

An Echo in the Bone

Diana Gabaldon

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DIANA
GABALDON



AN ECHO
IN THE BONE

A NOVEL



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PART ONE



A Troubling of the Waters



SOMETIMES THEY'RE REALLY DEAD

*Wilmington, colony of North Carolina
July 1776*

THE PIRATE'S HEAD had disappeared. William heard the speculations from a group of idlers on the quay nearby, wondering whether it would be seen again.

"Na, him be gone for good," said a ragged man of mixed blood, shaking his head. "De ally-gator don' take him, de water will."

A backwoodsman shifted his tobacco and spat into the water in disagreement.

"No, he's good for another day—two, maybe. Them gristly bits what holds the head on, they dry out in the sun. Tighten up like iron. Seen it many a time with deer carcasses."

William saw Mrs. MacKenzie glance quickly at the harbor, then away. She looked pale, he thought, and maneuvered himself slightly so as to block her view of the men and the brown flood of high tide, though since it *was* high, the corpse tied to its stake was naturally not visible. The stake was, though—a stark reminder of the price of crime. The pirate had been staked to drown on the mudflats several days before, the persistence of his decaying corpse an ongoing topic of public conversation.

"Jem!" Mr. MacKenzie called sharply, and lunged past William in pursuit of his son. The little boy, red-haired like his mother, had wandered away to listen to the men's talk, and was now leaning perilously out over the water, clinging to a bollard in an attempt to see the dead pirate.

Mr. MacKenzie snatched the boy by the collar, pulled him in, and swept him up in his arms, though the boy struggled, craning back toward the swampish harbor.

"I want to see the wallygator eat the pirate, Daddy!"

The idlers laughed, and even MacKenzie smiled a little, though the smile disappeared when he glanced at his wife. He was at her side in an instant, one hand beneath her elbow.

"I think we must be going," MacKenzie said, shifting his son's weight in order better to support his wife, whose distress was apparent. "Lieutenant Ransom—Lord Ellesmere, I mean"—he corrected with an apologetic smile at William—"will have other engagements, I'm sure."

This was true; William was engaged to meet his father for supper. Still, his father had arranged to meet him at the tavern just across the quay; there was

no risk of missing him. William said as much, and urged them to stay, for he was enjoying their company—Mrs. MacKenzie’s, particularly—but she smiled regretfully, though her color was better, and patted the capped head of the baby in her arms.

“No, we do have to be going.” She glanced at her son, still struggling to get down, and William saw her eyes flicker toward the harbor and the stark pole that stood above the flood. She resolutely looked away, fixing her eyes upon William’s face instead. “The baby’s waking up; she’ll be wanting food. It was so lovely to meet you, though. I wish we might talk longer.” She said this with the greatest sincerity, and touched his arm lightly, giving him a pleasant sensation in the pit of the stomach.

The idlers were now placing wagers on the reappearance of the drowned pirate, though by the looks of things, none of them had two groats to rub together.

“Two to one he’s still there when the tide goes out.”

“Five to one the body’s still there, but the head’s gone. I don’t care what you say about the gristly bits, Lem, that there head was just a-hangin’ by a thread when this last tide come in. Next un’ll take it, sure.”

Hoping to drown this conversation out, William embarked on an elaborate farewell, going so far as to kiss Mrs. MacKenzie’s hand with his best court manner—and, seized by inspiration, kissed the baby girl’s hand, too, making them all laugh. Mr. MacKenzie gave him rather an odd look, but didn’t seem offended, and shook his hand in a most republican manner—playing out the joke by setting down his son and making the little boy shake hands as well.

“Have you kilt anybody?” the boy inquired with interest, looking at William’s dress sword.

“No, not yet,” William replied, smiling.

“My grandsire’s kilt two dozen men!”

“Jemmy!” Both parents spoke at once, and the little boy’s shoulders went up around his ears.

“Well, he *has*!”

“I’m sure he is a bold and bloody man, your grandsire,” William assured the little boy gravely. “The King always has need of such men.”

“My grandda says the King can kiss his arse,” the boy replied matter-of-factly.

“JEMMY!”

Mr. MacKenzie clapped a hand over his outspoken offspring’s mouth.

“You *know* your grandda didn’t say that!” Mrs. MacKenzie said. The little boy nodded agreeably, and his father removed the muffling hand.

“No. Grannie did, though.”

“Well, that’s somewhat more likely,” Mr. MacKenzie murmured, obviously trying not to laugh. “But we still don’t say things like that to soldiers—they work for the King.”

“Oh,” said Jemmy, clearly losing interest. “Is the tide going out now?” he asked hopefully, craning his neck toward the harbor once more.

“No,” Mr. MacKenzie said firmly. “Not for hours. You’ll be in bed.”

Mrs. MacKenzie smiled at William in apology, her cheeks charmingly

flushed with embarrassment, and the family took its leave with some haste, leaving William struggling between laughter and dismay.

“Oy, Ransom!”

He turned at his name, to find Harry Dobson and Colin Osborn, two second lieutenants from his regiment, evidently escaped from duty and eager to sample the fleshpots of Wilmington—such as they were.

“Who’s that?” Dobson looked after the departing group, interested.

“A Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie. Friends of my father’s.”

“Oh, married, is she?” Dobson sucked in his cheeks, still watching the woman. “Well, make it a bit harder, I suppose, but what’s life without a challenge?”

“Challenge?” William gave his diminutive friend a jaundiced look. “Her husband’s roughly three times your size, if you hadn’t noticed.”

Osborn laughed, going red in the face.

“She’s *twice* his size! She’d crush you, Dobby.”

“And what makes you think I mean to be on the bottom?” Dobson inquired with dignity. Osborn hooted.

“What’s this obsession of yours with giantesses?” William demanded. He glanced at the little family, now nearly out of sight at the end of the street. “That woman’s nearly as tall as I am!”

“Oh, rub it in, why don’t you?” Osborn, who was taller than Dobson’s five feet, but still a head shorter than William, aimed a mock kick at his knee. William dodged it and cuffed Osborn, who ducked and shoved him into Dobson.

“Gennelmen!” The menacing cockney tones of Sergeant Cutter brought them up sharp. They might outrank the sergeant, but not one of them would have the nerve to point this out. The entire battalion went in fear of Sergeant Cutter, who was older than God and approximately Dobson’s height, but who contained within his diminutive physique the sheer fury of a full-sized volcano on the boil.

“Sergeant!” Lieutenant William Ransom, Earl of Ellesmere and senior of the group, drew himself up straight, chin pressed back into his stock. Osborn and Dobson hastily followed his lead, quaking in their boots.

Cutter strode back and forth in front of them, in the manner of a stalking leopard. You could just see the lashing tail and the preliminary licking of chops, William thought. Waiting for the bite was almost worse than getting it in the arse.

“And where’s your troops, then?” Cutter snarled. “*Sirs?*”

Osborn and Dobson at once began sputtering explanations, but Lieutenant Ransom—for once—walked on the side of the angels.

“My men are guarding the Governor’s Palace, under Lieutenant Colson. I’m given leave, Sergeant, to dine with my father,” he said respectfully. “By Sir Peter.”

Sir Peter Packer’s was a name to conjure with, and Cutter abated in mid-speech. Rather to William’s surprise, though, it wasn’t Sir Peter’s name that had produced this reaction.

“Your father?” Cutter said, squinting. “That’s Lord John Grey, is it?”

“Er . . . yes,” William replied cautiously. “Do you . . . know him?”

Before Cutter could reply, the door of a nearby tavern opened, and William’s father came out. William smiled in delight at this timely appearance, but quickly erased the smile as the sergeant’s gimlet gaze fixed on him.

“Don’t you be a-grinnin’ at *me* like an ’airy ape,” the sergeant began, in dangerous tones, but was interrupted by Lord John’s clapping him familiarly on the shoulder—something none of the three young lieutenants would have done if offered significant money.

“Cutter!” Lord John said, smiling warmly. “I heard those dulcet tones and said to myself, why damn me if it isn’t Sergeant Aloysius Cutter! There can’t be another man alive who sounds so much like a bulldog that’s swallowed a cat and lived to tell about it.”

“*Aloysius?*” Dobson mouthed at William, but William merely grunted briefly in response, unable to shrug, as his father had now turned his attention in his direction.

“William,” he said, with a cordial nod. “How very punctual you are. My apologies for being so late; I was detained.” Before William could say anything or introduce the others, though, Lord John had embarked upon a lengthy reminiscence with Sergeant Cutter, reliving high old times on the Plains of Abraham with General Wolfe.

This allowed the three young officers to relax slightly, which, in Dobson’s case, meant a return to his earlier train of thought.

“You said that red-haired poppet’s a friend of your father’s?” he whispered to William. “Find out from him where she’s staying, eh?”

“Idiot,” hissed Osborn. “She isn’t even pretty! She’s long-nosed as—as—as Willie!”

“Didn’t see as high as her face,” Dobson said, smirking. “Her tits were right at eye-level, though, and *those* . . .”

“Ass!”

“Shh!” Osborn stamped on Dobson’s foot to shut him up as Lord John turned back to the young men.

“Will you introduce me to your friends, William?” Lord John inquired politely. Rather red in the face—he had reason to know that his father had acute hearing, despite his artillery experiences—William did so, and Osborn and Dobson both bowed, looking rather awed. They hadn’t realized who his father was, and William was at once proud that they were impressed, and mildly dismayed that they’d discovered Lord John’s identity—it would be all over the battalion before supper tomorrow. Not that Sir Peter didn’t know, of course, but—

He gathered his wits, realizing that his father was taking leave for them both, and returned Sergeant Cutter’s salute, hastily but in good form, before hurrying after his father, leaving Dobby and Osborn to their fate.

“I saw you speaking to Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie,” Lord John said casually. “I trust they are well?” He glanced down the quay, but the MacKenzies had long since disappeared from view.

“Seemed so,” Willie said. He was *not* going to ask where they stayed, but the impression the young woman had made on him lingered. He couldn’t say if she was pretty or not; her eyes had struck him, though—a wonderful deep

blue with long auburn lashes, and fixed on him with a flattering intensity that had warmed the cockles of his heart. Grotesquely tall, of course, but—what was he thinking? The woman was married—with children! And red-haired, to boot.

“You’ve—er—known them long?” he asked, thinking of the startlingly perverse political sentiments that evidently flourished in the family.

“Quite some time. She is the daughter of one of my oldest friends, Mr. James Fraser. Do you recall him, by chance?”

William frowned, not placing the name—his father had thousands of friends, how should he . . .

“Oh!” he said. “Not an English friend, you don’t mean. Was it not a Mr. Fraser that we visited in the mountains, that time when you fell sick of the—of the measles?” The bottom of his stomach dropped a little, remembering the sheer terror of that time. He had traveled through the mountains in a daze of misery; his mother had died only a month before. Then Lord John had caught the measles, and William had been sure that his father was about to die likewise, leaving him completely alone in the wilderness. There hadn’t been room for anything in his mind but fear and grief, and he retained only a jumble of confused impressions from the visit. He had some dim recollection that Mr. Fraser had taken him fishing and been kind to him.

“Yes,” his father said, with a sidelong smile. “I’m touched, Willie. I should have thought you might recall that visit more because of your own misadventure than mine.”

“Mis—” Memory rushed over him, succeeded by a flood of heat, hotter than the humid summer air. “Thanks very much! I’d managed to expunge that from my memory, until you mentioned it!”

His father was laughing, and making no attempt to hide it. In fact, he was convulsed.

“I’m sorry, Willie,” he said, gasping and wiping his eyes with a corner of his handkerchief. “I can’t help it; it was the most—the most—oh, God, I’ll never forget what you looked like when we pulled you out of that privy!”

“You *know* it was an accident,” William said stiffly. His cheeks burned with remembered mortification. At least Fraser’s daughter hadn’t been present to witness his humiliation at the time.

“Yes, of course. But—” His father pressed the handkerchief to his mouth, his shoulders shaking silently.

“Feel free to stop cackling at any point,” William said coldly. “Where the devil are we going, anyway?” They’d reached the end of the quay, and his father was leading them—still snorting like a grampus—into one of the quiet, tree-lined streets, away from the taverns and inns near the harbor.

“We’re dining with a Captain Richardson,” his father said, controlling himself with an obvious effort. He coughed, blew his nose, and put away the handkerchief. “At the house of a Mr. Bell.”

Mr. Bell’s house was whitewashed, neat, and prosperous, without being ostentatious. Captain Richardson gave much the same sort of impression: of middle age, well-groomed and well-tailored, but without any notable style, and with a face you couldn’t pick out of a crowd two minutes after seeing it.

The two Misses Bell made a much stronger impression, particularly the

younger, Miriam, who had honey-colored curls peeping out of her cap, and big, round eyes that remained fixed on William throughout dinner. She was seated too far away for him to be able to converse with her directly, but he fancied that the language of the eyes was sufficient to indicate to her that the fascination was mutual, and if an opportunity for more personal communication should offer later . . . ? A smile, and a demure lowering of honey-colored lashes, followed by a quick glance toward a door that stood open to the side porch, for air. He smiled back.

“Do you think so, William?” his father said, loudly enough to indicate that it was the second time of asking.

“Oh, certainly. Um . . . think what?” he asked, since it was after all Papa, and not his commander. His father gave him the look that meant he would have rolled his eyes had they not been in public, but replied patiently.

“Mr. Bell was asking whether Sir Peter intends to remain long in Wilmington.” Mr. Bell, at the head of the table, bowed graciously—though William observed a certain narrowing of his eyes in Miriam’s direction. Perhaps he’d best come back to call tomorrow, he thought, when Mr. Bell might be at his place of business.

“Oh. I believe we’ll remain here for only a short time, sir,” he said respectfully to Mr. Bell. “I collect that the chief trouble is in the backcountry, and so we will no doubt move to suppress it without delay.”

Mr. Bell looked pleased, though from the corner of his eye, William saw Miriam pout prettily at the suggestion of his imminent departure.

“Good, good,” Bell said jovially. “No doubt hundreds of Loyalists will flock to join you along your march.”

“Doubtless so, sir,” William murmured, taking another spoonful of soup. He doubted that Mr. Bell would be among them. Not really the marching type, to look at. And not that the assistance of a lot of untrained provincials armed with shovels would be helpful in any case, but he could hardly say so.

William, trying to see Miriam without looking directly at her, instead intercepted the flicker of a glance that traveled between his father and Captain Richardson, and for the first time, began to wonder. His father had distinctly said they were dining with Captain Richardson—meaning that a meeting with the captain was the point of the evening. Why?

Then he caught a look from Miss Lillian Bell, who was seated across from him, next his father, and ceased thinking about Captain Richardson. Dark-eyed, taller and more slender than her sister—but really quite a handsome girl, now he noticed.

Still, when Mrs. Bell and her daughters rose and the men retired to the porch after dinner, William was not surprised to find himself at one end with Captain Richardson, while his father engaged Mr. Bell at the other in a spirited discussion of tar prices. Papa could talk to anyone about anything.

“I have a proposition to put before you, Lieutenant,” Richardson said, after the usual cordialities had been exchanged.

“Yes, sir,” William said respectfully. His curiosity had begun to rise. Richardson was a captain of light dragoons, but not presently with his regiment; that much he had revealed over dinner, saying casually that he was on detached duty. Detached to do what?

"I do not know how much your father has told you regarding my mission?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Ah. I am charged with the gathering of intelligence in the Southern Department. Not that I am in command of such operations, you understand"—the captain smiled modestly—"but a small part of them."

"I . . . appreciate the great value of such operations, sir," William said, groping for diplomacy, "but I—for myself, that is to say—"

"You have no interest in spying. No, of course not." It was dark on the porch, but the dryness of the captain's tone was evident. "Few men who regard themselves as soldiers do."

"I meant no offense, sir."

"None taken. I am not, however, recruiting you as a spy—that is a delicate occupation, and one involving some danger—but rather as a messenger. Though should you find opportunity to act the intelligencer along your way . . . well, that would be an additional contribution, and much appreciated."

William felt the blood rise in his face at the implication that he was capable neither of delicacy nor danger, but kept his temper, saying only, "Oh?"

The captain, it seemed, had gathered significant information regarding local conditions in the Carolinas, and now required to send this to the commander of the Northern Department—General Howe, presently in Halifax.

"I will of course be sending more than one messenger," Richardson said. "It is naturally somewhat quicker by ship—but I desire to have at least one messenger travel overland, both for safety's sake and for the sake of making observations *en route*. Your father speaks very highly of your abilities, Lieutenant"—did he detect a hint of amusement in that dry-as-sawdust voice?—"and I collect that you have traveled extensively in North Carolina and Virginia. That is a valuable attribute. You will appreciate that I do not wish my messenger to disappear into the Dismal Swamp, never to be seen again."

"Ha-ha," said William, politely, perceiving this to be meant as a jest. Clearly, Captain Richardson had never been near the Great Dismal; William had, though he didn't think anyone in his right mind would go that way a-purpose, save to hunt.

He also had severe doubts regarding Richardson's suggestion—though even as he told himself that he shouldn't consider leaving his men, his regiment . . . he was already seeing a romantic vision of himself, alone in the vast wilderness, bearing important news through storm and danger.

More of a consideration, though, was what he might expect at the other end of the journey.

Richardson anticipated his question, answering before he could speak.

"Once in the north, you would—it being agreeable—join General Howe's staff."

Well, now, he thought. Here was the apple, and a juicy red one, too. He was aware that Richardson meant "it being agreeable" to General Howe, rather than to William—but he had some confidence in his own capabilities, and rather thought he might prove himself useful.

He had been in North Carolina only a few days, but that was quite long

enough for him to have made an accurate assessment of the relative chances for advancement between the Northern Department and the Southern. The entire Continental army was with Washington in the north; the southern rebellion appeared to consist of troublesome pockets of backwoodsmen and impromptu militia—hardly a threat. And as for the relative status of Sir Peter and General Howe as commanders . . .

“I would like to think on your offer, if I might, Captain,” he said, hoping eagerness didn’t show in his voice. “May I give my answer tomorrow?”

“Certainly. I imagine you will wish to discuss the prospects with your father—you may do so.”

The captain then deliberately changed the subject, and within a few moments, Lord John and Mr. Bell had joined them, the conversation becoming general.

William paid little heed to what was said, his own attention distracted by the sight of two slender white figures that hovered ghostlike among the bushes at the outer edge of the yard. Two capped white heads drew together, then apart. Now and then, one turned briefly toward the porch in what looked like speculation.

“‘And for his vesture, they cast lots,’” his father murmured, shaking his head.

“Eh?”

“Never mind.” His father smiled, and turned toward Captain Richardson, who had just said something about the weather.

Fireflies lit the yard, drifting like green sparks among the damp, lush growth of plants. It was good to see fireflies again; he had missed them, in England—and that peculiar softness of the southern air that molded his linen to his body and made the blood throb in his fingertips. Crickets were chirping all around them, and for an instant, their song seemed to drown out everything save the sound of his pulse.

“Coffee’s ready, gen’mun.” The soft voice of the Bells’ slave cut through the small ferment of his blood, though, and he went in with the other men, with no more than a glance toward the yard. The white figures had disappeared, but a sense of promise lingered in the soft, warm air.

An hour later, he found himself walking back toward his billet, thoughts in a pleasant muddle, his father strolling silent by his side.

Miss Lillian Bell had granted him a kiss among the fireflies at the end of the evening, chaste and fleeting, but upon the lips, and the thick summer air seemed to taste of coffee and ripe strawberries, despite the pervasive dank smell of the harbor.

“Captain Richardson told me of the proposal he made to you,” Lord John said casually. “Are you inclined?”

“Don’t know,” William replied, with equal casualness. “I should miss my men, of course, but . . .” Mrs. Bell had pressed him to come to tea, later in the week.

“Little permanence in a military life,” his father said, with a brief shake of the head. “I did warn you.”

William gave a brief grunt of assent, not really listening.

"A good opportunity for advancement," his father was saying, adding offhandedly, "though of course there is some danger to the proposition."

"What?" William scoffed, hearing this. "Riding from Wilmington to take ship at New York? There's a road, nearly all the way!"

"And quite a number of Continentals on it," Lord John pointed out. "General Washington's entire army lies this side of Philadelphia, if the news I hear be correct."

William shrugged.

"Richardson said he wanted me because I knew the country. I can make my way well enough without roads."

"Are you sure? You have not been in Virginia for nearly four years."

The dubious tone of this annoyed William.

"Do you think me incapable of finding my way?"

"No, not at all," his father said, still with that note of doubt in his voice. "But there is no little *risk* to this proposition; I should not like to see you undertake it without due thought."

"Well, I *have* thought," said William, stung. "I'll do it."

Lord John walked in silence for a few steps, then nodded, reluctantly.

"It's your decision, Willie," he said softly. "I should be personally obliged if you would take care, though."

William's annoyance melted at once.

"Course I will," he said gruffly. They walked on beneath the dark canopy of maple and hickory, not talking, close enough that their shoulders brushed now and then.

At the inn, William bade Lord John good night, but didn't return at once to his own lodgings. Instead, he wandered out along the quay, restless, unready for sleep.

The tide had turned and was well out, he saw; the smell of dead fish and decaying seaweed was stronger, though a smooth sheet of water still covered the mudflats, quiet in the light of a quarter-moon.

It took a moment to locate the stake. For an instant, he thought it had gone, but no—there it was, a thin dark line against the glimmer of the water. Empty.

The stake no longer stood upright, but leaned sharply, as though about to fall, and a thin loop of rope trailed from it, floating like a hangman's noose on the waning tide. William was conscious of some visceral uneasiness; the tide alone would not have taken the whole body. Some said there were crocodiles or alligators here, though he had not yet seen one himself. He glanced down involuntarily, as though one of these reptiles might suddenly lunge from the water at his feet. The air was still warm, but a small shiver went through him.

He shook this off, and turned away toward his lodgings. There would be a day or two before he must go, he thought, and wondered whether he might see the blue-eyed Mrs. MacKenzie again before he left.



LORD JOHN LINGERED for a moment on the porch of the inn, watching his son vanish into the shadows under the trees. He had some qualms; the

matter had been arranged with more haste than he would have liked—but he did have confidence in William’s abilities. And while the arrangement clearly had its risks, that was the nature of a soldier’s life. Some situations were riskier than others, though.

He hesitated, hearing the buzz of talk from the taproom inside, but he had had enough of company for the night, and the thought of tossing to and fro under the low ceiling of his room, stifling in the day’s trapped heat, determined him to walk about until bodily exhaustion should ensure sleep.

It wasn’t just the heat, he reflected, stepping off the porch and setting off in the opposite direction to the one Willie had taken. He knew himself well enough to realize that even the apparent success of his plan would not prevent his lying awake, worrying at it like a dog with a bone, testing for weaknesses, seeking for ways of improvement. After all, William would not depart immediately; there was a little time to consider, to make alterations, should that be necessary.

General Howe, for instance. Had that been the best choice? Perhaps Clinton . . . but no. Henry Clinton was a fussy old woman, unwilling to stir a foot without orders in triplicate.

The Howe brothers—one a general, one an admiral—were famously uncouth, both having the manners, aspect, and general aroma of boars in rut. Neither of them was stupid, though—God knew they weren’t timid—and Grey thought Willie fully capable of surviving rough manners and harsh words. And a commander given to spitting on the floor—Richard Howe had once spat on Grey himself, though this was largely accidental, the wind having changed unexpectedly—was possibly easier for a young subaltern to deal with than the quirks of some other military gentlemen of Grey’s acquaintance.

Though even the most peculiar of the brotherhood of the blade was preferable to the diplomats. He wondered idly what the term of venery might be for a collection of diplomats. If writers formed the brotherhood of the quill, and a group of foxes be termed a skulk . . . a stab of diplomats, perhaps? Brothers of the stiletto? No, he decided. Much too direct. An opiate of diplomats, more like. Brotherhood of the boring. Though the ones who were not boring could be dangerous, on occasion.

Sir George Germain was one of the rarer sorts: boring *and* dangerous.

He walked up and down the streets of the town for some time, in hopes of exhausting himself before going back to his small, stuffy room. The sky was low and sullen, with heat lightning flickering among the clouds, and the atmosphere was damp as a bath sponge. He should have been in Albany by now—no less humid and bug-ridden, but somewhat cooler, and near the sweet dark forests of the Adirondacks.

Still, he didn’t regret his hasty journey to Wilmington. Willie was sorted; that was the important thing. And Willie’s sister, Brianna—he stopped dead for a moment, eyes closed, reliving the moment of transcendence and heart-break he had experienced that afternoon, seeing the two of them together for what would be their only meeting, ever. He’d scarcely been able to breathe, his eyes fixed on the two tall figures, those handsome, bold faces, so alike—and both so like the man who had stood beside him, unmoving, but by con-

trast with Grey, taking in great tearing gulps of air, as though he feared he might never breathe again.

Grey rubbed idly at his left ring finger, not yet accustomed to finding it bare. He and Jamie Fraser had done the best they could to safeguard those they loved, and despite his melancholy, he was comforted at the thought that they were united in that kinship of responsibility.

Would he ever meet Brianna Fraser MacKenzie again? he wondered. She had said not—and seemed as saddened by that fact as he was.

“God bless you, child,” he murmured, shaking his head as he turned back toward the harbor. He would miss her very much—but as with Willie, his relief that she would soon be out of Wilmington and out of danger overwhelmed his personal sense of loss.

He glanced involuntarily at the water as he came out onto the quay, and drew a deep sigh of relief at seeing the empty stake, aslant in the tide. He hadn’t understood her reasons for doing what she’d done, but he’d known her father—and her brother, for that matter—far too long to mistake the stubborn conviction he’d seen in those catlike blue eyes. So he’d got her the small boat she’d asked for, and stood on the quay with his heart in his throat, ready to create a distraction if needed, as her husband had rowed her out toward the bound pirate.

He’d seen men die in great numbers, usually unwillingly, occasionally with resignation. He’d never seen one go with such passionate gratitude in his eyes. Grey had no more than a passing acquaintance with Roger MacKenzie, but suspected him to be a remarkable man, having not only survived marriage to that fabulous and dangerous creature but actually having sired children upon her.

He shook his head and turned, heading back toward the inn. He could safely wait another two weeks, he thought, before replying to Germain’s letter—which he had deftly magicked out of the diplomatic pouch when he’d seen William’s name upon it—at which time he could truthfully say that, alas, by the time the letter had been received, Lord Ellesmere was somewhere in the wilderness between North Carolina and New York, and thus could not be informed that he was recalled to England, though he (Grey) was positive that Ellesmere would greatly regret the loss of his opportunity to join Sir George’s staff, when he learned of it—several months hence. Too bad.

He began to whistle “Lillibulero,” and strode back to the inn in good spirits.

He paused in the taproom, and asked for a bottle of wine to be sent up—only to be informed by the barmaid that “the gentleman” had already taken a bottle upstairs with him.

“And two glasses,” she added, dimpling at him. “So I don’t s’pose he meant to drink it all himself.”

Grey felt something like a centipede skitter up his spine.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “Did you say that there is a gentleman in my room?”

“Yes, sir,” she assured him. “He said as he’s an old friend of yours. . . . Now, he did tell me his name. . . .” Her brow furrowed for an instant, then cleared. “Bow-shaw, he said, or summat of the kind. Frenchy kind of name,” she

clarified. "And a Frenchy kind of gentleman, too. Will you be wanting food at all, sir?"

"No, I thank you." He waved her off, and went up the stairs, thinking rapidly whether he had left anything in his room that he shouldn't have.

A Frenchman, named Bow-shaw . . . *Beauchamp*. The name flashed in his mind like the flicker of heat lightning. He stopped dead for an instant in the middle of the staircase, then resumed his climb, more slowly.

Surely not . . . but who else might it be? When he had ceased active service, some years before, he had begun diplomatic life as a member of England's Black Chamber, that shadowy organization of persons charged with the interception and decoding of official diplomatic mail—and much less official messages—that flowed between the governments of Europe. Every one of those governments possessed its own Black Chamber, and it was not unusual for the inhabitants of one such chamber to be aware of their opposite numbers—never met, but known by their signatures, their initials, their unsigned marginal notes.

Beauchamp had been one of the most active French agents; Grey had run across his trail several times in the intervening years, even though his own days in the Black Chamber were well behind him. If he knew Beauchamp by name, it was entirely reasonable that the man knew him as well—but their invisible association had been years ago. They had never met in person, and for such a meeting to occur *here* . . . He touched the secret pocket in his coat, and was reassured by the muffled crackle of paper.

He hesitated at the top of the stair, but there was no point in furtiveness; clearly, he was expected. With a firm step, he walked down the hall and turned the white china knob of his door, the porcelain smooth and cool beneath his fingers.

A wave of heat engulfed him and he gasped for air, involuntarily. Just as well, as it prevented his uttering the blasphemy that had sprung to his lips.

The gentleman occupying the room's only chair was indeed "Frenchy"—his very well-cut suit set off by cascades of snowy lace at throat and cuff, his shoes buckled with a silver that matched the hair at his temples.

"Mr. Beauchamp," Grey said, and slowly closed the door behind him. His damp linen clung to him, and he could feel his pulse thumping in his own temples. "I fear you take me at something of a disadvantage."

Perseverance Wainwright smiled, very slightly.

"I'm glad to see you, John," he said.

GREY BIT HIS TONGUE to forestall anything injudicious—which description covered just about anything he might say, he thought, with the exception of "Good evening."

"Good evening," he said. He lifted an eyebrow in question. "*Monsieur Beauchamp?*"

"Oh, yes." Percy got his feet under him, making to rise, but Grey waved him back and turned to fetch a stool, hoping the seconds gained by the movement would allow him to regain his composure. Finding that they didn't, he

took another moment to open the window, and stood for a couple of lungfuls of the thick, dank air, before turning back and taking his own seat.

“How did that happen?” he asked, affecting casualness. “Beauchamp, I mean. Or is it merely a *nom de guerre*?”

“Oh, no.” Percy took up his lace-trimmed handkerchief and dabbed sweat delicately from his hairline—which was beginning to recede, Grey noted. “I married one of the sisters of the Baron Amandine. The family name is Beauchamp; I adopted it. The relationship provided a certain *entrée* to political circles, from which . . .” He shrugged charmingly and made a graceful gesture that encompassed his career in the Black Chamber—and doubtless elsewhere, Grey thought grimly.

“My congratulations on your marriage,” Grey said, not bothering to keep the irony out of his voice. “Which one are you sleeping with, the baron or his sister?”

Percy looked amused.

“Both, on occasion.”

“Together?”

The smile widened. His teeth were still good, Grey saw, though somewhat stained by wine.

“Occasionally. Though Cecile—my wife—really prefers the attentions of her cousin Lucianne, and I myself prefer the attentions of the sub-gardener. Lovely man named Emile; he reminds me of you . . . in your younger years. Slender, blond, muscular, and brutal.”

To his dismay, Grey found that he wanted to laugh.

“It sounds extremely French,” he said dryly, instead. “I’m sure it suits you. What do you want?”

“More a matter of what *you* want, I think.” Percy had not yet drunk any of the wine; he took up the bottle and poured carefully, red liquid purling dark against the glasses. “Or perhaps I should say—what England wants.” He held out a glass to Grey, smiling. “For one can hardly separate your interests from those of your country, can one? In fact, I confess that you have always seemed to me to *be* England, John.”

Grey wished to forbid him the use of his Christian name, but to do so would merely emphasize the memory of their intimacy—which was, of course, what Percy intended. He chose to ignore it, and took a sip of his wine, which was good. He wondered whether he was paying for it—and if so, how.

“What England wants,” he repeated, skeptical. “And what is your impression of what England wants?”

Percy took a swallow of the wine and held it in his mouth, evidently savoring it, before finally swallowing.

“Hardly a secret, my dear, is it?”

Grey sighed, and stared pointedly at him.

“You’ve seen this ‘Declaration of Independency’ issued by the so-called Continental Congress?” Percy asked. He turned and, reaching into a leather bag he had slung over the back of the chair, withdrew a folded sheaf of papers, which he handed to Grey.

Grey had not in fact seen the document in question, though he’d certainly heard about it. It had been printed only two weeks previous, in Philadelphia,

yet copies had spread like wind-borne weeds through the Colonies. Raising a brow at Percy, he unfolded the paper and skimmed it rapidly.

"The King is a tyrant?" he said, half-laughing at the outrageousness of some of the document's more extreme sentiments. He folded the sheets back together and tossed them on the table.

"And if I am England, I suppose you are the embodiment of France, for the purposes of this conversation?"

"I represent certain interests there," Percy replied blandly. "And in Canada."

That rang small alarm bells. Grey had fought in Canada with Wolfe, and was well aware that while the French had lost much of their North American holdings in that war, they remained ferociously entrenched in the northern regions, from the Ohio Valley to Quebec. Close enough to cause trouble now? He thought not—but wouldn't put anything past the French. Or Percy.

"England wants a quick end to this nonsense, plainly." A long, knob-jointed hand waved toward the paper. "The Continental army—so-called—is a flimsy association of men with no experience and conflicting notions. What if I were prepared to provide you with information that might be used to . . . separate one of Washington's chief officers from his allegiance?"

"What if you were?" Grey replied, making no effort to conceal the skepticism in his voice. "How would this benefit France—or your own interests, which I take leave to think are possibly not entirely identical?"

"I see that time has not softened your natural cynicism, John. One of your less attractive traits—I don't know whether I ever mentioned that to you."

Grey widened his stare slightly, and Percy sighed.

"Land, then," he said. "The Northwest Territory. We want it back."

Grey uttered a short laugh.

"I daresay you do." The territory in question, a large tract northwest of the Ohio River Valley, had been ceded to Great Britain from France at the end of the French and Indian War. Britain had not occupied the territory, though, and had prevented the colonists' expansion into it, owing to armed resistance from the natives and the ongoing negotiation of treaties with them. The colonists weren't pleased about it, he understood. Grey had encountered some of said natives himself, and was inclined to think the British government's position both reasonable and honorable.

"French traders had extensive ties with the aboriginals in that area; you have none."

"The fur-trading merchants being some of the . . . interests . . . you represent?"

Percy smiled openly at that.

"Not the major interests. But some."

Grey didn't bother asking why Percy was approaching him—an ostensibly retired diplomat of no particular influence—in the matter. Percy knew the power of Grey's family and connections from the days of their personal association—and "Monsieur Beauchamp" knew a great deal more about his present personal connections from the nexus of information that fed the Black Chambers of Europe. Grey could not act in the matter, of course. But he was well placed to bring the offer quietly to the attention of those who could.

He felt as though every hair on his body was standing on end like an insect's antennae, alert for danger.

"We would require something more than the suggestion, of course," he said, very cool. "The name of the officer in question, for example."

"Not mine to share, at the moment. But once a negotiation in good faith is opened . . ."

Grey was already wondering to whom he should take this offer. *Not* Sir George Germain. Lord North's office? That could wait, though.

"And your personal interests?" he asked, with an edge. He knew Percy Wainwright well enough to know that there would be some aspect of the affair to Percy's personal benefit.

"Ah, that." Percy sipped at his wine, then lowered the glass and gazed limpidly at Grey across it. "Very simple, really. I am commissioned to find a man. Do you know a Scottish gentleman named James Fraser?"

Grey felt the stem of his glass crack. He went on holding it, though, and sipped the wine carefully, thanking God, firstly, that he had never told Percy Jamie Fraser's name and, secondly, that Fraser had left Wilmington that afternoon.

"No," he said calmly. "What do you want with this Mr. Fraser?"

Percy shrugged, and smiled.

"Only a question or two."

Grey could feel blood seeping from his lacerated palm. Holding the cracked glass carefully together, he drank the rest of his wine. Percy was quiet, drinking with him.

"My condolences upon the loss of your wife," Percy said quietly. "I know that she—"

"You know nothing," Grey said roughly. He leaned over and set the broken glass on the table; the bowl rolled crazily, the lees of wine washing the glass. "Not one thing. About my wife, *or* about me."

Percy lifted his shoulders in the faintest of Gallic shrugs. *As you like*, it said. And yet his eyes—they were still beautiful, damn him, dark and soft—rested on Grey with what seemed a genuine sympathy.

Grey sighed. Doubtless it *was* genuine. Percy could not be trusted—not ever—but what he'd done had been done from weakness, not from malice, or even lack of feeling.

"What do you want?" he repeated.

"Your son—" Percy began, and Grey turned suddenly on him. He gripped Percy's shoulder, hard enough that the man gave a little gasp and stiffened. Grey leaned down, looking into Wainwright's—sorry, *Beauchamp's*—face, so close that he felt the warmth of the man's breath on his cheek and smelled his cologne. He was getting blood on Wainwright's coat.

"The last time I saw you," Grey said, very quietly, "I came within an inch of putting a bullet through your head. Don't give me cause to regret my restraint."

He let go and stood up.

"Stay away from my son—stay away from me. And if you will take a well-meant bit of advice—go back to France. Quickly."

Turning on his heel, he went out, shutting the door firmly behind him. He

was halfway down the street before he realized that he had left Percy in his own room.

“The devil with it,” he muttered, and stamped off to beg a billet for the night from Sergeant Cutter. In the morning, he would make sure that the Fraser family and William were all safely out of Wilmington.



AND SOMETIMES THEY AREN'T

*Lallybroch
Inverness-shire, Scotland
September 1980*

“WE ARE ALIVE,” Brianna MacKenzie repeated, her voice tremulous. She looked up at Roger, the paper pressed to her chest with both hands. Her face streamed with tears, but a glorious light glowed in her blue eyes. “Alive!”

“Let me see.” His heart was hammering so hard in his chest that he could barely hear his own words. He reached out a hand, and reluctantly she surrendered the paper to him, coming at once to press herself against him, clinging to his arm as he read, unable to take her eyes off the bit of ancient paper.

It was pleasantly rough under his fingers, handmade paper with the ghosts of leaves and flowers pressed into its fibers. Yellowed with age, but still tough and surprisingly flexible. Bree had made it herself—more than two hundred years before.

Roger became aware that his hands were trembling, the paper shaking so that the sprawling, difficult hand was hard to read, faded as the ink was.

December 31, 1776

My dear daughter,

As you will see if ever you receive this, we are alive . . .

His own eyes blurred, and he wiped the back of his hand across them, even as he told himself that it didn't matter, for they were surely dead now, Jamie Fraser and his wife, Claire—but he felt such joy at those words on the page that it was as though the two of them stood smiling before him.

It *was* the two of them, too, he discovered. While the letter began in Jamie's hand—and voice—the second page took up in Claire's crisply slanted writing.