

DARE AND CONSEQUENCES

February 1811

I have been chosen first. Me. Jacob Gibson. Hero-in-waiting.

Shoulders back like a soldier. Snowballs in my mitts. My faithful attack dog at my side. (Well, Ginger is actually romping about with the new boy.) And beneath my coat and shirt, my magic medicine bag to protect me.

First. Bravest. Best.

I wasn't exactly first. The older boys were picked before me — both the towners and the dockers.

Then William Dunwoody said, "We'll take Gibson."

But of all the young boys, I am first. The older boys know me by name. No one knows the name of the new boy.

He moved here last week and lives at the foot of King Street, where his father bought the tannery. He smells like a tannery too. He's probably a docker rather than a townner, but none of the sons of the fisher-

men and longshoremen welcome him.

William didn't even bother to learn his name. After even the youngest boys had been picked, he said, "I suppose that means we have to take this one."

And the new boy just grinned.

On the other side of the field, waits the enemy. They've built a big snow fort, but stand before its walls, ready for our attack.

Further up the hill, a pair of sentries watch from the bastion of Fort George — real soldiers and a real fort. They hold their muskets in the crooks of their arms and tuck their hands up their sleeves of their greatcoats.

And in between, from the wooden palisade to the frozen river, a carpet of fresh snow. Soft, moist snow. Snowball snow.

Only two sets of tracks spoil that pure white field. One shows where Ginger trotted toward the enemy and squatted to do her business. And then, following her tracks, *his* boot prints. They stop where he stooped to pick up the steaming turds and put them in a small canvas bag. At the tannery, they use dog droppings along with human piss to make the leather soft. The boys on the other side of the field hooted and laughed.

He's drawn attention to himself. When the snowballs fly, he will be a target — that's for sure. Best not to stand too close.

I stare forward. But Ginger has other ideas. She prances around the new boy and jumps up with her paws on his chest. He has picked up her mess. In the dog world, that must count for something. “Ginger! Down!” I command.

But she bounces and yaps, and licks the new boy’s face, then twirls and lies on her back for a belly rub. The new boy grins at me and, in spite of myself, I like him: his toothy smile, a mop of black hair, and bright blue eyes. He’s small and skinny, like me.

“Mister Gibson,” a voice snaps. “Can you control that dog of yours?”

“Yes, sir.”

William Dunwoody has called me “Mister.” Any boy would feel lucky if he said hello — let alone called him *mister*. And he has chosen *me*. *First!*

“I want you in reserve, Gibson.”

Reserve? In a snowball fight?

“You and Turd Boy here.”

Turd Boy? The other boys snicker. Poor fellow — he’ll never live this down. Might as well pack his bags and head west to the Indian country.

The new boy stands, head high. “Sure, Junior,” he replies calmly. “Whatever you like ... Junior.”

He pronounces “like” as *lahk* — drawn out and relaxed — an accent that comes from way beyond the other side of the river. But never mind that. *Junior?* Doesn’t the new boy know who he is talking to?

Junior . . . Obviously he does! I suck in my breath and glance at the others. Trouble ahead. William's father is also named William Dunwoody — the richest man in town with his ships, his warehouses, and his contracts to feed the army. He's also the magistrate for Lincoln County. His son likes to call himself William Dunwoody II. "Junior" might stick worse than "Turd Boy."

They stare at each other. Even on a winter day, William leaves his overcoat open and his cravat untied. Only William would wear a cravat to a snowball fight. He stands tall, with his feet firm and he turns his head to glance at me, then back down at the new boy. His green eyes narrow. Hungry eyes — he eats his revenge cold.

"Gibson," he says, "never mind the reserve. You and this one will lead the attack. You're the Forlorn Hope."

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In Newark, we see soldiers every day and learn early what they do, and how they do it. The Forlorn Hope is the detail that leads the attack on a fort. It's a deadly job. Those few soldiers face cannons, muskets and hand bombs. They rarely come back alive, but if they do, they are heroes.

That's the new boy and me, crossing the slope, heroes. I march straight ahead. Chin high. No duck-