

# Secrets Worth Killing For

*A Founding Fathers Mystery*

*Jamison Borek*

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**I**f you are seized with a chilliness or shaking, followed by a fever, bad headache, pain in the back and loins, sick stomach or vomiting, uneasiness about the breast, soreness of the eyes or pain in them, immediately get bled; and take one of the powders of jalap and calomel, so successfully used in 1793. They may be had at the apothecaries with proper directions for using them. Drink very freely of molasses and water, or tamarinds and water. If this method does not carry off the disease, send for a physician.

Philadelphia, September 6th, 1797

It was a bright, sunny October day when Bridget LeClair breathed her last, lying there in her bed in the hospital. No one thought very much of it when she died – no one, that is, except for Doctor Dobel, the doctor who was treating her, and her fellow servant Annie Dawson.

Her death was but one of many, after all. The deadly yellow fever had returned to Philadelphia just months before, in July of

1797. It wasn't as bad as the epidemic of 1793, when thousands of people had died. The lesson had been learned. Everyone who could manage it fled from the city to the safety of the countryside, leaving the poor and the unlucky to die.

Bridget was one of the unlucky ones. She was a kitchen maid working for Mr. and Mrs. Waln, one of the city's wealthiest merchant traders with ships travelling all over the world. They were preparing to leave Philadelphia, like so many others, but he was waiting for a ship to return from China.

When she showed signs of the fever, Bridget was sent to the Wigwam Hospital. A former tavern situated at the foot of Race Street by the Schuylkill River, now it was set aside for the yellow fever victims, being well away from the settled parts of town.

She didn't want to go, but she had no one else to turn to. Her father had died when she was small, run down in the street by a carriage. Her mother and her husband had died of the yellow fever in 1793, and her brother had died of it also just a few weeks before. They all lay in the churchyard at Saint Mary's now and soon she would lie there too.

Bridget lingered for a week in her hospital bed, growing daily sicker and weaker. On the seventh day, early in the evening, she breathed her last.

Doctor Dobell happened to come by just moments before it happened. Watching helplessly as her life slipped away, he felt surprise along with his pity. He'd been so certain that she'd be one of the few who would recover. Earlier that day her pulse had been strong, not weak and broken like the others. She'd had no difficulty breathing and she wasn't yellow with jaundice. These were signs, in his experience, that she would survive, that she'd be

able to walk away from the hospital rather than being carried out lifeless to her grave.

As he closed her eyelids and drew the thin bed sheet over her body, he was struck by how much the girl had been sweating. Her nightclothes and the sheet were practically dripping with moisture, a veritable flood it seemed.

He turned to the nurse who stood beside him.

“How long was she sweating like this?”

The nurse shook her head, gesturing at the room around them. It was crowded with beds, so far beyond capacity that there was scarcely room to walk between them.

“There’s so many coming in these days, how can I keep track of them? They come, they stay a while, they die.”

“Yes of course.” It was true enough. He couldn’t blame her. He himself was tired beyond measure. “Do you remember anything about her symptoms?”

“She had a spell this afternoon, according to the nurse on duty. First it was cramps, tossing in her bed and moaning. Then a bit later on, when I came on, she was like to puke her guts out. A proper mess it was, I can tell you.” The nurse made a face at the recollection.

Doctor Dobell shook his head, perplexed. Bridget’s case was very curious. According to Doctor Benjamin Rush’s observations, sweating – especially great sweating like this – was always a sign that the patient would survive the fever. Dr. Rush had seen literally thousands of cases, he said, and not a single one where the patient had died after sweating heavily. Yet here was this girl who had sweated and died, and with no jaundice, no weak and broken pulse, but cramps and nausea. It was strange, very strange indeed. Had she really died of the yellow fever?

As Doctor Dobell rose from Bridget's bedside, a wave of dizziness came over him. He felt so light headed and weak that he feared he would fall, and he reached for the bed frame to steady himself. His face felt flushed and hot. A sense of dread overcame him. Was he merely overtired? Could it be that he'd caught the yellow fever himself?

Surely he was just overtired, he told himself. Desperately tired, to be honest. There were so many who'd fallen ill, far too many to attend to. He'd hardly seen his dear sweet wife, whom he'd married just a few months ago. For weeks, he had hardly slept at all.

Home again, very late that evening, he had a late supper and a glass of port and felt somewhat recovered. He made notes in his journal about the curious symptoms of the sweating girl and penned a short letter about it to Dr. Rush, to pique his curiosity.

As Dobell sealed the letter, he stared at the blob of bright red sealing wax with fascination. How much it was the color of blood – such bright, arterial blood, and how exactly! Blood, so much like blood . . . With a start, he realized that he wasn't thinking clearly. He forced himself to rise and go to bed, leaving the note to Doctor Rush in the hall.

The next morning, he could barely lift his head. He was jaundiced and his body was burning. It wasn't just a matter of overwork; that was now undeniable. After months of treating yellow fever patients, he'd succumbed to the disease himself.

Doctor Rush came by the day afterwards. He'd gotten the strange, cryptic note about Bridget's case and come to discuss it, but Doctor Dobell was so weak that he could barely manage a word of greeting. Doctor Rush spent his time purging and bleeding his colleague and friend.

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To no avail. Doctor Dobell would not be the one to contradict Doctor Rush's theories. He was desert dry; not a drop of sweat escaped his pores. His pulse was broken and his breathing was labored and difficult. On the sixth day after Bridget's death, Doctor Dobel also breathed his last.

Jacob Martin stepped onto the dock from the little three-masted ship with an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude. He'd sailed up and down the coast many times, first to attend the Continental Congress and now as a United States Senator. He'd even sailed back and forth to London once, across the entire Atlantic Ocean in a small and leaky wooden ship. These last twelve days sailing up from Charleston to Philadelphia, however, had been the worst of his entire life.

The weather had been stormy and raw; rain, snow, and hail had beat down on them incessantly. The ocean had tossed the tiny ship up and down, a fragile wooden toy in the maelstrom, as wave after giant wave rose up high over them, taller than even the mainmast, and then came crashing down.

More than once, Jacob had been sure that he'd never see land again, that the angry sea would be his grave. Now here he was, miraculously landed. Somehow they had all survived.

In his heavy black wool greatcoat, sturdy boots, and cocked beaver hat, Jacob blended in to the crowd of passengers



disembarking. A slim man of average height, he wore his thick dark hair long and ribbon-tied in a queue behind him, and he dressed in a deliberately conservative style. A lawyer by trade, a plantation farmer by inheritance, he looked as he was, an honest and honorable man. Only a shrewd observer might see more, behind the carefully controlled exterior – the sharp intelligence that glinted in his dark brown eyes and the fiery nature that smoldered within.

There had been other, wilder times in his younger days, when he studied law at the Inns of Court in London. Times cut short by the Revolution, when he came swiftly home to fight for a new and independent land. He was a Patriot, to the extreme disgust of his stubborn, self-righteous, Loyalist father.

His father's assets were all confiscated once the Revolution was won, as a punishment for being a Loyalist, and an unrepentant one too. So it fell to Jacob, as the eldest son, to take on the role of head of the family. He started paying off his father's debts and supporting them all. His father, a scornful, disapproving, broken man, never forgave him.

Jacob's father and mother had passed away some years before and his brother was now a successful doctor, but Jacob still supported his sister and her charming but ne'er-do-well husband. They lived in Georgia and took care of Jacob's two children, Jacob and Louisa, ever since his own wife died in childbirth.

Sometimes he wondered if he'd paid too high a price, accepting so dutifully the role fate seemed to have handed out to him. But what else could he have done? Could he have left his mother, brother, and sister to live in poverty?

He paused a moment on the dock to savor the view of Philadelphia as it was best seen, from the water. The city was built

long and low, a thin crescent of buildings that hugged the Delaware River shore, for the sea-going trade was the lifeblood of the city. The merchant's wharves and warehouses clustered along the river's edge, with the waterfront taverns and merchant's mansions behind them. Rows and rows of densely-packed red-brick townhouses lined the broad, straight streets beyond. Rising above it all were the tall spires of the city's public buildings and churches, the majestic steeple of Christ Church chief among them. Just visible, some five blocks away, was the weather vane-topped white cupola of Jacob's destination, Congress Hall.

The inhabitants of Philadelphia, numbering well over forty thousand, had long been proud of their city, with its outstanding institutions of science, medicine, and education. The economy was booming too, as fortunes were recovering from the long years of war. The great merchant families of Philadelphia were perhaps the richest in America. For the past seven years, they'd also had the honor (if honor it was) of being the nation's capital, until the government moved permanently to the newly-created District of Columbia.

Jacob had only been gone a few months, since the last session of Congress had ended just after Independence Day. It had been an extraordinary session, called by President Adams to deal with the crisis in French relations. As the two nations teetered precariously on the brink of outright war, the depredations of French privateers were devastating the economy. They were seizing ships not only on the open seas, but even in American coastal waters and harbors. More than three hundred ships had been lost in the past twelve months alone, to say nothing of all their precious and expensive cargo. American cargoes were "legally" awarded to the privateers by compliant French authorities in the Caribbean.

American captains had been tortured and crews imprisoned or left impoverished on foreign shores.

It was a crisis indeed, one that threatened the very survival of the fledgling nation. The United States was virtually defenseless, with no army, no navy, and the revolutionary militias now disbanded. The country was in worse shape militarily than it had been in 1776. Thanks to the bitterly partisan nature of politics these days, however, the extraordinary session had accomplished nearly nothing. The Federalists and the Republicans spent their time fighting each other instead.

President Adams had proposed a series of measures to protect the country and its trade, but the Republicans opposed any measures to improve things. They still considered the French to be friends and allies, for all their insults and attacks, and blamed President Washington for causing the conflict. He was too cozy with the British, they said. He'd violated the French alliance and any measures to strengthen defenses could only aggravate things. The best and only way to improve relations with the French, they said, was to elect a Republican as President. The only significant thing the whole session had managed to agree on was to send (yet another) mission to Paris, in the hope that things could be improved by diplomacy.

Now the next regular session would be starting soon. Jacob wondered if it would be any better.

He slowly became aware that his fingers and toes were numb, thanks to the piercing cold wind blowing off the river. He was hungry too. He felt as if he hadn't eaten a decent meal since he set sail from Charleston, as indeed he hadn't. He badly wanted warmth, drink, and food, preferably in that order. His rented rooms in the city would be cheerless and cold, however, so he

arranged for his baggage to be taken there and he made his way to the City Tavern.

“Good day, Senator Martin!”

The doorman greeted Jacob heartily, as befitted a long-time, prominent patron of the establishment. Jacob had been going there for over twenty years, ever since he'd come to Philadelphia as a delegate to the Continental Congress. He remembered how he and the others had marched in parade from the City Tavern to Carpenters' Hall, where they would write the Declaration of Independence. These days, most of the tavern rooms were reserved for the Merchant's Coffee House and Place of Exchange, a club where merchants, captains of vessels, and other business gentlemen could sip coffee, brandy, or what they pleased, as they did their deals and traded the latest intelligence.

Soon Jacob was comfortably settled in a high-back red leather chair, close to a cheerfully blazing fire in the marble-fronted fireplace. He had only moments of peace and comfort, however, before he was rudely interrupted.

“Senator Martin!”

It was no greeting of welcome this time, but rather a sharp and peremptory command, such as one might use to summon a lazy servant. Jacob knew the speaker all too well – Theodore Sedgwick, Senator from New Hampshire. Sedgwick was all New Hampshire granite without any leavening of charm, forceful, blunt, and passionate in his prejudices.

Sedgwick pulled up a chair and sat himself down next to Jacob.

“I left you messages at the Senate and your rooms, but you haven't answered,” he began without preliminary. The way he said it, it sounded like he was accusing Jacob of deliberately avoiding him. He peered at Jacob suspiciously.

“I wasn’t here,” Jacob answered evenly. It was curious that Sedgwick of all people wanted to see him so urgently. The man was what they called a “High Federalist,” fiercely conservative in his views. He disapproved, to say the least, of Jacob’s more moderate and independent positions. “As a matter of fact, I’ve only just gotten off the ship from Charleston.”

“Ah, yes?” Sedgwick’s attitude mellowed ever so slightly. “Then you could do with some hot punch, I suppose. It must have been a rough voyage, if the weather was anything like it was reported to be.”

At Jacob’s surprised and grateful nod, Sedgwick signaled to the bartender through the doorway. Catching his eye, he pantomimed drinking from a punch bowl. Soon a steaming bowl of punch arrived, fragrant with orange, nutmeg, and rum. There was silence for a moment, as they passed it back and forth until it was finished. It was almost – almost – companionable.

“All right then,” Sedgwick resumed, “as I said before, I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“About what?” Jacob looked at Sedgwick with a wary eye. There was business enough to be sure, once the session started. National defense, for one thing. Day by day, hostilities with the French were worsening.

“Have the French declared war? Has it come to that?” Jacob asked worriedly.

“Not yet, thank God.” On this one issue at least, Sedgwick and Jacob were in agreement. “What a disaster that would be, with them well on the way to conquering the world and us so pitifully defenseless. They’ve already subdued the Italian states, as I’m sure you know, even the Papal territory and Austria. I hear they’re

planning to invade Britain too. It seems there's no stopping that young Corsican fellow, General Bonaparte."

"Senator Blount, then?" Jacob tried again. "Has the House of Representatives finished its investigation?" According to reliable reports, Senator Blount had been the mastermind of a treasonous conspiracy. He'd been plotting with the British to fight against Spain, a country the United States was at peace with. Blount would raise his own army of Americans and Indians to invade and conquer the Spanish Louisiana territories, and the British would provide money and equipment. The Senate would be holding the very first impeachment trial, just as soon as the House of Representatives adopted the Articles of Impeachment.

"Not yet. I can't imagine what's taking so long, when the situation is so perfectly clear to begin with. The whole Blount conspiracy is a plot by the French, quite obviously. I expect the Republicans are trying to delay the investigation and report, to keep the truth from becoming public."

Jacob's eyes widened in astonishment.

"A French plot? You can't be serious. He was working on behalf of the British. His whole plot was aimed against the French, to keep their ally Spain from giving them Louisiana and control over the Mississippi trade."

"That's what they'd like people to believe, but can you really be so credulous?" Sedgwick looked at Jacob narrowly, as if trying to decide if he was being devious or just dumb. "Blount's a Republican, after all, and he's not such a fool as he pretends to be. The French plan was to entrap the British, to ensnare them in a treasonous plot against the United States and then to expose their perfidy. Why else would Blount write a letter telling of his plot and then send it to someone who was bound to make it public?"

To harm the British, that was the plan all along – and it worked, didn't it?"

Jacob was impressed despite himself. Sedgwick made this crazy theory sound almost plausible.

"Which leads to my question, in a way," Sedgwick went on. "Did you know that Senator Bingham's been going around saying we should make you the President *pro tem* for this session? That's if our most honorable Vice-President doesn't show up on time and preside himself," he added contemptuously. "Since Jefferson can never bring himself to show up on time, I think that's a safe assumption."

"Senator Bingham's been saying I should preside?" Jacob's surprise was genuine. "I didn't know, in fact. He hasn't said or written anything to me about it."

Sedgwick shrugged.

"Well, that's Bingham's plan, no doubt about it. Maybe you left Charleston before the letter arrived, or maybe the damned postal carrier just left it at some tavern. Bingham's already lining up support, so he must assume you'd accept if offered. It's hard to imagine my voting for it, I have to say. To be fair, however, I told him I'd talk to you."

"Talk to me?" Jacob had a pretty good idea what Sedgwick meant, but he wanted him to come right out and say it.

Sedgwick didn't hesitate.

"It's about your political sympathies, of course. You say you're a Federalist, but given your past voting record, I'd have to say that your Federalist credentials are pretty questionable. Between your behavior in the Senate and your efforts to save Jefferson's precious life, I'd say your sympathies were decidedly Republican."

“You know very well –” Jacob began, his temper rising. Talk about “saving Jefferson” again – would there be no end to it? At the farewell dinner for George Washington in March, a waiter was poisoned, but it seemed that the poison was really intended for Thomas Jefferson. Soon charges were flying that President Adams, or someone in his Federalist Party at least, was trying to murder their chief Republican opponent, Thomas Jefferson. It was President Adams himself who insisted that Jacob solve the crime, but the task was difficult and thankless. When Jacob couldn’t find the murderer quickly, the crisis escalated. The bonds that held the fragile young nation together were coming apart, as people came to believe that the Federalists had abandoned the Constitution and meant to stay in power through political assassination. Jacob himself had been ruthlessly (and inconsistently) attacked by his colleagues and in the press as incompetent, complicit in a cover up, and even engaged in a dastardly secret plot with Jefferson to fake the murder attempts.

“Oh I know what you’re going to say,” Sedgwick cut off Jacob’s protest. “You say you only got involved because President Adams asked you, but do you really think he meant for you to take it so seriously? He had to do something to deflect the charges that he was the one behind it all. He only asked you for the sake of appearances. And then there’s your voting record as well – hardly what one would expect from a committed Federalist.” Sedgwick paused and looked at Jacob haughtily. “If you want my vote, then in return I want some assurances. Can you swear to me that as President *pro tem* you’d be more reliable?”

“Do you mean, will I always vote the way you think I should, no matter my own opinion?” Jacob asked sharply. “Is that what



you mean? If that's your question, Senator, the answer is no. No, most assuredly."

"That's not what I meant." Sedgwick looked annoyed, as if Jacob was being unreasonable. "You take offense so easily, you southerners. Which, by the way, is another ground for concern, your being a southerner. Almost all the other southerners are Republicans, as you know, and you southerners tend to stick together."

It was only with a visible effort of will that Jacob held his tongue. He'd be damned if he'd lower himself to Sedgwick's level. Between the rigors of the journey, the insults, and the punch, however, it took nearly all of his self-control. The look he gave Sedgwick was purely lethal.

Sedgwick didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he was even amused. By now, the two of them had an audience. Behind a pretense of reading their papers or sipping their drinks, the other gentlemen in the room were listening with keen attention. Some were even betting in whispers amongst themselves, whether and when Jacob would lose his temper.

"The worst thing you've done, I have to say," Sedgwick went on, "is to work so hard to keep Jefferson from being murdered. He's a dangerous man, just like those blood-sucking French Jacobin terrorists he supports. Given a chance, he'd be happy to see us have a French-style bloody revolution. You know he's behind the efforts to foment insurrection here in the United States, trying to overthrow even President Washington by mob violence. I can't think why you'd want to make sure he survived, unless you were secretly one of them."

Jacob rose and bowed to Sedgwick with bare politeness. Aware of the others keenly listening, he raised his voice just enough for his words to be heard throughout the room.

“I thank you for the punch, Senator Sedgwick, but now I will take my departure. I don’t give a damn what you think or how you vote, and I’ll see you in hell before I care a whit for your opinion. As for the rest, I think you’ve insulted me quite enough, even for a man with your obvious lack of breeding. You should just be thankful that I swore that I’d never duel again, or my second would be visiting you this very evening.”

With that, Jacob bowed to the Senator once again, turned his back, and left the room, leaving behind a hubbub of gossip, commentary, and settling of wagers.

By the time he reached his lodgings, the fires had been lit and his rooms, if not yet comfortable, were at least a few degrees warmer than the street outside. For a man hoping to recover from a long and trying trip, however, the prospect before him was hardly welcoming. The entry room, which served as his office and study, resembled nothing so much as a storehouse. Boxes, trunks and cases full of books and other belongings were still in heaps and piles, covering nearly half the floor space. The things he’d left behind were covered in dust, having sat there since last July. The things he’d taken home to Charleston and back again were cold and wet from the voyage.

He decided to put off the tedious job of setting things to rights again. All he needed for the moment was the small travelling case of toiletries and other necessities that had served him on his journey and a clean shirt and a fresh pair of stockings for the morning.

He opened the case and pulled out the book he had been reading, on and off, and looked at it dubiously. *A Vindication of*

*the Rights of Women*, by Mary Wollstonecraft. It was not, truth be told, a book he ordinarily would have chosen. He meant to make a point with Elizabeth Powel, however. She'd been so sure he'd never read it. "Men just can't take women seriously when they speak of women's rights," she'd said, with a rare display of annoyance and even anger.

He sighed. Elizabeth Powel, how much he had missed her. He had been drawn to her from the very first meeting. It had been Bishop White who'd brought them together, just a few months ago. As the chaplain of the Senate, he knew Jacob well. He also knew Elizabeth as his parishioner.

"You two can talk about politics," the Bishop had told him, knowing politics was Elizabeth's weakness. She liked to say women should leave the political sphere alone, but she herself could never stay away from it.

Bishop White had been right that she and Jacob would get along. The initial meeting had quickly evolved into a regular weekly invitation. She would provide him with "tea and relishes" (that staple of Philadelphia social life) and he would provide her with the political news and gossip. Jacob had also valued her opinions and advice, for she was an acute and intelligent observer. Even George Washington had listened to her views. It was she, people said, who'd convinced him that he must accept a second term as President.

Always, however, Jacob felt an undercurrent of uneasiness and reserve in her attitude that left him wondering if his feelings were reciprocated. People said that the death of her husband and her sons had left her reclusive and withdrawn. Was that why she seemed so detached and cool, seemingly unwilling to open up again to any sort of deeper friendship? He would not dream of

rushing to see her, for all that he longed to do so. He was always afraid a too-eager approach would frighten her. Instead, the next morning early, he spent several hours composing a two-sentence letter to inform her of his return. Then he anxiously awaited her answer.