

SHE'S TRYING TO SURVIVE A BRITISH
INVASION—HE IS THE ENEMY.

A woman with a blonde braid, wearing a white lace-trimmed top and a red dress, stands in a golden field. In the background, there is a large red barn and a smaller wooden shed. The scene is set against a clear blue sky.

THE
SCARLET
COAT

ANGELA K. COUCH

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Dedication

To my father who showed me the way. To my husband
who gave me wings.

What People are Saying

"Angela K Couch brings history to life in this captivating story set during the American Revolution. I fell in love with the characters, silently rooting for them along the way." ~ Sarah Monzon

"Fast-paced historical with an unusual twist. Perfect balance between romance and action. ~ Lora Young

"The Scarlet Coat brings the American Revolutionary War to life. The characters reveal this slice of history in living colors, and you'll weave through their emotional turmoil and love right along with them." ~ Janet Ferguson

"The Scarlet Coat is a beautiful historical romance told through the eyes and hearts of a young colonist and her enemy, a British soldier. Love, heartache, and intrigue abound in their story, beautifully woven by the author. A must-read for any history lover." ~ Laura Hodges Poole

1

The last rays of sun faded into twilight, and the wind whispered through the trees, as if warning Rachel to turn back. She encouraged her pa's stallion forward, though her pulse threatened to strangle her. Somewhere, not far away, a wolf wailed into the night. The mournful song resonated within her, bespeaking tragedy. She searched the deepening shadows of the forest. What if all the British hadn't retreated? What if there were still Indians and Tories out there, waiting behind those trees?

Something unseen rustled the leaves, and a twig snapped. *Lord, what am I doing?* How would she even find them out here in the dark? Maybe she should go home or to the Reids' for another night.

Her course of action seemed so clear when General Herkimer, and what remained of his regiment and the local militia, limped their way alongside the Mohawk River from Oriskany. The general lay on a stretcher, his leg below the knee wrapped in a crimson cloth, his face pale and expressionless—like so many of the men with him. Eight hundred had marched north the day before yesterday and barely half returned.

Her pa and brother were not among them.

Stay with the Reids. That was all Pa had asked of her. Benjamin Reid's bad leg compelled him to remain behind and watch over their farms. Though the safest place for her, Rachel could no longer wait there trying

to carry on a casual conversation with any of the Reid girls or hide behind her mother's Bible. She couldn't abide the confines of their snug cabin a minute longer without knowing her own family's fate. Since losing Mama to illness two years ago, Pa and Joseph were all she had. She couldn't lose them, too. But she'd ridden for hours now. Where was she?

A little farther along the trail, the wind shifted slightly, carrying on it the odor of burnt powder and blood. Battle. Rachel's hand came to her stomach in an attempt to calm the sickness churning within.

The horse whinnied, shifting as he tossed his head.

"Whoa. Easy, Hunter." She slid to the ground and surveyed her surroundings. Both sides of the road were heavily treed and thick with underbrush. Even still, she could make out the dark forms of fallen men. She stumbled over her feet but kept moving. "Joseph! Pa!" *You can't be dead.*

Dragging the horse, Rachel ran. Each step constricted her throat until she could hardly breathe. Bodies littered the road—Indian, Tory, and American alike. She maneuvered around them, searching faces in the faint glow of the remaining light. She should have brought a lantern.

The road sloped downward into a deep ravine. Her feet faltered. Hundreds of men—a patchwork of blue and homespun. All motionless. All dead. If only she could close her eyes or turn away, but every muscle held her in place.

The rasp of a voice jolted her from the trance. She yelped and spun toward the intruder.

"Rachel?" The murmur of her name accompanied the form of a man emerging from the trees. "What are you doing here?"

“Joseph.” Relief at seeing her brother alive stole the strength from her legs. They trembled as she moved to him and brushed her fingers across his cheek, stained with dirt and powder. His sandy brown hair was tousled and appeared just as black. Rachel wrapped him in her arms and clung tight. “Why didn’t you come back with the others? I was so worried...afraid something happened to you and...”

She glanced to his face and the strange expression that marked it. More accurately, a complete lack of expression. “Where is Pa? What happened, Joseph? Tell me.”

“Tell you? You can see it, can’t you? Everywhere you look.”

Of course she saw it. All of it. But... “Where is Pa?”

Joseph looked back, and Rachel followed his gaze into the blackness of the timbered ridge of the ravine. She pushed away and moved stiffly in that direction. *Pa.*

“No.” Joseph’s cold hand seized hers. “There is nothing left in there. He’s dead.”

“Let me go.” She wrenched away, breaking free before he was able to grab her arm and pull her back. Her vision hazed. “Let me go. I need him.”

“It’s too late, Rachel. He’s dead. I was with him. I watched the life bleed out of him...nothing I could do to stop it. Don’t go up there.” His voice pleaded and his eyes glistened. Joseph wiped a sleeve across his nose and motioned to Hunter. “Please let me take you home, and I’ll return for Pa’s body.”

Rachel stared into the trees, aching to pull away once again. She took in a jagged breath, managed a nod, and then surrendered to his firm hands. He

assisted her into the saddle. Joseph retained the reins to lead the horse, but they didn't make it more than a few steps before an unusual cry wafted in the breeze.

Shivers spiked up and down Rachel's spine. "What was that?"

"It was no animal."

The mewling of human suffering perforated the night. A yapping howl followed—a wolf answering the plea.

"You stay here." Joseph forced the thin leather reins into her hands, shooting her a warning glance before he hurried off the path and into the thick foliage.

Ignoring his order, Rachel dropped to the ground, twisted the reins around a branch and ran after him. She wouldn't be left alone again. Not in this place. Not in the gathering dark. As she caught up to him, she gripped his sleeve.

Their gazes met.

Joseph's mouth opened; then, he nodded his head. Turning away, he allowed her to trail him.

Her fingers remained tangled in the fabric of his shirt.

They followed the moaning to a tiny meadow strewn with more bodies.

Rachel gaped at the shiny black patches of blood evident on almost every corpse and covered her nose and mouth against the stench saturating the air.

As they drew near, the moans ceased.

Joseph called out, but there was no reply. "He must be here somewhere." Frustration edged his voice.

"Maybe he's too weak. We've got to find him if he's still alive."

Joseph moved out, stepping over the fallen,

checking each for any sign of life.

Rachel stood back, frozen. Motionless. Numb. The man's whimpers, though now silent, resounded in her mind. What if he were still alive? What if he woke again to this dark and death, only to become as the corpses surrounding him, with no one to lend him life...to help him?

Rachel forced her feet into action as she picked her way around a dead Indian. Though she tried to keep her eyes averted, they rebelliously wandered to the large hole in the middle of his chest. Her hand flew to her mouth as she lurched away. Stumbling backward, her feet tripped over a red uniformed body. She landed hard on the ground beside him. Bile rose in her throat and she twisted, retching into the nearest bush.

"What happened?" Joseph rushed to her.

She sat upright and wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve. Her whole body shook.

Joseph grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet. "You shouldn't have seen this. Let's get you home. Whoever it was must already be gone." He led her away, stepping over a fallen soldier's body.

Rachel shrieked as the hem of her dress snagged on something.

"Do not leave...me." An almost voiceless plea met her ears. "Please."

She pivoted on her heel to where the soldier lay in his blood, his eyes wide, one hand extended. Rachel shivered.

Joseph also reacted, bringing his pistol to the enemy's position.

The man coughed, and closed his eyes in pain. His brilliant scarlet coat and white breeches were smudged with grit and mud, his right hip a bloodied mass of

flesh, probably ripped through by a musket ball.

"Rachel, go to the road." The pistol trembled in Joseph's grip.

"You're going to kill him?" She glanced to the soldier.

His eyes remained closed. His mouth moved slightly as though speaking to someone. Perhaps he was praying.

Pushing past the nausea, Rachel swung back to her brother, reaching for him. "You can't do this."

Joseph jerked away. "This is exactly what both he and I have done since morning. How many of our neighbors do you think he's personally sent from this life?"

Silence hung between them.

Joseph lowered his head and weariness returned to his voice. "I'm so tired of this, but there's no other choice. Go back to the road and wait for me. I'll be along in a minute."

She couldn't do it. Rachel moved, but not in the direction required by her brother. Instead, she knelt beside the wounded soldier and laid a cautious hand against his cool forehead.

His eyes fluttered open and peered up with evident fear. Confusion ridged his brow. Did he know he could expect no mercy and therefore could not understand her actions? His eyes rolled back, and his head slid from the large stone on which it had been resting. His body became limp with no sign of life other than the shallow, irregular breaths which moved his chest.

"Joseph, I know he's our enemy, and I do hate him..." Rachel shook her head as she tried to swallow back the bitter taste still coating her tongue. "But we

can't kill him, and we can't leave him to die out here like some dog we don't like. Can we? I...I don't know anymore."

"What are you suggesting?"

Rachel watched the soldier, her frown deepening. "Without the uniform he would appear the same as any of us." Her gaze rose to Joseph's face and the tension etched in his usually kind features. "Mama taught us to love our enemies—do good to those who hate you. That's what's written in the Bible. I see the uniform, but..."

"All that Bible talk is right and good, but it's only a book. What if this was the soldier that killed Pa...or Jarrett? There isn't hardly a family in this valley who hasn't lost someone today. They slaughtered us, Rachel." His voice faltered. "If anyone found out we had protected or saved a British soldier—an officer, no less—we could be shot. This is war."

Rachel stood, not able to look at the dying man as she stepped away. Jarrett Adler...dead? He'd only been twenty, less than a year older than her. An attractive young man with his wheat blond hair and teasing blue eyes. More than once she'd considered the possibility of a future with him, and now he was dead, too. Same as Pa.

"I'll wait by the road," Rachel whispered, too drained, heartbroken, and scared to argue further. She would never fully understand war and the insanity required for one man to kill another in such a way. She didn't want to try to understand it. Rachel hurried, almost running to put as much distance as possible between herself and the nightmare. Still, the haunted eyes of that soldier, that man, wouldn't leave her. Perhaps they never would.

Hunter waited on the road, nibbling on what grass lined the trails.

Grasping the reins, Rachel hugged the animal's neck, pressed her cheek into the soft coat and braced for what seemed inevitable—the shot of a pistol. “Let him die, Lord. Take him before Joseph has to. Please, let him be dead already.” Her heart thundered. Not from fear, but with the realization that she couldn't let Joseph kill that man. She had to stop him. Pushing away, Rachel darted back into the forest, her skirts hitched high. She stumbled over her feet as the stillness of the night shattered, the sharp crack echoing. *No.*

The man had begged for his life.

And she'd left him to die.

Rachel backed away several steps before turning. When she reached the road, she laid her hand against Hunter's jaw. “I...” *I feel his death is my doing.* Was she so weak? Hundreds of men lay dead, and she wasn't sure if she could live with the death of her enemy?

Fatigue dragged Joseph's footsteps as he approached. “Rachel?”

She slipped under Hunter's neck, and then looked over his withers.

Joseph's face appeared eerie in the rising moonlight.

“Don't say anything,” she begged.

“Rachel, I need you to help me get him on the horse.”

Her mind could not comprehend the meaning. She moved around Hunter, her gaze drawn to the form lying at Joseph's feet. The red coat was gone, but the bloodied hip, the gash on the head, and the man's face...

“But... you said...and the shot?”

Joseph glanced away. "Wolves. I wanted to frighten them." It was said dryly. Perhaps he could find no true excuse. Wolves would be too shy to come anywhere near here tonight.

"You mean...?"

"I guess. I really don't know." A hand passed over his eyes. "We can take him home and let him die in peace."

A simple enough plan, but...

"What will we do if he recovers?" This man was a British officer—their enemy. She couldn't forget that.

"I don't reckon he will. There's not much life in him. Besides, we aren't here to save him, only give him a chance to die on his own."

~*~

Exquisite agony pulsed through his whole body with each beat of his heart. The scent of horse filled his nostrils as he attempted a breath. His lungs refused to expand, as though the full weight of the animal resided on top of them and across his stomach. They ached from the pressure. The swaying of the ground only compounded the intense pressure threatening to burst his head apart. Why did the ground sway? Was he back on a ship? That did not explain the horse sitting on him, or why he hung upside down. Nothing made sense. He opened his eyes to the blackness...and fur? The sleek coat of a horse. Hence the smell. But the animal did not lie on him as assumed. Instead, it seemed he was slung face down over the back of a horse. No wonder his stomach pinched so. He had to get off.

At first his arms refused his beckoning. Numb

from dangling above his head, they might as well have been severed from him entirely. Slowly, however, he wielded enough control to bring them to the saddle over which he was draped. Planting them against the firm leather, he pushed, writhing his body up with the same motion. As he slid from the saddle, a feminine scream pierced the air, a hammer to the spike already driven through his temples.

His feet touched the ground, but little good that did him. Like his arms, they refused to heed his will. He should have considered that before he disembarked. The frantic voice of a woman and the lingering aroma of horse sweat faded. Agony ripped through his right thigh, and he hit the ground.

"Let me help you get him back up on Hunter." The woman's words filtered through the haze residing in his mind as it resurfaced to consciousness.

"What, so he can throw himself off again?" The deeper voice rasped with anger.

Who were these people? What did they want with him?

"After bringing him this far, we can't leave him. Only a couple more miles, and we'll be home."

Home...would not that be agreeable? At least, it conjured a pleasant sensation within him. No images, though. A dim light glowed high above as he forced his eyelids open, blinking against the grit. As much as his eyes begged to remain closed, he refused to allow them such luxury. Not with the face of an angel hovering so near, shadowed but still somewhat visible in the moonlight. Young. Large eyes. A halo of gold. Who was she?

Someone yanked on his arm, heaving him upward. *Lord, not back on the horse.* Anything but that.

“No.” He tried to pull away, and his body again sagged to the earth.

“He’s awake.” Her voice.

The man’s was edged. “How is that possible when he shouldn’t even be alive?”

Did they speak of him, implying he should be dead? Perhaps that explained the pain—the struggle to remain cognizant to anything around him. Dead. How far off was he from slipping away completely? What held him here? He stared at the young woman as she knelt beside him.

“We’re trying to help you.”

He attempted to wet his lips, but his tongue was just as dry. Blood and gunpowder tainted his senses. “What happened?”

“You were—”

The man pulled her aside. “There’s no time for this. We either get him back on that horse, or leave him here.”

As they dragged his body from the ground, all thoughts and awareness fled, returning in waves of oblivion and torture. Finally, he awoke on a solid surface, a floor, the only movement the flickering of a candle set upon a table across a small room. Closer, a chair held the form of a woman, her head tipped back. Asleep. He let his eyes close, allowing exhaustion and pain to take him. No use fighting it any longer. God willing, he would awaken. But if not...he only wished he could remember what he had sacrificed his life for.

2

The first rays of sun lighted upon her face, warming it. Rachel's eyes flew open as she pulled away from the nightmares. An involuntary shiver passed through her entire body, the images of death and gore slow to fade. She stretched her sore neck. A kink burned like a hot coal in her right shoulder, but that was no wonder. Joseph had told her to go to bed. Covering a yawn and trying to blink the tiredness from her eyes, Rachel leaned forward in her mother's rocking chair. With the soft glow of the sun in the small windows, she studied the man lying on the floor against the wall.

His brown hair held highlights of red, especially in the whiskers which showed on the relaxed slope of his jaw. His nose was prominent, but in an attractive way. Slight lines marked the corners of his eyes. He appeared to have several years on Joseph's twenty-two, but was probably still younger than thirty.

Rachel laid a hand across his ashen face, only to yank it back an instant later. His forehead seemed the temperature of a pot hanging over a fire. She tucked the quilt around his chin, and hurried to where a pitcher of water sat on the table. She poured some into a basin, and then grabbed a rag from the stash she'd made from an old dress.

The front door of the cabin creaked opened and Joseph stepped in looking bedraggled, his eyes

bloodshot. "He's still alive? How is that possible?"

Rachel dropped to her knees beside the man, swatting what remained of her braid out of the way. She dipped the rag into the warm water, wrung it out, and then laid it across the British officer's brow. "I don't know how much longer he'll last. He's burning up."

"What are you doing?"

She glanced at her brother. "I'm trying to help his—"

"We're not helping him, remember?" Joseph walked to the table where he deposited his tricorn hat, and poured some water. He took several long gulps before slamming the tin mug onto the table "We're only giving him a place to die, though he doesn't deserve even that much."

Rachel glanced at the man on the floor, not sure whether to retreat or go back to her ministrations. Her insides twisted. This man fought for life. He was the enemy—her mind knew it—but lying here so helpless...he was only a man. Could she sit back and do nothing while he died? Her emotional state was not up to that task.

A grunt huffed from Joseph's throat as he came to her side. He crouched, and then yanked back the blanket, baring the wounded thigh. He removed the wad of cloth they had pushed into the gaping hole to keep the injury from leaving a crimson trail.

Rachel gasped, recoiling at the mess of blood and dirt tinged with whitish-yellow pus. "How awful."

"It won't be long before the poison spreads through his body. It'll be what kills him since he hasn't already bled to death." Joseph pressed the cloth back into place and pushed to his feet, the exertion

betraying his exhaustion.

"He needs a doctor." Rachel glanced to where her cap hung near the door.

Joseph followed her gaze. "What's going through that head of yours?"

"We could fetch Doctor Weber."

The man wasn't a real doctor, but the closest they had within twenty miles. He lived near what was left of Frankfort, about ten miles farther down the Mohawk.

If she rode hard, she could be back by midafternoon.

"He can't help here."

"But this man will die." Rachel stood, facing her brother.

"That's what we want, remember? He's the enemy." Joseph's voice was sharp, but hushed—almost a whisper. "There are dozens of our own men and soldiers who need the doctor's help before I would allow him to waste his time here. Even if there was only one other American man, woman, or child who needed the doctor for something as slight as a splinter in his finger, I wouldn't ask him here."

Rachel's mouth opened, then clamped shut. He was right, of course. How could she have forgotten the men who had returned with the general, or even Herkimer's own condition? Or what would happen if anyone knew this man lay here in their home? "So we sit back and let him die?"

Joseph blew out his breath. "I guess not. I reckon I didn't think this through last night. Otherwise, I would have realized that wouldn't be an option for you. Heat some water and wash this wound good and clean. Don't be worried about hurting him, 'cause he

probably won't feel anything anyways. Just scrub it out. A warm milk and bread poultice like Ma used to make will probably do the most good."

Joseph half staggered to the table to rip a large piece of bread off the stale loaf. "After I finish the chores, I'll head over to the Adlers'. I brought Jarrett's body back with Pa's." He collected his hat, staring at it for several moments before shoving it on his head and pulling it low.

"But you haven't had a wink of sleep." Rachel marveled that he still moved at all. Marching, hours of battle, fighting for his very life, staying out there with Pa until the end...and still no rest. "Why don't you lie down for a while? I'll see to the chores."

"No!" He shook his head, his eyes haunted. "I don't want you going out there. Just...stay in the cabin until I get Pa ready to bury."

No need to employ her imagination. Not after last night. "All right. I'll stay in. But you still need to rest. I tended the animals yesterday before I came for you. They can wait long enough for you to—"

"There's too much to do." He waved her suggestion away. "Besides, I dozed on the wagon. Hunter and Sorrowful didn't need any help coming home." He turned to the door.

"Joseph."

"I can't, Rachel. I can't stop, or I'll not move again. Already I can feel my body stiffening, my strength slipping away...almost like a corpse. I have to keep moving." He motioned to the British officer. "I doubt he'll wake up, but don't take chances." Joseph withdrew the pistol from his side and slid it across the table. "It's loaded. If he does wake when you're alone and causes you any trouble, shoot him."