

THIEFTAKER, book I of the Thieftaker Chronicles

By D. B. Jackson

Chapter 1

Boston, Province of Massachusetts Bay, August 26, 1765

Ethan Kaille eased his knife from the leather sheath on his belt as he approached Griffin's Wharf, the words of a warding spell on his lips. He had sweated through his linen shirt, and nearly through his waistcoat, as well. His leg ached and he was breathing hard, gasping greedily at the warm, heavy air hanging over Boston on this August eve. But he had chased Daniel Folter this far--from the Town Dock to Purchase Street, over cobblestone and dirt, past storefronts and homes and pastures empty save for crows and grazing cows--and he wasn't about to let the pup escape him now.

The western horizon still glowed with the last golden light of day, but the sky over Boston Harbor and the South End shoreline had darkened to a deep indigo. Hulking wooden warehouses, shrouded in a faint mist cast, deep elongated shadows across the wharves. Clouds of midges danced around Ethan's head, scattering when he waved a hand at them, only to swarm again as soon as he turned his attention back to his quarry.

Ethan stepped onto the wharf and peered into murky corners, expecting Folter to fly at him at any moment. The boy had shown himself to be a fool; now he was desperate as well, a dangerous combination. Ethan preferred to handle this without casting, but he

already knew what spell he would speak if he had to.

“You’re mine now, Daniel!” he called. “Best you come out and face what’s coming to you!”

No answer. He crept forward, wary, his gaze sweeping back and forth between the warehouses that loomed on either side of the pier. He heard small waves lapping at the timbers, and the echoing cries of a lone gull. But Ethan was listening for the man’s breathing, for the scrape of a shoe or the whisper of a blade clearing leather.

After a few more steps, he halted, afraid to stray too far out onto the pier lest the pup sneak past him. If he lost Folter to the tangled streets of the South End, he would have to begin his search anew.

“You shouldn’t have stolen Missus Corbett’s necklaces, Daniel!” Ethan pitched his voice to carry, but his words were swallowed by the hazy twilight air and the sounds of the harbor. “Her husband is angry. He’s paying his hard-earned money to get her jewels back, and to have some justice meted out on her behalf.”

He waited, listening, watching.

“Your only way out is through me, lad. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Still no response. Doubt started to gnaw at Ethan’s mind. Had Folter found some other way off the wharf? Or was he simply smarter and more patient than Ethan had allowed?

Neither, as it turned out.

Ethan heard a footfall to his left and wheeled quickly, his knife held ready. Folter stepped from the darkness, the faint glow of twilight shining in his eyes and glinting off

the dagger he carried.

“Corbett can rot fer all I care!” he said. Brave words, but his voice trembled, almost as badly as his blade hand.

Ethan shook his head and approached him slowly. “You know better, lad. Mister Corbett is a man of means. He decides who rots and who doesn’t.”

Folter was bigger than he remembered. He stood a full head taller than Ethan, with long limbs and a thin, bony face. His hair, damp and lank, hung to his stooped shoulders. His breeches were torn at the knees, his waistcoat stained; the sleeves of his shirt barely reached his narrow wrists. His knife had a long, curved blade, and though he passed it from one hand to the other, wiping his sweaty palms on his breeches, the movements were deft. Ethan guessed that he would be a formidable foe in a knife fight if it came to that.

“Tha’s not true,” Folter said. “Not all of it, anyway.”

Ethan stopped, leaving some distance between them. Folter’s gaze met his for a moment before darting away, first to one side, then to the other. He was looking for a way out or past—or through, if need be. Ethan sensed that Folter had already taken his measure and convinced himself that he could prevail in a fight if he had to. He was wrong, but he had no way of knowing that. Ethan didn’t exactly cut an imposing figure. He was of medium height and build, and looked like a competent fighter, but not one to be truly feared. His hair was starting to go gray at the temples, and his face was lined and scarred. Folter would see in him someone too old and too small to be a true threat. Others had made the same mistake.

“I done a bit o’ work fer Pryce--Miss Pryce--back a year or two. If she could see her way clear t’ let this slide . . .”

“I don’t work for Pryce,” Ethan said.

Folter stared at him. “Then why are ya--?”

“I work on my own.”

The pup actually laughed. “Yar own? Ya think Sephira Pryce will stand by an’ let another thieftaker work anywhere in Boston?”

Ethan shrugged. “She has for the last few years.”

Folter’s smile faded. “Who are ya?” he asked.

Ethan twirled his knife casually between his fingers. “I was hired by Ezra Corbett to retrieve the jewels you’re carrying. My name is Ethan Kaille.”

The pup’s eyes widened at the mention of Ethan’s name. “Kaille,” he repeated. He tightened his grip on the hilt of his blade. “I’ve heard o’ ya.”

“Good,” Ethan said. “Then you know that you’d best be giving me what I’m after.”

“Ya’ll take them an’ then give me t’ th’ lobst’rbacks. I’ll be fourteen years at hard labor.”

“It doesn’t have to come to that.”

The young man shook his head, panic in his eyes. “I don’ believe ya.” He shifted his weight just slightly toward his right, his knees bending, his shoulders tensing. Subtle changes, but taken together they were all the warning Ethan needed.

By the time Folter lunged at him, leading with his blade, Ethan had already started to spin away. He had every intention of countering over Folter’s off hand, but at

the last moment he saw that the boy--more cur now than pup--somehow had drawn a second knife. Only another spin saved Ethan from being skewered.

But in evading Folter's attacks, Ethan had opened a path of escape. Folter looked at the thieftaker once, perhaps weighing another assault. Instead he ran up the wharf back toward Purchase Street.

With the harbor at his back and the air heavy with moisture, Ethan had enough water at hand to cast an elemental spell. He spoke it quickly under his breath--"Imago ex aqua evocata." Illusion, conjured from water--and at the same time made a small flicking gesture with his hands, directing the charm so that the image formed directly in front of Folter.

Instantly the air around him felt charged, as it did when a storm came upon a ship at sea; as it did any time he conjured. Ethan felt the hairs on his neck and arms stand on end.

The old ghost appeared at Ethan's side, glowing a rich reddish brown like the moon when it hangs low in the night. His eyes gleamed like brands, and they held a hint of annoyance, as if Ethan had torn him away from something too important to be interrupted for a mere illusion spell. Not that the ghost could refuse him. He was Ethan's guide, a spectral guardian of the power laden realm between the living world and the domain of the dead. Folter wouldn't be able to see the specter; no one who wasn't a conjurer could. But he would see the conjuring that Ethan's ghost made possible.

For this illusion, Ethan summoned the first image that came to mind: a great

white horse with a flowing mane, like the one he had seen earlier that day leading a chaise through the streets near the Common. Ethan cast the spell quickly, with little preparation; at midday, the creature might have looked insubstantial. But in the gloaming it appeared solid and huge and wild. It bore down on Folter as if intent on trampling him, and the pup did exactly what Ethan had hoped. He halted, dove to one side, and wrapped his hands over his head to shield himself. He gave no sign of noticing that though the beast looked real enough, its hooves made no sound on the wharf.

Ethan sprinted forward just as Folter scrambled to his feet.

The young man looked around frantically, his knives still in hand, though seemingly forgotten for the moment. "Where'd it--?"

Ethan didn't allow him to finish the thought. He crashed into him, sending him sprawling. Ethan fell, too, rolled, and was on his feet again. One of the knives had flown from Folter's hand; Ethan kicked the other one away. He aimed a second kick at Folter's jaw, but the pup was too fast for him. He grabbed Ethan's foot and twisted viciously, flipping Ethan to the ground.

Folter threw himself onto Ethan, and for a few harrowing moments the two of them grappled for control of Ethan's blade. Folter was younger, quicker, stronger. He tried to pry Ethan's fingers off the knife, and though Ethan fought him, he could feel his grip on the weapon slipping.

He wrapped his other hand around Folter's throat and squeezed as hard as he could. Immediately the younger man stopped trying to tear the knife away and instead grabbed at Ethan's other hand. Ethan, his blade hand now free, drove the heel of it up

into Folter's nose. He heard bone break, felt hot blood splatter on his cheek. An instant later, Folter rolled off of him, both hands clutching his face, blood running over his fingers.

"Damn ya!" the pup said, his voice thick.

Ethan got to his feet and kicked Folter in the side. The pup gasped and doubled up.

"Where are the jewels?" Ethan demanded.

Folter groaned.

Kneeling beside him, Ethan laid the edge of his blade along Folter's throat. The young man stiffened.

"Don't try it, lad," Ethan said. "I don't want to kill you, but I will." Folter didn't move; Ethan began to search his pockets with his free hand. In no time at all, he had found three bejeweled golden necklaces. "Was this it, or were there more?" he asked.

When Folter didn't answer, Ethan pressed harder with his knife drawing a small trickle of blood from the pup's throat.

"Tha's all," Folter said sullenly.

Ethan didn't release him.

The young man looked up at Ethan, fear in his eyes. "I swear!"

After holding him for another moment, Ethan removed the knife and stood once more.

"Are ya going t' kill me now?" Folter asked. He sat up, eyeing Ethan, his body tensing, coiled.

“I can tell you that Mister Corbett wouldn’t object,” Ethan said. “The Admiralty Court would probably thank me for performing a service. And I promise you that if I meant to, you couldn’t stop me.”

“But ya’re going t’ let me go,” Folter said with disbelief. “Ya really don’ work fer Pryce, do ya?”

“No, I really don’t. I’m giving you this one chance, Daniel. I’ll let you go, but you have to leave Boston and never return. Corbett instructed me to give you over to Sheriff Greenleaf; he would be happy to see you transported to the Carolinas, or the Indies.” Ethan felt a twinge in his foot at his mention of the islands, the remembered pain of an old wound. “But Diver Jervis is a friend of mine, and he wouldn’t want to see you come to that end. I’m risking a great deal by letting you go. If I see you again, I’ll turn you in. Failing that, I’ll have no choice but to kill you.”

“I’s born here,” Folter said. “I ain’ never been anywhere else.”

“Then this is your chance to see the world,” Ethan told him. “But one way or another, you’re leaving the city.”

Folter opened his mouth to argue.

“I’ll give you one day, Daniel,” Ethan said, cutting him off. “If you’re still in Boston after midnight tomorrow, I’ll know it, and I’ll find you. Then you’ll have the sheriff to deal with.”

The young man nodded glumly.

“Go,” Ethan said.

Folter started away, then stopped, turning again. “My knives--”

“Leave them. And when you get to wherever you’re going, try not to make a mess of your life.”

The pup frowned and glanced about as if he had barely heard. “Say, where did tha’ horse go?” he asked. “Th’ one tha’ nearly ran me down.”

“I didn’t see it.”

Folter eyed him curiously. “Ya had t’ have seen it.”

“Good bye, Daniel.”

The young man stared at him for a long time. “Ya’re a speller, aren’ ya?” he finally said. “Tha’s why I’d heard o’ ya. Ethan Kaille. Sure, tha’s it. Th’ speller wha’ does thieftakin’ here in th’ city. I remember now. Tha’s where tha’ horse came from. It was bloody witch’ry. An’ tha’s how ya can compete with Sephira Pryce.”

Ethan retrieved Folter’s knives and put them in his pocket. He made no answer.

“I could tell someone,” Folter said. “I could tell Pryce or one o’ her men.” A smile crept over his thin face. “I could get ya hung fer a witch.”

“You could,” Ethan said, meeting his gaze. “But if I really am a speller, what’s to keep me from killing you in your sleep if I think you’re a threat to me? What’s to keep me from tracking you down whenever I want to, and giving you small pox or plague?”

Even in the failing light, Ethan could see the pup’s face go white. In truth, the fact that Ethan was a conjurer--a speller, as Folter put it--wasn’t as much of a secret as he would have liked. He suspected that Sephira Pryce already knew and it was possible that some on the Admiralty Court still remembered the names Ruby Blade and Ethan Kaille. But he didn’t want word of his talents spreading further than necessary, and he surely

didn't want Folter thinking that he had any advantage over him.

"I'm not sayin' I'd tell," Folter told him. "I was jus' . . . I wouldn't tell anyone."

"Go, Daniel. Right now. Get out of Boston, and you won't need to worry about me ever again. Remain here, and I'll make Sephira Pryce seem like a kindly aunt.

Understand?"

The pup nodded, and began to back away from him, his eyes wide, his face still ashen save for the bright blood that trickled from his nose. After a few steps, he turned and ran.

Chapter 2

Ezra Corbett and his wife lived only a few streets west of the South End waterfront, in a house on Long Street along the edge of d'Acosta's Pasture, a broad ley within the confines of the city. Ethan made his way up from the water's edge, crossing Purchase Street once more, and then Cow Lane. The sky had darkened almost to black. A gibbous moon hung in the east, its glow dulled and made faintly yellow by the summer haze that had settled over Boston.

As Ethan approached the Corbett house, he caught the scent of smoke riding the warm breeze, and he thought he heard the excited babble of many voices in the distance. He wondered if another mob was abroad in the city, drinking Madeira wine and making mischief. Only two weeks before, such a rabble had made its way to Kilby Street, just a short distance from Henry Dall's cooperage where Ethan leased a room, and had destroyed a building belonging to Andrew Oliver, the King's newly designated Distributor of Stamps here in the Province. The crowd had been loud, vulgar, and violent. Ethan sat out front for several hours guarding Henry's cooperage, while the rioters dismantled Oliver's building, ransacked his home, which was also nearby, and finally built a bonfire at Fort Hill. In the end, they didn't approach his home, but he didn't relish the idea of spending another sleepless night listening to the drunken cries of agitators.

The Corbett house was no more grand than its neighbors, but neither was it any less so. It was built of stone and oak, its few windows thrown open as if to coax inside whatever breeze drifted along the lane. Ethan rapped on the door with the brass knocker and stood with his hands behind his back. His shoulder hurt where he had run into Folter, and he was sure that he would be sore come morning. Twenty years ago he could fight in the streets without worrying about such things. Not anymore.

A pretty young servant opened the door and led Ethan into a small sitting room before going in search of her master. He surveyed the room: wooden floors, simple furnishings, an empty hearth in the center of the south wall. The subtle aroma of roasted fowl and fresh bread blended with the bitter scent of spermaceti candles. There were finer houses in town--mostly on Beacon Street and in the North End--but it was obvious the Corbett family didn't want for much.

Ethan strolled around the room, looking at the paintings of Corbett's wife and his two daughters. After several moments a door opened at the far end of the chamber. Mister Corbett stepped in and closed the door quietly behind him. Facing Ethan and eyeing his clothes, he faltered, a frown on his homely face. Belatedly it occurred to Ethan that he must look a mess. His breeches were filthy from his struggles with Folter on the wharf, and there probably were blood stains on his waistcoat and shirt.

"Mister Kaille," the merchant said, grimly. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon. Is there a problem?"

He was a short, round man whose clothes didn't fit him quite right. They were too long in the sleeves and legs and too tight around the middle. He was bald except for tufts

of steel gray hair that poked out from behind his ears, and he wore spectacles on the end of his nose.

“There’s no problem, sir,” Ethan said, producing the necklaces and laying them on a small table beside the hearth. “I’ve come to return your wife’s jewels.”

Corbett’s entire bearing changed. His eyes widened and as he crossed to the table he actually broke into a smile. “You’ve found them already! Well done, Mister Kaille!”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And the thief?” Corbett asked, examining each necklace by the light of an oil lamp.

“Daniel Folter.”

The merchant looked at him. “Daniel? You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir. You know him?”

Corbett hesitated. “He did some work for me a year or so ago. He even expressed interest in courting my older daughter, though I didn’t encourage him in that regard.” He shook his head. “Still, I’m surprised. I never figured the man for a thief.”

“No, sir.”

Corbett studied the necklaces a moment longer before facing Ethan again. “Well, Mister Kaille, these look to be none the worse for their adventure. I take it Daniel has been dealt with?”

“He won’t trouble you again, sir,” Ethan said holding the man’s gaze.

“Very well. I owe you another ten shillings, don’t I?”

Ethan bit down on his tongue to keep from laughing. He had dealt with

merchants before. “Actually I believe you owe me fifteen.”

Corbett raised an eyebrow. “Fifteen is it?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmmm, I suppose that’s right.” The merchant dug into a small pocket on his vest and pulled out a coin purse. He poured its contents onto his desk and began to count out Ethan’s payment. “An acquaintance of mine said I shouldn’t hire you,” he said as he piled the coins.

Ethan tensed. “Is that so?”

“Yes” the merchant said, not meeting Ethan’s gaze, lamp light reflecting off his glasses so that the lenses looked opaque. “He said I would have been better off hiring someone . . . safer.”

Ethan didn’t know whether to laugh or yank out his own hair. There was only one other thieftaker in Boston; Corbett’s friend thought Sephira Pryce would be a safer than Ethan.

Corbett went on. “I think he was concerned about your past.”

“Of course,” Ethan said.

“I bring this up because I wanted you to know that people still speak of it, those who remember anyway.”

He knew this already, of course. Nearly twenty years had passed since the Ruby Blade mutiny, but few who were old enough to have heard of the incident when it happened would have forgotten. Mutinies were scandalous enough; add to that whispers of witchcraft and the result was enough to cause quite a stir.

“Thank you, sir,” Ethan said stiffly.

The merchant finished counting out the money and returned the coin purse to his pocket. “I intend to tell my friend that he was wrong about you,” he said.

I don't give a damn, Ethan wanted to say. Instead, he thanked him once more.

“Here you are,” Corbett said, handing Ethan the stack of coins. “Well earned, Mister Kaille. I hope that I won't require your services again, but should I have further need of a thieftaker, I'll be certain to call on you.”

“Thank you, sir. For your sake, and that of your family, I hope that won't be necessary.”

Corbett smiled and led him back to the front door. “My wife will be most pleased,” he said, pulling the door open.

“I hope so, sir.”

The smell of smoke had grown stronger. Corbett wrinkled his nose and frowned. “More trouble,” he said sourly. “I don't hold with lawlessness, Mister Kaille. And I don't choose to associate with those who do. You take my meaning?”

Ethan was about to answer, but in that moment he felt the pulse of a spell, the air around him thrumming like a bow string. Ethan's first impulse was to ward himself, and his hand flew to the hilt of his blade.

“Mister Kaille?”

An instant later, Ethan realized that the spell had not been intended for him, that it hadn't even been cast in this part of the city. Which meant that it must have been a powerful conjuring. He stared into the night, trying to locate the conjurer, wondering

who could have cast such a spell.

“Mister Kaille! I asked you a question!”

“Yes, sir,” Ethan said, far more interested in the spell he had felt than in whatever Corbett had said. “I beg your pardon. What did you ask?”

“I said that I don’t hold with those who would flout the law in pursuit of political aims, and I asked if you took my meaning.”

“I do, sir.” He wanted to go. Right now. He wanted to find the conjurer who had cast that spell. But Corbett had paid him, and might well hire him again. Kannice would tell him that he should give the man his undivided attention.

The merchant gazed out into the night. “Do you support them?” he asked. “These agitators?”

In recent days, Ethan had heard arguments on both sides of this issue. There was nowhere a man could go in the city without overhearing discussions of Grenville’s Stamp Act. Like much of Boston, all the people he knew were beginning to align themselves according to whether they supported or opposed Parliament’s latest attempt to raise revenue. Corbett had made his position clear, and Ethan thought it best to give the safest response he could, even if it didn’t exactly answer the man’s question.

“I’m a subject of the British Crown, sir,” he said. “I recognize the authority of Parliament in all matters pertaining to the colonies.”

Corbett nodded. “That’s most wise of you. This sort of villainy and licentiousness will be the ruin of Britain.”

“Yes, sir,” Ethan said. “Good night.”

“And to you, Mister Kaille.”

Ethan stepped out of the house, followed the path back to Long Lane, and turned northward. As he walked, he wondered if Corbett and his acquaintances knew only of the mutiny and Ethan’s time in forced labor, or if they knew as well the role that conjurings played in all that happened aboard the Ruby Blade. Just how many people in Boston knew that he was a conjurer? Three or four months might pass without anyone speaking to him of his spellmaking abilities. And then he could have days like this one, when it seemed that everyone knew.

He had his share of enemies in the city, and none of them would hesitate to use his secret against him if they thought themselves safe from his retribution. But fear of conjuring ran deep, even among the wealthy, even among the likes of Sephira Pryce.

Corbett’s coins jingled in Ethan’s pocket, bringing a smile. Combined with the seven and a half shillings Corbett had paid upon hiring him last week, it was money enough to last him a while. He wouldn’t need to work again for at least a month, perhaps longer. Maybe this would be a good time for him to stay out of sight; let talk of his . . . talents die out. Particularly if there was another conjurer in the city casting spells as potent as the one he had just sensed. And in the meantime, he could spend a few days with Kannice.

He was headed to the Dowsing Rod now. She would want to know that he had found Folter and managed to avoid getting himself killed in the process.

Ethan strode through the heart of the South End, passing by the brick edifice of the Third Church, its steeple looming dark and tall against the moonlit sky. The smell of

smoke grew stronger as he walked, and he could hear shouts coming from different parts of the city--the area just north of Cornhill as well as the North End. He wondered if there were two mobs loose in the streets, or if there might be even more. As he neared the First Church and the Town House, he saw the glow of the fire he had been smelling.

He slowed. Ezra Corbett wasn't the only client who might look askance at Ethan's involvement in any mischief, and Ethan had no interest in attracting the notice of officials of the Crown. He had already endured enough British justice to last a lifetime.

A sound behind him made him spin; his knife was in his hand almost before he realized that he had reached for it. Two shadows emerged from behind a dark house and trotted up to him. Shelly and Pitch: a pair of dogs who lived in the streets, and spent most of their time scrounging for food at Henry's door. Ethan lowered his blade, laughing at himself. But his heart continued to hammer, as he sheathed his weapon and squatted down to greet the dogs. They licked his hand, tails wagging.

Shelly had first shown up at the cooperage several years before, not long after Ethan took a room there. She was a large dog with a short coat, mottled grey and white. She had a splash of tan on her snout, and pale grey-blue eyes. Henry had named her Shells because he said her coloring reminded him of the shells that washed up on the harbor shore. But before long he and Ethan were both calling her Shelly.

Pitch, who showed up a few months later, was a bit smaller, and entirely black, save for his deep brown eyes. His coat was long and silky. Ethan often wondered if he had once belonged to a wealthy family; dogs as pretty as Pitch generally didn't live in the streets.

“No food,” he told them, as they continued to lick his hand and sniff his clothes.

“Sorry.”

He scratched them both behind their ears. Judging from their response, this made up for the fact that he had nothing to feed them.

Standing again, he back-tracked to School Street, and followed Treamount northward, the two dogs flanking him. He hoped to keep his distance from those abroad in the streets. He soon realized, though, that rather than avoiding the mob, he was walking directly toward it. The closer he got to Queen Street, the louder the noise grew. He could hear raucous laughter and shouted curses, the shattering of glass and the splintering of wood. As he crossed the lane and gazed eastward, he saw men tossing broken furniture and bundles of parchment from the window of a stately home directly across the street from the court house and prison. The irony of it nearly made him laugh out loud.

One man stood in the middle of the lane, holding a bottle of wine in one hand and what looked to be a table leg in the other. He spotted Ethan and shouted, “Hey, you!” The man sounded so merry, one might have thought that he was celebrating the coming of a new year rather than the sacking of someone’s home. “Care t’ join us?” the man asked. “Th’re’s plen’y t’ go ‘roun’!”

Ethan waved a hand and shook his head without breaking stride.

“Wha’samatter?” the man called after him, his voice hardening. “Don’ like wha’ we’re doin’? King’s man, eh? Well, damn ya t’ hell!”

Ethan walked on, allowing the man to shout at his back. But he spoke a spell

under his breath. Veni ad me. Come to me.

The air around him hummed, and the ghost of the old man appeared at his shoulder again and fell in stride beside him. The drunkard continued to shout after him, but he didn't follow. Shelly and Pitch broke off, whining slightly as they headed back to the South End. This wasn't the first time Ethan had seen the dogs flee at the first appearance of the ghost. He regretted scaring them off, but he felt better knowing that he could summon his power instantly if he had to. Too much was happening this evening. The spell he had felt, these rioters; he had grown cautious over the years, and if ever there was a night that called for care, this seemed to be it.

Ethan felt the ghost watching him, but he kept his eyes trained on the street ahead. He wished he knew more about this glowing figure who materialized at his side whenever he conjured. The man was tall and lean, with a trim beard and mustache, and close-cropped hair that looked like it would have been white had it not been for the shade's reddish glow. He was always dressed the same way: in a coat of mail and an ornate tabard bearing the leopards of the ancient kings, like those worn by Medieval knights. Ethan guessed that he had lived hundreds of years ago, and he assumed that the old man was one of his mother's forebears. All Ethan knew for certain, was that every time he spoke the words of a spell, the ghost materialized to blend his power with whatever source Ethan had chosen to complete his conjuring.

The ghost couldn't speak; at least he had never said anything to Ethan, although his bright eyes and bushy eyebrows could be quite expressive. Over the years, Ethan had taken to calling him Uncle Reginald--Reg, for short--after one of his mother's older

brothers who had a prickly personality.

At last, as he continued to walk up Treamount, Ethan glanced at the wraith, who was still eyeing him with that familiar vexed expression.

“Something on your mind?” Ethan asked.

By way of answer, the ghost pointedly glanced back toward Queen Street and then nodded toward the knife on Ethan’s belt.

“Yes, I could have spoken a spell when I needed you. But the castings are faster when you’re already here.” He grinned. “Besides, you’re such pleasant company.”

The specter glowered at him.

They reached Hanover Street, and Ethan heard more commotion coming from down the lane. Two weeks ago the agitators had concentrated their ire on Oliver; tonight, they were casting a wider net. Best to get off the streets.

When at last he reached the Dowsing Rod, Ethan turned to Uncle Reg again.

Dimittas. I release you.

The ghost touched a glowing hand to his own brow and then began to fade from view. Ethan gazed back toward the center of the city, where smoke continued to billow into the night. Shouts echoed through the streets, punctuated occasionally by strident cheers. If anything, there was more commotion now than there had been earlier. He could guess who was behind these riots, and he knew that only trouble could come of them.

Chapter 3

The Dowsing Rod was owned and run by Kannice Lester, who had become the sole owner of the tavern several years ago, after her husband Rafe died. Kannice served decent ales at a reasonable price, but she was known throughout Boston for her stews, which most people, Ethan included, thought were the best in the city.

From without, the Dowser looked clean and reputable. Kannice wouldn't have had it any other way. She made it clear to all her guests--even Ethan--that she wouldn't tolerate gambling or whoring or any other sort of mischief within the walls of her inn.

"Leave it in the streets," she always told them. "Or you won't be welcome here again."

Ethan had yet to meet anyone brave or foolish enough to defy her.

Stepping into the tavern, Ethan expected to be greeted by the usual din of laughter and shouted conversations. But the Dowser was half empty, unusual even for a Monday night, and those who stood at the bar or sat at tables arrayed around the hearth, spoke in hushed voices. The air within was heavy with the smell of candles and pipe smoke, and the mouth-watering aroma of one of Kannice's famous fish stews. Though the crowd was small, Ethan saw several familiar faces, including Devren Jervis--Diver--an old friend who occasionally helped Ethan with his work.

Of all the people Ethan knew who frequented the Dowser, Diver came closest to

getting himself banned from the tavern. He did so with some frequency, and, as Kannice had pointed out on more than one occasion, if it wasn't for Ethan's friendship with the man, Diver would have been tossed out into the street long ago. He sat alone at a table near the back of the tavern. Catching Ethan's eye, he raised his tankard, his eyebrows going up.

Ethan had to laugh. The evening mist and a few stubborn midges still clung to his waistcoat, and already Diver was asking him to buy his next ale. Ethan walked to the bar, where a few men stood drinking ale and eating oysters.

"Evenin', Ethan," said Kelf Fingarin, the hulking barman. "Wha' kin I getchya?" Actually, he said it so quickly that it came out as a single word: WhakinIgetchya? Ethan understood only because he had been in this tavern a thousand times. Newcomers weren't so lucky, and in addition to being the size of a Dutch merchant ship, Kelf also had a quick temper. He was certain that his words were as clear as an autumn morning in New England.

"What's Diver drinking?" Ethan asked.

"Th' cheap stuff, as usual."

Ethan wrinkled his nose. "You have any of the pale left?"

"From Kent, you mean?"

Ethan nodded.

"I might have a bit."

Ethan tossed two shillings onto the bar. "I'll have two. And keep them coming."

Kelf grinned and grabbed two tankards. "Someone jest got paid."

“Where’s Kannice?” Ethan asked.

Kelf was already filling the first tankard. He jerked his head toward the entrance to the kitchen. “’N back, gettin’ more stew. I’ll tell ’er ya’re here.” He placed the first ale on the bar, began to fill the second.

“There’s another mob out in the streets,” Ethan said.

“Don’ need t’ tell me,” Kelf said. “Look ‘round. Half them who’re supposed t’ be here are with th’ rabble, an’ th’ rest are too scared t’ leave their homes.”

“You know why?”

The barman shrugged and put the second ale on the bar next to the first. “Stamp nonsense again.”

Ethan took the ales. “My thanks, Kelf.”

He wove his way past tables and chairs, nodding and smiling to the few people who met his glance and offered a greeting. When he reached Diver’s table, he placed one ale in front of his friend and sat.

“I’m grateful, Ethan,” Diver said. “I’ll get the next one.”

“We’re paid through a few rounds,” Ethan said. “You can pay next time.”

Diver raised his ale. “Well, then!”

Ethan tapped his friend’s tankard with his own and they both drank, Diver draining most of his.

Diver wiped his mouth on his sleeve and peered down into his drink. “The good stuff, eh?”

“I got paid,” Ethan said. “Enjoy it.”

Diver sipped from his mug again. But he said nothing more and soon began to drum his fingers nervously on the table.

“You all right?” Ethan asked.

“Fine!” Diver said. “Just . . . I’m fine.”

A cheer went up from the bar; looking past Ethan, Diver smiled. Ethan turned in time to see Kelf and an attractive, auburn-haired woman emerge from the kitchen carrying a large tureen of what had to be more fish stew. Kannice Lester was willowy and stood at least a full head shorter than the barman, but her arms were corded from years of lifting pots of stew, of keeping her tavern clean, of making sure there was wood for the hearth and for the stove in her beloved kitchen. At a word to Kelf, she and the barman hoisted the tureen onto the bar in one fluid motion. She began to ladle the soup into empty bowls as patrons converged on her from all around the room. After a few moments she spotted Ethan, and a smile lit her face. She whispered something to Kelf, who immediately returned to the kitchen. Kannice continued to serve out the stew.

“So who paid you?” Diver asked Ethan, leaning close.

Ethan tore his gaze from Kannice. “Corbett,” he said. “His wife’s got her jewels back and I’ve got my coin.”

Diver’s eyebrows went up. “Already?”

“Don’t look so impressed. It was Daniel.”

“Daniel? He swore to me that he’d given up thieving.”

“Well, he’s as much a liar as he is an idiot.” Ethan narrowed his eyes. “Did you have business with him?”

“Of course not,” Diver said, suddenly interested in the tankard in front of him. “I know Daniel’s trouble. I stay away from him.” He glanced up at Ethan, though only for an instant. “Is he . . . did you . . . ?”

“I didn’t give him up to Greenleaf,” Ethan said, lowering his voice to a whisper. “And I didn’t kill him, either, though Sephira wouldn’t have been so forgiving. I told him to leave Boston, so if he owes you money, I’d suggest you collect in the next day.”

“I told you, I have no dealings with him.” Diver said the words forcefully enough, but he wouldn’t look Ethan in the eye.

Diver was nearly ten years younger than Ethan, and had long looked up to him as he might an older brother. They had known each other for more than twenty years, since Ethan first arrived in Boston and Diver was just a boy working the wharves. The younger man was clever, but he had been orphaned as a small boy and raised by an uncle who never liked him. Early on he had turned his wits to activities that might well have landed a less fortunate man in prison or on a boat to a British penal colony. He put to sea as a hand on merchant ships for a time and about five years ago, around the time Ethan was released from his servitude in the West Indies, Diver came back to Boston to work the wharves once more. In the years since, he had also helped Ethan track down the occasional thief. He actually seemed to have a knack for such work, though Ethan often wondered if this might not be because of Diver’s own shady dealings and his connections with Boston’s less virtuous citizens.

Ethan had every intention of pressing his friend further on his association with Daniel, but before he could ask more questions he felt a smooth arm snake gently

around his neck, and soft curls brush against his cheek.

“I didn’t expect to see you tonight,” Kannice whispered in his ear. Her breath smelled lightly of whiskey, her hair of lavender. Over the past few years he had grown fond of the combination. She kissed his temple, and when he turned to her, kissed his lips softly.

“This job worked out better than I hoped it would,” he said, brushing a strand of hair off her brow. “Hope you didn’t have other plans.”

She shrugged, blue eyes wandering the tavern. “I figured I’d have to make do with one of these others,” she said airily. “But since you’re here . . .”

He smiled, as did she. Then she looked over at Diver and straightened.

“Derrey,” she said, a trace of ice in her voice.

“Stew smells good tonight, Kannice,” Diver said with brittle cheer.

She inclined her head toward Ethan, though her eyes never left Diver’s face. “You going to make him pay for your meal, too?”

Kannice was younger than both of them and, so, far closer in age to Diver than Ethan. Her husband, who Ethan never met, was nearly twenty years older than she, and when he died back in 1761, leaving her to run the tavern, she was barely more than a girl. But she always spoke to Diver this way, like he was a wayward child, and she his older sister. Or his mother.

“I was glad to buy him the ale,” Ethan said, keeping his voice low. “I just got paid.”

She pursed her lips, but held her tongue. Diver had enough sense to shut his

mouth as well. A moment later Kelf showed up with a bowl of steaming stew, which he placed in front of Ethan.

“Thereyago.”

“Better bring another for Derrey here,” Kannice said.

Kelf eyed each of them in turn, raised his eyebrows, and tromped back to the kitchen to fetch another bowl.

Kannice turned her back on Diver and looked down at Ethan. “I’ll deal with you later,” she said, a coy smile on her lips. She started back to the bar, shouting, “Tom Langer, I swear if you spill another ale in my tavern I’ll banish you for a year and a day!”

Several men behind Ethan laughed uproariously.

“She’s a hard woman, Ethan,” Diver said, watching her walk away.

“Only with you. And I’m not sure it’s undeserved.”

Diver frowned and drank the rest of his ale. Kelf brought a second bowl of stew, placed it in front of Diver without saying a word, and returned to the bar.

“I want to know what you had going on with Daniel,” Ethan said as Diver started to eat.

“I told you,” Diver said, his mouth full. “Nothing at all.”

“That’s the first time you’ve looked me in the eye since we started talking about him.”

Diver’s cheeks reddened. He was a handsome man, his face still youthful, his black curls as yet untouched by gray. Kannice’s hostility notwithstanding, women were drawn to him. He was tall, lean, and dark-eyed, and he had a winning smile and was

quick with a jest. But if Ethan had a daughter, he would have done everything in his power to keep Diver away from her.

Ethan continued to stare at his friend, saying nothing, until at last Diver put down his spoon and glanced around, as if to make certain that no one could hear.

“Was Corbett your only job?” Diver asked in a low voice.

“What?”

Diver leaned closer and lowered his voice even more. “Are you working on anything else right now?”

Ethan let out a small laugh and shook his head. “What have you gotten yourself into, Diver?”

“Answer the question.”

“No, I’m not working on anything else. In fact, I’m thinking I should lie low for a time. It seems everyone I meet right now knows too much about me, if you catch my meaning.”

Diver’s eyes widened. “Really? You think Pryce is spreading rumors about you?”

“They’re not rumors if they’re true. And no, I don’t think she would bother with something like this. If Sephira gets tired of having me around, she’ll just have me killed and be done with it.” He took a spoonful of Kannice’s stew, which was savory, just a bit spicy, and as delicious as usual. He never took his eyes off of Diver, though, and now he added, “But we were talking about you.”

“I’m getting to it.” He took a breath and scanned the room again. “It’s not as bad as you think.”

“I don’t think anything, yet,” Ethan said, which was not entirely true.

“Well, then it’s not as bad as it’s going to sound. There’s a group of merchants who have put in together to buy a shipment from a French merchant.”

“A shipment of what?” Ethan asked, though he already knew.

“What do you think? He’s French. Wine from France--fifty casks--and a few hundred gallons of molasses from the French West Indies. ‘Course the merchants can’t sell any of it the usual way. They can’t have the casks showing up in their warehouses, and they need people to sell them outside the usual places, where the lobsterbacks can’t see.”

Of course. Since Parliament passed the first of the Grenville Acts the year before, it had been illegal for anyone in the colonies to import or sell any wine or molasses from the French. The problem was, as much as the British here in the Americas hated the French, they still had a mighty thirst for French wines. And with the new tariffs in place, molasses from the British Caribbean had become too expensive. Distillers in New England were eager to buy molasses from the French West Indies, and would gladly turn to smugglers if it meant saving themselves six pence a gallon.

If the customs men caught Boston merchants selling French goods, they would confiscate what they found and fine the merchants. But if they found someone like Diver selling them, they would leave the merchants alone and deal harshly with him.

“So they want you to sell them,” Ethan said.

“I get paid two pence for every gallon of wine or molasses; that’s still less than the new tariffs, and it adds up. I could make more in five days selling this stuff than I make

at the wharf in an entire season.”

You could also get yourself thrown in the stocks. Or worse. Ethan kept that thought to himself; Diver was a fool, but he understood the risks.

“Daniel was supposed to sell them, too, wasn’t he?” Ethan asked.

Diver faltered. “Aye.”

“When does the shipment get here?”

“Tonight. It might be here already. I’m waiting for one of my mates from the wharf. He’s supposed to tell me when it arrives.”

Ethan shook his head and ran a hand over his face. Daniel wouldn’t be leaving the city after all. He couldn’t refuse that kind of money. Ethan had to hope that Folter would manage to avoid Corbett until he sold his share of the contraband.

“You think I’m mad,” Diver said.

“I have for years. Why should it start bothering you now?” He grinned, as did Diver. “No, I was thinking about Daniel. I told him to leave the city. But he won’t go if he’s waiting for this shipment.”

“He might, if you scared him enough.”

“Would you,” Ethan asked, “if you knew the casks were coming?”

“Probably,” Diver said, dropping his voice once more. “But I’ve seen what your spells can do.” He took another spoonful of stew.

They ate in silence for a time. Diver eyed the tavern’s entrance, while Ethan pondered what might happen if Ezra Corbett learned that Daniel was still roaming the streets. Ethan depended on men like Corbett--merchants and craftsmen of means--for

his livelihood. If word spread through the city that he had let Daniel go, they would think twice about calling on him when they needed a thieftaker. Sephira Pryce, Ethan was sure, would be all too happy to take their business.

“There we are,” Diver said suddenly.

Ethan looked up to see that his friend was already standing, his eyes fixed on the doorway. A burly man stood in the tavern entrance, motioning to Diver.

“I’ll see you later, Ethan,” Diver said.

“Watch yourself,” Ethan told him. “There are plenty of men in this city who would be willing to sell the wine and molasses themselves, and who would think nothing of taking them from you and leaving you a bloody mess.”

Diver nodded and crossed to the doorway. He and the man spoke briefly, the burly man shaking his head repeatedly as Diver’s expression grew grimmer by the moment. At last, Diver turned and walked slowly back to the table.

“What happened?” Ethan asked, as his friend lowered himself back into his chair. “Ship delayed? There’s been more talk of privateers in the waters off Boston and Europe.”

“No,” Diver said, sounding morose. “The ship’s put in, but the shipment wasn’t on board. There’s no telling when it’ll be getting here.” He stared at his empty bowl.

“Damn!” he muttered after several moments.

“You need another ale,” Ethan said. “And so do I. Tell Kelf that you’re buying off the shillings I gave him before.”

Diver got up again, eager as a puppy. “You’re a good man.”

Ethan finished his stew, and when Diver brought back the ales, he turned his chair so that he could see the rest of the room. Kannice spent most of her time behind the bar, helping Kelf with the ales and whiskeys. But occasionally she came out into the common area to joke with her patrons or settle down a group that was getting too boisterous.

She might have been small of stature, but there was steel in her voice and ice in those blue eyes when she had need. Ethan had yet to meet a man who wasn't cowed by her. At one point she glanced his way and saw that he was watching her. She smiled, her color rising, and then went back to what she had been doing.

“Why don't you marry her?”

Ethan glanced at Diver and sipped his ale. “That's none of your concern.”

“If you're still thinking that you and Marielle--”

“I said it was none of your concern, Diver.”

He didn't raise his voice; he didn't have to. Diver knew him well enough to understand that he had sailed into dangerous waters.

Marielle Harper--Elli, Ethan called her--had once been his betrothed. Among the better families of the North End it had been said that she was too fine for him. She was the daughter of a wealthy shipbuilder; he, the wayward son of a captain in the British navy. But she loved him, and he adored her. Still, in all their time together, he never revealed to her that he was a conjurer, and when he was accused of taking part in the Ruby Blade mutiny, of using “witchcraft” to subdue the ship's captain, she wrote a letter to him that to this day he could recite from memory. In it she that said he'd betrayed her

trust, and she vowed never to see him again. By the time he returned, bitter and maimed, from the plantation in Barbados where he had labored and bled and, on more than one occasion, nearly died, Elli had married another and borne the man's children.

She had since been widowed, but she still insisted that she wanted nothing to do with Ethan or his spellmaking. Ethan knew better than to expect that she would ever change her mind, even as he also knew that a part of him would always long for her.

Kannice knew about Elli. Having ruined one romance with secrets and lies, Ethan vowed never to do so again. He sensed that she harbored hopes that eventually he would forget about his first love and agree to spend the rest of his life with her. She rarely spoke of it, though, and that was fine with Ethan; the last thing he wanted was to hurt her.

For long minutes Ethan and his friend sat in uneasy silence, until at last Diver drained his tankard and set it down smartly on the table. "Well, then," he said, getting to his feet. "Looks like I'll be working the wharf again tomorrow, so I'd best get some sleep." He flashed a smile, though it appeared forced. "Good night, Ethan. My thanks for the ale."

"Take care of yourself, Diver."

"I always do," Diver said, and left the tavern.

Ethan remained where he was and drank his ale slowly. No one approached him. Most of those who knew him either feared him for his ability to conjure or saw him as an unrepentant mutineer. He had few friends, though those he had he trusted.

Eventually, as the crowd in the tavern began to thin and the noise died down,

Kannice approached his table again.

“Derry was in a hurry to leave,” she said, pulling Diver’s chair around and placing it beside Ethan’s.

“Not really. He has to work the wharves come morning.”

“Who was that came to talk to him?” she asked, her eyes fixed on her hands as she toyed with one of the silver rings on her fingers.

She doesn’t miss a thing.

“One of his mates from the wharf, I think.”

A faint smile touched her lips as she glanced up at him through her eyelashes.

“Why do you protect him?”

“Why do you harry him?”

“If ever there was a man who needed harrying . . .” She trailed off, letting the words hang.

He knew better than to argue. “I’ll tell him to keep it outside next time,” he said, an admission in the words.

“Thank you.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. Eventually Ethan took her hand. She met his gaze, smiled.

“You say it went well with Corbett?” she asked

“It did. I found all that his wife had lost. He was pleased.”

“And the thief?”

Ethan exhaled and made a sour face. “Daniel Folter.”

Kannice rolled her eyes. “Another fool.”

“Aye,” Ethan said, conceding the point as far as Diver was concerned.

“You let him go?”

“Of course.” He started to tell her that doing so might well prove to have been a mistake, but thought better of it. That would have carried the conversation back around to Diver, and Ethan didn’t want that.

“Why is it that you’re so forgiving of fools?” she asked him.

“Maybe I see enough of my younger self in them to think they’re not beyond hope.”

She shook her head, the corners of her mouth quirking upward again. Then she stood, moved to stand behind his chair and began to knead the muscles in his neck, her small fingers deft and strong. He closed his eyes and tipped his head forward.

“Just because there’s hope for them, doesn’t mean it’s your job to save them all,” she whispered.

“Now you tell me.”

She kissed the top of his head.

“That feels good,” he said, as she continued to rub his neck.

“It’s supposed to.”

He smiled, but just as he did she moved her hands down and began to rub his shoulders. Ethan winced, sucking air through his teeth.

“What’s the matter?”

“I had to fight Daniel to get back those necklaces. My right shoulder’s sore.”

She kissed the side of his neck. "That's a shame. And your leg?"

"It hurts, too."

The air around them was redolent of her perfume. "Poor baby. You're probably too tired and sore to do anything but sleep."

He laughed. "I'm not sure I'd go that far," he murmured.

Kannice giggled. "I'm glad to hear it," she said. She took his hand. "Let's go then."

"Don't you have to clean up?"

She waved a hand vaguely toward the bar. "Kelf will get most of it. I let him leave early a few nights ago. He owes me."

Ethan grinned. "I've always liked Kelf."

She stopped. "Well, if that's what you prefer . . ." She held his gaze for several moments, struggling to keep her expression neutral. Finally she began to giggle again. "Come on," she said, tugging on his hand.

Before they reached the back stairs leading up to her chamber, the door to the Dowsing Rod swung open and several men rushed in.

"Did ya hear?" one of them asked of no one in particular. "They're sacking Hutchinson's house!"

Ethan and Kannice had stopped, and now Kannice took a step toward the men.

"Who are?" she demanded.

"Mackintosh an' his boys," the man said.

And another added, "They got Story an' Hallowell, too!"

"Idiots!" Kannice said. She glanced at Ethan. "They can't think any good will

come of it.”

He shrugged. She knew well enough what he thought of the agitators. After the attack on Oliver’s house, they had argued about it for two days. But he was thinking once more about that conjuring he had felt. Had there been spells at work in addition to whatever else stirred the mobs to attack?

Regardless of the answer, Kannice was right: Attacking the homes of William Story and Benjamin Hallowell was one matter. Story, of the Admiralty Court, and Hallowell, the comptroller of the Customs House, were two of the most hated men in all of Boston. But Thomas Hutchinson was Lieutenant Governor and Chief Justice of the Province. To be sure, he had enemies among those opposed to the Grenville Acts, but he was also one of the most respected leaders in the colony. If these men were right--if Hutchinson’s home had been attacked--it would anger not only the Crown, but many of those the leaders of these demonstrations hoped to draw to their cause.

“Has anyone been hurt?” Kannice asked, sounding disgusted.

“Not tha’ we know,” the first man said. “Hutchinson an’ his family have got away, an’ so did th’ other two. Bu’ their homes are wrecked.”

One of the men behind him suppressed a chuckle and looked sidelong at another. This man laughed, too.

“All right, you lot,” Kannice said. “You’ve had your say. Now get out.”

“Bu’ we’re thirsty,” the first man said, sounding aggrieved.

“Well, you’ll have to find your drink elsewhere.”

They looked like they might argue, but at that moment Kelf stepped out from

behind the bar, and planted himself in the middle of the great room, his massive arms crossed over his chest. The men grumbled among themselves, but shuffled out of the tavern.

When they had gone, Kelf faced Ethan and Kannice. “Ya think it’s true?”

“Hallowell’s place is on Hanover Street, isn’t it?” Ethan asked.

“Yes,” Kannice said. “And I think William Story lives near the Court House.”

“I heard them,” Ethan said. “There were mobs at both houses.”

Kelf looked from one of them to the other. “But Hutchinson--he lives in th’ North End, don’ he? Did ya hear anything from there?”

“It was hard to tell,” Ethan told him. “But if the rest of it’s true . . .”

“Then this is, too,” Kannice finished for him. “And there’ll be hell to pay.”