

Chapter 1 - The Ledger of Souls

New York, NY: April 26, 1783

Three minutes before the Devil gets his due

Here's the thing about masks — everyone's wearing one. The trick is knowing which face is the lie and which lie is the truth. Me? I've got more faces than a deck of marked cards. Today, I'm playing the humble man with hat in hand and murder in my pocket.

As my fingers trace the weathered lines etched deep in my face, I realize my youth is gone, sacrificed years ago on the altar of harsh reality. Each groove a testament to hard years lived harder. Some might call that a tragedy. I call it education. Young men tend to think they're immortal — right up until the moment they're not.

The Continental sentries' eyes slide over me, they're searching for cracks in the mask. I give them nothing but still waters. True enough, rage burns like smuggled rum in my belly, but fear dances on my tongue — gunpowder waiting for the spark.

You're probably wondering how I ended up here, standing on the deck of the HMS Brothers with six guns pointed vaguely in my direction and a ledger that might as well be Satan's guest book. Well... it all started with a Quaker, a leather strap, and a peculiar understanding of Christian charity. But we'll get to that last one later.

Memory's a funny thing — keeps its secrets locked up tighter than a miser counting coins at midnight. As for mine, the combination to that vault got lost somewhere amidst the blood and smoke. Yet, if it serves, I was raised on a plantation in New Jersey. If you're thinking, mint juleps and lazy afternoons on the veranda watching the world drift by — brother, truth cuts a different path.

My father was a Quaker with a Bible in one hand, leather strap in the other. Could quote scripture while leaving welts that'd make the devil wince. "Spare the rod," they all whispered soft as cemetery dirt. Funny how holy men always find God's permission to do the devil's work.

Some nights I still wake up hearing leather sing its righteous song. They called it a "strict Quaker upbringing." I called it learning how to swallow blood and keep dancing. Dear old Dad taught me my first lesson in wearing masks. These days, I wear them better than he ever wore his piety.

A man of ironclad principles, he ensured my tongue knew silence and my heart stayed caged. In those my formative years, I mastered the art of keeping my mouth shut and my emotions locked down. Silence became my first language, non-indulgence my daily bread. A life of silence and stifled emotions were the crucible of restraint that forged my unreadable mask.

That's why these blokes only see what they expect to see — just another face in the crowd, blind to the killer shark swimming past their boots.

Just over a quarter-century in time's ledger, my life's a patchwork quilt stitched from the tattered remnants of many names. Started life as Titus, picked up "Creamy" early on — a running joke that wasn't funny the first time. Added "Shaman" and "Colonel" along the way. But eventually, got tagged with "Satan" — the icy echo of a name that still chills men who learned to fear the dark. Each name earned through deeds both laudable and contemptible — depending on which side of my blade you stood on. Call it the mathematics of violence.

But today? Today, in this precarious moment... just call me Cato. That ledger on the table might as well be the devil's own guestbook, and here I am, ready to sign that name in blood. Not for glory — glory's just peacock feathers on a dead man's hat. No, this dance with death is for the only people who matter — my crew. Family, if you want to get sentimental about it. Though sentiment's about as useful as an anchor in a row boat.

Don't mistake necessity for surrender. Today I play the penitent. Tomorrow... well, let's just say some debts only get paid in lead and gunpowder. Old scores are patient — they keep like smooth whiskey and rough vengeance.

The names sit heavy on my shoulders, each one a different flavor of sin. Hell... I've been called everything but blessed. Saint and sinner? Sure, if you believe in that sort of thing. Me? I believe in the razor's edge between survival and damnation. Been walking that line so long, my feet are scarred from the blade. I've played the hero and the hangman — often in the same damn hour. Funny thing about being both savior and executioner — after a while, you grow weary of the weight of both.

As I stand here, balanced on the knife's edge of destiny, I can taste the acrid smoke of impending conflict. The air thrums with tension, thick as molasses and twice as treacherous. My fingers, calloused from years of war and strife, twitch with the memory of powder and steel.

The irony is not lost on me — I, a man of many names, must now commit one to paper. Pin my fleeting identity like a butterfly to a board. One stroke of ink seals not just my fate, but that of everyone depending on my cunning.

These Patriots think they see weakness — a simple man in a threadbare hat, begging favors from the British. Let them. Even a snake looks helpless before it strikes. They'll write "Cato"

in their ledger with their fancy quill, but names are smoke and mirrors in my trade. The Shaman, Colonel Tye, Satan — each one's a loaded gun waiting to be drawn.

I've played this game before. You smile, you nod, you let them think they've won. But victory? That's only a borrowed coat that never fits quite right. These soldiers strut around like they own the tide itself. Poor bastards don't realize they're just renting space in the devil's waiting room.

Survival first — that's today's sermon. Tomorrow's a different gospel, written in steel and sealed with blood. When that tide turns — and it will turn as sure as sin follows Sunday — Providence better pack her bags and run. Because mercy? That's just another name I left behind in the ashes of better days.

“Next!” The redcoat barks like he's got somewhere important to be. Probably does. Probably involves a woman of easy virtue and a bottle of rum. Good for him. My guts twist. I press my palm against the hollow void of my stomach, stifling a groan born of trepidation rather than hunger. Eyes shut tighter than a coffin's lid, I draw a slow and measured breath, seeking to quell the storm raging in my chest. My mind begs my feet to move, but they stay rooted to the frost-covered planks.

Finally, with a sound like death's own rattle, my boot scrapes forward. I tug the threadbare brim low. I first feel, then see, my frenzied pulse, beating a desperate rhythm through the veins in my wrist. My hand starts to shake like a leaf in winter wind. With haste, I clasp my other hand around it, rubbing hard like it's just the cold air causing such tremors.

New York harbor's icy wind slices through my thin clothes, frozen fingers clawing at my face. But it's a different chill running through me as I behold the welcoming committee. Their solemn faces are better suited for executioners than hosts.

“Next!”

The soldier's voice grates anew, a reminder of the precarious line I walk. My feet, recalcitrant as mules, refuse to heed my will. Masts tower overhead, rigging singing its rope song in the harbor breeze. The scent of tar and brine mingles with something foul — the stench of desperate men pressed too close together, perhaps. I force another shuffling step toward either salvation or doom.

At the table, a quill poised in her hand like a weapon of fate, sits a negress with the ledger — now she's a different equation entirely. Chocolate eyes that could melt lead, and a smile that could start a war. She's trouble wearing Sunday clothes, and I've got a nose for trouble. No longer in the bloom of youth, yet her beauty endures, undimmed by time's relentless march. I'd wager her to be just south of forty, her lustrous ebony tresses drawn back with a purple cloth like a crown.

She lifts her gaze, dropping a smile on me warm as sunrise itself. Her beauty, enhanced by a charm as potent as any elixir, is nothing short of bewitching.

“Good morrow,” she purrs, voice sweet and rich as honey. Her ebony eyes shimmer like twin pools beneath a harvest moon. They ensnare my gaze with fathomless depths. Though the years have left their mark upon her visage, she bears her age with the grace of a fine Madeira wine.

By rights, such a welcome should set me at ease, yet it achieves the opposite. The hairs on my nape stand to attention, my senses sharpened to a razor’s edge.

You’re in the belly of the beast, I remind myself. Stay frosty, lest this Venus flytrap be your undoing.

I wrap myself tight, rubbing my arms to ward off the cold as my hawk’s gaze sweeps the deck cataloging every detail.

Four soldiers behind the table — two redcoats — two Continentals. Two more Continentals guard the gangplank. Three escape routes — nay, make that two. I’ll take my chances with frozen fingers squeezing triggers before I dive in that icy water — to hell with that idea. The arithmetic’s simple enough — Four soldiers. Two exits. One pistol. One blade — I’m two moves short of a clean getaway. My heart thunders like a war drum.

Speed, surprise, and violence of action. That’s how I’ve cheated death so far. *That, and no small measure of luck.*

I’ve encountered my fair share of bedraggled soldiers in my time, but these six are cut from a different cloth.

The four behind the negress are cut from different cloth than the usual rabble. Uniforms pristine, creased with precision speaking of discipline. Pistols and sabers gleam with deadly promise — a silent vow of swift, merciless death for any who dare cross them. For now, their blades slumber in scabbards. I aim to keep it that way.

The two Britons are ostensibly allies, but I wouldn’t stake my life on their loyalty. The Continentals harbor nothing but hostility. The tall, lanky redcoat in the Dragoon’s garb wears a lieutenant’s insignia, yet his face speaks of youth barely old enough to sprout whiskers. Kid looks like he should be in short pants, not uniform. Freckled features and innocent eyes seem a cruel joke in this war-torn land.

His fellow Briton — a captain of the Queen’s American Rangers is carved from tougher stock — scarred face, definitely seen some shit. His eyes are hard as flint, yet not devoid of fairness. No doubt that he’s in command.

The Continental captain personifies hardness born of conflict. Square jaw, thick neck, hands strong enough to crush stone. He's weathered his share of skirmishes, no doubt, yet a glimmer of kindness in his eyes suggests he's no instigator of needless bloodshed.

His companion — a rifleman sergeant — short twitchy bastard. His nervous energy sets my teeth on edge. He's the wild card in this deadly game, the one whose actions I can't foresee.

The four huddle together having themselves a little conference as they pour over the ledger. That book represents more than parchment and ink — it's a lifeline, a supposed guarantee of the Crown's protection. At least, that's the comforting lie they'd have us swallow.

"Ahem," the negress clears her throat, her smile unwavering as she dips her quill. I'd be inclined to return her charming manners with my own, if not for those vultures looming behind her.

Instead, I draw a deep, steadying breath. This is the moment of reckoning.

"I beg your pardon, my lady," inclining my head in contrition. "My attention wandered, though not from your radiant beauty."

"That's one I hadn't heard before," she rejoins, mischievous glint dancing in her eyes like fireflies. Confusion furrows my brow. "Being called 'my lady,'" she explains, her smile taking on a quizzical bent as she regards me as a simpleton.

"A lamentable oversight that such a self-evident truth has escaped the notice of others." I seize the chance to regain lost ground.

A faint blush, like dawn's first light, suffuses her cheeks. Her eyes meet mine fleetingly before returning to the ledger, her smile broadening like a flower unfurling in the warmth of the sun.

Well played, indeed, I muse.

"Please state your name, unit, place of origin, and when you pledged loyalty to the British Army." Her tone now tinged with a hint of official decorum.

"Cato," the lies slides off the tongue like smooth whiskey. "Originally in Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Brigade. I joined—"

"Hat off, boy!" the Continental sergeant's voice cracks like a whip.

Here's lesson number one about survival: when a white man with a gun tells you to take off your hat, you take off your damn hat. Even if you're planning to put a bullet in his brain later. Especially then. My dislike for the little man solidifies, hardening like ice in my gut.

The sweat on my scalp has nothing to do with the temperature. Everything to do with the fact that I'm Colonel Tye — Satan himself — standing in broad daylight while my wanted posters paper every tree from here to Philadelphia.

I resist the urge to wipe the moisture from my brow, lest I draw unwanted scrutiny. The negress catches my eye. Smart girl. She knows something's off.

I give her the look — the one that says, “keep writing, keep smiling, keep breathing.” She gives me the tiniest nod. Sets quill to parchment, inscribes ‘Cato’ in the fateful ledger.

A wave of relief washes over me, however fleeting. Head still bowed in feigned deference, I chance a furtive glance at the soldiers. The sergeant's lips move with barely concealed urgency, whispering to the American captain. He keeps looking at me like I owe him money. Or blood. Probably both.

The American captain's hand rises, fingers snapping with hangman's finality. Dread courses through my veins, cold as the Hudson River. The two brutes posted at the gangplank advance, footfalls heavy and measured, beating out a rhythm of impending doom. Every eye on deck fixes on me. Suddenly, I'm as out of place as a priest in a whore house. But if this powder keg ignites, I sure as hell won't be offering salvation.

Twenty-five feet away, Preacher's right hand, silent as viper's strike, disappears in the folds of his cloak. He's got his Bible clutched to his chest like holy shield with his left hand and something considerably less holy in his right. Been my first sergeant for five years. Man can quote scripture while slitting throats. Multi-talented, you might say.

Esther's playing the terrified wife with a thespian's skill. She's about as terrified as a rattlesnake in a room full of mice. Her hand's already on the spare pistol tucked in the small of Preacher's back.

I turn my head a fraction, my eyes locking with my trusted companions. In that fleeting instant, wordless discourse passes between us swift as summer lightning. My gaze carries both plea and caution.

This ain't a battle we can win.

Preacher's resolve wavers, a ghost of uncertainty flickering across his stoic features. Slowly, reluctantly, his right hand emerges empty as a pauper's purse. But Esther relinquishing her pistol? Well, she's just not that kind of girl. She'd sooner spit in the devil's eye than run from a fight.

The air crackles with tension, thick as London fog and the stench to match. We stand on the precipice, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. The slightest misstep could plunge us all into the abyss.

I have two more pieces on the board, but they're just pawns in this high-stakes chess game.

“Seize this man!” The American captain’s voice thunders across the deck, his finger thrust towards me like the point of a bayonet.

Time slows down.

It always does when the violence is about to start.

Like the universe wants to savor it.