

Prologue

July 4, 1826

Glittering trails of firelight illuminated the champagne in Lydia's glass. Leaning back against a sandstone column, her stiff fingers curled over the worn crook of her cane, Lydia sipped the Veuve Clicquot from its gold-encrusted pool. The warmth from her drink fought off the coolness that stole through her silk gown and gloves.

Hundreds of guests gathered on the north lawn of the white President's Palace as another round of red-and-blue fireworks rocketed through the night, but only one of the guests interested her. Lydia scanned the shadowed faces of cabinet members and representatives from across the States, searching in vain for their country's secretary of state.

The echoing *boom* rattled her bones, and the crowd cheered as shards of light cascaded over the grass.

"*Jubilee of Freedom*"—that's what John Quincy Adams, president of their United States, called this day, but the celebration in Lydia's heart blended with her memories, jubilation fading away like the fireworks in the darkness.

Would their country remember the sacrifices the men and women of the colonies had made as well as their triumphs?

She took another sip, looking again for the distinguished secretary.

Fifty years had passed since their country had declared its independence from Great Britain—and almost fifty years since the man who became the country's secretary of state turned her and her family upside down.

After the last firework fizzled into the night, the strum of a harpsichord soothed the crashing sounds from the fireworks display. A flute followed the harp and then violins.

Lydia scanned the crowd again. This time she found him.

He stood beside the president, looking quite regal in his long black evening coat. The red-and-golden stripes on his waistcoat and cravat honored this celebration of independence, and his laughter made her smile. He usually didn't enjoy parties, but this was one celebration he loved.

The music stopped, and silence rippled across the grass as President Adams lifted his glass. Men and women alike lifted their glasses with him. Even though her champagne was gone, Lydia lifted her coupe as high as the others. Decades ago she would have been mortified about her empty glass, but she was much too old now to care about pomp and circumstance.

The secretary of state turned his head slowly until he found her in the lantern light. As the president toasted the jubilee, the secretary raised his glass to Lydia and she smiled at him. His love seemed to wash over her, cleansing the remnants of pain, and her heart fluttered.

Ages ago she'd been called beautiful, but now lines crept up her face even as the youth of her body slipped away. At sixty-nine, her hands were already speckled purple-and-blue, and her copper-brown locks had turned the same milky-gray color of the stone portico at her beloved Caswell Hall.

Yet when he captured her with his gaze, she felt beautiful.

The orchestra resumed playing, and the couples around her began to dance a minuet on the wide patio. How she wished she and the secretary could steal away from the lights and the people and the responsibilities that weighed heavy on them. How she wished they could go back to Caswell Hall and sit together on the wide porch, hand in hand, as they watched the ships parade up and down the river.

Louisa Adams stepped beside her and took her arm. Mrs. Adams's gaze wandered toward the secretary. "I think you still fancy him."

Lydia smiled at the First Lady. "Very much."

"And clearly he fancies you."

Lydia laughed. "I've cast a spell over him."

"I believe you have. A beautiful spell." Mrs. Adams let go of Lydia's arm and brushed her gloved hands over the ruffles of her pale-green gown. "How many years has it been?"

"Forty-four years since our wedding day."

"And you are still in love."

Lydia's heart stirred. "Madly."

As her husband slowly crossed the floor, Lydia turned away from the First Lady and welcomed him with her smile.

Mrs. Adams nudged her forward. "You should dance with him."

How she had once loved to dance. She and the secretary hadn't danced in more than a decade, ever since the doctor said a cane would be her companion for her remaining years, but tonight her husband gently set her cane against the wall and offered her his arm.

Her feet moved slowly to the music, her leg threatening to buckle. But she knew the dance, and she knew her husband's steps. She knew everything about this man who held her.

His arm anchored her back as they danced on the patio. He'd anchored her for most of her life. Through illness and the loss of her family. Through the birth of eight children and the death of two. Through the storms that raged outside their plantation and those that raged in her heart.

He bent toward her and whispered in her ear, "Do you remember?"

She looked up into green eyes that flashed in the light, and the years seemed to melt away. She was twenty-four again, and he was teasing her.

She tilted her head ever so slightly, their banter as familiar as the steps of the minuet. "Remember what?"

"That night by the river." He stopped dancing, and a curtain of skirts swirled around them. "I do not want you to forget."

"I—" she started, but she never finished her words. He rocked toward her and she clung to him, holding his limp body to her chest. Pain shot up her failing leg, but she wouldn't let him fall. He was saying something to her, and she tried to hear his voice over the music, desperately wanting to understand.

One of the senators—a doctor—rushed toward them, and the orchestra stopped playing as the senator helped lay her husband on the ground. Her husband opened his eyes and calmed her racing heart with his gaze.

The crowd circling around them seemed to vanish. All she saw were the eyes of the man she loved looking back at her.

His gaze transported her to that cold night so long ago when he'd searched her face. The night he'd asked her the question that changed her life. She could almost feel the dampness on her skin, the longing in her heart.

Her tears drenched her husband's fine coat as she pushed his hair behind his ears. He was so handsome. So strong.

She couldn't lose him here.

She reached for his hand and leaned forward so only he would hear her whisper. "We're going home, my love."

PART ONE

*What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly:
it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.*

THOMAS PAINE, *THE AMERICAN CRISIS*, 1776

Chapter One

February 1781

Near Williamsburg, Virginia

Twilight laced the snowy banks along the James River with orange and pink. The Caswell family had already retired for the night, each member warming by a fire in his or her bedchamber, but the King's Men hadn't retired. Leaning against the pillows on her window seat, Lydia Caswell watched a parade of British ships steal past her family's home, the blue-and-red King's Colours glowing from a dozen masts.

Why was the British navy sailing up their river?

The last she'd heard from her father, the British soldiers who'd landed in Newport News last month had left for Charles Towne in South Carolina. They weren't supposed to return to Virginia.

She put down her sampler and slid off the cushioned seat, neatly folding the quilt that had warmed her lap. Part of her wanted to sneak down to the bank to enjoy a better view of the ships, but she wasn't fond of being outside—at least not like her friend Sarah Hammond. Before the war, Lydia's family hosted hundreds of visitors each year at Caswell Hall for lavish dinners and balls. She preferred dances and teas to walks in the garden, but the winter and lingering war made the evenings terribly long. Sometimes it felt as if the paneled walls were beginning to close in upon her.

With a candle flickering in her hand, Lydia stepped into the dark hallway. Her parents' chamber was across from hers, and to her right was the door for the servants' staircase. Her sister's chamber and the one kept for her brother, Grayson, were to the left of Lydia's room. Beyond