

Valley of the Shadow
Book 5
The American Patriot Series

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Chapter 1

Thursday, 30 October, 1777

11:05 p.m.

In the flickering candlelight the words swam and blurred before his eyes. Clenched in his hand, the paper shook.

Brigadier General Jonathan Carleton stared at the letter, his mind gone blank. A wave of terror and rage squeezed the air from his lungs and brought bile into his throat.

By degrees he became aware of the gusting wind that beat against the inn, the sudden bursts of freezing rain flailing the window panes, his own ragged breath. Despite the heat radiating from the hearth's blaze, chill sweat trickled down his brow and beneath his worn buckskins, darkly rain-slicked from the downpour his Rangers had ridden through. He swallowed with difficulty and forced himself to focus on the letter's signature.

William Howe.

Knight of the Bath. Commander in Chief of His Majesty's forces on the North American Station.

"Jon, what is it?"

Behind him, Colonel Charles Andrews's voice sounded hollow and far away. Ignoring his friend, Carleton studied the words scrawled boldly above Howe's name as though, if he willed it, they would say something else.

That the American cause was entirely lost. That Washington had surrendered to the British. That Howe's entire army waited outside the door to escort Carleton to the scaffold, there to hang for treason.

Anything.

Not this.

Tuesday 28 October, 1777

Brigadier General Jonathan Carleton

Sir,

This is to inform you that I hold Elizabeth Howard prisoner. If you wish her to live, present yourself to me, alone and unarmed, at my headquarters no later than two days following your receipt of this letter. The guard that bears it has orders to conduct you directly to me with all courtesies due a general officer.

Be advised that if you do not appear or if anyone accompanies or attempts to follow you, Miss Howard will die in that hour.

I am, sir,

Your most humble servant . . .

Humble servant. If he did not loathe Howe so intensely at that moment, he would laugh.

"Jon, please—"

His expression masked, Carleton thrust the letter at Andrews. The colonel threw an alarmed glance at the brigade's chief physician, Major Pieter Vander Groot, before bringing it close to the candle to scan its contents. When he looked up, his face had gone chalk white.

"Dear God! He has Beth!"

Vander Groot strode across the cramped chamber of the modest inn on the edge of the small village of Baptist Meeting House, where they were staying the night on their journey across New Jersey. He tore the letter from Andrews's hand and after reading it dropped the page on the table and slumped into one of the chairs drawn up to it, groaning, his face buried in his hands.

"It's my fault. My rashness caused this." Taking a shaky breath, Carleton moved woodenly past the two men.

Andrews grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. "What do you mean?"

"When they ambushed me at Gray's Hill," Carleton reminded him hoarsely. "I taunted Howe to his face. You warned me he'd move heaven and earth to capture me. Obviously he has." Again he stepped toward the door.

"You can't mean to go to him!"

Carleton tried to wrest his arm free, but Andrews gripped him by the other as well and forced Carleton to face him. "This is insane! Think, Jon. He'll arrest you—hang you."

For a suspended moment Carleton regarded the colonel blankly, unable to make sense of his plea or to come up with a coherent response. "I know," he rasped at last.

"Do you truly think he'll release Beth in exchange for you?"

"No."

"You're right. You'll accomplish nothing but to hand him your head on a silver platter—one of our best officers, the very one who so magnificently fleeced the British of every scrap of intelligence the patriots needed! What you suffered when General Gage arrested you back in Boston will be nothing to what Howe will do now. Didn't he say in Beth's hearing that he wanted to personally hand your scalp to George the Third? He'll make you the prime example of what happens to those who dare defy the king, then execute you both."

Carleton tore out of his hold, but before he could reach the door, Vander Groot sprang to block him. "What Charles says is true. I know Howe well enough to be certain of it."

"I—cannot—allow her—to die—alone," Carleton said, his voice thick, each word an effort. "*I will not.*"

Andrews's expression hardened, and he grasped Carleton by the shoulder. "Do you honestly think Howe hasn't thought of that, that he'd allow you to catch even one glimpse of each other, or that he'd give either of you the comfort of being hanged together? He'll never allow her to know that you gave yourself up for her, never allow you to see her one last time and assure her of your love!"

His voice broke. "After he hangs you, he'll simply let her rot away in misery in some stinking hellhole, knowing full well what would happen if you came, but wondering still whether you ever learned of her fate—or whether your love failed."

Staggered, Carleton tried blindly to turn away. Vander Groot shoved a chair toward him, and he collapsed into it. Leaning forward, hands gripped between his knees, shoulders heaving, Carleton fought to ride out the tide of agony that bore over him. But it rose all the higher until he feared he must either drown or be swept away to some unspeakable act of violence.

"Lord, what am I to do?" he whispered.

Vander Groot pulled up a chair and bent over him, his hand resting on Carleton's back. "First we have to verify that Howe's not lying, that indeed he does hold Beth. I'd not put any deception beyond him."

Carleton wrenched upright. "I have two days to present myself at Philadelphia before he executes her, Pieter! A detachment waits outside to take me to him—"

"They're under guard and will wait as long as we deem fit," Andrews countered. "Howe will do nothing unless he's certain you'll not come."

"But Beth—"

"Jon, you know I love Beth as much as you do," Vander Groot broke in, his face contorted with anguish. "To think of her suffering or—" Breaking off, he made a painful gesture before continuing, "If Howe hangs her, he'll lose the only hold he has over you and gain your undying enmity. Even a commanding officer can't completely secure himself from attack by a determined assailant, and if he doesn't know by now that there's no one more determined and capable than you, he's more thick-headed than even I give him credit for. Despite his threats, he dare not take that course and risk losing everything while there's yet hope you might be persuaded to give yourself up."

"You have the right to ask for proof of his claims," Andrews approved, "and that'll give us time to come up with a plan to rescue Beth."

Carleton gave a short laugh. Shoving out of his chair, he began to pace the room.

"If that were even possible, how could we rescue her when we've no idea where she's held?"

"His headquarters are in Philadelphia—"

Carleton rounded on Andrews. "It's certain he'd not hold her there, Charles, not with us on the way to join Washington, near at hand with his entire corps. There'd be too much opportunity for our spies to discover her location—"

"Then where?" Vander Groot's eyes narrowed. "New York?"

Carleton stared at him for a taut moment, then let out his breath in a groan. "When we left Albany, I sent her and Caleb downriver to Dobbs Ferry to take the post road to Boston. Her parents' ship was due in at any time from England, and I believed that route the easiest and fastest. My most trusted informants confirmed that after capturing the forts on the upper Hudson General Clinton withdrew his force to New York and that the militia had regained control south beyond Dobbs Ferry. I had every confidence they'd be entirely safe."

"Don't blame yourself. Beth knew the risks she was taking and took them freely." Andrews raked his fingers through his hair and released a sigh. "I wouldn't be surprised if Howe had her and Caleb followed from the time they left Philadelphia and was only waiting for his suspicions to be confirmed in order to take them."

"Howe's detachment found us here so it's likely we've been followed as well. Or someone's betrayed us as Jeffreys did." At thought of his former aide's treachery, which had too nearly resulted in his own capture by the British, Carleton ground his teeth.

"It's easy enough to track as large a force as ours," Vander Groot reminded him. "The Jersey militias may control this region, but there are still many loyalists all too willing to pass intelligence along to the British."

"You set patrols?" Carleton said sharply to Andrews.

The colonel made a dismissive gesture. "Two troops along with native scouts ranging two miles out, as usual. But neither Howe nor Clinton is foolish enough to risk sending a force

against us and provoking a general engagement. He'd have not only us, but also the Jersey militia on him like a hound on a badger."

"Then how did this detachment get through?"

"They didn't," Andrews pointed out. "Even though there are only ten of them, which would make it easier to find cover, Lieutenant Matheson's patrol intercepted them crossing the fields west of here despite the storm and darkness. He told me they made no show of resistance, but immediately showed a flag of truce and demanded to be brought to you."

Pulling a map out of Carleton's rawhide pouch on the table, he bent over it. "If Beth and Caleb were captured around Dobbs Ferry or even farther east along the post road, then New York's where they'd logically be taken. Howe would believe them fully secured from rescue or escape there."

Vander Groot snatched the letter from the table and studied it for a moment. "This letter is in Howe's hand, but judging by their uniforms, the detachment that delivered it belongs to one of Clinton's regiments."

Andrews's eyebrows rose. "Oh ho! Then Howe must have been in New York when he wrote it—which means he had a very urgent reason to leave off trying to smash through our puny defenses on the Delaware and travel all that way. I'll wager everything that Beth's in New York and Howe's headed back to his headquarters on the double. He wants you to come to Philadelphia in order to throw you off the scent and keep you as far from her as possible."

Carleton nodded, grim-faced, feeling that they grasped at straws. In the absence of any alternative, however, what choice did they have?

He arrested his steps abruptly. Covering his face with his hands, he thought, *No. We have another choice. We are not alone. The One for whom nothing is impossible is with us.*

He steadied and turned to his companions. "Pieter, you're familiar with British dispositions in the city. Where are their prisons located?"

"The North Dutch Church and a number of other churches have been turned into prisons. And there's the Provost's gaol at—" Blanching, Vander Groot broke off, horror coming into his eyes.

Carleton came to his side. "What is it? Tell me!"

Sweat beaded the doctor's brow. When Carleton shook him, Vander Groot met his alarmed gaze with a hopeless one.

"There's only one place on the continent where he'd be confident we could never get at her. Aboard one of the prison ships in New York Harbor. Guarded by the Royal Navy."

A wave of nausea twisted in Carleton's gut. "The devil himself wouldn't treat a woman so!"

"Perhaps not the devil," Vander Groot returned, his voice echoing the despair that gripped Carleton's breast. "But I wouldn't put it past Howe."

Cursing, Andrews slammed his fist on the table, toppling the guttering candle. It cast dizzying shadows as it fell, then abruptly extinguished, deepening the chamber's gloom.

Vander Groot went to the fireplace, brought a candlestick from the mantel, and placed it on the table where it faintly brightened a circle around them. "If that's the case, how are we to reach her, much less get her safely off one of those rotting hulks—if we can even determine which one she's aboard? Or to begin with, verify that she's indeed held on one of them?"

Carleton's shoulders slumped, and he let out a harsh laugh. "We'd need a navy to even get into the harbor, much less to overcome the British fleet."

Light dawned at the same instant comprehension came into his companions' eyes.

“You have a navy!” the two officers exclaimed in unison.

“With the merchantmen you outfitted as privateers this past summer, that gives you how many ready for combat—a dozen?”

Staring at Andrews, Carleton shook his head, hope plummeting to despair. “Even if every one of them were at hand—and they aren’t—what’s a tiny squadron of privateers compared to Lord Howe’s entire fleet? He’d swat them like a handful of fleas, send them to the bottom of the ocean.”

Andrews gave him a calculating look. “But we won’t be going against Black Dick’s entire fleet, Jon,” he said, referring to Admiral Lord Richard Howe, General William Howe’s elder brother. “A large number of his warships are in the Delaware, trying to blow through Washington’s defenses and open the sea roads to Philadelphia. Others are at Newport Harbor, still more prowling along our southern coast or in the Caribbean.”

For some moments the three men regarded one another soberly, each calculating the odds.

“He’d never leave New York without sufficient guard,” Carleton pointed out. “There’s no doubt that enough warships are stationed there to tilt the odds decisively against us. And don’t forget that Newport’s just outside Long Island Sound, and British ships are constantly prowling those waters.”

“Do your ships not fly the French flag?” Andrews demanded.

“When they’re not flying the Union Jack or the Spanish ensign,” Carleton conceded with a shrug. “My uncle, le comte, had their lines altered so that with a little paint and other adjustments by the ships’ carpenters they can appear as French, Spanish, or British.”

“The French and Spanish aren’t party to this war—yet. A small, harmless convoy of French merchantmen, say, blown off course during a gale at sea and seeking a port to make repairs and resupply should expect to be accommodated even by the British.”

“Brilliant!” Vander Groot exulted, rubbing his hands together.

“How many of your privateers are at hand?” Andrews demanded.

Carleton mentally reviewed the latest reports from Louis Teissèdre, his French agent. “Only three could be in port at Boston now or due within the next week: *Liberty*, *Destiny*, and *Invictus*.”

“Three ships will arouse less suspicion than a larger number. *Destiny* carries 100 guns, equal to the largest warship in Howe’s command, and *Liberty* and *Invictus* are 74s. That’s firepower enough for a bold stroke.”

Carleton resumed his pacing. “They’ll all have to be refitted and take on supplies before they can sail again. It’ll take too much time.”

“That can be delayed, can’t it? They’ll not be going far.”

“Perhaps, but what difference will it make if we don’t know which ship Beth’s aboard?”

“The prison ships are clustered in Wallabout Bay,” Vander Groot noted thoughtfully.

“There are only three, including the hospital ship, and she’s not likely to be held on that one. That leaves two. I was aboard one of them last spring and am known to the captain.”

“That will make our task easier.” Andrews turned to Carleton. “Send Stowe on his way to Boston tonight, and Briggs with him. Then wait until mid morning to send the detachment back to Howe so they can’t reach him before nightfall.”

Carleton stopped in front of the window and stared hopelessly out into the stormy night. “Even riding the fastest post horses, with a minimum of rest and no interference from the British, it isn’t possible to reach Boston any earlier than six days from now, Charles. And then the ships

will have to be stripped and readied for action. I'm ordered to surrender myself at Howe's headquarters *the day after tomorrow!*"

Vander Groot joined him at the window. "Then we have to stall. You have the right to demand proof that he has Beth, that this isn't simply a lie meant to trap you. Write a letter assuring Howe that you will turn yourself in—but only after receiving verification that she is indeed his prisoner."

Andrews moved to the fireplace to warm his hands at its blaze. "What proof will you demand?"

"That Howe send Caleb to me with a letter from Beth—written in her own hand."

"Perfect!" the doctor exclaimed. "Caleb may be held aboard the same ship as Beth or at least have some idea where she is."

Carleton let out an oath. "If Caleb knows where she is, Howe will never send him."

Arms folded, the doctor gnawed his lip while regarding Carleton with apprehension.

"I highly doubt Howe would hold them in the same place. I wouldn't." Andrews laid another log on the fire and prodded the seething embers with the poker. "In any case, as Pieter said, New York Harbor is the one place on the continent he'd believe Beth to be beyond our reach. He'd never credit you with the temerity to take on the Royal Navy right under Clinton's nose even if you knew exactly where she was held."

Vander Groot resumed his seat at the table. "And Howe won't risk losing you by refusing to negotiate terms for your surrender. He's no choice but to agree, and that'll give us just the time we need."

Leaning back in his chair, he studied the shadowed ceiling thoughtfully. "Let's see . . . it'll be tomorrow evening before Howe's detachment can deliver your letter. Then at least four more days until Howe's messenger can reach Clinton—who then must summon Beth and force her to write a letter. And another couple of days for Caleb to deliver it. Approximately a week in total."

Andrews joined Vander Groot at the table, his expression exultant. "You'll have a couple days more before you're expected at Howe's headquarters, Jon. By then your ships should have arrived at whatever rendezvous you set. And when you don't show at Philadelphia, it'll take another four days for Howe's commands to get to Clinton—more if our forts along the Delaware keep him busily enough engaged—"

Eyes narrowed, Carleton rounded on the two men and jabbed his finger in the direction of the window. "You hear that out there? What do you think that's like at sea? I've experienced it, and so have you, Charles. The fall storms are already on us. My ships are likely to encounter dirty weather and high seas on the way. If another storm hits before they leave port, it could be as long as a week until they can sail!"

"What other choice do we have but to take the risk?" Vander Groot demanded.

Carleton felt as though he had to fight for every breath. He swallowed with an effort and said gruffly, "Even with all my privateers, and even if the weather cooperates, there's no certainty of success against a large portion of Lord Howe's fleet. To attempt such madness will only extend Beth's suffering and may well endanger her life even more."

"Whether we attempt to rescue her and fail or you turn yourself over to Howe, Beth will certainly die," the colonel said forcefully. "Pieter's right—we have to risk it if there's to be any hope at all of saving her."

“She’s strong,” Vander Groot agreed, his tone sounding to Carleton as though he was trying to reassure himself. “She’ll not give up without a fight. We’ve nothing to lose, and everything to gain. And if all goes well, we might free not only Beth, but the prisoners with her.”

“Inform your French and Spanish captains of the stakes,” Andrews added, “and they’ll converge on New York Harbor like sharks scenting blood.”

Carleton could not suppress a smile. For the first time on that dark night, a measure of hope filtered through the anguish that held his heart in its iron grip. Rubbing his burning eyes, he stopped at the table, rifled through his pack, and pulled out a map of New Jersey.

He sank into a chair and unrolled it. While Andrews and Vander Groot leaned over him, he ran his finger slowly along the coastline, then stopped.

“Barnegat Bay. The draught should be deep enough for my ships at New Inlet, there, at the end of Squan Beach. It’s less than two day’s ride from here, and if the winds are fair, it’s less than two days from Boston by sea as well and only hours from New York Harbor.”

He looked up. “It’s been a dozen years since I rode through there, but then it was sparsely settled. Pirates and smugglers have been very active along that coast for a hundred years or more, and I’ll wager the inhabitants are more than a little sympathetic to our cause. The main concern is the treacherous tides.”

“I’ll talk to our local guides right away to make sure it’s sufficiently isolated,” Andrews noted with approval. “We’ll set the rendezvous point by their recommendation.”

“Tell them no more than they have to know, and make haste. I yet need to write orders to *Destiny’s* captain, and I want Stowe and Briggs off to Boston within the hour—with a small guard to accompany them, all in common dress but well armed, Charles. Warn them to remain on exceptional alert every moment and be prepared to take any measures that become necessary should they encounter the enemy.”

Andrews gave him a meaningful look. “Stowe will get through.”

“If I know him, he will.” Head drooping, Carleton pressed his fingers against his temples. “Once that’s done, we all need rest if we’re to think clearly on the morrow. It’s been a very long day, and we can do no more tonight. My head’s pounding, and I need at least to lie down and close my eyes for a few hours, though I doubt I’ll sleep.”

Vander Groot clasped Carleton’s shoulder and for a long moment regarded him earnestly. “Remember, we’re not alone.”

“Thank you,” Carleton said huskily, returning his look with a grateful one. “It’s certain we’ll need God’s help to carry off this mad plan.”

Vander Groot conceded a faint smile, then bade him and Andrews good night and quietly moved to the door. There he hesitated and swung back to see Carleton and Andrews bending over the map with their heads close together.

For a long moment the doctor fixed them both in an assessing look. At last he set his shoulders and eased the door open. Nodding to the guards posted outside, he stepped past them into the dark passage.

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*Friday, 31 October*  
*12:50 a.m.*

Vander Groot looked up from the letter he was writing to meet the hard gaze of the powerfully built black officer seated opposite him at the table. The tap of sleet and buffet of the storm's assault on the building filled the small chamber off the kitchen at the inn's rear.

"It's going to be a cold, wet ride."

"That be the least o' your worries," Major Isaiah Moghrab objected with a scowl. "You tryin' to get back into New York be foolhardy. You ride with us when the army parade through Philadelphia, and maybe some Tory reco'nize you and tell the British."

The doctor laid down his pen and stretched back in his chair. "That's unlikely. General Carleton gave me permission to ride with the corps only because my parents assured me that all their Tory friends had joined the exodus out of the city. There was no one left who might recognize me. At any rate, the loyalists who'd stayed were cowering in their homes that day for fear of reprisals from the patriots if they showed their faces."

"Gen'l Carleton don't give you leave to go."

"That's why I'm not telling him. If you wait to deliver this letter until morning when my absence is discovered, no one will be able to catch up with me."

Isaiah snorted. "And I take the blame."

"He won't fault you once he reads this."

"How you get into New York?" Isaiah countered.

Pulling a paper from the capacious leather pocketbook lying beside him, Vander Groot tossed it across the table to Isaiah. The major scrutinized it, his expression doubtful.

"You forget my parents were close friends of the brothers Howe—still are for all they know. The night you arrested me at Montcoeur, I'd just come from trying to meet with the admiral about these very prison ships where we suspect Beth's being held. Lord Howe was otherwise engaged, but his aide was more than happy to provide me a pass so I could visit my family in Philadelphia whenever I chose. I held onto it in case it might prove useful someday."

Although the strain on Isaiah's face eased, he stared into space, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. "We got to get to Miss 'Lizabeth somehow and soon, that's sure," he muttered, before returning his attention to the doctor. "I guess you find out whether you been betrayed when you reach New York."

Vander Groot dipped his pen in the inkwell and bent over his letter. "If we're to have any hope of success, we need someone inside the city who can locate Miss Howard, keep General Carleton informed, and have arrangements in place by the time his ships arrive. I'm the only one who can manage that, but I can't overpower a ship's crew alone. I want you with me and as many men as you can spirit across the Hudson. Can you leave one of your captains in charge of your troops while you're gone?"

When Isaiah nodded, Vander Groot finished writing, wiped his pen on an ink-stained cloth, and set it down. "You remember where you crossed the Hudson to reach Montcoeur the night you arrested me?"

Isaiah nodded. "One o' our brigades still in control o' the Jersey side o' the river there. But I need orders from the gen'l if they goin' to help us get 'cross since we don't have Pete to fetch us," he added. His younger son, who had secretly transported Elizabeth between the Hudson estate she and her aunt had leased and the islands of New York Harbor aboard a small sailboat, now served aboard *Destiny*.

"Good."

Frowning, Isaiah cocked one eye at the doctor. "You intend to stay at Montcoeur?"

Vander Groot scattered sand across the page. “My home’s not only right in the city, but is also being used as a hospital for the wives and children of British soldiers. Trying to explain the comings and goings of a party of black men to the staff would be difficult, to say the least. The caretaker and his wife at Montcoeur are a black couple named Stebbins that Sarah engaged,” he added, referring to Isaiah’s wife, who served as housekeeper for Elizabeth and her Aunt Tess. “I’m known to them, and the hospital occupying my house should provide sufficient pretext for them to allow me to stay there temporarily.”

Isaiah rubbed his jaw. “If Sarah hire them, then they likely be sympathetic to our cause. And know things we don’t.”

Vander Groot’s eyes narrowed. “As soon as I get there, I’ll feel them out. If they are sympathetic, they might be useful in recruiting a party to help us take control of the prison ship—or find out if Miss Howard’s being held somewhere else. There’s an old carriage house at the back of the property used for storage where you and your men should be able to lie in concealment until we determine the lay of the land. I’ll meet you there Sunday morning.”

He shook the sand off the letter. Folding the page, he handed it to the major.

“I guarantee General Carleton won’t deny you anything for the journey, and I’ll supply what’s needed at New York.” Frowning, he watched Isaiah tuck the letter into the pouch on his belt with every sign of reluctance. “Bring at least half a dozen of your best men. They’ll serve you well should you run afoul of any British patrols along the way.”

Isaiah waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “After all the troubles they suffer from us Continentals and the Jersey militia last winter and spring, they pull all their troops back ’round New York. All we got to worry about is loyalist spies.”

“Wear common dress for the journey, as will I. Luckily you and your men can pass as servants, which will allow you much greater liberty to come and go unremarked.”

“You know if soldiers be caught behind enemy lines in civilian dress, they be counted spies and hanged.”

“Is that going to stop you?” When Isaiah grinned and shook his head, Vander Groot said, “Nor me.”

He pulled out his watch, studied it, then got to his feet. “It’s past one o’clock already. I better get on the road. As long as this storm doesn’t delay me overmuch, I should reach King’s Bridge tomorrow afternoon and be in the city around nightfall. Be prepared to leave with your men as soon as you talk to the general. That’ll put you half a day behind me.”

Isaiah rose, shaking his head, brow creased with worry. “All this take too long, while Miss ’Lisabeth be sufferin’. A woman can’t last as long as a man in such conditions.”

Vander Groot swallowed around the lump in his throat, feeling as though a cruel hand squeezed the breath from his lungs. Images of the misery he had witnessed aboard one of the prison ships the past spring rose up to haunt him. To think of Elizabeth being forced to endure such horror filled him with inexpressible rage—and a sickening fear.

Controlling his emotions with an effort, he muttered, more to himself than to Isaiah, “If we rush ahead pell-mell, we’ll only guarantee our failure. We have to trust God to watch over her and guide us to her. He’s never failed us yet, and I’ve every confidence that He won’t now.”

He spoke bravely. Yet his heart was deeply torn.