



Boston 1769

One

MY PROBLEMS with Ezekiel Tobin began in 1766, during the time the British still thought they might collect money from the tax stamps they ordered Americans to buy before they could legally sell everything from paper to glass. It was just a few months after I first took a room above the Sword and Scabbard tavern, so that I could serve the drinks and tend the crowd for the Widow Maggie Magowan. But I was already familiar with Tobin and his visits to collect from Maggie to insure her license. This time, when he came through the door and began brushing dust from the sleeves of his coat, I found my teeth clamped tight so no words could escape and betray my wish to strike him before he could sit down or open his mouth.

He tugged at his green satin waistcoat before he sat, though it would never stay over his round belly. I guessed him at nearly forty years and his face was pinched, as if someone had drawn his mouth up tight like the strings on a purse. He was middle-sized with a body shaped like a pear, and his wig bobbed up and down with his head when he talked. But it was his air which angered me, every move smug and sure, as if he knew he held the winning ticket in a lottery before it was drawn.

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Maggie had to pay Tobin a consideration each month to be sure she received a tavern license each year and that no one lodged a complaint against her. The arrangement wasn't legal, but it was like many back in England for those who were no better than footpads but had the power of the law behind them. He waved me away after I swallowed hard and politely brought him a cup of ale. "Send the Widow out, it's her license." When I went to Maggie in the kitchen, her face turned dark, like a rain squall across a sunny deck, and I could see her lips move in a silent curse.

She sat opposite him at the table near to the kitchen door and close enough to the bar across the room at the back so I could hear while I rearranged the pottery mugs for ale on its top. "You're not due here till the middle of the month," she began before he had a chance.

His face showed what passed for a smile. "That's why I'm here. There'll be a change starting now." He stared at her hard and continued in a patient voice. "You've gotten by easy since your husband died. You've got more in the door than ever and most others are scraping the bottom." He took a long drink from his cup and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "The fee will be the same, but I'll visit you in your quarters when I come to collect every month."

He held up a hand to her before she could speak. "It's a small price, since you know I've got the sheriff's ear. Just a few words to him or one of the pious selectmen that decides on your license and you'd be shut down for being disorderly." His head stopped bobbing for a moment and he licked ale from his lips. "I could even arrange for your lease to be cancelled. Mr. Brown follows my direction like I stood in the pulpit. Your rent is no more than a trifle to him, and if I encouraged it, he might just want to start up a new tavern here himself." His lips curled in a tight smile and his head continued to nod slowly.

I started towards the table, eager to flavor his ale with his own blood, but Maggie looked hard at me and I ground my teeth together and went back behind the bar where I worked at tapping a

new cask of rum beneath it.

Maggie said nothing at first, but her eyes glowed with fire and I could see the blood color her oval face, making the scar trailing down her cheek show white against it. I knew then that Tobin should fear for his health, but he seemed all the more excited by the look she gave him, his mouth open like a great hound ready to mount a tiny bitch.

She looked down for a moment and composed herself before answering him with a terrible calm. "Come back two nights from now like usual," she said, "just after supper. We'll discuss it then." Tobin probably missed it, but there was iron in her voice, and her look was as sharp as a butcher's blade.

We talked little the rest of the day, even when the tables were empty between dinner and when the first of the mechanics came after a day's work. Maggie finally slammed the front door at about 10 P.M., narrowly missing the backsides of the last two tars who'd spent most of the last hour with a single cup of rum, boasting of their bravery in standing up to captains and mates.

"I'll not have it," she said to me and to herself at the same time, her voice mixed with anger and fear. "I can't go back to the other life and the thought of that bastard lifting my skirts makes me retch." She lifted an eye my way as I brought down the portcullis on the bar for the night and started to snuff the few candles still lit. I'd filled us both a cup of the good rum from the barrel in the kitchen and set them before us on the table.

"And I won't leave either," she said now as the natural warmth in her voice turned icy. "I've started over enough times already, and I've spent enough of myself keeping this fine parlor open." She scanned the room with its six rough tables and benches, three in a row on each side of the fireplace which took up the back wall and stood next to the door to the kitchen and the stairs to the second floor. They were scarred from seamen's knives, and the single picture over the fireplace was so darkened from the smoke that it was hard to tell that it represented a sunrise over the harbor

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at Kingston. It looked more like a sunset on a cloudy day.

I guessed that she was imagining some of the rooms she'd told me about in her months as a high-class moll in London. But she'd finally fled with Capt. McGowan, afraid of the French pox and the trade that turned most girls into hollow chaff blown by the wind.

I shifted on the bench to stretch my leg to the side and her eyes lit brightly again as she raised a finger toward me. "And don't you start in on marrying again either, there's no help there."

"I was drunk, Maggie. I only said it because of the license." It might have been true, but not for the full weight.

"The selectmen would never give you the license they give me, they think it's the only way to help a poor widow survive. They'd turn you out, unless you slipped a purse of sterling in their pockets, or one of their mates, and you won't have that much before the moon turns blue." She was in a righteous anger now but it faded quickly because she didn't know what to do, only what not to do. "You've never heard me say I wanted another husband." She searched my eyes for a moment to see my reaction, but I turned to look at the ends of the fire instead.

She took a long sip of rum and I did the same, feeling the pleasant warmth down my throat, nothing like the fire that came from the barrel under the bar we used for flip. Maggie got two or three cheap barrels at a time from a warehouse by Scarlett's Wharf and didn't have to pay the excise. Without the sugar and the hot iron to foam up the flip, the cheap, straight rum would make a man cry like a baby if he wasn't used to it. For a moment, I wondered if Maggie was going to cry, but I should have known better. When she turned back to me, her eyes had changed from the easy blue of an October sky to the flashing blue steel of a new bayonet.

"I'll just have to find some way to fix him," she said quietly.

When I'd taken the room upstairs, Maggie had run the Sword by herself for nearly a year. She'd been given the license for the Sword and Scabbard as a widow after Capt. McGowan's body had

been taken from the rocky beach towards Salem. Apparently, he'd fallen from his own rowboat as he fished, although it's doubtful he ever hooked a cod, staying too busy scouting the coast for landing spots out of the view of customs. The bruises about his face probably came from banging against the rocks at high tide.

But the stories said that Maggie had made it happen herself. Some said she got one of McGowan's smuggling crew to kill him, paying him with the entire proceeds from their last shipment to do the deed and disappear, probably to New York. That stood up, since she'd never shown a fat purse later, but no one knew for certain.

Others said that she went with him herself and beat him senseless, using a small bag of lead weights she'd gathered from fishing nets and lines which were always about the docks, before dumping him into the dark waters. After they'd opened the tavern, McGowan had been a brute when he was drunk, knocking her down if she spilled a bit of his rum on the way to his table or rummaging under her skirts to show her fine legs to a crew just in from London and willing to pay a few shillings from their cache. She'd struck him back once, with a loggerhead standing by the fire, but not hard enough. That's when the scar at her eye had appeared, changing in their two years of marriage from an angry red welt to the narrow white line which contrasted with her skin (which echoed the color of honey), and hair that changed from brown to red and back with the light. McGowan had carried a blade as keen as a surgeon's.

I'd never asked her about it and didn't intend to. I'd always shied away from planning murder, but I'd never been at the mercy of someone like McGowan, either. To my mind, a cold killing is different than what might happen in a fight. I'd known some who would drain your blood for a price, but I never wanted to join them. It seemed a stain that could never be washed.

Maggie must have seen the thoughts cross my face because she started in again before I had a chance to say anything. "Don't

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think the worst. Drink your rum and finish up. I need some time to think about it. You might put your brain at it, too, if you care.”

“Why would you ask that, Maggie? You’re . . .” I stopped because the right words wouldn’t come, a common feeling when I talked with Maggie, and I didn’t want them tangling my feet like an uncoiled bowline. “Maybe the Lord will strike him dead in the street as a punishment for wicked thoughts,” I offered and Maggie’s face softened for a moment. “But if he did, God would have to empty every pew in North Church before he was done.”

When I’d slept that night, hanging my hammock on the hooks near the back door I’d put in especially for nights like this, the air was soft and the smell of the ocean and the docks was pleasant and mild, but my dreams were filled with the smell of blood and powder and shackles.

WHEN EZEKIEL TOBIN, ESQ., came back, we were ready. I expected that he might wear a shirt with ruffles or show some extra powder on his wig, but I was wrong. He looked just as rude as he did in his offices, scribing contracts for Tobias Brown and staying as near his arse as he could without wearing his clothes. He’d started as no more than a scrivener but now he called himself Esquire like the rest of the lawyers and Brown relied on him to make contracts as tight as a bung in a barrel. The only way out was with more money than you owed already.

One of the tables was full with the usual mechanics complaining about their wages while another held just Mouse, squinting slightly at the newspaper I would hang by the door the next day. As Tobin swaggered up to the bar, I managed to say quietly, “Widow McGowan says to proceed directly to her room, up the stairs in the back, and I’ll have the coins when you come back down.”

A few moments later, I stood at the foot of the stairs and heard Maggie call to him and the door open and close, I nodded to

Mouse, who would watch the tavern room, and climbed the stairs silently. With my ear cocked outside the door, I could hear Tobin shuffling about and imagined his fevered breathing as he saw Maggie beneath the blanket in her bed.

“You’ll take off your shoes and your breeches, Master Tobin, my bed isn’t a barnyard. Put your stockings and breeches on the chest.”

Again, I heard the shuffling of clothes and Tobin shifting his weight back and forth, struggling to undress while standing up. Then there was a pause and I heard Maggie say in a loud voice, “Now’s the time.”

I was through the door in a flash, knife in hand, as Tobin turned at the sound, awkward in surprise and with his member pointing out beneath his shirt tails. I grabbed the front of his shirt and my knife came up from below, menacing his lower parts. His face was close enough to mine that I felt the spittle that sprayed from his lips on my cheek.

Maggie was out of the bed quickly, still fully dressed, and her eyes blazed with contempt and fury. “And what would Mrs. Tobin think now, Master, you in your tails ready to fuck a fine widow? Or Reverend Harper? Or even Mr. Brown who gives you so much money for your scratchings?”

Tobin continued to sputter, turning slightly to see her over his shoulder and his legs began to quiver. “Stand still, Tobin,” I whispered, “or you’ll lose more than you bargained for.” His eyes went wide and he shifted his weight slightly, trying to keep the cold steel at a distance.

“You’ll sign this paper and we’ll take your shiny buttons for a keepsake. You’ll miss your payment this month, but next you can come back and we’ll all act like this never happened,” said Maggie, taking the paper we’d prepared the night before from the small desk she kept in the corner. She shoved his breeches on the floor and took the ink and quill from the desk top. “I’ll put it here and you can read it. It won’t take long.” She lit a second candle and

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placed it next to the supplies on the chest.

Tobin wanted to look behind him but didn't dare move. "I'll move the knife now," I said pleasantly, "but I'll have no trouble finding the same spot if there's any problems." When he turned to see the paper on the chest, I offered, "You'll probably need to kneel down to see it, like you were in church. I'll just take your buttons while I'm waiting."

Tobin looked at me, mystified, while I took his waistcoat and cut away three brass buttons, each decorated with the outline of a flower, one from the bottom and top, and one from the middle, rattling them in my hand like dice.

The note was simple.

April 5, 1766

I came for the Widow McGowan and they took my buttons.

"Make sure you sign it in your usual hand," said Maggie. "We've got it on our lease right here to compare." She took a folded document from another pigeonhole in the desk and waved it in the air.

I saw a drop of sweat fall from Tobin's chin as he looked at the document. The vein in his neck throbbed next to the flat of the knife blade where I'd laid it gently on his shoulder. He started to talk, "It won't work, I'll . . ." until I tapped the blade gently near his neck and he picked up the quill.

The bigger problem came when I followed Tobin out the back door. He was shaking when he'd come down the stairs and I couldn't help myself. His was just the type of business that made my blood boil up. He would take from us, Maggie more than anyone, simply because he could, and then go to church and act like he would never understand the sinful ways of those beneath him. His power came from money and nothing else, and he would be blessed in church simply because he could buy a pew. Now that we had turned the tables against him, I wanted to make his fear last, make him tremble in his sleep, even though his sheets smelled of powder and his mattress was made from down. I followed him

out so he could feel me close and remember the blade against his skin.

But I misjudged him. He walked a few paces from the back door in the dark and turned to me, where he could see me outlined against the candle light. He spoke in a low voice, his teeth close together like he had a bit of gristle between them, and his head stayed stock still now. "It won't work, Gray, sooner or later I'll figure it out and she'll be a whore on the street. She'll be lucky if they take her in the workhouse without branding her first or taking her skin with the whip. You . . . you'll wish you could swim with the shit in the gutter. You're not smart enough to end anywhere but the gaol or the gallows."

I was only a few steps away and I closed them before he could get his body turned. I caught him on the side of the neck with the edge of my hand and he dropped like a sack of cornmeal. I kicked him once in his belly, full I'm sure from the partridge or salmon they served at the Coffee House.