

## Chapter One

1

### An Interrupted Conversation

The dog sensed them first. Dark as it was, Ian Murray felt rather than saw Rollo's head lift suddenly near his thigh, ears pricking. He put a hand on the dog's neck, and felt the hair there ridged with warning.

So attuned as they were to each other, he did not even think consciously, "Men," but put his other hand to his knife and lay still, breathing. Listening.

The forest was quiet. It was hours 'til dawn and the air was still as that in a church, with a mist like incense rising slowly up from the ground. He had lain down to rest on the fallen trunk of a giant tulip tree, preferring the tickle of wood-lice to seeping damp. He kept his hand on the dog, waiting.

Rollo was growling, a low, constant rumble that Ian could barely hear but felt easily, the vibration of it traveling up his arm, arousing all the nerves of his body. He hadn't been asleep—he rarely slept at night anymore—but had been quiet, looking up into the vault of the sky, engrossed in his usual argument with God. Quietness had vanished with Rollo's movement. He sat up slowly, swinging his legs over the side of the half-rotted log, heart beating fast now.

Rollo's warning hadn't changed, but the great head swiveled, following something unseen. It was a moonless night; Ian could see the faint silhouettes of trees and the moving shadows of the night, but nothing more.

Then he heard them. Sounds of passage. A good distance away, but coming nearer by the moment. He stood and stepped softly into the pool of black under a balsam fir. A click of the tongue, and Rollo left off his growling and followed, silent as the wolf who had been his father.

Ian's resting-place overlooked a game trail. The men who followed it were not hunting. White men. Now that was odd, and more than odd. He couldn't see them, but didn't need to; the noise they made was unmistakable. Indians traveling were not silent, and many of the Highlanders he lived among could move like ghosts in the wood—but he had no doubt whatever. Metal, that was it. He was hearing the jingle of harness, the clink of buttons and buckles—and gun barrels.

A lot of them. So close, he began to smell them. He leaned forward a little, eyes closed, the better to snuff up what clue he could. They carried pelts; now he picked up the dried-blood cold-fur smell that had probably waked Rollo—but not trappers, surely; too many. Trappers moved in ones and twos. Poor men, and dirty. Not trappers, and not hunters. Game was easy to come by at this season, but they smelled of hunger. And the sweat of bad drink.

Close by now, perhaps ten feet from the place where he stood. Rollo made a tiny snorting sound, and Ian closed his hand once more on the dog's ruff, but the men made too much noise to hear it. He counted the passing footsteps, the bumping of canteens and bullet boxes, foot-sore grunts and sighs of weariness.

Twenty-three men, he made it, and there was a mule-no, two mules with them; he could hear the creak of laden panniers and that querulous heavy breathing, the way a loaded mule did, always on the verge of complaint.

The men would never have detected them, but some freak of the air bore Rollo's scent to the mules. A deafening bray shattered the dark, and the forest erupted in front of him with a clishmaclaver of crashing and startled shouts. Ian was already running when pistol shots crashed behind him.

"A Dhia!" Something struck him in the head and he fell headlong. Was he killed?

No. Rollo was pushing a worried wet nose into his ear. His head buzzed like a hive and he saw bright flashes of light before his eyes.

"Run! Ruith!" he gasped, pushing at the dog. "Run out! Go!" The dog hesitated, whining deep in his throat. He couldn't see, but felt the big body lunge and turn, turn back, undecided.

"Ruith!" He got himself up onto hands and knees, urging, and the dog at last obeyed, running as he had been trained.

There was no time to run himself, even could he have gained his feet. He fell facedown, thrust hands and feet deep into the leaf mold, and wriggled madly, burrowing in.

A foot struck between his shoulder blades, but the breath it drove out of him was muffled in wet leaves. It didn't matter, they were making so much noise. Whoever had stepped on him didn't notice; it was a glancing blow as the man ran over him in panic, doubtless thinking him a rotted log.

The shooting ceased. The shouting didn't, but he made no sense of it. He knew he was lying flat on his face, cold damp on his cheeks and the tang of dead leaves in his nose-but felt as though very drunk, the world revolving slowly round him. His head didn't hurt much, past the first burst of pain, but he didn't seem able to lift it.

He had the dim thought that if he died here, no one would know. His mother would mind, he thought, not knowing what had become of him.

The noises grew fainter, more orderly. Someone was still bellowing, but it had the sound of command. They were leaving. It occurred to him dimly that he might call out. If they knew he was white, they might help him. And they might not.

He kept quiet. Either he was dying or he wasn't. If he was, no help was possible. If he wasn't, none was needed.

Well, I asked then, didn't I? he thought, resuming his conversation with God, calm as though he lay still on the trunk of the tulip tree, looking up into the depths of heaven above. A sign, I said. I

didna quite expect Ye to be so prompt about it, though.

2

Dutch Cabin

March 1773

no one had known the cabin was there, until Kenny Lindsay had seen the flames, on his way up the creek.

"I wouldna ha' seen at all," he said, for perhaps the sixth time. "Save for the dark comin' on. Had it been daylight, I'd never ha' kent it, never." He wiped a trembling hand over his face, unable to take his eyes off the line of bodies that lay at the edge of the forest. "Was it savages, Mac Dubh? They're no scalped, but maybe-"

"No." Jamie laid the soot-smearred handkerchief gently back over the staring blue face of a small girl. "None of them is wounded. Surely ye saw as much when ye brought them out?"

Lindsay shook his head, eyes closed, and shivered convulsively. It was late afternoon, and a chilly spring day, but the men were all sweating.

"I didna look," he said simply.

My own hands were like ice; as numb and unfeeling as the rubbery flesh of the dead woman I was examining. They had been dead for more than a day; the rigor of death had passed off, leaving them limp and chilled, but the cold weather of the mountain spring had preserved them so far from the grosser indignities of putrefaction.

Still, I breathed shallowly; the air was bitter with the scent of burning. Wisps of steam rose now and then from the charred ruin of the tiny cabin. From the corner of my eye, I saw Roger kick at a nearby log, then bend and pick up something from the ground beneath.

Kenny had pounded on our door long before daylight, summoning us from warm beds. We had come in haste, even knowing that we were far too late to offer aid. Some of the tenants from the homesteads on Fraser's Ridge had come, too; Kenny's brother Evan stood with Fergus and Ronnie Sinclair in a small knot under the trees, talking together in low-voiced Gaelic.

"D'ye ken what did for them, Sassenach?" Jamie squatted beside me, face troubled. "The ones under the trees, that is." He nodded at the corpse in front of me. "I ken what killed this puir woman."

The woman's long skirt stirred in the wind, lifting to show long, slender feet shod in leather clogs. A pair of long hands to match lay still at her sides. She had been tall-though not so tall as Brianna, I thought, and looked automatically for my daughter's bright hair, bobbing among the branches on the far side of the clearing.

I had turned the woman's apron up to cover her head and upper body. Her hands were red, rough-knuckled with work, and with callused palms, but from the firmness of her thighs and the slenderness of her body, I thought she was no more than thirty-likely much younger. No one could say whether she had been pretty.

I shook my head at his remark.

"I don't think she died of the burning," I said. "See, her legs and feet aren't touched. She must have fallen into the hearth. Her hair caught fire, and it spread to the shoulders of her gown. She must have lain near enough to the wall or the chimney hood for the flames to touch; that caught, and then the whole bloody place went up."

Jamie nodded slowly, eyes on the dead woman.

"Aye, that makes sense. But what was it killed them, Sassenach? The others are singed a bit, though none are burned like this. But they must have been dead before the cabin caught alight, for none o' them ran out. Was it a deadly illness, perhaps?"

"I don't think so. Let me look at the others again."

I walked slowly down the row of still bodies with their cloth-covered faces, stooping over each one to peer again beneath the makeshift shrouds. There were any number of illnesses that could be quickly fatal in these days-with no antibiotics to hand, and no way of administering fluids save by mouth or rectum, a simple case of diarrhea could kill within twenty-four hours.

I saw such things often enough to recognize them easily; any doctor does, and I had been a doctor for more than twenty years. I saw things now and then in this century that I had never encountered in my own-particularly horrible parasitical diseases, brought with the slave trade from the tropics-but it was no parasite that had done for these poor souls, and no illness that I knew, to leave such traces on its victims.

All the bodies-the burned woman, a much older woman, and three children-had been found inside the walls of the flaming house. Kenny had pulled them out, just before the roof fell in, then ridden for help. All dead before the fire started; all dead virtually at the same time, then, for surely the fire had begun to smolder soon after the woman fell dead on her hearth?