

MARCH 1767  
SANDY CREEK,  
NORTH CAROLINA



# *Prologue*

“YOU BOYS ARE CERTAIN YOU WANT ME TO BE A leader in this.”

Robert Boothe searched the faces of the men around him. “It’s not just a few men here and there anymore. It’s—” He picked up the paper in front of him and read, “An Association to assemble ourselves for conferences for regulating publick Grievances and abuses of Power.” He let the page drop. “It’s a mighty big responsibility, leading a thing like that.”

“If we trust you enough to write it, we trust you enough to lead us in standing by it.” John Woodbridge clapped Robert’s shoulder. “You’ve been leading folks for years, Preacher. We trust you. And anybody who don’t—knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know, ain’t that what the Scripture says?”

“I don’t think the Scripture was speaking of my leadership skills.” Robert’s drawl was quiet in the big meetinghouse. Too quiet. But he was not a man given to raising his voice.

“What was it you wrote in that list?” This from a rangy, angular man Robert knew only as Perry. “Right near the end, there. ‘In Cases of differences in Judgment we will submit to the Majority of our Body.’ So submit.”

Robert glanced up and looked around at that “majority of

the body,” what part of it was present. So many men, all sick and tired of government corruption.

All he had ever wanted was to be a preacher. A circuit rider, at that. Living life for the Lord, for the lost, for the wind in his face. Now he was “regulating public grievances and abuses of power.” And still shy of thirty-five.

He took the pen Woodbridge handed him and ran his eye down the page one last time.

*That we will pay no Taxes until we are satisfied they are agreeable to Law . . .*

*That we will pay no Officer any more fees than the Law allows . . .*

*That in Cases of differences in Judgment we will submit to the Majority of our Body.*

Once he signed the pledge, there would be no turning back. Not that there was any turning back even now. Not after eleven years of preaching freedom.

“To all which we do solemnly swear,” he read slowly, out loud.

He dipped the nib in the inkwell and signed his name.

Robert Boothe was a Regulator. No turning back.

FOUR YEARS LATER  
MARCH 1771  
AYEN FORD,  
NORTH CAROLINA



ROBERT BOOTHE HAD NEVER KNOWN HIS favorite county justice to burst in on a late-night Regulator meeting at the Ayen Ford Baptist meetinghouse.

Other folks certainly had done just that. The sheriff, for one. But not Geoffrey Sheridan. The moment his old friend came through the door, Robert knew this was a warning.

“Sheriff Kendall on his way?” he asked, stepping away from the men clustered in the back of the meetinghouse.

“Not only the sheriff.” Geoffrey Sheridan was in his middle forties, only ten years older than Robert, but tonight he looked sixty. “One of the governor’s men is with him. A new man, Colonel Charles Drake. I don’t know what you and your men are meeting about tonight, and I’ve no wish to know. But Drake is looking for trouble. If he looks here—”

“I allow as he’ll find it.” Robert smiled grimly. “Thanks, Geoff. Now you’d best be getting out while you can.”

A musket butt cracked against the door. Too late for anyone to run. Robert motioned Sheridan behind him an instant before the door crashed against the wall.

Robert had dealt with the wrong side of the law before. He’d

preached without a license for fifteen years and led Regulators for nearly half that, and the last thing Ayen Ford needed was a new agent of Governor Tryon. The stranger behind the sheriff wore a sword that branded him as a military man. No older than Robert, tall and trim, coal-black hair in a flawless queue and eyes that looked right through a man and out the other side.

“What’s this about?” Robert said.

“There’s a law against seditious meetings.” Ebeniah Kendall was a big man. Robert was solidly built, but the sheriff was easily sixty pounds heavier, made weightier by the knowledge of his own power and the musket he held at Robert’s chest. “I’ve seen my share of dissenter preachers calling for rebellion. Don’t try to tell me this is just neighborly talk. It’s the kind of thing the governor wants to put an end to. Which is what Colonel Drake and I are here to do.”

“This being Colonel Drake, I gather.” Robert nodded toward the stranger, who was examining the room. Simple plank benches, a few windows, a front door Kendall had forced open, and a second exit behind the unadorned pulpit.

Drake pulled his attention from his perusal and wordlessly inclined his head.

From the corner of his eye, Robert saw Saul McBraden move restlessly. *Lord, help.* If Saul took a notion to knock the sheriff upside the head, five and a half feet of musket would blow the pastor of the Ayen Ford Baptists from here to kingdom come. Robert wanted to go to heaven, but not that way.

“Put the gun down, Sheriff,” he said evenly. “I’ll give you fair warning that you’re on God’s property and he’s watching you, but beyond that I’m not aiming to run and I’m not aiming to fight you.”

Saul McBraden exploded. “But Preacher, they have no right to come on in through here unprovoked and—”

“I told you, there’s a law,” Kendall snapped.

“Not by our rights as Englishmen,” Saul muttered.

Robert eased in front of Saul before Drake could see the

young man's clenched fists. Saul's hair was more blond than red, but every now and then, the red showed in his temper. If Saul got angry, and the officials got angry, the lot of them would end up in jail. Which they would anyway if Sheriff Kendall and this Colonel Drake fellow found out they'd been meeting to discuss unjust taxes.

"If you're here to break this up, then break it up," Robert said. "There's no need for it to get out of hand."

Geoffrey Sheridan came forward a step. "These are good men, Colonel."

"I'll be the judge of that." Drake's gaze roved over the small gathering of men, church members and otherwise, before again coming to rest on Robert.

Drake said nothing more. But there was a challenge in his silence, a challenge Robert felt to the soles of his boots.

Charles Drake was not finished with Robert Boothe.

"Everyone get out." The sheriff gestured with his musket. The men looked at Robert. He nodded.

One by one the men filed out the front door. The governor's riot act made a felony of failure to leave the meeting within an hour of the sheriff's order. Sometimes a man had to pick his battles. Saul was last to go, looking as if he'd just as soon stay and fight it out with the law.

Robert held his ground beside Geoffrey Sheridan and watched Colonel Drake watch the men. The governor's new man was all chiseled edges and poise, dark and polished, how Robert had always imagined an eastern military man to look. Robert was more a continuation of the rough brown wood of the meetinghouse. Oak-brown hair, bronzed skin, buckskin hunting shirt. Not of Drake's world at all.

"I would never have guessed," the colonel said, "that a building as small and plain as this could ever be suspected as the breeding ground of mass rebellion. Or that a man like you should ever be suspected as the leader of it."

"Life is full of surprises, Colonel."

“Are you admitting—”

“Nothing at all.”

A spark of something like humor flickered in Drake’s dark eyes. “I see.” He held Robert’s gaze a moment longer, then wheeled abruptly and motioned for Kendall to follow.

Kendall moved toward the door. “If anything comes of this, we’ll be back. And we’ll be coming for you.”

“It’d not be the first time,” Robert said quietly.

“And you, Sheridan.” Drake paused at the door. “This is the last time you’ll play with fire.”

When Robert got home, Susanna’s piping seven-year-old voice instantly called from the sleeping loft overhead. “Is Papa home? Can I get up and say good night, Mama? You said I could if I was awake. I’m awake.”

“So I hear,” Magdalen Boothe murmured as Robert leaned down to kiss her.

“Let her wait a minute,” Robert whispered into Magdalen’s hair. Thick dark bronze ringlets, loosely bound back, smelling of lye soap and thyme. Robert’s manservant, Gunning, came in and hastily edged back out. Gunning could wait too.

Magdalen gave Robert the minute he’d asked for plus a little more, then pulled away and called back to Susanna. “Come say good night. Then back to bed.”

Susanna padded down the ladder, her light blond curls wisping out from under her nightcap, her cornflower-blue eyes suspiciously heavy. She stopped a few feet short of Robert and asked, “Why are you holding Cricket?”

He’d been loading his rifle once as Susanna watched him close the hinged frizzen that struck sparks over the priming pan. *It squeaks*, she had said, *just like a cricket*. The rifle had been called Cricket ever since. Persistent squeak notwithstanding, it was a beautiful gun. Tempered .45-caliber bore, flame-maple stock, brass fittings, scrolled carving Robert had done himself on long winter nights. The flint was knapped sharp, the trigger as smooth

as any he had ever known. He'd take Cricket and a good horse over any other advantage a man could name. But there were times, like tonight, when a good rifle was not the answer.

"You know Papa brings his rifle down to the meeting-house sometimes," Magdalen said smoothly.

"Can I go with you next time, Papa?"

"Depends how late it is and what I'm doing." Robert reached around her and set Cricket in the corner.

"What were you doing this time?"

"Talking with some men."

"About the vestry tax?"

Robert frowned. "Who told you about that?"

"Benjamin told me," Susanna said.

That explained it. Benjamin Woodbridge, older brother of Susanna's best friend, was twelve and knew everything.

"And I heard you say it to Mama after meeting last Sunday," Susanna added.

Robert glanced at Magdalen, wondering what else Susanna had overheard in days past. "The vestry tax is a mighty heavy subject for so late at night, Susanna. And a mighty heavy subject for a curly little head like yours."

"But what is it?"

"Money we have to chunk in to support the Church of England. Even if we don't agree with the Church of England."

Susanna's forehead puckered. "But that's not right."

"Well, some of us don't think so."

"Rob . . ."

The soft southern in Magdalen's voice turned his name into a syllable and a half, a quiet warning that it was late and this was no time to rehearse their grievances. So he amended his statement in silence, thinking, A whole slew of us don't think it's right. Baptist, Presbyterian, Quaker, who knows what else, we all hate it. All but the Anglican clergy it profits.

Gunning came all the way into the room this time. "Sorry, Master Rob, I didn't mean to walk in on you and the missus

while you were—uh—”

“No harm done, Gunning.” Robert winked at Magdalen.

“While you were what, Papa?” Susanna piped up.

“Nothing, pumpkin. And neither is the vestry tax. Nothing to bother your head about, that is.” How did a man explain a decade and a half of injustice to a seven-year-old who didn’t know what *extortion* meant?

“Papa,” Susanna said, “what’s extortion?”

“Benjamin again?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I figured,” he said.

“I don’t hear anything that sounds like ‘good night,’” Magdalen said.

“Good night, Papa.” Susanna lifted her face for a kiss. Robert complied and gave her a gentle nudge in the direction of the ladder.

He had never meant to drag his family into his stand for freedom. But these days the struggle touched every part of life. He wished he did not feel so powerless to stop it.

“How was the meeting?” Gunning asked when Susanna had disappeared into the loft.

“You just heard. Nothing to bother your head about.”

Gunning gave him a look. “That might work on Miss Susanna, but not on me, no sir.”

“It doesn’t work on her either,” Robert said wryly. “John Woodbridge needs to grub up more work for Benjamin. The scouts say Governor Tryon got leave from his council four days ago to muster his militia and march our way. We’ve a meeting of Regulators planned, but in the meantime, we’re studying on what to do. We didn’t get far before Sheridan came to warn us.”

He passed lightly over the details of his encounter with Drake, not wanting to frighten his wife. Not that Magdalen Davies Boothe was an easy woman to frighten. She had left her life as the privileged daughter of a plantation owner to follow Robert to his mountain circuit, where she had known things far

more frightening than officials with inflated views of themselves.

“Is there anything you can do?” Magdalen asked when he finished.

“Get a license,” Robert said with a humorless smile. “That’s all a man like Drake wants—control over what I say and where I say it.”

“He thinks he’s got more say over it than the Lord does?” Gunning’s smile was equally mirthless.

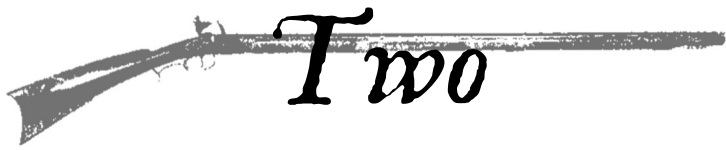
“If he thinks he does, he’s wrong,” Robert said. “The county has no authority to limit where and when a man may preach the Word. But even Geoffrey Sheridan doesn’t seem to understand that, obliging as he’s been. I didn’t tell him I’m fixing to preach in the open air tomorrow. He’d not have taken to that notion, though he’d know better than to think he could change my mind.”

“Give him time, love,” Magdalen said gently. “The Lord didn’t show you everything in a day.”

“Geoff’s had nine years,” Robert said dryly. “But you’re right, of course. You always are.”

“I try to be.” Abruptly the teasing left her voice. “This Colonel Drake—did he know who you are? How you’ve organized the Regulators here and led petitions and all?”

“If he did, he didn’t say so,” Robert said. “Which is what worries me.”



# Two

“ROB. WAKE UP.”

Magdalen was shaking him. Robert opened one eye, grunted. “Mm.”

“Wake up. Did you hear that?”

He rolled halfway over. “Hear what?”

“*That.*”

The straw tick crackled as Robert sat up and listened. Someone across the street seemed to be making an unholy din. He glanced at the kitchen window beyond the doorway. Dawn was still well on the other side of the horizon.

“Some no-account out celebrating. Though what there is to celebrate these days I don’t know.” He lay down again and waited for Magdalen to settle beside him. “More likely, maybe, someone making a protest in his own way.”

A crash. Like a door rending from its hinges. Across the street but loud enough to be their own front door.

“I don’t think that’s it, Rob,” Magdalen said in a small voice. “Across the street—that’s—”

“Geoff Sheridan’s house. I know.” Robert was already on his feet, reaching for the garments that lay over the chair in the corner. “Something’s wrong. Stay here and I’ll go see.”

“Be careful, Rob.”

He threw on his clothes. “Don’t you worry, love.”

Torchlight flared from Geoffrey Sheridan’s house as Robert stepped into the street. A pair of horses moved restlessly in front of a splintered void where the door had been.

Robert’s fingers tightened on Cricket’s cool barrel. If whoever was over there crossed the street to kick in Robert’s door that way, Cricket would do the talking. Robert was a peace-loving man, a preacher, after all. But when it came to protecting family, preachers in these parts could shoot.

He edged cautiously past the horses. Voices carried from within the building. Sheriff Kendall’s, strident as always. Sheridan’s voice, and a deeper, quieter one. The words were indistinct, but the tones indicated an argument.

Footsteps neared the doorway. Robert faded into the shadows. Sheriff Kendall appeared with a torch in one hand. Behind him came Colonel Charles Drake, escorting Geoffrey Sheridan. Sheridan’s lips were pressed together, his hands clasped in front of him.

Not clasped.

Shackled.

Anger surged through Robert, a notch shy of white rage. Without moving from the shadows, he said, “What do you think you’re doing, Drake?”

Colonel Drake wheeled. The torchlight accentuated the sharp lines of his face, turned them hard as stone. “Reverend Boothe. I might have known.”

“I asked you a question, Colonel.”

“What do I think I’m doing, was that it? I might ask you the same.”

Robert moved forward. “I’m looking out for law and justice, is what I’m doing.”

“Don’t try, Rob,” Sheridan said in a low, weary voice.

Drake’s smile showed straight, perfect teeth. “On the contrary. Law and justice say Sheridan has countermanded the

governor's authority long enough."

"That's a rank lie."

"No doubt you would say so. From what I understand, you've reaped most of the benefits."

"This is wrong, Colonel."

"My word here is law."

"Not to God."

"Listen to me, preacher." The smile was gone. "The only reason I'm not taking you with him is that I'm giving you just enough rope to hang yourself."

Magdalen looked out the window, seeing dim silhouettes in the torchlight, two men, no, three, parting from one lone figure. Dark shapes, nothing more. What if Rob—

*No, Lord. I'm not going to go there.*

She forced herself to turn from the window. The taper she'd set on the kitchen table flickered as Gunning let himself in the back door. "You all right, Miz Maggie?"

She almost couldn't see him, the way his dark skin blended with the shadows. But his deep voice was comforting. "I'm well enough. Rob went to see what the noise was."

"I figured he would. That's why I come in. He'd have wanted me to."

"I just hope Rob doesn't do anything foolish."

The front door opened behind her. Robert said, "I haven't, though I've surely a mind to."

Magdalen turned. Robert shut the door. His voice and face were calm. Too calm. But when he looked at her, the candlelight showed that his eyes, the deep color of warm molasses, were not.

"What happened?" she said, as much for Robert's benefit as her own. "I thought I saw the sheriff."

"Aye." He set Cricket in the corner with care but a little more force than was strictly necessary. "And Charles Drake."

"But what were they doing at Sheridan's house? In the wee hours of the night?"

“Arresting him for treason.”

“Oh, Rob, no.”

“I thought you said he let Sheridan off with just a warning at that meeting of yours,” Gunning said.

“When he speaketh fair, believe him not: for seven abominations are in his heart,” Robert said bitterly.

“What did you do?” Gunning wanted to know.

“I’d have shot him if my conscience would’ve let me.” He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at Magdalen. “We had some peace with Geoff on the court. He kept the rest in line. But now it’s up to me.”

“And all the other men like you,” Magdalen said softly.

She saw the quick twist of his lips, a melancholy half smile. He knew good men stood with him. He knew the Lord stood with him. But in some part of Rob’s mind, it would always be up to him.

She was scared to death of what could happen to him, standing against men like Drake and the governor. But she was proud of him too. She let her eyes follow the rugged line of his profile, his wide shoulders, his nut-brown hair cut just to the back of his collar. Next to the Lord, she’d never loved anyone as she loved Robert Boothe. He was an easy man to love, as a rule. But she knew for a fact she wouldn’t want to stand in his way when once he’d had enough.

“What about preaching out of doors tomorrow?” she asked.

“I’ll be a risk, to be sure. But I’ve got to, Maggie.” Robert pulled her close, rested his chin on her hair. “If I’m next to go, I haven’t much time left.”



# Three

IN THE MORNING ROBERT LEFT TO PREACH ON the street as planned, though he lingered an extra moment over his goodbyes.

Magdalen could not stand to remain quietly at home and wonder what might happen. She took Susanna in tow to deliver fresh bread to the Thurmond family, a gaggle of motherless boys under the care of their only sister. Their father, Caleb, had nearly lost his leg in a woodcutting accident, and infection still threatened his life. Sixteen-year-old Elsie could use all the help she could get.

Elsie's heart-shaped face was grateful as she took Magdalen's basket. "Oh, Mrs. Boothe, thank you so much. For the bread, but just for coming. It's such a comfort to have women-folk about now and then. Come in and set a spell, if you don't mind the house. I try so hard to keep it tidy, but—"

Magdalen touched her shoulder. "You've managed very well, Elsie. We'll stay for a bit, if it won't be a trouble."

Susanna tugged Magdalen's arm. "Mama, may I play in the yard with Abner?"

"Yes, you may. Keep out of the road."

Susanna vanished out the door, and Magdalen added, "I'll

sit down, Elsie, but only if you will. You look tired.”

“I’m always tired now, I guess,” Elsie said with a wisp of a smile. She led Magdalen into the small house with its simple furnishings and pungent scents of old ashes, fresh broth, and grave illness. “Saul says when we’re wed he’ll not let me be tired anymore.” She blushed to the edge of her honey-colored hair.

Magdalen tsked playfully. “Is this the Saul McBraden I know?”

“I reckon he doesn’t say those things where most folks hear,” Elsie said, dropping her eyes.

“No, I reckon not,” Magdalen said with a laugh.

“And I don’t tell most folks either,” Elsie added shyly.

“Have you planned a time yet?” Magdalen watched Elsie take the kettle off the fire. The girl seemed so young to wed. Still, she was sixteen, the age Magdalen had been at her marriage to Robert, and many girls were married even younger than that.

“Saul had said right after planting.” Elsie filled a pair of tin cups and brought them to the table. The earthy spice of sassafras rose with the steam. “But then Pa had his trouble, and it’s all different now. Saul still wants us to wed and then keep Pa with us until he’s well, but Pa’s not even strong enough for that yet. And until he is, he needs me here.”

“How is he today?”

“The fever’s down, but he’s so weak it scares me. And we’ve no way to know if his leg will heal.” Elsie sat and lifted her cup, not quite hiding the tremble of her lips. She sipped slowly, as if gathering strength, then set the cup down and played with a dent in the rim. “Sometimes I wonder if the doctor waited too long to set the break, seeing as he wanted to take the leg until folks prayed him out of it. Pa might not ever get well. Not really *well*. And I’m happy to have him with Saul and me when we wed, but I don’t know if Pa would be happy that way.”

Magdalen leaned toward her. “You’re a brave woman, Elsie, and a good woman, to be willing to take your whole family into your new home.”

Elsie shrugged. "We're family. It's what we do." She gave a shy little smile. "I just hope Saul and I get some time to ourselves. We hardly do now, with him only visiting. I hate to think what it'll be if we're all in the same house."

Magdalen smiled. "Trust me, Elsie, when a man takes a wife, he can get downright stubborn about having her to himself."

Elsie blushed again. Magdalen had known she would.

Caleb Thurmond called hoarsely from the bedroom. "Elsie, someone's coming in the yard."

"I'll see to it, Pa," Elsie called back, rising. To Magdalen she said, "I'd best see who's here."

She opened the door. A tall, black-haired man, Robert's age or a little younger, stepped into the opening and bowed briefly to Elsie as if he owned the place and her with it.

Magdalen frowned. Other women might have swooned over the stranger's dark good looks. But not a woman who was happily married to the man she loved. And not a woman who saw Sheriff Kendall on the man's heels.

She had dreaded the thought of the governor's men accosting Robert as he preached. She had never thought to dread this. *Lord, tell me this isn't what I think it is.*

"Can I help you?" Elsie asked.

"I must say I scarcely expected such a fair young woman to answer the door." His smile was a study in masculine perfection. "Caleb Thurmond's place of residence, is it not?"

"Aye, but he's not able to see folks," Elsie said softly.

"I fear he has little choice. I am Colonel Charles Drake, representative of His Excellency William Tryon."

I knew it, Magdalen wanted to say. How she had known, she couldn't have said. But when Drake's smile slipped away, she saw a man who could throw Geoffrey Sheridan in a dungeon somewhere and not have his conscience bother him a whit.

"I have here a writ of execution for a civil debt in the amount of three pounds, eight shillings and sixpence," Drake said. "Payable to Ebeniah Kendall, past due by thirteen days."

“Mr. Sheridan ordered two months’ stay of execution.” Elsie’s voice wavered. “We’ve more than a month left.”

Not to Drake, you don’t, Magdalen thought. She got up and went to stand behind Elsie.

“Sheridan has been removed from office on charges of treason,” Drake said. “Your father must pay the debt at once or have his goods distrained for public auction.”

“There’s no money in the house.” Elsie spoke in a low voice, clearly trying not to disturb her father.

“Then distraintment will begin at once.” Drake turned. “Kendall, bring in your men.”

Magdalen could hold her peace no longer. “Colonel Drake, this family barely has a home to call its own. Caleb Thurmond was all but killed by falling timber not three weeks ago, and if you had any kind of human conscience, you’d not dare to sell their goods from under them.”

Drake’s eyes raked her up and down before he bowed. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“I don’t see as that matters, Colonel.” Ordinarily she didn’t mind her petite build, which fit perfectly into Robert’s side. But today she wished she were a foot and a half taller so she could look down at Drake instead of up. And she didn’t like the way his gaze played over her. Rob had always told her she was too fetching for her own good . . .

“Robert Boothe’s wife, sir,” Sheriff Kendall said.

“I might have known. A pity, that. She doesn’t look like a preacher’s wife.” Drake flashed a taut smile in her direction. “Get out of my way, Mrs. Boothe. And tell your husband to do the same.”

“Colonel, you can’t—”

“Yes, madam, I can.”

Sheriff Kendall shouldered between Magdalen and Elsie, four burly men following on his heels. Magdalen squeezed Elsie’s arm and turned back inside.

Caleb Thurmond appeared in the bedroom doorway, a

blanket around his shoulders and one hand gripping the doorframe. He was not much older than Rob, but the last three weeks had aged him by years.

Elsie turned around and saw him. “Pa! You shouldn’t be up. You’re not strong enough!”

“Sometimes the strength isn’t there till you need it,” Caleb said.

“At least sit in your chair by the window,” Elsie pleaded.

“Get that too,” Kendall called over his shoulder to his men. “It will fetch something at least.”

“I made that chair for my Jemima before she passed on, God rest her.” Caleb took a step forward, dragging his heavily splinted left leg. Pain washed over his face, yet he held his ground. “That’s one thing you ain’t taking.”

“We’ll take what we wish,” Kendall snapped.

“Not that,” Caleb said.

Kendall shoved him. Caleb fell hard. Elsie screamed. She broke from Magdalen’s side and pushed the sheriff away with surprising force. “Let him alone!”

Caleb said, “Elsie.” Then his eyes drifted shut and he went still.

The three Thurmond boys who weren’t working the fields burst into the room, Susanna tagging behind them. “What’d Elsie scream for?” Edward demanded. He stopped to stare. “What—”

Susanna’s eyes went wide. “Mama—”

“Susanna, you and Abner go back outside.” Magdalen’s voice caught. “Now. Edward, Owen—go get Preacher Boothe and Saul. Hurry!”