he's had his sights on ya since ya left the tavern."

She had no reason to believe him, yet for some crazy reason she did. Perhaps it was the way his hold relaxed, cupping her shoulders now with gentle pressure. Or the resonant sound of his voice. Or that scent, so familiar, so deeply reassuring, and so reminiscent of home.

"Who are you?" she whispered against the wind.

"I'm many things," he replied. "Right now, I'm a protector. And if I'm to protect ya, ya must do as I say."

How could he ask her to trust him when she had ceased trusting all things human? "What would you have me do?"

His head jerked away and froze, listening to the imperceptible sound of footsteps crunching on the hard-packed snow. "There's no time for anything else."

Without warning, his hands found her in the darkness and pulled her abruptly into his embrace. Roughly, he advised, "Just act like ya like it."

In the frosty night his lips came to hers in a meeting that seemed at once both shocking and unexplainably inevitable. The hood fell from her head that tilted back to receive his kiss.

The wind carried the snow along the empty street and swept it into the alley in chilled eddies. Alice's cloak swirled madly about her ankles. With the blood pounding at her temples, she scarcely heard the footsteps that slowed at the entrance to the alley, paused, and then hurried on. Dizziness swept over her. Heart pounding, she fought to forget the past. For this one wildly illogical moment only the present mattered. And yes, yes, for some crazy reason, she trusted him.

Her arms inched around his neck where her fingers twined in the dark, snow-dampened hair. How was it possible to feel such life and longing in the wake of such utter grief and despair? She rose on tiptoes and with a soft gasp molded herself to his lean length, lips parting, recklessly encouraging the deepening of his kiss. No one had ever kissed her like this. Certainly, not the local farm boys who came to bundle, whose inexperienced lips did nothing to stir her. The only

one who'd come close to taking such liberty with a kiss was Jimmy Crandall and she'd damned near bit his lip off for trying.

A soft moan welled from somewhere deep inside and spilled from her lips, mingling with his breath that was sweetened with ale. She felt his body stiffen with desire and heard his ragged murmur in words she did not understand that carried a familiar lilt. Something inside of her stilled as her mind floundered to assign some recognition to his speech. And then she remembered the sound of Indian voices in the kitchen as she had crouched in the crawl space behind the settle.

Reeling from the sudden onrush of memories, she tore her lips from his and pushed herself free of his embrace. Her face radiated white from out of the darkness.

"Is—is he gone?"

The breath shot from his nostrils in rapid white bursts. "For now," he rasped.

She drew the hood back up over her head. "I must go. Thank you for your assistance." Whirling, she ran from the alley, chancing one quick peek back over her shoulder only to find him gone, the alley deserted.

The wind had abated and the snow drifted almost peacefully to earth, the patterned flakes falling on the lashes of her wide-set eyes. Her grandfather used to say that eyes such as hers could lead a man to poetry or suicide. They were extraordinary and unforgettable, changing color with her mood, from smoke to granite with each shift of emotion. At this moment she resisted the tears that stung them. This was no time for weakness. She had to keep her wits and strength about her. There were dangerous men lurking about. Not to mention deep-voiced strangers who stole kisses in deserted alleys.

She'd been a fool to believe him about being followed. Who would be following her?

Her question was answered when she rounded the corner of the boarding house and ran smack into the chest of a man. For a fleet instant she thought it was the man from the alley, but the scent that wafted into her nostrils was not that of the forest, but of stale ale and tobacco. She swallowed audibly and backed away.

"Not so fast." His hand shot out to clamp over her arm.

Alice blanched with fear when she recognized the voice of the man from the tavern. Men such as this were dangerous, drunken men even more so. She had witnessed his mean temper at the tavern on several occasions prior to the pinching incident.

"Embarrass me in front of the whole room, will ya? I'll teach ya to mind yer bloody manners."

He grabbed for her, but before he could make contact, a dark shape lunged past them, catching him by surprise and hurling him backwards up against the side of the building with enough force to shatter the bones of a weaker man. In a heartbeat the sharp edge of a blade was at his throat.

"Do ya want me to kill him for ya?"

Alice recognized the deep voice that asked flatly, as if the mere nod of her head would send the blade in deep.

"No!" she cried. "Don't kill him!"

He turned to look at her. Through the darkness she could see disbelief written in his eyes. The knife lifted fractionally from the vulnerable neck.

She reached out. To stop him? To touch him? She wasn't sure which. "Please," she implored. "There's been too much killing already."

Turning back to the other man, he pricked the skin at his throat with the tip of his knife, forcing one small droplet of blood to spill onto the cold metal blade. "If it was up to me, I'd have gutted ya by now. Listen and listen good. Stay away from this woman or I'll feed yer innards to the buzzards."

"Who are ya, the wench's husband, to be tellin' me I can't go near her?" the other asked with drunken belligerence.

The blade edged upwards towards his chin. "No, I ain't her husband. Fact is, we only just met." He looked at Alice briefly and she thought she saw the glimmer of a conspiratorial smile flash at her through the shadows.

Turning back to his victim, he bent close and whispered something in his ear.

The other man blanched. "I won't go near her," he said, his voice raw with panic. "Ya have my word on it."

"Good. Now, get the hell out of here and don't let me see ya around her again."

The other man edged away, hugging the splintered planks of the building until he was clear, and then running away as fast as he could.

The dark-haired stranger shook his head, and muttered, "Were the choice mine." The metal blade glinted as he buried it in the moose hide sheath at his belt.

Alice shivered. She knew if it had not been for her, he would have killed the other man, and something told her it would not have been the first killing for him. Yet despite the violence in him she felt no fear for herself. He hadn't lied to her about being followed. And he had protected her, then and now. Who was he? And what was this strange magnetism he seemed to exert over her which made her look at him and say urgently, "I need your help, sir."

"So it seems."

"There's something I must do. Something I *have* to do which I cannot do alone."

His eyes narrowed upon her face. "I'm listenin'."

Alice hesitated. For several moments their eyes locked, sad, haunted gray to hunger-filled jet. His deep voice spliced the silence stung tautly between them. "What kind of trouble are ya in?"

She drew in a shuddering, supportive breath, and said, "No trouble. It's my nephew, Billy. He's only five years old and it's him who's in trouble."

"What kinda trouble can a five-year old get into?" But even as he asked it, he knew only too well about little boys in peril.

"He was a survivor of the William Henry massacre. He's being held for ransom in Montreal by a man named Francois Bigot."

A hardness gripped his jaw, but his tone remained level. "I see. But what can I do?"

"You can guide me to Montreal so that I can pay the ransom."

His cool reserve snapped. "What?"

She spoke up quickly. "You seem like the kind of man who can take of himself. Just the kind of man I need to make the journey into enemy territory."

"Yer right about that, miss."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Hell no."

"I can pay you."

"If it was money I wanted, I'd have taken it sooner. That must be a tidy sum ya got sewn in yer cloak." At the look of astonishment on her face he issued a low, harsh laugh. "I knew it

back there in the alley. Ya couldn't weigh that much on yer own. No, miss, money don't mean nothin' to me."

"Then why won't you do it?"

"Because the wilderness ain't no place for a woman. Besides, in case ya haven' noticed, it's winter. The snow would be up to yer knees out there."

Alice's hand disappeared into a fold of her cloak and brought out a piece of paper.

"It's all right here. He says if we don't pay the money, we'll never see Billy again." She held the letter out to him but he made no move to take it. "If you can't read, I can—"

"I can read as good as anyone," he shot back.

"I meant no offense, sir."

His stance softened. "None taken, miss. But like I said, I can't help ya. The chances are ya ain't never gonna see yer nephew again even if ya do pay the ransom. The French are like that." The night concealed the wince in his eyes, caused by an onslaught of his own painful memories.

"Ya said 'we'. Ain't there anyone else who can do this?"

Alice felt the tiny sliver of hope vanish. "My family was murdered by Abnaki Indians back home in New Hampshire. There's no one." Her head tilted up at him. "It appears I was mistaken about you." Her frown settled into a determined line across her mouth. "Clearly, this is something I must do on my own."

"Ya'd never make it to Montreal alone. It would take the whole damned militia to get ya there safely."

"I never said I was going to do it alone." Her thoughts were already churning. The militia? Why hadn't she thought of that before?

She could smell the leather of his jerkin, the faint aroma of grass that clung to it, the fragrance of the forest laced in his dark hair. She'd seen deer hunters and backwoodsmen, *voyageurs* and farmers, English military offices and gentlemen, but she had never seen anything quite like him. He did not seem of this world, but from another place she knew nothing about. She searched his face and form, trying to focus on his shadowed features, but it was too dark to see him clearly.

"I don't know your name, sir."

"The name's Hawke, miss. Nathaniel Hawke. And might I know who I had the pleasure of kissin' tonight?"

A rush of warmth tinted her cheeks. Still burning hot over the kiss, she forced a smile to hide her embarrassment. "Alice Winslow. Thank you, Mr. Hawke." Pulling her cloak close to her, she edged past him and hurried into the boarding house.