

# A Devil of a Time

## Prologue

*The Ohio Frontier*  
*October 1779*

The flotilla of five longboats lay motionless in the Ohio River, concealed beneath overhanging boughs along the heavily forested Kentucky shoreline. Kneeling in the prow of the lead boat, Lieutenant Andrew Wade shaded his eyes and peered anxiously ahead. “Are you certain you saw something?” he asked the young man beside him.

Captain Niall McLane nodded, his attention fixed mainly on the river. He said simply, “Wait.”

Andrew gripped the gunwale in keen anticipation and waited, waited with his pulse beating like a drum in his ears. Sure enough he spied movement on the sun-drenched waterway. A half-mile upriver two large canoes glided swiftly from the mouth of a creek onto the Ohio, propelled by bronzed, muscular arms.

Savages.

Andrew expelled a pent-up breath. Indians both fascinated and terrified him. His only practical knowledge of their deeds and habits was drawn from Niall’s teachings and from listening to the other members of their party of Virginians, all veterans of wilderness warfare. For months the frontiersmen had regaled him with tales of Indian cruelty—scalpings, ritual tortures, frenzied orgies of bloodlust and cannibalism—until he came to believe all savages were in league with the devil.

Wanting a closer look at the storied heathens, Andrew withdrew his brassbound spyglass and raised it to his eye, only to have Niall drag it down again. Pierced by an admonishing stare, Andrew realized his mistake at once—a reflection off glass could betray the presence of the flotilla, which was transporting gunpowder from Spanish New Orleans to beleaguered Fort Pitt. Embarrassed at his own carelessness, Andrew stowed the glass in his haversack, then listened intently as Niall spoke with Colonel David Rogers, commander of the expedition.

“Looks like a hunting party,” Rogers noted.

Niall seemed skeptical. “Maybe.”

“Can you tell which tribe?”

Niall kept quiet for a moment, fixating on the distant canoes. “Shawnee,” he said finally, hatred underscoring the name. He continued watching until the Indians reached the Kentucky side of the river. After dragging their canoes onto a narrow strip of beach, the Shawnee concealed the craft on the brush-choked bank.

Watching the Indians disappear single file into dense forest, Colonel Rogers smiled thinly. “I don’t think they saw us,” he said. “Let’s surprise them, shall we?” So saying, he signaled the oarsmen to row to the sandy beach at the confluence of the Licking and Ohio rivers.

As the convoy angled toward a landing, Niall lifted his long rifle to check the priming. Andrew did likewise, going through the motions while his thoughts leaped ahead. *There’s no*

*cause for alarm, he consoled himself. There's but a handful of them and more than sixty of us.* Even so, as he stepped into the shallows and waded ashore with the majority of the company, his stomach clenched like a fist, his palms now slick with sweat. He had never been in a battle, much less killed a man. Despite his inexperience, he had volunteered for this hazardous undertaking. It wasn't bravery that had motivated him but rather the desire to learn if he had any. Encouraged by his friend, Governor Patrick Henry of Virginia, he had agreed to act as the governor's liaison to the Spanish at New Orleans. The fact that he was unfamiliar with the beautiful but deadly West Country seemed a minor drawback at the time.

Not so to Niall McLane. When the two men first met at Fort Pitt, Niall had tried to dissuade Andrew from venturing into the frontier. "Ever been west of the Blue Ridge, Lieutenant?"

Feeling somewhat defensive, Andrew admitted that he had not.

"Ever seen an Indian?" Niall persisted in a soft-spoken voice that bore the hint of a drawl.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In Williamsburg."

"Ah," said Niall, "the ones that talk peace. What about the ones in the woods that would sooner lift your hair than look at you? Ever met any of those Indians?"

Again Andrew was forced to answer no. Irritated by Niall's point-blank manner, he vouched for himself. "Captain McLane," he said forcefully, "I'm a fair marksman, an accomplished hunter and well versed in the rules of military conduct. I've spent the past three years drilling regularly with the James City County militia."

"That's all well and good," Niall allowed, "but where we're going, close-order drill is about as useful as tits on a tomcat."

Bristling with indignation, Andrew gauged his antagonist and saw a young man whose appearance defied military protocol. Clad in fringed buckskin and coarse linsey-woolsey, with a pipe tomahawk and a stag-handled knife at his belt, Niall McLane reminded him of the long hunters he had seen on his travels to Richmond. Niall's dark brown hair was cropped short, frontier-style, and curled naturally about his head as though windblown. He was tall, all sinew and lithe grace, but his most arresting feature was a manmade one—a line of whitened scar tissue encircling his neck where a gentleman's stock would rest, or a hangman's noose. Taking no pains to conceal the disfigurement, he wore it like a ghastly necklace.

That Niall was intelligent and dangerous was apparent at a glance, reinforced by his formidable reputation as an Indian fighter, woodsman and scout. A former Shawnee captive, he knew the frontier and its natives as few white men did, and while Andrew hated to admit it, especially to himself, Niall's reservations about him were not without merit. His concern, however, was surprising.

"Lieutenant, I wish you'd think twice about this. You seem like an upstanding man, and I'm told you have a family back in Williamsburg. I'd hate for something to happen to you out here."

"Whether or not you approve, I am going."

"Then you'd better pay close attention and do exactly what you're told," was Niall's warning. "You have a lot to learn if you plan to stay alive."

Andrew had embarked on the journey fully prepared to dislike Niall McLane every step of the way. Instead he grew to admire him more than any man he had ever known. Whether by order of Colonel Rogers or by his own design, Niall took it upon himself to become Andrew's teacher in the ways of the backwoods. His remarkable patience, keen wit, quiet dignity and instinctive skills

as a woodsman made lasting impressions on Andrew, who slowly shed his civilized exterior to become something of a woodsman himself.

Now, bracing for his first confrontation with Indians, he hoped to put his untried abilities to the test. He knelt beside Niall at the edge of the beach.

“Nervous?” Niall asked, surveying his pale face.

Andrew knew better than to try to fool him. “Somewhat.”

“If you like, you can stay with Ben and the Cutters to guard the boats.”

“Is that your way of saying I’m not ready for this?”

“It’s my way of saying you have a choice.”

“I’m going with you.”

Niall sighed. “So be it,” he said and gripped Andrew’s shoulder. “Stay close to me. Pay attention to our route so you can find your way back here alone if need be.”

“I understand.”

“If you find yourself in a tight scratch, remember the weak points—throat, knee, groin.”

Little did Andrew realize how prophetic those words would turn out to be.

With Colonel Rogers leading the way, the Virginians penetrated the thick forest in search of their prey. They were a fearsome force, heavily armed, their bodies bearing the proof of their hardiness—bullet and knife scars, an eye gouged out, a finger or ear missing. Andrew, traveling in their midst, had the acute sensation of being overmatched and out of his element. As the forest closed in around him, everything he saw had a peculiar vividness—the splash of sunlight against rough bark, the red flurry of a cardinal taking flight, the occasional glimmer of silver river through the trees to his left. His thoughts, too, were intensely focused, though not on the business at hand. He was thinking of home, of his toddling son and his beloved wife.

Clarice...

Countless times since leaving Williamsburg, he had longed for her embrace. He shivered in the warm October afternoon, unnerved by the prospect of never seeing her again. Then steeling himself, he pushed Clarice from his mind to concentrate on his immediate situation, straining with his senses to feel his surroundings, as Niall had taught him to do. To his right and left Colonel Roger’s men had fanned out into the gloom beneath the canopy of trees. Using foliage to break up their silhouettes, they blended so well with the forest that most of them eluded Andrew’s detection. He glanced at Niall, noting his predatory demeanor, his air of absolute confidence, and edged closer to him.

With pantherlike stealth, Niall’s moccasined feet took him silently toward the killing. The ground began to ascend a gentle ridge, the other side of which lay the beach where the Indians had landed their canoes. Trailing Niall like a shadow, taking care to avoid stepping on sticks or loose stones, Andrew skirted a clump of serviceberry bushes, scaled a low, limestone escarpment at the foot of the rise, and continued after Niall. They had covered but a few more yards when Niall abruptly halted, a hand raised in caution.

Obediently Andrew held still, the back of his neck tingling with vague alarm as he awaited Niall’s bidding. At times his friend demonstrated an uncanny degree of perception, a kind of sixth sense that enabled him to see, hear and feel things in ways Andrew could not. Niall had that look about him now, his face intent, eyes scanning the woods all around, head tilted to home in on the least intrusion of sound.

Andrew staggered back when Niall shouted, “*Take cover!*”

No sooner did Niall speak than a chorus of high-pitched howls burst upon the shadowy woodlands. The undulating war whoops seemed to pour from hundreds of throats, and yet Andrew,

gazing wildly about, could not see a single Indian. Rooted in shock, he felt Niall seize his arm and drag him over the ledge as murderous fire erupted from scores of hidden weapons. Bullets hummed like hornets overhead, screams of pain rent the air. Risking a glance up the slope, Andrew saw puffs of smoke billowing from thickets to form drifting white clouds.

Beside him Niall muttered, "Goddamn me," rose up from concealment and fired at a flitting form. His victim dropped as though poleaxed. Quickly reloading, he told Andrew, "Get ready to fly."

Andrew could hear Colonel Rogers bellowing orders for his men to fall back and regroup, but for many the call came too late. Fully a third of Rogers's command lay dead or wounded. The rest were in desperate trouble, for the Indians were closing the jaws of their clever trap, and from the volume of their fire, Andrew reckoned the Shawnee outnumbered them better than two to one. The canoes on the Ohio had been nothing more than successful decoys.

Having recovered his wits sufficiently to put his rifle to use, Andrew found that his aim was as unsteady as the rest of him. Worse, his targets moved like phantoms, darting from tree to rock to bush, advancing inexorably toward a complete encirclement of the frontiersmen. He squeezed off an ineffectual shot, then crouched behind the rock ledge to reload. With sweat slick hands, he poured a charge from his powder horn down the muzzle, fumbled to get the patch and ball started, and finally rammed the shot home. He then primed the flash pan, spilling gunpowder in his haste. By the time he was ready to fire again, Niall had twice duplicated his efforts and was pulling the trigger for a third time.

Andrew rose up to take aim but then froze, wide eyes staring. Just yards away an injured Virginian was crawling for cover, his shirtfront and thigh saturated with blood. Half a dozen Shawnee warriors fell upon the hapless man like a pack of rabid dogs. One attacker seized a fistful of flaxen hair, flensed the crown of the man's head with his knife, then tore away the scalplock with his teeth. He straightened, the trophy dangling from his mouth, his features twisting into a grotesquerie of exultation.

Niall's shot entered his left eye and blew out the back of his skull. As the warrior's body flopped to the ground, a stunned Andrew slid down behind the ledge, moaning in horror, "Dear God...oh dear God..." Above the din of war cries and gunshots, he heard the shrieking of wounded comrades, brave men reduced to begging for mercy and death while being tortured alive. As much as he wanted to, Andrew knew he could do nothing to help them. As things stood, he would be lucky to escape the same fate.

Niall dropped down beside him to reload. "We can't stay here," he said, his face dark with fury. "When I give the word, head for that gully and follow it as fast as you can toward the Licking."

Andrew gaped at him. "Run straight at the Indians?"

"Yes."

"What sort of plan is that?"

"One they won't expect."

"Are you mad?"

"I'm a *Virginian*, and I'm going to punch right through those bastards."

Andrew flinched as a musket ball ricocheted off the top of the ledge.

"Andrew, we can make it," Niall insisted, though clearly their chance of survival was poor at best. "Are you with me?" he demanded. When Andrew only stammered in response, Niall struck him hard across the face, then seized his shirtfront and shook him. "Do you want to die?" he asked fiercely.

Stung by his vehemence, Andrew collected himself. “No,” he managed.

“Then do as I say. Don’t waste lead. Let me shoot first. Try to hold off till I’m empty so one of us is always loaded. Ready?”

Andrew swallowed, murmured a prayer, nodded.

“*Now!*”

To Andrew’s astonishment, they reached the ravine unscathed, but there, encountering the loosely formed Shawnee battle line, he forgot Niall’s directive to conserve his fire. When a trio of howling warriors rose in their path, he panicked, pulled the trigger and missed.

Niall plugged the lead Shawnee in the chest, knocking him backward into his companions. Before they could recover, he descended upon them with his knife, a man possessed with maniacal strength and will. He slashed the throat of one, disemboweled the other. Retrieving his rifle, he signaled sharply for Andrew to follow and kept going, reloading as he ran. Bushes quivered ahead. Unearthly shrieks rent the air as four more warriors exploded from concealment. Still in the process of loading, Niall had the hickory ramrod down the barrel and could not extract it in time for a clean shot. He fired, sending ramrod and all at the attackers, spearing one through the neck. He dropped his rifle. Knife and tomahawk unsheathed, he roared a blood-curdling challenge and charged the remaining three.

Nothing so aroused an Indian’s respect as bravery in battle. Awed by Niall’s fearlessness, the Shawnee declined to shoot him outright, instead drew blades and hatchets.

By then Andrew had managed to reload his rifle. He took aim at the nearest Shawnee and squeezed the trigger. The flint fell, sparks flew, powder flashed in the pan and then died with an unimpressive fizzle. A groan escaped him. His rifle was fouled, useless. He threw it down and with hands shaking drew his long knife. He saw Niall grappling with two husky braves while a third writhed in death throes at his feet. Niall’s sleeve was reddened from a deep wound; bright blood welled from his gashed forehead and spilled down his face. Although Andrew’s conscience demanded he go to Niall’s aid, terror controlled him. His urge was to save himself. When a devilishly painted warrior burst from a thicket and rushed at him, flourishing a tomahawk, Andrew ran for his life.

Fleeing through the forest, footsteps pounding behind him, he felt the evil at his back and realized he was going to die. He sobbed as he fled. Blinded by tears, he caught his foot on a root and sprawled facedown on the forest floor. Memories flooded through his mind in split-second fragments, shards of a shattered mirror—Clarice nursing William...her serene face against midnight hair...a last embrace, her arms clutching him tightly...

“*No!*” With his heart thudding against his ribs, he rolled onto his back, beheld a painted, leering face above him and kicked wildly at his assailant.

Unable to get past Andrew’s flailing legs, the Shawnee struck at what he could reach; his hatchet stroked downward to bite deep into flesh.

Pain exploded through Andrew’s groin. Mouth gaping, spine arching against an agony that shocked him nearly senseless, he was unaware of the Shawnee straddling him, barely felt the sting as a razored knife was applied to his hairline.

Intent on collecting a trophy, the Shawnee failed to hear the soft tread behind him. All at once he stiffened like a statue, a puzzled look on his face as he toppled forward with a tomahawk buried in his skull.

Niall flung the body aside. Breathing raggedly, he hauled Andrew up and dragged him, stumbling and moaning, across a creek, up a rise, into a dense thicket. Although bleeding badly from two knife wounds, he first looked to Andrew’s injury. What he uncovered made him shudder.

Propped against a sapling, Andrew looked down at his blood-soaked crotch and saw his testicles hanging by a thin flap of skin. Slowly his mind registered the unimaginable. Castrated. His splayed fingers dug into the earth as a horrified scream welled up in his throat.

Niall clamped a hand over his mouth. “Andrew, no...Jesus, don’t yell.” Wincing with each movement, he got an arm around him and eventually quieted him, smothering whimpers against his chest.

Andrew quivered in shock and disbelief. After a time, wracked by hellish pain, he angled his head back against Niall’s shoulder and came out of himself. The disastrous turn of fate, the ghastrliness of his wound, the shame of his own abysmal cowardice—all crushed his soul as he met Niall’s compassionate gaze.

“Kill me,” he begged in a whisper. “Please just kill me.”

## Chapter One

*Tidewater Virginia*  
*June 1781*

British cavalry struck Farview plantation just before dawn.

Clarice Wade received little warning of the raid. As the first faint streaks of gray painted the eastern horizon, a horseman rode madly up the mile-long drive to the great house situated on a bluff overlooking the York River. His frantic shouting in the yard woke Clarice from a troubled sleep.

“British are coming! Get up, the cavalry are out!”

Clarice sprang from bed and rushed to a window. In the yard below, her neighbor Philip Dunstan, a miller, reined his sweating roan in a tight circle. Spying her at the window, he called out, “They burned my mill, goddamn them! You don’t have much time, Clarice. They’re headed this way. I’m off the spread the alarm.” Before she could respond, Dunstan spurred his horse away, calling over his shoulder, “Good luck to you!”

Clarice moved swiftly. After donning a robe over her linen shift, she removed a loaded pistol from her dressing table drawer and thrust the weapon into the robe’s deep pocket. Upon leaving her bedchamber, she encountered Farview’s half-clothed housekeeper, Martha Cook, carrying a branch of candles. In the frail wash of light Martha’s thin, dark face, framed by a mobcap, bespoke terror. “British soldiers are coming,” she said in a quavering voice.

“I know it.” Clarice hurried through the hallway, Martha on her heels.

“Ma’am, what are we gonna do?”

“Hide in the woods until they’re gone.” Entering the nursery, Clarice scooped up her sleeping son, cradling him against her shoulder. Four-year-old William Wade pressed his face against her neck, murmuring in protest. “Bring his blanket,” she told Martha then hastened downstairs as fast as her bare feet could carry her.

On reaching the entrance hall, she found her husband’s ancient manservant waiting with a lantern in one hand, a satchel in the other. Ned Winter, a stooped figure with snowy hair and a face like old brown parchment, peered at her with consternation. “I grabbed some victuals,” he said, hefting the sack. “We’d best go now, Miss Clarice.”

“Where’s Mr. Hawke?” she asked, surprised that her voice was so calm.

“Up and gone, Ma’am. First sign of trouble, he and his wife got their horse from the stable and ran off.”

At first stunned, Clarice bristled with fury at Tom Hawke, Farview’s heavy-handed overseer, on whom she had been counting to evacuate the slave quarters. Then she was aware of nothing except the thudding of numerous hoofbeats on the gravel driveway. She bolted through a passageway toward the rear of the mansion, William clutched tightly to her, the house servants following like flitting shadows.

British cavalymen entered the yard, dozens of them. Deep voices boomed orders. Heavy, spurred boots pounded up the stone stairs leading to the back entrance. When a powerful shoulder thudded against wood, splintering the door jamb, Clarice turned back toward the front of the house, nearly colliding with Ned and Martha. Upon reaching the great hall, she saw torchlight flare orange in the transom window over the paneled front door. They were trapped.

Iron shod hooves clattered like thunder on the front terrace. In the next instant the front door exploded inward, crashing against the wall. Through the opening rode a green-coated dragoon captain on a sleek gray charger. The huge beast seemed to fill the hall, snorting and quivering while its rider sawed the reins. Martha screamed and hid behind Ned. Clarice shrank back, hugging a sobbing William protectively, her gaze riveted on the horseman's drawn glittering saber. Brandishing the weapon, the dragoon advanced on her as more greencoats filed in behind him on foot, members of the infamous British Legion.

Nostrils flaring, eyes showing white, the gray stallion crossed the hall with Clarice retreating in its path. Confronted by flashing, deadly hooves, she fled up the staircase to escape the beast, ignoring the dragoon's shouted, "*Halt!*"

Glancing back, she saw him vault from the saddle onto the stairs. Once free of its rider, the wild-eyed stallion pivoted clumsily toward the door, hooves skittering on parquet flooring, scattering soldiers in its mad flight from the house.

Clarice made it as far as the landing before the dragoon overtook her. Cornered, she sank into a crouch and cringed against a wall, shielding William with her body. Darting a glance at the intruder, she beheld a young man of arrogant bearing, his black-plumed helmet rakishly cocked, morning dew glistening on his captain's uniform. He ordered his men, "Search every room," then trained his attention on her. Fierce, dark eyes raked her with interest. He gripped her arm and hauled her up to face him. "Where's your husband?"

"He isn't here." William, keening and trembling, had a death grip on her neck.

"Shut him up."

"He's frightened, you bastard." She flinched as the dragoon's sword hacked a deep groove in the banister.

"I said *shut him up*, or I'll give him something to be frightened about."

Clarice stroked William's hair and spoke softly to him, urgently quieting him. All the while her guarded eyes watched those of the dragoon, who leaned closer, ogling a glimpse of blushing cleavage where her robe had gaped at the neck. With a sharp tug, she cut off his view.

"Where has your husband gone?"

"He's with the militia, fighting the likes of you."

The captain's sneer conveyed what he thought of the Virginia militia. "I'm sure you mean *fleeing* the likes of me."

Clarice lowered her gaze, a vision of Andrew's pallid face blooming in her mind. She knew what it had cost him to take up arms again. For months he had dwelled in dread of a British invasion, turning to liquor for courage once it became clear the enemy would strike Virginia. The more imminent the threat of military action became, the more he drowned himself with spirits that only further eroded his self-confidence. Clarice thought he might refuse to answer the call to duty. But just hours ago, responding to Governor Jefferson's desperate appeal, Andrew had collected his weapons, braced himself with brandy, and left Farview to join the James City County militia.

Militia units from all over the state were rushing to reinforce the Continentals under Generals Lafayette and Wayne, who were shadowing the British advance of Lieutenant-General Lord Charles Cornwallis toward the Virginia coast. The main enemy force was presently encamped at Williamsburg, a scant six miles away. For days British patrols had infested the roads in alarming numbers, but the invaders had refrained from terrorizing local inhabitants.

Until now.

As the ransacking of her home progressed, Clarice endured the sounds of glass shattering, drawers slamming, furniture overturning. She wondered, with a sinking sensation, if Farview



would be stripped of valuables, forage and livestock as so many plantations in the Carolinas had been. Her question was answered when three soldiers emerged from the dining room, their arms laden with the Wade family silver. While she watched in helpless frustration, they yanked down drapery curtains, bundled up their treasure and disappeared into the night.

The dragoon captain, who did nothing to stop the thievery, met her contemptuous look with something cold and amused. One of his soldiers entered the house and announced, "Captain, we found no horses."

"Search the nearby fields. I will not return empty handed to Colonel Tarleton."

At the mention of the name, Clarice felt the heat of fury burning in her heart. In recent months, Banastre "Bloody" Tarleton and his British Legion had won infamy as Lord Cornwallis's ruthless cavalry arm, cutting a swath of destruction through the Carolinas and now Virginia. She eyed Tarleton's minion with renewed hatred. There was nothing extraordinary to be seen—patrician features, dark auburn hair, a stocky physique enhanced by a dashing green coat and buckskin breeches—but nothing to distinguish him as belonging to a legion of devils.

He said, "Rumor has it your plantation has been very generous to the rebel cause."

Clarice matched his stare. "Rumor has it you're a man, which just proves how misleading rumors can be."

His face darkened as he stepped toward her. She held her ground, perceiving his threatening stance as mostly show, but even so his nearness tested her courage. *Don't cower for him... 'tis what he wants.*

William, acutely aware of her distress, began to cry again, the sound muffled against her throat. "Mama..."

"Ssh, darling," she soothed. "I won't let him harm you." As she said this, her glittering gaze conveyed the same message to the dragoon, who scoffed at her implication.

"I don't make war on women and children."

"No," she could not resist saying, "you just murder unarmed men." In South Carolina, at a place called Waxhaws, the British Legion had cut down and bayoneted one hundred and thirteen Virginia Continentals after they showed a truce flag and called for quarter. Bloody Tarleton and his officers were said to be proud of that achievement.

Seizing Clarice by the arm, the dragoon half dragged her to the foot of the stairs, where Martha and Ned were crouched behind the banister, trying to be invisible. He saw them and pointed. "Go outside," he commanded, "*now.*" They scurried to obey. The dragoon prodded Clarice after them, William still clutched in her arms.

The sky had turned the pale blue of twilight, feathered with crimson and gold to the east. Standing barefoot on the drive, Clarice watched with dismay as groups of cavalymen, working by torchlight, pillaged precious stores from Farview's outbuildings. Although the July morning was warm and muggy, her limbs felt chilled. William was growing heavy, but she dared not put him down. For one thing he was petrified. For another his dangling legs concealed the outline of the flintlock in her robe pocket, which she would employ only in his defense. Trembling with suppressed wrath, she could only watch with Martha and Ned while the marauders crippled Farview.

They emptied storehouses of forage, stripped the smokehouse of meats, trampled the vegetable garden to raid the corn crib. Sacks of flour, corn meal and grain were loaded into wagons along with casks of rum, cases of brandy and other spoils from the great house. The soldiers then rounded up all the livestock not safely hidden in the woods. A few cows and sheep were herded

down the drive, while the smaller animals—lambs, piglets and as many chickens as could be captured—were methodically slaughtered and left where they fell.

The slaves from the quarters, having been ordered to leave with the soldiers, stood in a solemn group near the brick stable. Clarice counted twenty-three men, women and children. Twelve men were missing. She prayed they were hiding in the woods and would return after the greencoats left. Already this week, five slaves had run off to join the British, who promised freedom to any Negro who would fight the rebels.

When the soldiers came for Martha and Ned, a distraught Martha threw herself on the ground at Clarice's feet. "Please don't let them take us!" she wailed. Kneeling beside her, Ned rested a bony hand on her shoulder, a hunted look on his face. The pair seemed so distraught that even the dragoon captain was moved to pity them.

"We offer you freedom," he said.

"Tell them the truth," Clarice challenged him. "Tell her she'll have to nurse your sick and wounded, and he'll have to clean your stinking boots."

He measured her, then the house servants, one middle-aged and skittish, the other old, too frail to be of much use. He looked back at Clarice, delving into dark eyes as hard as stones, set in a beguiling face of exquisite proportions—her lips full and red, her nose straight and delicate, her skin a flawless ivory against the glory of cascading black hair. She looked as though she wanted to kill him. She would fight like a wildcat, he imagined, but there would be softness and pleasure underneath. Without warning he felt the heat in his belly, the tight clenching in his loins. He relished a good fight. Were he not a gentleman, this brave little nymph would be adding ravishment to her list of grievances against him.

"Leave these two," he told his men and strode away.

Clarice expelled a shaky breath. Her relief was short-lived, ending when soldiers with torches in hand walked down to the landing. They flung the torches into the tobacco warehouse, where last season's harvest of sweet-scented leaves, packed in hogsheads and ready for inspection, was stored. What with British warships plying the James and York rivers all spring, the Wades had been unable to ship their crop to a public warehouse for inspection and sale. Tobacco was like gold in inflation-ridden Virginia. Gold now going up in smoke.

Breathing shallowly, her mouth dry with dread, Clarice eyed the newly planted fields beyond the great house, the acres upon acres of young green tobacco plants. Should the dragoon captain choose to destroy them, Farview would never recover.

Fortunately he took no interest in the planted fields. As crackling flames began to consume the warehouse, he and his men mounted up. Reining over to Clarice, the captain stared down with disdainful eyes shadowed beneath his helmet brim. "Perhaps now you'll think twice before aiding traitors."

She looked into his face, the face of a killer, and felt the pistol burning a hole in her pocket. Such an easy shot. She could put a lead ball between those taunting eyes, and the death film would be on them before he hit the ground.

When she made no reply, the captain touched his plumed helmet with mock respect. "A pleasure to have made your acquaintance, Madam."

"Go to hell."

Almost before the soldiers, slaves and wagons disappeared from view, Clarice, Martha and Ned, armed with leather water buckets, were working furiously to extinguish the warehouse fire. The battle proved hopeless. Realizing this, Clarice redirected their efforts toward saving the adjacent wharf. While Martha and Ned doused dry planking with river water, Clarice raced to the

storehouse for a pry bar and a sledgehammer, then ran back to the wharf. As flames ate their way toward her, gusting smoke and blistering sparks, she ripped away planking with frenzied determination. Using the pry bar, she levered the first plank above dock level, smashed it loose with the sledge then tore it free with her hands. After removing two boards in this manner, she stood on an exposed joist and worked solely with the sledge, hammering away at the planking, wood splintering and her feet gripping wet timbers while Martha and Ned kept the water coming.

The fire kept coming as well. The air around her grew almost too hot to breathe. At length she managed to strip an eight-foot wide section of dock down to the support beams, but then, beaten back by the intense heat, she retreated to join the bucket brigade.

Glancing toward the house, she saw a miracle emerging from the smoke. Three of Farview's missing slaves, having fled into the woods when the dragoons arrived, walked meekly down the slope to the landing. Without a word, Mulatto Jack, Toby the cooper and Bacchus, Farview's coachman, stepped in to relieve their mistress and the two house servants.

Minutes later the warehouse caved in with a groan, shooting a geyser of glowing embers skyward. Flames shot out to lick the edge of the wharf, hissing against wet wood but not catching. Slowly the fire receded.

Dazed and exhausted, Clarice stumbled away from the ruins and sat on the grass. Her hands stung. Looking down, she saw that her blistered palms were full of splinters. Her bleak gaze surveyed the smoldering warehouse, the slaughtered livestock, the yawning mouths of empty barns. Somehow she would handle the losses, but Andrew...

William put his arms around her. She held him close, comforted by the warmth of his small, sturdy body. Smoothing his golden curls, she drew back and looked into blue eyes so like his father's.

"Mama, please don't cry."

"I'm all right." She kissed his cheek and rocked him, as much to reassure herself as him. "Everything will be all right."

\* \* \* \* \*

Where had the bitch hidden it? Goddamnit, it was *here*, somewhere. He stood in the study, books strewn across the floor, the desk torn apart, every crevice and nook searched by his greedy hands but to no avail.

He hurried upstairs to a high-ceilinged bedchamber—hers, all frills and lace and satin damask, the walls adorned with embossed paper hangings, the ornately carved woodwork painted a fashionable green. She worked like a Negress and lived like a queen. The Queen Bitch.

The soldiers had been thorough in their search, but they had not found her treasures, he felt certain of it. His gaze roved the room, which smelled faintly of lavender and strongly of the smoke drifting up from the wharf. The warehouse fire was giving them fits down there. Good. He needed more time to root around.

He flung the mattress off her bed. Nothing. He emptied a chest of drawers, searched inside for hidden compartments. Still nothing. The fireplace was marble, with an ornamental iron fireback and a surrounding border of blue delft tiles. The figures painted on the tiles represented Elizabethan knights defending their ladies, but it occurred to him that the knights might be protecting something else. He crossed to the fireplace, his narrowed gaze seeking an irregularity—too much space between tiles, not enough space.

*There.* He knelt on the hearth, and with thick, blunt fingers outlined a tile, first tracing, then pressing and digging. The tile moved by fractions, slowly separating from its neighbor. Excited now, sensing victory, he withdrew a folding knife from pocket and inserted the thin blade into the gap.

“Did you lose something, Tom?”

The voice pierced him like sharp steel, puncturing his euphoria. Tom Hawke spun in a crouch, the knife clutched in his hand.

Clarice Wade stood in the doorway, disheveled dark hair tumbling down her back, torn robe exposing a creamy shoulder. The Queen Bitch. He had seen her irritated, occasionally angry, but never as cold and forbidding as she appeared now. She watched him in silence, waiting.

He lowered the knife. “Is everyone all right?” he ventured.

“Everyone is outside. That is, everyone who is *left*.” She glanced at the skewed tile, and then her dark eyes bored into him. “What were you looking for?”

Hawke hesitated, despising her boldness, that air of superiority inappropriate in a woman. Defiance hardened his features. “For nothing. I was just having a look at what the soldiers did.”

“Had you not disappeared at the first sign of trouble, you might have witnessed their actions firsthand, perhaps even evacuated the quarters before they arrived.”

He grunted a laugh. “And risk my life for a bunch of niggers? You think me a fool?”

“I think you’re a liar and a thief.”

Her venom snatched away his breath. He stepped toward her, fingers tightening around the haft of his knife, but stopped short as she withdrew a pistol from the folds of her robe. With practiced ease, she thumbed the hammer to full cock while leveling the flintlock at his face. “Not to mention a coward.”

Hawke stood frozen. Here was a Clarice Wade he had never met.

“Get out,” she said softly, “and don’t you ever come back.”

A moment passed before Hawke recovered his brass. “I don’t work for you, woman,” he retorted. “Mr. Wade’s my employer.”

“Not anymore.”

Hawke’s face twisted into a mask of menace, all semblance of civility blasted away by an explosion of fury that revealed, in an instant, the darkness of his soul. “You owe me wages.”

“We owe you *nothing*,” she said, equally fierce. “Get out of my house or I’ll pay you in lead.”

He believed her. Still, he would not let this bitch get the better of him. He aimed a finger at her like a weapon. “This ain’t over,” he vowed. “I’ll get what’s owed to me, and before I’m through you’ll get what’s coming to you.”

As he stalked from the room, Clarice gave him a wide berth, tracking his progress with her pistol. She followed him down the stairs, out the back door, across the yard to the poultry house, where his horse was discreetly tethered.

With a parting glare, Hawke rode away.

Her brave front crumbling, Clarice lowered the pistol to her side. *Vile bastard!* She waited to make sure he was gone, then hurried back inside. In her bedroom, she finished the work Hawke had begun, carefully removing the fireplace tile to reveal a deep, narrow recess in the wall. Reaching inside, she gasped with relief as her fingers encountered a leather jewelry case. She inventoried the contents—a stunning necklace of twenty-six amethysts graduating in size toward the center stone, her wedding gift from Andrew; her aunt’s gold festoon necklace with emerald stations surrounded by seed pearls; a diamond and ruby choker that had belonged to her mother. There were other, lesser pieces, but the necklaces alone concerned her. They would bring hard

specie, which would buy Farview's salvation until this year's tobacco crop could be harvested, packed and sold.

Clasping the necklace from Andrew to her breast, she swallowed heavily. She had lost so much and now must part with her treasures, irreplaceable keepsakes of important events in her life. The acrid odor of smoke washed over her, a sharp reminder that the sacrifice must be made. Racked with despair, she sat on the floor and wept bitterly.

Slowly she composed herself, wiped her sooty face with her sleeve and put her priorities in order. First she must locate the missing slaves, then discover what stores, if any, the British had overlooked. Weary but resolved to these tasks, she walked downstairs to the terrace where she paused, a hand shading her eyes against the rising sun. A horseman was riding down from the bluff beyond the orchard.

Andrew.

She started toward him, her anxiety renewed. When they met on the driveway, Andrew slid from the saddle to an unsteady landing. She saw that his clothes were rumpled and sodden, his blond hair flecked with bits of leaves, as though he had slept in the woods. His appearance was startling enough, but his eyes were what galvanized her, those red-rimmed, bloodshot wells of defeat, surveying the destruction of his property.

"Those bastards!" he cried hoarsely.

"It was Tarleton's men," she said, and Andrew needed no further explanation. He wrapped his arms around her in a clinging embrace. He reeked of stale sweat and brandy.

"Is William all right?"

"He's fine," she assured him.

"I never should have left," he moaned. He tightened his embrace, and Clarice knew from his tremors that he was weeping. She ran her hands over his back to soothe him. "I couldn't make myself go," he confessed in an agonized whisper. "I didn't report for duty."