

Prologue

May 1777

The trees were coming into leaf, and from the valley a warm breeze wafted the scent of blossoms and wild honey. Charlotte and Nick sat side by side, yet not touching, under the sycamore tree at the edge of the ravine.

“We’ve had word from my brothers,” Charlotte said. “They’re all in the same battalion. Isaac writes——”

“Stop! Don’t tell me about it. I hate this war.” Nick was staring across the ravine to the hills on the far side. His jaw was clenched. He’d been moody like this for months. She wanted to reach out her hand to brush back the lock of blond hair that fell across his brow, but a sense of hard separateness prevented her.

"We have to fight for what we believe in," she said.

"Why?"

"Because duty matters. I would fight if I were a man."

"Thank God you're not."

A hopeless feeling came over her because Nick was a Whig and she was a Tory. He loved her, and she loved him, but that seemed to matter less and less.

And yet — God be thanked — Nick had not joined a Rebel regiment. She thought about it all the time: Nick in a blue uniform and her three brothers in red, bayonets drawn, advancing toward each other in battle lines. With every prayer for the safety of James, Charlie and Isaac, she also prayed that Nick would not take up arms on the Rebel side.

Nick spoke suddenly. "My father thinks I'm a coward. He said so when I told him that I don't believe in war. He said that if I were a real man, I'd want to fight." A bitter laugh. "That's what you think too, isn't it?"

"I never said so."

"You said that you would fight if you were a man."

"I said we have to fight for what we believe in."

"So you think I should kill another human being because I want to live in a republic and he doesn't? Charlotte, I don't think war is glorious or heroic. I cheered for those fellows who dumped the tea into Boston harbour. Yet I can't understand why your brothers are ready to kill or be killed for mad King George, who doesn't give two hoots for any of us even when he isn't stark out of his mind."

“My brothers aren’t like you. To them, war is an adventure.” For a moment Charlotte felt uncomfortable, almost ashamed.

“Some adventure! Neighbours burn each other out. Fathers and sons become enemies. Lovers are divided.”

“Are you divided from me?” Birds were singing, but a silence fell upon her heart.

“That’s how it feels.”

They stood up at the same moment, staring at each other. This was the closest they had ever come to a quarrel. Nick looked away first. He placed his fingers upon the heart that he had carved one year ago in the smooth bark of the sycamore tree, with their initials C.H. and N.S. entwined.

“Remember this,” he said.

When she saw the sadness in his eyes, she could not bear it.

“I must go,” she said. Straightening her shoulders, she turned and walked away.

“I’ll always love you, Charlotte.” His voice followed her along the path. She did not look back.

Chapter one



“**W**hy is your father galloping off down the road with supper almost ready?” Mama exclaimed as she turned from the window.

“He has to see Mr. Herkimer about something,” Charlotte answered.

“He’s trying to sell the livestock, isn’t he?”

Charlotte looked away. “We have to leave, so he might as well try to get something for the animals.”

“I told him I’m not leaving this house.” Mama stood firm, her arms crossed. “Until Isaac comes home, this is where I stay.” She looked determined, but her lower lip trembled just the same.

“Papa says the Rebels are going to drive us out.”

“Not me.”

Straightening her narrow shoulders, Mama marched from the window across the kitchen to the open fireplace, grasped the crank that rotated the roasting pig on the spit, and turned it. Dripping fat sizzled in the flames

“We’ll wait supper till your father gets back,” she said.

The platter of fresh bread was already on the table, and the pot of turnips ready to be mashed sat on the hob. Mama had the table set with three places. Papa’s place was at the head, with Charlotte’s on his left and Mama’s on his right. The other end of the long wooden table looked empty without places set for Charlotte’s brothers. The room, too, felt empty without them there, joking and whistling and shoving each other around.

“Papa won’t be long. Maybe an hour.” Charlotte figured that Mr. Herkimer wouldn’t take more than a minute to refuse him. “While we wait, I’ll let the cows into the barn.”

She lifted the latch and hurried out the kitchen door. It was not yet dark, although the sun had set. Papa had five miles to ride, then five miles back. The moon would be up before he reached home. Charlotte smelled frost in the air.

In the barnyard, the ten cows stood in a huddle, steam rising from their warm flanks. Charlotte grabbed the collar of Daisy, the lead cow, and led her into the barn. Cowbells jangling, the others followed. Charlotte forked hay into their mangers before leaving the barn.

After closing the barn door, she glanced toward the house. Mama was standing at the window again. She looked as if she was marked off into little squares by the panes of window glass. With the light of the fire behind her, her hair was the colour of flame.

When Charlotte returned to the house, Mama was still watching out the window. Charlotte pulled off her boots — work boots that had belonged to her brother Charlie — and padded across the kitchen floor to the bottom of the staircase. She wanted to go up to her bedroom. There was still time, before Papa came home, to brush her hair and change her gown for one that didn't have cow dung on the skirt. As Charlotte set her foot on the first tread, Mama turned from the window.

"Charlotte?" Her voice was low, almost a whisper. "You do believe that Isaac is . . . alive?"

"Of course I do. They didn't find his body on the battlefield."

"But you don't think he'll come home, do you?"

"Oh, Mama!" Charlotte turned back and walked up to her mother. "He may have been captured. You heard the same report I did, how James and Charlie died at Saratoga, but there was no trace of Isaac. You heard how the Rebels marched their prisoners off to Boston. If Isaac was among them, he'll be there until the end of the war."

"But he may have escaped," Mama insisted. "We were told that those Indians who had been helping the British

simply melted into the forest. Isaac could have escaped with them.”

“Mama, that’s what I hope too. But General Burgoyne surrendered a week ago, and it’s only a three-day journey from Saratoga, even through the bush. Isaac would be here by now, if he were coming home.”

“He might be hiding . . . or wounded.” Tears brimmed in Mama’s eyes.

Charlotte gathered her mother into her arms. There was nothing more she could say, so she said nothing. Mama might be right. This very night there might be a rap at the door, and Mama would rush to let him in, for she slept downstairs now, in constant readiness for Isaac’s return.

“Mama, all we can do is pray.”

Charlotte’s mother pulled gently away. “I know that God will hear our prayer.” She rubbed her eyes with the corner of her apron. “Now you go change your gown, while I mash the turnips.”

What chance was there, Charlotte thought as she climbed the stairs, of Isaac returning before the family left their home? They had to leave, and soon. It was no longer safe for Loyalists to remain in the Mohawk Valley.

Charlotte put on her grey gown, the one with lace at the throat, and tied the strings of a clean white apron around her waist. She brushed her black, unruly hair and twisted it into a knot at the nape of her neck, and settled her white, ruffled cap onto her head. Over her shoulders she draped

her deep red woollen shawl. Inspecting her reflection in the looking glass that hung above her washstand, Charlotte considered that she looked quite fetching, for a girl who had spent most of the day mucking out a barn.

Charlotte had a bedroom to herself because she was the only girl, although for the past year she had not lived a girl's life. With her brothers gone, she had to help bring in the hay, slaughter pigs and chop wood just like a man.

There was a framed hole in the floor of Charlotte's bedroom, as in all the bedrooms, to allow warmth to rise to the upper storey. Sound also rose, so nothing happening downstairs was secret from anyone upstairs.

She was still studying her reflection when she heard the snick of the door latch. Papa was home. As soon as the door closed, she heard her mother's voice.

"You sold Herkimer the livestock, didn't you?"

"I tried to." There was a long pause. "But he wasn't buying. Herkimer figures they'll soon be confiscated anyway. By waiting a bit, he can get our animals dirt cheap." Charlotte heard the thump of her father's boots on the floor, first one then the other, as he took them off.

"Martha, there's nothing we can do. We can't stay here any longer. The law won't protect us."

"Henry, I don't want to leave."

"I know, dearest, but we must."

"How will Isaac find us if we're gone when he comes back?"