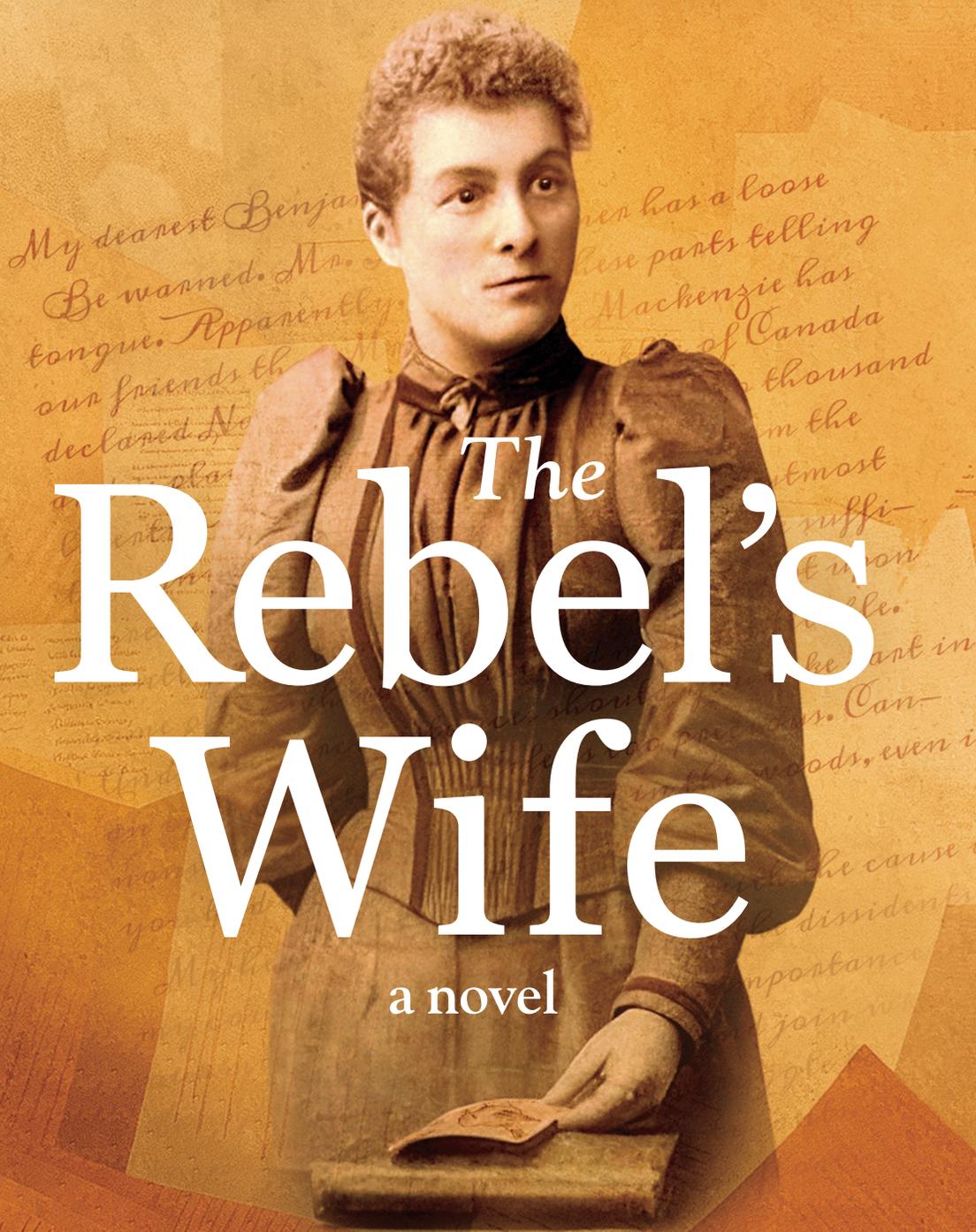


Seeking Justice in Canada's Past



The  
**Rebel's  
Wife**

a novel

GERALD RICHARDSON BROWN

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Dedicated to  
Janet Elizabeth Brown

A remarkable woman of our time  
Whose loving support made possible  
The writing of this book



Speaker: Stranger, what do you seek or ask of us?  
Tamino: Friendship and love.  
Speaker: And are you prepared, even if it costs you  
your life?  
Tamino: I am.

—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *The Magic Flute*

Those who dance are considered insane by those who  
can't hear the music.

—Anon

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# Author's Note

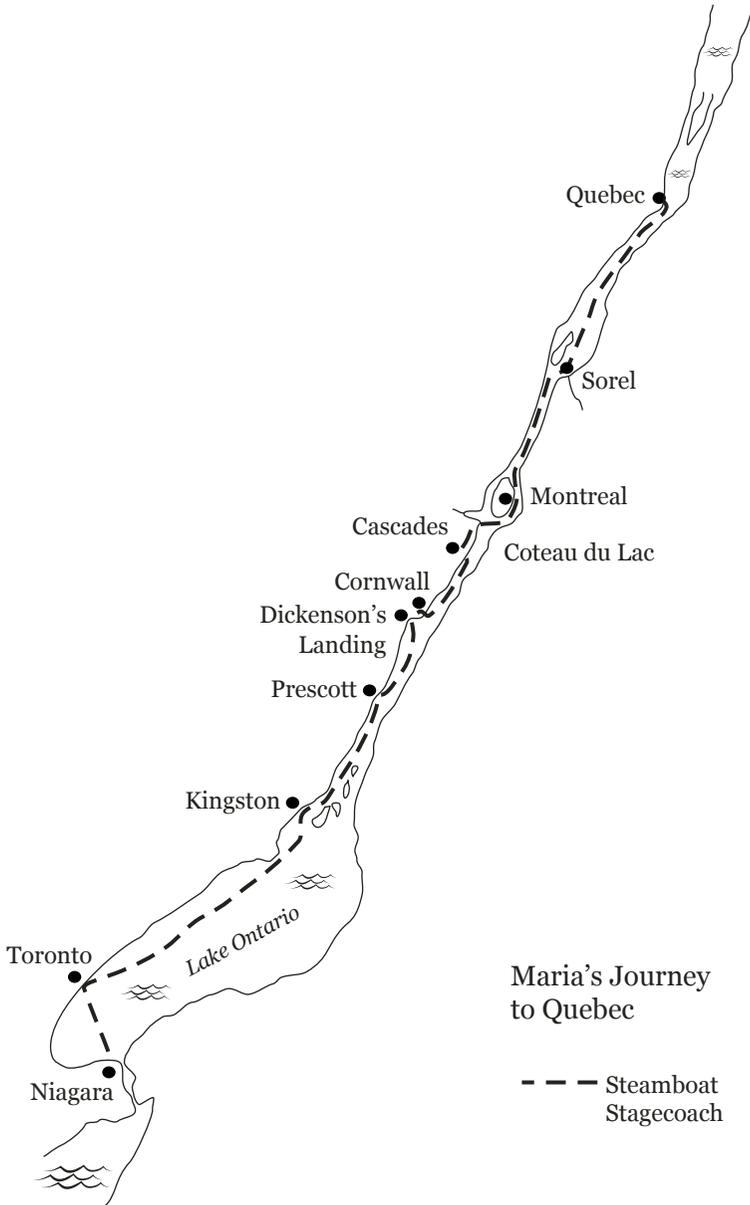
This is a work of fiction with historical roots inspired by the life and times of a woman who lived almost two hundred years ago during a turbulent period in Canadian history. My story of Maria Wait, the rebel's wife, hangs largely on the skeleton of letters written by Maria herself and on witnesses to the events during the rebellions of 1837–38 in Upper Canada. The fictional letters in the narrative are adaptations of, or inferred from, letters written by Maria and her husband. Occasionally, I have reproduced words and sentences from the original letters, they being cogent to the story.

I have interpreted the personalities and actions of the historical characters through the eyes of the rebels; they might, therefore, diverge from those of historical documents. I have used a novelist's licence to put flesh on the bones of historical characters and especially of Maria during her short life.

Cover image: Mary Isabella Wager, born 1868. Her ancestors were among the first Euro-Americans to settle in the territory that became Upper Canada. She was the author's grandmother.



NIAGARA RIVER AND REGION  
1837-38



ST. LAWRENCE VALLEY  
1838



## Chapter 1

# The Courier

On the crest of a steep hill, the stagecoach driver reined in his team to let the horses blow off the effort of the climb and rest for the difficult, dangerous stretch of road ahead. The driver tugged at his dirty slouched hat and, from below its brim, peered at the crude road that had been cut through the woods. He said to the man beside him, "Road sure is muddy." The man hired as a guard looked to the musket lying across his knees, then he too peered into the dark slash through the trees.

"Cain't see any bandits."

"You expect them to be standing in the road waiting for us? If they're here today, they will be behind the trees ready to pick you off."

"We only got mail. I ain't goin' to be killed saving the goddamn mail."

The driver glanced across at his guard and cursed under his breath, saying to himself, "What an idiot they sent me today, a mail guard that won't guard the mail."

"An' it don't look to me like our passengers got much money."

The driver looked at his steaming horses, judging their condition for a hard run if necessary. His team and passengers were his main concern, not the idiot guard. But he was anxious to get the horses moving before they cooled off too much and became lazy. He slapped the reins to get his rig rolling.

The coach was bouncing and swaying on the rough road before he said to his partner, "I ain't so sure. The well-dressed lady in the corner travels this route often. I suspect she carries money from patriots at Lockport to buy guns for the rebels across the border in Canada. Wouldn't be surprised if she had a stash of cash under her bloomers right now."

The guard grasped his musket tightly, leaned over the spinning wheel and looked back over his shoulder to see the woman who had taken his

hand to step up to the coach at Lockport, revealing a shapely leg above her boot as she lifted her gown to board. At the time, a thin gold band dampened his ardour, but now a new mystery rode along with her. The drawn curtain across the coach window hid her from his sight, defeating his attempt at voyeurism.

“Ain’t no use her sewing it in her petticoats,” the driver mused. “They would find it at the frontier. But it would take a pretty brave soldier to mess around in her bloomers for contraband.” He slapped the reins on the horses’ backs, clearly excited by the thought.

\* \* \*

Behind the curtain the lone woman in the coach was young with strands of dark hair peeking out from beneath her blue felt hat. The hat, secured from the wind by a light blue scarf draped over the crown and tied beneath her chin, also served as ear protection by the simple act of drawing the scarf more tightly. It was late fall and some days were frigid as winter approached. To add some colour on this cloudy day, Maria had stuck a turkey feather in her hatband. As the coach bounced over the bumps and potholes of the road, the feather sometimes touched the roof.

Twenty years old, Maria bloomed with vitality and wit. She had strong, well-defined facial features that young men desired and old men cherished as a work of art: a Renoir woman, except for her eyes, the colour of a summer sky with a hint of storm clouds, that shone with an aura of defiance and fierce determination even in the shadow of her hat. She had a classic exterior and also, one suspected, a virtuous character. A woman that was capable of great love and strong hatred.

Maria squeezed her hip against the hard side of the coach to move as far as possible from the portly man who sat beside her. He smelled of tobacco and barnyard, and his overalls were dirty with finger marks from his indulgent eating habits. A heavy mackinaw shirt produced the acrid smell of long-dried sweat. He wore a wide-brimmed hat turned up at the front and back. Maria thought he resembled a giant turtle stranded on land. She pushed herself against the seat and hoped the fat man would leave the coach at the next stop.

Directly across from Maria was a young man about her age, dressed in

black and holding a book that he was trying to read. He seemed out of place in this rough frontier of unlettered farmers. Beside him sat a well-dressed older man, wearing a beaver top hat and green cravat. *Probably an Englishman*, she thought.

She pulled aside the curtain, an unconscious attempt to rid her nose of the assault of nasty smells. The trees rushed past the speeding coach, so dense that she could not distinguish one from another. Outside the window, they formed a green wall that was almost as constricting as the interior of the coach. But then the coach broke out of the trees into a clearing dotted with stumps left from harvested trees. A log house came into view framed by brown fields, their bounty exhausted for the season. A small boy was running toward the road waving to the people in the coach. The domestic scene of the young boy and smoke rising from the chimney of the cabin lightened her mood, and in a spirit of companionship she smiled and raised her hand to the boy. In spite of the bumping of the coach, the scene reminded her of her own childhood and for a brief moment made her think of the grim task she had taken upon herself.

As the farm clearing passed from view, she could sense a change in movement. The coach was slowing down, and instead of bumping up and down it was slewing sideways, at times forcing one of her hips against the well-fed passenger beside her and then her other hard against the side of the coach. Suddenly they stopped altogether and she heard a shout from outside: "All out, folks. We're stuck."

She heard a curse and then the door on the side opposite Maria opened and the guard stood there.

"Hurry, folks. All out. We're stuck in the mud, and you able-bodied men will have to push."

The man in the beaver hat stuck his head out the door and said, "Where are we?"

"Bout halfway between Lockport an' Fort Schlosser."

"A fort? With guns?"

"Nah! Stop asking stupid questions and get down from there, or you'll see a gun alright."

The man muttered, "Barbarian," but dutifully got out, followed by the others. Maria was the last to exit. Observing the mud, she raised her gown

to keep it from getting wet and dirty; it was her travelling outfit, and she still had a long trip ahead. The driver approached and said, "Come with me, ma'am. There's a dry patch just over there." And he led her to a grassy knoll slightly above the travelled part of the road. Before leaving her he said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, you're goin' to have to walk to the top of the hill while we get this beast out of the mud."

He walked back to the coach, and the guard shouted at the male passengers, "A'right, you hearties. Put your shoulder to the wheels and help get this thing moving again."

The man wearing the top hat whined, "Me, too? I am not from here. Do you know who I am?"

The guard looked him up and down and said, "I don't care if you're Jesus Christ himself, or where you hail from. You look healthy enough. Get ye behind that there wheel and push." He pointed his musket toward a rear wheel of the coach and threatened, "Otherwise you can just stand there and get shot by bandits. Or by me."

The man sputtered and gave the guard a menacing look, but peering down the muzzle of the gun dampened his anger, and he meekly walked toward the coach wheel. Crisis averted, the men bent to the task of getting the coach rolling again before bandits appeared.

After much grunting and shouting, the three male passengers, the guard and the driver standing beside the horses were able to move the heavy coach to dry ground. Maria walked up the hill and entered the coach while the gentlemen stood aside. She was smiling, enjoying the humour of the situation.

When they were underway again, Maria found her eyes straying to the young man opposite. He was thin with a pale, clean-shaven face and scholarly eyes. His black attire matched his unruly black hair. His boots were clean, which surprised her after the episode of pushing the coach out of the mud. He must have found some way to clean them while she was walking up the hill. He hadn't said a word since they left Lockport, busily reading a thin red book as much as was possible in the bouncing coach. He raised his eyes to her at the very moment she was searching his face. Embarrassed, she stared at the toes of her boots but not before she saw a flash of brightness in his dark, intelligent eyes that identified him

as a zealot for some cause. She wondered if he was associated with the patriots at Lockport.

At a crossroad, the stage stopped for her portly seatmate to leave the coach. She saw a farm horse and rig sitting beside the road and assumed the man was being met.

The coach was approaching the river and turning to Fort Schlosser when Maria began to hear the familiar rumbling sound she associated with home. The man with the green cravat said, "What in God's name is the confounded noise I hear in front of us?"

The young man Maria imagined to be a scholar, eager to pass on knowledge of his country, said, "Mister, that's the roar of the waterfalls in the river that defines the boundary between our Republic and British territory."

"Is that the Niagara River, sir?"

"It is. You can cross into Canada above the falls at the fort, if that's your business."

"No, my business is in Buffalo."

"May I inquire as to your business, sir?"

The man looked miffed. "I cannot divulge my business, sir. Very sorry."

"I apologize for asking."

The young man didn't pursue the matter further, which disappointed Maria. She too would like to know who the man was, and his business.

Soon they were at Schlosser and minutes later at the old fort, which was now nothing more than a chimney, a rotted palisade surrounded by an earth berm and a dry ditch. The blockhouse had burned down years before to be replaced by a small guardhouse, a lean-to for horses and an office for the two troopers who guarded the frontier and the river crossing to Chippewa.

Inside the berm, the driver pulled up his team adjacent to the guardhouse, and the mail guard opened the coach door and announced, "This is Fort Schlosser, folks, the frontier. If you're going across the river into Canada you are required to report your presence and your business."

A soldier in a faded blue tunic emerged from the guardhouse and replaced the mail guard at the door of the coach.

He looked at the scholar. "What's your name, lad?"

"Me? I'm Linus Miller. Lawyer."

The soldier stiffened to attention.

"You goin' across the river?"

"Nope, going south."

"What's your business?"

"To visit my father in Jamestown."

"You American, then?"

"Yes. From Stockton, New York."

He looked Miller close in the face. "Miller, eh? From Stockton? You sure you're not goin' across the river?"

"Scout's honour. I am going to Jamestown. My father lives there now."

It seemed obvious to Maria that the border guard knew of Miller but was conflicted in whether to make an issue of the situation. "Well, if you try to cross, the British will get you. Go on!"

Maria's curiosity was heightened. *Who is this young man who acts and dresses like a scholar yet is of interest to the American border guard?*

To Maria the guard said, "Ma'am, I believe you know how to get to the dock to catch the ferry boat."

"Yes, I do. But I'm not crossing here. I'm going south to Black Rock and crossing there to go up to Black Creek. May I alight to stretch my legs?"

He allowed her to step down. She said to the coachman, "Thank you for your kindness in seeing to my need when we were stuck in the mud."

"It was a pleasure, ma'am."

She walked a few yards from the coach and stood, taking in the clean air. It was a relief from the stuffiness of the coach and its passengers.

She heard a voice behind her. "Take ye across the river, ma'am?"

She turned and faced a grizzled old man in overalls and a greasy tricorne.

"Take ye across...?" he repeated. "Oh! It's you, ma'am. Goin' across today, Mrs. Wait? My sons are ready and waiting down at the dock."

"Sorry, Sam," she said to the ferry operator, "I am going to Black Rock today. My child is at Black Creek with Mrs. Wait. Did you know, Sam, that the ferryman at Black Rock has a steamboat? You should get yourself a steamboat."

"Too much money, ma'am. Besides, I don't need a steamboat. I have two hardy sons. They're more dependable in this part of the river."

"Someday, Sam, there will be many steamboats on the river."

“I hope I don’t have to see that. Good luck to you, ma’am. An’ your child.”

“Thank you, Sam. And also to your sons. They’re a fine pair of boys.”

Sam hustled over to the coach to see if he could get some business there. Maria saw the man she believed to be English shake his head. Sam went to help the driver with the fresh horses.

The driver had by now unhitched his team and returned with a glossy black and a larger roan with a Roman nose. The roan was restless and it took both Sam and the driver, whom Sam called Bob, to back the new team onto the tongue of the stagecoach and fasten the chains to the whippetrees for the onward journey upriver. This done, Bob came to the rear and strapped a case onto the boot. As Maria watched this process, she saw an older couple climb into the coach. She would have new company.

As Maria climbed back into the coach, the mail guard emerged from the guardhouse where she suspected he had been lounging. He swung his frame up and over the wheel and took his place beside Bob. With the shout, “Get up, ye lovelies” and the slapping of the reins, they left the fort and took the main road, accompanied by the rattle of harness and the squeaking of leather.

Maria could see the blue frontier of the mighty Niagara through the bare trees as the coach sped along the dusty road. Across the river lay her country, governed by a remote, nepotist and oppressive “family compact.” Her late friend Robert Randal had tried to reform the colonial regime to give the people more say in matters affecting them but had failed. A chill came over Maria when she thought of returning home and what might await her when she crossed the river at Black Rock.

She tore her thoughts away from war and grief and observed her fellow passengers. Linus Miller, the young American lawyer, sat beside her. The mysterious businessman had pushed himself into a corner of the coach as if trying to disappear. The older couple sat opposite Maria. The woman was rather lumpish but with refined features, evidence that once she was quite handsome. Age had wrinkled and darkened her face, but she retained the lines of one who smiled and laughed much. Unnatural straw-coloured hair that once was darker peeped from the edges of a fine woollen hat. A heavy matching coat of grey only partially covered her dark green dress of the finest wool. Her shoulders were covered with a silky

fur that Maria, with some envy, thought was mink. Brown leather boots peeked out from beneath her gown. Judging by her dress and manner, this woman had wealth.

The woman looked up from her knitting into Maria's face. Embarrassed and flustered to be caught snooping, Maria turned away to look toward the river. But the woman touched her knee and said, "I am Mrs. Welby," and nodding toward her husband, said, "This is Mr. Welby."

"How do you do? My name is Maria."

She really did not want to talk to the woman, but it was her nature to be polite.

"Mr. Welby and I recently came from Ohio to live with our son in Schlosser. He's a lieutenant in the New York militia. Are you from Schlosser, dear? I do not think we have met."

"No, ma'am, I am just passing through."

"Oh, that is too bad. I did not think I had met you. We are travelling to Jamestown to visit Mr. Welby's sister who is an 'old maid,' as they say, and gets very lonely at times. Is not that true, Mr. Welby?"

"Yes, dear."

"I think a woman cannot be happy until she is wed. Don't you agree, dear?"

Maria clasped her hands to hide her wedding ring.

"Well, Mrs. Welby, I believe a woman can be happy despite her circumstances. That is, if she wishes to be happy."

Mrs. Welby said nothing in response. She turned her attention to Linus Miller who was shuffling some papers.

"Have you taken a wife yet, sir?"

Linus continued shuffling papers as if he had not heard. Mrs. Welby, rebuffed, turned her attention on her husband. Maria picked up a few words that told her they were discussing Mr. Welby's sister's descent into hell for not finding a man. Maria ascertained that Mrs. Welby was very unhappy in her marriage. Her well-dressed husband seemed equally unhappy. Maria hoped her marriage to Benjamin did not turn out like that of the couple opposite.

The coach rumbled across a short bridge and skirted a flat, swampy area between the coach road and the river, and then they were in Black Rock. The hamlet had been burned down by the British in the 1812 war and

now mostly consisted of a landing place for boats and the ferry owner's house, with a few cabins spread along the road. Maria was the only passenger leaving the coach. She thanked the stagecoach guard for helping her alight. As she walked the few yards to the landing place, she saw the guard talking animatedly to the man she presumed to be the ferry operator. Thankfully, she was not challenged as she walked onto the ferry that would take her from America across the river into Upper Canada. It scared her to think that a final ordeal from the British border guard was still to come before she was safely back on her native soil and on her way to be reunited with her little girl. On the ferry, out on the river, the raw beauty and the roiling cauldron of water thrilled her to the bone, temporarily driving away her fears.

When she left the ferry, she noticed the operator talking to one of the soldiers standing at attention on the wharf. When she had collected her things, he had disappeared.

A rough-looking British redcoat with a pockmarked face stepped out of a sentry box beside the path leading up to the road. Confronting her, he said, "State your name, residence and business, ma'am."

She remained calm even with the thumping in her chest. "Mrs. Wait, of York, on the Grand River."

"Your business?"

"To collect my daughter at Black Creek and to visit my husband's step-mother there."

"What goods do you carry from the United States?"

"None. I visited my brother at Lockport."

"Lockport, eh?"

He put the muzzle of his gun between her boots and lifted her gown slightly.

"Hiding nothing there, eh?"

Panic leapt from her boots to the very ends of her hair. *The letter! He mustn't find the letter!*

Terrified, she took a step toward the sentry and slapped his face, hard. Startled he stepped back and raised his gun, the muzzle pressing her belly. "You bitch!" he shouted. His face went from white to red to purple. Maria braced for the charge. A few tense seconds passed. An eternity. Then he pushed hard, the muzzle sinking deep into her belly. She slumped to the

ground in pain but determined not to give the beast any satisfaction for his brutality. She was prepared for the butt of his gun to her head.

She heard a shout from the sentry post. A sergeant ran out and shouted, "Private Beatty! Don't touch her!"

"But she assaulted me when I asked her if she was carrying illicit money."

The sergeant helped her, shaken but unbowed, to her feet. "Are you hurt, ma'am?"

"I am fine."

"Your name, please?"

"Mrs. Wait of York on the Grand River, as I told the private."

"I'm sorry. Private Beatty is new here. Please forgive him."

"Private Beatty was very rude to me. He made lewd gestures to my person—unbecoming for a British soldier."

"Okay, Beatty, what's this all about?"

"The mail guard on the coach from Lockport claimed she was carrying contraband money into Niagara for the rebels to buy guns. Said it was likely strapped to her thigh, under her bloomers."

"Is that true, Mrs. Wait?"

"The only money I carry in my handbag is a few coins, which you're perfectly welcome to examine." She offered her bag to the sergeant. He put up his hand, didn't want to see it. He looked into her face, as though trying to decide if she was lying, and then his eyes drifted to her crotch as if he could see a moneybag through the many layers of undergarments.

He said, "Please wait here, Mrs. Wait." He instructed Private Beatty to find her a place to sit while he went to his kiosk. When the sergeant returned to her he asked, "Are you related to Benjamin Wait of York on the Grand River?"

"He is my husband."

"My records say you were a friend of Robert Randal."

"Mr. Randal was a friend of my family."

Maria knew the sergeant had a quandary. It was well known that Randal had caused trouble for the government with his rebellious talk.

The sergeant searched her with his eyes but didn't touch her. He hesitated. Finally he asked, "Again, Mrs. Wait, are you carrying money for the rebel army?"

“No, I am not. The mail guard has been dreaming of seeing me undressed since I mounted the coach at Lockport. The idea of money is all in his imagination.”

The sergeant looked to be in pain. Maria said, “Officer, I cross here often to visit my father in Tonawanda and my brother in Lockport. The money thing is imaginary and only in the mind of the lewd coachman. His lust has poisoned his good sense.”

The sergeant asked, “Is that true, ma’am?”

“Yes.” Maria looked him straight in the eyes, knowing that if he found the letter, the British would call her a traitor.

Finally the sergeant took Private Beatty aside and with no attempt to keep his admonition private, he said, “The guard obviously knows nothing, letting his cock run away with his common sense. Let her be. She’s a friend to some high mucky-mucks in the government. It’s not worth your job—and mine—to make trouble for her.”

“All right, ma’am. Proceed!” said Private Beatty.

Maria walked away up the hill, not daring to look back.