

THE IMPOSTER

A LEGACY OF LOVE NOVEL



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EMBER ROTH BOOKS



PROLOGUE



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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. She 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 don’t want you to ever 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.”

*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 1



FEBRUARY 1781, WILLIAMSBURG

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 their rooms was the balcony that overlooked the grand staircase and hall below.

When her father built Caswell Hall, he meticulously crafted a manor that would rival his childhood home outside London, intending to raise his family in a colony ruled by the king. His father had helped him build this house, but the life of the senior Lord Caswell was stolen away much too early.

Lydia crossed the hall to her parents' door. If he hadn't seen them already, Father would want to know about these ships. After what had happened to Grandfather, Father kept his political views inside the walls of their house, but she doubted there were many in the American colonies more loyal to the Crown than he.

Her parents' door was cracked open, and she lifted her hand to knock but stopped when she heard her mother speak. "She cannot marry until after the war."

Lydia leaned closer to the door. Who was her mother talking about?

Everyone knew that Lydia wouldn't be married until after the war was over, and her sister, Hannah, had only just turned fifteen. Some families married off their daughters when they were fourteen, but Mother had told Hannah many times that they wouldn't even consider a marriage for her until she was at least sixteen.

"The war will be finished soon, Dotty. Perhaps before summer." Her father was probably sitting by the fire, waving a

cigar in his hand as he spoke. "We must begin to make arrangements."

Perhaps they were discussing Lydia's marriage to Seth Hammond after all. While she had promised to marry their neighbor five years ago—and her parents approved of the union at the time—Father had since changed his mind.

Was he reconsidering his objection?

"There will be no wedding without a groom," Mother said.

Father sighed. "We must find an Englishman for her. Someone loyal to the Crown."

Lydia held her breath as she leaned closer to the door. Surely they were talking about Hannah, when she was old enough to marry.

"Tis impossible to say who is truly loyal now," Mother replied. "When the fighting is over, it will be sorted out."

"But she is already twenty-four," Father insisted. "I fear we cannot wait much longer to find a husband for her."

Lydia sank back against the wall. They were discussing her.

Father continued speaking. "We know where the loyalties of the British officers rest. Perhaps one of them could marry her and take her back to England."

The strength in Mother's voice drained. "I do not want to lose her, Charles."

"Then one of the officers must learn how to run a plantation."

Lydia backed away from the door and fled down the servants' circular staircase. She didn't want to marry a stranger. Until Seth had gone to fight in this cursed war, she had planned to marry him and stay here, at Caswell Hall. But when he joined the rebels in their fight, Father swore she and Seth would never marry.

In the basement she retrieved a dark-blue cloak from the wardrobe along with a muff to warm her hands. She needed to

get out of the house, if only for part of an hour. The war was making all of them desperate.

Great Britain had the most powerful army in the world. Once they stopped the rebellion among the colonists, all would return to normalcy. Seth and her father would reconcile, and she would become Mrs. Hammond.

Quickly she fastened the leather straps of wooden-soled pattens over her slippers to keep the satin dry. She reached for the long handle of the door that led toward the river, but before she turned the handle, someone stepped into the room through the kitchen door.

Both she and Prudence gasped at the sight of the other. Lydia reached out to help Prudence steady the silver tray in her hand.

Prudence was the oldest of their six maidservants, the only light-skinned one among them. Her hair was tucked back under her white mobcap, and her plump cheeks were always rosy, in both the hot and the cold. She had come to Caswell Hall almost twenty-five years ago to work as a nursemaid for Lydia and then Hannah. The girls were much too old for a nursemaid now, but Prudence had stayed on with the Caswell family to attend to all the women.

Lydia eyed the top of the silver platter. There was an oval-shaped teapot, hand-painted teacups, a wooden caddy for the tea leaves, and a plate of powdered cakes. "Is Hannah hungry again?"

Prudence shook her head. "Your parents called for tea in their rooms. Would you like to join them?"

Lydia stepped toward the door that led to the riverfront. "Perhaps when I return."

Prudence eyed her cloak. "'Tis too cold for you outside."
"I'm just walking to the river."

The teacups clattered with the shake of Prudence's head. Lydia may have outgrown the need for a nursemaid, but

Prudence still watched over her. “The river’s a long way in the snow.”

“Only a few steps, really.” She tied the strings of her cloak. “I shan’t be gone long.”

“Aye,” Prudence said. “I will take Lady Caswell her tea and then remain here until you return.”

“Please don’t tell them where I’m going.”

Prudence hesitated before she agreed.

Lydia pulled the woolen hood over her cap as she stepped outside. Snow crunched under her pattens as she hurried away from the house down a pathway leading to the small wharf where her family received and shipped goods to England.

She breathed deeply of the crisp air, savoring the golden moments before the sunlight was completely gone. Father’s office was on the left side of the house, its frosty slate roof matching the main house, along with a smokehouse and a barn. The kitchen gardens were to her right along with several other flank buildings: stable, coach house, washhouse, and summer kitchen.

The gardeners, laundry maids, and groundskeepers lived in the servants’ quarters beside the coach house, while the rest of the Negroes lived in dwellings a half mile north, closer to where they labored. Prudence and the other fairer-skinned house servants lived in the attic of Caswell Hall.

The family’s formal gardens wrapped around the east side of Caswell Hall, extending all the way to the river, and centered in the midst of the garden was a white gazebo and an ornate glass-and-brick orangery where the gardener grew fruits and vegetables in the winter. On long summer days, she and Seth had sometimes sat in the gazebo, before war began to rage in their colonies.

In 1775, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, stole the colonists’ gunpowder from the magazine in Williamsburg and harassed those who rebelled against the Crown. But

then, like the tides along the Chesapeake Bay, the power in Virginia shifted. Lord Dunmore and his family fled during the night, and the rebels began attacking those who remained loyal to the king. They boycotted businesses, imprisoned Loyalists, and administered a painful coat of thickset to the most outspoken opponents of rebellion.

Her heart ached at the memories of her grandfather, a distinguished member of the House of Burgesses, covered with the tar that burned his skin. He died from his wounds—or perhaps from the humiliation of being forced to walk through town clothed only in thickset and a degrading coat of feathers.

Lydia shook her head. That was four years past now, and Grandfather wouldn't want her to think about the tar and feathering. Even though he'd been treated dishonorably, he'd died an honorable man and he would want her to remember his strength. If he were still alive, he might have been on one of the British ships, fighting for the king.

Caswell Hall was four miles southwest of Williamsburg. She'd seen the British soldiers passing through the town last October, but neither the British nor the rebel soldiers had come near her family's plantation. She didn't know how her father had managed to keep the soldiers away, but the current Lord Caswell would do almost anything to protect their plantation.

It was only a matter of weeks, Father had said, before the Continental Army would fold anyway. When that happened, King George III would reward the Caswell family well for its loyalty.

She stepped to the top of the bank and looked upriver. Black willows drooped low to her right, their icy fingers dangling in the water. The ships had passed by, but on the other side of the willows, she could still see their ensigns in the fading light. With the British navy in Virginia, surely the British were close to restoring peace in their colony.

She burrowed her hands farther into the muff. Her father

might not be vocal about his politics in Williamsburg, but in the privacy of their dining hall, her father was as loyal to the Crown as General Cornwallis. And he wanted her to marry someone just as loyal.

She was so tired of this war that pitted neighbor against neighbor—the war that killed her grandfather, took away her brother, and drove the man she was supposed to marry to rebel against the country her family loved.

Peace was what she desired. A return to the days when neighbors trusted each other. When they were all working together to build up the colonies instead of tearing them apart.

King George III would eventually win the war—everyone of a reasonable intellect knew that—but like a child rebelling against his parents, the Yankees and their George, General Washington, persisted in demonstrating the little strength they had left. No amount of discipline from Great Britain had been effective enough to end the rebellion. The rebels stood on what they called “principle”—principles that would get them either hanged or shot.

She shivered. Every day she prayed that the rebels would buckle before Seth was killed.

At one time, her father had great admiration for George Washington, a hero for the British during the French and Indian War, but that changed when Washington stood against the Crown. Still, Father respected Washington, just as he should respect Seth.

She must convince Father to change his mind. When the war ended, Seth and her father would make amends—she was certain of it—and their lives would return to a steady pace of high teas and elegant balls and visits with the friends who now shunned them in Williamsburg and Richmond.

Stars began to peek through the darkness until a canopy of twinkling lights ceiled the wide river. She took a deep breath. Perhaps now she could tell her parents about the ships—and try

to tell them that she couldn't bear the thought of marrying a stranger. She must make them understand.

She turned to retrace her trail along the starlit path, but before she took a step, she heard a sound in the willows.

A groan.

Her heart leaped in her chest. She froze, listening, but the only sound in the night was the steady current flowing over the rocks near the shore.

The darkness must be playing with her mind. An animal had gotten trapped in the branches. Or the water was driving a log through the leaves.

She began walking toward the windows that glowed with warmth when a voice cried out.

Her heart seemed to stop.

It wasn't an animal in the willows. It was a man.