

Chapter 1

A Marriage Proposal

Roger Macefield proposes to Mercy—Johnny Bishop informs them that Josiah has returned—Mercy prepares to leave for Boston immediately—

Concord, Massachusetts

December 1777

At the Willingham House on the outskirts of the village, Roger Macefield was trying desperately to convince Mercy Willingham to marry him.

“My parents are giving a big Christmas party next week,” he said. “We could announce our engagement then. Wouldn’t that be grand?”

“How many times must I tell you, Roger,” Mercy replied, with the air and tone of someone who has repeated something more times than they care to remember, “that there can be only one man for me, and that is Josiah Hartford. I will never marry anyone else.”

“But Mercy,” Roger persisted, pleadingly now, “no one has seen or heard from Josiah since last February. That’s almost a year.”

“I can count, Roger,” Mercy said, no longer able to keep the impatience out of her voice, “and I know how long it has been. It doesn’t matter. I am waiting for Josiah, and that’s final.”

“Mercy, Josiah must be dead,” Roger said gravely, for he had decided it was time to loose the best arrow in his quiver. “He isn’t ever coming back.”

He had been holding this card in reserve, waiting for the right moment to suggest what no one else would dare to say—that if Josiah Hartford was ever going to return he would have arrived long ago. But playing his ace did not make the impression he had hoped for.

“Roger Macefield,” Mercy flared, “you better not ever say anything like that to me again as long as you live, because if you do I will slap you silly and never speak to you until the day I die! Josiah will come back. I know he will. And when he does, I’m going to marry him.”

Mercy was twenty now, known far and wide as one of the most beautiful young women in New England. Roger was only one of a dozen men who were courting her. To each entreaty she gave the same answer: She was promised to Josiah Hartford and was

waiting for him to come home from the war. She wouldn't dream of marrying anyone else.

"I'm sorry, Mercy," Roger said contritely. "I didn't mean to upset you. I've even checked with his family in Boston. All they know is that he left his sister's house in New Jersey last February, and that he was going to Philadelphia to find a ship to bring him home. But it was all those months ago. How long does it take a ship to get to Boston from Philadelphia?"

Mercy didn't reply. While she would never admit it, she did have her moments of doubt. It *was* an awfully long time, and Philadelphia wasn't on the moon. What if something terrible had happened? What if his ship sank? Months ago John Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress, had come through Concord on one of his many trips to Boston and told her he had helped Josiah find passage on a Spanish ship named the San Martin. It was a good, sturdy bark, and he had done business with the skipper, Captain Rodriguez, many times in the past. If anyone could get Josiah to Boston, he could. But there had been no word of Josiah since then.

Josiah had proposed to her twice, and she had turned him down both times. She had been angry at what he had done with Alice, the Hartford's maid, who died giving birth to Josiah's son, Little Josiah. But soon after he proposed the second time, Mercy had realized what a terrible mistake she had made. She loved Josiah, she always had, and she wanted nothing so much in this world as to marry him, live with him at Hartford Manor, raise Little Josiah and have children of their own. She had hurried to Boston to tell him she had changed her mind.

It was too late. He had already left to go back to the army, by now camped in New York, waiting for the British to attack. Then the news came earlier this year: His sister Mary Louise had written from New Jersey that Josiah had left the army and was going to come home.

This made Mercy delirious with joy. Every day she expected to hear that Josiah was back in Boston, and that she should pack her things and hurry to Hartford Manor. But days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, and there was no word from him, no letters, nothing. She wrote regularly to Josiah's family in Boston, and even went to visit Hartford Manor, desperate for some news, but there was none.

And so she waited, month after month. When people asked her how long she intended to wait, her reply was always the same: Forever, although there were moments, becoming more common lately, when she wondered if she could really do that. Forever was a long time.

Roger was the most persistent of her suitors. He was dark haired and handsome, and came from a family just as prominent as her own. He would make a good catch for most girls, Mercy thought, for he wasn't the type to cheat or drink too much. He had an infectious, boyish charm, and she didn't mind the way he endlessly repeated that she was the most beautiful creature on earth. But she found his company boring. Mercy admired intelligence in men, and Roger never read a book unless he had to. His empty-headedness was a sharp contrast to Josiah Hartford's keen intellect. Roger was also a snob, always looking down on people who were of a lesser station in life, something both her family and the Hartfords did not approve of. And while the Willinghams were ardent Patriots and wanted a complete victory over the British in the war that was still raging in what had been the American colonies—Mercy's father, Jessup, had worked with John Hancock in smuggling guns and supplies to the rebel militias before the war began—Roger and his family were lukewarm patriots at best, not caring too much which side won, although Roger had expressed outrage over the British bringing in Hessian mercenaries.

Now there was an uncomfortable silence. Roger kept trying to think of something more he could say. The big Claggett and Wady grandfather clock on the other side of the parlor tolled noon. When the quietude had gone on for several minutes Mercy decided it was time for her to suggest that Roger go home. Then she heard the clop-clop of horses' hooves and the sound of a wagon squeaking as it came to a halt in front of her house, followed by the loud voice of her younger brother Scotty. A moment later he burst through the front door and came running in, his face red with excitement.

"You won't believe what I just heard!" he exclaimed.

Scotty was fourteen, willful and headstrong. The changes that were happening in his body now took up a lot of his time. His voice broke frequently, he was growing out of his clothes faster than new ones could be found, hair was popping out of him in strange places. He was also starting to realize that men and women were interestingly different from one another. He wasn't sure how that worked, but he knew that when men

reached a certain age they began asking women to marry them. That was why Roger was here so often, because he wanted Mercy to become his wife.

“What did you hear, you young scamp?” Mercy asked fondly.

“Josiah Hartford has come back! He’s in Boston, right now!”

Mercy’s face lit up like a chandelier held in front of a mirror. Roger, however, looked like a man whose legs have just been cut off at the hips.

“How do you know that, you rascal?” Mercy asked. She wanted to believe it more than anything on earth, but she did not, would not, allow herself to embrace it until she was certain it was true. “Who told you?”

“Mr. Bishop, the man who married Jessica Hartford. He’s right outside, you can ask him yourself if you don’t believe me.”

Mercy almost knocked her brother over in her eagerness to get to the front door and then outside and onto the road that ran past the Willinghams’ house. She saw this man, Johnny Bishop, in the driver’s place of a large wagon, the kind used to haul wood and other supplies, pulled by two big brown horses. She vaguely remembered him, a carpenter who worked for Hartford Ships, the company Josiah’s family owned. He had married Jessica Hartford, Josiah’s sister, sometime last year in a private ceremony.

“Hello, Mercy,” he said. He did not take his hat off, as good manners dictated at a moment like this, and he spoke in a too-familiar, almost impudent manner. “I suppose the youngster told you the news?”

“Is it true, Mr. Bishop?” Mercy asked politely. “Is it true Josiah has come back?”

“Just as sure as you’re standin’ there, Mercy, just as sure as that. He’s come back in all his glory.”

“When did he get back, Bishop?” Roger asked sharply. While he was doing his best to hide it, he was seething with anger at this bumptious fellow for coming here to bring this unwelcome news and also at his rudeness. Who did he think he was, being so familiar with his betters? Etiquette demanded he address Mercy as “Miss Willingham” or at least as “Miss Mercy.” What nerve these upstarts had!

“Three days ago, Roger. He come a-ridin’ a sorry-lookin’ horse and with nothin’ but the clothes on his back. Surprised the hell out of us all, I’m here to tell ya.”

“I’ll thank you not to use that kind of language in front of a lady, Bishop,” Roger reprimanded sternly. You had to keep fellows like this in their place or they would walk

all over you. "And now tell me why you waited three days to come to Concord with this tidbit of news."

"I didn't come to Concord to give you any news at all, tit-bit or otherwise," Bishop replied haughtily. "I'm here to pick up a load of lumber for the shipyard. I'm the new yardmaster, ya know."

"You are moving up in the world," Roger said acidly.

"That I am, Roger, that I am."

They were in front of the Willingham's three story house, situated on the edge of the town and away from Concord's main thoroughfare. The Willingham's home, and several others nearby, still had bullet holes in their walls and other reminders of the fighting that had taken place here on April 19, 1775, the day the war began. The British soldiers had ransacked the Willingham's house and dug up the gardens outside, searching for the muskets and gunpowder they believed were hidden there, but they found nothing, and a furious counter-attack by the Patriot militias had driven them out of Concord and all the way back to Boston.

It was a cold December day. There was some snow on the ground in places, but it was melting. Mercy wished she had put on a shawl. But before she went back inside to get warm she had to ask Bishop at least one more question.

"Tell me, how is he?" she inquired. "Is he well?"

"He's just as fit as a fiddle, Mercy ma'am, fit as a fiddle. Came ridin' up big as life, along with a wagon his friend Bigelow was drivin' and two women in the back. The whole house just about went crazy."

"Two women?" Mercy was taken aback. "Who are they?"

"How should I know? I got the idea they got picked up along the way. Josiah said they came all the way from Can-Tuck-Ee. I know Josiah means for them to live in the Manor. I live there too, ya know, since I married into the family." Bishop smiled in a self-satisfied way. "Waal, I gotta go get that wood. Cedar, it is, for a new ship the Congress in Philly wants us to build. As the Yardmaster, it's up to me to oversee that."

"Good day, Bishop," Roger said frostily.

Bishop shook the reins and said "Giddap," and the wagon groaned once more and began to move.

"Insufferable man," Roger said, "how many times do you think he was going to remind us of how he's the *Yardmaster* at the Hartford's shipyard?"

He put a special emphasis on the word "Yardmaster," as if described someone who cleaned pig pens for a living. But to his chagrin, he saw that speaking to the air. Mercy had already gone back into the house, and with a sinking heart he understood she had forgotten about him.

"Prudence!" He heard her calling for one of the servant girls the Willinghams employed. "Prudy," she said when the girl, no more than sixteen and dressed in a maid's uniform, appeared, "pack a suitcase for me. No, pack two. I'm going to Boston. Tell Hastings to have the carriage ready."

"You're going to Boston?" Roger asked.

"Of course I'm going to Boston, Roger. I've got to go see Josiah. He's the man I'm going to marry." She saw the anguished look that seized Roger's face at these words, and she said impatiently, "Roger, I've told you at least one hundred times that you and I can never be anything but friends."

"I have friends," Roger said despairingly. "But it's you I love, Mercy."

"You must get over that," Mercy said firmly. "Josiah is the only man I'll ever love."

"But does he truly love you, Mercy? The way I do?"

"Of course he does! Now run along. I have half a hundred things to do before I leave."

"Give Josiah my regards." Roger picked up his three cornered hat. He tried his best to put on a brave front, but it wasn't working and he knew it. "If I must lose out, I'm glad it's to someone that everybody looks up to. I knew Josiah at Harvard. We were classmates there. He was the fencing champion, the star of the debating team, and now he's a war hero. Just please tell me one thing, Mercy. If Josiah weren't around, would I have a chance?"

"No," Mercy said automatically. "Yes. I don't know." It was evident that she was done with him. "My head is too full of Josiah right now to answer a question like that. Roger, will you please skedaddle so I can get ready?"

Roger left, trying not to show how disappointed he felt. Mercy was so excited she did not hear him when he rode away. Her father was in Philadelphia on business with

the Continental Congress, but her mother, Patricia, was upstairs. Mercy bounded up the carpeted steps. She couldn't wait to tell her mother the news, that Josiah Hartford was back and they would be planning a wedding soon.

But who, she wondered, were the two women that had come back with him?"