

DAUGHTER OF LIBERTY

The American Patriot Series
Book 1

J. M. Hochstetler

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Daughter of Liberty

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This book is dedicated to my parents.
Their godly example first taught me to know and love my Lord,
and their love story taught me what true love is.

Alvin W. Hochstetler, November 22, 1915–September 4, 2002
Lula Bontrager Hochstetler, October 13, 1914–September 6, 2002

*Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.
Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.
—Psalm 37:4–5*

*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.
In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.
—Proverbs 3:5–6*

The flag that appears on the cover is known as the Bunker Hill Flag. On the night of June 16, 1775, during the rebel army's siege of Boston, the Americans fortified Breed's Hill, which overlooked Boston Harbor. This flag flew over the rebel redoubt as the British force under General Howe assaulted the rebel positions the next day. Some accounts state that the flag had a blue field, while others state that its field was red, so it is possible to find two variations of this flag. It received its present name after the battle, when the hill on which it took place was incorrectly identified as Bunker's Hill.

Chapter 1

The crack of the pistol's report came from directly behind the courier. Sizzling past so close to his ear he could feel the heat of it, the musket ball whined off into the windy night.

Instinctively he crouched, bringing his head close to his mount's straining neck. "*Go! Go!*"

The mare responded with a burst of speed, stretching the distance between her and the pursuing British patrol. Flying strands of mane whipped tears to the courier's eyes as he fumbled beneath his cloak for the handle of the pistol shoved into the waistband of his breeches. His hand shaking, he tore the weapon free and cocked it with his thumb.

"Hold! Pull up and surrender, you blasted rebel!"

The shouted command reached him faintly above rushing wind and pounding hoofbeats. Mouth dry, stomach knotted with fear and exhilaration, he searched the shadowy landscape for an escape route.

In the darkness off to his right beyond a high stone wall, wooded hills loomed up. Inside the line of trees the woodland dropped to a winding creek, then rose again into the hills, the courier knew. Reining his mare hard right, his breath coming in sharp pants, he glanced over his shoulder at the same moment the wind shredded the clouds high overhead.

For an instant splintered shafts of moonlight rippled across hill and hollow, gleaming on icy remnants of a late snow that still clung in sheltered areas. Touching the irregular stone walls that wound through the rolling farmland, the light glimmered across the blood-red uniforms of the soldiers stampeding after him through the murky Massachusetts countryside.

The quick glimpse revealed three soldiers in the patrol. The one who had fired had dropped back, and the officer now held the lead. He hung stubbornly close, trying to aim his pistol while he swung wide in the attempt to cut his quarry off.

The dim bulk of the stone wall raced toward the courier. A tangled growth of brambles topped the wall on the far side, reaching thorny fingers well above the stones. With reckless determination, he urged his mount on, raising in the stirrups at the exact instant the mare gathered her haunches under her and took flight.

She skimmed over the seemingly impossible height as effortlessly as a gull and lit softly on the other side. Hardly breaking stride, she fled toward the line of trees. A crashing sound reached the courier, and he threw an anxious glance back.

The officer had angled his mount off to a partial break in the wall some yards down. One of the two soldiers was riding hard toward the wall's far end.

The other had tried the wall at the same point as the courier, but had miscalculated the jump. Before his mare swept around a bend that for the moment cut him off from the patrol's sight, the courier caught a brief glimpse of dislodged stone slabs spilled across the ground and the thrashing legs of the fallen horse.

He urged his mount between the trees. A dozen strides into the woods he pulled up hard behind a head-high outcropping of rock screened by slender saplings and dense undergrowth. Shoulders hunched, head bent so the wide brim of his hat shaded his face, he sat motionless, calculating that his black cloak and the midnight black of his mare would render them all but invisible in the shadows.

The mare stood silent, head down, lathered sides heaving. Gripping the reins tight with one hand, the courier aimed his pistol with the other, holding it steady with difficulty. His heart beat so hard that for a moment he was overwhelmed by the irrational fear that his pursuer must hear it.

He could make out the sharp crackle of fallen branches and rustle of dry leaves underfoot as the officer fought his way through the dense growth, cursing in frustration. The creak of leather and jingle of metal drew steadily closer.

The dim shape of a horseman materialized between the ghostly trunks of the trees. The thud of hoofbeats slowed, then for long, heart-stopping moments paused within eight feet of the courier's hiding place.

He became aware of the stinging tickle of perspiration that wound past the corner of his eye onto his cheek. Holding his breath, he aimed his pistol at the rider's breast at point-blank range, his hand grown suddenly steady, finger tightening over the trigger.

The mare's ears pricked, but she made no sound. When the tension reached the point at which the courier feared his nerves would snap, the sound of other hoofbeats approached from the left.

"Captain! Scott's horse fell on him," a hoarse voice called out. "He's in a bad way."

Muttering an oath, the rider reined his horse around to face the oncoming rider. "I'll be right there."

The courier could hear the second rider move off, but still the officer did not spur his mount forward. Instead, he urged him round until he again faced the courier's hiding place.

"I know you're there somewhere, you rebel devil!" he rasped. "Come on, you cursed Oriole! Show yourself! I know it's you!"

Motionless, eyes fixed on the officer's indistinct form, the courier willed him to ride on. The pulse of his blood sounded like thunder in his ears.

The officer waited for several moments more, finally taunted, “One day you’ll make a misstep, and then we’ll have you. And you’ll hang at last.”

Giving a harsh laugh, he moved past the courier’s hiding place, fighting through the low-hanging branches. Within seconds he vanished into the night as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up.

Feeling weak, the courier lowered his weapon. For some minutes longer he waited, every sense strained to the breaking point. But no sound reached him except for the moan of the wind through the bare limbs of the trees and the creak of interlaced branches high overhead.

Taking a shaky breath, he took the pistol off cock and shoved it back into the waistband of his breeches. “Thanks be to God!” he exclaimed with a low laugh. “That was entirely too close.”

The mare tossed her head, and he patted her lathered neck. When he was certain the patrol had to be well out of sight and sound, he spurred her out of their hiding place, urged her down the slope and across the shallow creek. Silent as a specter, they moved up the flank of the hill on the other side and slipped over the summit.

Thus unnoticed, the courier—known to General Thomas Gage and the British garrison in Boston only by the name “Oriole” for the whistled notes of his characteristic signal—melted into the impenetrable cloak of the forest beyond.

It was a quarter of midnight that Friday, April 14, 1775, when the courier reached the nondescript tavern on the outskirts of Lincoln. The building faced the dusty road that pointed through the hamlet toward the village of Concord some six miles northwest.

In spite of the late hour, the flicker of candle and lamplight illuminated the lower windows of the tavern and the one-story addition at its rear. Half a dozen horses still switched their tails patiently at the hitching rail along the building’s side.

The courier took the precaution of scouting the area before approaching the tavern. The road was deserted in both directions, the windows of the houses visible along the road blank and black. Reassured, he dismounted and found a place for his mare at the hitching rail.

Slim and straight in stature, the courier had regular features markedly more handsome than those of the average farm boy and a pale complexion that had been reddened by the fast ride in the icy wind. His sole concession to the April chill was a frayed black cloak, beneath which he wore the loose tan smock and brown breeches common to the region’s farmers. Straight brown hair pulled back and tied with a black ribbon was visible under the drooping brim of his dusty, sweat-stained hat.

As he unbuckled the leather pouch behind the saddle, the door of the tavern’s rear addition creaked open. A lanky figure slouched in the doorway, outlined black against the candlelight.

“Will, tell Pa he can quit worrying,” said a terse voice.

“Hey, Levi,” the courier greeted his cousin wearily.

Slinging the pouch over his arm, he strode to the door beneath the peeling paint of a worn wooden sign that proclaimed the establishment to be simply “Stern’s.” The tow-haired youth who held the door open with one spare, sinewy arm was about the courier’s age. He moved out of the way to allow the courier to step into the passage between the kitchen of the main building and the enclosed lean-to at its rear.

Once inside, the courier pulled off his hat and wiped the clammy sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. Levi scrutinized him, his pale blue eyes growing keen.

“You’re more’n an hour late. Any problems gettin’ through?”

“You could say that, Cuz.”

To his left, through the door of the tavern’s kitchen, the courier could see into the taproom. The long, narrow room was crowded, the atmosphere thick with the yeasty aroma of ale and the blue tobacco smoke that gathered in a dense haze against the blackened beams supporting the low ceiling. The grim-faced patrons who bent their heads together over their pints were all members of the local militia.

Farmers, merchants, and tradesmen, they sported clothing that showed varying degrees of prosperity. Most were clad, as was the courier, in simple homespun, a necessity for the vast majority of colonists because of the despised taxes Britain had imposed on imported goods. Even the more prosperous members of the group were soberly suited in a reflection of their Puritan stock as well as the temper of the times.

“Was Uncle Josh expecting trouble tonight?”

“Naw.” Levi shrugged. “Will dismissed the company a couple hours ago, but most of ’em decided to hang around a while. I guess we’re all thinkin’ trouble’s bound to come right soon.”

The courier’s nod was rueful. “I got a taste of it tonight.”

Before Levi could question him, a tall man stepped out from behind the door to their right. About thirty years of age, he was lean and tanned as a hunter, though spotless white linen, a waistcoat of dove-grey silk, breeches of fine black wool, and the silver buckles of his shoes marked him as a member of some profession.

The courier grinned at his oldest cousin in grudging admiration. A lawyer who was gaining some reputation in the area, William Stern was also captain of the Lincoln militia and chairman of the local Committee of Correspondence, which was responsible for distributing information about the activities of the British to other committees throughout the thirteen colonies.

He was, as well, a delegate to the illegal Provincial Congress currently convened in Concord under the direction of thirty-four-year-old Dr. Joseph Warren. Samuel Adams's right-hand man, Warren was considered to be the most personable incendiary in the colonies, reluctantly admired by his enemies even while they despised his politics.

"You'd better get in here," Will said with a relieved grin. "Pa's been fretting. He's about worried himself sick."

With Levi at his heels, the courier squeezed past him into a low-ceilinged room hardly larger than a closet. The constricted space was pungent with the scent of mingled tobacco smoke, whale oil, and the musty leather bindings of the books that crowded shelves occupying every available inch from floor to ceiling along the bare plaster walls. To one side of the single window stood a large, scarred desk piled with an untidy clutter of books and papers that threatened to crowd a battered whale oil lamp off its edge.

Behind the desk, in the lamp's flickering light, Joshua Stern, proprietor of the establishment and colonel of the Lincoln militia, threw down his quill pen with a sigh and looked up, his square, genial face softening into a smile. Transferring his blackened pipe to an ash-filled saucer with one large paw, he reached for the courier's pouch with the other. When he had tossed it on top of the papers in front of him, he stretched back in his chair and, yawning, ran his fingers through the unruly mop of curly grey hair that wreathed his head.

"I was about to send a party out to hunt you down." He directed a pointed glance in the direction of the ancient oak clock that ticked on unperturbed from the wall behind the desk.

The courier dropped into the chair Will shoved toward him, weighing how much he could safely confess. He threw his cousins a look of appeal, knowing all too well that in spite of every attempt at evasion his uncle would eventually pry each incriminating detail out of him.

Will slouched into a dilapidated wing chair, while Levi leaned against the closed door. Both watched him with a mixture of amusement and concern.

"You didn't run into any trouble, did you?" Stern fixed the courier in a gaze that had become piercing.

"There was a patrol this side of Brooklyne," the courier admitted, resigned to his fate. "I'd swear they were on the lookout for me, too. They just rode up out of nowhere and came after me."

"It appears you got away unscathed," Stern noted.

The courier grimaced. "It took some creative riding to shake them off."

"They get close enough to get a good look at you?" Will's tone was sharp.

"I don't think so. Luckily they weren't good shots—" He stopped, disgusted.

Levi's jaw dropped. "You mean they fired at you?"

"I guess they meant business this time." At the memory of his narrow escape, the courier suddenly felt weak.

"I had a feeling you needed my prayers tonight," Stern said, his voice sober. "I've said it before, though no one's listening. You're testing God's patience too far. One of these days he's going to remove his hand of protection."

Will leaned forward in his chair. "This is serious. Gage ordered his troops not to shoot except in self-defense. So either they took matters into their own hands or the general has changed his policy."

Stern packed a pinch of fresh tobacco into his pipe. Clenching the stem between his teeth, he took the stub of a candle from his desk, lighted it at the lamp, then applied its flame to the pipe's bowl.

"Someone's putting them on to you," he said, blowing out the candle. "Gage is going to keep his hounds hot on your tail until they bring you to bay."

"He's not going to catch me, Uncle Josh." The courier bit his lip the instant the impulsive words slipped out, but too late to take them back.

Stern's eyes narrowed. "So you're too clever for the king's men, are you? How long do you think you can keep tweaking Gage's nose before he comes down on you with an iron fist? But having some experience with your complete inability to exercise reasonable caution, I suspect it hasn't sunk into your thick skull that you're playing with fire. Do I have to remind you that Gage has spies planted even in Revere's circle of mechanics? All it would take is a hint dropped in the wrong ears—"

"There's no one in Boston, except for Mr. Longworthy, Mr. Revere, and of course, Dr. Warren, who has any suspicion I'm not as zealous a Tory as my father. I'd trust any one of those gentlemen with my life."

"They aren't the ones I'm worried about," Stern countered. "There's a reward on your head. Sooner or later you'll make a misstep, or someone will put two and two together. If Gage manages to capture you, the most your father's influence will gain you is a quick exit in front of a firing squad instead of slow strangulation at the end of a rope."

"I'm not afraid of the Regulars," retorted the courier with some heat.

"That's the trouble! If you understood the consequences that could result from your actions, you'd stop behaving as if this were nothing more than an amusing game."

Levi and Will exchanged glances. The courier flushed and opened his mouth to protest, but Stern cut him off, emphasizing each word with a jab of his pipe.

“I fought your Aunt Tess about your involvement from the beginning, and I’d have won the argument if she hadn’t persuaded Warren to intervene. If any harm comes to you, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“You couldn’t have stopped me,” the courier protested. “From the time I was a child, you and Will and Papa have debated whether the rights God gave us as free beings take precedence over our allegiance to an earthly king who is a tyrant. I listened to all your arguments and came to my own conclusions.

“I love and respect my father more than any man, but on this issue, I cannot agree with him. The last thing I want is to hurt him, but I have to follow my own conscience, as you did. Yes, Aunt Tess encouraged me to take an active part in working for the Sons of Liberty. But I alone made the decision to act, and I think I’ve proven of some value to the patriot cause.”

“You’re the most daring and resourceful courier we have,” Will conceded. “And you have the perfect cover. With your close ties to so many of the officers on Gage’s staff, there’s no end to what you can learn just by keeping your mouth shut and your ears open. So far, at least, even your father doesn’t suspect you—or that his own sister is storing enough powder in her barn to blow up a good part of Boston.”

Levi gave the courier a wink. “Don’t pay Pa any mind. His bark is considerably worse than his bite.”

The courier laughed, but Stern puffed thick smoke from his pipe, exasperated by their apparent unconcern. “You may consider this a fine joke, but you’d better heed my warning or you’re likely to find your head in a noose in short order.”

“I’m not the only one taking risks, Uncle Josh. All of us are. It’s too late for us to turn back, even if we wanted to. As for me, I refuse to live as any man’s slave—even George the Third’s!”

“Well said, Cousin,” Will murmured as Levi nodded in approval.

“All very well and good, but I get the impression that more often than not you’re following your own desire for excitement rather than seeking God’s guidance and purpose. In my experience, that’s a sure recipe for disaster.” Stern accompanied his words with a warm look.

The courier flushed and raised his chin. “I pray for guidance every day.”

“And do you ever listen for the answer?”

Will and Levi guffawed. Throwing them a reproving look, the courier changed the subject.

“Gage has ordered all the men-of-war in Boston harbor to keep their longboats on standby. That has to mean there’s a move afoot—and soon.”

Sobering, Will frowned and shifted in his chair. “Gage doesn’t dare wait much longer. The more

he delays, the stronger our position becomes. And if he expects to arrest Sam Adams and John Hancock, he's going to have to move within the next few days, before they leave Concord for the next session of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia."

Still frowning, Stern unbuckled the straps of the courier's pouch and shuffled through the papers it contained. Those from the Boston Committee of Correspondence he handed to Will. As he scanned the report from the Committee of Safety, charged by the Provincial Congress with overseeing the military defense of the colony, he stiffened.

"Gage received a dispatch from Parliament yesterday. They're sending substantial reinforcements as well as several high-powered generals: Clinton, Howe, and Burgoyne. Looks like the Ministry is determined to stir Gage to action."

"Another confidential dispatch arrived today. I haven't gotten wind of its contents yet, but I should be able to learn something at the general's ball tomorrow—or rather tonight," the courier corrected himself as the clock chimed the quarter hour past midnight. "If he's set a definite date, I may be able to discover it as well."

Sitting forward on his chair, he went on, "By the way, I chanced on another bit of information you may find interesting. The other night we had Lord Percy and Major Pitcairn to dinner, and they mentioned they're expecting the arrival either today or tomorrow of a captain of the Seventeenth Light Dragoons who's being posted here from Virginia."

"I hadn't heard of any dragoons being stationed in the colonies," Stern responded.

"None have been, so far, at least. The captain has been on leave from his troop."

Stern raised his eyebrows. "What was he doing in Virginia?"

"He was reared there. According to Lord Percy, when the captain was very young he was adopted by a wealthy old bachelor uncle from Virginia who needed an heir—it seems his older brother was set to inherit their father's estate in England. At any rate, the captain eventually returned to England, where he became fast friends with Major Pitcairn and Lord Percy and took a commission in the dragoons. When his uncle died last fall, he came back to Virginia to settle the estate."

"So what's his business in Boston?" Will asked, puzzled.

The courier glanced over at him. "I gathered Percy and Pitcairn persuaded the general to have him attached to his command. The Seventeenth is included in the reinforcements Parliament is posting here, so the captain would have ended up in Boston anyway. But it's interesting that Gage intends to place him on his staff as an advisor of sorts."

Will was plainly mystified. "Why all the fuss over a mere captain?"

"It turns out this 'mere captain' is not only rich, but also happens to be blessed with influential

friends at court and in Parliament who might be induced to do Gage a good turn. The general hasn't exactly been in favor in either place of late. And Pitcairn says the captain knows this region like the back of his hand and is exceptionally knowledgeable about the political and military situation here."

"But you said he grew up in Virginia," Levi pointed out.

The courier's gaze remained on Will. "He did, but he also spent considerable time in Boston overseeing his uncle's business interests. In fact, Captain Carleton graduated from Harvard."

Startled, Will shot upright in his chair. "Carleton? Not Jonathan Stuart Carleton?"

The courier smiled with satisfaction. "I thought you might know him."

"The younger son of Lord Oliver Carleton, George II's closest advisor? I should say!" Will exclaimed. "He was a year ahead of me at Harvard. I had him home to dinner a couple of times, Pa—tall, blond fellow, very agreeable sort."

Stern broke into a smile. "Oh, yes. I used to wish you'd bring him around more often."

"He was a brilliant student, though I rarely saw him crack a book."

"From Percy's description, I'd hardly have taken him for a scholar, Will," the courier chided. "I got the impression he's a bit of a dandy and very much the lady's man."

Will laughed and propped his long legs up on the edge of the desk. "That would be Jon, all right. We all heard rumors about Sir Harrison Carleton's vast fortune, and from my acquaintance with him, I'd say Sir Harry could have bought and sold even John Hancock without batting an eyelash. And Jon had the most attractive penchant for spreading the wealth around. The parties he threw were memorable, to say the least."

"Lord Percy did mention that his reputation is notorious even among the officers," the courier said with some severity. "It appears your old friend has found it necessary to cultivate an exceptional proficiency at the duel."

"I shouldn't be surprised. He was a crack shot and an elegant swordsman when I knew him."

"Really, Will, I wouldn't think him at all the sort you'd find congenial."

"On the contrary, I liked him more than I can say. When he wasn't charming himself out of some absurd scrape or other, he was fast-talking one of the rest of us out of trouble. He provided me an alibi on more than one occasion."

Grumpily the courier said, "Well, I suspect I'm not going to like him one whit."

Will's smile was skeptical. "Don't make any judgments until you meet him. Personally, I've

always hoped we'd meet again one day."

"You may very well—as adversaries on a battlefield. Still, considering that the captain spent his childhood in the colonies, who knows where his real sympathies lie."

"In Jon's case, I wouldn't rule out either alternative," Will said. "None of us ever came close to figuring out what made him tick. He was exceptionally close-mouthed about himself, though on the surface he could seem as transparent as glass."

"Well, as luck would have it, our tenants sailed for England a couple of weeks ago, so of course Papa offered to billet Captain Carleton in our town house, along with a lieutenant who's traveling with him. And if I know my father, he'll find occasion to entertain both of them at Stony Hill on a regular basis."

Will smiled in anticipation. "Which opens up all sorts of possibilities for you."

"The contact may turn out to be . . . useful."

"See how much you can learn," Stern approved. "The next few days are going to be critical, and we need every scrap of intelligence you can pry loose."

He broke off, then said, "One more thing. Warren has made contact with someone on a high level in Boston who has offered to provide us with the most sensitive military intelligence. They're meeting tonight to work out a way to pass the information safely."

"What do you mean high level, Pa? An officer on Gage's staff?"

"That's something none of us need to know, Levi," Stern reproved. "He's putting himself in considerable danger by passing intelligence on to us, so it's best if we mind our own business."

Levi flushed and clamped his mouth shut. Stern did not appear to notice. Rising, he began to pace up and down the cramped room with an agitation he couldn't conceal. For several moments, all of them silently marked the steady ticking of the clock.

At last Stern turned to the courier. "As much as I'm reluctant to involve you any further, we need someone to rendezvous with this contact—Patriot, Warren called him—then relay the intelligence back here to me. It'll mean meeting him in or pretty close to Boston."

"You know I'll do it—"

"Now hear me out. This intelligence will be so compromising that if you're caught with it, they'll likely string you up on the spot."

"Since there's already a price on my head, what difference does it make?"

As though he were trying to convince himself, Stern admitted, "I thought of that too. It's a virtual

certainty they'd hang you anyway. But you've proven that you're resourceful in a tight spot."

On impulse the courier got to his feet and embraced the older man. "Please don't worry. Look how much effect your prayers have had already."

Stern patted him on the back then released him. "Heed what I said about putting God to the test. Still, if Gage moves tomorrow, this will be a moot point."

Will rose and stepped to the desk. After placing a thick sheaf of papers into the courier's pouch, he fastened it and handed it to his cousin.

"There are the reports from our Committees of Safety and Correspondence for Longworthy. You'd better get along before you're missed at home. It'll be dawn by the time you get back."

"Sunday is Easter," Stern reminded them as they went out through the tavern's rear door. "Let's hope everything remains quiet for one more day. Warren is leaving Concord for Boston this evening so he won't have to travel on the Sabbath. He'll leave your instructions in the usual place Monday morning."

"Pa said you're bringing out the last of the gunpowder today," Will noted.

The courier brightened. "We've gotten hold of some muskets and a fair supply of cartridges too—though since the fines have been raised, the soldiers aren't nearly as eager to sell them as they used to be."

"Gage has a sight of gall to put a price on our heads for taking back the munitions he stole from us!" Levi broke in. "The citizens of this colony bought and paid for every last ounce of that gunpowder, and he just walks in and takes it without a by-your-leave. We even pay his soldiers premium prices to take their worn-out muskets off their hands!"

Will pushed the door open. "That argument won't hold up in a royal court. The king can claim everything you own, and you don't even have the right to demand payment."

"On your way now," Stern growled, waving the courier off. "And be especially careful just in case another patrol is out there waiting for you."

He and Levi went back inside while Will walked the courier to his horse. The tavern's customers had all gone home, and the mare stood alone at the hitching rail, head drooping.

"How's Rebekah doing?"

Will smiled. "Moving slow, but the baby's due any day now."

"And little Will and Anne?"

"Full of mischief and growing like weeds."

The courier finished buckling the pouch behind his saddle then turned to give his cousin a probing glance. “I notice you’ve taken down your shingle.”

Will shoved his hands into his pockets. “With the royal courts shut down, we’re handling as many legal cases as possible through the local committees. My days are taken up with the sessions of the Provincial Congress, committee meetings, drilling the militia, and trying to scare up enough guns and ammunition to go around, none of which brings in cold coin. I believe in what we’re doing with all my heart, but it’s sure hard to support a family on rhetoric.”

The uncharacteristic bitterness in his voice wasn’t lost on the courier, and he touched his cousin’s arm in sympathy. “Rebekah knows how important your involvement is to the cause right now. She doesn’t begrudge the sacrifices.”

“I know. If anything, she feels more strongly about it than I do. But I’m hardly indispensable.”

“All of us are indispensable if we’re serious about opposing tyranny.”

Will frowned and looked away. His voice muffled, he said, “I know you’re right. It’s just that I can’t help wondering who’d take care of my family if I couldn’t.”

An unaccustomed tightness closed over the courier’s heart. “Everyone keeps saying Gage won’t dare press the issue to the point of war.”

Will’s answering look was hard. “Do you still believe that after tonight?”

The courier mounted without answering, but as he reined the mare round, Will caught the halter. “No more of your daredevil exploits, all right? Stick to spying. That should be dangerous enough even for you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Pride goeth before a fall,” Will warned. “And be doubly careful where Jon is concerned. I witnessed several incidents that led me to believe he’d be a dangerous adversary. He has a keen eye for the little details others miss—and an extraordinary ability to figure out what they mean.”

“Thanks for the warning,” the courier said with a smile.

Although Will also smiled, his eyes remained serious. “While you’re at it, guard your heart well, little Oriole. If I know my old friend, he’ll try to steal it.”

The courier threw back his head, laughing as the wind ruffled his long cloak around him. “Don’t worry about me on that score, Cuz. My heart is proof against all attempts.”