



the
Lacemaker



L A U R A
F R A N T Z



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To Susanna Thorne Hightower,
my fifth great-grandmother
and a recognized Virginia Patriot,
who supplied the Continental Army
during the American Revolution.
I promise you your own story.



1



MAY 1775

Elisabeth took a breath, breaking an intense hour of concentration. Mindful of the pinch of her stays, she straightened, the ache in her back and shoulders easing. In her apron-clad lap was the round pillow with the new lace she'd worked. Delicate as snowflakes, the intricate design was crafted of imported linen thread, now a good two yards of snowy white. She preferred white to black. All skilled lacemakers knew that working with white was kinder to the eye.

Raising her gaze, she looked out fine English glass onto a world of vivid greens broken by colorful splashes of blossoms. Elisabeth's favorites, butter-yellow roses and pale pink peonies, danced in the wind as it sighed around the townhouse's corners. Nearly summer at last. But not only almost June. 'Twas nearly her wedding day.

"*Oh là là!* What have we here?" Around the bedchamber's corner came a high, musical voice. "Surely a bride does not sew her own laces!"

“Nay, Isabeau. I’ve not patience enough for that.”

“Not for an entire wedding gown, *merci*.” The maid rounded the four-poster bed as fast as her girth would allow, holding a pair of clocked stockings. “You have been busy all the forenoon and likely forgot ’tis nearly teatime with the countess. Lady Charlotte surely wants to discuss your betrothal ball. ’Tis rumored Lord and Lady Amberly will be there.”

Elisabeth nearly smiled at her maid’s flaunting of titles. A humble Huguenot, Isabeau was still as bedazzled by the gentry as the day she’d first landed on Virginia’s shores. Elisabeth set aside her lace pillow and watched her maid pull two tea gowns from a large armoire.

“Are you in a blue mood or a yellow one?”

“Yellow,” she said. Yellow was Lady Charlotte’s favorite color, and Elisabeth sought to cheer her all she could. In turn, the Governor’s Palace served up a lavish tea table that surely rivaled the British king’s.

Glancing at the tiny watch pinned to her bodice, Elisabeth left her chair so that Isabeau could undress and redress her.

“’Tis such a lovely day, likely the countess wants a turn in the garden. Do you think her girls will be about?”

“I should hope so. Fresh air and exercise are good for them, though their father oft keeps them inside of late.”

Isabeau darted her a fretful look. “On account of the trouble, you mean.”

Elisabeth tried not to think of that. “The sun might spoil their complexion, Lady Charlotte says. And she’s right, you know. Look at me!” Though faint, the freckles across the bridge of her nose and the top of her cheekbones gave her skin a slightly tarnished look that even ample powder couldn’t cover. Her fault for slipping outside with her hand-

work in the private corner of the garden she was so fond of, forever hatless.

“You are *tres belle*, even speckled,” Isabeau said, lacing her stays a bit tighter. “And you’ve won the most dashing suitor in all Virginia Colony, no?”

“One of them.” Elisabeth swallowed hard to keep from saying more on that score too. Her fiancé, Miles Cullen Roth, was many things, but he was not cut of the same cloth as fellow Virginians William Drew and George Rogers Clark and Edmund Randolph.

Isabeau’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Though I do wonder about love.”

Elisabeth shot a glance at the cracked bedchamber door. Papa always said she gave the servants too much room to talk, but the truth was she preferred plain speaking to the prissy airs of the drawing room. “’Tis a business matter, marriage.”

“So says your father.” Isabeau frowned her displeasure. “I am a romantic. One must marry for love, no?”

“Is that the way of it in France?”

“*Oui, oui!*” her maid answered.

Though she was an indentured servant, Isabeau did not have a father who orchestrated her every move. Given that, Elisabeth could only guess the gist of Isabeau’s thoughts. *I am free. Free to come and go outside of work. Free to marry whom I please.*

And she? Who was Elisabeth Anne Lawson? The reflection in the looking glass told her little. When the history books were printed and gathered dust, what would be said of her?

That she had the fortune—or misfortune—to be the only child of the lieutenant governor of Virginia Colony, the earl of Stirling? Daughter of a firebrand mother who used ink and quill like a weapon? Possessor of a pedigree and dowry

the envy of any colonial belle? Friend and confidante of Lady Dunmore? Wife of Miles Cullen Roth? Mistress of Roth Hall?
End of story.



The scarlet seal on the letter was as unmistakable as the writing hand. Noble Rynallt took it from his housekeeper and retreated to the quiet of Ty Mawr's paneled study. Sitting down in a leather chair, he propped his dusty boots up on the wide windowsill overlooking the James River before breaking the letter's seal.

Time is of the essence. We must take account of our true allies as well as our enemies. You must finagle a way to attend Lord Dunmore's ball 2 June, 1775, at the Palace. 'Tis on behalf of your cousin, after all. Gather any intelligence you can that will aid our cause.

Patrick Henry

'Twas the last of May. Noble had little time to finagle. His cousin was soon to wed Williamsburg's belle, Lady Elisabeth Lawson. He'd given it little thought, had no desire to attend any function at the Governor's Palace, especially one in honor of his nemesis's daughter. Lord Stirling was onto him, onto all the Independence Men, and none of them had received an invitation. But 'twas as Henry said, Noble's cousin was the groom. Surely an invitation was forthcoming or had been overlooked.

Noble frowned, thinking of the stir he'd raise appearing. Lord Stirling was likely to have an apoplectic fit. But if that happened, at least one of the major players barring Virginia Colony's fight for independence would be removed. And his

own attendance at the ball would announce he'd finally come out of second mourning.



The unwrinkled copy of the *Virginia Gazette*, smelling of fresh ink and Dutch bond paper, seemed to shout the matrimonial news.

Miles Cullen Roth's future bride, Lady Elisabeth Lawson, an agreeable young Lady of Fortune, will preside at the Governor's ball the 2nd of June, 1775 . . .

The flowery column included details of the much anticipated event right down to her dowry, naming minutiae even Elisabeth was unaware of. As she turned the paper facedown atop the dressing table, her smile faded. A ticklish business, indeed.

Isabeau, quick to catch her mistress's every mood, murmured, "The beggars! I'd rather it be said you have a sunny disposition and Christian character. Or that you are a smidgen over five feet tall, flaxen haired, and have all your teeth save one. And that one, *Dieu merci*, is a jaw tooth!"

"I *am* Williamsburg's bride," Elisabeth said as her maid pinned her gown together with practiced hands. "The locals feel they can print what they want about me. After all, I was born and bred in this very spot and have been catered to ever since."

"You don't begrudge them their bragging?" Isabeau studied her. "Having the particulars of one's dowry devoured by the masses seems shabby somehow."

"It does seem silly. Everyone knows what everyone else is worth in Williamsburg. There's no need to spell it out."

"Tell that to your dear papa," Isabeau answered with fur-

rowed brow. “He had a footman pass out multiple copies of the *Gazette* this morning like bonbons on Market Square.”

Unsurprised, Elisabeth fell silent. Turning, silk skirts swishing, she extended an arm for Isabeau to arrange the beribboned sleeve. Below came the muted sound of horse hooves atop cobblestones.

“Your intended? On time? And in such stormy weather?” Isabeau looked up at her mistress with surprised jade eyes.

Turning toward an open window, Elisabeth listened but now only heard the slur of rain. “Mister Roth promised he’d come. ’Tis all that matters. He didn’t say when.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen him?”

“April,” Elisabeth admitted reluctantly, wondering why Isabeau even asked. Her maid well knew, being by her side night and day. Isabeau’s pinched expression was a reminder that Miles was not a favorite, no matter his standing in Williamsburg. Elisabeth dug for another excuse. “He’s been busy getting Roth Hall ready for us, his letters said.”

She felt a twinge at her own words, for his letters had been but two over six months. He sent unnecessary, extravagant gifts instead. Gold earrings in the shape of horseshoes. A bottle-green riding dress. Pineapples, lemons, and limes from his estate’s orangery. A London-built carriage. So many presents she soon lost track of them. And not a one had swayed Isabeau’s low opinion of him.

Despite his generosity, Elisabeth felt a sense of foreboding for the future. She did not want his gifts. She wanted his presence. If he was like her oft absent father . . . ’Twas difficult to see clear to what she really hoped for. A happy home. A whole family.

“Your coiffure is *magnifique*, no?” The words were uttered with satisfaction as Isabeau produced a hand mirror for her to

better see the lovely twisting of curls falling to her shoulders, the wig dusted a costly powdered pink. Twin ostrich feathers, dyed a deeper rose, plumed near her right ear.

“I don’t know.” Reaching up, Elisabeth slid free the pins holding the wig in place, displacing the artfully arranged feathers. “Powder is going out of fashion like patch boxes. Tonight I will move forward with fashion.”

Her maid’s brows arched, but she took the wig and put it on a near stand, where it looked forlorn and deflated. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror, Isabeau smoothed a silvered strand of her own charcoal hair into place beneath her cap. At middle age, she was still an attractive woman, as dark as Elisabeth was fair.

“We must make haste, no? But first . . .” Isabeau retrieved the ostrich feathers and refastened them in Elisabeth’s hair while her mistress glanced again at the watch lying faceup on her dressing table.

Late.

Miles was nothing if not perpetually late, while she happened to be an on-time sort of person. Fighting frustration, she set down the hand mirror. “I wonder what Mama is doing tonight.”

Isabeau looked up, a telling sympathy in her eyes. “Your *mere* will rejoin you when all this talk of tea and taxes blows over, no?”

Elisabeth had no answer. Mama had sailed to England—Bath—months ago. All this talk of tea and taxes had no end.

A soft knock sounded on the door, followed by another maid’s muffled voice. “A gentleman to see you, m’lady, in the drawing room.”

A gentleman? Not her intended? She smiled wryly. Likely the servants didn’t remember Miles.

She went hot, then cold. Miles's visits were so few and far between, he seemed a stranger each time she saw him. Because of it they spent the better part of an hour becoming reacquainted at each meeting. Tonight would be no different. Perhaps they'd recover the time lost to them in the coach.

Isabeau steered her to the stool of her dressing table. With deft hands, she clasped a strand of pearls about Elisabeth's neck. The routine was reassuring. Familiar. Selecting a glass bottle, Elisabeth uncapped it, overwhelmed by the scent of the latest cologne from London. Rose geranium. Again Elisabeth peered at her reflection in the looking glass with a sense of growing unease.

Everything seemed new tonight. Her scent. Her shoes. Her stays. Her gown. She'd never worn such a gown, nor felt so exposed. Despite the creamy lace spilling in profusion about her bare shoulders, the décolletage was decidedly daring. Made of oyster-pink silk, the gown shimmered and called out her every curve. The mantua maker had outdone herself this time. Fit for Queen Charlotte, it was.

Moving to the door, she grasped about for a glimmer of anticipation. "I'd best not keep company waiting."

At this, Isabeau rolled her eyes. "I should like to hear Mister Roth say such!"

Isabeau followed her out, and they passed down a dimly lit hall to a landing graced with an oriole window and upholstered seat. The velvety blackness beyond the shining glass was splashed with rain, not pierced with stars, and the warm air was soaked. This was her prayer place. Isabeau paused for a moment as Elisabeth bent her head briefly before going further.

Then down, down, down the circular steps they went, Isabeau pulling at a stray thread or straightening a fold in

the polonaise skirt before reaching the open door of the sitting room, its gaudy gold and scarlet overpowering and oppressive even by candlelight. The colors reminded Elisabeth of red-coated British soldiers. She stepped inside as Isabeau retreated. Her eyes shot to the marble hearth where she expected Miles Roth to be.

“Lady Elisabeth.”

She swung round, her skirts sashaying, her head spinning as well. Mercy, her stays were tight. She’d eaten little at tea.

Behind her stood a man, the shadows hiding his features. She put out a hand to steady herself, missing the needed chair back by a good two inches and finding a coat sleeve instead. The gentleman looked down at her and she looked up, finding his dark head just shy of the wispy clouds skittering in blue oils across the ceiling. Whoever he was, he wasn’t Miles. Miles was but two inches taller than she.

“Mister . . .”

“Rynallt. Noble Rynallt of Ty Mawr.”

What? A recollection returned to her in a rush. Noble Rynallt was a distant cousin of Miles. So distant she had no further inkling of their tie. Quickly she calculated what little she knew of him. Welsh to the bone. Master of a large James River estate. Recently bereft of a sister. A lawyer turned burgess. The Rynallts were known for their horses, were they not? Horse racing? The finest horseflesh in Virginia, if not all the colonies.

She was certain of only one thing.

Noble Rynallt was here because Miles was not.

Surprise mellowed to resignation. She gave a small curtsy.

“Mister Rynallt, what an unexpected pleasure.”

“Mayhap more surprise.”

She hesitated. He was honest, at least. “Is Mister Roth . . .”

“Delayed.” He managed to look bemused. And apologetic.

She tried not to stare as rich impressions crowded her senses. A great deal of muscle and broadcloth and sandalwood. The cut of his suit was exceptionally fine, dark but for the deep blue waistcoat embroidered with the bare minimum of silver thread, a creamy stock about his neck. The color of his eyes eluded her, the remainder of his features failing to take root as she dwelt on the word *delayed*.

Dismayed, she anchored herself to the chair at last.

“He asked me to act as your escort till he arrives.” He struck a conciliatory tone. “If you’ll have me.”

He had the grace to sound a bit embarrassed, as well he should. This was, after all, her betrothal ball given by Lord Dunmore at the Governor’s Palace, with the cream of all Williamsburg in attendance. And she was coming not with her intended but with a . . . stranger.

Nay, worse. Far worse.

Yet good breeding wouldn’t allow a breach of manners. She forced a small smile. “I thank you for the kindness. Will my intended’s delay be long?”

“As brief as possible, I should hope,” he replied, extending an arm.

No matter who Noble Rynallt was, his polite manner communicated that he had all in hand. Yet it failed to give her the slightest ease.

“As I rode in I noticed your coach waiting,” he remarked as he led her down the front steps, past the butler to the mounting block. “I’ll ride alongside on my horse.”

Behind them the foyer’s grandfather clock tolled one too many times. The ball had begun. Lord Dunmore hated late-comers.

They’d be fashionably tardy, at best.