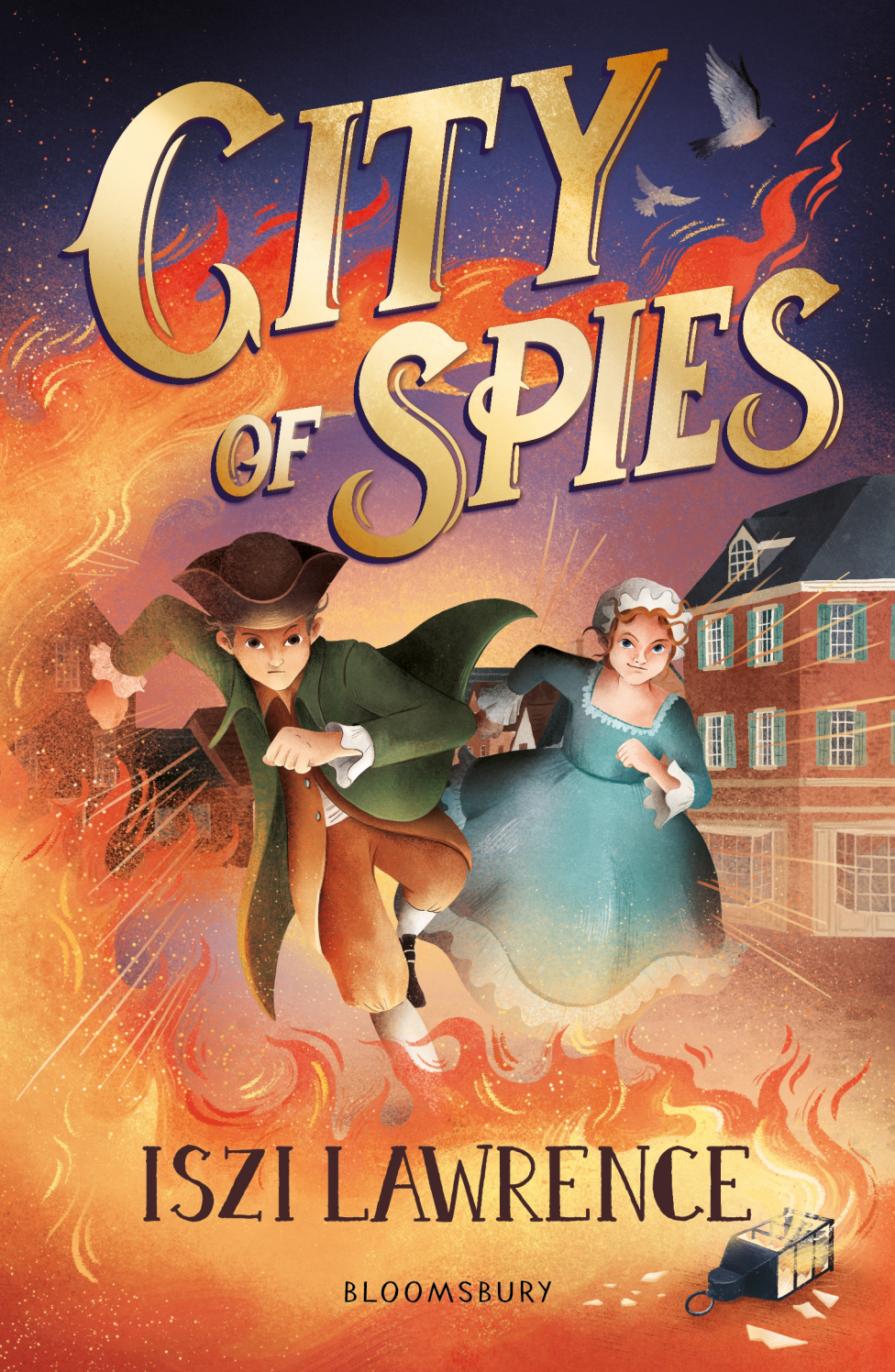

CITY
OF SPIES
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To Storm



CHAPTER ONE

It was like Aiden didn't exist. His family had finally forgotten him. Once again, the packet ship from England had brought him no messages. Just the bundle of letters for Mr Rivington and a few addressed to the Royal Gazette. It had been three months. No word from home. Not even a note from his brothers.

Aiden Blaise cut a diminutive silhouette against the backdrop of tall ships, crates and troops that crowded the dock. If it weren't for the thick coat that slopped over his thin shoulders, the leather boots he was yet to grow into and the clean collar, too loose around his scrawny

neck, he'd be indistinguishable from a rat. That was how he imagined himself. He was a tiny rat in human clothing. No wonder his mother didn't care to write.

He turned into the Fly Market, and was greeted by a bitter wind. There were still women out selling on the stalls, protected from the chill by their husband's old coats. That would be him one day; a peddler, a hawker – no family, no situation. He had to make a name for himself somehow or he would be just another empty face on the New York streets.

'Cheer up poppet, it might never happen,' bawled one of the market traders.

Aiden turned up his collar and stomped purposefully towards the coffeehouse. A man walked into him. He didn't even stop to apologise. Aiden rubbed his shoulder. He watched a group of soldiers, their boots splattered with mud, slicing through the crowd like a poker through coals. Some people took off their caps in a show of respect, others looked resentful, but they all stood back.

Aiden was too young to be a soldier. He'd heard drummer boys had to be at least fifteen and he was sure the war would end before he was old enough. Everyone said so. After all, how could a few rebel American colonies hold out against the might of the British crown? Aiden couldn't afford a commission to be an officer anyway. If he wanted to grow from a rat into a man, he had to work. That was why his father had sent him from England to be an apprentice to the most successful businessmen in Manhattan. To give him a future.

The familiar burnt smell of the coffeehouse met Aiden yards from across the muddy street. The coffee looked like wet soot. It tasted like it too. Gentlemen enjoyed it though, so Aiden would steel himself to the terrible taste and try some every now and then. If he was going to make something of himself, learning to drink coffee was important.

The coffeehouse was full today, judging by the number of horses tied up outside. As he walked past them, Aiden jumped. A dark, lean man stood

between the horses like a shadow. He looked ghostly – like a grim apparition staring through the window into the coffeehouse. He must have caught sight of Aiden's reflection in the glass and turned around. Aiden saw it was Mr Townsend, the shopkeeper.

'Boy, tie this horse for me.' Mr Townsend pointed at a mare. 'I've urgent business.'

Aiden touched his hat in acknowledgement and Mr Townsend headed inside. Aiden balanced his bundle of letters on the hitching post. He tied a release knot, securing the mare loosely. Her warm breath tickled the back of his hands. He was starting to feel a bit more himself when a gust of wind blew the letters off the post.

They landed in a puddle.

Useless. He was useless. No wonder his parents hadn't written. He picked up the papers and dried them off with his coat. The ink was smeared. He would have to try and deliver them before Mr Steppe or Mrs Jones noticed and told Mr Rivington he'd gotten the letters wet. Maybe Hector would get the blame. He usually did the

morning messages but that was before Aiden began to miss his letters. For the last month, Aiden had insisted on collecting the mail himself before going to his work at Mr Rivington's printshop.

Aiden entered the coffeehouse and was hit by a wall of conversation. A few men glanced up but didn't greet him. They returned to their boisterous arguments, waving pamphlets and gesturing with clay pipes along the long wooden tables. Aiden admired them. Their clothes, their wigs, their wit. Well-spoken gentlemen of education, with clean collars and cuffs, pontificating about the rights of man. They sat shoulder to shoulder along the long benches, drinking their coffee and wincing at its taste. Aiden was sure that if they defended the King in battle with guns as well as they defended him in here with words, it wouldn't be long before the rebels were brought back under control.

Through the pipe smoke and steaming cups, Aiden spotted Mr Townsend alone at the far end of a messy table with his tiny cup of coffee

balanced on a pile of pamphlets. He evidently was not doing anything urgent at all, ignoring entirely the conversation bubbling on at the other end of his table. Aiden decided to speak to him after he had delivered the muddy letters. There was a small chance, given that Mr Townsend also wrote for Mr Rivington's newspaper, the Royal Gazette, that a letter from Aiden's family had been mixed into the wrong mail stack.

Thankfully, Mrs Jones was occupied with serving the gentlemen and Aiden managed to slip behind the bar, leaving the messages dry side up on a crate. The door to the coffeehouse opened again and Aiden heard a large group of men stomp in.

'What news?' the gentlemen cried.

'Has anyone seen a boy?'

There had been a boy; Aiden had spotted him lurking in the corner when he came in. Probably a peddler selling something. Aiden had found that boys like himself could enter pretty much any establishment as long as they looked determined, like they were on an errand. Aiden

came out from behind the bar and watched the redcoats fan out, upsetting gentlemen at their tables. Mr Townsend seemed the most affronted. He dropped his handkerchief on the table before storming out.

'Mr Townsend!' Aiden went to retrieve the square of cloth but his calls only seemed to accelerate Mr Townsend's hasty departure.

A redcoat stepped in front of Aiden. 'Have you seen a boy?'

'I am a boy,' Aiden replied.

The soldier leant over him. 'Not you. A boy, boy.'

'There's a boy over there.' Aiden gestured to the corner and, in doing so, knocked over the candle on Mr Townsend's table. He quickly reached to move the handkerchief from the flame but it was too late. As Aiden whipped it out of the way, it ignited like it had been dipped in lamp oil.

Aiden shrieked. It was a high, childish cry that caused every head to turn. He dropped the burning hankie. It fell on the table and set light to the pamphlets. He shrieked again. Desperate

not to touch the flames, he tried to move the papers out of danger. The fire followed the papers, spreading across the table like foam over water. Every move he made fanned the flames and they grew higher.

Everyone was laughing. Not at the fire but at Aiden squeaking like a frightened gull.

The boy from the corner appeared. He didn't say anything, nor was he laughing. He gave Aiden a sympathetic glance and placed his hat over the flames. Using his bare hand, he beat out the remaining embers of the fire.

Before Aiden could thank the boy, a redcoat grabbed his wrist.

'What's in your satchel?' The soldier took it from him.

'Hey!' Aiden said. 'You've no right to search him!'

'I've every right,' the redcoat said. 'I've the King's right.'

The contents of the boy's bag cascaded onto the table… handkerchiefs, an oyster shell, a ball of string, two coins, scraps of paper, a half-eaten

bun. Another redcoat joined in the search. They ate the boy's food and stole his coins. Aiden was still red in the face, only now his embarrassment had turned to anger.

'This is exactly the sort of behaviour, sirs, that caused the colonies to mutiny in the first place!' he said. More redcoats came over, picking up the scraps of paper from the table. 'You have no right to touch his things! Does he look like a revolutionary to you?' Aiden continued.

The men ignored him. They were passing a piece of paper between themselves.

'What's this then, lad?' one of them said.

The paper was only a few inches square. It had soot from the fire on it and was covered with a strangely faded, light brown ink. It was written in a neat hand. A coded message.

Sir, 726

711 is most ~290 and ~~~283. 85. 685.~~ ~233. 85. shortly pass a bill to stop printing of all colonial bank notes. Please 442. ~712. 613. and 592. ~381. Stay 660.

Yours in haste,

Culper Jnr
God damn the 343! F

The boy still said nothing as heavy hands dropped on his shoulders.

'Apologies for our interruption, gentlemen,' the redcoat said to the crowd. 'We've found our spy.'

There was laughter and a cheer as the redcoats dragged the boy away.

'Wait!' Aiden shouted after them. He followed the men back out into the windy street. 'You've no proof he wrote that! I've had the benefit of an education and *I* can't write so neatly!'

The nearest redcoat turned and leant over him. The wind blew loose strands of his long hair into Aiden's eyes. 'It don't matter if he wrote it. He was going to give it to someone. We're going to find out who. Then we'll hang the little weasel.'

'And why are you defending him?' a cool voice said. Aiden turned and recognised the handsome, boyish face of Major John André.

Before Aiden could answer, there was a clattering of hooves. The redcoat fell into Aiden and Major André, knocking them to the ground. Major André swore loudly. Aiden hit the filthy cobbles with both his hands. He'd bitten his tongue; everything stung.

Aiden peeled himself off the muddy cobblestones. The grey mare he'd tied up for Mr Townsend had gotten loose and was angrily bucking and rearing at the soldiers trying to recapture her. She made a break for it through the covered market. In the commotion, the redcoats let go of the boy spy. He vanished.