

# Saratoga Captive

*Jack Reber*



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*I wish to thank the staff of Saratoga National Historical Park for sharing their knowledge with me and allowing me the use of their library. My warmest thank you to my wife, Lenore, whose thoughtful listening and ideas help me through everything I do.*

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Royal Fireworks Press  
First Avenue, PO Box 399  
Unionville, NY 10988-0399  
(845) 726-4444  
FAX: (845) 726-3824  
email: [mail@rfwp.com](mailto:mail@rfwp.com)  
website: [rfwp.com](http://rfwp.com)



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# Chapter One

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*Wednesday, September 10, 1777*

“Well, we’d better get back to camp,” said Pa. “That was a mighty fine breakfast, Abby. The best we’ll have for awhile, I reckon.” He stood and hoisted his pack. “I’m grateful for the johnnycake.”

“You must promise me you’ll be careful,” said Ma.

“Don’t worry about us,” replied Martin. “We’ll whip the British Redcoats and be back in no time. Besides, we spend more time doing chores than soldiering.”

“I don’t see why you can’t visit one more day,” pleaded Ma. “You volunteered for the militia. You didn’t join up with the regular army.”

“Tis all the same since the day we reported for duty in July. We’ll be back soon enough,” said Pa. He picked up his musket and stepped off the cabin porch.

Ruth Anna watched Martin collect his pack and musket. She felt proud that he and Pa had signed up for the militia, not only because it was required of men over sixteen years old, but because they deeply believed that the British must leave America alone to govern itself. Ruth Anna and her mother followed Pa and Martin down the path in silence. Midway to the road, Ruth Anna heard the sound of horses and marching men. Pa signaled toward the woods. The family sneaked off the path and began quietly angling toward the road.

Ruth Anna planned each step, placing her feet silently on the forest floor. The soldiers on the road could be the enemy. She crept behind a tree and listened to the rhythmic footfalls



of the marching soldiers. Clouds of tan dust rolled over the woods, powdering leaves and stones and tickling a cough in Ruth Anna's throat. Martin glared at her, and she quickly held her apron against her nose to filter the dust, but there was no chance that the soldiers could hear her cough over the noise of their march. Soon, Ruth Anna joined Martin behind a moss-covered log and watched the soldiers stream by in endless rows of scarlet and tan uniforms.

A lump formed in Ruth Anna's throat. The soldiers looked invincible. An officer rode by on a huge black horse, shouting at the foot soldiers. *They are so well-trained*, she thought. *What chance do Pa and Martin have against such an army?* The scarlet coats changed to blue. *Hessians*, thought Ruth Anna. Their comical gold helmets are pointed like stiff nightcaps. German killers hired by the British to shoot New Yorkers. *Why don't they go back home and earn money by doing honest work?*

Finally the last of the soldiers marched by, and a long line of wagons hauled the British supplies. Next came the camp followers, the wives and children of the soldiers, who carried pots, pans, and bundles of clothing. *Imagine coming all the way from England to march on a dusty road behind the army. Foolish*, thought Ruth Anna. A yellow carriage escorted by a British officer on a chestnut horse passed by, ending the enemy column. When the road was empty, Pa slipped from his hiding place. To the left, there was only the dust to mark the army's passing. Pa hugged Ma and Ruth Anna.

"Tisn't safe, Jonathan," cautioned Ma. "Pray, wait a day until they've gotten far ahead."

"No, Lydia. We need to rejoin our regiment. We'll slip across the Hudson River and go down the west side. That way we'll be safe. You and Ruth Anna can breathe easier



now that they've left. Promise me that you'll go easy on the chores. I worry about you working yourselves too hard."

"Don't worry, Pa," promised Ruth Anna. "We'll be fine."

"Ruth Anna is working like a beaver," said Ma. "I fear 'tis too heavy a burden for a child to carry."

Ruth Anna blushed. "I'm twelve, Ma. In a few years, I might be married and working with my husband."

"Who would marry you? Everyone knows how stubborn you are," mocked Martin.

"Enough, you two," ordered Pa. "You haven't seen each other for weeks and you're fighting like two wet cats."

Pa and Martin sprinted across the road and slipped into the woods. Martin turned and waved goodbye. A lump rose in Ruth Anna's throat as she waved back from behind the trees. *They'll be home soon, she thought. Won't take long to defeat these British. We're going to have them outnumbered in no time.* She took a deep breath and followed Ma into the forest.



After supper, Ruth Anna set the last wooden bowl to dry on the table. "The dishes are done, Ma."

"Thank you, Ruth Anna." Ma sat in Granny Minard's rocking chair in a corner of the Cunningham cabin. "I'm mighty tired tonight."

Ruth Anna untied her apron and hung it on the peg over the bed. She sat on a bench and rested her back against the table. She knew that Ma felt the strain of working the farm without Pa and Martin. Usually, Ma was an army of energy, attacking chores with uncomplaining devotion. Lately though, lines of fatigue and worry had begun to appear on Ma's round face. The chores did seem endless. They fed the pigs and chickens; milked Mabel, their docile Holstein



cow; pulled the weeds from the vegetable garden with bare hands; chopped the weeds between the corn rows with a hoe; cut the weeds in front of the necessary door with a scythe. Every night, while Ruth Anna slept, the weeds seemed to grow again, mocking her the next morning as if she'd done nothing the day before. Ruth Anna scratched her head through her linen mobcap. "Do you reckon Pa and Martin are safe?"

Ma rubbed her eyes, slumping deeper into Granny's rocker. "I pray that they are, Ruth Anna."

The dishpan sat on the table, waiting to be emptied. Ruth Anna glanced at Ma, who looked as if she couldn't do another thing. "I'll throw out the dishwater, Ma. I have to go to the necessary anyway."

"Thank you, dear." Ma laid her head back and sighed wearily. "I'll get my bedding into the woods." Ruth Anna hefted the dishpan and bumped open the wooden door with her hip. Crickets and other rasping insects stopped their evening songs as she threw the water onto Ma's treasured rose bush. Ruth Anna set the pan down on the porch and walked across the yard to the necessary.

Ma sighed and rose from the rocker. She pulled a blanket from the bed and draped it around her neck. Picking up the musket leaning against the table, she walked toward the woods. "I'll try to stay awake 'til you come," called Ma as she disappeared through the trees.

"I'll collect my blanket as soon as I'm done," said Ruth Anna.

Although it was mid-September, the air felt warm, with no hint of a frost. Ruth Anna slipped through the necessary door. She was glad Pa had dug a new hole for the necessary so it wouldn't stink on humid days. She raised her skirt and shift and sat down.



She loved this farm, built beside the forest near Fort Edward, New York, on the east side of the Hudson River. The farmland was fertile, the well water was sweet, and the forest supplied plenty of wood. Ruth Anna longed for the day when the cursed British sailed home and her family would be together again. She heard Mabel lowing down by the apple tree.

*Silly cow*, thought Ruth Anna. *You've been milked and there's lots to eat. No need to complain.* The chickens clattered. *Everyone's making a ruckus tonight.* Ruth Anna stood and reached for the door. Her hand paused when she heard footsteps. *Who could this be?* She shuddered, remembering how brutally Jane McCrea and the Allen family had been murdered by Burgoyne's Indians. Since those murders back in July, Ruth Anna and her mother had slept in the forest, hiding from Indian war parties and Loyalist raiders. She peeked through a crack in the wall.

"Follow the plan, boys, and soon we'll be fetching a handsome price from Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne for these provisions." The man spoke with authority. Silently, Ruth Anna crouched and peered through a knothole in the necessary wall. She spied four men sneaking toward the barn with muskets in their arms.

Pigs squealed, their fear echoed by the chickens, who clucked and ran under the hay wagon. The noise made Ruth Anna panic. *How can I warn Ma?*

"What's the racket?" Ma called from the woods. A squeal came from Amos, the largest pig. "Who's after my stock?"

Ruth Anna heard a musket fired, and then a human scream broke above the squealing animals.

Two men took cover behind the wagon, then aimed muskets into the woods.



“Pray, get off my farm before another one of you gets shot,” called Ma.

With a thump, a man rested against the knothole, hiding Ruth Anna’s view. Only a thin wooden wall separated her from the man. Her heart pounded so loudly that she felt sure the whole county could hear. She backed away from the wall.

“Luther, I’m shot. Ephraim said nothing would happen.”

“’Tis just a scratch, Silas. Keep your voice down. We’ll get you out of here in no time.”

One of the raiders spoke sternly, “You made a big mistake shooting off that musket, Rebel. We meant you no harm.”

“No harm? Why are you on my farm, sneaking around with guns?” asked Ma.

“The army needs to eat, ma’am. We aim to take the stock and sell them to the British. Before you finish reloading that musket, think about the fact that there’s four of us. Your next shot may harm one of us, but we’ll be on you before you can reload again. Stop shooting and we’ll be leaving soon.”

“We’ll starve without the stock. Go find some rich Tory farmer to rob.”

The man moved away from the knothole, and Ruth Anna peered out. Ma fired another shot, but it missed. One of the raiders returned fire, and Ma screamed. Ruth Anna held onto the necessary seat to steady herself, then sat down silently, clamping her hands tightly over her face, fighting back tears.

“That should take care of her. Get the stock and let’s clear out,” shouted a raider.

“They shot that woman, Luther,” said the man leaning against the necessary. “I thought there wouldn’t be trouble.”



“Couldn’t be helped. That woman shot you and was aiming to shoot more of us. Rebels must pay for their treachery. Now let’s get going.”

Ruth Anna held her breath. The shed quivered as the two men moved on. Ruth Anna heard the unmistakable sound of a team and wagon approaching from the road.

“I heard shots. Everyone all right?”

“Help Silas. We’ll kill some pigs and load ’em into the wagon. Hurry, in case some other Rebel heard the shots. I’ll fetch the cow.”

Ruth Anna clamped her hands over her ears hoping to block out the commotion in the farmyard, but the clamor of the animals’ slaughter would not disappear. Each thump of a pig hitting the wagon bed vibrated through her body. Some of the chickens were able to escape, scattering and squawking about the barnyard as if a thousand foxes were chasing them.

“That’s enough, boys. Tie that milk cow to the wagon, and let’s be on our way.”

When the evening songs of insects were the only sounds she could hear, Ruth Anna slowly opened the door of the necessary. The road was empty, so she ran to her mother.

Ma was slumped against a tree. “I’m hit.” She inhaled sharply.

“How bad is it, Ma?”

“It grazed my arm and kept on goin’. I should be all right if I can stop the bleeding. It sure stings.” Ma pressed the wound with her hand.

Ruth Anna studied the lines of fatigue on Ma’s round face. “You hit one of them, but he didn’t seem to be hurt bad. Who were they? I didn’t recognize them.”



“I never laid eyes on them before. Please help me to the cabin. I feel weak. They got what they wanted. They won’t be back.”

“Are you sure? They might want revenge.” Ruth Anna helped Ma stand.

“Too cowardly. They got the stock; they won’t care about me. Let’s go slowly.” Ruth Anna supported her mother, and together they returned to the cabin.

“I thank you, Ruth Anna.” Ma sat in Granny Minard’s rocking chair in a corner of the Cunningham cabin.

“I’ll prepare a poultice, Ma. You just rest.”

“Would you fetch my scissors? I can cut the fabric away from the wound. This dress has been patched so many times, once more won’t matter.”

Ruth Anna handed the scissors to Ma on her way to the shelf above the coat pegs. She lifted the box of herbs and set it on the table. “What are we going to do? All we have are some chickens.” She crumbled dried yarrow and slippery elm bark into a wooden bowl and mixed in some water. Then she took the bowl over to Ma and applied the paste on the wound.

“Ah, that feels better,” said Ma. “Tomorrow you’d better visit Sally Fritts and tell her of our troubles. Perhaps she can spare some milk to tide us over. Now you’d better fetch our things from the woods. We’ll sleep here tonight.”

Ruth Anna stepped onto the dark porch and listened for danger. Hearing only insects, she walked into the woods and retrieved the blanket and musket. Once back in the cabin, Ruth Anna sat next to the rocker and stroked her mother’s brown hair. Hair the color of the good, rich earth, Pa always said. It comforted Ruth Anna to touch it. “Everything will be fine, Ma. Tomorrow morning I’ll fetch Sally Fritts. You rest.” Ma answered with a snore.



# Chapter Two

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Thursday, September 11, 1777

“Is there anything else I can do for you before I leave?” asked Ruth Anna. She had prepared breakfast and changed Ma’s bandage since waking. “Will you be all right?”

“I’m comfortable, thank you,” replied Ma. “The poultice soothes the wound. Pray be careful on your way to the Fritts farm.”

“Don’t worry. The Redcoats have left. I’ll walk like a mouse and stay off the road. You rest. No chores today.”

“Aye, ma’am,” chuckled Ma. “Hurry back.”

Ruth Anna stepped from the porch and headed north through the cornfield. She slipped into the forest where the cornfield ended and made a game of walking silently. *Ma will be fine, she thought. That poultice seems to be drawing out the swelling, and there’s no sign of fever.* The Fritts farmhouse was about one-half mile from the edge of the Cunningham cornfield. It was an easy walk by the road, but Ruth Anna was slowed by blown-down trees and a creek. She entered a grove of old oak trees where the pigs had rooted up the soil looking for acorns. *How will we replace the stock?* thought Ruth Anna.

She heard a twig snap behind her, and before she could react, a powerful hand covered her mouth. The hand smelled of wood smoke and rancid fat. *Indians!* She kicked and wriggled, but the man gripped her more firmly. Two more warriors arrived. Ruth Anna’s captor pushed her away, causing her to fall and scrape her hands. Immediately she



stood, prepared to run, but the three Indians blocked her escape.

“Curse on the Bostonians!” shouted one of the warriors, raising his fist.

“I’m not from Boston,” shouted Ruth Anna. “Let me go!” She rubbed her hands.

The Indians grunted and pushed her forward. One warrior held Ruth Anna’s right arm, and another took her left arm. Together they followed the third warrior southward.

“I can’t run this fast,” complained Ruth Anna. “Let me go. I have to help my mother.” The Indians held muskets in their free hands as they ran. Their powder horns bounced against Ruth Anna’s sides.

The Indians kept on running, ignoring Ruth Anna’s screams. She tripped on roots and sticks, but the Indians always kept her upright and running. Her legs would have surely collapsed if the Indians had not been holding her. She panted, trying to get more air into her burning lungs.

At last they reached a small clearing. The Indians released her, and she collapsed onto the ground. One warrior wrapped her hands together with a lace of rawhide. When he finished, he pulled off her mobcap, freeing her long, brown hair, and combed it with his fingers.

“Don’t touch me!” shouted Ruth Anna, rolling away from the Indian. *He likes my hair*, she thought. *He’s going to scalp me!* “Please don’t hurt me,” she cried. She curled into a ball and sobbed. *What are they going to do to me? Am I to be killed? Or even worse, they’ll adopt me into the tribe, and I’ll become an Indian wife. I think I’d rather die.*

The Indian left her on the ground and joined the others. They sat down, pinched dried cornmeal from pouches on their belts, and poured it into their mouths. Ruth Anna shivered as she watched her captors finish eating. They disgusted



her. *How can they go around in public almost naked like that? How awful to be married to one of them. They look so fierce with their half-shaved heads and their black war paint. I cannot imagine them as husbands or fathers, only murderers. I wonder if they will kill me before they scalp me?* Her scalp tingled at the thought.

The Indians tied the pouches of cornmeal to their deerhide belts and stood. They inspected Ruth Anna with stern faces and then beckoned her to stand.

“Let me go,” sobbed Ruth Anna. She lay on the ground, but the Indians pulled her upright, and soon they were running through the forest again.

As they neared the Hudson River, Ruth Anna saw a large party of blue-uniformed soldiers waiting on the riverbank. *Hessians!* thought Ruth Anna. *Now what’s going to happen to me?* A line of soldiers was crossing the river on a floating bridge. Ruth Anna noticed a British officer sitting on a horse and talking with a woman in a yellow carriage. A child’s head was staring at Ruth Anna from the window.

“What have you done?” asked the officer as he rode forward.

“Curse on the Bostonians!” shouted one of the Indians.

“Yes, yes,” sighed the officer. “I suppose you want a reward. We don’t need a young prisoner right now. I can’t give you anything. The British Army is across the river. You’ll have to wait.”

The Indians glared at him. “Curse on the Bostonians,” said the one that had captured Ruth Anna.

“What’s the matter, Captain Willoe?” The voice that came from the carriage had a foreign accent.



“These Indians have captured a girl, Baroness. They want a reward. I don’t think they understand English, and our Indian interpreters are across the river.”

“Ask the girl who she is and what has happened,” demanded the baroness. Ruth Anna wondered if the accent was German, since the woman was with the Hessians.

Captain Willoe turned to Ruth Anna, who anticipated his question. “I live in Fort Edward, and some men raided our farm and shot my Ma. I was going for help when these Indians seized me. You must let me go.”

Captain Willoe’s blue eyes flashed. “What I must do is not the business of impertinent children. You shall not speak to a British officer in such a manner.”

Ruth Anna bit her lip and stared at the dirty yellow side of the carriage. *Am I to become a prisoner of Hessians? ’Tis better than an Indian wife, I vow.*

“What is the normal reward for captives?” asked the baroness.

“I do not know,” replied Captain Willoe. “’Tis my duty to escort you and your children, not deal with Indians.”

The baroness reached out her carriage window. “Here, Captain, give them some coins. The girl may ride with me. No telling what these savages would do to her. I could use another servant.”

“As you wish, Baroness. Into the carriage, Rebel.” Captain Willoe motioned with a turn of his head.

“Please let me go,” Ruth Anna insisted. “I’m not a servant, but a freeborn American. I will never serve these hired killers.”

“We cannot take the time to return you to Fort Edward,” said Captain Willoe. “If we set you free, the Indians will just recapture you. The Baroness von Riedesel has saved your



life. You owe her a great debt. I know that the baroness will treat you better than these savages. Now, do as you are told.”

Ruth Anna sighed and began to climb into the carriage. A hand grasped her arm and pulled her back.

“Curse on the Bostonians,” said the Indian, holding out his hand.

“What is the problem now?” asked the baroness.

“They want more money,” replied Captain Willoe.

“Very well. Here are a few more coins. They will get no more.”

The Indians seemed satisfied and left. Ruth Anna returned to the carriage and took a place on the seat next to a girl about her age. The girl slid over, making room for Ruth Anna.

“Captain Willoe?” Ruth Anna tried to speak respectfully.

“Yes, miss?”

“The Indians kept saying ‘Curse on the Bostonians’ to me. Do you know why they said this? I’m not a Bostonian.”

“’Tis what they call you Rebels, since Boston is the place of so much Rebel activity. ’Tis the only words of English many of the Indians know.”

“Thank you for explaining,” said Ruth Anna politely. *Rebels indeed*, she thought. *If you’d leave us, everything would be fine.* Ruth Anna settled on the carriage seat and stared out the window, avoiding the von Riedesel family.

“Who are you?” asked one of the children.

“Frederika, settle yourself. We’ll find out the fraulein’s story soon enough,” warned the baroness. She was a small, plump woman with dark hair surrounding her oval face.



Ruth Anna was immediately drawn to her deep blue eyes, which welcomed and comforted Ruth Anna.

“I am the Baroness von Riedesel,” she said. “These are my daughters. The oldest is Augusta. She is six years of age. Sitting with her is Frederika, who is four. The baby is Caroline. You are sitting with Lena, my servant. My husband commands the Brunswick soldiers with General Burgoyne. We should reach Albany in a few days. What may I call you?”

“Ruth Anna Cunningham.”

“Well, Rusanna Cunningham, it appears that I have rescued you from the Indians. I think that you shall stay with us until we reach Albany. Then we can send you back home. Lena would welcome some help, yes?”

“Yes, Baroness.” Lena blushed.

“I don’t know what I’d do without Lena.”

Ruth Anna stiffened. “I’ve done nothing to you,” she argued. “Let me go.”

“Ach, such manners,” scolded the baroness. “We’ll need to improve them. You will learn to respect your betters. You heard Captain Willoe. You are not safe roaming the country alone.”

The carriage began moving. Ruth Anna bit her lower lip. Tears welled, then burst in her eyes. She hid her face in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

“There, there,” said the baroness. “You will be safe with me. I’m sorry to hear about your mother’s wound. Where is your father or other members of your family?”

Ruth Anna shook her head. *I can’t tell her that Pa and Martin are in the American army. She’ll hang me for sure.*

“Pray, Rusanna, tell me,” soothed the baroness. “There must be someone at home. A neighbor, perhaps?”



Ruth Anna did not reply. She stared at the blue checks on her dress.

“Very well. You need time to recover from your trouble. We shall speak of this again later.”

The baroness turned her attention to baby Caroline, who was fussing on Lena’s lap. The carriage approached the floating bridge made of logs that were lashed to boats whose bows faced upstream. The bridge bobbed like a cornstalk caught in the current. The last supply wagons were at mid-crossing, teamsters urging the fearful oxen onward.

“Are we crossing the big river now, Mama?” asked Augusta.

“Yes, we are,” replied the baroness. “Your papa is already on the other side.”

“Why don’t we stay on this side?” asked Ruth Anna. While she had grown up near the Hudson River, she had never gotten more than her ankles wet. Her parents had deeply ingrained their fear of drowning in her.

“There, there, child,” soothed the baroness. “My husband says that the road on the eastern side has marshy ground and mountains, and the way on the western side is the better one. Also, this is a narrow place in the river, which will be an easier crossing.”

“I can’t swim.” Ruth Anna watched the boats jiggling in the current like leaves rustling on a twig. The planks that connected the boats seemed far too narrow for a carriage. “We’ll die crossing this river. Ants are the only things that could cross this bridge, I vow.”

“Hush now. Do not alarm the children. We cannot swim either, but the entire British army and many wagons are already on the other side. Our brave Brunswick troops have crossed this morning. One little carriage can easily cross.

