

PART I



THE ATTACK

I.

December 21, 1759

Dawn

The winter ground is cold and hard against the length of my body. I lie on my stomach, propped on my elbows. The cold of the fowler's metal lock scissors into my fingers as I pull back the hammer and prepare to fire, and the smooth wooden stock presses into my cheek as I eye the length of the barrel and line up the tip with a flash of movement beyond. There's a rock poking into my hip, but I ignore it and stop my breath, conscious of every movement, of every inch of my body hidden behind the fallen log I've steadied the musket on. I pull hard on the trigger.

A half second later, the flint and the frazzle spark, lighting the powder in the pan and sending fire to light the powder in the barrel. In a flash of flame and smoke, the fowler fires and the butt slams into my shoulder, and I grunt with pain despite the thick cloth pad secured there. I glance down at the open pan to make sure there are no remaining sparks and scramble to my feet, brushing bracken from my clothes. I peer into the densely tangled bare vines and branches of the winter underbrush.

"Did I hit anything?" I ask, turning to Mark.

My elder brother leans against a tree, his dark brown linsey-woolsey leggings and shirt nearly blending into the thick bark. He grins.

"Go see."

"She got something that time, didn't she, Mark?" asks Jaime, my younger brother. "Not everybody has that good an aim with a musket, do they?"

Mark shrugs. "Hitting anything with a fowling musket is half luck, anytime, no matter who's shooting. You'd starve to death if you had to depend

on it for food. Go get your rabbit, Catie. It'll make a nice birthday dinner for you."

I make to cuff him on the ear as I hand him the fowler, and he grins, his dark blond hair nearly swishing out of its leather tie as he darts out of reach. He knows we're having pork. That's one good thing about my birthday falling in late December. Plenty of meat remains from the fall hog slaughters and deer hunts, and for seventeen years now, Mother has used my smaller celebration to experiment with her Christmas and New Year dishes. Mark's birthday is in March, so he's gotten rabbit or squirrel more times than I can recall. Maybe seven times, all the years since we moved from New Jersey to the South Carolina backcountry when he was thirteen.

Dead leaves crackle under my feet as I push through the underbrush, looking for evidence of a kill. I spot the blood first and lean to pick up a large rabbit by the scruff of the neck. A splinter of shot caught it in the head at about thirty yards. That's not luck, no matter what Mark says. The blood that spilled from the rabbit's skull has melted the morning frost on the leaves around it, turning them a watery pink. As I lift the creature, its hind end snags. I pull harder, but whatever is holding it pulls back. I crouch and find the rabbit's back feet caught in a knot of vines. Grimacing, I pull my jackknife from my pocket. No matter that Mark would have laughed had I not hit anything. I'm sorry to have killed an animal that was trapped. I snap the vines one by one, nicking my thumb as the last one breaks faster than I anticipate. Wincing, I suck blood from the tiny wound.

I turn to rejoin my brothers, holding the carcass away from my gown and overskirt so the dark blue wool won't stain and Mother won't fuss. She'll have enough of a fit when she finds out Mark took me shooting for my birthday. I can hear her now. *It's time to leave the hunting to the men.* And not even to all the men, but to the farmers and the woodsmen. Not to the men like my father, with his university education. If he hunts at all, he should be riding horseback and chasing foxes with a pack of hounds like the lowland dandies of Charlestown, not lying in the dirt to take down a glorified rodent. No, if anything, the backcountry people Mother has been forced to live among should bring my father the glorified rodents and the venison, and when they can afford it, the chicken and the pork. In fact, they do, but that doesn't go a long way toward endearing them to my mother. To her, it's small recompense for living on the edge of the world.

Still uneasy at the way the rabbit died, I swing the body to Mark so he can stuff it in his game bag, and I catch Jaime biting his lip. I cut my eyes sideways at Mark. He has seen it, too. We've talked about this many times,

about how strange it is that Jaime, who at ten does not remember a world before the frontier, should be the one most like our parents, the one least able to bear the sight of blood and pain and death. It should be me, I think, because I'm the girl and thus the one mother has most tried to shield. Or it should be Mark, who can remember not only New Jersey but Edinburgh, too, and the way our father's father pilfered shortbread from his wife's cupboards to hide in his pockets for his grandchildren.

But it's Jaime. Not Mark, who is fast becoming a trapper and a trader to rival any Frenchman. Not me. I so quickly learned that the best way to protect myself in the backcountry was neither to flutter my eyelashes and demur when men spoke to me, nor to keep my elbows and ankles carefully covered, but to learn to handle a gun and an ax.

"So," I say to Mark, crossing my arms and lifting my chin toward the long rifle propped against a tree. "I really think I've gone about as far as the fowler can take me."

"Oh, no," Mark laughs. "It took you three tries to hit anything."

Still trying to take my mind off the pitifully trapped rabbit, I protest. "With a fowler, Mark. With an old, cheap fowler. With your rifle, I would have hit something the first time."

Mark pats the cartridge box at his belt. "I can't let you waste my rifle cartridges. It's stupid to waste good ammunition on rabbits and squirrels, anyway, especially when there's plenty of meat waiting at home. And you know Father agreed to cover for us only as long as we promised not to waste ammunition in target practice. You don't need target practice. After me, you're the best shot in the family."

That isn't saying much, but I smile. He might be weakening. And I need him to weaken, because I need to practice shooting the rifle. However little we like to think of it, the war is drawing nearer, and the more skilled I am on both weapons, the safer I'll feel.

I press my fingers into the pad on my shoulder. Bruises are forming in the tender flesh underneath, but because Jaime is here, I keep the smile. "Please, Mark. I could shoot the rifle, and Jaime could try the fowler. He needs practice, you know he does."

Mark shakes his head. "We've done enough for one day. Besides, we need to be getting back to the house. Someday, Catie, maybe I'll take you deer hunting. You can shoot the rifle then."

There will be no *then*, and we both know it. Not because Mark doesn't want to take me with him, but because there's no telling how far we'd have to track a deer or how long we'd be gone, and an overnight trek through the

woods would be harder to hide from Mother than a predawn hunting trip on my birthday.

“At least let me hold it,” I say, and Mark sighs because he knows I won’t give up until I get what I want.

He retrieves the long rifle from beside the tree. With the butt on the ground, the barrel ends at his shoulder.

“It’s as tall as you are,” he says. “Here, it’s not loaded. Just hold it like you would the fowler.”

I take the rifle from Mark and cradle the stock between my shoulder and cheek. I slide my left hand down the barrel, trying to get a feel for the balance, trying to learn. It’s a heavy weapon. Too heavy and too long. I hold it steady for only a few seconds before the barrel begins to tremble and Mark snatches the rifle from my hands.

“It’s too heavy for me to hold,” I admit. “I’d have to prop it on something like I do the fowler.”

Mark considers. “You held it long enough to fire. You wouldn’t have to prop up either of them if you’d learn to shoot faster. That’s your worst habit. You wait too long to fire and lose your nerve and your aim. You’re decent enough, but you’d be better if you didn’t try so hard. You’ve got to learn to load and aim and fire in one long flow.”

I grin. “So you’re saying I can fire the rifle?”

Mark laughs and runs his hands lovingly over the dark wood of the stock. “This rifle cost me three years of deer hides. Maybe you can get your husband to buy you one someday.”

He tilts an eyebrow skyward. “Speaking of husbands,” he adds, meaning to get a rise out of me. “Will I get to see Owen Ramsay tonight?”

I pull my heavy winter cloak from the branch where it’s been hanging since before dawn. The weather isn’t yet cold enough for me to need the cloak over my thick layers of clothing, and I like to have my arms free for shooting. I tie the ribbon around my throat, hoping the folds of the cloth and the red shadows cast by the rising sun hide my furious blush. Mother has had her eye on Owen Ramsay for me for at least five years. That I’ve had my own eye on him far longer is something she doesn’t need to know. If she thought my gaze had landed in the same place as hers, she’d begin to doubt her own judgment.

My fingers hover at my throat, finding the short necklace of blue ribbons my parents gave me last night. Mother said she wanted me to have it before my birthday dinner. I slide the ribbons through my fingers, working my way around large knots set about an inch apart. I haven’t untied them, but

Mother told me each knot holds a pearl, a treasure she took from her father's house when she ran away to marry my father.

"It wasn't stealing," she told me once. "They were my pearls." I'd wondered if she'd been trying to convince me or herself.

"I suppose all the Ramsays will come." I feign annoyance as I pull Jaime's cloak from another branch. The Ramsays always come to our celebrations, as we go to theirs. They are our nearest neighbors, and one of the few families Mother deems fit to socialize with us. Patrick Ramsay, Owen's father, may struggle to write more than his own name, but he can read and has built one of the finest farms in the settlement. His wife, Owen's stepmother, was educated by a private tutor in Philadelphia before her father lost his fortune and she was forced to seek hers. Between the two of them, they suit Mother as well as anyone in the backcountry could.

"Turn around, Jaime." I throw my younger brother's cloak over his shoulders and do the tie, though he's plenty old enough to do it himself. Mark and I never have gotten out of the habit of protecting Jaime, though. Maybe Jaime is our fault.

Mark straps the rifle across his back, slings the game bag over one shoulder and the powder horn and shot bag under the other arm, and picks up the fowler. I take the basket that holds what remains of the food we brought for an early breakfast. I packed it quickly, in big slabs of bread and cheese and smoked venison, so the basket is still very heavy.

Jaime should carry something, I decide. Mark and I are too quick to take care of everything. We've never given him the slightest responsibility. We've never given him the chance to learn much.

"Would you rather carry the basket or the game bag?" I ask Jaime.

He hesitates for a moment, eyes darting between Mark and me.

"Game bag," he answers at last, determined.

"Mark," I call, signaling. He pulls the strap over his head and holds the game bag out.

"Can I carry the fowler, too?" Jaime asks. A rush of affection comes over me. He is trying so hard to keep up, to be brave, to make us proud. I laugh, pleased, and Jaime starts to speak again, but Mark holds up a hand that stops us both.

"Quiet." There's a strange timbre in Mark's voice, and Jaime and I fall silent. I look up sharply. Silhouetted in the morning light, Mark is perfectly still, listening, alert. My mind flashes to a painting of a spotted hunting hound I saw once on a wall in New Jersey. If Mark had a front paw, it would be raised, pointing.