

DEAD MAN’S REACH, book I of the Thieftaker Chronicles

By D. B. Jackson

Chapter 1

Boston, Province of Massachusetts Bay, February 21, 1770

Ethan Kaille slipped through shadows, stepping from one snow-crusting cobble to the next with the care of a thief. He held a knife in one hand, his fingers numb with cold. The other hand he trailed along the side of a brick building, steadying himself as a precaution against the uncertain footing.

Dim pools of light spilled onto the street from candlelit windows. Flakes of snow dusted his coat and hat, and melted as they brushed against his face. Every breath produced a billow of vapor, rendering his concealment spell all but useless.

The air was still--a small mercy on a night as cold as this one--and a deep silence had settled over Boston, like a thick woolen blanket. Even the harbor, her waters frozen near to shore, and placid where they remained open, offered not a sound. In the hush that enveloped the city, Ethan’s steps seemed as loud as musket fire.

Will Pryor, who had stolen several gemmed necklaces and bracelets from the home of a merchant in the North End, lived here on Lindal’s Lane, in a room above a farrier’s shop. Ethan had followed the man for two days, and though he’d not yet seen the jewels in Pryor’s hands, he had little doubt but that the pup still possessed them, and was merely biding his time until he could sell them without drawing undue attention to himself. Ethan was determined to keep him from finding a buyer. He feared, though, that the uneven sound of his footsteps would be enough to wake Pryor from a sound slumber, much less alert the thief to his approach.

Ethan reached the worn wooden stairway leading up to Pryor’s room and began to climb, wincing at every creak, eyeing the window, which glowed faintly. It wasn’t until he heard the murmur of voices, however, that he thought to examine the steps with more care. Leaning forward, squinting in the murky

light, he felt his stomach clench.

Footprints in the snow. Several pairs.

Seconds later, an all too familiar voice called out, “Come and join us, Ethan. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Damnit!” he muttered, teeth clenched.

He kept still, snow settling on his shoulders, and he pondered his options. Realizing that he had none, he pushed up his sleeve, cut his arm, and whispered an incantation to remove his concealment spell.

A glowing figure appeared beside him, russet like a newly risen moon, with eyes as bright as flames. He was the ghost of an ancient warrior, tall, lean, dour, and dressed in chain mail and a tabard bearing the leopards of England’s ancient kings. He was also Ethan’s spectral guide, the wraith of an ancient ancestor who allowed Ethan access to the power that dwelt at the boundary between the living world and the realm of the dead. For years, Ethan had called the ghost Uncle Reg after Reginald Jerill, his mother’s waspish brother, of whom the ghost reminded him.

Reg regarded Ethan with an expression that bespoke both amusement and disapproval.

“I didn’t know she was here,” Ethan said.

Reg scowled, as if to say, *No, but you should have.*

Ethan could hardly argue. For years, Sephira Pryce, the so-called Empress of the South End, Boston’s most infamous and successful thieftaker, had been interfering with his inquiries, swooping in at the last moment to take for herself items he had been hired to recover, stealing his clients and with them the finder’s fees they paid. She reveled in tormenting him, although most times she seemed content to taunt and ridicule. On occasion, she set her toughs on him, allowing them to beat Ethan to a bloody mess. And every now and then, she threatened to let them kill him, and dump his body in the leas of Boston’s Common.

That she and her men had reached Pryor first, should have come as no surprise at all.

“Don’t stand out there pouting, Ethan. It’s only a few pounds. Mister Wells should never have gone to you in the first place. A man of means, of culture. He should have been mine.”

Ethan glanced at Reg. "I'd gladly pay a few pounds if it meant a moment's peace and an end to her mocking."

Reg grinned and faded from view. Ethan cut his arm again before climbing to the top of the stairway and pushing open Pryor's door.

Three of Sephira's men stood before him, blocking his way. One of them, a brute named Afton, was as large as a British frigate and almost as welcoming. He had dark, stringy hair and a broad, homely face. Next to him, smaller, also dark-haired, stood Nap, a flintlock pistol in his hand, full-cocked and aimed at Ethan's heart.

The third man held a blade instead of a pistol. He had pushed up the sleeve on his left arm; a trickle of blood ran from a cut on his forearm, twin to the gash Ethan had carved into his own skin. Gaspar Mariz was a conjurer like Ethan, and though in private conversations he had declared himself Ethan's friend, he still answered to Sephira. Ethan had no doubt that if she ordered him to kill Ethan with a spell, he would attempt it. He stared at Ethan, his expression grim, the lenses of his spectacles catching the light of a candle so that they appeared opaque.

Behind these three, were three others. Will Pryor, lanky, youthful, with yellow hair and dark eyes, sat in a chair, blood seeping from his nose and split lip, as well as from a raw wound on his temple. He watched Ethan, clearly uncertain as to whether his arrival presaged an escape from his predicament or a worsening of it. Another brute loomed over him: Gordon, as big and as ugly as Afton. And beside these two, a look of smug satisfaction on her lovely face, stood Sephira.

There could be no denying that she was beautiful; even Ethan, who had as much cause to hate the woman as anyone in Boston, had to admit as much. Ringlets of shining black hair fell over her shoulders. Her eyes, bright blue and dancing with mischief, shone in the candlelight. A black cloak that he assumed must be hers--it was far too fine to be Pryor's--lay on the thief's bed. She wore her usual street garb: black breeches, a white silk shirt opened at the neck, and a black waistcoat that hugged her curves with the ardor of a lover.

But though she was exquisite and alluring, her beauty put him in mind of a cut diamond. She was

hard, remote, cold, and sharp enough to draw blood. He had never met anyone more ruthless or better suited to a life of thuggery and deception. She could be cruel as well as charming; he had known her to be shrewdly calculating one minute and utterly capricious the next. There was no predicting what she might do under any given circumstance, which was one reason why she could be so confounding as a rival.

Another reason: she--or at least men in her employ--bore responsibility for a good number of the thefts she investigated. She stole from the wealthy and then took their money as reward for returning their property, all the while basking in their praise. "She can solve any crime," they said, their praise as fatuous as it was fulsome. "No thief in Boston can elude the Empress." Those like Ethan, who encountered her in the streets, knew her for what she was: a brigand, bonny and winsome, but villainous. To the rest of the city, however, including its wealthiest and most powerful citizens, she was a heroine.

And tonight she had bested Ethan yet again; she would claim as her own the three pounds Mister Wells had promised him. Ethan felt reasonably sure that this would be the extent of his loss for the evening. But he couldn't be entirely confident that the night wouldn't end in his death. Such were the risks of any encounter with Sephira Pryce.

She smiled at him as she would at an old friend, but then her gaze fell to the cut on his arm, and her mien turned icy.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"And you shouldn't be surprised that I did. You're going to have Nap take my knife. All your men are armed. Did you expect me to walk in here without any means of protecting myself?"

Sephira stared daggers at him, but then nodded once to Nap, seeming to concede the point.

Nap stepped forward and took the blade from Ethan's hand, all the while keeping his pistol trained on Ethan's heart.

"Will, how are you bearing up?" Ethan asked.

The thief swallowed. He cast a wide-eyed, fearful look Ethan's way, but a second later his gaze was drawn back to Nap's pistol. At last he gave a tentative shrug. "I don't know."

"He's quite the intellect," Sephira said, regarding Will with unconcealed scorn. "I find it hard to

believe he eluded you for as long as he did.”

“Aye, well thieves are easier to find when you have another thieftaker doing all the difficult work for you. Why are you here, Sephira? Have times grown so difficult that the Empress of the South End must abandon the warmth and comfort of her home for a mere three pounds?”

She tipped her head to the side, a coy grin on her lips. “I never see you anymore,” she said, purring the words. “I’ve missed you.”

Ethan offered no response.

Sephira began to pace the room. As she strolled past Will, she traced a finger lightly down the bridge of his nose. The pup looked to be on the verge of wetting himself.

“Wells is one of those clients I’m not sure you ought to be working for,” she said at last. “You’ve seen his estate, you know the sort of men who live on his street.” She halted, her eyes finding Ethan’s. “I thought I had made myself clear on this point.”

“You have,” Ethan said, his tone light.

Arguing the point would have been useless. Sephira had told Ethan more times than he cared to remember that she expected him to limit his thieftaking to a clientele of her choosing. He could work for families of limited means, while leaving the wealthier clients for her. And he could work for those who came to him explicitly because they believed their property to have been spirited away by someone with access to the same conjuring powers that he possessed. This was her notion of an equitable arrangement. She appeared not to care in the least that he had never agreed to her terms, despite her threats of beatings at the hands of her men should he violate their “agreement.”

“Yet, you took on the inquiry anyway,” she continued, “without regard for my wishes. Will here is no conjurer, so I know that you didn’t take the job because witchery was involved. Therefore, I can only assume that you deliberately ignored my previous warnings.”

“That’s right.”

“And still you ask why I’m here.”

It was his turn to concede the point. He did so with a shrug. “So have I earned another beating?”

he asked. "Or do you plan to do worse this time?"

"Neither, actually. I'll take the gems, which Will was clever enough to hide on top of that table there. And I'll claim your fee from Mister Wells. I'll do the same with your next job, and the one after that. Perhaps, with time, you'll decide that working without being paid makes little sense, you'll concede that I've beaten you in this, as in everything else, and you'll start taking on the sort of clients I've been telling you to work for all along."

Ethan watched her, waiting for more: for the threats, for an order to Nap and his companions to bludgeon him a bit. But she said nothing else. She merely stared back at him.

"What?" she asked in unfeigned innocence--odd in and of itself coming from Sephira.

"That's surprisingly...restrained of you."

"I can have them beat you, if you'd prefer," she said, sounding bored.

"No. Thank you, though." He tipped his head toward Will, who was listening to all they said and looking more anxious with every word. "What about him?"

"You know what Mister Wells would say."

"I do," Ethan said.

Wells, like others who had hired him to retrieve stolen items, would want to see the pup punished as severely as the law allowed. Indeed, if he was as vengeful as some for whom Ethan had worked, he wouldn't care about the limits of the law, and would want Will killed for his transgression.

"What?" Will asked, his gaze darting from one of them to the other. "What would he say?"

Before either of them could answer, several things happened at once. A pulse of conjuring power hummed in the floor; Ethan couldn't say with any surety whence it had come. He thought he saw a flash of light as well, but he had no opportunity to see what it was, or to ask Mariz if he had felt the spell.

Because at that moment, Gordon, without uttering a word, or giving any indication of what might have provoked him, stepped directly in front of Will, and began to beat the pup with his cobble-like fists. A blow to the side of the head nearly knocked the lad from his chair. A second broke his nose, so that blood gushed over Will's mouth and chin. One more, and the pup fell over, his chair toppling with him.

But Gordon wasn't through. He aimed a vicious kick at Will's side--Ethan heard ribs break.

At first, it seemed all of them were too shocked by the sudden assault to do more than gape. For seconds that might as well have been hours, none of them moved to intervene.

Sephira was the first to act.

"Gordon!" she shouted, the name echoing in the small room.

No response. The brute kicked Will a second time, then wrapped one fist in the pup's bloodstained collar and hoisted him to his feet, his other fist drawn back to strike again.

By this time, though, Afton, Nap, and Ethan had emerged from their stupor and were converging on the man. Afton grabbed Gordon's arm. Nap and Ethan wrested Will from the tough's grasp and set him back in his chair, which Sephira had set upright. The pup's head lolled to the side. He was unconscious; Ethan feared he might be dead.

Gordon struggled to free himself from Afton, the room quaking as the two behemoths wrestled each other.

Sephira planted herself in front of them. "Gordon, stop it!"

But still he fought, as if in a blind rage.

Another conjuring thrummed, this one coming from within the room. Gordon staggered, slumped in Afton's arms. Afton eased him to the floor where he lay still, his chest rising and falling gently.

"Is he alive?" Sephira asked, turning back to Will.

Nap knelt beside the pup and put a hand to Will's neck, feeling for a pulse. "Barely," he said after a few seconds.

"What did you do?"

They all turned to Mariz, who alone among them had not moved, though the blood had vanished from his arm, expended in the sleep spell that subdued Gordon.

He glared at Ethan, his knife poised over his arm, ready to cut himself and conjure again.

"I don't know what you mean," Ethan said, knowing that he sounded slow-witted.

"What did you do to him?" Mariz repeated, his accent thickening as his anger flared.

Sephira snapped her fingers. Immediately, Nap stood once more and raised his pistol

“You’re saying that Kaille used his witchery on Gordon? That’s why--?”

“I did not!”

“I sensed a conjuring, Kaille,” Mariz said. “And for just an instant I thought I saw your spectral guide appear.”

Ethan shook his head, even as he considered the magick he had sensed and the flash of light he thought he saw before Gordon struck his first blow at Will. He pointed to his forearm, which was still red with blood. “Look,” he said, holding it out for Mariz and Sephira to see. “The blood’s still there. Had I conjured, it wouldn’t be.”

Mariz blinked once, his brow creasing.

“Mariz?” Sephira said. Ethan sensed that she was seconds away from ordering Nap to pull the trigger.

“There are other ways for him to conjure. But the blood on his arm would have been easiest.”

Sephira appeared unconvinced. “Unless he wanted to hide what he was doing, isn’t that right?”

Mariz shook his head. “Even then I would see his guide, and feel his spell.”

“But you say that you did--you saw the ghost and felt a conjuring. That’s what you said.”

“I thought his guide had appeared. It was there, and then it was gone. I might have imagined it.”

Sephira frowned. Since the previous summer, when Ethan and Mariz had worked together to defeat a conjurer named Nate Ramsey, she had been distrustful of their friendship. Mariz’s uncertainty was only making matters worse.

“Why would I make Gordon beat the lad?” Ethan asked her. “I’m the sentimental one, remember? That’s what you always say. I was prepared to plead for Will’s life. It’s you who usually argues on behalf of vengeance for the client.”

She didn’t answer, but instead turned to Mariz once more. “How long will he sleep?” she asked, dipping her chin toward Gordon.

“Not long. But if we wake him, I can offer no assurance that he will not resume his attack.”

“I want him to tell us what happened.”

“He can,” Ethan said. “And we don’t have to wake him.” He and Mariz shared a look. “A *revela potestatem* spell would show the color of the conjuring that hit him.”

“It will show my sleep spell,” Mariz said.

“Aye, but if you word it correctly it will also show the previous conjuring.”

“What are you two talking about?” Sephira asked, the words clipped.

“You’ve seen the spell before; more than once. We can use a conjuring to show what spells have been used against him. You’ll see that I had nothing to do with what happened.”

She made a sharp, impatient gesture that might or might not have been meant to indicate her acquiescence. Ethan didn’t ask her to clarify.

“*Omnias magias*,” he said to Mariz. “All magicks. That’s the wording.”

“Yes, I know it,” Mariz said, and cut his arm. Blood welled; he put some on his fingertip and dabbed it across Gordon’s forehead and down the bridge of his nose to the base of his neck. When he had finished doing this, he spoke the incantation. “*Revela omnia magias ex cruore evocatas*.” Reveal all magicks, conjured from blood.

The spell rumbled in the walls and floor. Mariz’s spectral guide, a young man in Renaissance clothing who resembled the conjurer and glowed with a warm beige hue, appeared beside him. The radiance of a conjuring appeared on Gordon’s body, but in only one color: Mariz’s beige.

“What did that mean?” Sephira asked, sounding cross. Ethan knew that she neither understood nor trusted spells and spellmaking. And she hated being at a disadvantage when Ethan was anywhere near her.

“There was nothing,” Mariz said. “No color at all aside from mine. Nothing from Kaille, nothing from another conjurer.” He looked up at Ethan, the lenses of his spectacles flashing again. “Perhaps there was no spell after all.”

Sephira’s scowl had grown more severe. “So, now you’re not even sure that a spell was cast.”

“I felt something,” Ethan told her. He turned back to Mariz. “We both did. And both of us thought

we saw something, as well--a light of some sort. It could have been the spectral guide of some other conjurer.”

“Or it could have been nothing,” Mariz said. “Lightning from outside, or the gleam of some distant conjuring.”

“Maybe. Has Gordon ever done anything like that before?” Ethan asked Sephira. “Has he ever taken it upon himself to beat someone without a word from you? For that matter, have you ever known him to ignore a direct order, as he did when you told him to stop?”

“No,” she said, and while she had sounded unsure of herself when speaking of spells, there was no hesitation in this response. “He may not be the smartest of my men, but he does as he’s told.”

“I thought as much.” Ethan looked down at Gordon, and then at Will, who had yet to regain consciousness. There had been something odd and deeply chilling about Gordon’s behavior. His attack on the pup had been savage, and yet devoid of provocation. And without any evidence to indicate that a spell had been cast, it was hard to imagine what could have caused him to lose control so suddenly.

“Perhaps Pryor said something we did not hear,” Mariz said, echoing Ethan’s thoughts. “Or maybe he made some rude gesture toward the Senhora that we did not see. Gordon is very protective of her.”

Ethan frowned. “Yes, maybe,” he said, unable to keep a note of doubt from his voice.

Sephira said nothing, but she regarded Ethan, Mariz, and Gordon in turn, seeming in that moment to trust none of them.

Chapter 2

Like Mariz, Ethan also feared that if they woke Gordon in the presence of Will Pryor, the brute might attempt to renew his assault. And though the room belonged to Will, it seemed easiest to move him rather than risk stirring Gordon. Not to mention the fact that with the possible exception of Afton, there was no one there who could lift Sephira's man.

Ethan and Mariz draped the lad's arms around their shoulders and bore him down the stairway to the icy street. There they both cast healing spells to repair some of the damage Gordon had done in his unexplained rage. Ethan mended Will's broken ribs, while Mariz tended to the pup's jaw and nose, which of both were also broken.

"How confident were you that you caught sight of my spectral guide?" Ethan asked as they conjured.

Mariz glanced his way. "I cannot say. When I saw it, I was quite certain. But in...What is your word? In retrospect, I am less sure. It lasted not even a second--the blink of an eye. Nothing more. I am sorry. I should not have accused you."

Ethan shook his head. "That's not why I was asking. As I said, I spotted something, too, and I'm not at all convinced that it came from the window."

"Did you see a figure? A color?"

"No. I saw a flicker of light. That's all."

"Do you still believe it was a spell that made Gordon do this?"

Ethan didn't know how to answer. Sephira's man had behaved as would one under the influence of a control spell. But control spells were among the most powerful of conjurings, and Ethan couldn't imagine how a conjurer might conceal one from an *omnias magias* spell.

The door to Will's room opened and closed, and boots scraped on the landing outside the room and then on the snow-dusted stairway. Seconds later, Sephira joined them on the street, her black cloak

draped over her shoulders.

“He’s awake,” she said.

What little light reached that corner of the street came from Will’s window, above and behind Sephira. It made a halo of her shining curls and left her face in shadow.

“And?” Ethan asked.

She shrugged. “And he seems perfectly normal, or at least as normal as Gordon gets. He remembers pummeling the noddy, but he can’t recall what set him off, nor can he explain why he wouldn’t stop. He keeps apologizing to me for ignoring my order to stop, but when I ask him why he did it, he merely shakes his head and tells me again that he’s sorry.”

Ethan wasn’t sure what to make of this, and to make matters worse, he wasn’t entirely certain whether he could trust what she told him. She had no reason to lie about the episode, but his mistrust of her ran deep, and old habits were not so easily broken.

“Do you think that if he saw Will, he would try again to attack him?”

“I don’t know,” Sephira said. “I don’t think we should take that chance.”

Mariz looked up. “I agree.”

“How is he?” Sephira asked.

“Another blow or two and I expect he would have died,” Ethan said. “As it is, he won’t be doing much thieving for a while.”

“Then, I suppose some good came of this.”

He couldn’t tell if she was joking.

“If you’ll take Gordon back to your home, Mariz and I will return Will to his bed.”

“Yes, all right.” She started to turn away, but stopped herself. “I believe you and I have more to discuss.”

“No, we don’t, Sephira. You’ll be watching me, I know. And you’ll be displeased if I take on other wealthy clients. I’ve heard it before.”

“Very well, Ethan. But one day, after you’ve once again ignored my warnings, you’ll find that my

patience has run out. When that happens, you'll have no one to blame but yourself." She looked at Mariz.

"When you're done here, return to the house. I have more questions for you."

"Of course, *Senhora*."

She climbed the stairs to Will's room and called to Nap and Afton from the doorway. Ethan and Mariz moved Pryor a short distance down the lane, so that Gordon wouldn't see the lad as he left. Once Sephira and the others were gone, they carried Will back up to his room.

"You did not answer my question before," Mariz said, as they settled the pup on his bed. "Do you still believe Gordon acted under the influence of a conjuring?"

"I don't know. It was all rather strange, and everything happened quickly. If only one of us had felt a conjuring and seen that light, I'd be willing to dismiss it as coincidence, or something imagined. But both of us..." He draped a blanket over Will and straightened. "Sephira is going to ask you the same question. What will you tell her?"

"That I am unsure of what I saw and what I sensed. That my spell indicated no conjuring had been used against Gordon. And that I am convinced you had nothing to do with whatever happened to him."

"You've told me in the past that our friendship has made Sephira and her other men less trusting of you. Is that still so?"

"It is," Mariz said. "She does not like you, Kaille. And yet she speaks of you with more respect than you might think. I believe if she had her way, you would be working for her, not I. Yours is an odd relationship."

"Aye. That much I know." He proffered a hand, which Mariz gripped. "Thank you."

"For what?"

Ethan gestured toward Will. "For helping me heal him. And for telling Sephira that I wasn't responsible for the spell."

"I believe I suggested first that you were."

"Aye, that you did. But I probably would have done the same."

They let themselves out of the room and closed the door behind them.

At the bottom of the stairway, they parted ways. Ethan intended to go to the Downing Rod, the tavern on Sudbury Street where he spent much of his time. First, however, he walked through Cornhill to Marlborough Street and turned southward. At the corner of Winter Street, he turned up a small walkway and followed it to the door of a modest house with a gabled roof. Candles shone in the windows, and pale gray smoke rose from the chimney. Ethan rapped on the door with the simple brass knocker.

The man who opened the door was tall, though his shoulders were stooped. He had deep-set eyes, a prominent nose, and long, powdered hair that he wore in a plait.

“Yes? What can I do for you?”

“Forgive me for disturbing you so late in the evening, Doctor Church. My name is Ethan Kaille--”

“Ah, yes! The thieftaker who doesn’t wish to be associated with Samuel Adams or the Sons of Liberty.”

Ethan offered a wan smile. “I’m surprised that you remember, sir. It’s been some time.”

Several months before, as Ethan tried to rid Boston of Nate Ramsey and his army of wraiths, he was summoned to the Green Dragon tavern by Samuel Adams. There he met with Adams, Benjamin Church, James Otis, Joseph Warren, and Paul Revere, who thanked Ethan for conjuring attacks on warehouses belonging to merchants who had not honored the nonimportation agreements. These agreements, which were intended to halt the sale in Boston of British goods, were the work of Adams and his allies, who believed that Ethan had thrown in with their cause at long last. But Ethan had nothing to do with the attacks; it turned out they were Ramsey’s doing. And at that meeting, as on previous occasions, Ethan refused to join with Adams and his allies in their struggle against the Crown.

“Yes, well,” Church said. “It’s not every day that one meets a man with the gumption to say ‘no’ to Samuel.” He stood to the side and waved Ethan into the house.

Ethan removed his hat and entered. It was blessedly warm within; a hearty blaze burned in the hearth.

“If I remember,” the doctor went on, “that was not our first meeting. Trevor Pell brought you to me some years ago. You had been beaten and shot, but most of your wounds had already been healed with what some might call witchcraft.”

Ethan recalled that evening vividly as well. Sephira and a large retinue of her toughs had taken Ethan out to the Common, fully intent on killing him. Only the timely intervention of Reverend Pell, with the unwitting cooperation of Sheriff Stephen Greenleaf, had saved Ethan’s life. He had healed the worst of his wounds with spells, and while Doctor Church had been surprised by this, his response had been notably measured. This was why Ethan had come to the doctor tonight.

He took a breath and faced the doctor. “Aye, sir. That’s my memory as well. Again, I’m flattered that you have such clear recollections of our encounters.”

“Can I offer you some wine or something to eat?”

“No, thank you.”

Church looked Ethan up and down. “You appear to be in a far better state this evening than you were that night. Is this a social visit then?”

“No, sir. There’s a lad who lives above a farrier’s shop on Lindal’s Lane. His name is Will Pryor. He’s taken a terrible beating, and while I’ve done what I can to heal the worst of his wounds, I was hoping you might go to him in the morning and make certain that he’s on the mend. I would pay you, of course.”

“I see,” Church said, his voice hardening. “And were you responsible for the beating?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Then why would you pay me?”

“Because I wasn’t able to prevent the assault, and because my ability to care for the lad is limited.”

The doctor considered him. “Very well, Mister Kaille. I’ll go to him first thing tomorrow.”

“I’d be most grateful, sir. How much shall I pay you?”

“One and ten should be enough.”

Ethan narrowed his eyes. "One shilling, ten pence. That's all?"

Church lifted his shoulders, a small grin tugging at his lips. "It sounds as though you've already done most of my work for me."

"But surely--"

"It's all right, Mister Kaille." He gestured in a manner that encompassed the whole of the sitting room. It was comfortably furnished, its appointments tasteful if not lavish. A pair of upholstered chairs stood near the hearth, and a sofa sat along the far wall, before a low oaken table. "As you see, I'm not about to go hungry."

"Thank you, sir." Ethan pulled out his worn leather purse, removed the coins, and handed them to the doctor. "There you are."

Church pocketed the money without bothering to count it.

Ethan started back toward the door. "I'll leave you to enjoy your evening."

"Pryor, you said?" the doctor asked, following him.

"Aye. Will Pryor. On Lindal's Lane."

"Above the farrier's shop."

"Just so. Again, my thanks."

After the doctor saw him out, Ethan turned once more onto Marlborough Street and followed it toward the Dowser, satisfied that he had done what he could for Will.

As had been his habit since the beginning of the British occupation of Boston in the fall of 1768, Ethan followed a somewhat roundabout route to the Dowser so that he would not pass too close to the intersection of Brattle Street and Hillier's Lane, where the regulars of the Twenty-ninth Regiment were billeted.

Still, Ethan could not avoid entirely the British military presence in the city. Regulars patrolled the streets night and day, and with tensions rising, everywhere they went they encountered the taunts of young men inflamed by drink or simply the folly of youth.

Walking on Treamount Street, he could hear cries of "Damn the king and his men!" and "You

have no business here, you bloody bastards!” aimed at the soldiers stationed a block away near the Town House. He heard as well the usual insults: “red herring,” “lobsters,” “thieving dogs,” “bloody backed scoundrels.” Each time he was abroad in the streets, he expected these jeers to be met with the report of a rifle, but miraculously--so far--the city had been spared that sort of tragedy. He didn’t approve of the occupation, and he had long since stopped referring to himself as a loyalist, or a Tory, as men of such thinking were called. But there could be no denying that thus far the soldiers had demonstrated remarkable forbearance.

Treamount met Sudbury Street a bit north of where the soldiers were based, and from there it was but a short walk to the Dowsing Rod.

Upon entering the tavern, Ethan was greeted by the usual savory aromas. Kannice Lester, the tavern’s proprietor, and Ethan’s lover for more than six years, made the finest stews and chowders in all of Boston. Tonight, she was serving the fish chowder; Ethan could smell the cod, as well as the bay and thyme Kannice used in her recipe. The aroma of the chowder was overlaid with the scents of fresh baked bread and roasting chestnuts.

The air within the tavern’s great room was warm and welcoming. A thin haze of pale pipe smoke hung over the tables and chairs, and the incomprehensible din of laughter and dozens of conversations brought a smile to Ethan’s lips. He rented a room above Henry Dall’s cooperage on Cooper’s Alley in the South End, but for years now, this tavern had been as much a home as he’d ever known.

He crossed to the bar, squeezing past the wharfmen and shipwrights who sipped ales while trading stories and jests, and caught the eye of Kelf Fingarín, Kannice’s mountain of a barman.

“Good evenin’, Ethan,” Kelf said, as always running his words together in a rapid jumble.

“Well met, Kelf. I’ll have the Kent pale, and a bowl of the chowder.”

“Ale’ll be right up. Chowder should be out in a few minutes.”

Ethan dropped a half shilling into the man’s massive hand.

Kelf nodded toward the back of the great room as he filled Ethan’s tankard with the Kentish pale ale Ethan preferred. “Diver’s in his usual spot, with Deborah. I’ll bring the chowder to you.”

“All right. Where’s Kannice?”

Kelf reddened to the tips of his ears. “She’s in back cookin’.” Abruptly the barman wouldn’t look Ethan in the eye.

“I take it she’s still angry.”

“I mind my own bus’ness, Ethan. You know that about me.” Kelf placed the tankard in front of him.

Ethan grinned, though it took some effort. “That would be a yes, then.”

“Not for nothin’, but I happen to think she’s right about this.”

“I never said she wasn’t. All I said was, a cove’s got to work, and times being as they are I can’t be turning down any jobs. You understand that, don’t you?”

Kelf’s crooked grin conveyed more than a bit of sympathy. “Aye. But she can be hard sometimes. You know that as well as anyone.”

“Aye.” Ethan took his ale. “My thanks, Kelf.” He pushed away from the bar and waded through the throng toward the back wall of the tavern, where his friend, Diver--Devren Jervis--usually sat.

As he wound past tables of workers and artisans drinking flips or Madeira wine, and eating oysters and chowder, he saw many faces he recognized. Kannice’s fine cooking had earned her a loyal clientele. But though most of these men had seen Ethan here day after day, few of them offered anything by way of greeting; most refused to make eye contact.

For as much as they cared for Kannice, they thought the worst of Ethan. He supposed they had cause.

As a young man, about the age of Will Pryor, he had put out to sea as second mate aboard the *Ruby Blade*, a privateering vessel. The initial legs of the ship’s voyage went poorly, and before long the first mate, a silver-tongued ruffian named Allen Foster, had talked much of the crew, including Ethan, into mutinying. Somehow Foster had learned that Ethan was a speller, and he convinced him to use his conjuring abilities on their behalf. Only after the captain and his supporters had been subdued did Ethan come to realize that Foster was cruel and arbitrary, a worse commander by far than the captain had been.

Ethan freed the captain and helped him retake the ship.

That act of repentance saved Ethan from the hanging he probably deserved. It could not keep him out of prison. He served for close to fourteen years as a laborer on a sugar plantation in Barbados. There, in a hell of back-breaking toil, disease, unbearable heat, and brutality at the hands of the plantation's overseers, he lost part of his foot to a stray blow from a cane knife. He lost as well his first love, Marielle Taylor. She broke off their betrothal upon hearing of his involvement in the mutiny, but she was even more appalled to learn that he was a conjurer, something he had concealed from her during their courtship. Hardest of all, Ethan lost the bright future he and Elli had planned together, as well as any chance of realizing his ambitions of becoming a successful merchant captain.

He had done all right for himself in the years since his release from servitude, and among those who knew him solely as a thieftaker, he had a reputation for honesty and competence, not to mention the notoriety that came with pitting himself against Sephira Pryce.

But to many who spent their evenings in the Dowsing Rod, he was little more than an ex-convict, an unrepentant mutineer, and a man dogged by rumors of witchery. He understood why Kannice's patrons shunned him and whispered that she was too good for him. Half the time he agreed with them.

The one person who welcomed him back to Boston after his release in 1760, was Diver. Ethan would never have remembered him--Diver had been but a boy working the wharves when Ethan sailed from Boston aboard the Blade--but Diver remembered Ethan, and didn't seem to mind at all that he was a convict and a reputed witch. In those early days after Ethan's return from the Caribbean, Diver was the only friend he had.

The intervening years had been kind to his friend. Aside from a few strands of silver hair amid his dark curls, Diver had conceded nothing to age. He still had a youthful face, a lean build, and a smile that could have won the heart of the Queen Consort. On this night, he sat near the back wall of the tavern with Deborah Crane, a red-haired beauty Diver had been courting for more than a year. He held her hand in his, their heads close together as they spoke.

Ethan cleared his throat as he approached their table. The two young lovers looked up.

“Am I intruding?”

“Not at all, Mister Kaille,” Deborah said, favoring him with a smile.

Diver nodded to Ethan, but there was something stiff in his manner. Ethan took the chair opposite his and sipped his ale.

“Something on your mind, Diver?”

Deborah glanced between them, appearing uneasy.

“Nothing that you haven’t already heard from Kannice. If she can’t convince you, what hope have I got?”

Ethan took a breath, his eyes fixed on his ale. “She told you?”

“She asked me to speak with you. But to be honest, I’m so furious that I don’t know what to say.”

Ethan had expected as much. He wanted to be angry--who was Diver to tell him which clients he could work for and which he couldn’t? He had no more right than did Sephira. But he couldn’t bring himself to look the younger man in the eye.

In the past, Ethan had taken on but one client at any given moment, but these were lean times, and even wealthy men like Sebastian Wells weren’t paying as much to thieftakers as they had in past years. Ethan had little choice but to work for whomever would hire him.

In recent months, as dissatisfaction with the occupation and British policies deepened, the nonimportation movement in the city had grown stronger. Agreements to eschew all imports from Britain had been circulated among Boston’s merchants, and those who refused to sign the agreements faced increasing pressure from the Sons of Liberty and their allies. Many had been harassed in the streets. The shops of noncompliant merchants had been vandalized, and mobs threatened worse.

Ethan had been approached by several noncomplying merchants who wanted protection, and needing the work, he had agreed to help one of them. Kannice, who had long been sympathetic to those who resisted the Crown’s attempts to impose ever-greater fees on the Colonies, made it clear to Ethan that she disapproved. Now it seemed she had enlisted Diver in her cause.

“I’m not helping anyone violate the agreements,” Ethan said, his voice low. “I’m merely trying to

keep shops from being burned to the ground. Is that so bad?"

"Some of them deserve to be burned out," Diver said with quiet intensity.

"You don't mean that," Ethan said. "Violence is--"

"Violence is all we've got. If these merchants break the agreements, then the movement fails and we're stuck with the Revenue Acts and all that comes with them. Is that what you want?"

Deborah had been good for Diver. In their time together he had matured, and had managed to find steady employment as a clerk in a shop near where she lived. But like Kannice, she was a supporter of Samuel Adams and his friends, and at her urging Diver had joined the Sons of Liberty. Ethan enjoyed the company of the new, mature Diver; he was less sure about this political Diver who was so fervent in support of a movement he had all but ignored until a few months before.

"I'll tell you what I don't want," Ethan said. "I don't want any part of 'liberty' if it means that those who don't agree with you and your friends can have their businesses destroyed, while those who do the deed go unpunished. And I think if you were to consider it even briefly, you'd agree with me."

Diver glowered at him, but said nothing.

"I believe, Mister Kaille," Deborah said after a brief silence, "that Derrey fears for you."

"Why is that?"

She hesitated, seeming to search for the right words. "People see you with these men, and they assume that you're in agreement with them, that you think they're right to defy the agreements."

"And then they see me with you," Ethan said to Diver, his choler rising in turn. "And they think the worst of you, as well. Is that it?"

"People know where I stand," Diver said. "Deborah's right: I'm worried about you."

"So am I."

Ethan swiveled in his chair. Kannice stood behind him, a towel draped over her shoulder, loose strands of auburn hair falling over her brow. There was a fine sheen of sweat on her face, and her cheeks were flushed. She looked lovely, as always.

He could smell the lavender in her hair, and the faint scent of Irish whiskey on her breath. It was a

combination he had come to know and love in their years together. He hoped that she would stoop and brush his lips with hers, as she usually did when she greeted him. But she merely gazed back at him, a pained expression in her periwinkle blue eyes.

It had been over four weeks since last Ethan stayed the night with her. In their seven years together, this was the longest they had gone without making love, and Ethan had little hope that she would invite him back into her bed any time soon. Unless he gave up working for the noncomplying merchants.

“Do you think it’s right,” Ethan asked, looking from Kannice to Diver, “that mobs cover the windows and doors of these men’s shops with dirt and shit? Do you think it’s right that the merchants should be so afraid for the safety of their wives and children that they can no longer live in their own homes, but instead must hide in the houses of the few friends they have left?”

“I can’t say if it’s right or not,” Diver said. “But I do know that they brought this on themselves.”

“Is that what you think as well?” Ethan asked Kannice. “If Tories did those things to the Dowser and justified their actions by saying that you brought it on yourself when you cast your lot with Samuel Adams and his fellow radicals, would you agree?”

She opened her mouth, closed it again, the look in her eyes hardening. After a moment, she turned on her heel and stalked back to the bar.

Ethan could do little more than stare after her.

“You don’t want people thinking you’re one of them,” Diver said. “And I can tell you that people are already talking.”

Ethan continued to watch Kannice, though she steadfastly refused to look his way. “Of course they are. That’s what people around here do best.”

“Ethan--”

“And what are they saying?” He faced Diver once more. “Are they calling me an ex-convict? A mutineer? A witch?”

“They’re calling you a traitor.”

“Odd, isn’t it: that I can be a traitor and a loyalist at the same time? Except that I’m neither. You and I both know that.”

“You make it hard for people to believe.”

Ethan took a long drink of ale before setting down his tankard smartly. “They’ll believe what they want to, regardless of what I do.”

“What if they come by your place, and do to Henry’s cooperage what they’ve been doing to the shops?”

“How are they going to find me, Diver? Are you going to tell them where I live?”

“That’s not fair, Mister Kaille!” Deborah said, her cheeks reddening, her eyes shining with candlelight. “Derrey defends you at every opportunity. I’ve heard him.”

Before Ethan could answer, Kelf arrived at their table with Ethan’s chowder and a small round of bread.

“There ya go,” the barkeep said, placing the bowl and bread in front of him. “Anything else, Ethan?”

Ethan shook his head. The barkeep looked at each of them in turn before starting back toward the kitchen, a frown on his broad face. Long after Kelf left them, Ethan continued to regard his ale.

“I’m sorry, Diver,” he said at last. “I shouldn’t have said that.” The younger man didn’t answer. Ethan looked up. Diver was staring down at his tankard, much as he had been.

“I need the money,” Ethan said. “Surely you can understand that. In my line of work, I don’t always get to choose my clients. They choose me, and if they’re offering coin, I can hardly refuse.”

“You could refuse this,” Diver said, sounding more sad than angry.

Ethan knew there was no point in continuing their argument. He had said his piece, as had Diver. He picked up his spoon and began to eat, though his appetite had long since left him. He scanned the tavern for Kannice and spotted her near the bar. She was chatting amiably with a man he didn’t recognize, a man younger and taller and better-looking than he was. At one point she laughed at something he said, and laid a hand lightly on his arm. Ethan looked away, fighting a powerful surge of jealousy.

She could do better than him. Ethan had known that for some time. She was smart and strong and beautiful and as kind as anyone he had ever known. He knew that any man in his right mind would want her. This might finally have occurred to her, as well.

“Maybe you could work for Adams and the rest,” Diver said, after several minutes.

Ethan glanced up at him, not bothering to mask his skepticism.

“I’m serious. Maybe they have jobs that you could do, and then you wouldn’t--”

Deborah laid a hand on his arm. “Have done, Derrey,” she said softly. “It’s enough.”

He pressed his lips thin and sat back in his chair. “Anyway,” he said after a brief pause. “It’s getting late. We should probably go.”

It couldn’t have been much past eight in the evening, which had never been late for Diver before. But Ethan didn’t try to stop them.

Diver stood, and Deborah did as well, her brow creased with concern.

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

“Diver.”

Ethan’s friend began to wend his way to the door. Deborah lingered at the table.

“He really is frightened for you. You’re like an older brother to him.”

“I know.”

“Mister Kaille--” She broke off, appearing to think better of whatever she had meant to say.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Deborah.”

She offered a sad smile and hurried after Diver.

Ethan watched them go before turning his attention back to his food. He ate a bit of his chowder and a few bites of bread. He chewed slowly, making himself eat, oblivious of taste. He couldn’t even bring himself to finish his ale.

Kannice still stood near the bar. The man with whom she had been speaking was nowhere to be seen, but she continued to avoid Ethan’s gaze. Once he had given Diver and Deborah time enough to put

good distance between themselves and the tavern, he stood and left as well. He was sure that Kannice saw him leave; he felt her watching him as he crossed to the door. But she made no effort to stop him, and Ethan gave her no indication that he wished to stay.

Chapter 3

Ethan slept poorly. His room was cold, and he spent much of the night bundled in his blankets, hovering at the edge of sleep and drifting in and out of dreams in which he argued once more with Diver and Kannice. He awoke tired and hungry and chilled to his very core.

He dressed with haste, donning his heaviest woolen stockings and shirt, a waistcoat and coat, and pulling on an old woolen great coat over all of that. He would be hard pressed to push up his sleeve for blood should he need to conjure, but he had not yet had to rely on spells for this job, and he didn't expect that he would today, either. Still, before leaving his room, he slipped into his pocket a full pouch of mullein, a powerful conjuring herb, and he strapped on his blade. Last, he set his tricorne hat on his head and slipped his hands into fingerless woolen gloves.

He had thought his room cold, but when he stepped outside onto the wooden stairway that led from his room down to the street, he shuddered. The sky had clouded over as he slept, leaving it as white as the snowy rooftops. The air remained bitterly cold, and even the gentle breeze blowing off the harbor was enough to make Ethan's cheeks ache and his eyes tear.

A large, gray and white dog waited for him at the bottom of the stairs, seemingly unaffected by winter's grip on the city. She wagged her tail as Ethan approached, her tongue lolling. Henry Dall, the cooper, had adopted Shelly years before, along with her mate, Pitch, a beautiful black dog with long, silken fur. Pitch had died several years ago. More accurately, Ethan had killed him, using the poor dog for what conjurers called a killing spell, a casting that drew upon the life of another for its power. The conjuring saved Ethan's life and that of a boy, the son of Elli, his former betrothed. But to this day, he wasn't sure that these ends excused what he had done. Of all the dark deeds Ethan had committed in his life, including those that led to his imprisonment, casting that spell was the one he regretted most. It had been nigh to five years, but still, upon seeing Shelly, Ethan had to resist the urge to apologize to her for taking her companion.

“Well met, Shelly,” Ethan said, squatting down to scratch her head.

She licked his hands.

“I’ve no food for you,” he said. “Nor for me, for that matter. My apologies.”

He straightened and started toward the North End. Shelly trotted alongside him, perhaps hoping that he would buy them both a bit of breakfast if she stayed with him long enough. As he neared the Town Dock, she seemed to decide that Ethan would be providing no meals; she turned and started back toward the cooperage.

The closer Ethan drew to the North End, the heavier his steps grew. The truth was, in all his years as a thieftaker, he had never harbored greater misgivings about taking on a job. His words to Kannice and Diver notwithstanding, he wasn’t entirely convinced that the merchants who violated the nonimportation agreements deserved protection. Those who argued that the Townshend Duties helped to pay for the ongoing occupation of Boston by British soldiers, an occupation of which Ethan disapproved, made a compelling case. But Ethan did need the money, and jobs were as hard to come by now as he could remember.

Making matters worse, Theophilus Lillie, the merchant who had hired him, was among the most outspoken of the importers, and, as a result, one of the most despised men in all of Boston. He was a grocer, whose dry goods shop sat on Middle Street, a short distance north of Mill Creek, where the North End began. In person, he was quiet, polite, and unassuming. But on those occasions when he chose to write in defense of his stand against the nonimportation agreements, as he had most recently the month before in the Boston News-Letter, he could be every bit as acerbic as the most talented Whig writers. To Ethan’s mind, much of the abuse directed at his store was well-deserved. Of course, he kept this opinion to himself.

When Ethan reached Middle Street, he found Lillie outside in the lane, surveying the latest indignities heaped upon his establishment. The windows of the shop had been smeared with tar and feathers, and a large wooden sign in the shape of a hand had been attached to one of the iron posts in front of the store. The sign, which appeared to be pointing toward Lillie’s door, read, “A very inoffensive man,

except in the offense of importation.”

A second sign, this one bearing effigies of four noncomplying merchants, including Lillie, had been erected nearby.

The signboards were annoyances; the tar on the windows could be removed eventually, although probably not until the air turned warmer.

Ethan was far more alarmed by the presence in the street of several dozen young men. They stood together a short distance from the shop, their hands in their pockets, their shoulders hunched against the cold. A few of them glanced toward the shop and Lillie, but mostly they talked amongst themselves, punctuating their conversations with occasional bursts of laughter. Ethan feared, however, that they would not be content for long to mind their own affairs.

Ethan halted a few feet from the merchant, his eyes on the mob.

“I suppose I should be flattered that they think me otherwise inoffensive,” Lillie said, frowning at the damage done to his windows. He leaned in closer, peering at the besmeared glass over the rims of his spectacles. “That tar won’t come off easily.”

“No, sir, at least not today with it being so cold. For now, I think you should go back inside.”

Lillie glanced at Ethan and then toward the crowd of young men. “Yes, you’re probably right.” He heaved a breath. “Could you have prevented this?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I hired you to protect my shop, my family, and me. And yet, they managed to do this despite the money I’m paying you.”

“If you remember, you hired me to watch your store by day. I told you what it would cost to hire me at night; you balked at the amount.”

“You were asking for a lot of money,” Lillie said, facing him.

“Be that as it may.”

Lillie scowled and surveyed the windows once more. “It might well have been worth the expense.”

Ethan held his tongue, hoping the merchant wouldn't change his mind and ask him to work past sundown. As bad as it was working for Lillie at all, it would worse be far spending his evenings here instead of at the Dowsing Rod.

Boys and young men continued to stream from all directions onto Middle Street. Watching them greet one another, it occurred to Ethan that this was no chance gathering. The same rabble who in recent weeks had tried to intimidate other importers with loud demonstrations, acts of mischief like the dirtying of Lillie's windows, and even wanton destruction of property, had chosen on this day to direct their ire at Mister Lillie.

"Sir, I do think we need to get you inside."

The merchant eyed the mob once more. "Yes, very well."

He stepped into the grocery shop, and Ethan followed close behind, shutting the door and securing the lock.

Lillie turned at the sound of the bolt. "I'm open for business, Mister Kaille. My purpose in hiring you was to remain open despite these threats."

"I understand, sir. And as soon as a customer approaches, I'll unlock the door. I'll even hold it open. But until then, I intend to keep it locked."

Lillie didn't look pleased, but neither did he argue the point further. He removed his cloak, revealing a deep green coat and matching breeches and waistcoat--a ditto suit, as such sets were called. He wore as well a powdered wig that made him look a good deal older than his years; Ethan guessed that Lillie was actually a few years younger than he. He had a round, pleasant face, dark eyes, and a weak chin. He didn't look to Ethan like a man who could so inflame the passions of the mob that lingered out in the street.

The young clerk who worked in the shop knelt before a shallow hearth and stirred the fire burning there. It was still chilly in the store but it wasn't nearly as cold as it had been outside.

Ethan removed his great coat, and, with his back turned to the merchant, pulled a few leaves of mullein from the pouch hidden in his pocket.

He had planned to cast a warding spell on the shop door, but now, holding the leaves in the curl of his fingers, he reconsidered. Lillie had gone behind the counter and was readying the shop for a day's business. Ethan wasn't sure a warding that allowed patrons to come and go as they pleased would have any effect on those with darker intentions.

Staring out through the filthy windows, he could see that the crowd continued to grow. More, many of the young toughs had positioned themselves closer to the shop and in the middle of the street.

"Sir, you might consider closing for the day."

Lillie turned. "What? I'll do no such thing! As I've said, you are here--"

"I'm here to protect you and your shop. I believe you would be safer at your home, and I believe that if you were to close, only for today, that mob would count it a victory and would be satisfied. As long as you remain and try to keep your doors open, they'll stay out there and will do everything in their power to keep customers from your door."

"I'm not interested in giving them a victory, Mister Kaille. I'm interested in running this establishment as I see fit, without interference from these so-called champions of liberty. Where is my liberty to do as I please with my shop?"

"I understand all that, sir," Ethan said, trying to keep his tone level. He almost told the merchant that he even agreed with him, but he couldn't bring himself to speak the words. He was no longer certain of his own mind; as much as he argued with Kannice and Diver, he couldn't bring himself to take Lillie's side, even in a conversation his friends could not hear. "I'm trying to keep you from coming to harm. That is my greatest concern."

"Then I would suggest that you get out there and see what you can do about clearing the street and allowing me to earn a bit of coin."

Ethan saw no point in this, although he did see great risk to himself. But Lillie had hired him, and was watching him now, an expectant look on his face.

He left his great coat where it was, willing in that moment to trade warmth for greater agility. And as he walked out the door and pulled it closed behind him, he muttered under his breath in Latin,

“Tegimen ex verbasco evocatum.” Warding, conjured from mullein.

Uncle Reg appeared beside him, pale to the point of translucence in the bright glare of the snow and clouds.

“Stay with me,” Ethan said in the same low voice. He started toward the nearest cluster of toughs, Reg matching him step for step.

“Are there any conjurers among them?”

The ghost shook his head.

That was a small grace.

“Good day,” Ethan called, raising a hand in greeting as he approached them.

The toughs stared back at him, stony faced.

“You work for him?” one of the pups asked, nodding toward Lillie’s shop.

“He’s hired me, yes. It’s my job to see to it that his shop is not vandalized and his person not abused.”

The pup grinned. “Looks like you didn’ do too good protectin’ his shop. I don’ suppose you’ll do much better guardin’ ‘his person.’”

The other toughs laughed.

Ethan glanced around. Others were listening to their conversation, eyeing him with manifest hostility. He didn’t wish to trade threats with the lad, but he felt compelled to make some attempt to do as the merchant had asked. “I should tell you that if you molest Mister Lillie’s customers or do anything to keep them from his door, he’ll have no choice but to summon Sheriff Greenleaf.”

“Oh, not the sheriff!” the pup said, feigning terror, and drawing more chuckles from his companions. He sobered. “The sheriff has about as much chance of clearin’ us from the street as you do.”

“The sheriff may bring soldiers.”

The lad smiled again though there was not a hint of mirth in his pale eyes. “Let him.”

Before Ethan could say more, the lad turned away from him. “Are we afraid of the lobsterbacks?” he cried.

The mob replied with a deafening “No!”

He faced Ethan again. “Go back an’ tell your importer friend that he’s free to summon the sheriff, or the gov’nor, or Gen’ral Gage. Hell, he can summon the goddamned king for all we care.”

The other toughs had sidled closer, and they cheered the lad. Ethan knew that if he didn’t retreat now, he might not have another opportunity.

Tipping his hat to them, he said, “Very well. Good day, gentlemen.” He turned and started back to the shop.

“You hear that?” the lad said, laughing once more. “Gentlemen he calls us. Good’ay to you, too, gov’nor!”

They continued to laugh at him, but they let him go, which Ethan counted a small victory.

No sooner had he reentered the shop than the mob began to converge on Lillie’s store.

“What did you say to them?” the merchant asked, sounding angry and frightened. He had come out from behind the counter and now stood at the window, marking their approach, his cheeks wan.

“I told them that I was here to keep your shop from harm, and I suggested that they refrain from molesting your customers lest you call the sheriff to disperse them.”

“Apparently you weren’t very convincing.”

Ethan laughed. “Did you truly believe I would be?”

Lillie shot him a filthy look.

The young men were shouting, although aside from hearing “importer,” and “traitor,” and a few other imprecations, Ethan could make out little of what they said. Some of them were also pelting Lillie’s door and window with snowballs and pieces of ice. Fearing that the glass might shatter under the onslaught, Ethan thought about casting another spell. But before he could retrieve more mullein from the pocket of his great coat, Lillie said, “What in the Lord’s name is he doing?”

“Who?” Ethan asked, stepping closer to the window.

Lillie pointed.

Gazing in the direction he indicated, Ethan spotted an older man scrutinizing the wooden hand

and effigies with a critical eye. He wore a tricorn hat and a bright red cloak much like Lillie's. He had a kerchief wrapped around his neck and the lower part of his face to protect him from the cold, but still Ethan thought he recognized the man as Ebenezer Richardson, Lillie's neighbor.

As much as Lillie had made himself an object of scorn among Boston's Whigs, his unpopularity was nothing compared to that of Richardson. Several years before, Richardson had been exposed as an informer for the Customs Board. He had alerted officials of the Crown to the smuggling of goods, including French wine, by merchants acting in defiance of Parliament. When these merchants, most of whom were Whig sympathizers, attempted to shame Richardson publicly, he was unapologetic. In the years since, he had been employed by the Customs Board in a more formal capacity, which did nothing to improve his reputation. Nor did his habit of referring to himself as "a magistrate," and ordering people about without any real authority to do so.

"He's going to get himself killed," Ethan said. Most of the lads had yet to take notice of the man, but when they did he would be in peril.

"Go help him, Kaille," Lillie said.

"That's not my job. I have no desire to risk my neck for Ebenezer Richardson."

"You said it yourself: they'll kill him."

Ethan glanced at Uncle Reg, who still stood beside him, his russet glow more pronounced inside the shop. Of course Lillie, who was no conjurer, could not see him. The specter gave a half-hearted shrug.

"Very well," Ethan said. "I'll use the rear entrance."

"Aye. That's a fine idea."

Ethan exited the shop through the door in back and returned to Middle Street by way of a narrow alley. By the time he reached the front of the shop, however, Richardson was no longer standing in front of the signs. Scanning the mob, Ethan spotted the man talking to the driver of a horse and cart, and gesturing back at the effigies. Ethan hurried toward them.

". . . Run them down!" Richardson was saying.

"No, sir," the cart driver replied. "Even if I were inclined to, it might hurt my horse or my cart."

“It will do neither.” When the driver said nothing more, Richardson dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “Fool!”

“Mister Richardson,” Ethan said, “you need to get off the street.”

Richardson rounded on him. “And who are you to tell me what I ought to be doing?”

“My name is Ethan Kaille, and I’m--”

“You’re that thieftaker who Theophilus hired.”

“Yes, sir. Mister Lillie is concerned for--”

“You’re not doing much to earn your wage, are you Kaille? These signs and such are a disgrace. They need to be torn down.”

“I’m less concerned with the signs than I am with keeping Mister Lillie safe. And he’s concerned about you, sir. This mob is getting more agitated by the moment, and you’re not exactly their favorite person.”

Richardson dismissed this remark much as he had the cart driver. “I don’t give a damn about that. Let ‘em come on me. I’ve got my guns loaded.” He turned a quick circle. “Ah! You there!” He hustled off toward a charcoal carter who was making his way through the throng.

Ethan didn’t bother to follow, but he watched as the customs man, his gesticulations growing ever more animated, tried to convince the charcoal man to knock down the signs with his cart. Once again, however, Richardson was rebuffed.

By this time, more people in the crowd had noticed him. Some were pointing; others shouted his name.

Richardson paid them no heed. He was as a man possessed. Unable to find a cart driver to knock over the offending signs, he strode to a small chaise that sat near another shop. Its driver had stepped away from the chaise to speak to a few of the street toughs, and before this man could stop him, Richardson grabbed the reins, shouted at the horse and steered the chaise toward the effigies.

Aware now of what the customs man was up to, the mob blocked his way and tried to pull him from the chaise.

Fearing for Richardson's life, Ethan clambered toward him, pushing his way through the sea of men and boys. He knew though that he wouldn't reach Richardson in time.

But to his surprise, Richardson escaped the chaise on his own and beat a hasty path toward his home. Several men accosted him, and the boys shouted "Informer!" again and again.

Richardson answered the taunts of several of the men with cries of "Perjury! Perjury!" And when at last he reached his door, he turned, and said to those baiting him, "By the eternal God, I'll make it too hot for you before night!"

With that, he shut the door in the men's faces.

Relieved that Richardson had reached the safety of his house without injury, Ethan turned, intending to make his way back to Lillie's shop.

"Come out, you damn son of a bitch!" one man shouted at Richardson's door. "I'll have your heart out! Your liver out!"

To Ethan's amazement and consternation, Richardson opened his door once more, and jumped out into the street, his fists raised.

"C'mon, you bloody bastards! I'll fight all of you. I'll make it hot for every one of you!"

The mob of men and boys that had gathered around Lillie's door swept toward Richardson's house as if compelled by a tide, calling him an informer and shouting other insults.

"Go off!" Richardson warned, his voice carrying along the street. His wife joined him in front of the house, and shouted most unladylike epithets at her husband's enemies.

The mob laughed at them both.

"We've as much right as you t' this street, informer!" one young man called.

His companions cheered.

Snowballs, chunks of ice, and pieces of refuse rained down on the Richardsons, forcing them to retreat once more into the house. Ethan hoped that this time the customs man would have the good sense to remain inside. He should have known better.

The door opened again, and Ethan drew breath to shout a warning. Richardson held in his hands

what Ethan took at first for a rifle, though as Richardson shook it at the mob and traded more insults with them, he realized it was nothing more threatening than a stick. Again the customs man ducked back through his door, but this time instead of closing it, he threw a brickbat out at the mob. It didn't hit anyone, but it further enraged his harassers. A man grabbed the brick and threw it through one of Richardson's first floor windows.

A roar went up from the mob. They pressed forward pelting the home with sticks, rocks, eggs and pieces of fruit from nearby shops, and anything else they could lay their hands on. More windows shattered. A woman cried out from the upper floor. A man Ethan didn't know leapt up onto the doorstep and after speaking briefly with Richardson was ushered into the house.

The door was barred, even as more projectiles flew at the windows and door. In short order, most of the glass on the front of the house had been broken. One man called for Richardson to be dragged from his home and hanged. Several other men--older than most of those in the mob--tried to dissuade the toughs from doing more damage, but the crowd seemed to be beyond reason. There were as many young boys as there were men. A number of them were laughing, seeming to think it all a great game. The scene reminded Ethan of the Pope's Day riots that used to pit North End gangs against ruffians from the South End.

Ethan watched the house, thinking--hoping--that at last Richardson had tired of the confrontation. Perhaps if he kept out of sight for a time, the crowd would disperse, or at least turn their attention back to their less combative demonstrations in front of Lillie's shop.

But even as he formed this thought, he felt a low thrum of power in the icy street. A spell? Reg, still beside him, though ethereal in the daylight, cast a sharp look Ethan's way.

"That was a conjuring, wasn't it?" Ethan asked the ghost, whispering the words.

Reg nodded, his eyebrows bunched.

"Do you know where it came from?"

A shake of the ghostly head. No.

He had other questions for the specter, and he sensed that there was more Reg wished to

communicate to him. But he had no opportunity to ask. Richardson appeared at a downstairs window, and this time there could be no mistaking the musket he held in his hands.

He knelt and rested the barrel on the window sill, seeming to take careful aim. But though it seemed to Ethan that he pulled the trigger, nothing happened. With a crash, the mob broke through Richardson's door. Those closest to the house appeared to be taken aback at what they had done; no one entered. But volleys of rocks and ice still flew at the structure. Richardson stepped away from the window, though only briefly. Seconds later he was back, kneeling again

The second man stood behind Richardson, also holding a musket, but it was Richardson who aimed at the crowd once more.

And this time when he pulled the trigger, the rifle fired with a report that reverberated through the lanes.

For the span of a heartbeat, all was still save for the receding echo of that gunshot. Then the stunned silence gave way to shouts of outrage and screams of panic. More stones hit off the façade of the house and flew through the unglazed windows. Someone cried "He's shot the boy!"

Richardson yelled back at the mob, aiming his musket again. The second man moved to the window and aimed his weapon toward the open doorway. Some who had advanced on the entrance retreated again. Several ran around toward the back of the house, no doubt hoping to gain entry that way.

Ethan spotted a young man being led away from the Richardson home toward another house. There was blood on his hand and on both of his thighs, but that appeared to be the extent of his wounds. He had been fortunate; all of them had. It seemed Richardson--the idiot--had fired pellets into the crowd, endangering dozens.

And in that moment, Ethan caught sight of the second lad.

He was slight, with wheaten hair, and he couldn't have been more than twelve years old. His coat had been peeled away to reveal the front of his shirt, which had several holes in it and was soaked with blood.

Two men carried the boy, their faces pale, though not so much as the child's. His face was white

as the snow, and contorted in a rictus of pain. They took him to one of the other houses and shut the door on the mob. A few seconds later two men rushed inside this same structure; Ethan hoped they were physicians.

He felt sick to his stomach. The battle for Richardson's house went on; he could hear men battering the rear of the customs man's home, but he hadn't the heart to watch more. He walked back toward Lillie's shop.

Before he was halfway there, he turned and made his way to the house into which they had taken the boy. He couldn't try to save the boy without revealing to everyone there that he was a conjurer. But he wouldn't forgive himself if he didn't make the attempt. Reaching the house, he rapped hard on the door.

Almost immediately it swung open. The man who blocked Ethan's way into the house had blood on his coat and breeches.

"Are you a surgeon?" he asked.

Ethan hesitated for no more than an instant. "I have experience healing wounds of this sort."

The man seemed unsure, but he stepped aside. Ethan rushed past him into what appeared to be the dining room. The boy lay on the table in the center of the chamber. His shirt had been removed; his chest and abdomen were a bloody mess. A man stood beside the table, his hands crimson, shocking. Ethan assumed he was a physician.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"My name is Ethan Kaille, doctor."

"Your name is not familiar to me. Are you a surgeon?"

Ethan stepped closer to him. He was aware of Reg hovering at his shoulder, eyeing the boy. "I have the ability to heal," he said, keeping his voice low and holding the man's gaze. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The doctor's eyes widened. "I believe I do," he whispered.

"I can close the wounds, stop the bleeding."

"The bleeding is only half the problem," the doctor said. "The boy was struck with swan shot. At

least one of the pellets seems to have lodged in a lung. There may be others in his heart or his stomach.

Unless we can extract them, he's going to die."

Ethan sagged and stared down at the boy.

"Can you get them out?" the doctor asked. "Is that within your...your talents?"

"No," Ethan said, his voice thick.

The doctor grimaced.

"I'm sorry," Ethan said, and turned to leave.

"We've called for other surgeons," the man said. "I'm sure they'll come; one of them might be able to save him."

Ethan paused, although he didn't look back. "I hope so."

"Pray for the boy."

I believe in neither prayer nor God, Ethan wanted to say. But he kept this to himself and left the house.