

# Chapter 1

JANUARY 1781



SHE COULDN'T SEE Nick anywhere.

Charlotte stood at the bow, her eyes searching the wharves as the *Blossom* entered Charleston Harbour. Around her, the other passengers' voices mingled with the sounds of sailors shouting, water lapping against the wooden hull, spars creaking and gulls shrieking.

The harbour was clogged with ships. There were warships of King George's Royal Navy, merchant ships, transport ships, slave ships, and the hulks that held prisoners of war. Except for the hulks, every ship carried guns. Even the *Blossom*, with its twelve passengers and its cargo of tallow and hides, was armed with twenty guns. What with French, Spanish and rebel warships on the hunt for any vessel flying a British flag,

the seas were perilous all the way from Nova Scotia to the Carolinas.

At Charlotte's side stood Mrs. Dickinson, the purser's wife. The only other woman on board, she was short and sturdy, with a red nose and cheeks roughened by sun and wind.

"Do you see him yet?" Mrs. Dickinson asked.

"Not yet. When we're closer, he'll be easy to spot. Nick's very tall."

But when the ship moored at its wharf and the sailors were lowering the rope ladder over the side, Charlotte still had not seen him.

"Even if I can't spot him in the crowd, he's sure to see me," said Charlotte. "I'll be the only woman climbing down the ship's ladder, except for you."

"Me! Merciful heavens! You won't catch me on that ladder one more time than I can help! Climbing it to come aboard was quite enough for me."

"Don't you want to see Charleston?"

"No, thank you." Mrs. Dickinson shook her head firmly. "From what I hear, the streets swarm with refugees, cut-purses and runaway slaves. I've no wish to go ashore. My only reason for going to sea is to be with my husband. If I didn't, I'd never see him at all."

"I know what that's like. Nick and I have been married more than a year. In all that time, we've spent a total of twenty-two days together."

"At that rate, you can hardly call yourself married, if you ask me."

“There’ve been times I thought so, too. But everything’s about to change. After three years as a courier, Nick has been attached to the Civilian Department of the Southern Command. He’s been given a room of his own in the officers’ quarters, and I have come to Charleston to join him.”

Charlotte stepped away from the rail. “If you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Dickinson, I’m eager to go ashore.”

“My best wishes go with you!”

“Goodbye and thank you. It’s been a comfort not to be the only woman on the ship.”

Hurrying to the spot where sailors had lowered the rope ladder, Charlotte was first in line when the gate in the rail was opened.

“Careful there, young lady!” a sailor warned, holding out his hand to offer help. But she was already over the side, her foot reaching for the next rung down.

“That lass is fit for a life at sea,” another sailor laughed.

“I’d like to see her up in the rigging,” the first chortled, “with those skirts blowing in the wind.”

She pretended not to hear.

Charlotte was eighteen years old. She had black hair, pink cheeks, and lively brown eyes. For her arrival in Charleston, she was wearing a blue cloak over a plum-coloured woollen gown—her first new garments in four years. Nick had sent five pounds sterling from his pay so that she could purchase clothes in Quebec before embarking.

If she had been wearing breeches on the voyage and not a long cloak and gown, she would have loved to climb up in

the rigging, where wind filled the sails, as far away as possible from her berth between the decks.

Charlotte thought that whoever gave the *Blossom* that name must have had an odd sense of humour, for her quarters had reeked of pitch, bilge water, and human waste—a noxious stench that nearly turned her stomach. She had heard rats skittering and squeaking, and sometimes she saw one. Although it was cold on the Atlantic in winter, she had spent almost every waking moment on deck. Even so, she felt as if the stink of the ship would cling to her clothes forever.

As soon as she was standing on the wharf, Charlotte resumed her search for Nick, her mind refusing to accept what her eyes told her.

A young officer stood a few yards away, his red coat and white cross belts making him stand out from the crowd. From under the brim of his tricorn peered a pair of eyes that seemed fixed on her. She turned away, avoiding eye contact. As she continued to look for Nick, she could not suppress the rising fear that something had gone wrong.

When she happened to notice the young officer again, he was still staring at her. The steadiness of his gaze forced the truth upon her. Nick was not here. This stranger had come to meet her. Their eyes met. She did not look away.

The young officer stepped forward. He bowed.

“Have I the honour of addressing Mrs. Charlotte Schyler?”

“I am Charlotte Schyler.” She held her breath, waiting.

“Captain Ralph Braemar, South Carolina Royalist Regi-

ment, at your service. Nick asked me to meet you. He is most unhappy not to be here.”

“Has something happened to him?”

“No. Nick is well.”

“Then why . . . why isn’t he here to meet me?” Her words caught in her throat. She had travelled three weeks in a stinking ship, enduring every kind of hardship cheerfully because she believed that as soon as she stepped ashore, Nick would be there to welcome her.

Captain Braemar looked around before he spoke, as if to make certain that no one could overhear. “He’s been ordered to the backcountry.”

“You mean the army is still using him as a courier? I thought that was finished. He wrote to me that he’s now attached to the Civilian Department.”

“He was. But the military needed someone to go into the interior of South Carolina to gather information. We think there’s considerable support for the King, but with so much persecution of Loyalists, hundreds have taken to the swamps to hide. General Cornwallis needs to know how much active support the army can expect. Nick has the skills to find that out.”

Her voice shook. “Are you telling me that Nick is a spy?”

“Shh!” His voice sank to a whisper. “You could say that. But you don’t need to worry. If the rebels couldn’t capture him when he was a courier, they can’t catch him now.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She wanted to believe this. For