

Excerpt of
Elizabeth's Hope

A More Perfect Union Series Novella



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About

Elizabeth's Hope

CAUGHT BETWEEN DUTY AND LOVE

Joining the revolutionary army was the honorable thing to do, but Jedediah Thomson hadn't realized how long he'd be away from the lovely, spirited Miss Elizabeth Sullivan. They'd only begun their courtship when the occupation of Charles Town, South Carolina, trapped her in the city, making it dangerous to get to her.

Elizabeth Sullivan feared for her brothers, fighting for American freedom; for her father, pretending to be a loyalist; for family and friends, caught between beliefs; and most of all for Jedediah, the man she loves, who was doing his duty. She cherished every moment they had together, knowing how swiftly it could be taken away.

And that made her willing to risk everything to claim a piece of him forever.

Chapter 1

Charles Town, South Carolina ó April 1780

The familiar silver box reflected the muted sunshine flowing into the parlor as Elizabeth Sullivan angled the rectangular object this way and that in her hands. A gift from the one man she could envision spending her life with, it contained the remembrances of his courtship. Trinkets, reallyô the note heød sent asking to court her, a smooth swirly stone picked up on a walk along the beach, even a silver coin he jokingly presented to her as payment for a clandestine, daring kissô but each held a memory of a shared moment over the past years. Only now everything had changed, and their future together had become clouded and doubtful. She set the box aside and rose to move to the front window. She pulled back the drape and studied the distressing view of her beloved city.

Enemy ships of war crowded the harbor; their masts sharp against the eastern sky. Loyalist troops had joined with the British officers outside the city, ready to strike. Elizabeth turned away from the pane of glass and paced the parlor floor, fear simmering in her chest at the recollection of the horrific sight and the knowledge of the impending attack. The sensation was unsettling. Her normally optimistic, buoyant nature felt deadened and heavy. She longed for her father to return from his errand with news. Any news. When would they attack? Would the city leaders capitulate? Then what would happen?

õEmily? Where are you?ö She walked through the downstairs rooms, her leather shoes slapping the wood floors, long skirts rustling in her haste. õI cannot tolerate the waiting and worrying.ö

Emily strode into view, emerging from the dining room. õWe must remain strong. Father will come home when he can.ö

õThe constant shooting is wearing on my patience.ö Elizabeth folded her arms around her waist. õWhat if he is hurt?ö

õWe must stay calm, Elizabeth. It is not like you to be so worried.ö Emily hurried to her twin sister and embraced her. õOur brave men will protect us from the enemy.ö

They would certainly try, but the odds were against them. Elizabeth shook her head and stepped away from Emily. "We're running out of food in town and Father said the soldiers are nearly out of ammunition."

Emily blanched and widened her eyes. "I had not heard that news. What will we do?"

The front door opened with a rush of cool air wafting down the hall and then thumped closed. Elizabeth rushed from the parlor to the passage, abruptly halting in the center of the main hall. Joshua Sullivan handed his long black cloak to his manservant and then strode toward his daughters. The scents of the outdoors drifted past her nose. The powerful man stopped before her, his expression serious.

"Father, what news?" Elizabeth clasped her hands together, gripping so hard her fingers ached.

"Our General Benjamin Lincoln sent terms for the surrender of the town to the enemy, Sir Henry Clinton."

Elizabeth gasped and flung her hands wide. "What? Oh, pray tell me that is not so!"

Father slowly nodded and brought her to him, wrapping his strong arms around her shoulders. "Clinton, as the British Commander-in-Chief, refused to accept certain of the terms, so we are still free."

"You sound as though it is only a matter of time before we will be occupied." Emily moved within the circle to join the embrace.

"Indeed. The city cannot withstand the deprivations much longer." Father squeezed one last time and then stepped away. "We're reduced to firing bits of iron and axes and even broken bottles. All while the men are only given some coffee, sugar, and a few ounces of meat to survive on."

Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest as she studied her father's countenance. Worry had etched lines between his eyes and pinched his expressive mouth. "What will we do when the British take over?"

"I have been thinking about that." He glanced between Elizabeth and Emily. "I want you to go to the Abernathy plantation. Your Uncle Richard and Aunt Lucille are far enough from town not to be in immediate danger from the invasion. They also have many strong hands who can help protect you both."

Elizabeth shook her head before he'd finished speaking. Since her mother had died giving

birth to her and Emily, her father had left the household management to her aunt. Then, when Elizabeth and her sister had become old enough, they'd assumed those duties. Thus he'd never had to handle the daily running of the place. "I'dl not leave you here alone. You need us to manage the household."

"I'dl cope. You need not fear on my behalf."

"I realize other women have left for the back-country, but we do not wish to abandon our home," Emily spoke up, eyes intent upon their father. "I will not run from the enemy."

He studied them both, looking from one obdurate face to the other. Then he dropped his shoulders in defeat. "Very well, but we have to find out what rules Clinton intends to impose upon any who remain."

"We will do what we must to survive," Elizabeth smoothed the homespun skirts of her last decent dress. "We're Americans."

A knock on the door drew their attention to the front and the street beyond. Solomon appeared from the rear of the house to hurry past them to answer the summons. She noted the set of his mouth and the concern in his brown eyes as he strode past. His white shirt and dark pants had seen much wear, but with no means to replace them, they'd have to do. She could not provide better attire for the slaves, let alone for her and Emily. She wanted to keep up appearances as they always had, but times were difficult, and with the Britons encircling the town, supplies could not reach the trapped inhabitants.

When Solomon pulled the door inward, Elizabeth's heart raced with pleasure to espy Jedediah Thomson filling the opening. Tall, broad of shoulder, his long dark gray cloak brushed the calves of his black boots. A black beaver tricorne topped his chocolate brown hair with strands of gold and red enlivening the color. He smiled at her with a dip of his head and then addressed Joshua.

"I trust we're not interrupting?" Jedediah accepted the silent invitation by Solomon to enter the house. "We've come to bid you farewell for a time."

Behind him, his older brother, Frank, stepped into the cool passageway. Similar in build, Frank differed in having blond hair pulled neatly into a queue beneath his tricorne. He appeared strong and capable in his buff breeches with tall boots, and a white hunting shirt gracing his broad shoulders. Solomon pushed the door closed and then took up a position nearby to be ready if needed. His medium brown skin glistened with sweat despite the cool spring air, the tension of

the times reflecting in every person. Elizabeth gave him a quick reassuring smile and then turned her attention to Jedediah.

“Where are you going?” She didn’t want him to leave. Ever since her father had introduced her and Emily to the brothers, she’d felt a connection to them, Jedediah in particular.

Jedediah looked at Frank and then Joshua before regarding her. “Before the enemy takes the town, we must rejoin our unit so we can continue to fight. That’s all you really need to know, for your safety.”

“What of your house?” Emily frowned as she turned to Jedediah. “And your printing shop?”

“I’m afraid they are a sacrifice I must make.” A pained expression flitted across Jedediah’s face. “I’d be surprised if they are not claimed by the Britons after we depart.”

Frank cleared his throat and then slowly shook his head. “There’s nothing to be done. We must get away while there are still holes in the enemy’s circle of armed soldiers around the town.”

Joshua folded his arms over his intimidating chest. “I’m not giving them my home and business. I’ll stay and do what I must to ensure they are not lost. Even fore swear any oath they demand of me. I’ll continue to help the Americans, if secretly. But I’m not as young and strong as you two. Fare thee both well and stay the course.”

Jedediah nodded in understanding of the directive. “We fully intend to do all in our power to recover the city from their despicable control at the earliest opportunity.”

Elizabeth caught Jedediah’s eye. “I know you will keep to our efforts for freedom from British rule.”

His gaze sharpened as he inclined his head in acknowledgment of her charge. “Elizabeth, I solemnly vow to hold to my duty to defend our state and our country.” He hesitated, his expression softening from stern belief to a silent plea. “Will you grant me a moment in private?”

Elizabeth looked at her father with a raised brow. “Father?”

Joshua glanced at her and Jedediah and then nodded. “Be quick about it. I’ll not have any questions regarding your reputation getting about town.”

“Come into the parlor, Jedediah.” She spun and strode into the room she’d occupied before his arrival, all the while wondering what urgent discourse he desired.

A quick perusal of the room proved it was in order. A fire in the fireplace warded off the

spring chill. An arrangement of cut flowers from the garden provided a sense of naturalness to the harshly different reality the town faced. Occupied? She shivered at the thought. She walked to a chair by the fireplace and held onto it to steady herself.

Jedediah softly closed the door behind him and then turned to face her, lingering by the door for several moments. Finally, he sauntered to her and took her hands in his, drawing her away from the chair to stand before him.

“I will miss you, Elizabeth.” He searched her face, as if committing to memory each of her features. “Do as your father instructs and be safe.”

She smiled, words failing her for several moments. She swallowed concern as she searched his eyes. “You as well, Jedediah. I pray you’ll succeed in ultimately freeing us from this oppression.”

She studied his face much as he had done to her. Would she ever see him again? Her heart thudded in her ears as she noted his striking blue eyes intent upon her. She and Jedediah had grown close over the time they’d known each other. She thought of the frequent appearance of both the men at the family dinner table of an afternoon, engaging in both happy banter and good-natured debates. The horseback rides she and her sister and the brothers had once enjoyed in the countryside on a pleasant morning. Walks along the Cooper, talking about whatever came to mind. She harbored some hope that one day he would ask for her hand in marriage, but the timing did not seem right with the war dragging on. With the arrival of the British fleet, the thought of marriage had been subsumed by far more frightening concerns.

His eyes focused on hers and then moved to her mouth. She moistened her lips, pressing them together and then relaxing them. His gaze flashed to her eyes and then back to her mouth again. Slowly he pulled her closer, his head ever so gradually bringing his mouth into proximity with hers. Giving her time to stop his advance. Giving her control of the unexpected and inappropriate kiss he obviously intended bestowing upon her. Despite knowing she should pull away, she leaned forward and closed the distance, pressing her lips to his.

Contact shot a charge of sensation throughout her trembling frame. The delicious desire spread and warmed her body. The forbidden pleasure only served to increase her reaction much like adding logs to the fire. She broke one hand free from his clasp and wound her arm around his neck to draw him closer, ever closer, until their bodies pressed together. After several moments, reality crashed upon her and she broke off the buss, pushing gently against his chest to

give herself a moment to restore her composure.

“Elizabethí” He searched her countenance as he drew in a long breath and released it on a sigh. “I must go.”

She inhaled a deep breath as well and slowly let it go. Despair and worry danced in her chest, making her hands tremble all the more. “I understand.”

“Do you?” He frowned, clouding the clearness of his eyes. “If not for my pledge to our government to serve, I could easily have remained here, with you.”

She nodded and dropped her hands to clasp in front of her skirts. “You must honor your word and fight for our independence. That’s your most urgent duty, and I know you will do what is right.”

“I will. I also will come back to you as soon as I can.” Jedediah stepped away and held out one hand. “Come. I want to say farewell to your father and sister and our time to escape grows short.”

So much she could say in response, but every sentiment paled in comparison to what was about to transpire. Better to remain mute and acquiesce. She placed her trembling hand in his, relishing the warmth and strength of his fingers closing over hers. Silently, she permitted him to lead her from the room knowing he carried her heart with him to the front lines.