

CHAPTER

ONE

The year was 1710, and at twenty-two years of age, Lawrence Kraymer belonged to the class of thriving young merchants transforming the city of Philadelphia. He brewed beer from the increasing supply of malting barley and hops grown in the middle and northern colonies, and the rough and crowded waterfront taverns couldn't get enough of it. Working all day and long into the night, he heaved the heavy kegs onto the drays that lined up at the brewery's loading dock, where the horses stood in their traces and the teamsters whistled for his attention.

Lawrence owed much of his good fortune to his grandfather, who had built the brewery from the ground up and who later took Lawrence in at an early age, after the boy's mother died of the coughing disease. The old man gave him a roof over his head, taught him a trade, and in due time passed on to him a thriving and lucrative business, and for this, Lawrence was truly grateful. But there was a price to be paid. The old man was disagreeable by nature and held the boy responsible for his mother's sins. He called Lawrence a bastard, without the least bit of remorse. He worked the boy like an indentured servant, whipping him at the least sign of sloth, and these many years later, Lawrence needed a break. He sought refuge from the recriminating spirit that persisted in haunting him. Putting a trusted employee in charge

of his brewery, he hired an Indian to take him on a hunting trip up along the Delaware.

They each rode a horse and shared a mule between them. Lawrence had chosen this particular mule for its good demeanor, which was no small consideration, regarding an animal that could be willful and contrary. The mule carried a cast iron cooking pot, a sack of beans, and ten pounds of bacon. It also carried the canvas tent and their sleeping blankets, two axes, three muskets, with extra gunpowder, and a leather bag of lead ball. Lawrence carried a knife on his belt, along with a pouch of flints and tinder. The Indian's name was John. He carried a knife as well, and wore a leather sack slung over his shoulder. In addition to his buckskins, he wore moccasins that laced up past his ankles. Lawrence wore a farmer's field boots.

After three days of camping, John decided to head north, where the New York colony was located, but Lawrence wasn't ready to leave the wild. He wanted to stay a while longer and hunt by himself, and that was when the stillness of the woods truly haunted him, reaching deep inside, past the clutching fingers of his grandfather's ghost, to a part of him that remained unsullied. The nights smothered him with a darkness that seemed to come from above and below, forcing its way into his eyes, his lungs, and heart. The wilderness didn't judge. In aloneness, he found peace—if only for the moment—and his veins filled with a rushing motion, like the waters of a cold mountain stream. The crackling flames of the bonfires he built sent sparks spiraling up to the pressing stars. In the mornings, he became as quiet as the woods themselves, just another creature of the forest, crawling on his belly, parting branches to peer into the clearings along the river. When he took a shot, the gun sounded like thunder, the echoes a distant reminder that, as far as he knew, he was totally alone in a world devoid of human presence.

All too soon, he had to head home, back to his yeast cultures and delivery schedules, and he packed the mule and readied his horse for travel. But then, something unexpected happened. Without John to guide him, he found himself on an unfamiliar road, and it amazed him to think how he had found his way so well in the wild places, only to lose himself on the road to civilization. The limestone ridges were covered in the same canopy of hickory and chestnut and oak he had known on his outbound journey. But they were not the same. Nor were the maples and willows and sumac that grew in the draws. The split rail fences along the way were not the same ones he had passed before. Nor were the log homes and river stone farmhouses. The cattle knew it and so did the horses in the pastures, which raised their heads to look at him in a way that said he was the one that was out of place and not anyone or anything else.

A rising breeze turned up the silver undersides of the tree leaves. Chill fingers of air began to close on the back of his neck. He smelled the coming rain and counted himself lucky when he came upon an isolated farm, so close to the wild but not quite in it. Lit by one of the last slanting rays of the sun, the farmhouse looked like an island of light in the darkening landscape. Several exceptional horses grazed in a lush meadow. As the storm neared, the scene shimmered with subtle and shifting gemstone colors that flared and glowed and ebbed from one hue to the next. A tall, angular man stood in a blacksmith's shed, gripping a horseshoe in a pair of tongs. Behind him, the fire of the forge glowed red in the failing light.

All manner of people came to the colonies. Many were of desperate circumstances, but some simply didn't fit in anywhere else and so were best avoided. Philadelphia had its own fair share of delinquents. But the frontier outback was rumored to have a much

worse sort, and Lawrence approached the smithy with care. Stopping at a safe distance, he marshalled his voice.

“Hello!” he called out, squeezing the breath from his lungs. After spending several days with the untalkative John and then many more alone in the tall, dark timber, his voice sounded strangely alien.

The man in the smithy paused in his labor. In the conversation that followed, the man allowed he was called Pierre, though the rest of the name wouldn’t come until much later. He had a natural reserve that suggested an innate distrust of his environment in general, and a particular distrust of the humans that occupied it. He did not seem aggressive. But Lawrence noted that he did not appear to be the sort to tolerate any foolishness, either.

“Looks like a storm on your heels,” Pierre said, with a curious accent, stating the obvious, trying to be friendly, perhaps. But Lawrence wasn’t fooled. Strangers were not known to engage in idle banter—not here at the edge of the wild, where your safety was a concern that you often bore alone. The man was probing him, laying out a simple statement and giving him the opportunity to respond, and Lawrence turned in his saddle and looked back the way he had come. A cloud lit up. Seconds later, thunder rumbled. Astride the horse, he felt thrust up against the sky, and exposed.

“You see my dilemma clearly,” he said, turning back to the man at the forge. “At the risk of imposing some inconvenience, I was hoping I could prevail upon you to provide some shelter for the night.”

Pierre’s eyes drifted to Lawrence’s mule, loaded down with the tent, the cooking implements, the hides of beaver and deer, and the pelt of a bear. Lawrence had the feeling that Pierre was not a hunter and that his lingering scrutiny was part of a slow, methodical judgment of Lawrence’s character.

“Lived on wild meat and beans, I dare say,” Pierre said.

“Wild meat and beans,” Lawrence agreed, chagrined at the memory of such a limited diet. At first, he had reveled in the taste of animal flesh but quickly grew tired of wild tallow and the lack of salt. Pained at having to eat so many beans in the first place and then running out and having none to eat at all.

“Might be we can find a place for you in the barn,” Pierre said, after a pause.

Lawrence had expected nothing more and was grateful for whatever kindness the man cared to bestow. Climbing down from his horse, he shook Pierre’s hand and then followed him to the barn, where he was shown where to put his animals and stow his gear. One of the stalls had fresh straw on which he could spread his blanket.

“I’ll leave this with you,” Pierre said, handing him a lantern.

Lawrence thanked him.

“Not often we get visitors,” Pierre said, shrugging. Giving Lawrence one last, lingering look, he turned and left the barn. Thunder boomed and the ground shuddered.

It was one thing to be alone in the woods, where no one had any knowledge or expectations of you, and quite another to be in a space owned and controlled by someone else, where the surrounding structures had been shaped by hands other than your own, and where human breath and blood gathered and coursed in unknowable fashion. Lawrence stood in momentary dejection, his feet planted wide and his shoulders slumped. All over again, he felt like a child with a dead mother, standing on the doorstep of an old man he had never met, a note of introduction in his hand. His mother had not spoken to her father since the unfortunate birth of her child, and the note was the only provenance Lawrence had. He sometimes felt as if he still stood on that doorstep, waiting, waiting.

The barn had darkened, and he struck his flint to light the lantern. The shadows cast by the glow loomed large. He could still hear the thudding draw of the bolt on the other side of his grandfather's door, the shudder of wood and the squeal of hinges, and as much as he appreciated the shelter of the barn, he already regretted the position he'd put himself in. He hated to feel beholden to his grandfather, to this man Pierre, or to anyone else.

Hearing a sound behind him, he whirled around, his heart in his throat. A boy of about thirteen stood there, his face glowing in the lantern light. He had sandy hair and ruddy cheeks. Another boy ranged past him, swinging wide. He looked a year or so older, with darker hair and a fuzzy lip. Both were unusually tall, lanky, and well-proportioned, with coltish insouciance, and Lawrence's surprise at their sudden arrival was soothed by their youth and the friendly curiosity in their frank gazes.

"Ma sent us," the younger brother said. "Pa told her about you and she said to invite you to supper, but that anyone who's spent time in the wild would have to take a bath before coming into any house of hers. Pa was all for sending you down to the creek, but Ma said you'd get struck by lightning for sure and she wouldn't have it. Pa said go ahead and use the horse trough. Just be sure to pull the plug when you're done and then pump in some fresh water." He held out a bundle that included a clean linen shirt and a pair of woolen breeches, in addition to a towel, a washcloth, and a big bar of soap.

The older brother appeared to be the more reserved of the two. He studied Lawrence with obvious interest but came no closer. "Come on," he finally said, tersely, to the younger boy. "Ma said we shouldn't linger."

"I'm not lingering," the younger one said, stoutly.

The older one gave Lawrence a look that begged his indulgence. “He always dillydallies,” he said, as if in answer to a curiosity Lawrence may have had.

“I do not,” the younger brother said.

A sudden light flickered, followed by a thunder crack. A deluge of rain hit the barn.

The brothers turned to leave, but Lawrence stopped them.

“Aren’t you going to tell me who you are?” he said.

The younger face brightened.

“I’m Georgie and this here’s my brother, Andrew. You haven’t met Jean yet.”

“Jean?” Lawrence said. But the brothers had turned again and disappeared like phantoms. Their silhouettes appeared at the doorway of the barn, and a flash of lightning revealed a third youth who appeared taller and leaner than the other two. He carried a musket, and Lawrence realized the youths had taken no chances and that he had been under a watchful eye the whole time. He shook his head with admiration.

Rain poured from the dark sky and thundered down against his shoulders and head as he took his cold bath, his bottom slick against the slippery surface of the horse trough. Scrubbing the bar of soap furiously against his hands, he then ran his fingers through his hair and down his face, startled at the extent of his beard. He had had the beard for two weeks and hardly given it a thought. But now that he was about to share a meal with people he didn’t know, he wondered what they would see when they looked at him. Returning to the barn, he towed off and dressed in the borrowed clothes, then swiped at his hair and whiskers, hoping it was enough to make him presentable.

Then, it seemed miraculously, he found himself in a kitchen banked with the smells of meat and freshly baked bread. A young

woman with braided chestnut hair knelt in front of the hearth, using a wooden spoon to scrape at the browned bits that had collected in an iron pot. An older woman set a plate of scallions and radishes on the table. She hardly seemed old enough to have children nearly grown. There were eight place settings, and Lawrence saw the two boys he had already met and the third, whom he had seen only in silhouette, all seated at the table and looking at him with the quiet enthusiasm of country folk, who rarely got to spend time with someone from outside of their small community. The man who had earlier introduced himself as Pierre sat beside a little girl of about four, with blue eyes and red curls, dimpled cheeks.

Lawrence's eyes swam the length of the room, trying to take it all in.

"Welcome," Pierre said, gesturing toward an empty space at the opposite end of the table. His earlier gruffness seemed to have evaporated. "My boys you already met. That's my eldest, Catharine, over there, and this here's our little Magdalena. The stern one is Beatrice," he said, smiling.

"I'll show you stern if you're not careful," said the woman named Beatrice, digging at her husband with a look that told him he had better watch out or there would be a price to pay for such teasing. Her brown hair was braided like her daughter's and her eyes were honey-colored, her back long and straight. She wore a simple linen dress, an apron, and wooden shoes.

Lawrence felt the need to apologize, at the outset, that he was dressed in someone else's clothes, and the two youngest brothers jostled each other, as if sharing a private joke. Beatrice quickly took charge.

"Just go on now and sit yourself down," she said, with a touch of bluster. "Boys, pass our guest the radishes and salt. The bread is

ready and the roast is taking a rest. Pierre, maybe you should go to the cellar and fetch some of the better wine.”

“You see who gives the orders around here,” Pierre grumbled, giving Lawrence a wink. He stomped out of the kitchen. A door opened and Lawrence heard heavy foot treads on wooden steps.

“He’s not really mad,” the little Magdalena piped up, with an authority that belied her age. She raised her cream-colored chin and gave her red curls a toss. “He acts like he is but he’s not.”

Pierre returned with a bottle of wine cradled in his hands. Beatrice removed the bread from its baking pan and placed it on a cutting board. She brought a platter of roasted beef to the table, and Catharine served the sauce in a cream pitcher. There were boiled potatoes with churned butter, and freshly picked green beans from the garden. Beatrice asked Pierre to say grace, and the family folded their hands and bowed their heads as he did so. Then they tucked into the meal with gusto. They were aware of the stranger in their midst—in fact, keenly so—but no one troubled Lawrence to explain himself just yet.

“Papa, tell us a story,” said Magdalena, swinging her feet under her chair.

“A story?” Pierre said, as if such a notion would never have occurred to him.

“I’m sure our guest is not interested in stories,” Beatrice said.

“Tell the one about the Poor Lonely Dragon,” said Georgie.

“The one who makes the sky dark when it spreads its wings,” added the little girl.

“Ah, the Poor Lonely Dragon . . .” Pierre said, with a mischievous twinkle. He made his hand into a claw and reached toward his daughter. She yanked her arm back, shrieking, and Lawrence’s body jerked. At a time when many children did not survive to adulthood,

love was often like a coin pinched tightly between the finger and thumb—present, perhaps, but not freely given—and Lawrence was not used to such open displays of affection. It was hard for him to imagine that something he had never personally experienced could exist here in such abundance.

Oblivious to his guest's disquietude, Pierre told the story of a lonely dragon that lived in the Pyrenees Mountains, where Pierre was from. It wandered the world, spreading darkness in its wake, looking for a lost love, and Lawrence could feel the dragon's pain. He could feel its suffering. And then, when the story was over and the dragon had wept itself to sleep in its poor lonely cave, it was someone else's turn to talk. All eyes turned to him. They looked at him as if what he had to say really mattered and his usual reticence crumbled. The personal reserve he wore like a coat of armor began to feel cumbersome.

The words came hesitantly at first. Then, they began to gather and spill in greater volume, building until they became a torrent of sound and intonation. He didn't know any stories like the one Pierre had told, so he talked about his brewery in Philadelphia, the commotion of life in the port city, the people coming off ships with little or nothing to their names. He liked making beer and selling it to the local taverns, but something was missing, he said. He liked the jangling of the horse harnesses and the barking of the dogs and the whistles of the men in the wagons. The music at night. The piano and the violin, the chanters who sang on street corners. But even in such a wonderful place, there was a hole in his chest that the wind blew through, and he told how he had sought the dark solitude of the timber beyond the edge of the homesteaded land. He told of rivers of wild shad and bald eagles and early morning mists dense enough to bathe you from the inside out, washing clean your lungs and eyes and between the fingers of your searching hands.

Barely touching her meal, Catharine Laux watched him devour his, and when he had finished, having done most of the talking and having had more than one helping of every dish, not to mention an abundance of wine, he pushed back from the table and their eyes met and lingered. The cheeks above his hunter's beard flushed and Catharine turned away, but too late. He had already seen her seeing him.

Eventually, good nights were said, and Lawrence found himself outside the house, deeply roused, lonely in a way he had never been before. Even the barn held a certain magic, and he lay awake most of the night listening to a rain that fell through the darkness, washing the buildings and the landscape, running in rivulets to the meadow where it flushed into the creek, which grew swollen, thickening as it roped off into the night. He felt as if the rain pummeled his body, washing him clean, and in the gray light of dawn he rose, packed his mule and left the homestead, still in awe of the night before—the food, the company of a close-knit family, and a young woman so abundant in beauty.