

Chapter One

WITH A NOD of approval for the sergeant, Lieutenant Michael Stoddard clasped his hands behind his back and faced the thirty soldiers where they stood on the sand-and-shell road. Each man in the two parallel lines before him was clear-eyed, his chin up and shoulders squared. Red wool coats had been brushed out and buttons buffed. Even in the dull winter dawn, every musket looked clean.

It was a fine day, indeed, for the Eighty-Second Regiment to occupy Wilmington, North Carolina, and these men were ready for it.

“Men, we’ll be marching out shortly, as soon as Captain Barkley heads upriver with the galleys.” A column of soldiers stomped through a drill behind Michael. He elevated his voice through the clank of muskets and equipment. “Here’s how matters stand. A deputation of civilians met Major Craig last night and gave him their articles of surrender. He rejected their terms. Any residents remaining in Wilmington when we arrive will be considered our prisoners of war, at Major Craig’s discretion.”

The din from the drill faded. Over the shoulders of his men, Michael saw a ship’s boat from the transport that was anchored in the middle of the Cape Fear River reach the bank. Infantrymen disembarked from it onto North Carolina soil and trotted up for inspection with another sergeant. He paced to allow him to make occasional eye contact with the men before him. “Scouts report that the regiment’s presence has thrown the rebels into confusion and panic. The leaders of these ‘patriots’ have fled the area, some with little more than the clothing on their backs. Less than a day ago, the militia commander, Colonel Young, evacuated his garrison from the barracks in town. Yes, surprising as it sounds, the rebels appear to have been caught off-guard by the Eighty-Second’s arrival.”

From the corner of his eye, Michael saw that a scout who’d been present at last night’s meeting, a free Negro called Teal, was conferring with Captain Pitcairn, his gestures animated. Michael returned attention to his men. “We’ve learned that Wilmington is home to many merchants who are not sympathetic to the rebel cause. Perhaps the occupation will proceed more smoothly than what we’d expected when we sailed from Charles Town. However, I don’t need to remind you lads to keep your wits about you. You can imagine what we’ll find when we arrive in Wilmington at the end of today’s march. Sullen and hostile townsfolk, and special ‘gifts’ that the militia left behind, like spiked cannon and traps set in the barracks. Don’t delude yourselves into believing that we’ve seen the last of the rebels, just because they ran like rabbits—”

“Mr. Stoddard!” called Pitcairn. “A word with you over here immediately!”

After another nod to the sergeant, who stepped forward to address the men, Michael strode for the captain and scout. While he traversed the distance between them, he squinted at the overcast sky to the southeast. Was that a thin column of smoke rising? Hard to say against the clouds. He didn’t smell smoke—but the breeze was coming from the west.

After exchanging a salute with Michael, Pitcairn jutted his chin to Teal, who was carrying a rifle. "Tell Mr. Stoddard." His nose red, the captain sneezed into a handkerchief.

The scout's hunting shirt was rumpled, and his face was sweaty, as if he'd been running. "I have come from the estate of loyalist merchant Mr. Farrell one mile distant from here. This very moment, about twenty men on horseback are attacking the estate." He swiveled, pointed to the southeastern sky, and added in his melodious-accented voice, "They have set one of the outbuildings afire. You see?"

Yes, that *was* a column of smoke. Michael addressed Teal. "Are these men from Colonel Young's militia?"

"I do not believe that they are—"

"Even if they were, it wouldn't matter." His voice gravelly, Pitcairn cleared his throat. "I've just watched those soldiers pass inspection, Mr. Stoddard. Excellent work. They're more than a match for rebels."

It sounded as though Pitcairn wanted him to run some men out there and take care of those marauders. Michael swelled his chest. "Orders, sir?"

The first portion of Pitcairn's cough missed the handkerchief. "Bloody head cold. Take ten men and follow Teal back to the estate. Render assistance to the King's Friends and drive off the perpetrators. Any captives will be marched to Wilmington with the regiment and imprisoned there."

Michael frowned, certain he'd misunderstood. "Ten men, sir? Teal said there were twenty mounted rebels. Surely all thirty men—"

"It isn't a pitched field battle. They aren't Continental dragoons. They're just rabble on horses." Pitcairn sniffed, propped a fist on his hip, and waved the handkerchief once. "Stand your ground with your selected ten, give those rebel scum their first taste of the King's might, and the miscreants will run away. They *always* run away. You know how it is."

True, untrained civilians ran from the sight of bayonets. Often militiamen did, too. But Michael was reluctant to discount the level of danger. His lips pinched.

Pitcairn scowled at him. "Do you understand your orders?"

"Sir." Michael's chin came up.

"Good. Send the remainder of the men over to me directly. I'll put them to work. Step lively now. Dismissed." They saluted. The captain turned his back on Michael and Teal and, after a moist sneeze, headed for another group of infantrymen.

A sinking feeling in his gut, Michael stared at the captain's retreating back, then swung his scrutiny to the men farther north on the road. Jove's arse! Surely he and ten infantrymen hadn't just been assigned a Forlorn Hope? He expelled a hard breath that converted to white fog in the chilly air. "Come along, Teal." He stalked toward the men.

The Negro caught up within one step. "I expected him to give you more soldiers, Mr. Stoddard. Infantry versus cavalry, you know."

In a corner of his mind, Michael recognized that Teal spoke with an accent he'd never before heard on any slave, whether captured African or American-born. He pushed the curiosity to one side and focused on the problem that loomed. Those might be untrained rebels attacking the Farrell estate, however Sir Isaac Newton's Laws didn't favor combatants on the ground over those astride charging horses unless they leveraged themselves shrewdly.

"Teal, tell me more about those rebels. What weapons do they have?"

“I do not think all of them are armed, sir. A few men fired pistols into the air. Their leader had a sword. Two or three carry muskets. And many of them look drunk.”

Drunk at dawn on Sunday morning—that must’ve been quite a jollification the night before. None of the infantrymen was drunk. That improved their odds a bit—but not enough to take the edge off Michael’s wariness. “How about the terrain between here and there? Is there a track of some sort?”

“Yes, sir, you will find a drive starting at the big mulberry tree back there. The drive will take you to the estate. The land is flat, much like what you see around here, and trees and brush surround the drive. It all thins out closer to the buildings.”

“Thank you.” Hmm. Sneak up on the rebels? Draw them out? Chase them off?

“You are welcome. I hope you can save the lady of the house.”

Ice shot up Michael’s back, and he swiveled his head to stare at the scout. “Are you speaking of Mrs. Farrell? What’s happened to her?”

Teal shrugged. “Nothing yet. But the rebels were hollering for her to come out of the house.”

“Why were they asking for her? Are they acquainted with her or her husband?”

“I do not know, Mr. Stoddard.”

Hairs on the back of Michael’s neck prickled. Was there more to this story than a random rebel attack on the property of a loyalist? With another brief press of his lips together, he made his strategy decision. Intimidate the rebels, and draw them away from the buildings so they didn’t set anything else afire or hurt the lady.

They arrived at the group of soldiers, and Michael went over to stand beside the sergeant. “Lads, we’ve received a report of mounted rebels attacking a loyalist’s estate one mile to the southeast. Who of the King’s finest will accompany me on reconnaissance and run those whoresons off? Step forward two paces if you will.”

With a rattle of muskets and cartridge boxes, every man stepped forward two paces. Again, Michael sighed, hard. He’d been transferred to the Eighty-Second while the regiment was garrisoned in South Carolina. By now, he knew the names of most soldiers and a little about each one. All but one man before him was a combat veteran. Decisions, decisions. “On the double. Rollins. Ferguson. Buchanan. Lindsay. Jackson. Wigglesworth. Stallings. Henshaw. Stone.”

That made nine soldiers hustling toward him. He needed one more. He eyed a recent recruit from Nova Scotia, the only six-foot-tall man in the squad. And as he considered the interesting role that Nick Spry had reportedly played in a scuffle the night before, the back of his neck felt tickly again, a hunch that eighteen-year-old Spry, who’d not yet seen combat, would prove helpful during the engagement this morning. “And Spry. The rest of you report to Captain Pitcairn.”

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The packed-dirt drive was wide enough for a carriage and flanked by longleaf pines, live oaks, and an occasional leafless mulberry. Wiregrass and prickly pear carpeted the brackish wilderness beyond the drive—ubiquitous, as far as Michael could see, in the landscape of the Cape Fear. But the last thing he wanted was for those twenty rebels on horseback to perform some sort of envelopment upon his ten infantrymen in all the cacti and crushed shells. To keep the patrol alerted of any rebel sentries or scouts, he sent Teal up ahead and had Spry fall back.

The patrol jogged southeast. Sounds from the regiment quickly faded, screened out by the foliage. After they'd clanked along for about seven minutes, Michael caught whiffs of burning building and heard the distant shouts of men engaged in dark revelry. He and his men rounded a tree-shadowed bend to a straight stretch. From about seventy-five feet ahead, Teal was closing the expanse between them at an open run, eyes wide with terror, arms pumping. "They have seen me!"

From somewhere beyond the scout, Michael heard the thud of approaching horses, and the shout of a man: "Run down that colored rat, boys!"

Hoping that partial shadow would enhance the menace his patrol posed, Michael ordered the nine soldiers to halt, form a line across the drive at the bend, and fix bayonets on their loaded muskets. He exhaled a quick breath that did nothing to settle the flutter in his gut. "Make ready!" At his command, the patrol became a wall of red in the gloom, the vertical line of each musket extended upward by almost two feet of sharp, metallic hell.

Half a dozen rebels on horseback trotted into view around a curve one hundred feet down the drive. The man in front spotted Teal and snarled. "There's the spy!" He kicked his horse in the sides and picked up speed.

The men with him followed, and one roared, "Yee-aww, we got our rascal now!"

Christ Jesus! Those men were going to trample Teal if the patrol didn't intervene. "Present!" Michael bellowed, his right hand balled into a fist at his side, his left hand clenched around the barrel of his loaded fusil. Each redcoat swiveled to cock and aim his musket, all movements smooth and synched. Not a man quailed.

Teal yelled something that sounded like "*allahuma thabetna*" and dove into the brush.

The rebels' eyes bugged on the patrol. "Whoa! Shit! Stop!" screamed several at the same time. The charge degenerated into a tangle of swearing riders and snorting horses about sixty feet away. After they finally got themselves reined about, they retreated up the drive as fast as they could get their mounts to go.

They vanished around the curve, and Michael heard their yells: "Redcoats—dozens of 'em! Get out of here! Save yourselves!"

Dozens. Michael smirked and ordered his men to stand down and remove bayonets. The flutter in his gut faded. He let out a breath of relief. Had those riders decided to charge his patrol from so close, his men could have been run down.

"Did you hear those cowards?" Jackson laughed, short. "They thought we looked like dozens."

Henshaw guffawed. "Maybe the regiment will number a thousand by noon."

"And all the rebels in North Carolina will surrender." Stone grinned.

For a moment, Michael watched Teal crawl from his hiding place and stand in the drive, head turned in the direction that the mob had fled. No doubt the scout was shaken after that experience. He listened again for the rebels. No longer pitched with revelry, those fading shouts were tight with panic and fear.

Michael said to Stone, "I wouldn't wager on their surrender if I were you, lad. Those were only pathetic wasters. Don't mistake them for the trained, tough rebels in these parts. And let's not forget our duty here. Make certain those scum are gone and the King's Friends are safe."

That was when he realized that he was missing one man. His gaze made a circuit of the patrol. "Where's Spry?"

A trip back around the bend rewarded him with the sight of the blond recruit strutting toward them, musket in one hand, waving the other arm to get their attention. To Michael's query about more rebels, Spry shook his head and halted thirty feet up the drive. "All quiet on this end, sir. But I found something back there that you ought to see."

For now, the rebels were gone, so after Michael motioned for Teal to catch up with them, he and the men followed Spry northwest about forty feet, where the recruit pointed out a one-inch thick piece of wood, three-feet squared, lodged firmly in the sandy soil not far off the east side of the drive. While everyone watched, Spry lifted one side of the wood. Metal squawked: hinges. The square of wood covered the entrance to a manmade underground tunnel.

A shallow tunnel, only about three feet deep from what Michael could tell. Any deeper, and it might fill with water. A couple of dead leaves and a little sand spiraled down into the gloom. Having opened the cover all the way, Spry straightened to his full height and grinned with white, horsey teeth.

Michael studied the maw below him, then lifted his gaze past it to the trees, as if to see beyond them. Where did the tunnel lead? And for what purpose was it used?

Judging from the small mound of dead leaves around the hole, the board must have been covered with forest debris earlier and thus disguised. So how did Spry find it? He studied the recruit in appreciation of his observational skills. "The rest of us walked right past this thing earlier. How is it that you spotted it?"

"Sir. As I passed by, a couple of squirrels chased each other across it." He shrugged. "Their thumping around on it made a sound that was wrong for the natural forest. Hollow. Like a board covering a hole. So I investigated."

Buchanan muttered, "That's bloody amazing, Spry."

It was beyond amazing. Michael wondered how many of the other men with him would have followed up on such a subtle stimulus. He wasn't sure that *he* would have done so.

Teal moved in beside him, nodded at the hole, and said, "Ah. Of course."

Michael frowned at him. "This is familiar to you?"

"I have seen a few tunnels like it, Mr. Stoddard."

"What can you tell me about it?"

"Tunnels like these are used for escape, sir. I suspect that this particular one goes to a hiding hole below the Farrells' house."

"Escape—hiding hole? Wait a moment." Michael turned to face him fully. "Escape tunnels farther inland are tall enough for an adult to walk hunched over. But from what I can see here, this tunnel is only about three feet tall. The only way an adult could pass through there is on hands and knees." He gestured to the east. "And how far away is the house from here—a quarter mile? Are you saying an adult would crawl that distance to escape?"

Teal held his gaze. "Those who are desperate would do so, sir. For five years, rebels have controlled North Carolina. On occasion, they persecute loyalists. Some loyalists built escapes for themselves and their families."

The scout nodded to the bend in the road where all of them except Spry had narrowly avoided a skirmish. "It is not so difficult for me to sympathize with persecuted loyalists." He regarded Michael again. "If I had to do so, Mr. Stoddard, I would crawl on my hands and knees a quarter mile to escape being captured by scoundrels like those back there."

A little chill slid down Michael's backbone. He could imagine what would have happened to Teal if he'd been overtaken by those riders. He nodded to the Negro. "Your point is well made."

After another glance down the tunnel, Michael replaced the cover, brushed sand off his hands, and surveyed his patrol. "All right, lads, let's move along to Mr. Farrell's house and ensure that he doesn't need to use this tunnel. Teal, you're up front again, but don't get so far ahead this time. Spry, stay behind."

The nine infantrymen and Teal headed down the road. For a moment, Michael hung back and paced himself beside the recruit who was three inches taller than he was and a good thirty-five pounds heavier. Again he thought about the incident last night. Coop up several hundred men in the belly of a transport ship, toss them around for three days in a storm—and the result when the ship stopped rolling wasn't always gratitude. "Spry. Tell me about the fistfight."

"Sir. It was quickly resolved. I regret that such a trifling matter was even brought to your notice." Spry kept his gaze forward.

Michael had looked over the recruit's face during squad inspection. No black eye, split lip, bruises, or cuts. "Captain Pitcairn has dispensed disciplinary measures on those men. What I want to know is how you managed to step between two pairs of swinging fists and stop the fight without being drawn into it yourself."

The corner of Spry's mouth crimped. He was holding back another grin. "Well, sir, it helps to be larger than either of the men who are doing the fighting. Gets their attention, you know."

"I'm certain it does."

"And I suggested that they save their enthusiasm for the rebels. Sir."

Michael gave a quick smile. "Well done, lad."

"Thank you, sir." Spry's big teeth shone.

As Michael quickened his pace to catch up with the rest of his men, he pondered. Later that day, when they arrived in Wilmington, Spry would be one of many men put to work at menial tasks such as digging latrines and building redoubts. It was guaranteed work for privates. Good, honest labor for the average soldier.

Except that the recruit from Nova Scotia wasn't the average soldier. In the few weeks that he'd been with the regiment, Spry had figured out what motivated seasoned fighters who were forced to sit idle in a garrison while they awaited their next assignment, and he'd used that to neutralize aggression.

Not to mention the fact that his observational skills were astounding.

Spry would be wasted on all that good, honest labor. Michael, who'd joined the Army at the age of seventeen, a year younger than Spry was, had nine years of service to His Majesty on American soil, and he'd seen how the machine worked. If Spry had unrealistic expectations about what the Army could do for him, its hulking orthodoxy would grind down that ambition.

Still, every now and then, special assignments became available within the Army for astute, deserving men. Michael resolved to keep his eyes and ears open for one of those assignments on behalf of Nick Spry.