

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



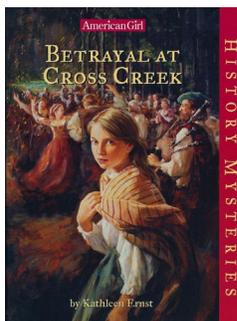
Preview of *Betrayal At Cross Creek*

An American Girl History Mystery

Written by Kathleen Ernst

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It's 1775. Elspeth Monroe, newly come from Scotland, is just beginning to feel at home in North Carolina, with a new friend and a weaving apprenticeship she loves. To Elspeth, the brewing Revolution feels very far away, until someone starts to threaten her own family, trying to force them to join the rebels. When her grandfather marches off to fight with the British, Elspeth is left alone to protect her grandmother, and to figure out who is putting her family in danger!

This story was first published as a 178-page book in softcover and hardcover, with a richly illustrated "Peak Into The Past" essay, glosseries of Scots-English and Gaelic words, and an author's note. It is currently available as a beautifully spoken 4-hour 13-minute audiobook.

"The basket in hand, Elspeth and Mercy curled together again in the cart. "We won't be gone overlong," Grandfather called to Grannie. "Come on, Moll. Up with ye now."

The trail Grandfather followed was barely wide enough for the cart. The quarter moon couldn't reach through the thick trees, and the punched-tin lantern on the seat beside Grandfather cast only flecks of feeble light. In the Scottish Highlands Elspeth had lived on the Isle of Skye, a place of craggy green and gray hills, and moorlands of low-growing heather. She didn't like North Carolina's deep forests of pine, oak, sycamore, and magnolia. The towering trees,



sometimes overhung with moss and mistletoe, made Elspeth feel nervy--especially at night.

She was glad when Grandfather began to sing an old Scottish ballad. The familiar song almost lulled her to sleep...but suddenly he stopped mid-phrase and pulled Moll to a halt. Elspeth jerked upright. "Grandda - "

"Wheesht!" he whispered, and jerked a hand in her direction: be still. Mercy sat up silently beside her. Then Elspeth heard what had caught Grandfather's attention: a saddle's creak, slow hoof beats. Coming toward them. Who would ride without a lantern on such a dark night?

"Take the lines, Elisaid," Grandfather whispered. Elspeth reached over the cart's seat and felt the heavy leather lines pressed into her suddenly-shaking fingers.

The rider approached them. No--riders. Three, four? Elspeth wished she could scrape away the darkness. One of the horses crashed into the forest litter to the right of the cart--and another to the left. Her heart began to skitter in her chest. Mercy clutched her arm like a carpenter's vise.

"Angus MacKinnon!" The rider in front of the cart was a faint shadow. His voice was rough, low--and definitely not Scottish.

"And who might ye be?"

"A Patriot."

"I'll be wondering why ye and your friends see fit to stop me on a dark night." Grandfather's voice was even, but tight.

"To give warning. We understand that the former royal governor of North Carolina is plotting with Scots to regain control of the colony."

"And why're ye telling this to me?" Grandfather rose slowly to his feet. He was not an overly-tall man, but he was strong and solid-built as an oak.



Elsbeth saw his flintlock pistol in his right hand. His left hand gripped the small knife he carried in his stocking. He held both weapons pressed against his plaid, but at the ready. Elspeth's mouth went dry.

"To make sure you understand that the Patriots of this colony will not permit the former governor to return. You are known and respected by many Scots in this settlement, and can influence the younger men. You would be wise to - "

"Are ye tellin' me my business?" Grandfather demanded. "By God! I'll no' have any man tell me my business." His fingers flexed on the handle of his dagger. Elspeth's fingers were so slick with sweat it was hard to grip the lines.

The speaker shrugged. He seemed to be wearing a tricorn hat, pulled low over his forehead. "It's everyone's business. And we need to know this: Are you Patriot or Loyalist?"

Grandfather bent his knees slightly, as if tensing for a spring. "I'll no' be tellin' you!"

"We Patriots are prepared to fight and die for our cause. And we're prepared to strike against those who don't - "

"And now ye dare to threaten me?" Grandfather roared. "Do ye think I'm some skulkin' wee lad to be sent running home with my tail 'tween my legs? Bas mallaichte! You're an ill-raised devil to provoke a man whilst he's ferryin' two wee lassies. But if it's a stramash you're wanting, by God I'll give ye more than ye bargained for! I fought at Culloden, ye numpty gowks!"

A horse whickered behind them. Elspeth bit her tongue. They were surrounded. Her hands cramped on the reins. Mercy's fingers bit into her arm.

"Angus MacKinnon, you have been warned," the lead rider said finally. "Come along, boys." Elspeth heard sticks snap as the three riders in the woods joined the fourth waiting behind them on the trail. They melted into the black night



as Angus MacKinnon bellowed a few final curses and insults after them in a scorching jumble of Gaelic and Scots.

Elspeth closed her eyes, willing her heart to ease back to normal. The reins slipped from her numb fingers but Moll, bless her placid hide, didn't move. Mercy slowly eased her grip on Elspeth's arm.

"Are ye both all well?" Grandfather asked finally. "They're gone."

"I--I think so," Elspeth stammered. "Who were they?"

"Naught but trouble. We'll get Mercy on to home now." He picked up the lines and called to Moll. The wooden wheels creaked as the cart lurched forward, and Elspeth sank back down beside her friend.

"Sweet heavens!" Mercy whispered. "I didn't know what to think."

"'Tis sorry I am for all that," Elspeth whispered back. She wanted to cry. The night was ruined!

"It's not your fault. I was frightened for a moment, but no harm came of it." Mercy leaned closer. "What did your grandfather say to them? I couldn't understand half of it."

Elspeth tried to remember. "He said that if they wanted a fight, he'd give them more than they bargained for...and called them stupid fools. The other Gaelic bits...well, it wasn't polite."

When they reached Mercy's home Mistress Blair guided her husband, who was nearly blind, out to meet them with lantern in hand. Elspeth chewed her lip as Grandfather explained what had happened. Would the Blairs say Mercy couldn't visit Elspeth again?

But once assuring themselves that Mercy was well, Mr. Blair only thanked Grandfather for seeing her safely home. "These are troubled times," he said. "We'd best be keeping indoors after dark. Do you wish to stay the night?"



"Nae," Grandfather said. "Those cowards said their piece, and they heard mine. I dinna expect any more trouble tonight."

Mercy hugged Elspeth good-bye. "Thank you again. I'll look for you tomorrow. And don't worry!"

Don't worry--that's easy for Mercy to say, Elspeth thought, as she and Grandfather headed back into the brooding forest. Mercy hadn't been raised in Scotland. Mercy didn't know what real trouble was.

Grandfather put his arm around her shoulders. "Ye did fine back there, lass. Just fine. Your Grannie'd be proud." He usually spoke English when they were alone.

Elspeth stared at the bits of lantern light cast upon her shoes. Grandfather hadn't known how scared she'd been. Grannie was a woman of great courage. Elspeth's own mother wouldn't have been frightened either. Both had stood up to far worse during the Scottish troubles thirty years earlier, when Elspeth's mother was only ten. Two years younger than Elspeth was now! If Grannie had seen Elspeth's hands trembling, she most certainly would not have been proud.

Elspeth sighed. A storm of trouble was brewing on the horizon--she felt it down to her bones. "The question that man asked--about whether ye favor Patriots or Loyalists. Which is it to be?"

Grandfather sighed. "My mind is no' yet decided."

Elspeth stared at the darkness as they rumbled along the narrow forest track, gritting her teeth when something rustled off to her right. What might be waiting ahead--more Patriots? Maybe a band of Loyalists this time? Or perhaps just a wee bear or bobcat? She gripped the seat tightly, wanting nothing more than to be back home.

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Then she glanced at her grandfather, ramrod-straight and vigilant, and felt some better. "Grandda," she said, "these troubles don't have to bother us, aye? Such men are likely to hide in darkness, and it's a rare night we roam about. We can just stay out of it."

Grandfather shook his head. "I'm no' so sure of that, Elspeth. What happened tonight was nae coincidence."

His tone made Elspeth's mouth go dry all over again. "What do ye mean?"

"Those scoundrels knew who I was without askin'. They called me by name. They knew we were about tonight--and that we'd no' be taking our usual path home." Grandfather's voice quivered with anger. "Elspeth, lass, we were betrayed."

Agatha Award Nominee for Best Children's/Young Adult Mystery
— **Malice Domestic**

Flora MacDonald Award for Outstanding Contribution to Scottish Affairs
— **St. Andrews Presbyterian College**

Children's Literature Award Winner
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