

*Promise of  
Deer Run*

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CROSSRIVER  
BREWSTER, KANSAS USA

PROMISE OF DEER RUN

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This book is dedicated to  
Jack, Chloe, and Luke — GiGi's Triplet Treasures

This book is also dedicated to all the veterans  
who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.  
May the Lord bless and heal you.



# Acknowledgments

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# Prelude

*H*uzzah! It's over! The treaty's been signed! Huzzah!"  
The news the troops had been awaiting for months was now a reality: the Americans had won the war against England. The United States of America was free and independent that spring of 1783. Eight long years of battle had proven victorious for the colonists.

Nineteen-year-old Nathaniel Stearns emerged from the small wooden barracks at West Point, New York. He had slept fitfully all night, finally falling into a deep slumber just before dawn. He awoke with a start when the cheers reached his ears. Rubbing his eyes, he squinted at the early morning sun.

"It's really over?" He shaded his eyes as he spoke to a jubilant private.

"Over and done, once for all! Johnny Bull is going back where he belongs! Come. Let's share a gill of the good creature to celebrate."

"You go on. I'll be there in a bit."

Nathaniel stood by himself as the others ran toward the hogshead of rum that the officers brought out for celebration.

The elation of this moment was blighted for young Corporal Stearns. The last three years of war had brought more than their share of personal losses, overshadowing the joy of victory. Nathaniel bore memories of his best friend's death, as well as the betrayal of his childhood sweetheart. He would never be the same after seeing his best friend's face blown away by enemy fire. That memory visited Nathaniel's sleep on a regular

basis, like an unwelcome visitor you wish you had never met.

As he turned back toward the barracks, Nathaniel caught a glimpse of his father approaching. Sergeant Benjamin Stearns had been away from home for the duration of the war, with an occasional furlough to visit his family in Deer Run. The years away from home deepened the lines around his father's eyes and mouth. The jovial man of Nathaniel's youthful memories was replaced by a somber gentleman with a stoop about his shoulders.

Nathaniel immediately noticed the change the news of victory brought to his father's countenance. He was smiling.

"Father." Nathaniel stood at attention.

"At ease." His father grinned from ear to ear. "Nathaniel, I'm certain you want to celebrate with the lads." His face grew serious. "But I'm asking you to consider heading back home as soon as you can. Here are your discharge papers. I asked the captain to prepare yours first. I want you to go home and stay at the farm. Check on your mother and brother and sisters." His voice caught in his throat. "My heart weighs heavy with worry. Please—"

"I'll pack immediately, sir," Nathaniel interrupted him. "You can count on me." He saluted his father.

"I've always been able to count on you, son. You've made me proud."

His father held his gaze and tears began to well in Nathaniel's eyes.

"Well then." His father cleared his throat and set his shoulders at attention. "Be on your way, lad."

"Yes, sir." Nathaniel sniffed sharply and wiped off his face. "Father, when will you return home? What shall I tell Mother?"

"Tell her... I'll be home forthwith. Tell her to look through her golden curtains and watch me arrive with the sun." He smiled. "I know how much your mother delights in seeing the sunrise through her only window."

Nathaniel couldn't help but smile at the thought. The two men embraced and his father turned away to join the celebration.

Returning to the barracks, Nathaniel gathered his few belongings. When he stepped out the door to begin the long walk to Deer Run, he searched the crowd of joyous troops for a glimpse of his



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father, but he couldn't see him anywhere. Nathaniel approached the group, grabbed the half cup of rum allotted to each soldier, and downed the drink in two quick gulps. He threw his satchel over his shoulder and started the journey home.

It took nearly a week to walk from the encampment in New York to the outskirts of Deer Run. Nearing the family farm, he hoped his mother or brother or sisters — someone — would burst out the front door to greet him. It had been three years since Nathaniel was home and until this moment he did not realize just how homesick he was.

Approaching the log cabin, he only heard the wind as a hollow, haunting sound stirring the trees in the woods. Chilled air swept against his neck and he pulled his collar up higher. The smell of rain infused his nostrils.

“Mother?” His voice filled with apprehension.

He opened the heavy wooden door, crafted years ago by his father. “Ethan? Sadie? Hello?”

His heart almost stopped as he saw the cabin was deserted. He surveyed the room. There were no linens, no dishes, no food cooking in the hearth. Even the yellow curtains his mother was so fond of were gone.

*What has happened? Where is everyone?*

He noticed a letter nailed to the wall above the chest of drawers. He walked across the room with unsteady legs and removed the old parchment.

His hands trembled as he read the note, dated September 30, 1780:

*Dearest Benjamin and Nathaniel,*

*It is with great sadness that I have been forced to leave our home. Ethan took ill some months after Nathaniel left. Despite our greatest efforts to treat his terrible fever, dearest Ethan went home to heaven. My heart is still breaking.*

*As I am unable to keep up the farm, my sister Abigail in Boston has kindly offered to take in the three girls and me. I am in despair that I may never see either of you again.*

*Please send word of your safekeeping and come to Boston as soon as you are able. I await word of my brave men.*

*Elaine Marie Cooper*

*With loving regard,  
Your Wife and Mother*

The paper dropped to the floor without Nathaniel taking notice. He stood without speaking for a moment before racing out the door to the burial ground up near the woods.

Tears stung at his eyes. Strands of his long blond hair whipped his face, clinging to the moisture on his cheeks. Frantic, he almost tripped more than once on the mass of weeds growing in the old cornfield.

“This cannot be!” he cried, but his voice was lost in the howling wind.

Arriving at the gravesite, the cold letters on the tombstone told the tragic truth: *Ethan Stearns, born January 19, 1766, died September 2, 1780.*

Nathaniel’s fingers etched the chiseled letters. He outlined them repeatedly with trembling hands encrusted with mud.

Ethan was indeed dead.

Nathaniel fell to his knees and shook his head back and forth.

“No. No. No!”

Sobs wracked his body with rhythmic waves. He would have raised a fist toward heaven... if he only had the strength.



# Nathaniel

*Seven years later*

The nightmare was back, plaguing Nathaniel Stearns' sleep. It was always the same.

He was eighteen once again and glancing over at his friend Isaiah. The two had been inseparable since signing on to fight the Redcoats. Now, covered in too many layers of dirt to count, they were poised like cougars, ready to leap at their lieutenant's order.

An unusually bright display of two planets in the otherwise pitch-black night sky seemed to shine a blessing on the battle. The anticipation was palpable in this company of Continental troops as they sensed impending victory in these trenches outside Yorktown.

"Be ready, men," Lieutenant Laurens yelled above the din of the French troops already attacking one British redoubt. The wooden fortification of the enemy was many yards up the hill, yet one could clearly hear the intense struggle between the English and French. The moans of the wounded and dying only increased Nathaniel's frenzied heartbeat.

He and Isaiah gripped their muskets with trembling fingers. Every muscle in their bodies tensed as the young soldiers readied to surge forward at the command.

"Up! Up!" The long-awaited order was finally given. As the Americans poured out of the dirt trenches, enemy fire lit up the sky, making the sweat glisten on the Colonial troops' determined faces.

Isaiah was closest to the edge of the fortification. Charging out of the trench, he glanced back at Nathaniel with a victorious smile. But

the face of Nathaniel's comrade was suddenly wiped away. In an instant, it was replaced by red nothingness.

Nathaniel stared silently at his faceless friend lying in a pool of blood. At first, his mind could not comprehend the horrific sight. A moment later he dropped his musket and screamed a gut-wrenching cry.

"Isaiah!"

Nathaniel woke with a start, his linen shirt clinging to his body with sweat. His heart raced, his breathing shallow and rapid.

*Was I screaming out loud?*

Staring around the empty log cabin, there was not another soul who could answer him. He had pondered that question for the last eight years since that battle occurred. But every time he awoke from that recurring nightmare, he had no one to ask.

A cool breeze blew through the open window, carrying the scent of a burning hearth nearby. He smelled simmering gruel from a neighbor's home.

Nathaniel's heart and stomach ached. Not just from the nightmare about Yorktown but from the thought of awakening years ago to his mother's cooking. The memory continued to bring him sadness as he looked at the cold, empty fireplace.

He tried to sit up, but his throbbing head begged him to lie back down. As he plopped his head onto the pillow, the bristly edges of his beard caught on the old linen fibers. The smell of the moldy material made his stomach turn.

He forced himself to sit up despite the pain in his head. Then he remembered the night before, at Deer Run Tavern. The dry, wretched feeling in his mouth brought that memory back clearly.

*How many gills of rum did I down with Dr. Burk? I should never have gone with him to the tavern.*

But Nathaniel had nothing better to do on a Saturday evening when Dr. Burk came knocking on the door at dusk. "Come let us share our tales of war," Dr. Burk had said enthusiastically as he threw his arm around Nathaniel's shoulder. He had thought it odd that the physician did not wish to spend his evening at home with his wife. Robert Burk seemed to spend

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a great many evenings at the tavern instead of in front of the fire with Matilda. Nathaniel was lonely, however, and did not question the doctor's personal affairs. He was grateful for some company.

With head throbbing and vile tastes filling his mouth, Nathaniel wished he had declined the offer.

Pushing himself off the straw-filled mattress, he drew a deep lungful of the fresh September air. He walked to the front door, opened it, and in his sleepiness nearly tripped over a basket on his front step. A small smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

*I wish I knew who was sending me victuals.*

Stopping to open the linen napkin covering the basket, he looked inside to find fresh bread from someone's oven. Nathaniel glanced around the front yard and down the road for any sign of the generous donor. But as always, there was no one in sight and no one ever came forward to claim credit for the gift. He felt embarrassed by this charity, but grateful. He knew no one wanted to make the ex-soldier feel beholden.

Groggily, he walked toward his mother's old garden. Searching for some parsley, he found a small plant tucked beneath a few weeds. He tore off the green stalks and crunched the leaves between his teeth. The bitter herb was preferable to the rank taste that assaulted his tongue.

Nathaniel hobbled on unsteady legs back to the house. He picked up the basket and brought it inside. Setting it on the tableboard, he looked with sadness at the long piece of wood that had once seen his parents, brother, and sisters enjoying a meal together. He could still see his brother Ethan, two years his junior, trying to keep up with Nathaniel's larger appetite.

*I should never have left Ethan to take over the farm.*

Tears stung at Nathaniel's eyes as he remembered how anxious he had been to fight in the Revolution, to free America from the ties that bound her to England. It was not two days after his sixteenth birthday in 1780 that he had bid his mother and siblings farewell.

"I shall find Father and we will fight for freedom together!" Nathaniel had said with youthful confidence.

He thought about his mother and sisters at his aunt and uncle's home in Boston. The childless relatives had a home as large as their hearts

and provided well for Nathaniel's family. After he found the letter, he visited his mother and sisters in Boston, but he stayed only a week. His generous uncle offered him a job at the newspaper he owned, but Nathaniel's heart ached to return to Deer Run. He implored his mother and uncle to allow him to go back to the family homestead.

"If no one is there to greet him, Father may despair of ever seeing his family again." His mother and uncle could not convince him otherwise, and they consented. Nathaniel understood their reservations about his decision, but they did not understand the pain of returning to an empty house and an unexpected gravestone.

And so Nathaniel took on the daunting task of reviving the long-neglected farm. He owed this to his father. After all, had Nathaniel stayed behind in the first place, the farm would have been well managed, and perhaps Ethan would still be alive. So each day as he labored to bring the land back to its former productivity, he awaited his parent's return.

Seven years had now passed since bidding his father farewell at West Point, and there was still no sign of him. The many letters Nathaniel sent to the army went unanswered. With so many veterans anxious to return home, the inefficient communications systems were soon overwhelmed. Why was Benjamin Stearns not home?

Nathaniel rubbed his swollen eyes as he pondered this. He walked over to the basin of water by the open window and splashed the cool liquid on his face. Looking up at the bare window, he wished his mother had left the yellow curtains behind. They had given this rustic cabin a feeling of warmth. Now the window frame's bare wood stood out as a stark reminder of the emptiness in his home — as well as the emptiness in his heart. This was one of those moments when he wished he had not even returned from the war alive.

*Dear God, why did you not spare my friend? Why was I not killed at Yorktown instead?*

His prayers always flew silently heavenward. They seemed lost in the clouds of despair.

Only one purpose kept him going. One thought obsessed him as he trudged through each laborious day on the farmstead — he was deter-

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mined to wait for his father's return. He would not abandon his parent who had promised to come home. It was Nathaniel's reason for survival, even if most of the townspeople of Deer Run thought he was quite strange for doing so. Everyone just assumed Benjamin Stearns was dead.

As Nathaniel splashed more cold water onto his bleary eyes, he heard a familiar sound, the bell at the meetinghouse. He had forgotten it was Sabbath.

Despite his weariness, he grabbed his razor from the wall hook and began shaving away the stubble that covered his leathery face.

*No sense in looking like a drunkard.*

He tried not to lament about his behavior of the night before — what he could remember of it. And as he walked out the door to go to the meetinghouse, he tried not to despair at the thought that God may have forgotten him completely.