

Harold Knutt, a hero of the French & Indian war, returns to England, winning a seat in Commons. A secretive cabal, backed by 'unnamed men' striking from the shadows, manipulates Harold, leading him back along the red path.

## **LEGACY'S ROAD: THE SHADOWED WAY (Book Two)**

By M. Daniel Smith

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LEGACY'S ROAD

BOOK TWO

THE  
SHADOWED  
WAY

M. DANIEL SMITH

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## CHAPTER ONE

Bristol, England—Early Summer, 1760

Pipe-smoke scented the air of Richard's study with a mix of oaky sweet tars and redolent oils: a rich blend of Turkish and Virginia colony tobacco leaves. Harold leaned back in a chair near the window with a vacant expression on his face. His father, sitting behind his desk with pipe clasped in a scarred hand, searched Harold's eyes, measuring the change in him. He finally nodded, breaking the silence, his words edged with sorrow. "You have met the beast."

Harold lowered his eyes and stared at the scar on his left hand where the outside finger had been lost to a musket ball, leaving a gouge torn along his upper ribs and shoulder. "It has made a *feast* of me. Body—and soul." His voice was whisper thin. "As you prophesied."

Richard shrugged, then tapped the bowl of his pipe against a clay container, emptying it of charred residue. He offered it to Harold, who refused with a wave of his injured hand. His father slipped it away in a waistcoat pocket, then nodded. "It was not *too* much of a meal provided it. Precious few managing to escape its bite—especially when leading from the front. Which, if certain tales related by spurious pamphleteers have been written true, you did—the entire time you were there."

Harold angled his head, the light streaming through the study window highlighting thin wrinkles pinching the edge of his eyes. "You—read them?"

"As did we all." Richard considered his son. "You saw the crowds yourself. Heard your moniker echoing in the air, with everyone in a frenzy as they shouted it. Red Fox. Red—" He stopped, seeing a grimace of pain slip across his son's face. "I'm sorry. Spoke without

consideration of how you might feel—receiving acclaim for dark deeds needing to be done.”

He leaned forward, hand outstretched, though he was sitting too far away to touch Harold's. “Your uncle and I kept abreast of what you accomplished, albeit two months or more after the actions described in broadsheets. Poured over the lurid descriptions of your many victories—along with the loss you suffered. Your injuries described in painful detail.”

Harold turned away, his shoulders heaving, hands clenched as everything he'd felt, experienced, and buried away over the past two years rose to the surface. He sat there, fully exposed in the presence of the only person who could understand what he'd been feeling, ever since placing the final rock atop the final resting place of his mentor and friend. Left in his eternal rest thousands of leagues to the west.

The press of a warm hand on the back of his neck broke the dam, Harold turning into his father's body, his grief spilling from him in silent, heart-wrenching sobs. He clung to the man he'd never been able to reach out to before, tossing aside stiff lipped English mores as he shared his love for, and pain suffered from the loss of those he'd stood alongside while serving overseas.

Richard listened as his son began to unwind the gnarled threads of his bittersweet memories, recalling moments of his own spent facing certain death. The echoes of his comrade's voices still in his ears as they fought and fell beside him, images of what he'd experienced swirling through his mind.

Harold's mother, standing on the other side of the study door, leaned her head against it, listening as her son slowly revealed his journey through the shadows of war with shuddering gasps and long, drawn out pauses. Clenching her hands over her heart, she ached to go to him. To go to them both. Then she straightened up, wiped her eyes, and slowly walked away.



Richard went over to his desk and opened a drawer, removing a bottle and two tumblers, pouring each half-full of whiskey. “They will come for you. Have already started the chase—in using your visage

for their own propaganda.” He handed his son a glass. “Here’s a bit of—”

“Mother’s milk. I know.” Harold nodded his thanks, taking a healthy sip, savoring the deep-bodied flavor before swallowing, the warmth of it spreading throughout his chest, helping him recover from the memories of those he’d lost, each a dagger to his heart. “My second, Sergeant Major Scott—Robert—he always said that after every action when offering me his flask.” Harold paused, staring at the whiskey in his glass. “Right up to the final one.”

Richard studied his son, unable to find any sign of the young man he’d shared drinks with at a local pub in what seemed to have been only a handful of days ago. A man now, full grown, appearing to be of middle age. His face was etched with lines of the pain from the grievous wounds suffered over the two years and more he’d been away. “Was in the same position myself—more than once. Offering liquid comfort to young officers, new to the game. More than a fair share of them slipping through my grasp over my years of service.” He smiled as he lifted his scarred hand. “The lack of two fingers—not helping me to keep a *tight* enough hold of them.”

Harold leaned back, buoyed in spirit from sharing a connection with a fellow member of the fraternity of war. “I was fortunate—to be placed under his tutelage. Of both his and General MacLean’s, the two of them having served together long before they arrived in the colonies. Back when Aidyn—when the General was no different than I was. New to the, as you named it—the *grind*.” Harold shook his head, lips pressed tight. “As you tried to warn me about, in telling the truth of it.”

Richard shrugged, then refilled and lit his pipe, eyeing his son through a trail of smoke rising from the bowl. “Destiny finds a man—one way or another. The few who manage to meet it with some measure of success often left suffering the most for any gain in notoriety. Paying for it with the loss of those who helped them to rise through the ranks. Both friend *and* foe.”

Harold looked up, finding his father’s eyes. “And you believe me to be one of them—a man of destiny?”

“A named man often becomes a reflection of himself, as seen in other people’s eyes. I served alongside a few in my time. All—with feet of clay, though marked by an awareness outside of themselves. Allowing something—*unseen* to move through them. At times.” Richard leaned back, a soft smile hazing the edges of his weathered face. “I was honored to stand in their shadow back then. As I am honored to stand in yours, this day.”

Harold blushed, embarrassed by the look of respect in his father's eyes, resisting any familial alteration in their relationship. “I do not—”

“You *are*, Harry, despite any protestation made against it. I recognized it in you long ago, in seeing it for the first time out back in the yard. Saw it in your eyes when you looked up at me in anger, slowly turning to awareness as you—as you saw the *truth* of what I was trying to show you.”

Harold looked down at the glass clasped in his hands, the dark surface of the whiskey reflecting the memory of the day in mention, a half-day after his younger brother had been laid to rest. Alone, standing in the back yard staring at the sandbox where the two of them had spent hours recreating battles with lead figurines. His mind numb with grief, unable to fathom ever being able to do so again, without Jackie at his side. The painted metal figurines left standing where Jackie had placed them, before chills and a fever had forced him from the battlefield.



The sun was a smear of a dull circle hiding behind a thin curtain of gray clouds. Rain, intermittent throughout the day, not yet fully delivered, leaving Harold standing outside the family manor, studying the interior of a wood-framed rectangle resting on the ground. He narrowed his eyes in concentration, staring at a line of British troops formed into a solid wall of hand-painted red and white figures. They faced a horde of enemy soldiers represented by a mix of acorns and pebbles posed in a semi-circular arc, pinched between two mounds of earth piled at one side of the sandbox. The battle lines as shown had come from a drawing in his latest book of military campaigns: a

birthday gift from his uncle Thomas, frowned upon by his father, though grudgingly consented to after a pleading look from his mother.

“God’s eye.” The gravel thick voice of his father called out from behind, startling Harold. “The view from on high, with everything seen clear and true. Exactly as written down in the books you and Jack—” There was a slight pause, his father’s voice softening a bit as he continued. “The same ones you both were always studying. The author’s drawings showing the field of battle as described, based on after action reports—with no regard for the viewpoint of the men standing the line.”

Harold started to turn around, unable to complete the motion, his neck held in his father’s firm grip, forced to the wet ground, the iron-forged hand sliding down, pressing on his shoulders until he was fully prone, his head arched back, jaw jammed in the sand, his throat squeezed against the edge of the thick wooden frame. Harold struggled to free himself, unable to find a reason for the harsh treatment, his eyes stinging with tears.

A hiss from his father’s lips pressed against his ear was frightening. “*This* is what the plan of battle looks like—when seen from a *soldier’s* perspective. Low to the ground—the enemy hidden behind folds in the earth. Unseen. Their voices heard—*felt*—in here.” A solid thump hit him between his shoulder blades, resonating throughout his chest as Harold heaved, trying to free himself from the painful assault.

“*Sit up.*” Released, Harold complied, his hands shaking in anger, tears in his eyes, forbidden to flow by his firm will. His lips were pressed thin in repressed fury, watching as his father struggled to kneel beside him, careless of the wet grass and potential to stain his best pair of pants. Harold noted a wince of pain on his father’s face as his legs folded back.

“The men—*line* soldiers—those who churn the ground into muck at the General’s whim and wish—have only the view shown you. With a comrade standing to either side, the terrain in unseen detail before them. No lofty perch on horse, eye to glass for *them*. Left having to wait, watching for the first sign of movement. With loose



bowels—their breath short and hands trembling as they cling to their muskets.”

“You were here.” Harold tilted his head, gazing at his father. “I mean *there*, on the ground—” Harold pointed. “*With* them.”

His father nodded. “I was. And it’s not as the words in your books describe it. Each group of soldiers left standing on an island, surrounded by the chaos that comes with killing. Currents of unbelievable rage carrying reason away. Training—*hundreds* upon *hundreds* of hours, the only thing keeping men standing the line. Firing—reloading—firing *again*—until released by the order to rush forward—thrusting with bayonet, over and over without thinking. Until finally—it ends.”

“In victory for *us*. For England. For the *King!*” Harold looked at his father, whose eyes were locked to a point far beyond the horizon, blinking slowly. “Right—Father?” The old soldier nodded, wiping his brow, the ends of his fingers dragging tears away as he did so.

“Yes, Harry. For England—*and* the King.” Richard held up his hand, waiting for his son to stand and help him regain his feet. “I did not mean to interrupt your recreation of the battle. Only wanted to impart an—alternative point of reference, not found in the books you and—and our Jack were always pouring through.”

Harold’s father walked away, leaving him to gaze at the battle scene his brother had laid out, noting the precise placement of each soldier, just in front of the imprint of his chin, embedded in the sand. Harold knew he would never see it the same way again, his mind forced open to a deeper appreciation of what his father had been through and managed to survive. At a loss of more than two fingers, with some unseen part of himself, lying deep inside his stiff-backed body, causing him pain. One still with him to this very day.



“They will come for me—as you said.” Harold raised his glass, taking a long sip, fighting an urge to drain it, and then the bottle as well. He looked over at his father, who stared back in silent appreciation, then forced a tight grin on his lips. “I know it will happen—that it’s already started, on seeing the throng of people waiting at the docks.

Felt it—from the man sitting in the carriage beside me. His mind whirring away as if a clock-work, considering when and how hard to press the lever—with myself the fulcrum to his own ambitions.”

“That would have been a member of the consortium who made their approach to *me*.” Richard shook his head. “Men with black-stained fingers. Dangerous men, Harry—holding the power of peoples rapt attention, hanging onto every word in print.”

Harold nodded. “Words wielded for both bad and good effect, depending on one's viewpoint. Based on their political inclinations and the degree of personal morality, entwined.”

“Your head's now in the *public's* noose.” Harold's father shrugged. “The price paid for the trumpeting of your successes, well-earned though they were. A bill they will soon want payment of.” He paused, eyeing his son carefully. “Would you go back and change it—*any* of it—the decisions you made, or actions taken?”

Harold shrugged. “Maybe. A *few*. None that helped to aid our campaign against the French. But as to spending more time with, and a greater effort made for ensuring the welfare of those I became close to—then yes. I'd go back and not waste a single moment in letting them know how much I cared for them. How much I came to love them—all.”

Richard nodded. “It's an ache we *both* bear, having lived with our heads pressed close to blood-churned earth. The future—a misty field in morning fog at the best of times. A tempest whirlwind of dirt, bodies, shell fragments, and blood—when things go south. Our eyes blinded by fear, anger, and loss.”

Harold raised his glass, then drained it, setting it down on a small table. He leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees. “So—what is your advice as to what comes *next*? I'd hoped to have an opportunity to encourage negotiations between colonies, crown, and native groups. To speak on behalf of an *increase* in trade of goods. Each side benefiting from share of materials in ripe abundance in the colonies. More than enough for all. Hoping to use my reputation, fleeting as it will no doubt be, to accomplish what was promised.” He paused. “I'd welcome your views, based on your experience—to help me form a plan of action.”

“A war of a different sort, as it were.” Richard nodded, emptying his glass with a careless shrug of head and hand. He wiped his lips as he stood up, helping his son to his feet. Harold grabbed his father’s arm, the whiskey having gone to his head, causing him to stumble. He let go and straightened up, his voice overly loud in the hushed confines of the study.

“To victory of *right* over greed. Sense, over *sedition*. Morality over—over *might!*”

Richard smiled. “How about we aim for a first step made, getting you to bed without falling flat on your face—the drink having floated your thoughts. Go and lay yourself down while I consider the planning of this mission in greater detail.”



Harold's mother opened her son's bedroom door and slipped inside, carrying a large mug of cold tea. She walked over and placed it on a small table between his bed and the window, leaving it there for when he woke up. She took his shirt, left draped over the back of a chair, and held it up, wondering when her boy had grown large enough to fill out its wide shoulders, as if a transformation made in the shadows. Able to accept it now, with Harold home and in one piece, more or less. His smile still distant but there, tucked away in the corners of his mouth.

Harold stirred, throwing his left arm back in a restless toss, exposing the scars on his wounded side. Eira muffled a gasp of shock, her fingers pressed to her lips as she stared at the large, bone-white patches of skin on her son's upper chest and side, revealing the horrible damage he'd suffered.

A spasm of pain rose from her womb in a cold fist, squeezing her heart, her mother's soul tormented at not having been there to soothe him, to wash the sweat from his fevered brow with cool water, leaving behind a trail of her warm tears. Her knees trembled beneath the weight of harm seen done to her boy, coming to rest on her shoulders as if it were her own to bear, her child lying before her as if a precious painting, the canvas rent by a clumsy stoke of butcher's

blade, sewn back together with clumsy fingers, leaving ghastly tears upon his flesh.

Harold opened his eyes and smiled, feeling young once more, if only for a moment stolen from time, his features quickly settling back into a practiced routine of tight grimace then release as he stretched his arms, yawning. “A bit too much—as Gran Da used to say—of *Agua Vitea*. The water of life, imbibed.”

Eira pulled a ready smile from where all mothers hide them, slipping it across freckle dusted cheeks beneath deep-blue eyes and hair the color of spun gold, trimmed in white along the edges of her forehead. She hid her pain, not wanting to add to the burden her son carried. “Not so much of it in ye, as your Da. But true enow—with its curse of a headache caused.” She reached down and picked up the cup. “I’ve brought cold tea for you, if you’re in need of it.”

Harold hand was a serpent’s strike, taking it from her and bringing it to his lips, drinking noisily, thin rivulets streaming from the corners of his mouth, landing on his chest. “So good. So *thirsty*—no doubt due to all the childish tears I shed on Father’s chest.” He sat up, wiping a hand across his bare skin, his fingers touching the smooth surface of his scars. Then he reached out, taking his shirt from his mother, noting the line of her sight, slipping it on as quickly as he could to soothe the look of concern in her eyes.

“It was a ball—a *musket* ball—from one of my own soldiers. It took my finger off, then knocked me flat. The shot made in error, coming from a young man new to sentry duty. Caused by my having come upon him out of the dark as if an apparition. Unexpected and—unidentified.”

Eira smiled. “We need not speak of it again. You’re home safe, and I’m finally able to draw a full breath once more.”

Harold buttoned his shirt, head down, easing circles of carved ivory through needled slits in the thin fabric. “I know you heard what was said, earlier—in Father’s study. Your head no doubt pressed to the other side of the door.” It was not a question, Harold’s eyes soft as he reached for his mother’s hand, squeezing gently. “I’m glad if you did. Would not have been able to unburden myself to your face,

painting a look of sadness on your lips. It's hard enough now, seeing it in your eyes."

Eira released herself from his grasp, turning and throwing open the curtains, letting the early afternoon light into the room. "Get yourself dressed and come down to the kitchen. You must be famished."

"The mid-day meal you provided was more—"

"Mid-day *yesterday*, Harry. You've slept the night through, and more."

Harold cocked his head, his hair hanging over one shoulder, dark as midnight, like his father's. His face still much too thin, appearing to him in the mirror as if a reflection of his mother's father, the past two years having scrubbed away the softness of his cheeks. "Really? I had no idea of having needed it—the rest. Though I didn't sleep well on the voyage back. Spent my nights walking the deck, keeping watch from the bow." He shook his head, giving his mother a warm smile. "Like Grand Da used to do, going outside the wee croft house in the highlands in the early morning and staring up at the mountain. Jackie and I watching from our bed, yawning, rubbing our eyes, wondering what he was looking at."

Eira nodded. "Speaking of my Da—I've booked a coach to go and see him, near as he is to a final climb to the top of the mountain." She gave Harold a searching look. "Would you like to go with me?"

"I am, as the General—as my friend and former commander Aidyn told me when we parted, free to pursue a life of luxury, having been granted a colonel's pension. With an additional stipend attached for wounds suffered in service to the King."

Eira stared at her son. "I didn't—I mean, your father and I didn't know. A *colonel*? We understood you to be a lieutenant."

"There is a story behind it, as with most things waiting to be told. One I will be happy to share with you both, as soon as we have buried the carcass." Eira arched her reddish-blond eyebrows in confusion. Harold grinned. "Of the beast I'm about to consume in its entirety—once it's been cooked, carved, and plated."



The dishes were cleared away, with a full-bodied red wine used to dampen his mother's reactions as Harold wove his tale of the previous two years, detailing as much as he felt could be shared in her company. His father listened without interruption, filling in the spaces between occasional pauses in his son's voice with thoughtful nods. When Harold told of his mentor's passing, his parents had exchanged a knowing glance, and then another when he mentioned having drawn the cameo likeness of the girl named Sinclair.

Harold, his voice steady, paid homage to his mentor, friend and boon companion. Then he told them of Meghan and her passing, having to stand up and go to the window, arms crossed on his chest, his cheeks wet with tears. When he'd finished and dried his eyes, he returned to the table, draining the rest of his wine as he looked down.

Richard was the first to speak. "Few words indeed, used to account for endless hours of a life—lived in full. It's why we are compelled to carry the memories of those we've come to love, so as to mark their passage into, then through our lives." Harold and his mother exchanged a glance of their own, never before having heard Richard wax poetic, the taciturn man seldom using two words where one would suffice. He nodded as he tapped the bowl of his pipe into a clay jar on the table, then stood up, begging his leave to attend to bills of lading waiting for him in his study.

Eira reached across the table and took Harold's hand. "Thank you for sharing. I feel I have come to know those you've spoken of as if part of my own family. Happy they were there for you when in need of comforting. Sorry for their loss—such a *brutal* life, for those standing so close to the edge of—of civilization."

"There's no boundary to be found there, Mother. No *edge* to it at all. There is a vast nation of civilized people who've long been in residence between the edge of the eastern coastline and whatever lies beyond. *We're* the ones who've continuously encroached on *their* lands, accepting offers of hospitality and trade—returning disease and broken promises in exchange. We have behaved in our finer moments as if a large, overly friendly dog—with mud-stained paws. And as if ravenous beasts with slavering jaws in darker times, led by snakes with false smiles and twisted words, encouraging tribe to fight against

tribe. Father—against son. Until blood on both sides is made to run like water, along the red path of war.

Eira stared at her son, uncertain as to his meaning, unable to marry the image of the boy Harold had been to the man he'd now become. "Surely there is more than enough land—for all?"

"A *piece* of it can be enough for most people, Mother. *All*—never enough for some. *Those* are the ones I need go up against in order to protect the rest."

"To protect your friend. The Indian girl—A'neewa."

"To protect those who are *natives*, Mother. A'neewa and all her people, including those of other native tribes. To help them secure an independent state, or territory. Left to live in as they see fit. Allied to England in word and deed with generations of young warriors eager to help defend our—to help defend *their* cause and ours. Brave men helping to expand our military forces, sent to every corner of the world. Joining us—eager to prove their valor in battle. A fair exchange for the right to self-government granted. Their blood, if you will, in exchange for enhanced trade with us."

"It sounds—horrible, in hearing it stated so—so—"

"Bluntly?"

"Yes, Harold. I've never heard such thoughts coming from you. Not from the son I—"

"Watched sail away? Tucked into the shadows at the dock, hat and veil on your head, with tears in your eyes. As if you could hide yourself from me. As if I would not find your face in the milling crowd. Along with Father's, too—each of you there without the other knowing."

Harold stood up and came over, pulling his mother to her feet, holding her, his chin resting atop her shoulder. "I see it all so clearly. Always have, no matter the moment. I knew you understood my need to leave, though you were unable to accept the reason behind my decision." He leaned back, finding her eyes, seeing her for the woman she was, while loving the mother she'd always been.

"I'm happy to go with you, to make your goodbye to your father. To Gran Da." He kissed her forehead, more than willing to pay homage to the elderly man who'd lent himself in full to two young

boys in restless itch, eager to take from him all the attention he had to offer. Without apology offered or regret felt at the theft of his time and energy, spent on their behalf each time they arrived.

Eira smiled, reaching up to smooth her son's hair back, her fingers touching the side of his face. "You've always been different. Much more so than our sweet Jackie ever was. Not as bright a light as he—but willing to spend so much of your time with him. Always patient with him." She leaned in, rising to her toes in order to kiss his cheek. "You were born with a wider view of things, though able to narrow your vision and look deep into them as well. It's why you managed to survive—and are standing here now, having rediscovered—no, having *fully* revealed yourself. The lessons learned—*painful*, at times. The rewards—*equally* as painful. But I can see they are cherished memories, too. And will be with you throughout the rest of your life."

Eira released herself from his arms, leaving him to the warmth of the dining room and fireplace, a bed of coals glowing red against the press of the cool evening air.



The family warehouse was dark, its cavernous interior holding rows of shelving containing a huge volume of bundled materials, along with stacked kegs and large oak barrels lying on their sides. Two large doors, closed against the afternoon air, were locked from inside with thick wooden crossbars.

Harold and his uncle Thomas stood on an upper platform at the top a narrow stairway, staring into the shadowed recess of the interior that represent his father's half of the family business, with three small temporary storage buildings located at the near end of a long finger pier a hundred paces away, belonging to his uncle.

Harold had been asked by his father to meet with Thomas in order to go over a manifest list. He'd agreed, aware the manifest was more of an excuse, allowing his uncle an opportunity to speak with him in private. A meeting Harold had been looking forward to, with his uncle always willing to listen, then share his thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Thomas waved his hand, pointing into the shadows of the large building. "Then we agree we're in complete accord with the city



assessors report.” Harold nodded, following Thomas as he turned and led him through a doorway, ending up in Richard’s office. His uncle sat down behind the desk, taking notice of a leather valise lying on the floor, one he’d gifted to Harry when he’d shipped out to the colonies, two years ago. Thomas aware now, based on the deep lines etched in his nephew’s face, that the months between his departure and return had aged him greatly.

“My thanks, Harry, for you’re coming here today. I appreciate your willingness to help—as always.”

“My pleasure, Uncle.” Harold crossed to a seat on the opposite side of his father’s desk. He pulled the valise over and undid two leather straps, pulling out four journals filled with notes, observations, drawings and other information, a record of his experiences while waging war in the vast wilderness surround of the American colonies. He placed them on the desk, his uncle eying them as if they were bags of coin. “It’s all in there, Uncle Thomas. Every thought, feeling, and emotion—written down when and where they occurred, or soon after—when given time and energy enough to do so.”

Harold paused, closing his eyes and sighing, remembering back to when he’d been another man, living another life in a richly colored and vibrant land. One he was still tethered to, by a headstone in a family plot, bearing the name of a woman he’d been willing to die for, and with. And another stone, placed in the ground between the thick roots of a sentinel oak, honoring a man left standing a lonely watch over a wide valley, bordered by a twisting ribbon of gleaming water.

He opened his eyes, then slid the journals across the table. “I wanted to share these with you—in repayment of the gift of them to me—used to help keep the memories alive of people as close to me as those of my own flesh and blood. Memories of the men I served with who I came to love—many of them lost to me.” Harold paused, taking a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Allowed the honor of holding their stories in trust, to be shared and reflected on by—whoever reads *these*. You—to be the first, if so inclined. And one day, my children—should I be granted an opportunity to have them.”

Thomas touched the stack, his fingers trembling. “I—am bowed down by your willingness to share these.” He paused, glancing up at

Harold. "My brother—has he not been given time enough to go through them all?"

Harold shook his head slightly, his eyes fixed on his uncle's. "He's not been offered them."

Thomas reached out, caressing the leather surface of the top one, noting the damaged cover. "Are you certain I should be the *first*? Perhaps better to wait and share them with him—when he's ready."

"My father has his *own* memories of what he suffered through." Harold leaned back, folding his hands in his lap. "You provided the pages. I filled them in. They are now provided you to read—to learn what your nephew has done and been made party to since last you saw him, standing on a Bristol dock, the gift of the valise and journals in hand." He paused. "The honor falls to you, Uncle. The burden of it—as well."

Thomas gazed back, his eyes gleaming. "I don't know what to say, Harry. Don't know—"

"Then best to say nothing. Just read, so we can speak of it another day. *All* of it." Harold felt a calmness settle over him, seeing the other man clearly as if a veil had suddenly been removed from between them. "As if—between a father to his son. As if Jackie and I were your *own* issue."

Thomas leaned back, a look of shock on his face, gone pale in the flickering light from two wall sconces. "You—*mustn't* say that, Harold! You're *wrong*—to suggest such a thing."

"My father's wounds. The scars on his lower body. His stiffness when standing and time needed to—relieve himself. The look of pain on his face every waking moment, with every step taken. Worse when on horseback, his body tensed, trying to hide it." Harold paused a moment, his face relaxing into a contemplative gaze. "As well the look in my mother's eyes whenever you visit—fading away when you leave. Or whenever my dear aunt enters the room."

Thomas looked down at the journals. He swallowed, took a deep breath then released it. "How long—how long have you known?"

"For certain?" Harold shrugged. "Just now, from the look on your face when I offered you my personal history. Could see the truth of it

in your eyes. A different look than that of my father's. Which he is—and will *always* be.”

Thomas clasped his hands in front of him, his voice soft. “It was both his and your mother’s proposal.”

Harold nodded. “I realize that. My mother's no—well, the arrangement would certainly would have been a difficult one. For all of you.”

“Your father—” Thomas looked away, his voice filled with grief. “Somehow Richard bore it—in wanting heirs. Someone of his own blood to share what the two of us were building.”

Joshua looked at his uncle. “You loved her. You love her *still*.”

“No.” Thomas shook his head. “Not like that. I would never—”

“You *do*, Uncle. I recognize the look—having worn it myself.” Harold nodded at the journals. “It's all in there. My having sworn my love to a woman in love with another man. A *good* man. Unable to let him go, though he was long dead. Wishing to be with him again. Loving the thought of me as a husband, but not able to accept the ring, ceremony, and promise of home and hearth. Aware she could never bear me children. Too brutal a reminder to her of what had been wrenched from her. Torn from her body. From her heart—and soul.”

Thomas looked at the journals, biting his lower lip. “I am almost afraid to look. To see the reflection of a common pain—for us all.”

“It's not *all* we share, Uncle—though I understand and appreciate your feelings.” Harold shrugged. “Perhaps this revelation will allow for more open discussions of other things. Where your issuance of insightful advice can be offered openly, between a doting uncle and his appreciative nephew—which we are.”

“Yes, Harry. Of course. Nothing's changed on that account.” Thomas hesitated a moment, staring back. “I've always wanted the best for you. For you and—for Jackie.” Tears began to flow, Thomas bowing his head, his narrow shoulders trembling, his thin hands drawn into fists, resting on top of the desk.

Harold smiled. “Jackie had your looks. Your hands, ears, as well as your intellect. Greater by far than my own and that of my father's. An equal match to your *own*. The chess matches between the two of you—things of beauty and finesse.”

Thomas reached up, wiping his tears away. He looked at Harold with a soft expression. “You, with your father's mind and eyes. The two of you always looking for and finding a strategic maneuver to employ. Seeing everything. Missing nothing. As if you were able to read other men's thoughts.”

“Until the one time—when I didn't.” Harold looked down, his hands twisting in his lap. “Leading good men to their deaths. Leading one, dearer to me than all the rest—to his. Nearly ending with my own.”

Thomas pulled the small pile of books closer, resting his hand on top of them. “Revealed in here?”

Harold nodded, his eyes half-closed, fatigue pulling at his shoulders and upper eyelids as thoughts crowded in, prying at doors he'd resisted opening, banging on them now. He stood up and stared at the books lying beneath his uncle's hand. “We'll speak again, Uncle—when you deliver these back to me. At a corner table in a public house, tankard of ale in hand, sitting in the shadows and toasting to our common pain.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Scottish Highlands, Summer, 1760

The scent of hay mixed with the earthy odor from a long-haired highland bull compelled Harold to close his eyes, drinking in the heated reek of manure and sweet-grass scents of hay welling up from a stall in his Grand Da's small stable. He started to look for his younger brother, able to feel him standing beside him, allowing a wave of loss to wash through him, having learned to accept the cleansing effect. Then he squared his shoulders, prepared to face the beard-framed scowl of his grandfather.

"There's a shovel in lean against the wall with ya *name* on it. Stall needs *mucking* out, if'n ye have wits enow to manage it done." Harold's grandfather came around the front end of a large Scottish bull, both of them shaggy in appearance. The smaller, thin framed man moved in a crooked stoop, with spindly arms and legs. The vision of his Gran Da was a shock to Harold's eyes, one he quickly recovered from, grabbing the shovel with one hand, giving the elderly man a hug around his much too narrow chest before settling into the messy chore.



The urine stained floor of the stall was covered in a layer of fresh strewn hay. A thick blanket of animal waste had been hauled away to an open shed where air could circulate, helping convert the odorous mass into a rich mulch to be spread on three small garden plots, arrayed in neat lines along the sunniest side of a narrow valley floor.

The farm was an ancient family croft, fronting a steep rise of ridges capped by snow-dusted mountains. The tallest peak, several hours hard climbing away, looked down on the small field-stone house where his grandfather lived. The irascible man in a self-

administered isolation, preferring to stay there alone, tending his crops and a single, well-aged bull. Both of them cantankerous in mood toward family and strangers alike, barely able to tolerate one another. An even match of dour moods.

Harold found his grandfather still strong in mind and speech, much the same as he'd been when his mother would bring him and his brother in months long visits to her family's Scottish highland estate. Their arrival would be followed by a steep climb to the small stone croft house, tucked away in the southernmost range of Scotland's high mountains, overlooking the borderlands shared with England. Both brothers eager to engage in a footrace, eager to be first to receive a cussing out for one imagined trespass or another, soon after they'd piled into the yard of the family's ancient holding

The elderly man's words still rung in Harold's memory, as well the image of Jackie's beaming face, relishing the oft repeated verbal tongue lashing. "Why ye hae nawt but broomsticks for legs, the lot of ya. You'll be in climb of the mountain each day, come rain, shine, or hail, be *damned!* Building calves ta shame those weak-kneed, bandy-legged *bastards* living below. Might as well be *Irish*, for all they care in the doing of an honest day's work."

There would be a pile of kilts and other kit in Scott Clan tartan waiting for them, fashioned in a pattern of red and green, supplied each time they arrived. Changed into, along with sturdy leather boots sized from a pile of hand-me-downs, the clothing donated from a host of male relatives living in the lower valley.

The days spent with their grandfather were filled with hours of back-breaking work and endless drudgery, long days spent in a constant climb to gather and lug down stones or wood from the high forests, with meals but twice a day. Sleep would often find them with spoons in their bowls, heads resting on the table. Carried off to bed, their kilts hung on wooden pegs, waiting for them at the break of day.

Their only recompense, vivid stories shared in odd moments of quiet repose. Their Gran Da's grating voice describing men in battle, with the chaos and whirl of long bladed claymores drawn, flashing in their imaginations, along with tales of murder, betrayal, mayhem, ending with men decked out in clan tartan standing side by side in

victory, or back-to-back in a final stand. Dying with prideful sneers and ripe disdain for the *damnable* English *dogs* who cut them down or strung them up.

Harold smiled, remembering how Jackie had adored their Gran Da, giving the heavily scarred man his full attention, never interrupting, hanging on his every word. A memory that tugged at his heart, still, wishing his father had allowed Jackson to be buried here in the manor plot, near as possible to, as Jackie always called it, his most favorite place in the entire world.

Harold reached up, wiping a tear away with his free hand, the other holding a shovel, heading uphill through a cleft in the valley wall to a small mill spring, where grain from clan fields below had once been ground into flour on an ancient millstone. He knew it would most likely need attending to, silt filtering in from a spring in the mountain's flank, the paddle wheel always in bind.



“You're more a man full grown than *last* time I laid eyes on ya. Bit more *weathered* in the hide, as well. The *bite* from a musket ball in ya side, seen while ya was flailing away in the stall.”

“One of *English* manufacture. A soldier on my side placing it there.”

“Happens when the shite is being flung to all sides, like the tail of a cow when milking.” The old man narrowed his eyes. “See ya tried to *catch* it first.” He pointed with his whiskered chin at Harold's hand, the outside finger missing.

“Was waving it to get the sentry's attention. Foolish move, left paying a hard price for the lesson learned.”

Harold's Gran Da shrugged, changing the subject. “Watched you wallowing in the outlet of the spring, clearing it of a dozen years or more of silt. Your calves look halfway decent—for someone spending so much of your life in the low-lands.”

“Then you'll not be having me run up the mountainside this time home?”

His grandfather stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. “Figure you'll do what needs being done. Reckon if there's something

waiting for you above, you've mind and sense enow to go look for it.” He paused, his blue eyes faded, turning to gaze up at the heights. “But *I* won't be the one sending you there.”

Harold nodded, finishing his plate of fresh greens and well-aged boiled meat. Cooked tough, and salty, but able to fill the ache of a stomach in need of a hearty meal. The taste and texture nudged his recall of meals shared in huddles with soldiers around fires, doing the same.



The morning broke with a wash of bright sunlight, raising a drift of mist from the side of the steep hills. Harold had risen early, eager to welcome the birth of a new day. He was moving in full stride along the top of a ridgeline bordering the narrow valley, centered by the small croft house. The top of the mountain loomed above, a narrow brook running alongside the snaking line of a narrow path, flowing from spring-fed pools and snow-melt waters starting just above a line of stunted trees where the woods ended, and the real climbing would begin.

Harold remembered how each visit had presented him and his brother with the challenge of going as high as they could, struggling with the thin air and steep slopes, needing to stop to recover their strength before heading down, defeated by the altitude. He'd always urged on his younger brother, telling him it was only a matter of will, to see it through, spurring him upwards. Both of them aware their grandfather was watching from below, waiting for them to appear on the ridge below the snowy summit. But soon Jackie's strength would fade, leaving the two of them to turn and wave, retreating in defeat, unable to reach the rock cairn on the mountain's top, placed there by the old man years ago as a marker.

Harold bowed his head as he made the solitary trek, hearing the ghost of his brother's voice in the keening of the wind, and croak of a raven's call. Along with the familiar gasping of breath, his lungs complaining, calves aching from months of inactivity. He was finally forced to stop, hands on his hips, head back as he opened his throat to



the crisp air, remembering the first time he'd made the climb all the way to the top with Jackie, who'd just turned ten.



“Are you unable to go on?” Jackie stood a step below his brother, his breathing steady, eyes gleaming in satisfaction as he watched his older brother struggling to catch his breath.

Harold frowned. “I've the bloody pack to carry—Shadow.”

“Gran Da evening the odds a bit. You're older—and *stronger*. Only fair you carry the water and food.”

“Along with two heavy cloaks, in case the weather turns and closes in. By the way—your sword tip is touching the soil. Bad form that—a *punishable* offense.”

Jackie raised the tip of his carved wooden sword, his eyes cutting to one side, looking back toward the house far below, hoping his grandfather hadn't seen. “You won't tell him—will you?”

Harold grinned, then reached out, tousling his younger brother's fine brown hair. “Of course not. When have I ever let you down, dear brother-of-mine?”

Jackie's face lit up in a smile. “Never have—and *never* will, War Chief Harold—of Clan Scott.” He stepped back, raising his wooden sword, presented him by their grandfather, carved while awaiting the arrival of his two Scottish grandsons, their English father be damned! “Engarde, Chieftain—I am making claim to the title!”

They met wooden blade to blade, going back and forth until Jackson pressed too hard, striking Harold on the cheek, opening a welt that began to drip thick beads of blood. The younger boy lowered his sword, a look of shock in his eyes as he watched his brother wipe the blood away with a finger. He stared in silence as Harold reached out and rubbed it on the edge of his blade, held in a trembling hand.

“First blood goes to *you*, warrior of Clan *Knutt*.”

Jackson's eyes widened. “Gran Da wouldn't like you saying that.”

Harold shook his head, wiping blood from his cheek, a firm expression on his lips. “Gran Da be *darned!* We are of our father's blood—as much his own. Best remember that, Jackson Knutt. It's our name and birthright, given. With the right to wear it with pride. You

know as well as I the origin of it—a royal lineage stretching all the way back to C'nut himself. First to rule all of Britannia.”

Jackson stared back. “Agreed to—in *principle*. But our father is there—” He pointed with the tip of his sword in the general direction of England. “And Gran Da is down *there*.” The sword swung in a line, pointing toward the wee croft house, far below.

“*Damn* good point, Shadow.” Harold raised his sword tip, thrusting it into the air, the light beginning to dim beneath a layer of gray clouds shifting in from the east. “To Clan Scott!”



The crest of the rock-topped mountain beckoned through an icy mist, starting to turn to snow. They were close enough to the cairn to coax one more effort from tired legs protesting the toll paid in strained muscles and throats rubbed raw from shuddering breaths.

“Almost—there—Shadow. Take my hand.” Harold, feeling as if some external force was drawing him up the final stretch of a steep, loosely formed gravel slope, was determined to make it this time, weather or weariness be damned. Jackie took his hand, then sagged, his reserves of energy spent, with nowhere left in his thin body to pull it from. Harold gathered him up, placing him on his back, arms under his legs, carrying him uphill until he came to a stop, leaning against the pile of heavy rocks.

Harold knew his grandfather could not see them there, clear weather or no, the line of sight impeded by a shoulder of granite ridge below. He smiled, kissing the stone, then turned to go. His brother's voice called to him, a whisper in his ear.

“We made it—you and I.”

“Aye, Jackson, son of Knutt, and heir to Clan Scott. We did. Together. Just like I promised you we would.”

“Like you—promised.”

“Aye, Jackie. As I told you long ago—where I go, you’re free to follow. Always.”



The cairn was still intact, though several small stones had fallen away from one side, put back in place by Harold, his fingers stiff from the brush of the raw wind. The sun was out, though the thin air was unable to trap its heat, left to bleed away along the sweeping shoulder of weather scattered stones.

Harold slid down and leaned back, his legs drawn up, hands clasped around his knees, feeling the abject loneliness of being without. Without his brother. Without Robert. Without Meghan and A'neewa, who he swore he could still feel the energy from, somewhere over the far horizon to the west. He wondered if she ever thought of him, or if she'd turned her head from the life they'd once shared, moving on and letting go of such foolish things.

He sighed, knowing it was time to release the accumulated pain, ending the process begun with his father, finishing it here, alone. The stones seemed to be warming against his back, as if from a wave of energy coursing from within, helping heal his emotional wounds.

Harold closed his eyes, shedding tears of sorrow, knowing hard work lay ahead of him, sensing the danger lurking alongside the path he must take, walking into shadows where a single misstep would spill him onto a hard and unforgiving ground. One lying far below, and thousands of leagues away.



“You reached it.” His grandfather’s faded blue eyes reflected the afternoon light. He angled his head, squinting as he measured Harold with a steady gaze.

“The cairn you built—yes.” Harold nodded, his body drained of energy from the climb and outpouring of his emotions.

“Nae, lad. Was never a cairn, but a crypt—for a good man helped up there from this very spot. A hole in his side from a British musket ball, same as your own. Got him above the ridge, carrying him on my back as a storm blew in, hiding us from pursuit. Then I placed him where the bastards would ’na find him. God-cursed *low-landers!*” The old man turned and spit on the ground. “Like yourself did, first time you and Jackson made the climb, with him on your back. Same as me, other than the burying part, though the laddie did cause me a wee bit

of worry—what with the cough he took on and was hard put to be rid of.”

Harold stared. “You—followed us?”

“Aye. Of course. Every time you made the climb. Your Ma with a blade to my throat if’n anything ever happened to ya.”

“It was the climb that day—that led him to his death.” Harold lowered his eyes, staring at the ground. “The thin air—it weakened his lungs.”

“You’ll be burying that thought, or feel my fist in your throat, you will!” His grandfather came over, taking Harold’s coat in his thin hands. “Was no such thing, you *daft* fool!” He paused, reaching up and giving Harold’s face a gentle cuff. “Our Jackson was the luckiest one of us all, having you as brother to him. He lived his entire life, short as it was, hanging on every breath you took. Found his joy in each hug you gave him, though you never learned the doing of that from your Da—or myself either.” The old man stepped back and gazed up at the mountain. “Your brother stood on your shoulders trying to touch the sun, with the stars and moon thrown in as well. Was no fault of yours—the fever that took him.”

Harold turned his head, joining his grandfather in looking up at the mountain, recognizing the truth in his grandfather’s words as he recalled the first climb all the way to the top, on through to having left his brother behind on the final day of his life. Remembering the pained expression in the younger boy’s eyes, measured against the gleam of satisfaction in his light colored eyes when he won at chess, or how he looked up at him that final time, lying in bed with the sound of bugles sounding in his fevered mind.

Harold nodded, understanding life was its own reward with each day met. With every moment in pass. Each beat of heart and suck of air a precious gift shared with family and friends well met, then let go of, all. “Thank you, Gran Da. For teaching me another lesson I needed to learn.”

“But not the *last* one you’ll be needing to learn.”

“No?” Harold stared at the old man.

“The bull has gone and shite the stall near full again.”

Harold nodded, then made his way over to the barn, head raised, finding a measure of peace at the thought of mucking it out.



The weight of Harold's bag settled in on his shoulder. His kilt was back on a peg in the croft house wall, belonging to the bear of a man his Grad Da had once been. The old man came up, his steps halting, hands shaking as he reached out and touched Harold on the shoulder.

“You'll be needing to come back and see me, laddie—long after I'm bones 'neath a pile of rocks at the far end of the pasture.”

Harold pointed with his chin toward the mountain. “I could always carry you up there.”

His grandfather shook his head, a cackle slipping from his pale lips. “Nae. The top of its too damn cold for my blood. Haven't had the stomach for it since—well, you know the story told. I'll be satisfied in resting over there.” He pointed in the general vicinity of the end of the field of grass. “Where the bastard bull can come and plaster my rocks with shite.” He chortled, then started coughing, needing a moment to gather himself. Then he sighed, looking at Harold. “Your Ma—did she ever tell you of my gift?”

Harold shook his head. “No. But I'm not wanting anything from you, other than your-”

“Not *that* kind, you *daft* fool! The gift of sight—the ken of things, unseen.”

Harold stared back, then shook his head. “No. She never has.”

His grandfather shrugged. “Your Ma—she's a feisty lass, at times. Suits her, being with a man who's strong enough to abide it, without losing sight of her spirit. Her *Scott* spirit.” He stared at Harold, his eyes rheumy with age. “She inherited most of my stubbornness, along with all my backbone and grit. And she'll end up with the manor house and lands, along with this place, belonging to her Ma. Handed from mother to daughter of the Scott clan from as far back as any can recall.”

He paused, drawing in a breath, then spitting on the ground. “The gift I'm speaking of is one of visions, seen clear. Where I'm not standing on the ground, but in a hover in the air, seeing all—with my

knowing what needs doing—most times. A gift *you* have as well, based on what your mother shared in visits made over the past few years. Passed on to you through her, along with the others mentioned. The stubbornness and—”

He started coughing, raising his hand, stopping Harold from reaching out as he placed a square of linen to his mouth, tinged with blood when he removed it. “You know what I mean. And you’ve a good measure of your Da mixed in too, much as it pains me to admit it. Hidden away somewhere inside ya, in how you measure things with care, balancing all sides against the middle.”

Harold held his thoughts, waiting for the old man to finish. When his grandfather remained silent, he dared a reply. “Thought you—were not *enamored* with my father.”

“Is that your high and mighty education speaking?”

Harold grinned. “Thought you hated my father.”

“Did—and still *do*. For his being English. Not for how he's always loved my wee lassie, much as any man ever could, and in having gifted me two fine grandsons. Nae, I’ve nothing but respect for him in doing that.” The old man sighed. “I just couldn’t see past the English side of things, seeing’s how they—well, we've had talk enow of all that. Let us leave it where it lies. You have the truth of it from me. Do with it what you will.”

“Thank you, Gran-”

“Not finished yet, lad. I need to bring you back ‘round to the matter of the gift. Need you to know and to trust what I'm gonna tell ya.” He waited for a nod, then wiped his lips with the cloth. “You will need bring them here—yourself, with a bonny wife and children in hand. To protect them from what will be heading your way, should you stay to your path. You’ll need bring them here, then leave—wiping away your trail like I did for him as lies up yonder.” The old man motioned toward the heights. “It will be a parting made in sorrow, for I'm not knowing if you’ll be coming back. Your woman—she will need be bound tight to our kin, who will shelter her, making certain she and your children thrive.”

Harold kept his lips pressed tight, sensing the same wash of energy move through him as earlier, when leaning against the crypt.

“Do you hear me, lad?”

Harold hung his head, his voice a whisper. “I will be forced to—leave them behind?”

“Aye. No choice for the man you became as soon as you stepped foot into lands across the ocean, setting yourself on your path. No way off it now, yourself on the journey you were born to the making of.” The wrinkled-face seer smiled, his thin lips widening, a twinkle in his eyes. “So—raise your head and face it like a true grandson of mine, and not some weak-kneed—”

“Low-lander.” Harold looked up, knowing how much he’d miss his Grad Da, aware he’d never see him standing upright again. The old man’s grin spread, his light-blue eyes catching and holding a beam of sunlight, piercing the thin clouds racing by overhead.

“Aye, laddie. Like one of those poor bastards—living down below.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Bristol, Late Summer, 1760

The knock on the door of the inn he was staying at caught Harold in the middle of his morning shave. He hesitated to answer it, thinking it was the middle-aged maid returning again, assigned to the care of his room at the inn during his stay.

He crossed the floor, ready to turn her away with a shake of his head before she could start in about how a man with his reputation should be married, offering to introduce him to several young ladies of her acquaintance, all women of high moral standards. Each time she'd tried to corner him, he'd managing to side-step the repeated offer without cause of too much vexation: his need for female energy met with frequent visits to his uncle's estate just outside the city of Bristol, enjoying the company of his aunt and their three young daughters, the eldest one just coming of age.

When he opened the door, Harold stepped back in surprise, seeing Nathan standing there, his thick hand raised to knock again. The shorter man was sporting an oversized mustache perched above his upper lip, along with the beginnings of a thick beard.

"Colonel *Knutt*! I've finally managed to track you down. A heroic task—with you having dropped out of the social scene, shortly after we last shared a meal."

"Nathan." Harold flashed a warm smile, though the expression in his eyes remained wary. "A surprise. Both your arrival at my door, as well as the—hirsute display on your chin and upper lip." He paused, a wide grin spreading across his face. "Worn as a disguise—no doubt to keep you safe from a jealous husband. Or perhaps a spurned lover?"

Nathan grinned. "Is naught but an affectation—though I will admit one grown in support of my pursuit of a lady with an eye for the like. And yes, it does offer me some small measure of disinterest by



keen-eyed observers stationed at the docks in Bristol, as well as many others, scattered throughout the realm.”

Harold went back to his depilatory efforts, using a straight-edged razor to remove all traces of facial hair, listening with half-an-ear as Nathan regaled him with the latest in gossip as if they had parted company only yesterday. Once Harold wiped the remnants of lather from his skin and finished buttoning up a clean shirt, the publisher got to the point, shifting verbal directions with practiced ease.

“I find myself in need of your services, paid for handsomely, of course. Though you do not seem to be in any hurry to spend your well-deserved allowance from our good King George.” Nathan paused. “I understand you have not yet found a property to your liking in the countryside, hereabouts. Perhaps you are considering a return to the colonies? Philadelphia is a *prime* place for investment. I know several men dealing in properties who would—”

“Services?” Harold focused his eyes on Nathan’s, his expression tightening.

Nathan didn’t blink, a speech already prepared with the fuse lit. “A meeting, needing but half a day—or perhaps a full day of your esteemed presence required—at the most.” He nodded with a satisfied look, as if having presented Harold the opportunity of a lifetime, a beaming smile on his wide-checked face, although Harold noted a glint of something harder hidden in the corners of his dark eyes.

“With whom—and to what end?”

“Men. Friends of mine.” Nathan hesitated. “Some of them, at least. Others—less so, although of like mind and similar vocation. Gazetteers all, the term they prefer.” He stopped, taking in a breath, stroking a finger along the line of his moustache.

“The purpose, Nathan? And try to anticipate my next question, helping to reduce the ebb and slow flow of your getting to the point.”

“Yes. The sooner we’re finished, the more time allowed for dinner and drinks. I quite agree, Colonel.”

Harold sighed. “It’s Harold—to you, Nathan. As I stated countless times before and *during* our crossing of the Atlantic together.”

“Harold.” Nathan narrowed his eyes, considering for a moment before reaching up to remove his powdered wig: the jovial tone of his

voice let slip away as he relaxed into a slouch. "I sometimes forget the man you are at heart, my friend—seeing you as the young officer who served with such distinction in the war. There being too few like you in number, I fear, posed against the relentless tide of men like me—who are far too common. I would do well to remember that, treating you with respect deserved due to your service offered—and sacrifices borne."

"I'm near to tears, Nathan. Please—do get to your point."

"The coalition I belong too, made up of numerous men involved in informational exchange on all sides of political and—moral considerations, wish to enlist your name and reputation in—" Nathan raised one hand, wig clutched in his thick fingers, staying Harold's shake of head in instant rebuke of the offer, half-made. "Please, Harold—if I might be allowed to finish, if only to get the sour taste of this vile invitation I've been tasked to make out of my mouth." Harold leaned back, arms crossed on his chest, waiting as Nathan regathered himself. "To enlist your name and associated reputation in helping to establish a momentum of public opinion designed to reduce the increase of tensions now that our King and—misguided heads of commerce have begun tightening the screws, demanding full remittance of the funds expended in securing lands west of the colonies for the empire."

Harold gazed at Nathan. "That is—truly amazing."

"I thought you might appreciate my presentation, knowing how you feel about such matters. Of mutual interest to us all, based on our conversations while at sea."

Harold shook his head, arms still crossed on his chest. "Not at the message, Nathan. I'm in awe that you were able to get it out with but a single breath."

Nathan lips formed into a pout, his hand dropping to his side, the wig dangling from his fingers. "You do not agree—as to the validity of the cause?"

Harold shook his head, going over to the curtained window, looking down, watching people passing below. "It is a *three-legged* stool in balance, not two."

“You fear the French will reapply themselves, forcing themselves back into the fray? They are as bankrupt as is the Crown—and short of warm bodies to absorb lead propelled by powder that no one has monies enough left in their royal coffers to buy.”

“*Native* lands, Nathan, as I have always made mention of. There needs to be a nation formed of tribal states, if you will—left in control of their natural borders throughout the entire watershed of the Ohio Basin, to north and south.”

Nathan frowned, shaking his head. “You would still propose ceding them control of the river system connecting the territories of New France in the south to those in the north. From head to tail, as it were.”

“Protecting our interests, by providing guarantee of theirs. Promises made and kept, this time.”

Nathan went over and looked at the bed, glancing at Harold who nodded. Sitting down, he rubbed his bald pate, then placed his fingers on his chin, stroking his upper lip. Harold finished dressing then looked over at Nathan, watching as the other man working through the benefits and potential drawbacks of his plan.

“It is damnably simple, brilliant in design. And—unworkable in the world we woke into this morn, and will, with God’s grace, go to sleep in later tonight, or in the early hours of tomorrow, depending on how the evening plays out.”

Harold nodded. “I concede it will be a difficult proposition to put forth, hoping to get a fair hearing—but it is the proper path to take and will provide far more benefits than—”

“I have worked it out, Harold—in concept.” Nathan pursed his lips. “I’m not as simple minded as I pretend to be.”

Harold smiled. “Have never thought that of you, my friend.”

Nathan tightened his expression. “It stresses me to no end in knowing I have put my small fortune and life at risk in attempting to manipulate the opinions of powerful men, hoping to align them with the—least unfavorable elements of your plan. Though I will say it again—it is not workable. Your Indian—sorry, your native friend, the intrepid A’neewa, will most likely be left to suffer, along with her people. As too the colonists—once their fruitless rebellion begins.”

Harold sighed. "You see no hope of avoiding it?"

Nathan shook his head. "Not unless you—" He paused, giving Harold a cold stare. "Not unless you are prepared to throw yourself and your considerable reputation into the mix, seeking a political position from which to pontificate, under guise of support for King and Country, with swivel made to fair treatment of our colonies—and the native peoples—once you are firmly ensconced. Then, and only then—can the public's opinion be made to follow such a fanciful diversion—if properly framed by pamphleteers in unison on both sides of the coin in play. A bit of bread and circuses for the mob, as it were."

Harold shook his head. "Again, your ability to orate without stopping to draw breath beguiles the mind." He sighed, then stepped over and placed a hand on his friend's thick shoulder. "I appreciate your efforts made on my behalf—but I will not seek a position in government. There must be another way. Perhaps if I speak with those who are resistant to—"

Nathan tightened his stare. "I had not thought you simple, Harold. There is no other choice. None. Not if you want this idea of yours to survive to birth and—hopefully—beyond."

Harold looked at Nathan. "You think it could work?"

Nathan smiled, shaking his head. "No. But watching you turn yourself inside out trying to maintain a smile when amongst the wolves, knowing you are tempted to reach out and snap their necks between your able fingers—it might, just might be worth the effort and risk on my part to support you." Nathan bounced up off the bed, resetting his wig, his eyes blazing with new ideas.

"As well mine." Harold's voice was soft.

"What's that?" Nathan glanced over, having gone over to stand in front of the mirror. "Oh, yes. Of course. Your risk, too. Quite right." He finished a final readjustment to his wig, gave a slow caress to his moustache, then turned and faced Harold. "So—we are now on to good food, strong drink—and the company of wanton women?"

"The first two, agreed, now you've managed to reset the dead animal upon your head, and made an attempt at taming the other, perched on your upper lip."



“I can help you to find her. It is what we—my companions and I—what we do.” Nathan spooned pudding into his mouth, followed by a large bite of cake, closing his eyes as he swallowed, savoring the mix of flavors. “And, once the lady you seek is found—you will file papers for the seat left vacant in the House of Commons.”

Harold pulled back slightly, sitting across from Nathan at an out of the way table, watching as he consumed the last course of an expansive meal. “You are—that certain of finding her?” He paused. “Making sure it is done without a direct approach? I will not have her bothered, if found.”

Nathan raised one hand, eyeing a dribble of pudding dangling from the tip of one finger. “If she is in England proper, then she is as good as yours.” He dipped his finger into his mouth, noting the flare of light in Harold's eyes. “To be approached by you alone, Harold—with no opinion offered as to the nature of your designs, if any, toward the lady in question.” Nathan paused. “Her name?” Then he placed another forkful of cake in his mouth as he waited for Harold's response.

Harold sighed, his hands clenched on top of the dining room table. “I have only her *first* name. The rest—unknown. Her last name was Scott at birth, though I believe it may have been changed when she turned seven years of age.” He paused, knowing the task of locating one person among countless thousands would most likely not succeed. “She would be in her early twenties by now.”

He watched as Nathan's eyes widened slightly, anxious to find Robert's daughter so he could present the letter written to her. To let her know how her father, at the end of each day, would bring the cameo bearing her likeness into the firelight, his thumb caressing her image. “I see by your reaction it will prove to be an impossible task.”

Nathan, thrust out his hand, taking Harold's. “It is—a difficult task put before me, but not *impossible*, my friend. And once the lady—Lady Sinclair's whereabouts have been discovered, I will provide the documentation needed for you to secure election to the open seat. Then each of us will do all we are capable of in support of the rights of the many—over the inherent power of the few.”



The public house was crowded with people moving in and out, several large cargo ships having just arrived from the American colonies, laden with goods. Merchants were stopping by for a tankard of liquid refreshment, heads bent, scanning ship manifests to compare goods on hand against current prices, trying their best to accurately judge which way the numbers might go. Then leaving after a round or two, a few of the more influential among them occasionally invited to enter a private room, held in reserve by a person of high birth, though not ennobled.

The needs of those invited in were seen to by the owner of the house, a greasy man with narrow forehead, dark eyes and nervous hands constantly wiping his apron as if trying to remove an invisible stain. He was currently standing in a restless hover at the entrance of the room, bowing to a corpulent man sitting at the head of a large table. The owner kept nodding his head, anxious to accommodate the other's every request, causing the obese man to frown, finding the nervous mannerisms of the sweaty man grating, to a fault.

His name was Alfred, Earl of Camborne, a prominent member of the House of Lords. He sniffed, then lifted the tip of one finger, signaling the owner to approach, lowering it as the man drew near, halting him in his tracks. "My friend and I will have another bottle—of the same label, though a year older—assuming you will have it on hand."

The thin man bowed his way out of the room, then broke into a run for the cellar, apron in flutter, scurrying away as if a rat chased by a dog. He had a wide range of vintages tucked below, specific to the large man's taste. The Earl was a frequent visitor, often accompanied by other titled men and others whose identities were unknown. Silent men, the scent of power hanging in the air as they entered the private room.

His hands trembled as he reached for a bottle, checking the label, sighing with relief. Nervous each time the Earl convened a meeting, the group he belonged to rumored to be in league with the seedy underbelly of London, but a few leagues away. He left the cellar, nodding his head at his wife as he entered the kitchen and opened the

bottle to breathe. Her harsh-toned voice berated him as he passed by, reminding him to present the bill at the end of the meal. A considerable debt having been accrued over the past few meetings, its payment long overdue.

Nathan was tense, having watched the sorry affair play out, witness to it many times before, though always from the other side of the door. Made to maintain a station suited to his lowly profession at a table in the great room without. On call as needed. Bidden entry now. Invited to sit at the same table where men of quiet wealth usually sat in powdered wigs with heavily bejeweled fingers alongside others in dark clothing with sullen pose. All with purses hanging from their belts, perfectly safe to wander the streets near the docks where and as they wished, under the eyes of unnamed men. Equally serious in posture and purpose, their tools of choice honed to a razors edge. A deadly presence that assured the usual collection of cut-throats, pick-a-purse waifs, and bully boys would stay tucked away in the shadows.

“The owner is an—interesting sort.”

Alfred pursed his lips as he surveyed the table. “He suits me, having everything near to hand required to satisfy my—well, my *every* need.” Picking up a cloth napkin, he dabbed his thick lips. Puffy, a dusky-rose in color, much too full to be considered masculine, though too thin to fit a more feminine describe. Left somewhere in between, as too his reputation for being entertained by young children, girl or boy.

The over-stuffed man reached for a small, silver bell, shaking it. The clear notes provided for an immediate arrival of a large platter filled with fresh rolls, selections of thinly sliced meats, and an assortment of cheeses. Small cups containing various sauces were arranged around its edge, there for the dipping of bread. The heavy platter was placed on one end of the table by a thick bodied woman with strong arms.

Alfred waving a finger in a small circle, sending her away, watching as she walked over to the door with a measured pace, then hesitated for a moment before pulling it closed behind her, causing Alfred's eyes to narrow. “His wife, on the other hand—is a burden to my emotions.”

Nathan was feeling discomfited, unable to relax in the presence of the Earl, with just the two of them in attendance, his first time invited in and told to sit down. “You wanted to discuss—” He clamped his lips shut, lowering his eyes, noting the other man's instant look of reproach.

“My friend—you have only just *now* arrived on this side of things. Are you in such a hurry to a return to your usual position—on the *other* side of the door?” Alfred sniffed, lifting one hand, considering the perfect sheen of his polished nails. “And with your signature barely dry on the parchment.”

“My apologies—in having overstepped. Was driven by my eagerness to reveal recent success, prompting the—” Nathan paused, wondering if he would earn another rebuke, the Earl allowing the slightest of a nod, indicating he should continue. “He has agreed to do it.”

The other man raised an eyebrow. “What leverage did you apply to compel our intrepid young warrior of note to re-enter the fray? Given—as I was led to understand by your *personal* assessment—he would not be easily persuaded to do?”

“A trivial matter—of no real import. He wanted to locate a child in order to present a letter written by her father, deceased in action during the recent conflict in the colonies. A man who was a—mentor to him.” Nathan centered his expression, his words tossed out with a causal tone. “I agreed to help him, of course. Putting it to members of my fellow group of pamphleteers, on *this* side of the watery divide, to seek said child forthwith.”

Alfred half-closed his eyes, pupils squeezed from sight behind fat-thickened lids, a slim gleam of satisfaction barely able to shine through. He reached out, piling cheese and meat onto a sliver of bread, dipping it into one of the bowls of sauce, holding it there for a moment, waiting for the liquid to be fully absorbed, then quickly folding it into his mouth. Not a single drop was allowed to fall, keeping the surface of his immaculate silk jacket unstained.

Nathan joined him, refusing a river of cold sweat to rise from beneath the edge of his wig, denying it access to his forehead. His stomach lurched, knowing he'd told but half the truth, having chosen



to keep any further information close to hand. The details of his conversation with Harold to remain hidden for now. Dangerous, if he were caught out in an attempt to deceive. Necessary, in order to placate what remained of his weakening morals, and a growing attachment to the young war hero, upon hearing the first name of Lord Haversham's adopted daughter fall from Harold's lips.



“I have only her *first* name. Sinclair. The rest—unknown. Her last name was Scott, at birth, though I believe it may have been changed when she turned seven years of age.”

“Master Sergeant Robert Scott?” When Harold nodded, Nathan had given him a considered look. “Yes. I set his name in type myself, many times, over the past few years. His notoriety in rise alongside your own. A *great* loss, indeed. A man of distinction and dear friend to you. I can see it reflected in your eyes.” Nathan had let his voice continue to roam unattended as he covered his startled reaction to hearing the name Sinclair used as a proper name. More common as a surname. Rarer still when applied to a woman of her purported age, with only one person coming to mind it could belong to. A young heiress, adopted daughter to Lord Haversham, inheriting the vast estate of the deceased former member of the House of Lords. Herself well known to high society, though she'd never seemed inclined to enter into it

A sweet enough young rose, Nathan thought, waiting to be plucked by a daring hand, though with a reputation earned of having sharp thorns and a cutting wit. Honed to perfection by her adoptive father, a man known for his penetrative vision and tenacious will. Traits no doubt he'd passed down to her, along with his immeasurable wealth and holdings.

“It might take some time. So—you will need be patient. In the meanwhile, we shall begin preparing you for what is to come, once we've announced your political ambitions to the public. A man will need to be assigned you as—an advisor, helping to guide you through the somewhat tangled and tiresome process.”

“How long?” Harold leaned forward, his hands clenched in his lap.

“Within the week, I'd say. I have several people in mind. Good men—of *impeccable* backgrounds.”

“The *girl*, Nathan.” Harold's eyes reflected the tense tone of his voice. “How long to *find* her?”

Nathan stared at him, the wheels of his ever-active mind in turn, imagining their pairing should biology provide for it. Two like minds, each with a callous disposition when it came to meaningless titles, ignoring the use of leverage coming along with them. He shuddered, considering the forces about to be released with two such naive and powerful innocents, in their own ways, tossed into a stockyard filled with stoic-faced, extremely dangerous men. Shadowy giants, striding the globe in grasp of everything lying everywhere. Their world a playground, adorned with kings, armies, and heads of commerce, seen as pieces to be moved about the board. “Soon, Harold. I promise you. *Soon.*”



The owner returned with slip of paper dangling from his fingers. The cost of their meal and libations were marked upon it in a scrawled hand. Alfred did not bother looking at it, using the tip of a fingernail to dislodge a small sliver of meat, swallowing it, then burping. He sighed, reaching down to pat his plump belly, the material covering it stretched tight, without a single wrinkle to be seen.

“Deliver it to my manor. Leave it with my steward. In the meantime—I require something *more*. A sweet dessert, I think.”

“We have fresh pastries, from a shoppe just down the road. An assortment of—”

“A more *pleasing* type of dessert. One with a warm, compressive texture.” Alfred noted the hesitant look on the owner's face. He sighed once more, heavily. “One of your *daughters*. The middle one, this time. See she is washed and that her hands are well scrubbed.” He paused. “As well, her mouth. And do have her chew a sprig of mint, if you've any about.”

He looked over at Nathan, eyebrows raised in question. Nathan shook his head, waiting for Alfred's nod of dismissal. "And a small capon. Whole, left uncut." The other man nodded, his hands performing their usual dance on his apron. Alfred hardened his tone. "*Now*. And take the paper with you, adding to it the fee for the—additional service. And do not return until summoned by the bell."

Alfred sighed, stretching, his pudgy arms outthrust like a child looking for a hug. He nattered on for a while, discussing items of gossip, asking Nathan his opinion as to their validity. Nathan responded with one eye on the door, standing up and excusing himself as it started to open.

As he moved toward the doorway, his hands clasped in front, Nathan considering the step he'd recently taken to elevate his position with the secretive group. A solemn vow given, his blood signature affixed to a document. The choice made, moving him further into the bowels of a world-wide cabal, left trying to square his own ambitions, fueled by greed and lust for true power, against a genuine concern for the young war hero, whose toe would soon be caught in the grip of an implacable force. As was his own.

Nathan neared the doorway, moving aside as a small girl stepped through, no more than eight years of age to his discerning eye. She clenched the knob of the heavy door, looking up at him as he moved past. Once through the opening, he turned around, watching as she slowly closed the door, a sad look on her face, tearing his heart in two.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Bristol, Autumn, 1760

The address on the paper in Harold's hand matched that of a large building standing in the heart of Bath. His journey there had been made by coach from Bristol, the one-hundred furlongs covered in less than half a day. The establishment appeared to be a place of public residence, with a bustle of people passing in and out through a large front door, left in a constant swing on thick metal hinges.

Harold's legs were trembling, as if he were once again facing the advance of white-garbed troops coming on in a steady march across a field of battle. He steeled himself, his hand raised, reaching for the metal knocker. The door fell open before he could grasp it, a young woman's face framed by dark curls standing before him, her silver-gray eyes widening in surprise as he tried to pull back, the knuckles of his fingers brushing against a thick brocade in the center of her chest, leaving them both in a moment of shocked pause until the ringing of a church bell announced the mid-day hour had just arrived, breaking the spell.

Harold felt the blood drain from his face, mortified at having almost landed an unintended blow. The young lady, one hand raised, clutching at her chest, stared back, looking resplendent in a dark green dress with charcoal colored trim.

"I apologize—for my having—for having *startled* you, Miss. I only meant to—to announce myself." Harold bowed his head slightly, swallowing his nervousness. "I am Harold Knutt, of Bristol."

"It is of no concern, sir." The woman smiled, her balance regained. "Tis a coincidence of timing—and nothing more." She stepped back slightly, then raised her hand. "I am Lady Sinclair Haversham, of—*many* places. One of them here, for this day."

Harold eyes widened slightly as he took her hand, releasing it with regret, her skin warm to the touch. He bowed his head. "My pleasure, Lady Sinclair Haversham of many places. Including here—for this day."

Sinclair placed her hand on the edge of doorway and stepped back, inviting Harold to move inside. The building entrance led into a wide hallway with doors on either side, small groups of people moving between them, a wash of scattered voices spilling along both sides. "You are seeking someone, Mister—" Sinclair paused, sudden awareness dawning on her narrow face. "*Colonel* Harold Knutt?"

Harold flushed, wishing to have met as strangers. "I am—though now retired. No longer in active service."

"You fought in the western regions of Pennsylvania colony. Against the French." Sinclair paused, considering him for a long moment, leaving Harold to press ahead.

"I had the great honor of serving alongside the man who was your father, my Lady. Sergeant Major Scott—Robert Scott—killed while doing his duty. The finest soldier—the finest *man* I have ever known."

Sinclair angled her head, the curls of her long hair shivering down the front of her dress. "You have come here then to make yourself known to me. To present your condolences, though there is little need of it. My father has always been but a faint memory, left to fade away." She blushed. "I apologize, Colonel—Harold Knutt. I'm afraid you've made the journey here in vain, wishing to offer—"

Sinclair stopped, her eyebrows raised, a look of concern coming over her delicate features. "How—*how* were you able to—"

"I have *friends*, or more accurately, *acquaintances*—able to locate—"

"You had people—*hunt* me down?" Sinclair's eyes narrowed in anger as she stepped back, starting to shut the heavy door in his face.

"Only so I could give you *this!*" Harold shoved an envelope with his letter inside toward her, almost hitting her in the chest again. He withdrew his hand, his face a match in color to her own.

"Our Lady—*Miss* Sinclair has a suitor, *girlies!*" A large-bosomed woman of middle age waddled down the corridor, the rasping croak

of her voice one a crow would give both its wings to own. She shoved past Sinclair, presenting her hand, eyes locked on Harold's, waiting for a kiss on her dimpled knuckles.

Harold bowed his head and complied, then straightened up, noting Sinclair's softened posture, though her cheeks were still flushed. His heart skipped several beats as he took in the image of her in full, unable to look away until the large woman nodded, reaching for his arm.

"Do come inside more *fully*, Mister—?"

Harold started to make his introduction, stopped by Sinclair as she took him by the hand and pulled him around the wide girth of the grinning woman, guiding him down the hallway, ushering him into a small side room. She closed the door and leaned against it, hands at her side, preventing the other woman from following them in. "He's only a *messenger*, Millie—not here as a *guest*."

The older woman made her verbal protestations known from the opposite side of the door, then wandered off on a new adventure, leaving the two of them staring at each other. Sinclair was the first to smile. "It is as if a *farce*, penned by the great Bard himself."

"I humbly beg your pardon, Lady Sinclair Haversham—for my poor choice in approach. I should have used an intermediary to—"

"I should very much like to see that, Colonel Knutt. A *humble* begging, as it were, from an officer—a *famous* officer at that. Please, sir—you have the floor."

Harold reached up, rubbing the side of his head, a lock of hair slipping free from the leather tie fastened about his thick ponytail. He started to tuck it back in, failing miserably, more spilling free until the twist of black leather gave up, falling to the wooden floor.

Sinclair reached down, retrieving it, allowing Harold a view of the top of her full breasts as she did so. He averted his eyes, the image stirring him, adding to his sense of discomfort when his mentor's visage came into his mind's eye, wearing a dark scowl. Sinclair touched him on his shoulder, turning him about. "Let me help to gather it up."

She had things put right in a flash of thin hands, then touched his shoulder, encouraging him to turn back around. She gently touched

his cheek before stepping back. Harold bowed, having regained a small measure of composure, settling into a practiced display of military courtesy shown officers of higher rank.

“I *humbly* beg your pardon, Lady Sinclair Haversham—for my poor manners in choosing to contact you directly to present a letter your father asked me to write, then deliver to you on his behalf. His final request—as it were.”

“A *Colonel*—attending to a Sergeant Major's request—as a *personal* favor. Has the *staid* English military hierarchy reversed itself over in the colonies? Perhaps it is due to the influence of the word *independence* being bandied about, by criers of news in the street? Publications made of impassioned speeches by men of notoriety, circulated amongst a restless citizenry, rumors spreading to this side of the world calling for rebellion against the crown.”

Harold shook his head. “I am only here as a favor sworn between two men, Lady Sinclair—”

“Please, Mister Knutt. Or Harold, if you’ll allow me the use of a—less formal address. I prefer Sinclair, since we are alone, with such nonsense as titles unnecessary here. Out of sight—*and* earshot.”

Harold considered a moment, then nodded, his voice soft. “As you wish. Sinclair.” He lowered his voice, looking down as he continued. “Your father, Robert—he was as close to me as my own. Closer, perhaps, in the bond of trust formed between those who saved each other’s lives on—” Harold stopped, clenching his jaw. “I apologize again—Sinclair.”

She stepped back and motioned toward a small settee in front of a large window in one corner of the room. “We will dispense with formality, seeing you are a man of good reputation, known throughout England as the Red Fox.” She paused, seeing a look on Harold’s face of genuine pain. “Please, Harold.” Taking his hand, she led him across the room. “Sit by the window and we will start over—each of us allowed a *fresh* start.”

Once they were seated, Sinclair reached out, touching Harold on his wrist. “My father asked you to do him a favor, and you have complied—willingly I take it, from your description of the relationship you shared with him.”

“Yes, very much so. I was beyond honored to provide your father my support, done as a last favor before he—I mean to say—” Harold hesitated, looking directly into Sinclair’s eyes. “Though you’ve made a claim of there being no closeness to exist between you—I find myself reluctant to tell it to you true, lest I disturb your sensibilities.”

“The *truth* is all I require from or ask of you.” Sinclair leaned back, the diffuse light through the window highlighting her smooth skin. “I assure you I am not made of glass. Your words, as plainspoken as you would make them—will not break me.”

“Your father was pinned through by an arrow from a native ally of the French. Passing from his lower back into his upper chest, puncturing his lung. Dying—over the course of a half-day, in order that I might live. Not that it would have mattered in the end, having hastened his own end in the hope of allowing me an opportunity to elude capture and, what seemed certain at the time, certain death.”

Sinclair waited, appearing unaffected, her touch on his wrist encouraging him to continue. Harold finished describing the details of what had occurred that day, ending with them having reached the sentinel oak, the story pouring out as if water from a spring-fed pool. When he finished, Sinclair reached out and touched the letter in his hand.

“These—are *his* words? His—*final* thoughts?”

Harold nodded. “Blended with a few of mine, at his request. Reading them back to him as he labored to breathe. They—” He hesitated, looking away, a sea of memories rising within, needing a moment to allow them to settle. “They seemed to satisfy him, knowing they were an accurate reflection of the feelings carried for you in his heart.”

He offered her the pages, but Sinclair placed her fingers around his and gently squeezed. “They are *his* words—and *yours*. I would hear them read aloud if you are—willing to oblige.”

Harold gave her a look that revealed a reluctance to agree, Sinclair aware she was asking more from him emotionally than he might wish to reveal in mixed company. She was about to withdraw her request, when Harold started to speak, without needing to look at the pages



torn from his journal, held in his trembling hand. While he did, tears fell from his cheeks, staining them as Sinclair sighed, feeling his pain.

When he reached the end of her father's final chapter, he turned and looked away, without adding any further details as to what had happened that day, though Sinclair sensed there was more to the story, left hovering in the shadows of his soft-edged words.

"I thank you, Harold—for all you did on my father's behalf. And just *now*, for me—someone who is but a *stranger* to you."

"No, Sinclair." He turned and looked at her. "You have *never* been a stranger. Not to me, with your father sharing *every* memory, every feeling *felt* for you, throughout our time together."

"Why you were able to write—what is in there." Sinclair paused. "At the beginning of the letter, and again—at the end."

Harold nodded, folding the pages, placing them beside him. "I came to know you as if part of my own family—as is the way with soldiers huddled around campfires, memories of home shared late into the night. We all have need to speak of the world we've left behind—in order to remind ourselves there is a purpose to the insanity of conflict, based on civilized rules. As if death has any concern as to the fair treatment of men standing shoulder pressed to shoulder, in line. The end of a person's life balanced on the toss of the die. As some would call it, of bad luck, fate, or—"

"Destiny?" Sinclair leaned forward, her eyes on Harold's.

"Yes. The way I see it to be. Your father—held strong feelings for you that only increased the longer between his last meeting with you—unto the day he passed."

Sinclair leaned forward. "I wish I could *return* those feelings, Harold. Truly—I *do*. But—I have no memories of him—or if I do, they are buried beneath all the things my—" Sinclair held her tongue, hands pulled into her lap, leaving her thoughts unsaid.

Harold gave her a considered gaze, then leaned back slightly, lowering his voice. "If I may—the necklace you wear about your neck—threaded through a silver locket—with a cameo of your likeness inside?"

Sinclair's eyes widened in surprise, her fingers going to the slight bulge beneath the cloth of her dress. "How—how could you possibly *know* that? It was a present—from my mother."

"It was a gift of *love*—from your father. An exact match to the one he was holding when he released his final breath, his thumb gently caressing the worn lines of your face. Something done every morning and evening—before and after every battle, as if a talisman to protect him. To protect you both. Each day he survived bringing him one step closer to an eventual return to England. To find his daughter—hoping to see you once again."

Sinclair's beautiful eyes filled to overflowing with tears as she pulled the locket from beneath her bodice, pressing it open, her thumb resting on the carved image. "I—am *undone* by this news. I never knew. Never imagined he would—that he could—that such *feelings* might have existed within him. My mother—telling me—lying to me, over and again—saying that he'd abandoned us."

It was Harold's turn to touch her arm. "I mean no distress be caused you, in delivering those words. Nor would your father want you left feeling out of sorts by them."

Sinclair shook her head. "I asked for the truth—and you have delivered it nobly. I am appreciative of your willingness to share your feelings so openly. And so honestly. A trait not uncommon in men with warm hearts, as I had opportunity to see in my own *adopted* father—among others."

She straightened up. "I owe you an opportunity to meet anew. Not as a messenger fulfilling a sworn vow—but as someone sharing something of great importance. Memories of my father. Yours so clearly stated and wonderfully defined. Mine—hazed by time and distance, seen from a young child's perspective, tainted by lies told true." Sinclair gave Harold a warm smile. "So, if you are of a mind to do so, please return again when you are able, and we shall try this—once more."

Harold rose to his feet and took her hand, kissing the back of it gently, then turned toward the door. Sinclair's voice caught him as he reached it. "And do not delay in *doing* so, Colonel Knutt."

She waited until the door closed behind him, then stood up and looked at her reflection in the window, smoothing her hair. When she went to exit the room, Harold was standing there, hand poised as if to knock.

He stepped back, bowing his head. “Allow me to introduce myself, Lady Sinclair Haversham. I am Harold Knutt, at your service. Here to inquire if you would care to join me for a meal at the fine establishment across the street. Along with Miss Millie—should you require a chaperone.” The other woman stood behind Harold, in full beam, a crooked grin on her wide-cheeked face.

Sinclair smiled. “What took you so long, Colonel Knutt? I'm *quite* famished and would welcome the opportunity to remedy such. As to our lovely Miss Millie—she can go and *stuff* herself with *sausages* for all I care.”



The kitchen was a blend of the scent of fresh baked bread and the savory aroma of meat pies, stirring Harold's appetite. His stomach growled as he prowled the edges of the heated room, kept at bay from the still warm loaves by the rap of a wooden spoon across his knuckles.

Eira gave her son a practiced glare. “You'll be waiting on your Da, young man.”

“He'll be another ringing of the bells or more before we see him home.”

“Never-the-less, you'll be waiting 'til then.”

Harold came over, hands raised in surrender, circling his mother's age-thickened waist with his arms, dancing with her in a smooth swirl about the kitchen floor, his smile bright enough to light the room, without need of opening the windows, spilling the heat from the kitchen.

Eira removed his hands, standing back. “You're in fine fettle. No doubt due to the young lady you've been chasing after.”

Harold snagged up a small loaf, knowing it was meant for him, all crust and baked dark brown. His mother smiled as he bit into it,

recalling her two boys circling the large butcher's block as if a flock of crows, before descending on a field of ripened corn.

"What makes you—think such a—thing as that?" Harold finished a large mouthful of the warm bread, swallowing it down with swigs of cold tea.

"The sea of hoofprints made between here and wherever it is your frequent travels of late have taken you to." Eira shook her head. "Poor thing. Kept in a constant gallop, made to pay with sore hooves for your lack of patience—or restraint."

Harold grinned. "My experiences overseas taught me that when the moment presents itself, one must advance quickly—the advantage gained."

Eira gave her son a sharp look, her lips pressed into thin lines. "Are you planning on making a *conquest* of the young lady?"

Harold smiled, ignoring her concern. "My *aim* is to form a mutually agreeable alliance—once the swirl of the dust 'tween here and Bath has had a chance to settle."

"And what of her *parents*? Are they not concerned by your—*overt* and *vigorous* approach?"

"She is the daughter of my mentor, Robert. Adopted by another, who forged a deep filial bond with her. The two of them gone, along with her mother, though I am cloudy as to the details—dying of a flux, I think."

Eira's hands tightened on the front of the apron she had on. "Poor thing." She looked away, her voice softening as she stared at the loaves of bread on the kitchen island. "Is she of an age of majority—able to attend to her *own* affairs?"

"Reached it a year ago, Mother. But do not *flash* yourself. She is strong and independent in mind—and spirit. And is in no need of motherly concern as to—"

"You will take me *with* you, the next time you go." Eira hesitated. "By carriage. *Tomorrow*, I think." Then she nodded her head. "I'll take the rest of the bread and pies. Go—and see to the preparations."



“*Here?*” Eira stood on the stoop, alongside her son. “Living alone in a rooming house of—*public* abode? Poor thing. She should not be reduced to such a state as this, having suffered the loss of her entire family.”

Harold raised his eyebrows in exasperation, having been unable to dissuade his mother from her mission of mercy. “She not only *lives* here, Mother, but is the—”

“The *door*, son—if you can manage it.”

Harold reached to open it, Millie overflowing the entrance, her hands filled with a large basket, more than a match in size to the one he was carrying, brought along at his mother’s insistence.

“*Harold!* It’s so good to *see* you again. Just going out to deliver this food to the family you met, your last time here. Such *sweet* little things.” Millie paused, noting Harold’s mother. “And *who* have we here? Another soul in need of a warm bed and a *decent* meal?” She handed her basket to Harold, reaching with a firm arm, pulling his mother into the plump cushion of her massive chest. Sinclair arrived in the nick of time, performing an extraction, preventing potential asphyxiation.

“*Millie!* How many times have I—” Sinclair stepped back, registering the shocked look on the face of the woman standing at Harold’s side. “You—you must be Harold’s mother. He’s told me so much about you.” She reached out, taking Eira’s hand. “My name is Sinclair. Please—do come inside.”

Harold received a cutting glance from a pair of narrowed, light-gray eyes. He ducked his head, aware of the inevitable blame Sinclair would assign him for not having warned her in advance.



“More tea, Mrs. Knutt?” Sinclair poised a teapot above a cup resting on a small table in front of Harold’s mother.

“Thank you, Sinclair. And please—call me Eira.” Harold’s mother waited until Sinclair stepped back, then held the teacup to her nose, inhaling deeply. “It is a *wonderful* brew. A mix of leaves, I think.”

“Black and green varieties. Though a bit heavier on the green for today.”

“My husband—Richard—he prefers the black, due to its lower cost. While I am of the other persuasion.” Eira paused, a gentle smile on her lips. “Interesting, don’t you think, the choices made in selection of one’s favorite libation, occupation—or *host* of other things that catches their interest?”

Harold sipped his tea, listening as the two women made small talk, smiling, satisfied the impromptu meeting was working out to the benefit of his blossoming relationship with Sinclair. His mother cut him a sideways glance.

“Harold—you should have spoken to your father and I of your interest in—Miss Sinclair. We would have extended an invitation for her to come visit with us in Bristol.” Eira leaned forward, facing Sinclair and lowering her voice. “My son is not accustomed to social niceties, having had his nose buried in books over the greater part of his youth, including his years spent away at school, matriculating at Marischal. In Scotland.”

“I was not always with a nose in a book, Mother. I had *other* interests as well.” Harold tried to hide a sudden blush as the memory of his nose buried in the inviting bosom of the daughter of one of his instructors flashed through his mind.

Eira raised her eyebrows, taking a sip of her tea. “True. It must have slipped my mind—all the hours you spent playing with your little *dolls*.”

Harold’s face turned red. “They were *figurines*, Mother. Of *military* formations, used in studies made of tactics—”

Eira raised her hand, waving it in his direction, her eyes on Sinclair. “Be a dear, Harry—and fetch my shawl from the carriage. I seem to have forgotten it there.”

Harold looked from his mother to Sinclair, who returned a slight smile, one of her eyebrows cocked. “Of course, Mother. I’ll be right back.” As he made his way to the door, Eira called out. “And do go across the street and find some of this delightful tea to take back with us. I believe I saw a coffeehouse thereabouts.” Harold offered a grumbled reply, then left.

Once he was gone, Sinclair gave Eira a lukewarm smile. “You have questions—regarding my living in a place such as this. To the

point of considering if it is merely a front for an entirely *different* sort of establishment.”

Eira hesitated, uncertain as to her footing, the younger woman exuding an energy that bordered on serene, appearing not the least offended by the subtle jabs pointed her way. “I would *never* consider, let alone *suggest* such—”

Sinclair interrupted. “My mother was a woman of repute.” She took a sip of her tea, allowing the remark to hang in the air. “Not any of it *good*, mind you—with her going about the business of marrying the two of us into positions of wealth—many times over. Betrothing herself to a succession of good, kind-hearted men, deserving of a better fate than they received after taking her hand in matrimony. All but one left broken shells of their former selves, having been offered and gratefully accepting me as a loving daughter. Taken from them, along with a substantial amount of their monies when she left. My having been forced into the role of a Judas lamb—used to lead them to their emotional slaughter.”

Sinclair paused, gauging Eira’s reaction, the other woman’s face reflecting nothing back. “Until—when I was first coming of age, with my mother having clawed her way to the top rung of societies rigid ladder, she offered me up as daughter to a childless Lord. To be adopted as his heir.” She paused again, taking a sip of tea, Harold’s mother remaining silent. “Her plan worked—to a point, with me inheriting all. But *not* her. She was—outmaneuvered. Paid off and sent packing. Lord Habersham, a gentle and loving man who fought like a lion for what he believed in was like a—”

Sinclair stopped, her eyes glazed with unshed tears. “Like a *silver-maned* lion—advocating for the fair treatment of all, high born or low.” She stood up and went over to a cupboard, retrieving a glass bottle filled with amber liquid, and two glasses. “I was given *liberal* use of his fortune, before he passed. Using it to improve the lot of the community bordering his estate. Then was left having to fight tooth and fingernail for his estate after he was gone. But I succeeded in the end. A slew of legal maneuvers needed to acquire control of his wealth, helping to turn buildings such as this one into shelters for women in need of a helping hand. To provide for their education and

training for suitable vocations. Working with good-hearted women like my erstwhile friend and adopted Aunt Millie. Our doors always open to those able to meet and follow but *two* simple rules.

Eira leaned back, having reassessed the quality of the young woman standing on the opposite side of the table. “And those would be—?”

“No *lies* told—and *no* men, other than children—to be brought through the door. *Ever.*”

Eira stared into the cup of tea she was holding, enjoying the warmth seeping into her palms, easing a nagging ache. “And what of my son? Is he not a—*violation* of your second rule?”

Sinclair grinned, her eyes lighting up with delight. “*My house. My* rules—when it comes to *his* visits. Made in daylight, and of short duration. Our time together spent at the local university, perusing leather bound books filled with truths, half-truths—misrepresentations and, as my good father always called them—*damnable* lies. Your son and I kept busy searching out the former, as if looking for pearls hidden in a sea of—as I’ve heard on occasion, muttered between your son’s clenched teeth—the *shite* of a *braw* bull!”

Harold came rushing through the door with Eira's shawl. He dropped it into her lap, placing a packet of black tea on the table beside her. Then he eyed both women, trying to gauge their mood.

“Thank you, son.” Eira paused. “But was the *green* tea I asked for—were they not able to provide it?” Her voice betrayed not one hint as to the direction of the emotional wind in the room, leaving Harold to sigh heavily, wishing he'd not displayed his improved mood in front of her the previous day. He exited the room again, shoulders sagging. Once he was gone, Eira looked at Sinclair, then placed her tea cup on the table.

“That looks to be a bottle of *Agua Vitae*. Is the source Irish—or Scottish?”

Sinclair gave her a sly smile. “*Why, Scottish* of course—like your own heritage. Your son having overfilled my ears with your family’s history.”

Eira nodded. “Would that he had done the same for *me*, in return. Though I am not disappointed in having learned your story—first



hand.” Sinclair nodded, then un-stoppered the bottle, pouring a healthy amount into each glass, knowing she would gladly accept Harold's mother's invitation to visit, once offered.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Bristol, Early Autumn, 1760

Harold's father pulled on the reins of his horse. It was a large, thick bodied black stallion with silver mane and tail. It came to a stop, pawing at the ground, wanting to run, its breath fogging the morning air as its teeth gnawed at the bit. "He needs the exercise—but I'm not able to sit the saddle long enough to satisfy the large beastie." Richard looked over at his son. "Are you willing to do the honor?"

Harold dismounted from his mare, then helped his father do the same. He leaping into the saddle of the black, gathering the reins and turning it into the field of his new home, a small manor a handful of furlongs from that of his uncle's. He looked back, smiling at Thomas, a shorter version of his father, slim in build though age was thickening his waist due to a lack of activity in the out-of-doors. "Are you up for a race, Uncle Thomas?"

The other man shook his head. "No. I'm in agreement with your father. You go chase fame and glory, while we rest here—swapping comments on how fine a rider you are—or *think* yourself to be."

Harold was off in a blur, his heels pressed against the side of the stallion. He rose out of the saddle, leaning forward, hands loose on the reins. He called out, urging the steed into a full gallop, its tail straight out, neck stretched ahead with flared nostrils as the animal and rider raced away.

"His form is—*perfect!*" Thomas shook his head. "Wasted in the infantry. The Calvary—now *that's* where he would have shined."

Richard shrugged, rubbing at his lower abdomen, trying to ease a lingering ache. "He did well enough, ground-bound and out in front. Different war there, Thomas. Different terrain. A different type of enemy, as well."

“True. And I meant no diminishment of Harold’s many victories, Richard. His accomplishments, if only half of what’s been written about them is true—*remarkable*. You should be very proud.”

Richard frowned. “Prouder—if I’d been able to stop him from joining up.”

Thomas stared at his older brother. “You—cannot *mean* that.”

“I can and *do*.” Richard looked at his brother, seeing the shadow of Jackson lurking in his feature, the two men as closely knit as had been their two sons. “Would have done so many things differently, in looking back. Been less—”

“Stubborn? Hard-headed? Irascible? Ignorant to their—”

Richard cut him off with a grin. “I’m too lame to gallop the steed this day, brother. Not yet too lame to give you a sound *thrashing*.”

Thomas nodded. “I do see the path you’re left to walk, Richard. Our Harry is *ripe* with reputation and ready for the plucking, with others no doubt queuing up to use him to their own ends. But that is through no fault of yours. Harry is—has always been his own man, from early on. Left standing slightly apart from the rest of us—other than his dear mother.” He paused, his eyes tracking Harold and the stallion as they slipped in and out of view on the other side of a line of trees. “He seems a better version, now—of the man you’ve always striven to be. No offense intended.”

Richard scuffed the wet grass with the toe of one boot. “None taken, brother, and concede the point.” He looked across the field, eyes narrowed in critical judgment, then he shook his head. “He does ride *damnably* well.” The horse was in a wide, looping turn, still at full stride, guided in graceful swerves between stands of trees, Harold in line with its outstretched neck, continuing to urge it on. “But I fear he’ll not be able to outrun those looking for him to lead their movement.”

Thomas stared at his older brother. “You have a—*premonition* of this?”

Richard spat on the ground. “I’m not his *damn* Gran Da! That—irascible old *bastard*. Nor his mother, sweet girl though she is, with her own curse of seeing visions come true.” He looked over at his younger brother, always near to hand, helping to balance out his own

paternal failures. Allowing him the same privilege in return, his three young nieces climbing into his lap during frequent visits. The pain caused him by their playful attention balanced against the kisses and cuddles received. Both men had relied on what the other had to offer to each of their families with Thomas serving as guide to the two boys when they needed advice and he was away, his work pulling him to foreign ports of call for weeks of travel on end.

Richard sighed, knowing there was nothing he could do to get back days, already spent. “I can smell it in the wind—the *stench* of greed from men seeking to use him to their own ends. Or perhaps it is only an *old man's* fears.”

“I'm of an age with you, brother—and do not consider myself as old. Is a *father's* fear, one shared in common in worry for *all* our children, not that we'd ever share such feelings with them—keeping a stiff upper lip and all.” Thomas paused, lowering his voice slightly. “Not like those of your dear Eira's acquaint, residing in northern climes. Free enough with their feelings, openly expressed in curses of anger, or joy. More so, when immersed in—well-lubricated stories.” He grinned. “Perhaps you should try and be more like *them*—down to the wearing of a kilt, though your legs are far too skinny to pull it off.”

Richard gave his brother a warning glare. “I told you before—about earning a beating.”

Thomas nodded, waving his hand as Harold came riding up, the horse in a lather, its rider sitting upright with a gleam of pride on his lined, yet still youthful face. “Yes, brother.” Thomas took in then released a deep breath, overwhelmed with his feelings of pride toward Harold. “You most *certainly* did.”



The third pint went down easier than the first two, leaving Harold's face flushed, his voice rising in volume amongst the thick background murmuring of men at surrounding tables. His father and uncle sat across from him, the three of them tucked in one corner of a public house, listening to patrons sharing verbal jousts while discussing the

latest political maneuverings. Inflated in tenor and tone of late, due to news of continued unrest in the American colonies.

“The price, Uncle—the *price* to be paid—will be *worth* the cost in time and attention spent—on what needs—what needs—*doing*.” Harold covered his mouth, muffling the sound of a muted, wet burp.

Thomas glanced at his brother, noting a look of concern on his face. “It’s certainly a *possible* consideration to make, Harry—in how you go about reaching your goal. In choosing to stand up for your positions on behalf of the common man. Politics can certainly be an honorable vocation—*if* you choose it for yourself.”

“It is a deal made with the devil, Uncle—one already done. A promise made—to—to one of many who wield the power of—of *vox populi*. And one that *must* be kept.”

Richard reached across the table, the three of them sitting in the same public house he’d visited with his son before seeing him off to the colonies in what seemed a lifetime ago. “It is not a decision to be entered into lightly, Harry. There are many—”

“I’ve already given my *word*, Father. In return for what was offered to me. The decision—*made*. Oars in motion. The tide—in rise—” Harold covered his mouth with a cupped hand as Thomas pulled him to his unsteady feet, escorting him through a side door of the tavern that opened into an alley. He stepped back, watching as his nephew bent over, releasing a voluminous helping of ale onto the ground. When Harold straightened up, his face was red with shame. He wiped his lips, taking in deep breaths, the cooler air helping to still the quivering in his stomach.

Thomas gave him a gentle pat on his shoulder, leaving him there, rejoining Richard who’d chosen to remain inside. Once reseated, he looked at his brother, giving him a gentle smile. “It’s a long road from the *saying* of something to the seeing of it done. No doubt there will be a few twists in the path, along the way. Time enough to swing him ‘round—if keeping a *delicate* touch on his reins.”

Richard shook his head, frowning, his voice a low grumble. “He’s too much of *me* in him and will *not* be dissuaded, now he’s made his bed. It’s his choice to lie in it, along with his intention to pursue some girl he’s recently met—one he and his mother are always going on

about.” Richard stared into his tankard of ale. “She’s to come for a visit—for a stay of a few days or so. Over my *firmly* voiced objections—Eira remaining deaf to my feelings on the matter.”

“Welcome to *my* world, brother, with the odds stacked four to one against.” Thomas lifted his pint, touching it to Richard's with a metallic thud. “Why I'm here now—drowning my false sorrows with you, along with the other members of our dour club of love-worn men.” Thomas stared at the ale, wishing it were wine. “Our Harold is in full blush at the moment—but the scales will fall from his eyes soon enough. You'll see.” Then he lifted his mug. “To our children, may we never be wrong in loving them as we do. Each and every one.”



A circle of men with beaming faces reflected back a false light, one Harold marked well, knowing them for the opportunists they were. Shakers and movers of the common man's opinions, wielding broadsheets supporting like-minded men with ample bellies and overstuffed cheeks, making them appear as if swine released from one wallow, heading to the next. Joined together this evening in a private room at a house of medium repute, surrounded by a flourish of low-cut clothing exposing feminine flesh, the gleam of candlelight on upper breasts matched by the feral smiles of the assembled committee. One with grandiose plans in mind for Colonel Harold Knutt, his name often in print, known to all as the English warrior, Red Fox.

Harold swallowed a sip of ale, keeping to a cautious pace while nodding at a thin man with thick glasses perched on a long, pock-scarred nose. He was handed a pile of documents, his signature needed in order to enter the race for a seat in the House of Commons. The flow of energy around him built in a steady rush, with a blizzard of broadsheets already printed, covered in words announcing his entry into politics, extolling his service record and wounds suffered in support of crown, country, and colonies. The list of battles he'd been involved in and won, removed at his insistence from mass distribution

as they were not his accomplishments, belonging instead to those who'd made their sacrifices in full measure.

There had remained more than a handful of misinformed quotes and opinions, inserted into stories written on behalf of Harold's candidacy for public office. Each one had provoked a sour expression on Harold's face, with pats of condolence on his shoulders from his father and uncle, their faces pinched with worried expressions. Along with a frown from Sinclair as she read through them, with cocked eyebrows raised above a pair of perfectly shaped, light-gray eyes.



“You step *beyond* where I had imagined you capable of going, Harold. Writing of your memoirs—*yes*. Escorting me about the countryside while introducing me to family and friends—*acceptable*, as we are in courtship of one another. And, should you choose to lie here on this very stone in midst of such a thick wood, staring at your toes for weeks on end—you would have my *earnest* support. But to reach for a position such as this promises to become, requiring a realignment of your morals in service to these—these men of *questionable* backgrounds and mean reputations—it leaves me to wonder if you're the person I *thought* you to be.” Sinclair pursed her lips, leaving Harold to try and explain his decision to run for election to the House.

“I am *still*—and will always *be* my own man.” Harold reached for her hands, denied by Sinclair, who pulled them back against her waist. “Though I will not *deny* the charge—as leveled.” Sinclair lowered her brows, her eyes gleaming with anger as Harold continued, his voice level in tone. “I will confess to selling a—*small* portion of my soul—in exchange for my efforts made to locate *you*. But as to my want of personal gain—or desire to join with men such as you describe—I am *innocent* of that crime, seeking the opposite of what they wish to see happen. I intend to use the seat in Commons to leverage my political standing in order to prevent, *if* possible, an excess of harm falling on our intrepid countrymen across the sea—as well as native peoples living further west.”

Sinclair lowered her eyes, her voice a whisper, hands hanging at her side. "I'm afraid I require *all* your soul, Harold, if this—delightful *wooing* is to continue. The same as has been freely offered *you* in return." She looked up. "Nothing less will do—if we are to wed."

Harold stepped closer, taking her hands in his, squeezing them. "I'm speaking of *blood*, Sinclair—dripping from the forged barrels of cannons—and muskets by the thousands. Soldiers, in great number, sent overseas to spill the *same* vital liquid from their veins. Off-loaded from transport ships, ordered into battle, sacrificed upon the very ground *I* once bled upon!" He lowered his voice, tears in the corners of his eyes. "I'm trying to save *both* sides from a repeat of such—of such *carnage* as I was witness to. Having been the *cause* of it, at times—to my everlasting shame. It will be a waste of all I've pledged to and provided on the backs of men who stood the line with me. Your own father there alongside me, trying to preserve—to *increase* the warmth of our embrace of our colonial citizens, as well those who could be made allies, if left to rule their own lands as they see fit."

He released her and stepped away, looking toward the east. "*That* is what I seek—what I *hunger* for. And if the price to fulfill that pledge means having to make a choice between pursuit of it and—" Harold paused, lowering his head.

"Yes?" Sinclair softened the former tone of her voice, her lips trembling as she waited for him to continue.

Harold turned around. "Of my having to let go of someone I have been in—in such *fascination* with—ever since seeing a cameo likeness of her beautiful face in a silver locket—come to life. The same one looking at me here and now—while the faces of those people I came to love, then lost—while they stare in quiet-eyed judgment of the life I'm living, with theirs at an end. My future—the very *measure* of my honor—balanced against decisions waiting to be—"

Sinclair stepped over and rose to the tips of her toes, kissing him. Then she brushed his ear with her lips. "One." Harold pulled back, a confused expression on his face, his hands clasped to her narrow waist, searching her eyes. "One—what?"



“Vote. *Yours.*” Sinclair painted a wicked smile on her lips, her eyes bright with passion, her emotions stirred by his impassioned words. “Go—and get the rest needed to *win* this seat. Then show the *bastards* what someone like you can do—when released upon a grander stage.”

Sinclair took Harold by the hand, pulling him down onto a bed of thick moss carpeting the middle of the small glade, tucked away in the woods bordering his manor. An agreement was soon struck between them, one ensuring Sinclair an equal voice in how far Harold would allow himself to be led onto a narrow plank. One to be thrust over dangerous waters, with the surging currents of public opinion in constant heave, made to change on the whim of those with ink-stained hands.



“Colonel Knutt. There is a Colonel Sandersen here, wishing to speak with you at your earliest convenience.” The personal assistant assigned by Nathan to Harold waited for a reply. He was a thin, dark skinned slip of a man with a narrow face and delicate features, his hands tipped with finely shaped fingers, wearing a powdered wig, perfectly coifed.

His name was Charles Beamon, Esquire. Late of London proper, assigned to help Harold during his run for a seat in the House of Commons. Nathan had hired the young man to help manage the effort through election night, approaching with the speed of horses in a mad gallop, with the counting of votes less than three weeks away. Available to stay on should the election be won, having arrived with a large valise, moving into a nearby boarding house just down the street, mere steps away from a small office lent to Harold by a group of well-heeled backers.

Harold sighed, lowering his eyes, staring at a desk overflowing with papers. “How do you find him to be, Charlie? Your opinion shot straight—without pausing to aim, if you will.”

“He appears to be the—*opposite* end of a horse, from whence the oats go in, sir. And again—it's *Charles*—not Charlie.”

“Of course, Charles. My apologies. A hard habit to break, your joyful countenance always in suggest of a less formal address. It will not happen a third time today, I assure you.” Harold paused, setting his shoulders, readying himself for an exchange of pleasantries with a man he thoroughly enjoyed the hating of.

Colonel Sanderson entered the office with a flurry of pomp, and little circumstance, his uniform a radiant display of rows of brightly colored ribbons and polished medals, dangling in a shimmer of gold. He stopped, one hand on his hip, elbow angled, appearing as if a proud peacock poised in self-manufactured plumage.

Harold studied the other man, surmising the awards pinned in place were fastened there by the fingers of superior officers in need of financial backing in order to retain ownership of their impoverished estates. “Welcome, my former comrade. You are in good health?”

“I am. And you’re *out* of uniform once again—Colonel Knutt.” The attempt at a light-hearted jape hit the floor with a dull thud, Sanderson left unaware as he strode over to Harold’s desk. “Though you *are* retired, so—no *demerit* assigned you. Still, it would behoove you to wear the colors proudly, lest people think you hold some measure of shame in regard to the work we did together, securing victory over the poxy French—and their *savage* brood of Indian allies.”

“A *damnable* pleasure, as always, to see you again, Colonel Sandersen. Congratulations on your promotion having come through. No doubt hastened by your arrival in London—as you had predicted.”

“Yes. A terrible state of affairs, communications being what they are now-a-days, with six weeks or more in exchange of news on current affairs, while going from hither to yon.” Sandersen paused, taking in both the small office and his former comrade in arms, standing on the opposite side of a non-descript desk, wearing a plain shirt, the sleeves unbuttoned, rolled up to mid forearm. “I have interrupted you at your rest. I apologize, having made clear to your man-servant I was here on urgent business—concerning *important* matters of State.” Sandersen drew himself up into another practiced pose, head angled slightly up, as if sitting for a portrait. “I am to be appointed to the House of Lords.”

“Congratulations are in order, Colonel Sandersen. Or rather, Lord Sandersen—that being the requisite title for such a regal nod in your direction.” Harold paused. “Though it may prove to be a *burden*—having to bear up beneath the responsibility.”

“I have only *recently* inherited the title. And yes—it *is* proving to be a difficult position.” Sandersen waited, as if expecting additional acclaim.

“I am, of course—*dreadfully* sorry.” Harold watched as the pompous man narrowed his eyes, confused by the offer of condolence. “For your *loss*, having heard the word—*inherited*.”

Sandersen recovered quickly. “Quite right. Of course. A terrible thing—my father dying, leaving me to take control of his—of *my* estate. In need of constant oversight and review.”

“As well your *additional* responsibilities—to the welfare of the realm.”

“A great weight, indeed.” Sandersen sighed, head lowered in a slight nod, then he looked up, his expression brightening. “When you have secured your seat in Commons, we will make use of our close acquaint to further mutual interests. A liaison, as it were, between former comrades. Each of us according to our own societal level, of course—but acting in *concert*, our years of military service bonding us to a common cause.”

“To the good of *all*—entitled or not.” Harold fought back his desire to toss the pop-in-jay out on his ear. “As our Charter so eloquently defines—to the *greater* good of all men, in common.”

Sandersen waved his hand. “Mere details, in need of working it out at a later date. The moment before us is one of *great* opportunity, with men such as ourselves about to take firm hold of the reins of power, wielding them to great effect.”

Harold nodded as he came around the desk and placed his hand on Charles upper arm. “Allow me to introduce my friend and associate, Charles Beamon, Esquire. Assigned to me during my quest for political office. And please, there is no need of an apology for having mistaken him as my—*man-servant*.”

He ushered Charles over, nudging him to take Sandersen’s hand, outstretched in greeting. “Bid welcome to my dear compatriot,

Charles—a former soldier and future Lord, willing to serve the people of this great empire at great personal expense of his *valuable* time. Daring to enter a particularly hellish environment, where one must step carefully, lest risk burning of one's toes—as happened with *me* at the Big Burn. Common soldiers made to pay with their lives—for *my* mistake.”

Sandersen narrowed his eyes further than normal, the pale orbs already in danger of touching. He gave a grudging nod of respect. “If I recall correctly, my friend—you did not make any other mistakes over there *or* here—your reputation remaining *fully* intact.”

“You are *too* kind, Colonel. Too kind by *half*.” Harold nodded at Charles. “If you would be so kind, friend Charles, as to take the Colonel's hat and coat into the outer room, returning with a bottle of—port?” Harold looked at Sandersen, receiving a slight nod. “Along with three glasses. It promises to be another long day, with serious matters of State to discuss with my comrade in arms, Colonel Sandersen.”



The visit by the faux Colonel wound its way through a maze of thinly veiled probes by Harold, eliciting an equal number of shifty responses by the other. The pompous prig of a man finally left, begging his leave due to pressing matters requiring his attention. He exited the small office none the wiser than when he'd arrived, wearing a look of supreme confidence on his face, unaware of having been led in circles by the tip of his overly long nose.

Charles closed the outer door, then stepped back inside the small office, shaking his head. Harold looked at him, grinning. “There's a horse outside wanting to have a word with you, Charles. It seeks the satisfaction of engaging you in a duel. Its second to meet with me to discuss where and when said duel is to take place.” Harold paused. “*Your* choice of weapons. I would suggest *pistols*, at dawn.”

“I will proffer the animal an *immediate* apology—in writing, sir. Published for all the horse world to see, begging it's forgiveness for my having compared its arse to that—that steaming pile of *excrement!*”

Harold handed him a glass of the port, watching as the man drained it, having refused to join in when first offered one. The nose-down stare of the uncouth officer indicating the underlings presence to be in bad form.

Charles shivered in anger. "I do not know how you managed it, spending a single moment of time with the—with the likes of *him* while in the colonies, with pistol near to hand and the entire wilderness to bury him in." He stared at Harold, shaking his perfectly coifed head. "In *awe*, Harold—simply in awe of your vast powers of restraint."

Harold shrugged. "Not worth the powder and ball, as soldiers often said of officers failing to meet the needs of the men in line. Nor the risk of a noose." Harold pointed at the chair across the desk from where he was standing. "Would have your thoughts on his ill-handled offer to share influence—Charles, if you would care to make a comparison with mine."

The dapper man shrugged, reaching for the near-empty bottle of port, drinking from it without use of a glass. "Please, sir—call me Charlie. And *where* am I to begin?" He began to list his opinions on a dozen thoughts centered around Colonel Sandersen's unscheduled visitation, come in search of a pledge to future alliance.



The rush in and out of young boys holding slips of paper in their hands was constant. Tally boards, fashioned of thin slabs of slate, were erased, then re-marked with chalk numbers. Nathan sidled over to where Charles and Harold were in conversation, waited for an opening, bidding the two of them to come and join him.

"The count is four to one in our—in *your* favor. A one-sided victory in the offing. Congratulations, Colonel Knutt—newly elected representative to the House of Commons."

Harold was silent for a moment, then nodded. "A victory for those *backing* my campaign as well. A matter now of ensuring my seat is firmly built, that it might bear up beneath the weight of so many—*esteemed* asses, eager to join mine in sitting *in* it."

Nathan winced, coming as close to blushing as was possible, his skin thickened by years of service to, and reward from, a vast coalition of political and commercial influencers. His own fingers, while not tied directly to them, were now resting on the outmost strands of a vast spider's web. His place assured, delivery been made of a man he'd come to respect over the past half-year.

"It will not be as difficult a position as you have so solemnly projected in our labored conversations over the past few weeks. Come, Harold—join in the *fervent* celebration amongst your friends and supporters, in gleeful surround." Nathan reached out, clasping the taller man by his shoulder. "Consider this as if the morning after your first grand adventure at the helm of your intrepid troops crossing over perilous waters, led by your *inspired* leadership. The François Armée Royale standing in stiff opposition. You found your way to success then, against *long* odds. You will, of a certain, be able to find your way through the pallid machinations of us lowly pamphleteers, and those of the *opposing* party—winning all to your side."

Harold gave Nathan a quiet look. "Leaving *our* relationship ever in a delicate hover."

Nathan frowned. "You will always have my backing, even when I'm required to serve *both* sides against my *own* interests. I assure you, Harold—it can—it *will* be managed."

"And when the bill for the favor extended my way is *finally* presented—with interest accrued?"

Nathan smiled. "You will no doubt pull a *ploy* or two from your military experiences, putting the enemy to *rout*—no matter the color of their flag."

Harold shook his head and sighed, loudly. Charlie reached out, handing him a glass of watered wine. "Go, Harold. Let them see your face and raise a cheer. Build esprit-de-corps with the public, while they are eager to hang their hopes and dreams on you. Tomorrow will be here soon enough, with the work begun of trying to set a' right the wayward ship of State."

## **About the Author**

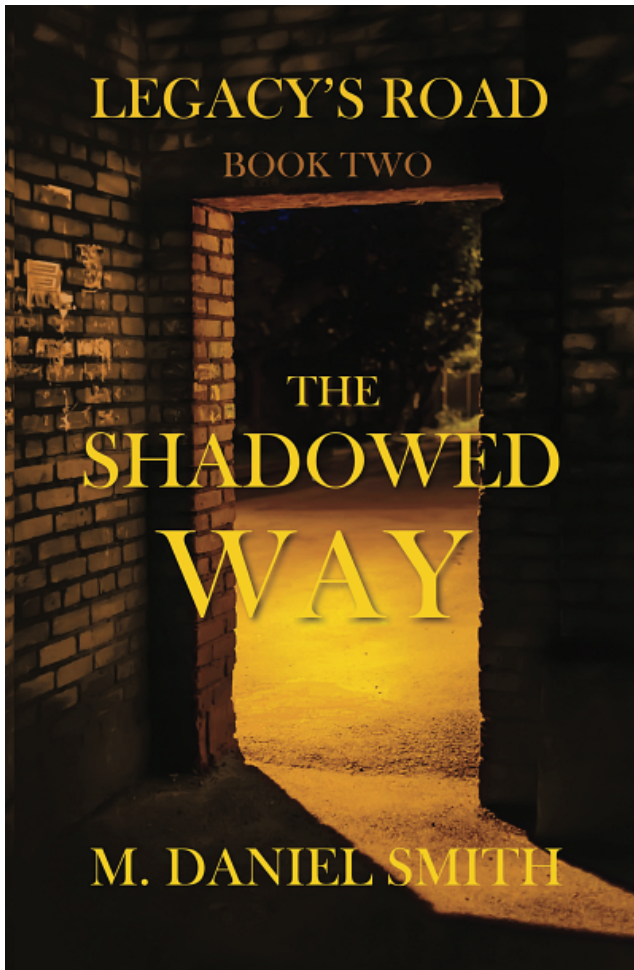
M. Daniel Smith is a writer of fiction, with interest in producing series covering various genres including historical fiction (Legacy's Road) speculative psychological (Coalescence) historical/sci-fi (A Soul, Between) and an upcoming murder mystery (The Cross).

His writing encompasses relationships between a diverse group of characters that are real to life, gritty at times, intelligent and feisty, helping to connect the reader emotionally to people that are difficult to let go of. Thus, the interest in writing series.

Raised in a blue-collar environment, he spent hours in front of his mother's extensive library, reading novels, exposed to every genre of literary works, from family sagas on through to sci-fi, military histories, and the like.

Now retired, able to write full time, he fills his days with the words sent him by the characters who show up, compelling the telling of their stories, allowing readers an intimate look into their motives, desires, joys—and moments of pain. His own thoughts, beliefs, and experiences, garnered from a life lived full, are liberally sprinkled throughout his writing.

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Harold Knutt, a hero of the French & Indian war, returns to England, winning a seat in Commons. A secretive cabal, backed by 'unnamed men' striking from the shadows, manipulates Harold, leading him back along the red path.

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