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WAR OF 1812

FLAMES IN THE SKY



by Hilary Echols

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War of 1812
Flames in the Sky

by

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1

Gone in the Night

Bright summer sunlight shone through the open attic window on Wednesday morning, August 24, 1814, rousing twelve-year-old Samuel Foster from a restless sleep. He glanced over at the bed next to his, expecting to see his sixteen-year-old brother and best friend, Benjamin, snoring softly. The bed was empty.

Samuel propped himself up on his elbow and tried to shake the sleep from his thoughts. Only one other time had he woken up to Benjamin's empty bed—four years ago, the day Papa died. Although Papa had been sick with malaria for some time, Benjamin had known something was wrong that night. He was older, and he picked up on things that young Samuel missed. So he had stayed up all night long, helping Mama tend the fire and keep hot water warmed in the big cast-iron pot, while Samuel slept and dreamed peaceful, happy dreams. And when Samuel woke up the next day, Benjamin's bed was empty, and it was too late. Papa was already gone.

malaria: a disease spread by mosquitoes that causes recurring fever, chills, and fatigue

cast-iron pot: a heavy pot made from an alloy of iron, carbon, and silicon

Samuel shuddered with the memory and took a deep breath, trying to calm the fear that swelled inside. He stepped out onto the dusty wood-plank floor and pulled on his work shirt and trousers. He sat down at the end of his bed and tugged his worn boots up over socked feet. And that's when he saw it. A folded piece of paper lay underneath the corner of Benjamin's pillow.

Samuel snatched it up and unfolded it carefully. As he did, a piece of newsprint slipped out and fluttered to the floor. Samuel recognized it immediately—the *National Intelligencer*, the local newspaper that kept Washington City informed about the war and other matters of public interest. He picked up the clipping and scanned the columns quickly. It said that Washington City, the capital of the United States, was being “threatened by an insolent foe,” and it begged for volunteers to protect the city from the British, who were closing in. “The spontaneous efforts of the people are demanded,” it declared.

Samuel's pulse pounded in his ears as he noticed Benjamin's handwriting on the paper he had unfolded. Slowly, he read the words to himself.

insolent: rude or disrespectful

spontaneous: unplanned and not influenced by outside forces

GONE IN THE NIGHT



Dear Samuel,

I've gone to join the militia. I can't take knowing the enemy is approaching and I've done nothing to help. I must do my part to protect our home—to protect you and Mama. It's what Papa would have done.

Your faithful brother,

Benjamin

P.S. Please take good care of Ave while I'm away.

Samuel squeezed the note in his clenched fist, angry that his brother had left without telling him. Angry that he couldn't fight, too. He made his way down the narrow stairway that led to the kitchen, bracing himself for what he had to do.

Mama's skirts swished against the hardwood floor, her hemline discolored from years of hard work. She balanced a large platter full of toasted bread, steaming hasty pudding, and a simmering pot of tea as she carefully made her way to the dining table to serve breakfast to the few remaining tenants of their boardinghouse. Their angry voices carried into the kitchen.

militia: citizens organized for military service

hasty pudding: baked pudding made from cornmeal and milk

tenants: people who rent the place where they live

boardinghouse: a house where people rent rooms and are provided meals

“It’s a crying shame Washington City isn’t more protected!” one of the gentlemen declared. “President Madison knew this might happen, and now the city’s in chaos—”

“He knew nothing of the sort!” the other interrupted. “He had no way of knowing they’d turn toward Washington City! The redcoats could have gone anywhere—Baltimore or Alexandria—”

“Nothing!” the first voice cut in as a fist slammed against the table for emphasis. “He’s done nothing! He waited until the last minute, and now we’re scrambling to put together a militia, and the blasted redcoats are already closing in on Bladensburg! Mark my words, they’ll be here before the sun sets!”

Word had gotten out that thousands of soldiers had arrived in Maryland on British ships and were making their way toward the federal city. Panic had ensued as residents and visitors fled. The Fosters’ boardinghouse usually housed a group of noisy, argumentative senators. Now, only two were left, and they had their bags packed and planned to leave after breakfast.

Mama shuffled back into the kitchen, her cheeks ruddy with the heat. Wisps of curly hair escaped the tightly pinned bun on top of her head. She smiled at her son, but her smile faded when she saw the look in his eyes and the paper crushed tightly in his fist.

“What is it?” she asked, drawing a quick breath.

“It’s Benjamin,” Samuel answered weakly, holding up the note and the article. “He’s gone.”

Mama snatched the papers and read. Her eyes, moistened with tears, finally met Samuel’s. She reached out and clasped his hand in hers, clinging to her youngest son and steadying herself. Then Mama tucked the papers into her apron pocket, ruffled Samuel’s brown curls affectionately, turned, and called back to him with a husky voice, “Make sure you finish your chores! I’ll need you to pick up a few supplies.”

2

A Gathering Storm

That afternoon, Samuel went to the barn to check on Ave and the other horses before heading out. Ave had been Papa's horse. The gentle creature remained a living, breathing link to the memory of their father.

Samuel heaved the heavy barn door open. The overpowering scent of horse and hay and heat filled his nose the instant he stepped inside. The horses in their stalls looked up at Samuel. Ave whinnied and pawed at the ground and pulled hard against the leather strap that kept him secured in his stall. His tail swished as he paced back and forth. Samuel picked up the pitchfork and heaped fresh hay into each stall. Then he entered Ave's stall, rubbed the white star that blazed down the center of his chestnut face, and leaned in close. "Benjamin joined the militia," he whispered. "He left this morning." The words stuck in his throat, and he swallowed hard.

Ave pulled his head back and reared up.

"Easy, Ave," Samuel soothed, patting his neck.

“Easy, boy. He’ll be back soon. Don’t worry.” Samuel pulled out a carrot and watched the horse munch it slowly. “I have to get some supplies. I won’t take you today—too much excitement.”

Samuel slung a large burlap bag over his shoulders, closed the barn door, and set off. In the distance, he heard the faint rumble of cannon fire, over and over, like thunder in a gathering storm. *No wonder Ave was upset*, he thought. Could Benjamin be caught in that battle? He shivered at the thought and quickened his pace.

Washington City was about ten square miles of mostly flat land, dotted here and there with clusters of trees and swamps and buildings. Dusty roads bisected it like a grid. On a hilltop at one end of the city center loomed two immense structures: the north and south wings of the Capitol. Their magnificent freestone walls stood three stories tall, the buildings connected by a covered wooden walkway. On the other end of the city stood the President’s House, with its white exterior, enormous windows, and park-like setting. The lovely Pennsylvania Avenue, lined with poplar trees, ran diagonally across the city, connecting one side to the other. The Potomac River outlined a large portion of the city, and several bridges crossed the river at different

burlap: rough, heavy fabric made from jute or hemp

bisected: divided into two parts

diagonally: at an angle; in a manner not horizontal or vertical

points, connecting Washington City to Virginia and Maryland.

Despite the grandeur of the government buildings, the city was little more than a village, bustling with life when Congress was in session but dull and sleepy when it was not. Two-story brick homes and wood-framed houses like Samuel's were scattered here and there, with stretches of land in between.

Samuel stared at the Capitol building. When Papa died, Benjamin had gotten a job as a messenger in the House Chamber, filling inkwells and delivering messages for members of Congress. Sometimes, when Benjamin didn't come home at his regular time, Mama would pack a little basket full of food, and Samuel and Ave would ride to the Capitol and deliver it to Benjamin. Once, Benjamin let him peek inside the chamber. Wooden desks, perched in neat rows and arranged in a slanted octagon, pointed toward a podium at the very front. Lush red curtains flanked the windows, and enormous marble columns kept watch over the space. The scent of wood and stone filled his nostrils. Samuel thought he had never seen any room so grand.

grandeur: impressiveness

inkwells: small containers of ink that quills or pens can be dipped in

octagon: a closed shape with eight straight sides and eight angles

podium: a raised platform that a public speaker stands behind and can rest a book or notes on

As Samuel walked through the streets, he saw the stragglers fleeing. These were the people who had not left the city on the previous day. Some were in wagons, and some were in carriages. A few were on foot. It was a race to escape before the British arrived. He was surprised to see soldiers mixed in with the crowd leaving the city. Their shoulders sagged, and their heads hung low. *Why aren't they fighting in the battle? Or protecting the city?* He searched each face intently but recognized no one.

"How far away are the redcoats?" Samuel heard a man cry out.

"Bladensburg!" another answered.

"They're drawing near!" a tattered soldier warned. "They'll be here before sundown."

Before sundown. Samuel shuddered at the thought. Above the sound of wagons and carriages, the distant battle rumbled on. A sickening dread swelled in the pit of his stomach as he zigzagged through the crowds to complete his errands.

"Ten o'clock sharp!" These words greeted Samuel as he stepped inside the butcher shop. The butcher was in the middle of offering stern advice to a customer. "Strict curfew for anyone not leaving—set by Mayor Blake himself."

curfew: a time by which people are required to be off the streets

“But why in heaven’s name isn’t the militia guarding the city?” the anxious customer asked.

The butcher shook his head. “The only soldiers I’ve seen standing guard are the ones at the President’s House, and even those are disappearing. Looks like they’ve left, near as I can tell.”

Samuel paid for the meat his mother wanted and tucked his purchase into his bag, mentally checking items off the list she had given him, before leaving. Just as he stepped onto the street, a carriage hurtled toward him at great speed.

“The president’s carriage!” someone cried out.

“It’s Mrs. Madison!” another exclaimed.

Jumping out of the way, Samuel got a good look inside the carriage as it passed by. A majestic woman sat tall and straight in front of him. Her porcelain skin contrasted sharply with her dark hair, and her eyes stared intently ahead. Although he’d never seen Mrs. Madison before, he felt certain this regal-looking woman must be her. He stared at the back of the carriage as it rattled down Pennsylvania Avenue. *Surely that was Mrs. Madison. But where is the president?*

carriage: a wheeled vehicle that carries passengers and is usually pulled by horses

Moments later, the grocer, Mr. Miller, joined Samuel on the street and urged him to go home. “It won’t be safe around here much longer,” he warned.

Samuel nodded and followed him back into the grocery store. Shelves stacked with bottles and boxes and jars lined each wall, and barrels of spices, teas, sugar, and flour crowded the floor. He handed over his mother’s list to Mr. Miller, who continued to warn of the impending dangers as he collected the items Samuel needed. “Once people leave, the looters will come. What’s more, rumor has it our troops are retreating from Bladensburg, and the redcoats may be hot on their trail. Tell your mother to keep the door locked and the gun close, just in case,” he instructed as he measured out a portion of Mama’s favorite tea leaves.

“Yes, sir,” Samuel answered solemnly.

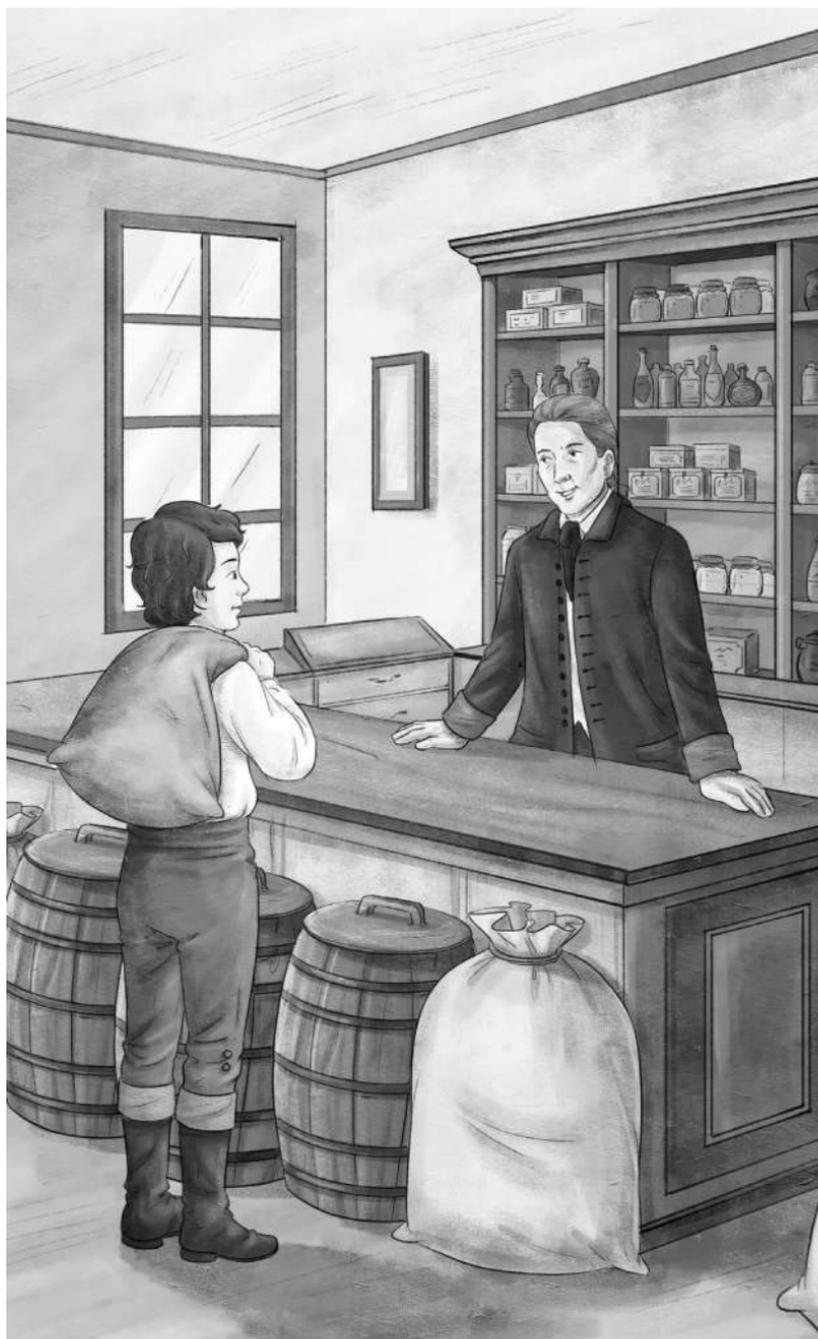
“And if the British come knocking, you best let them have whatever it is they want. It’s better not to put up a fight unless it’s absolutely necessary. Remember: they outnumber us.”

“Yes, sir,” Samuel said again. “Mr. Miller, have you

impending: likely to happen soon

looters: people who take advantage of chaos or unrest to steal things

retreating: the usually forced withdrawing of troops from an enemy or from an advanced position



seen Benjamin? He ran off with the militia in the middle of the night.”

Mr. Miller shook his head. “I’ll keep my eye out for him, young fellow,” he said gently, handing the package of tea to Samuel. “Hard to know what’s happening right now. Rumors are flying. Some say the militia will gather to fight the British here. Others say they’re all meeting up at Georgetown. Hard to say.”

Mr Miller handed the grocery list back to Samuel. “Benjamin’s a smart boy. He’ll keep his head about him and find his way back if he can.”

“Yes, sir,” Samuel said, as he slung the burlap bag over his shoulder.

As Samuel made his way home, he noticed the crowd had thickened as a group of soldiers filed through the streets. They were also leaving. Some people in the crowd shook their fists and swore in anger. Others cried openly. All kept on marching forward, a mixture of confusion and shock. Men on horseback thundered through the streets crying out, “Fly, fly! The ruffians are at hand!” Samuel searched the faces in the crowd, desperately looking for his brother.

A horse-drawn wagon rolled past Samuel.

He watched it pass by and noticed the corner of a large, wooden-framed painting sticking out from the back, amid various pieces of furniture. He could be mistaken, but he thought he recognized the hair and face of George Washington's portrait! He stared after the wagon in awe, trying to catch a final glimpse of the painting before it disappeared down the road, lost in the sea of people—and the retreating soldiers.

3

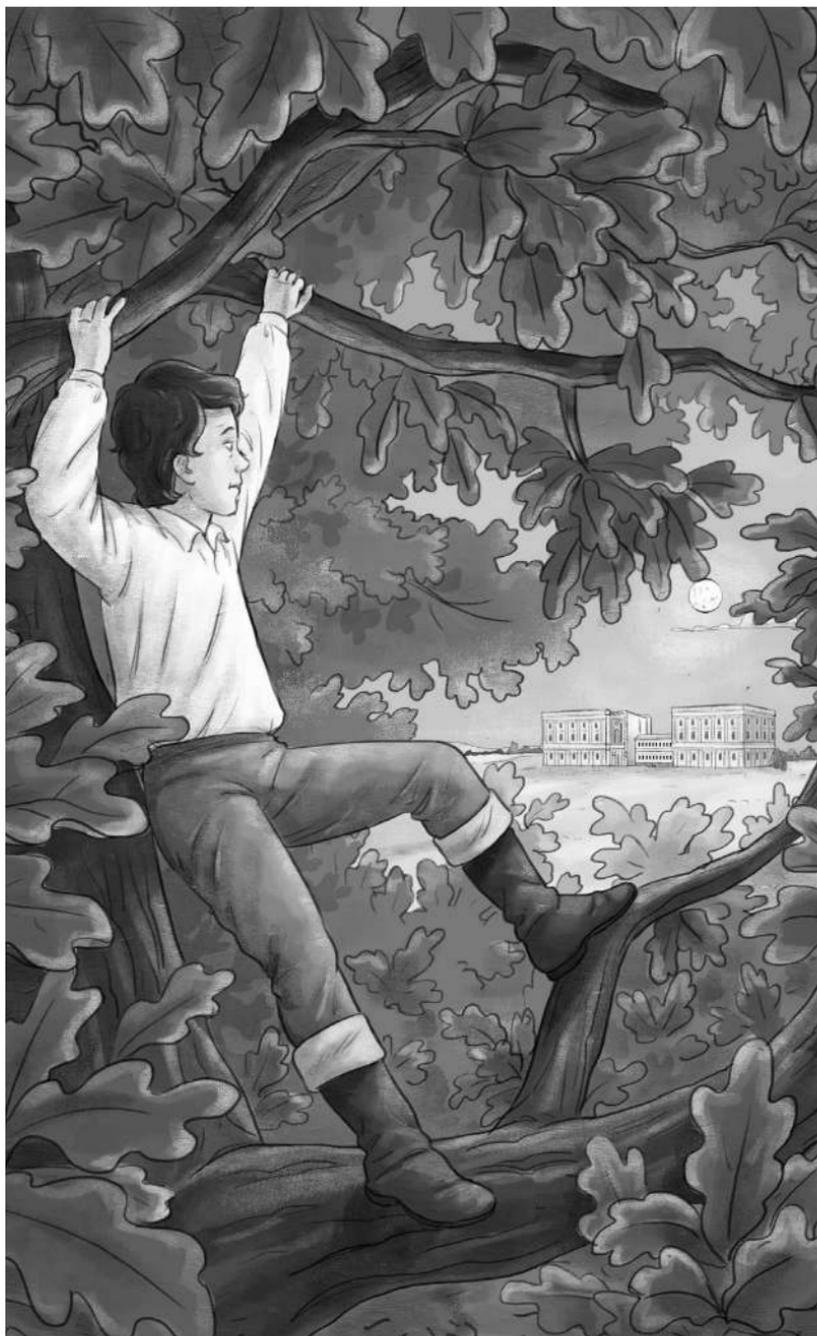
Marching Flames

That evening after supper, Samuel walked outside. *They'll be here before sundown.* He couldn't shake the dread he'd felt when he'd heard those words. With his Papa gone and his older brother missing, Samuel felt responsible for Mama. He wanted to protect her and Ave and the boardinghouse, so he found the highest lookout possible, one that would give him the ability to see in just about every direction.

Samuel climbed his tree, the old oak tree near the barn. From the top, he could see the moon begin to rise over the city. He glanced toward the Capitol building resting peacefully in the soft twilight. On the other side of the city center, the President's House lay quiet, tucked into clumps of trees in the gathering shadows. The Potomac River glistened like a silvery snake bordering the city. Silence settled over the streets. No more wagons rushing. No more people yelling. No more soldiers escaping. The quiet screamed in his ears. Each one of his senses felt on edge.

Beyond the Capitol building, a column of British soldiers in bright red uniforms emerged, their shiny

column: long row



swords gleaming golden, like flames descending on the city. Samuel drew a deep breath to steady his pounding heart. He watched, mesmerized by the soldiers as they made their way toward the Capitol. He could just imagine their thundering footsteps as they closed in on the Capitol building.

Where is the militia? Samuel wondered. They're supposed to protect the city! Then an even more distressing thought hit him. Where is Benjamin?

He could just make out a group of important-looking soldiers at the very front of the procession, sitting astride large horses. A British soldier nearby carried a large white flag. As one of the important-looking men on horseback drew near to the Capitol building, he paused. The entire group of marching soldiers behind him immediately stopped as well. Samuel held his breath and stared at the soldiers, still as statues.

Suddenly, the crack of gunfire rang out! Samuel couldn't tell where it came from or what was happening, but the column began to scatter as the soldiers in red rushed forward. Soon, the shriek of rockets filled the air, and smoke snaked toward the sky. Samuel leaned forward on his perch, trying to make sense of what was happening.

mesmerized: fascinated

Without warning, the sound of an enormous explosion tore through the city. Startled, Samuel lost his footing on the tree branch. He fell a few feet down, catching himself on another branch but ripping his trousers and cutting his left leg just above his knee. He regained his balance, pressed the torn cloth into the cut to slow the bleeding, and climbed back up to his lookout point. Near the shore of the Potomac River, smoke billowed, and flames licked the water's edge. The Navy Yard, Samuel realized.

"Samuel." Mama's voice, strong and serious, drifted up through the branches. "Get in the house."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, suddenly feeling much more like Mama's younger son than her protector. He took one final look around and began his descent. Although he felt strangely calm inside, his hands shook as he grasped the branches on his way to the ground.

Samuel immediately resumed lookout duties at his attic window. He reached into the drawer of the little table near the window and pulled out Papa's old spyglass. The dull brass felt cool against his face as he focused in on the scene unfolding before him. Flames and smoke rose up from behind the Capitol, and rockets continued to whistle and screech.

billowed: swelled or rolled outward like a wave

With all the destruction that was happening around him, a disturbing thought flooded Samuel's mind. Could the redcoats come to the boardinghouse? And if they did, would they try to burn it down? Would they try to steal Ave?

He rubbed the spyglass with his thumb anxiously, trying to think of a plan. *How can I protect Mama and the boardinghouse and the barn?* he wondered. He recalled Mr. Miller's words. *It's better not to put up a fight unless it's absolutely necessary. Remember: They outnumber us.*

The heat of the August evening and the fear lodged in Samuel's throat made it hard to breathe. He held his head in his hands, unable to comprehend everything he was witnessing. Soon, the smoky scent of burning wood drifted through the open window. When he finally looked up, he saw fire streaming out of the windows of the Capitol building. Smoke ascended skyward, mixing with clouds that had begun to gather over the city.

Samuel pushed his elbows into the windowsill and leaned forward as far as he could, steadying the spyglass. In front of the Capitol, a flagpole stood, bearing the Stars and Stripes. But as Samuel looked on in dismay, the flag began to lower. Down, down in the flickering torchlight it descended. Soon, the empty pole hoisted a new banner. The British flag unfurled majestically, watching over the destruction all around.

4

A Knock at the Door

Mama's footsteps echoed up the back stairs. The light from her lantern radiated through the darkness.

"Samuel," she called out softly, her voice quivering slightly.

"I'm in here," he answered.

Mama appeared by his side, setting the lantern on the table.

"They took the flag," Samuel said, handing her the spyglass. "They're burning the Capitol."

Mama gasped as she beheld the flames engulfing the Capitol building.

"Do you think he's out there, Mama?"

She shook her head. "I don't know where he is, Samuel."

Bang! Bang! Bang! A loud knock sounded at the front door.

engulfing: completely surrounding or covering

The redcoats! Samuel thought, his breath catching in his chest.

Mama snatched up her lantern and hurried downstairs. As Samuel flew down the steps behind her, he caught a glimpse of Papa's rifle, hung on hooks over the fireplace.

Mama unlatched the door with a steady hand and pulled it back slowly. Then she gasped.

"Mrs. Harris!" Mama exclaimed, swinging the door wide open. "Whatever is the matter?"

Their neighbor, Mrs. Harris, a young woman about ten years older than Samuel, was hunched over, cradling her protruding belly. She gasped in pain and crumpled to her knees on the doorstep.

"Samuel," Mama said, handing the lantern to her son, "Mrs. Harris is in a delicate state. Quickly! Hold this while I bring her in."

Samuel held the lantern while Mama gently helped the woman inside.

"The baby," Mrs. Harris managed haltingly, through clenched teeth. "It's not yet time—four more weeks—Josiah left last month—to join the militia—I'm all alone—"

Samuel studied Mrs. Harris. Her face looked ashen,

and her eyes stared past him, unfocused. A stricken look of pain etched her features as Mama helped her hobble to a chair in the corner.

“I can fetch Doctor Ewell,” Samuel said confidently. “Ave’s fed and ready. If I ride him hard, we can be back in a jiffy.”

“Curfew—” Mrs. Harris gasped. “The mayor set a curfew. Ten o’clock.”

“You shouldn’t be out. It’s too late!” Mama said sternly.

“I have to try,” Samuel insisted, glancing over at his stricken neighbor.

“Samuel, it’s too dangerous! And Doctor Ewell might have left like everyone else.”

“I know the city like the back of my hand. I’ll stay away from the soldiers. I promise.”

Mama looked at Mrs. Harris, who was doubled over in agony, and then back at her son, who stood with arms folded and jawline set. She threw her arms around her boy and rested her cheek against his. “Godspeed, my brave son,” she said through her tears.

Samuel stepped out into the summer night. The air reeked of smoke, and Samuel coughed to clear his throat. He glanced in the direction of the doctor’s house,

reeked: gave off a strong smell

near the Capitol. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep his promise to avoid soldiers if he rode in that direction, so he decided to change course. Instead, he would try Doctor Barnes, who lived near the President's House.

Samuel flung the barn door open and lit the lantern that hung on a hook by Ave's stall. He saddled and bridled Ave, then doused the lantern and led him out of the barn, fastening the door behind him. He gripped the saddle and pulled himself up, pausing to wrap his arms around Ave's neck and bury his face in his mane.



"We need to ride, boy. As fast as we can," he said, holding the reins securely. He squeezed Ave's sides sharply with both legs, wincing with pain from the wound above his left knee. He clicked his tongue twice, and Ave took off, the sound of his thundering hooves rising up into the sky.

bridled: put a bridle or harness on

doused: put out, as with a light or fire

5

Under Arrest!

The night, normally blanketed in darkness, was hazy and silvery with the light of the fires and the August humidity. Behind Samuel, the Navy Yard was consumed by fire and smoke, and the Capitol raged with angry flames. Samuel guided Ave toward the President's House, taking pains to avoid soldiers. He rode across the open, partially wooded area that cut through the city center and weaved his way through the dusty, vacant streets.

The President's House loomed ahead. The enormous white sandstone building sat in the middle of a vast lawn, with clusters of trees and shrubs scattered all around. Covered walkways wrapped the building, and staircases connected the second and third stories to the ground.

As he drew near, he realized he'd have to change course once again. A wall of enemy soldiers marched down Pennsylvania Avenue, the light from their torches dancing across the president's lawn. Without a moment to lose, Samuel redirected Ave, avoiding the marching soldiers.

They moved around to one side of the President's House, keeping to any tree coverage they could find. Through the enormous windows, Samuel saw that British soldiers had taken over the residence. Suddenly, a terrible realization hit him. He'd seen Mrs. Madison leave earlier, but the president wasn't with her. Could he be at home? Had the soldiers captured President Madison? Samuel trembled at the thought. He had no choice—he had to find out more.

With no other soldiers in sight, Samuel steeled himself and cautiously edged closer to investigate the president's whereabouts. He selected a cluster of trees and tied Ave securely. Using shrubbery for shelter, he crawled closer to the enormous windows. Prickly leaves and branches scratched his face and arms, and the wound on his leg stung, but he pushed himself onward.

Squatting in the darkness, he watched in silent rage and disgust as soldiers invaded the home. Through the window closest to him, he saw British soldiers gathered around an enormous table set with fine china, silver and gold place settings, and lovely crystal goblets. Wine bottles, chilling in ice buckets, were opened and poured. The redcoats reveled in their good fortune, clinking wine

goblets: drinking glasses with a stem and base

reveled: took great pleasure

glasses and wolfing down a delicious meal. *Perhaps they've captured the president and are celebrating!* Samuel thought with concern, still unable to spot President Madison. But before he could look any further, a group of soldiers appeared from around the far corner of the house. Samuel ducked down instantly and scrambled back to Ave. He untied and mounted his horse and continued to Doctor Barnes's house, several streets away.

The house stood halfway down a darkened road that contained two other houses, each one as gloomy and lifeless as the next. The doctor's two-story brick-front home was completely dark inside, and its pitch-black windows stared at Samuel hauntingly. A dirt walkway wound from the street to the wide steps in front.

Samuel looked all around to ensure there were no soldiers nearby. As far as he could tell, the street was deserted. Without making a sound, he dismounted and tiptoed up to the front entry. He put his ear to the door but heard nothing. He tapped the wood with his knuckles, then listened again. Still nothing. He balled his fists and banged against the door as hard as he could. No one answered. His mind raced to Mrs. Harris, whose life—and the life of her baby—might rest in his hands. He pounded the door with all his might. Silence. He thought of Benjamin as he flung his fists against the

door, and he let out a cry that seemed to come from the deepest place inside him.

“You there!” a deep voice bellowed behind him. “Young man!” Samuel froze. Time stopped. “You’re under arrest, by order of the king’s army!”

His heart sank and an ice-cold weight settled in the pit of his stomach as an iron grip clamped down hard on his shoulder. He turned slowly around and came face-to-face with a British soldier.

“What business do you have at this time of night?” the soldier demanded.

Samuel forced himself to speak up. “Please, sir, my mother is at home with our neighbor, who is in a delicate state. She needs a doctor, sir. I’m looking for Doctor Barnes.”

To Samuel’s surprise, the soldier’s face softened, and his voice lowered. “What’s your name, lad?”

“Samuel,” he managed. “Samuel Foster.”

“I have an infant son back home in England, Samuel Foster,” the soldier said, his voice oddly gentle. “I hope he turns out to be as courageous as you.”

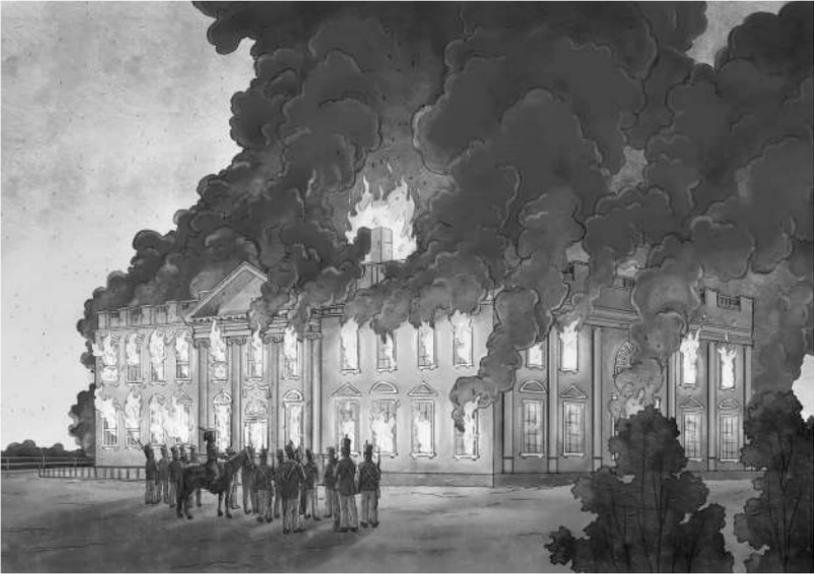
“Thank you, sir,” was all Samuel could think to say in his shock.

“The doctor doesn’t appear to be in.” The soldier released his grip on Samuel’s shoulder. “Ride home, Samuel Foster. Make haste!”

Samuel ran to Ave, leaped on his back, and urged him toward home. As they passed by the President’s House again, torch-bearing soldiers shouted with glee in the front yard, showing off the things they’d stolen. One man carried an armful of silver. Another took off his own shirt and put on a crisp white shirt with a ruffle on the front. *Could that belong to President Madison?* Samuel wondered. Yet another soldier balanced what Samuel thought might be one of the president’s hats on the end of his bayonet. Samuel hoped with all his heart that the president was safe and unharmed.

A wave of nausea swept over Samuel as his gaze moved from the scene in the front yard to the house itself. Flames leaped and tore through the President’s House. He stared at the burning home as glass cracked and stone crackled. With his city on fire, his brother gone, and no doctor to be found, Samuel wondered what else could possibly go wrong.

Washington City was crawling with soldiers. To avoid the enemy, Samuel turned Ave toward the marshy edges of the Potomac. Ave struggled through the soft,



swampy land. He huffed and panted. Foam formed around his nostrils and covered his back. His sweaty sides heaved underneath Samuel's body, making it difficult for Samuel to keep his balance. Sweat and ash formed tracks down Samuel's face, and his shirt and trousers dripped with moisture in the heat. The wound on his leg throbbed, his hands cramped, and his back ached, but still he rode on.

As Samuel caught the first glimpse of his home, rockets boomed behind him. He glanced back and saw that another building near the President's House had gone up in flames. With blazing buildings all around, he feared it was only a matter of time before the boardinghouse would be in danger of burning too.

6

An Unexpected Storm

Samuel shut the barn door and ran toward the flickering candles in the windows of the boardinghouse. Mama stood in the doorway waiting to wrap him in her arms.



“Doctor Barnes was not at home,” Samuel gasped, out of breath. “What happened here?”

“Thank goodness you’re home!” Mama squeezed him harder, then smiled reassuringly. “The baby arrived, not yet half an hour ago. Her name is Liberty. They’re both resting.”

As Liberty slept, rockets whistled and cannons roared. Once again, Samuel took up his position at the attic window. From there, he could see that the President’s House and the structures nearby were like bonfires, with fire spreading to nearby trees and houses. The two wings of the Capitol building and several neighboring buildings blazed like giant torches. He blew out the candle that flickered in his window. With fires burning all around, his bedroom was as bright as day.

The hours passed, but the fires raged on and on.

“Go to bed, Samuel,” Mama urged at last. “It will be morning soon.”

“I can’t sleep,” he said, “not now. All I can think about is Benjamin. I miss him, Mama. I wish he were here.”

“Me too,” Mama said, holding him close in a hug. “Me too. But please try to rest. We must be ready for a new day, whatever it may bring.”

What else could a new day bring? Samuel thought as he tugged on his nightshirt and pulled his bedcovers back. He never could have imagined the destruction this day had brought, and he wondered what lay ahead. He crawled into bed and waited for sleep to come.

Suddenly, the city rumbled. Another explosion? Samuel bolted upright in bed and listened. Another rumble shook the boardinghouse, followed by a brilliant flash of light. He ran to the window and saw for himself. It wasn't an explosion, after all. It was thunder and lightning! Curtains of rain covered the blazing city as bolts of lightning joined the dancing flames. Finally, the driving rain extinguished some of the fires and dampened others.

Samuel crawled into bed once again and listened to the rain drumming the roof and tapping the attic window. He thought of Benjamin and prayed he was still alive.

7

Breakfast with the British

Ababy's cry cut through the quiet. Samuel opened his eyes to the gray, dingy morning light. All the events of the past twenty-four hours rushed back to him in an instant. He breathed in the scent of fresh bread and crispy bacon sizzling on the skillet and felt an ache inside his chest, knowing Benjamin wasn't there to enjoy it with him.

Samuel walked past his brother's empty bed to the table near the window. He extended the spyglass, peered out at the destruction, and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the fires had gone out. The smoldering city stared back at him. Shells of buildings and houses looked like giant skeletons that had lost their skin. The walls of the Capitol, the President's House, and the building next to that—which he now recognized as the Treasury building—rose up defiantly. Samuel's lips curled in a slight smile as he focused on the steadfast structures.

dingy: dirty or dull-looking

skillet: frying pan

smoldering: burning slowly, usually with a lot of smoke and no flame

They may have been burned, but they weren't destroyed. The government buildings stood firm.

A knock sounded at the door below. Samuel put the spyglass away, pulled on his clothes, and raced down the stairs to see who was calling.

Mama stood in the doorway with her back to Samuel. Her hands rested on her hips, blocking the entrance.

"You have no business here," Mama was saying in an iron-hard tone. "This is a private residence, not a government building."

"Just making the rounds, madam," declared a crisp voice with an English accent.

"Nothing of interest for you here," Mama said sternly, folding her arms in front of her.

"Perhaps not," the soldier said, seemingly unconvinced. Samuel peered over Mama's shoulder and caught a glimpse of a young man with grime on his cheeks and hunger in his eyes. "But I must say, something smells delicious."

Samuel couldn't quite read the soldier. Would it be more dangerous to invite this man into their house or forcibly turn him away? The grocer's words replayed in his mind: *If the British come knocking, you best let them*

have whatever it is they want. It's better not to put up a fight unless it's absolutely necessary. Samuel's shoulders tensed, and he clenched his jaw at the thought of a British soldier entering his home and eating his breakfast.

Samuel stepped to the doorway beside his mother, stuck out his chest, and stood up as tall as he could. "If it's breakfast you're after, we can spare a plate," he said to the man. "Then you can be on your way."

Mama gave Samuel a worried glance but moved to the side to make way for the soldier. Samuel gave her a reassuring nod.

"Thank you, young man," the soldier said as he stepped over the threshold and removed his hat.

Mama motioned for him to take a seat at the dining room table. He chose the chair Benjamin always sat in. Samuel remained standing. Mama disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Samuel and the soldier to share a prickly silence. The soldier couldn't have been more than a few years older than Benjamin. His gaunt face, streaked with soot, sprouted whiskers underneath his nose and on his chin. His black boots were dirty and dull, caked with wet ash and mud. He smelled of smoke and sweat.

threshold: a piece of wood or stone that forms the bottom of a doorway

gaunt: thin and bony

soot: black powder formed when something is burned

Samuel relaxed when Mama finally returned with a tray of tea. She set out two teacups and poured the steaming liquid into each one.

“Please, join me,” the soldier said, motioning for Samuel to take a seat at the table. “I hate to take my tea alone.”

Samuel remained rooted where he stood. Tea? With the enemy? It seemed preposterous! But again, Mr. Miller’s words rang in his head: *Let them have whatever it is they want.* Samuel gave a slight nod and sat down stiffly across the table from the redcoat. He stared in silence at his full teacup.

The soldier took a sip of tea, and something in him relaxed. His eyes grew less tired, and he let out a deep sigh.

“What’s your name, lad?” he asked, setting down his cup.

“Samuel Foster, sir,” he said with all the courage he could muster.

“I’m Private James Witherspoon. A pleasure to meet you.”

Samuel didn’t know how to respond. Fearing what rudeness might warrant, he finally forced himself to say, “The pleasure is mine.”

muster: gather up or produce

warrant: make necessary or give reason for

Mama brought out two plates of food and set one in front of Private Witherspoon and the other in front of Samuel. The private ate quickly. Judging by his lean face and ravenous appetite, he hadn't seen a solid meal in some time.



“I envy you, Samuel Foster,” Private Witherspoon said between bites. “Being at home. Close to your family. Makes me think of my mum. And my older brother in the war. Fighting in France.”

Samuel nodded. He'd not thought of how hard it must be to fight in another country, away from family and everything familiar. He thought of Benjamin. It hurt to think of him, but how much worse would it be if he were across an ocean, in another country?

“My older brother’s fighting in the war, too,” Samuel said, lowering his gaze and studying the uneaten biscuit on his plate.

Private Witherspoon picked up his teacup and nodded to Samuel. “A toast! To our older brothers!” he said, thrusting his teacup in the air. He kept it suspended, clearly waiting for Samuel to do the same. Samuel quickly grasped his full cup and copied the gesture. The soldier gave another nod and took a sip, and so did Samuel.

Mama watched from the doorway, and Samuel was surprised to find a slight smile brightening her tired face.

After he’d eaten every crumb and scraped his plate clean, the soldier pushed his chair out from under the table and stood. “I must bid you good day,” he said, placing his hat on his head. “Thank you, Samuel Foster, for the conversation. Mrs. Foster, I thank you sincerely for the food.”

“Good day, Private Witherspoon,” Mama said.

Before he knew what he was doing, Samuel folded his uneaten biscuit in his napkin and handed the bundle to the grateful British soldier, who departed the boarding house a little less hungry than when he had first arrived.

Mama shut the door and turned to Samuel. “You have a kind heart, Samuel Foster. Your father would be proud.”

8

Admiral Cockburn's Revenge

Samuel and Ave set out with clear instructions from Mama: Investigate the damage and gather news about the militia. He made his way to the best source of news he knew—the *National Intelligencer*.

Ave sauntered slowly, dragging his hooves through shallow puddles. Samuel patted his neck, curious about the horse's sluggishness. The wind blew softly, and heaps of dark gray clouds gathered along the horizon.

As he approached the vicinity of the Capitol, he was startled to see soldiers relighting fires. Some buildings that hadn't been burned the night before and others that weren't completely destroyed were now freshly ablaze. Smoke rising in the distance suggested they were doing the same thing to the President's House and the Treasury building, too. The wind, now blowing steadily, picked up the flames and spread them through the gutted buildings.

A few blocks over, a group of British soldiers gathered

sauntered: walked in a relaxed way

vicinity: surrounding area

with torches outside of the *National Intelligencer* office, in a confrontation with several citizens. The newspaper's printing office was located on a corner of Pennsylvania Avenue, not far from the Capitol building. Surrounded by residential homes, it was seemingly untouched by the fires.

Hoping to discover news about the militia but not wanting to spook Ave, Samuel tied him securely outside a nearby building and weaved into the crowd of onlookers.

"We spoke to Admiral Cockburn last night," one woman exclaimed. "He didn't burn it then, and it shouldn't be burned now."

"The owner of this establishment publishes treacherous slander against Admiral Cockburn!"

"Please," another woman pleaded, "the owner of the paper only uses this building to print his paper. The building doesn't belong to him."

The soldiers hesitated, as if reconsidering their actions. Suddenly, a distinguished-looking officer rode past the crowd and called out to his soldiers, "Bring everything out!"

"Admiral Cockburn!" the soldiers exclaimed.

“I will oversee the activities,” the admiral said, pulling his horse to a stop and tipping his hat to the women in the crowd. Then, with a withering glance toward his men, he ordered, “Make a pile in the street!”

Out came stacks of old newspapers. Out came boxes of books. Out came the printing equipment—even the printing plates!

“Be sure that all the *c*’s are destroyed,” Admiral Cockburn commanded his men, “so the rascals can’t abuse my name anymore!” Soon, dashed pieces of broken printing plates littered the street.

Once the soldiers had thoroughly ransacked the office and most of its insides lay in the street, they torched the pile. To Samuel’s astonishment, they then began to dismantle the building itself, taking apart its bricks and stones and pulling down its walls with heavy rope.

Samuel turned to a man with gray hair, leaning on a cane behind him. “Excuse me, sir,” Samuel said, “have you heard any word about the militia?”

“Blast the militia!” the man growled back, shaking his cane at Samuel. “Blast the president and his men

withering: harshly critical

printing plates: metal plates used to transfer ink to paper in the form of text and images

ransacked: searched through roughly or carelessly

for leaving us to face the British alone. What kind of president leaves his city unprotected to be burned and pillaged, I'd like to know!"

Samuel wasn't sure. Afraid others might have a similar response, he made his way back to Ave's hitching post.

As Samuel unhitched Ave, he noticed a woman standing back from the crowd, dabbing her eyes as she watched the soldiers destroy the building's contents. "Pardon me," he said as he approached her, reins in hand. "My brother has joined the militia, and I'm trying to figure out where he might be. Would you happen to have any information about the militia?"

The woman listened intently, dabbed her eyes once more, and lowered her voice. "My husband escaped Bladensburg when the retreat was sounded yesterday. He was home no more than an hour's time to pack provisions. He left in haste before the British arrived. He said he was to meet up with the militia in Georgetown and await orders there."

Samuel thanked the woman and started home. Ave plodded through the smoky streets, head down and hooves dragging. As the clouds grew heavier and darker,

pillaged: stolen from with force, especially during war

hitching post: a fixed pole or other structure to which horses can be tied

Ave became even more subdued and sluggish. He didn't get startled by the fires, and he wasn't spooked by the rockets. The more Samuel felt the horse mellow beneath him, the more convinced he became that something was terribly wrong. "Oh, Ave," Samuel whispered desperately, "what's wrong? I can't lose you too!"



9

A Storm like No Other

Samuel pumped fresh water into buckets and watered all the horses in the barn, giving a little extra to Ave.

“What’s wrong, boy?” he asked again, securing Ave in the stall with the leather strap. The board that held the strap jiggled loosely. *That must have come loose when Ave was so upset yesterday*, Samuel mused. “Are you missing Benjamin? Don’t worry. He’ll come back. You’ll see.”

Ave ignored Samuel and refused the water he’d been given. He lowered his head and stood as still as stone.

Samuel closed the barn door, consumed with concern. Was Ave worried about Benjamin? Or could he really be sick? Normally, Ave got startled by loud noises or stepped playfully when he cantered with Samuel or galloped home with his tail streaming behind him. But Ave hadn’t done any of those things. He was so calm. If he didn’t know better, Samuel would have sworn he was a different horse.

cantered: ran at the second-fastest speed a horse can achieve

galloped: ran at the fastest speed a horse can achieve

Suddenly, an explosion shook the ground beneath Samuel's feet. The force of the eruption unbalanced him, and he stumbled backward. Regaining his balance, he ran to his old oak tree and scrambled upward. As he reached the top, he peered at the Capitol, where he thought the blast had come from. It stood smoldering, as it had all morning.

He looked around until he spotted thick clouds of gray smoke near the arsenal rise into the air, curling outward with the force of the wind that had begun to pick up. Orange flames and smoke mixed with dark, angry storm clouds threatened to smother the city.

What other destruction could lay ahead? And was Benjamin safe in all of this?

The wind whipped and thrashed the branches surrounding Samuel, and huge drops of rain pelted his face and neck. The tree began to sway back and forth, and Samuel finally understood the source of Ave's concern: the weather! The horse had picked up on it long before Samuel had any idea what was coming.

Samuel climbed down and ran into the house. "This storm is a big one, Mama!" he said breathlessly, shutting the door against the gusts behind him. Baby Liberty's cries rang out above the whistling of the wind outside.

arsenal: a place where weapons are stored



Mama helped Mrs. Harris and her baby downstairs and settled them on a pile of blankets she had arranged for them in the kitchen.

For two hours, the little group huddled together and listened to the wind howl and scream. Every so often, Samuel ran to the window to check on the barn. It seemed to be holding up, but the gusting wind and pounding rain concerned him. Large hailstones pounded the roof and hammered the sides of the boardinghouse. The wooden slats creaked as the building shook and quivered. The glass windowpanes rattled with the force of the wind and the hail, and Samuel wondered if they might break. Would the barn hold? Was Ave safe? Was Benjamin safe?

At last, the wind quieted, and the storm subsided. Samuel ran for the door, intending to check on the horses, but as soon as he stepped outside, he froze in horror. The barn door stood wide open. He sprinted to the barn, and his worst fears were confirmed. The loosened board had broken free. Ave was gone.

10

Ave's Escape

“Ave!” Samuel yelled. His voice pierced the stillness after the storm. “Ave!” Where would Ave go? His mind raced through all the options, but instinctively, he knew. The Capitol building. Ave often rode with Samuel to deliver food to Benjamin at the Capitol. If the horse were missing Benjamin, that was the place Ave might hope to find him.

Without thinking, Samuel raced through the streets toward the Capitol. He leaped over debris, including giant tree limbs that littered the path. As Samuel drew nearer to the Capitol, the surrounding damage became more extensive. Nearly every structure had been impacted. Collapsed buildings and caved-in roofs lined the streets. Whole trees, looking as if they'd been plucked from the ground by giant hands, blocked roads. Wounded people helped one another climb out of houses that had been damaged.

Samuel's lungs burned, but still he ran as hard as he could, searching for Ave. He turned the corner, and just

debris: the remains of something that was broken or destroyed

as he'd predicted, Ave stood at the bottom of the hill that held the Capitol building.

"Ave!" Samuel shrieked, out of breath but enormously relieved. Ave trotted up to Samuel, dragging the leather strap and broken board behind him. Samuel threw his arms around the horse, his body shaking with relief.

The two cautiously made their way back to the boardinghouse, Samuel riding bareback. He had never seen such destruction. Moving through the burned-down, storm-damaged city stirred in him an overwhelming desire to help in any way he could. After returning home, he fixed the broken board in Ave's stall and secured the latch on the barn door that had been damaged by the storm. Then he went inside to tell his mother what he'd seen.

"So many people are hurt," he explained as Mama glanced out at the desolate landscape. "We have an empty house. With all the boarders gone, it would make a perfect hospital!"

Mama nodded thoughtfully. "I'm sure there will be a need. Let's be ready."

Samuel and his mother spent the day preparing their home for injured soldiers and citizens. Samuel beat the straw mattresses and put fresh bedding on each bed. He swept the floors, and Mama helped him haul

each rug outside. Together, they pounded the rugs with sticks. Samuel took clean rags and tore them in strips for bandages. Mama baked fresh bread and readied provisions for anyone in need of food or shelter.

Once the sun had set and candlelight flickered in the house, Mama rested. At last, no buildings were on fire. No storms shook the city. All was calm. Samuel went to the barn to check on the horses.

As soon as he stepped outside, he froze. In the distance, dotting the hillsides around the city, campfires flickered. Washington City was surrounded by the British! He shivered, knowing they could be watching. And waiting.

11

Surrounded

Inside the barn, the horses were restless. Samuel lit the lantern by Ave's stall and went about feeding them oats and freshening their water. Ave whinnied and shook his head at Samuel, and Samuel wondered what the horse was sensing. Ave had known the soldiers were fighting in Bladensburg. He'd felt the storm hours before it arrived. What else could be coming?

Samuel blew out the lantern, fastened the barn door securely, and started toward the house. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. He stood as still as death. All his senses were alert as he stared through the darkness. His skin prickled as he saw shadows hovering beyond the boardinghouse. Footsteps plodded through the muddy ground behind him, near the oak tree. The sound of labored breathing echoed to his right. The candlelight from the window reached just far enough for Samuel to spot a red uniform. Nausea surged through him as he realized the boardinghouse was surrounded! In an instant, he dashed to the house and bolted the door behind him.



“They’re here!” he cried.

“Samuel, what in heaven’s name do you mean?” Mama asked, leaping to her feet and dropping the trousers she was mending.

“The British! They’re all around us!”

Mama snatched Papa’s rifle from the mantel and stood beside the bolted door. Samuel blew out the candles and leaned against the windowsill, peering out stealthily into the darkness. The baby whimpered softly, but otherwise, the house was still. Samuel held his breath. Would they try to steal Ave? He glanced at the barn. Or would they burn down the house? Or worse?

He clenched his fists and waited. He heard the rustling sound of movement. He thought he heard a wagon roll by. He heard a horse snort and another squeal. Still, no one tried to come inside. No one approached the barn. Minutes turned into hours, and they continued to watch and wait in the darkness. Samuel’s jaw ached, and his legs hurt from standing so stiffly.

Finally, Mama sat down in the chair beside the door. She held the gun across her lap and leaned her head against the wall. “Try to get some rest,” she said, her voice heavy with exhaustion. “I’ll need your help in the morning.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered. He tiptoed upstairs to the attic, crawled into bed, and tried his best to fall asleep.

mantel: a shelf or ledge above a fireplace

12

Brighter Days

“S amuel!”

A voice broke through his dreams, and a hand shook his body. Samuel resisted waking and pulled the cover over his head. His body ached from the strain of the past two days, and he only wanted to sleep. He'd dreamed that Benjamin was home, and he wanted to stay with him—even if it was just a dream—a little while longer.

“Samuel,” the voice said again. It was Benjamin's. Samuel couldn't figure out if he was dreaming or if someone really was calling him.

“Samuel!” Benjamin called loudly.

This time, it sounded real. Samuel tossed back the bed cover and threw his arms around his brother's neck.

“Are you really here?” Samuel asked, pulling back. “Or am I dreaming?”

“I'm here,” Benjamin laughed. “Mama sent me up to get your lazy bones out of bed!”

Samuel rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “But I

thought you joined the militia.” As much as he’d wished for Benjamin to come home, he had thought it would be some time before he saw his brother again.

“I tried.” Benjamin shrugged. “I got found out. Mr. Meyers—Daniel Meyers’s father—joined too. The moment he saw me, he reported me for being too young. He knows I’m the same age as his son. You have to be eighteen to join, not sixteen.”

“I’m sorry,” Samuel said, not feeling sorry at all. He was overjoyed at his brother’s sudden return.

“It’s OK. No hard feelings. They told me to go back home as soon as the coast was clear. The camp got word that the British left in the night, so I came as soon as I could.”

“What do you mean they left?” Samuel exclaimed, suddenly remembering last night’s terror. “The British were all around our house!”

Benjamin nodded. “You probably heard them sneaking out. Don’t worry, Samuel. They’re gone now.”

“Have you seen Ave yet?” Samuel asked.

“I went into the barn first thing. Had to let ol’ Ave know I’m home.”

“He got loose during the storm. He went looking for you.”

“Oh, no!” Benjamin exclaimed. “Was he hurt?”

“No, I found him at the Capitol building. He must have thought you were there—”

“Boys,” Mama called up to the attic bedroom, “breakfast!”

The family and Mrs. Harris gathered around the table. They reached across and held hands as Mama said a prayer of thanks to God for keeping her family safe and bringing her son home.

Samuel could see Benjamin’s discomfort at the worry he had caused his family. “Well, come on, Benjamin,” he prodded enthusiastically, trying to defuse his brother’s tension. “Tell us what happened!”

As they began eating, Benjamin told his story.

“I saw the call for volunteers in the *National Intelligencer* on Monday. I knew I was too young, but I had to try. I kept thinking of Papa. He would have hated to see the British take over the city. I thought I was joining the militia so that Washington City would be protected.”

“Where was the militia when the redcoats came?” Samuel demanded. “They let the British burn the city!”

“Let me finish, and I’ll explain,” Benjamin chided. “First thing Wednesday morning, they sent my regiment

chided: mildly criticized

to Bladensburg to provide reinforcements. So we marched to Bladensburg.”

“I heard the cannons from Bladensburg on Wednesday,” Samuel interrupted. “I wondered if you were there.”

“But halfway there,” Benjamin continued patiently, “one of the generals stopped us and told us to turn around and defend the federal city from the British, who were supposed to arrive later that day.”

“Which they did,” Samuel asserted, “and no militia was there to stop them!”

“Because,” Benjamin continued, “once we arrived back at Washington City, General Winder ordered all the militia to leave the city immediately, which we did. My regiment reconvened in Georgetown.”

“Why?” Samuel demanded. “Why wouldn’t he protect us? Why would he let the British take over and burn everything down?”

“I don’t know. Seems to me it would have been better to try to fight. That’s why I joined in the first place.”

“Well, I’m just thankful you’re home, safe and sound,” Mama said. “There’s plenty of helping to be done here, anyways.”

“How so?” Benjamin asked.

“We’re turning the boardinghouse into a hospital!” Samuel announced.

“We had to work hard yesterday to get it ready for all the people who’ve been hurt by the storm—” Mama began.

“Or the soldiers injured in the explosion near the arsenal,” Samuel added.

“Or anyone who needs a safe place,” Mama said, chuckling at her son’s enthusiasm.

That morning, after Mama took Mrs. Harris and Baby Liberty back home and Benjamin sent word that the boardinghouse was open, the wounded began to arrive. They came in wagons—just a few at first, but by the time the sun set, the house brimmed with injured British soldiers and citizens of Washington City. Doctor Barnes rode over when he heard what the Fosters had done.

“I need your help with this one,” Doctor Barnes said to Samuel as he cut the sleeve off the arm of a British soldier. A deep gash ran from his elbow to his shoulder. Samuel handed clean cloths to Doctor Barnes.

“What happened?” Samuel asked.

“We followed orders,” the soldier said, wincing, “to destroy ammunitions at Greenleaf Point. One hundred



kegs of gunpowder—maybe even 150—tossed in a well. Somehow, the whole lot exploded in a fiery mess.” He moaned with pain as Doctor Barnes began carefully stitching the wound.

Samuel nodded, recalling the explosion the previous day.

“Men around me flew into the air. I was hit with shrapnel,” he said, nodding toward his arm.

“Don’t worry,” Doctor Barnes reassured him. “You’ll be mended before you know it.”

Samuel continued to help Doctor Barnes with whatever he needed—bandaging wounds, setting limbs, replacing supplies. Benjamin helped Mama cook.

The brothers fed the horses and kept them watered, the little barn seeing much more activity than Ave was accustomed to. Everyone worked late into the night.

Over the next two days, more wounded came. No sooner would a person get bandaged and rested than another would come and take their place. Samuel and his family worked tirelessly to care for every injured person who came through their doors.

Early Sunday morning, Samuel was out in the barn, tending to the horses, when he heard hooves pounding up the lane. He closed the barn door behind him, expecting to see more wounded people. There would be many injuries to treat, horses to look after, and mouths to feed, but Samuel was ready. Instead, his jaw dropped, and he looked at the visitors in amazement.

President James Madison, accompanied by another gentleman, rode up to the Fosters' boardinghouse and dismounted. "Good day, young lad," the president called out. "Is this the Foster residence?"

"It is, sir," Samuel stammered, stepping forward to greet the guests with his very best manners. "I'm Samuel Foster."

"A pleasure to meet you, Samuel Foster." The president smiled warmly. "This is Secretary of State James Monroe."

Samuel nodded politely.

“As you know,” the president continued, “Washington City has received a terrible blow from the British.”

“Yes, sir,” Samuel agreed.

“We’re surveying the damage. And I’m offering my thanks to you and your family for your service.”

Samuel’s mother and brother stumbled out of the house to greet President Madison and the Secretary of State.

“Your family has taken it upon yourselves to care for the injured,” the president continued. “You represent all that is good about this country,” he said, nodding to Samuel. “Thank you.”

The family thanked him, despite their shock.

Samuel watched the men ride away. He thought of the fires the city had endured and the storm they had weathered over the past days. He thought of his family, together again, and the help they would give to friends and neighbors, to strangers and even to enemy soldiers. *It’s time to rebuild*, Samuel thought to himself. And he was ready.

Epilogue

Over the next few days, residents returned to the charred federal city. They were grieved to see their city in ruins. Some outraged citizens even wrote angry notes to the president on the walls of the burned Capitol building! Mrs. Madison was saddened to see her lovely home burned and many of her personal belongings destroyed. She was also heartbroken for her country and the impact that the burning of the federal city had on the citizens of the United States.

President Madison worked tirelessly to gather information and organize his scattered team of leaders. Over the course of four days, the sixty-three-year-old president rode on horseback through damaging storms and dangerous heat, between fifteen and twenty hours each day. On Saturday, August 27, President Madison returned to Washington City. His presence there, along with his strength, perseverance, and steady leadership, gave citizens hope and encouragement. They joined together to ensure that the city would be rebuilt and the destruction they endured would not happen again.

charred: blackened by fire

perseverance: continued effort despite difficulties, failures, or obstacles

While Washington City worried that the British might return, the redcoats fled the capital and made their way to their ships. Meanwhile, another British squadron approached Alexandria, a seaport village eight miles away across the Potomac. They plundered it, loading up on cotton, flour, and other supplies. Then they worked their way to Baltimore, Maryland, assuming it would be an easy port to capture as well.

By this point, it had been nearly three weeks since the burning of the federal city, and news of the disaster had spread. American soldiers and militia flooded to Baltimore. The citizens of Baltimore had worked tirelessly for a year to protect the city from capture, and their work paid off. After a fierce, sustained bombardment that lasted more than twenty-four hours, the British fled, and the port city of Baltimore remained in American hands. The Stars and Stripes still waved over Fort McHenry, inspiring the poem that would later become “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the national anthem of the United States of America.

squadron: military unit

plundered: stole from by force

bombardment: a continuous attack with bombs or other weapons

Afterword

While Samuel Foster and his family are fictional characters, the ordeal they and others in Washington City experienced is largely based on facts.

On Wednesday, August 24, 1814, the British—on their way to capture Washington City—defeated the Americans at the Battle of Bladensburg, forcing large numbers of soldiers to retreat through Washington City. Politicians, including President Madison, escaped the city, too. Before Mrs. Madison left the President's House, she gave orders for a life-sized portrait of George Washington to be saved. It was loaded onto the back of a cart and carried to safety.

That evening, the British entered the unprotected city and burned and plundered nearly every federal building in the city. Shortly after the British entered Washington City, at 8:20 p.m., Thomas Tingey, the American commandant of the Navy Yard, set fire to the Navy Yard, in order to keep it out of British hands.

The British began by burning the Capitol building, which housed the Library of Congress. Then, they moved on to burn the President's House, after enjoying the delicious meal that had been prepared earlier that afternoon.

Early the next morning, Thursday, August 25, a brief, powerful storm dampened the fires, though many of them were soon relit. The *National Intelligencer* was destroyed before an eruption at the arsenal at Greenleaf Point exploded 150 kegs of gunpowder, killing or injuring scores of British soldiers. Around the same time, one of the worst storms to ever hit the area moved in, spawning tornadoes and hail as large as softballs!

The British, ready to leave Washington City, enforced a curfew for the residents, built bonfires around the outskirts of the city, and left in the night.

The burning of Washington City was just one two-day event in a war that lasted more than two and a half years. The War of 1812 officially began on June 18, 1812, when the United States under President James Madison declared war on Great Britain, the most powerful military force in the world.

There were several reasons the United States declared war, but one of the most important ones was impressment. American sailors were being kidnapped and forced to serve in the British king's navy. The young country was sick and tired of its ships being attacked, its sailors being stolen and forced to fight against Napoleon, and its ability to trade with other countries being disrupted.

impressment: forcing people to serve as sailors or soldiers against their will

Although it had been almost thirty years since the United States won its independence from Britain, the country still lacked a strong military. Its soldiers were untested, and its leadership was disorganized. Fighting the most powerful military force in the world proved to be very difficult.

At first, much of the fighting occurred in Canada, where President Madison hoped he could defeat the British and force them out. But in 1813, the first British ships landed in the Chesapeake Bay region. There followed raids on coastal village towns, burning houses, and stealing crops and livestock. In August 1814, more than four thousand British soldiers landed in Maryland and began marching toward the capital, Washington City.

After the federal city was burned and nearby Alexandria plundered, the Americans were determined to protect the port city of Baltimore. A militia of between ten thousand and twenty thousand was assembled, and after nearly two days of fierce battle, the port of Baltimore and Fort McHenry remained in the hands of the Americans.

The British retreated, eventually heading south to New Orleans. There, they met Andrew Jackson's fierce warriors, who ultimately defeated the British. The war

ended when the federal city received news of Jackson's victory at the Siege of New Orleans and the signing of the Treaty of Ghent. At last, the young country was free from British impressment and Britain's terror in the states!

The War of 1812 and the burning of Washington City emphasized the United States' need for a stronger military. It also served to encourage unity as Americans worked together to defeat the British during the Battle of Baltimore and the Siege of New Orleans. A brighter future was possible, and with strong leadership and national unity, the young nation would learn from the mistakes of the past and grow into a great and powerful democracy.

siege: the act of surrounding a city or base with an armed force to prevent it from receiving supplies

democracy: a government in which the people hold the power, either directly or through representation

Meet the Author



When Hilary Echols was fourteen years old, her family moved to the Washington, D.C. area. She loved discovering her new city—touring the historic buildings, exploring the National Mall, and staring through the iron fence at the lovely White House—completely unaware that 175 years earlier, the city had been captured, set ablaze, and nearly destroyed. Over time, Hilary discovered the incredible story behind the burning of Washington, D.C., and when she was asked to write about the War of 1812, she knew the city’s story needed to be told.

As a parent and a former teacher, Hilary is passionate about engaging young learners in the reading process and encouraging a love of history and an appreciation for those who've gone before. She was the recipient of the Ann Whitford Paul-Writer's Digest Manuscript Award, and her poetry was featured in *Friends and Anemones: Ocean Poems for Children*. Her debut picture book, *What if the World is a Letter?* (Tommy Nelson, 2026), is set to be released in the spring of 2026.

Hilary lives in Virginia with her family and a chocolate lab named Bear. She loves reading and hiking, and after all these years, she still enjoys exploring Washington, D.C.

Meet the Illustrator



Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

Credits

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Core Knowledge® Adventures in History™

The United States has been at war with Great Britain for more than two years. When British soldiers finally descend on the capital city of Washington, Samuel's older brother runs off to join the militia. Samuel is left to do what he can to help his mother and neighbors withstand the attack.

As the city burns, Samuel rides out on his horse, Ave, in search of supplies, information, aid, and news of his brother. Surrounded by British soldiers, Samuel must be brave, take risks, and be careful who he trusts if he wishes to survive.



These books are suitable for readers aged 8 and up.

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