



# Puritan

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*For Mom and Dad,  
who nurtured my love of learning*



# Chapter One

The red blur flew past Mercia's cheek, chill air skimming her face. From atop her nervous horse she looked around, staring at the elm tree quivering beside her. A din of blue and black ascended screeching from its branches; loose leaves fluttered to the earthen ground, settling on top of others now turned a dirty brown from the soil the steady rain was trickling across them.

For a moment she hesitated, but then she shifted in her saddle, her eyes settling on the elm's warped trunk. A slender pole was trembling level with the topknot of her hair, the painted axe head at its end embedded deep in the bark. Still uncertain, her horse pulled up short, taking its lead from the others around it.

As her travelling party reacted to the hatchet, two men rode into place to surround her. Behind, Nathan Keyte, her great friend and perhaps now her lover, not losing his grip on the boy riding with him: her son. In front, Nicholas Wildmoor, her manservant, positioning himself between her horse and the forest, his youthful green eyes the colour of the leaves on their branches as they waited for their annual fall.

A rustling in the bushes – a murmuring – a collective intake of breath. The men in her group – they were all men, besides her – drew firearms,

pointing them towards the woods. Mercia took her own pistol from the belt around her dress, specially tailored down the middle so she could ride the rough forest paths more easily. Nathan had insisted on it, as she had on the pistol: she had to protect her son in case of attack.

A barely dressed man stepped onto the forest trail, the anger on his face apparent. The muscles of his bare abdomen hardened above his deerskin breechclout as he clenched a wooden spear adorned with feathers and colourful beads. His many bracelets of white and blue wampum jangled against its tip.

*'Nummayaôntam!'* he cried.

One of Mercia's group signalled to the rest to keep still. After a fashion they complied, although their fingers continued to twitch on their pistols. She glanced left and right; the men's faces were grim, but they held back. Then the man who had signalled turned to the Indian on the path.

*'Tawhitch musquaw . . . naméan?'* he said, stumbling over the syllables in his broad English accent. *'Wutti . . . neapum . . . mushâuta!'*

'What did you say?' his nearest companion whispered, his thumb stroking the arming mechanism of his loaded doglock.

'I asked him why he was angry, to let us pass.' The man nodded at his friend's gun. 'Best put that down.'

His companion scoffed, not lowering his pistol. 'Can these heathens not learn English?'

The Indian advanced. 'We speak English much better than you do our words. But we know the tongue you prefer is that of death.' Reaching into the fur pouch tied onto his belt, he pulled out a knife, stained with blood; in front of Mercia, Nathan tensed, but the Indian merely threw the weapon to the ground. 'You know this blade, I think.'

The interpreter jumped from his horse to pick up the knife. 'No,' he blinked, turning it in his hands. 'I do not.'

'Then perhaps you will know this.' He let out a screech, a shrill sound more of a bird of the forest than of a man. A ragged object flew from the undergrowth, crashing on the dirty track near to Nathan's horse.

Mercia peered round to be repulsed by a severed head, the pale skin of an Englishman turning grey amidst sunken cheeks. The blood at the neck was black and congealed. She looked away, nauseous, involuntarily thinking of her father.

‘Savage dog!’ The interpreter’s companion pulled his trigger, but his fury impaired his aim; the bullet went wide, ploughing instead into the bushes. A high-pitched voice screamed out in pain, a boy tumbling from his hiding place, clutching his shoulder. Of a sudden a mass of angry men, their shining bodies covered in grease, stormed onto the trail. Nicholas hugged his horse closer to Mercia’s, but then another, sombrely dressed man in their party rode forward, turning aside a young follower who had been shielding him just as Nathan and Nicholas had been protecting her.

‘*Aquétuck!*’ he shouted at their assailants, holding up a wrinkled hand, and then to his own men: ‘Stop!’ He halted his horse in front of the Indian who had spoken, raising his hands in a gesture of peace, all the while exposed to being hacked down where he sat. The Indian stared up at him a moment, breathing steadily, before curtly nodding and barking orders to his own men. Grumbling, they lowered their hatchets and guns, glaring at their leader in their bloodlust, but obeying his instructions nonetheless.

‘Powwow Winthrop,’ said the Indian. ‘For you I will listen.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘But only as it is you.’

‘*Cowauôntam.*’ Winthrop bowed in his saddle. ‘Your wisdom is strong, *sachem.*’ His eyes flicked to the severed head. ‘Now, let us talk.’

The road to New England should have been well worn after several years’ use, but the track was tortuous as it weaved through the dim forest. The deep ruts were causing trouble even for horses accustomed to the colonial wilderness, and the recent rain was making the grooves slippery, the going becoming slower still. As Mercia made her way into a river valley, the water running swiftly below, Nicholas’s horse skidded in the mud behind, knocking its head into the flank of her mount. But she kept her

balance, soon reaching the narrow river that blocked their path.

While she was waiting her turn to ford the stuttering stream – the men liked her to go in the middle; they thought she needed the protection – Winthrop fell in alongside her.

‘Do not mind the men,’ he said. ‘After that excitement they are anxious for home.’

Mercia nodded. ‘I can understand that, Governor.’

Winthrop smiled, his face creasing under his broad-brimmed hat. ‘You tire of America already, Mrs Blakewood?’

‘Why, no.’ She looked up at the trees, the elms by now familiar from their three-day ride. ‘Surprise encounters aside, it is . . . invigorating. So unlike home. But home will always be home.’

‘I too once thought of England as home,’ he mused, fiddling with the reins of his horse. ‘But that was above thirty years ago. Now home could never be anywhere but here. I am more pleased than you know that you accepted my invitation to visit us.’ He lifted his rein with a gloved hand, pointing towards the riverbank. ‘It appears you are next.’

‘Careful!’ Beckoning her approach, one of the party was shouting louder than he needed: the river was not roaring and there was no wind to steal his words. ‘Tis a narrow crossing, but the rains have made it swift. Will you manage to ford it?’

‘Will I manage?’ she muttered. ‘Narrow is right. ’Tis no more than the breadth of this horse.’

Pulling her hood around her, she made sure her grip was tight and sped towards the riverbank. Without stopping she leapt her horse across; its back hooves splashed into water on the other side, but its front legs found muddy land and it pulled itself up to stop beside Nathan who had forded immediately before her.

He shook his head and smiled. ‘Always the hard way with you.’

She shrugged. ‘Hardly a difficult jump.’

‘Well done, Mamma!’ Astride Nathan’s horse, her son beamed up at her, joy across his young face. ‘Can I try?’



Pleased at his approval, she laughed. 'No, Daniel. There will be plenty of chance to ride horses while we are here, but no leaping rivers. And—oh!' She looked behind as she heard a loud thud. Nicholas had made the same jump she had.

'See what you have started,' said Nathan.

'I don't know,' said Nicholas. 'An Indian ambush, and now a river jump. Who says the New World is dull?'

'I have not found it so,' she agreed.

'No.' Nathan calmed his anxious horse. 'But let us hope it is duller in Connecticut than it was in New York.'

Not many miles beyond the river, they emerged from the forest to pass through the town of New Haven, its nine squares of houses laid out around a central green, but they did not stop. As they were passing a white-boarded house set apart on the outskirts of town, she thought she saw Winthrop give her a hasty glance before looking up at the first-floor windows and quickly away. Following his gaze she was too late to see whoever had been peering out, but she thought she had seen two silhouettes. And then a blurred figure returned, only to vanish as she inclined her head, wondering who was watching.

It was a similar story in the main part of the small town, although here most stayed standing at their windows or doors, happy to be seen. Many wore angry grimaces, one woman even hissing as Winthrop passed beneath. He turned his serious face to look up at her; she narrowed her eyes but kept silent, and the party moved on, leaving the town behind.

'Seems like trouble,' said Nathan, back in the forest.

Winthrop manoeuvred his horse alongside them. 'We – that is my brothers and sisters in Connecticut – are in the process of welcoming New Haven into our fold. But as you see, some of the townsfolk would prefer to remain apart.'

Mercia raised an eyebrow. 'But you think differently, Governor?'

'Let us just say I do not think they will have much choice.' He sighed.

‘Now the King’s brother has taken New Amsterdam and renamed it for himself, they find themselves caught between his new lands and ours.’ He raised an eyebrow of his own. ‘I would hope they would prefer to join their fellow New Englanders than risk being absorbed by the royal advance.’

Nathan steadied his horse on the bumpy track. ‘I take it you have little confidence the Duke will keep to the lands he was granted?’

‘Already he has claimed Long Island. We have our charter, but still, our boundaries are somewhat porous. With the Dutch as our neighbours we managed, but with the Duke of York, well – you have met him, I believe.’

Mercia blew out her cheeks. ‘Indeed I have.’

He glanced at her askance. ‘What did you think?’

‘He was not happy when the King gave Nathan and I permission to sail here with his fleet. I do not know.’ She played with her reins. ‘He did not seem to care much for women. But he has a prize in New York.’

Winthrop nodded. ‘Tis where it is sited, at the mouth of Hudson’s river. I do not think my cousins in Massachusetts Bay would care to hear me say so, Mrs Blakewood, but one day I think New York could grow greater than Boston itself. And if that happens – well. I want New Haven with us, and not with him.’

They rode a few minutes in quiet, listening to the strange bird calls trilling in the close-packed trees. The gnarled trunks were covered in beard-like moss, the air around them clear and fresh. Away from the town, Mercia felt a renewed shiver of apprehension after the morning’s incident, although she knew she was safe in the company of the governor.

She cleared the lump from her throat. ‘Nobody wants to speak of the Indians,’ she said. ‘But you seem to have an understanding with them, Governor. What did you and the – *sachem* is it? – talk of?’

Winthrop nodded sadly. ‘If you think the Duke is a problem, then the

Indians are no less difficult. Not in themselves, you understand, for they are a people of no small nobility. But there are those among both them and us who are not so keen to live in harmony. Many would sooner wage war than have peace.'

'We hear tales back in England,' said Nathan. 'In the coffee houses and the pamphlets. Probably most of it is untrue, but well.' He glanced at Mercia. 'They are not as savage as they say?'

'Any more so than many Europeans?' Winthrop smiled. 'I should say we are all God's children, all behaving in similar ways.'

'What of that head?' said Nicholas, riding just behind them. 'I thought there was going to be a fight back there.'

'That was . . . one of our own miscreants, I am afraid. A man named Atterley who thought he had licence to kill Indians whenever they strayed onto his land. Or what he said was his land.' He sighed. 'It is a difficult line we have to tread here, for the Indians claim they have right to the land, while my fellows seek to buy it, sometimes take it by force. Often there is conflict. That knife the *sachem* showed us was used to kill the tribe's powwow. Their healer.'

'And so they took their vengeance on Atterley,' said Nathan.

'In part. But mostly they think to remind us of our promises, that when one of ours is to blame for a crime then we root out the culprit and punish him. And their powwow was important, a great figure in their heathen devotions. They will not forgive so easily as that.' Winthrop shuddered as a sudden gust of wind rose up. 'My task is to delay that reckoning such that it never occurs.'

Nathan shook his head. 'Even here, in this place of beauty, there is strife.'

'Indeed our ways of life oft times resemble those in England. Think of the recent wars you had, family against family, Royalist against Parliamentarian.' He pulled at his white neck collar. 'But let us not dwell on such miseries. We will soon be in Hartford. I should rather you look around and enjoy the ride.'

Mercia was glad to accept the suggestion, interested as she was in the discussion, for as ever the journey fascinated her. Still, it was two bedraggled days more before they came to the end of their road. The final stretch took them along the Connecticut River for which Winthrop's colony was named, and she was entranced by the majesty of the watercourse as it ambled amidst the cultivated fields of the townships that had sprung up along its banks. The few people who were travelling the road, or fishing in the river, doffed their hats to the governor as they passed by; she was impressed as he hailed them in return, seeming to know most of their names.

By the time they arrived in Hartford the sun had replaced the rain, domesticated pigs grunting their porcine welcome to the travellers who had crossed the ocean just a fortnight before. The principal town of Connecticut colony, Hartford was of a decent size, larger than New Haven but likewise centred on a well-kept green, its two-storey houses enjoying elongated plots set back from the few roads. As in the countryside, the townsfolk bowed to Winthrop in respect, then stared with interest at his unknown companions. Mercia had decided to forego the mourning clothes she had worn for the last six months for her father, but choice was limited, and she was still only wearing a simple grey dress. But she felt like a fine lady as she resisted the temptation to wave.

Then a commotion rang out, a portly man hurtling from a nearby doorway. Wheezing, he ran up to Winthrop, patting his horse's flanks as though signalling him to stop.

'Governor,' he cried. He paused to catch his breath, resting his palms on his corpulent thighs. 'I am glad you are returned.'

Winthrop reined in his horse, peering down from under his hat. 'Were matters that complex in my absence, Peter?' He tutted. 'Speak, man. What is it?'

'Tis Meltwater.' The man looked up, his red cheeks paling. 'Their minister. He's been found!'

Winthrop looked skywards. 'Thank the Lord,' he began. 'I was beginning to fear—'

'No.' The frantic man cut him off. 'It is to be feared.'

Winthrop frowned. 'Well?'

'He has been found in the river, Governor.' The man swallowed. 'Found dead. He has drowned.'