

# Chains



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON

Laurie Halse Anderson has loved reading and writing since she was a young child, but she never envisioned herself becoming a writer. As a teenager, she participated in an exchange program and spent a year on a pig farm in Denmark. Upon her return to the U.S., Anderson attended community college and ultimately graduated from Georgetown University in 1984 with a degree in languages and linguistics. Following this, Anderson got a job as a journalist working for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. She published her first novel in 1996 (*Ndito Runs*, about Kenyan Olympic marathon runners) but rose to fame in 1999 after publishing the young adult novel *Speak. Speak.*, which is about a high school student who is sexually assaulted, is loosely autobiographical—Anderson later published a memoir, *Shout*, about the sexual violence she experienced as a high school student. *Chains*, and the other two novels in the Seeds of America Trilogy, have received major acclaim, with *Chains* winning the prestigious Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Anderson has been married twice; she is currently married to her high school sweetheart.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Chains* takes place during the American Revolutionary War, which began in 1775 and ended in 1783. By its conclusion, the 13 American Colonies had won independence from Great Britain and become the United States of America. In the novel, Isabel reads Thomas Paine’s influential political pamphlet *Common Sense*, which was published in 1776 and offered a moral argument for why the colonies must fight for independence from Britain. The Declaration of Independence also expressed high-minded ideals, such as the idea that “all men are created equal” and have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But in *Chains*, enslaved people like Isabel and Curzon find that American Patriots are, on the whole, unwilling to extend the same freedom to enslaved Black people, who at the time made up about one-fifth of the colonies’ population. As Isabel notes in the novel, the British did free enslaved people in America—provided those people belonged to Patriots. The British hoped that this would decimate important parts of the American economy by depriving Patriots of the majority of their labor force. But any enslaved people who were owned by Loyalists were returned to their owners if they attempted to join the British. It wasn’t until the end of the American Civil War in 1865 that slavery ended in the United States.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Chains* is the first in the Seeds of America Trilogy; it’s followed by *Forge* and *Ashes*. It was Anderson’s second young adult historical fiction book; her first was *Fever 1793*, which is about the Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793. As a story for young people about slavery, *Chains* is similar to *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen, which is intended for middle-grade readers and is about an enslaved man who teaches others to read, at great personal risk. Sharon Draper’s novel *Copper Sun*—about a young woman who is kidnapped in Africa and sold into slavery in the American Colonies—is intended for older readers. *Chains* is also in good company when it comes to novels about spies during wartime. Avi’s novel *Sophia’s War* is about a young white girl who spies on the British during the Revolutionary War, while *Behind Rebel Lines* by Seymour Reit tells the story of a young woman who dresses as a man to spy on the Confederates during the American Civil War. Within the novel itself, Isabel reads Thomas Paine’s political pamphlet *Common Sense*, which advocated for American independence and was circulated widely in the colonies. She also reads *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. Additionally, Isabel has heard of poet Phillis Wheatley, though she never gets to read her work. Wheatley was the first published Black poet in America (she published her collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773). Ann Rinaldi’s novel *Hang a Thousand Trees with Ribbons* tells Phillis Wheatley’s story.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Chains
- **When Written:** 2007–2008
- **Where Written:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- **When Published:** 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Rhode Island and New York, 1776–1777
- **Climax:** Having discovered that Ruth is actually on the Lockton plantation in Charleston, Isabel runs away and rescues Curzon from prison.
- **Antagonist:** Madam Lockton is Isabel’s biggest foe, but most of the novel’s white characters are antagonists in some way.
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Epilepsy.** Epilepsy, which Ruth suffers from in the novel, was first recorded thousands of years ago. For millennia, it was thought that seizures were a sign that someone was possessed,

which led to the kind of superstitions that Madam expresses in the novel (such as that Ruth's mere presence will curdle milk). Today, epilepsy is understood as a medical condition rather than a spiritual affliction, and there are a variety of treatments available.

**How Fashionable.** As Isabel observes in the novel, bushy eyebrows were in fashion during the 1700s—but due to the widespread use of lead-based face makeup, which can cause hair to fall out, many women didn't naturally have full eyebrows. It's unclear exactly how common mouse-skin false eyebrows were, but they did exist as an alternative to drawing on brows. Satirical poetry from the day, though, does suggest it was common for the mouse-skin eyebrows to fall off the wearer's face (as Madam's do in the novel).



## PLOT SUMMARY

Thirteen-year-old Isabel and her five-year-old sister, Ruth, are enslaved—but Isabel believes they'll be free, since the girls' owner, Miss Mary Finch, has just died. Miss Finch stipulated in her will that the girls would be freed upon her death. But since the will is missing, Isabel can't prove she's free. Miss Finch's nephew, Mr. Robert, takes the girls to Newport to sell them. Being enslaved, Isabel can't even bring Ruth's rag **doll**—she doesn't own it. But she brings some **seeds** Momma saved, though she doesn't know what they'll become.

At a tavern in Newport, a wealthy Loyalist couple, Master Lockton and Madam Lockton, purchase the girls. Isabel will help in the kitchen, and since Ruth is "simple," she'll be "an amusement in the parlor." Isabel is distraught: the Locktons live in New York, which means she and Ruth will have to leave behind the ghosts of their parents, Momma and Poppa, since ghosts can't cross water.

Immediately upon arriving in New York, Isabel meets an enslaved boy, Curzon. Curzon explains that his master, Bellingham, is a Patriot—and the Patriots will free slaves. He asks Isabel to spy on the Locktons, who are Loyalists, and in exchange for information Bellingham might free Isabel and Ruth. Isabel initially refuses—she doesn't care about the war, just about figuring out how to free and protect herself and Ruth. She begins work in the Lockton home, which is huge and lavish, and she plants her seeds in the garden. Madam is exacting and cruel. The paid maid, Becky, coaches Isabel on how to protect herself and Ruth: do exactly what Madam says.

Madam begins dressing Ruth in fancy clothes and always keeps Ruth with her. Isabel, meanwhile, manages to make Ruth a new doll out of cornhusks. One day, Isabel is called to introduce herself to Lady Seymour, Lockton's wealthy aunt. Upon learning Isabel's name at this point, Madam renames Isabel Sal. Isabel is then called to serve Lockton and his friends—and she

discovers that Lockton has a chest of money that he plans to use to bribe Patriots. Isabel passes this information to Curzon, but when Bellingham comes to look for the money, he can't find it.

Weeks later, Isabel hears that Lockton and his friends are plotting to assassinate General Washington. Then, Ruth has a seizure in front of Madam. Madam believes Ruth is possessed by demons and threatens to sell her, so Isabel takes a list of those involved in the plot to kill Washington to the Patriot Captain Regan. He promises to help Isabel. Though the Patriots hang a man for his involvement in the plot, Lockton escapes the city, and Madam continues to threaten Ruth.

Soon after, British ships drop anchor in the harbor. Madam is thrilled—and one night, she decides it's time to change how she treats Isabel and Ruth. Isabel gets home from running errands to the news that Ruth is back serving Madam in the parlor. Madam made gingerbread and spiced milk for Isabel and served the same to Ruth earlier. Isabel enjoys her treat and falls fast asleep. When she wakes up the next morning, she finds Becky has been crying—and discovers that Madam drugged Isabel and Ruth so she could sell Ruth. Isabel confronts Madam on the stairs, but Madam hits Isabel with a painting, and Isabel runs away. She runs straight to Captain Regan, but when Madam arrives moments later and demands Isabel, Regan says he can't help.

Isabel then runs to the Patriot fort—but when Madam comes looking for her, Isabel leaps out the window to escape and loses consciousness due to the impact. She's drug through the streets and jailed for several days, and then she stands trial. Madam lies to the judge about what happened, but he believes her and agrees to punish Isabel by branding her cheek with an I for "insolent." Men lock Isabel in the stocks and brand her cheek, and Momma and Poppa's ghosts comfort Isabel's pain with their tears.

Six days later, Isabel wakes up in an attic bedroom at Lady Seymour's house, where the lady explains that Isabel contracted a serious fever while imprisoned and in the stocks. Curzon fetched the lady, who insisted on bringing Isabel to her house to recover. But Lady Seymour can't keep Isabel; she returns her to Madam.

The next few weeks pass in a blur. Isabel feels like she has a hive of angry bees living in her; they keep her from remembering Ruth or from thinking too hard about anything. Curzon continues to ask Isabel to spy, but she tells him to leave her alone. Not long after, the British win an important battle and invade New York—and rumor has it that the British are willing to free enslaved people. Curzon, who is now an American soldier, insists enslaved people should nevertheless support the Patriot cause. But when Madam sends Isabel to shop for a celebratory dinner, Isabel seeks out a British captain, Captain Campbell, and offers to work for him. When he learns that Isabel's owners are Loyalists, though, he reveals he can't free

her: the British will only free enslaved people owned by Patriots. Master Lockton comes to shore soon after Captain Campbell, since New York is safe for him again now that the British hold the island. Becky vanishes at this time, so Isabel is the only staff left at the Locktons' home.

The British require Loyalists in New York to house soldiers—and since Lady Seymour took in a dozen Hessians compared to the Locktons' two British soldiers (and recently had her maids quit), she requests that Isabel work at her house. Isabel takes Ruth's doll with her. One night, Isabel wakes up and the city is on fire. She tries to bring the doll out of the house with her, but Lady Seymour begs for help saving her own precious belongings. Isabel is able to save Lady Seymour and several of the lady's things, but not the doll. Following this, Lady Seymour becomes extremely ill and moves in with the Locktons.

The Locktons take in five more soldiers whose wives are in the Colonies with them, so a pregnant woman named Sarah takes over as boss in the kitchen. Isabel discovers that her seedlings died at about the same time as the British win another battle and take thousands of men prisoner—including Curzon. To celebrate the win, Madam throws an elaborate banquet. Isabel saves the scraps, and a few days later, she sneaks them to the prison. She discovers that Curzon is injured and ill, but alive. From then on, Isabel visits the prison daily. Lady Seymour catches onto this fact and warns Isabel that while she has no problem with Isabel doing this, Madam will not be pleased if she finds out.

Just before Christmas, Isabel runs some errands for Lady Seymour, and a stationer catches on to the fact that she can read. He gives Isabel a copy of Thomas Paine's political pamphlet [Common Sense](#), which Isabel sneakily reads by the fire late at night. She also discovers that Curzon's cellmates are stealing his rations and blankets, so she strikes a deal with a Private Dibdin to bring food and carry messages to their captain, Captain Morse, if they ensure Curzon gets medical attention. Though Isabel is supposed to get Christmas day off, Madam makes her work well into the afternoon. Isabel thinks of Momma and decides to follow Momma's advice to "keep Christmas" by baking a bread pudding for a houseless family. This helps Isabel feel more at peace.

Two days after Christmas, Isabel carries a loaf of bread with a message hidden in it to the prison—General Washington won a surprise victory on Christmas Day. The Patriots win another battle just after New Year's Day. Master Lockton leaves on a ship for England to tell the king the bad news. Not long after this, Lady Seymour—who is again gravely ill—asks Isabel to sit with her. She reveals that she tried to buy Isabel and Ruth to save them from Madam's abuse, clearly expecting this to make Isabel feel grateful. Isabel isn't grateful, though—she doesn't want to be bought and sold.

Queen Charlotte's birthday is coming up, and there's going to

be a grand ball in her honor. Madam begins preparing by ordering a dress, and Isabel continues to read [Common Sense](#) in secret, finishing it the night before the ball. Isabel knows the words are dangerous—but she can't bring herself to burn the book. On the day of the ball, Isabel agrees to take a penny to a Captain Farrar for Captain Morse, which is payment for a bet Morse lost. Farrar asks Isabel to take a note back to Morse for him, but Isabel is too busy to deliver the note. When Isabel gets back to the Locktons', Madam beats her with a riding crop—a friend saw Isabel speaking to Captain Farrar. Isabel throws the note in the fire rather than hand it over, so Madam has one of the soldier's wives lock Isabel in the potato bin. Madam also reveals that she couldn't sell Ruth; Ruth is actually on the Lockton estate in Charleston, South Carolina.

Once Madam leaves for the ball and the house is quiet, Isabel kicks out of the bin. She's going to rescue Ruth. Isabel steals a map of the Colonies and, for the first time in a long time, sees her reflection in a mirror. She realizes she looks like Momma and like Poppa—and that her scar makes her who she is. The I, she decides, stands for Isabel; and when she forges a pass for herself, she decides her last name is Gardener. Isabel stokes Lady Seymour's fire just before she leaves. The lady lets Isabel take money, and she tells Isabel to run.

Isabel decides she can't leave without rescuing Curzon too, so she tells the guard she's come to clean out cells. Curzon is very weak and ill, so it's not hard to pretend he's dead and sneak him out of the prison and into a rowboat at the wharf. Isabel rows them across the river and sees figures in the mist—ghosts can move across water. She passes out, and when she wakes in the morning, she sees New York behind her. She and Curzon are free.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Isabel** – The protagonist of the novel, Isabel is a 13-year-old girl who, along with her little sister Ruth, is enslaved in Rhode Island. Unlike almost all enslaved people, Isabel can read—so she knows that her owner, Miss Mary Finch, freed Isabel and Ruth in her will. But because the will is missing, Isabel is unable to prove that she's free after Miss Finch dies. She and Ruth are sold to the Mr. Lockton and Madam Lockton, who live in New York and rename Isabel Sal. This is an awful prospect for Isabel, as it means she has to leave Momma and Poppa's graves behind—and she believes she'll never be able to connect with her parents' ghosts again. In New York, Isabel throws herself into protecting Ruth, who's "simple" (mentally and physically disabled) and therefore vulnerable. At first, Isabel doesn't care about the Revolutionary War happening around her—all she cares about is securing freedom for herself and Ruth, and keeping them both safe. But Isabel soon realizes that getting

involved in the war might be her ticket to freedom. Isabel first spies on the Locktons, who are Loyalists, for the Patriots, believing an enslaved boy named Curzon's promise that his owner will free Isabel. But when the Patriots refuse to help and she hears that the British are freeing enslaved people, Isabel's loyalty changes—until she learns that the British will only free people owned by Patriots. It's traumatizing for Isabel when, as she's trying to figure out where she fits politically, Madam sells Ruth, and Isabel is beaten and branded for getting upset and trying to run away. For weeks, Isabel essentially shuts down. But as she reads Thomas Paine's political pamphlet [Common Sense](#) and feeds Patriot prisoners (including Curzon) in the nearby prison, Isabel starts to feel more powerful and secure. Things come to a head, though, when Madam discovers that Isabel is carrying messages for Patriots and reveals that Ruth is actually on the Lockton estate in Charleston. Isabel decides to run away and rescue Ruth—and when she writes herself a pass, she gives herself a new name, Isabel Gardener. This represents her connection to her parents (since Isabel is the name they gave her), as well as her burgeoning independence and adult identity. Isabel rescues Curzon from prison and is able to row them both across the river to freedom.

**Ruth** – Ruth is Isabel's five-year-old sister. She's "simple" (mentally disabled) and "prone to fits" (that is, she regularly experiences seizures), so Ruth is extremely vulnerable. (At the time the novel takes place, many people believed seizures were a sign of demonic possession.) Ruth, though, is far from possessed—she's a sweet child who wants to please people, especially Isabel. Ruth is distraught when she and Isabel are first sold to the Locktons, as she's unable to bring her baby **doll** with her—as enslaved people, she and Isabel don't technically own anything. Things improve somewhat for Ruth at the Locktons' home when Isabel makes her a new doll out of cornhusks, though life isn't easy for Ruth. Madam thinks Ruth is pretty, so she decides to essentially treat Ruth like a human doll, dressing her up in fancy clothes and making Ruth stay with her at all times. Ruth often looks like she's been crying, so Isabel suspects Madam has been beating Ruth. When Ruth experiences a seizure in front of Madam, her life changes: Madam believes Ruth is possessed and vows to sell Ruth as soon as possible. When Master Lockton isn't around to stop her, Madam drugs both Ruth and Isabel and sells Ruth. Isabel grieves for Ruth by clinging tightly to Ruth's cornhusk doll—though the doll is destroyed in a devastating fire. At the end of the novel, Madam reveals that she never sold Ruth: Ruth is on the Locktons' estate in Charleston, South Carolina. Isabel runs away from the Locktons, vowing to rescue her sister and secure freedom for both of them.

**Madam Lockton** – The primary antagonist of the novel, Madam Lockton is Master Lockton's wife; the Locktons own both Isabel and Ruth. Madam is extremely cruel and selfish. She wants to purchase enslaved people rather than take on indentured

servants because she believes indentured servants do nothing but complain and steal—and in contrast, Madam can exert total control over someone who's enslaved. So Madam renames Isabel Sal, insisting that Isabel is a "ridiculous" name; and she essentially turns Ruth into a human doll to be with her at all times and make her look wealthy and powerful. She's also cruel to Lockton's elderly aunt, Lady Seymour, as she finds Lady Seymour improperly kind and generous—and Isabel suspects Madam can't wait for the elderly lady to die so she can take control of Lady Seymour's money and properties. Madam is just as committed to the British winning the war as her husband is, though her focus is slightly different. Whereas Lockton insists on doing whatever necessary to support the cause, Madam's concerns are more selfish: she wants to entertain officers and regain the lavish lifestyle she lived before the war started. Madam is superstitious, so when she discovers that Ruth has epilepsy, she believes Ruth is possessed—and vows to sell Ruth the first chance she gets. When Madam is finally successful, and Isabel insults her and runs away in protest, Madam lies about her altercation with Isabel and asks the judge to brand Isabel with an I, for "insolent." This, she believes, will put Isabel in her place. Madam also goes out of her way to make Isabel feel powerless and insecure, such as by forbidding Isabel from visiting Curzon and feeding prisoners at the prison. But Isabel continues to resist—and when Madam finds out that Isabel is delivering messages for Patriot soldiers, she angrily reveals that Ruth is actually on the Lockton estate in Charleston. But Madam's desire to be a respected, high-society lady overpowers her need to punish Isabel right away—and so when Madam is at a ball honoring the Queen's birthday, Isabel runs away.

**Master Elihu Lockton** – Madam Lockton's husband, Master Lockton, is a wealthy merchant. He's tall, overweight, and is a devout Loyalist—he believes the King should maintain control of the Colonies, as that's how Lockton will continue to amass his fortune and how he'll remain influential among the British ruling class. He has an even wealthier aunt, Lady Seymour, whom he respects—though he and Madam also hope to inherit her wealth and property when she dies. Lockton is extremely self-centered and wants to succeed at all costs. For this reason, he demands total deference from Madam—and when she resists, he gets physically violent with her. His wealth and prestige is so important to him that when threatened with arrest, he forces Madam to stay in their city home against her will—if she leaves, he reasons, the Patriots will loot their house. Lockton is a key player in Loyalist circles when the Patriots hold New York, smuggling money into the city to bribe Patriot farmers and later helping to plot the assassination of General Washington. Despite his self-centeredness and his violent tendencies, though, Lockton reads as somewhat ambivalent about slavery. He's seldom outright cruel to Isabel, and when it's revealed that Ruth suffers from epilepsy, he refuses to let Madam sell Ruth—he insists that because the girls are children

and sisters, it'd be inhumane to separate them. Lockton also insists on treating Lady Seymour kindly and generously by sending Isabel to work for her when Lady Seymour needs household help more than the Locktons do, and then by giving the lady the Locktons' bedroom when she becomes gravely ill. Ultimately, though, Lockton leaves New York for London—and Madam's cruelty to both Isabel and Lady Seymour goes unchecked without him around.

**Lady Seymour** – Lady Seymour is Master Lockton's elderly and extremely wealthy aunt. According to Becky, Madam and Master Lockton are only pleasant to Lady Seymour to her face because they want her money and her land when she dies. And in private, Madam clearly detests Lady Seymour, though Lockton seems to take a milder and more generous view of his aunt. Part of the women's hatred of each other stems from the fact that unlike Madam, Lady Seymour is kind to household staff, whether those people are paid or enslaved, and she also doesn't think it's right to buy and sell children. So, in Isabel's interactions with Lady Seymour, the lady refuses to call Isabel Sal, the name Madam gave her, and instead calls Isabel by her given name. When Isabel visits Lady Seymour's house, Lady Seymour also makes sure Isabel eats nourishing food, and she never speaks cruelly to Isabel. She even saves Isabel from the stocks and nurses Isabel back to health in her own home. However, Isabel's relationship with Lady Seymour becomes somewhat complicated when Isabel rescues the lady and some of Lady Seymour's prized possessions from a devastating fire, sacrificing Ruth's **doll** in the process. Following this, Lady Seymour becomes very ill—and in this state, she shares with Isabel that she attempted to purchase Isabel and Ruth from Madam to work in her own house, thereby saving them from Madam's abuse. It's clear to Isabel that Lady Seymour expects this revelation to be a comfort to Isabel, but it's not—Isabel instead wonders why Lady Seymour never thought to free her instead. Still, on the night that Isabel plans to run away from the Locktons, she decides to stoke Lady Seymour's fire. Lady Seymour, who's close to death at this point, allows Isabel to take money for her journey and tells her to run.

**Curzon** – Curzon is an enslaved boy who's about Isabel's age; Master Bellingham owns him. He soon becomes Isabel's only real friend in New York, and she can always recognize him in the crowd by his "ridiculous" red hat and gold hoop in his ear. Curzon is bright, idealistic, and is fully committed to the Americans' fight for freedom—he believes that when the Patriots talk about freeing everyone, they truly mean everyone, enslaved people included. Because of this, Curzon encourages Isabel to spy on the Locktons (who are Loyalists) for the Patriots' cause—and in exchange for her intelligence, he promises to talk to Bellingham about freeing Isabel and Ruth. But Isabel eventually finds out that neither Bellingham nor other Patriot officers are willing to help her, and she refuses to speak to Curzon after this. During this time, Isabel learns that

Curzon has joined the American army in Bellingham's place. Curzon believes Bellingham's promise to free him if Curzon signs up for the military in his place—but other enslaved people insist that Curzon is more likely to die as a soldier. Ultimately, Curzon is shot through the leg and then imprisoned with thousands of other Patriot prisoners at the Bridewell Prison. There, survival is a struggle due to his white fellow prisoners' racism—they don't believe Curzon, as a Black enslaved person, deserves food, medical care, or blankets. Isabel strikes a deal with one of Curzon's cellmates to make sure Curzon survives. Because Curzon saved Isabel from dying in the stocks when she was imprisoned for trying to run away, Isabel smuggles Curzon out of the prison early in January and runs away with him, freeing them both.

**Momma/Dinah** – Isabel and Ruth's mother, Momma, died of smallpox about a year before the novel begins. Momma was kind, loving, and extremely protective of her children—according to Isabel, Momma would never let anyone beat Isabel or Ruth. She also made Isabel promise to continue protecting Ruth right before she died. Because of this, Isabel often feels like she's letting Momma down, since she's unable to stop Madam from abusing and eventually selling Ruth. But as Isabel matures, she starts to focus less on how she's letting Momma down and more on taking Momma's advice to strive to be good and kind. This is why Isabel bakes a bread pudding for a family in Canvastown, and it's what spurs her to not respond in kind when Madam is "evil" to her.

**Poppa** – Isabel and Ruth's father never appears in person in the novel; he's deceased, and it's implied that he died when he was beaten for fighting back when Momma, Isabel, and baby Ruth were separated from him and sold to Miss Finch at an auction. Poppa had scars on his face that, in his birthplace of Guinea, signified that he was a man. Isabel uses what she knows about Poppa's scars to decide the branded I on her cheek works in much the same way: she decides that it's a sign of her strength and that it stands for Isabel, not "insolent."

**Master Bellingham** – Master Bellingham is a Patriot living in New York. He owns and enslaves Curzon and is supposedly desperate to arrest the Locktons. Curzon trusts Bellingham and convinces Isabel to spy for the Patriots because he believes that Bellingham will free Isabel and Ruth if Isabel can provide useful intelligence. But Isabel realizes that she and her information seem unreliable because she isn't able to pass along certain details about the Locktons, so Bellingham never frees her. Though it's never confirmed whether Bellingham would've kept his word if Isabel had given him more, later events call Bellingham's commitment to enslaved people's freedom and well-being into question. Though Curzon sees it as a kindness when Bellingham promises to free Curzon if Curzon signs up for military service in his place, for instance, other enslaved people insist this actually just guarantees that Curzon will die during the war.

**Becky Barry** – Becky is the paid white maid working for the Locktons when Isabel first arrives in New York. Becky is kind to Isabel and Ruth—she insists she has no problem with enslaved people, provided they do as they’re told—but she is generally unwilling to protect the girls from Madam’s ire. However, Isabel does appreciate that Becky seems to dislike Madam and isn’t afraid to voice her annoyances whenever she’s out of earshot of Madam. Becky also coaches Isabel on how best to behave to keep herself safe, both in New York more broadly and in Madam’s terrifying, abusive household. Like many New Yorkers, Becky’s loyalty to either the British or the Patriots changes depending on the day. She insists to Isabel that since the Locktons are Tories, she and Isabel are too—agreeing with the Locktons is how they stay safe and employed. But Becky also seems very impressed with General Washington and attends parades of Patriot soldiers. Becky does stand up for Isabel once by encouraging her to run away, after Madam sells Ruth and threatens to injure or kill Isabel when Isabel confronts her. It doesn’t appear as though Becky suffers any consequences for this. Becky disappears soon after the British soldiers invade New York.

**Sarah** – Sarah’s husband is a British soldier; they join several other couples in living with the Locktons. As Becky has disappeared by this point, Sarah takes over as the boss in the kitchen. Though she’s not outright cruel to Isabel, Sarah is curt, exacting, and short-tempered; Isabel attributes some of this to the fact that Sarah is pregnant and very uncomfortable. However, Sarah and Isabel do form an understanding, and Sarah continues to allow Isabel to fetch water from the Tea Water Pump, going against Madam’s orders. Though Sarah is initially upset to be in the Colonies at all, when she has her baby and names him George, it’s implied that perhaps her loyalties are changing. She suggests that she and her husband might stay in North America after the war is over—and notes that George (the first name of both the king of England and of the American General Washington) is a good name no matter where one lives. Isabel is sad when Sarah and George move to a house for new mothers and babies, as she’d looked forward to a baby brightening up her days.

**Jenny** – Jenny and her husband own a tavern in Newport, Rhode Island. When Mr. Robert shows up wanting to sell Isabel and Ruth on the tavern’s steps, Jenny refuses, insisting it’s not proper to sell people in that way. She’s kind, though her status as a working-class woman keeps her from being able to meaningfully help Isabel and Ruth. Jenny knows the girls and wants to help them because she was an indentured servant on the same farm where Momma was enslaved, and Momma was extremely kind to Jenny. So, although Jenny offers to buy Isabel and Ruth, she’s unable to afford them when the Locktons offer double.

**Miss Mary Finch** – Miss Finch is deceased in the novel, but prior to her death she owned Isabel and Ruth. She had some

beliefs many white people consider “peculiar”—she taught Isabel to read and stipulated in her will that upon her death, Isabel, Ruth, and Momma (had she not died a year before the novel begins) should be freed. However, since the lawyer who wrote Miss Finch’s will left town with the document, there’s no way for Isabel to prove she’s supposed to be free.

**Mr. Robert Finch** – Mr. Robert is Miss Finch’s nephew; he comes to visit Miss Finch not long after she becomes ill. A greedy and selfish man, he doesn’t seem sad at all about his aunt dying—and according to Isabel, Mr. Robert steals Miss Finch’s money before her body is cold and then buries her so fast that it’s disrespectful. He also refuses to acknowledge that his aunt freed Isabel and Ruth in her will and accuses Isabel of lying about this, since the will is missing. He sells Isabel and Ruth to the Locktons, thinking only of his profits and not at all about the girls’ welfare, dignity, or humanity.

**Grandfather** – Grandfather is an old enslaved man who runs the Tea Water Pump. He insists that he’s everyone’s grandfather, and he’s generally dismissive of youthful idealism and of affiliating with either the Patriots or the Loyalists. Instead, he insists that each enslaved person must cross their own personal (and metaphorical) River Jordan, which stands between them and freedom. Grandfather disappears without fanfare about the time the British invade New York.

**Captain Campbell** – Captain Campbell is a captain with the British army. He’s the first officer Isabel sees when she goes to the arriving British army, believing they’ll free her—but Campbell reveals that while he personally doesn’t believe in slavery and would like to help Isabel, the British position is that they may only free slaves who belong to Patriots. Campbell does help cover up Isabel’s escape attempt by making an excuse to Master Lockton, but he’s unable to help her any more than that.

**Captain Farrar** – Captain Farrar is a captured Patriot officer and a friend of Captain Morse. Isabel visits him once so she can deliver a penny from Morse, and Farrar asks her to carry a message back to Morse for him. This visit, though, results in Madam finding out that Isabel is carrying messages for the rebels.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Colonel Regan** – Colonel Regan is a colonel in the American army whom Isabel goes to with news that the Loyalists are plotting to assassinate General Washington. She believes him when he promises to help free her and Ruth in exchange for the information—but Regan is unwilling to keep his promise.

**Thomas Hickey** – Thomas Hickey is an American soldier who serves in the unit that protects General Washington. However, he’s a spy and is involved in the (unsuccessful) plot to assassinate Washington. Isabel witnesses his hanging for this crime.

**The Dutch Maid/Angelika** – Angelika is a Dutch maid working in Lady Seymour’s household. She’s the palest person Isabel has ever seen and, according to Lady Seymour, she refuses to learn English. Angelika disappears sometime after the British arrive in New York.

**Colonel Hawkins** – Colonel Hawkins is a British officer who moves in with the Locktons after the devastating fire. Master Lockton gives Colonel Hawkins his own study, as he’d like to impress Hawkins.

**Captain Morse** – Captain Morse leads Curzon and the other imprisoned men in the battle that results in their imprisonment. Being an officer, Morse is able to work and move freely around New York while imprisoned. Isabel carries messages to and from the Bridewell prison for him.

**The Guard/Fisher** – Fisher is a hulking British soldier and a guard at the Bridewell prison. He’s always hungry and always takes the best food out of Isabel’s scrap bucket before letting her offer food to the prisoners. Until Isabel learns his name, she just calls him “the guard.”

**Hannah** – Hannah is one of the British soldier’s wives who live with the Locktons and work in the kitchen.

**Mary** – Mary is one of the British soldier’s wives who live with the Locktons and work in the kitchen.

**Private Dibdin** – Private Dibdin is a Patriot soldier imprisoned with Curzon. He’s racist and greedy, taking food and clothes from Curzon until Isabel strikes a deal with Dibdin.

**General George Washington** – The general of the American army and the future first president of the United States only appears once in the novel; Isabel sees him when she attends Thomas Hardy’s hanging.

**Charles** – Charles is a Loyalist in New York who works closely with Master Lockton.

**Goldbuttons** – Isabel never learns Goldbuttons’ real name, but he’s one of Master Lockton’s close friends and confidants. Though Goldbuttons is concerned about the risk, he ultimately gets involved with the plot to assassinate General Washington.

**The Mayor** – The mayor of New York is a Loyalist and is involved in the plot to assassinate General Washington.

**Pastor Weeks** – Pastor Weeks is Isabel, Ruth, and Miss Finch’s pastor in Rhode Island. He refuses to help Isabel when she insists Miss Finch freed her and Ruth in her will.

**Old Ben** – Old Ben is an enslaved man whom Pastor Weeks owns.

rising tensions with the British; they appointed **George Washington** the general of the American forces and drafted the Declaration of Independence. The Second Continental Congress was the temporary government of the independent United States during the Revolutionary War. The Congress was initially based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**Hessian** – Hessians were German soldiers that the British hired to fight for them during the Revolutionary War.

**Indentured Servant** – Indentured servants were people brought to the American Colonies, mostly from Europe, to work for a set number of years to pay off their debts. Some people also entered into a period of indentured servitude from the Colonies when they couldn’t pay off debts. Unlike enslaved people, they were free to go at the end of their indentured servitude.

**Loyalist/Tory** – Loyalists, or Tories, were people loyal to the British cause during the American Revolution. The term is usually applied to civilians rather than people in the military.

**Patriot/Rebel** – Patriots, or the rebels, were those who supported and/or fought for American independence during the Revolutionary War.

**Redcoat** – Redcoat is a term for British soldiers during the Revolutionary War. It arose from the fact that British soldiers wore bright red coats. They were also sometimes called “lobsterbacks.”



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### FREEDOM

Beginning in the spring of 1775, against the backdrop of the Revolutionary War, *Chains* tells the story of 13-year-old Isabel, an enslaved Black girl.

When Isabel’s owner dies, Isabel expects to be freed along with her five-year-old sister, Ruth—her owner’s will dictates that the girls should be freed upon her death. But since the will is missing, Isabel and Ruth are instead sold to wealthy New Yorkers, Master and Madam Lockton, who are ardent Loyalists (they support the British in the war). In New York, Isabel throws herself into trying to secure her freedom through any means possible, including spying for the Patriots. But Isabel comes to suspect that while the white Patriots seek freedom from oppressive British rule and often talk about how everyone deserves freedom, they actually have no intention of helping enslaved Black people become free as well. However, *Chains*

## TERMS

**Continental Congress** – The Continental Congress refers to two separate 18th-century American legislative bodies. The First Continental Congress first met in 1774 in response to

shows that despite the hypocrisy Isabel observes among the Patriots, their rhetoric about freedom and equality is still powerful. In fact, the Patriots' cause helps Isabel realize that there are different kinds of freedom. Although Isabel isn't physically free from slavery by the end of the novel, she realizes that her mind and soul belong to her alone—and in that way, she and other enslaved people do have some degree of freedom.

Isabel begins the novel with a specific idea of what freedom looks like. Isabel initially conflates freedom from slavery with freedom from British rule because of the way the Patriots talk about freedom. One of the Patriots' central beliefs is that "all men are created equal," which means that no one person is superior to another and that all people have the right to live freely. Isabel and some other enslaved people—most notably Curzon—take this to mean that they're included in the group of "all men," since they are, of course, human beings too. In this sense, Isabel comes to think of freedom as being treated equally to everyone else and not being tyrannized by an oppressive ruler. And she assumes that if she supports the Patriots' cause, they'll free her—so, she does as Curzon asks and spies on the Locktons for the Patriots.

Yet few characters in *Chains*—other than wealthy, white men—are actually free by Isabel's definition, suggesting that how free a person is depends on a variety of factors (such as gender, skin color, and class status). Isabel, as an enslaved Black girl, has very little, if any, freedom. At one point, Isabel is branded with an I for "insolent" because she dared to call Madam out for selling Ruth (who's also enslaved) and then ran away. And selling Ruth in and of itself illustrates enslaved people's lack of freedom, as Ruth has no agency over her life. In essence, Isabel and other enslaved people aren't allowed to think for themselves, defend themselves from abuse, or speak for themselves—they're supposed to mold their behavior and thoughts to please the people who own them. Yet Curzon sees himself as freer than Isabel even though he's enslaved too, since he's able to join the Patriot army and earn his legal freedom that way. But this doesn't free him from the effects of racism. For instance, when he and his fellow soldiers are imprisoned, Curzon's cellmates steal his rations and his blanket, as the white soldiers don't believe it's right for an enslaved person like Curzon to receive the same accommodations they do. And while Madam is a villain in the novel and is one of the most formidable figures standing between Isabel and freedom, it's possible to see that Madam herself isn't truly free. She may have the power to abuse her staff, especially those who are enslaved, and she lives a lavish lifestyle—but Master Lockton demands total deference from his wife and becomes physically abusive when she tries to advocate for what she wants. In this way, Madam isn't treated as an equal in her relationship, and Lockton oppresses her similarly to how the Patriots believe the British are oppressing them. This, of course, doesn't excuse

Madam's abusive and manipulative behavior, but it suggests that few characters in the novel are able to enjoy Isabel's definition of freedom.

While Isabel doesn't end the novel legally free (she's still technically enslaved), she does ultimately discover that she can find a different sort of freedom by understanding that her mind and soul belong to her alone. After Madam sells Ruth, Isabel is traumatized and defeated; she stops trying to resist Madam's abuse. But as Isabel reads Thomas Paine's political pamphlet [\*Common Sense\*](#) and starts to remember some of her deceased Momma's advice, Isabel realizes that in some ways, she can be free—she realizes it's her choice whether to let Madam take her soul and her spirit. Though Isabel acknowledges that she has to work within the system of slavery and follow Madam's rules, she can also find ways to bend or break them, as when she continues to visit Curzon and the other prisoners in the Bridewell prison despite being forbidden to do so. This is also why Isabel decides to bake a bread pudding for a houseless family on Christmas. She knows Madam wouldn't approve, but doing so allows Isabel to feel like she's still a human being who can make choices for herself. One of the things that spurs Isabel to accept this kind of emotional and mental freedom is her realization that no matter what the Patriots say, Isabel—and other enslaved Black people—*aren't* included when the Patriots say that all men are created equal. Put another way, in the world she inhabits, she's severely limited in the kind of freedom she can access. This doesn't deprive the Patriots' words of their power, but it does show Isabel that for now, at least, she's going to have to work harder to achieve the same kind of freedom as the Patriots, or she'll have to settle for a different type of freedom. It's Isabel's realization that she can keep ahold of her mental and emotional freedom that spurs her to plan her final escape from the Locktons, and to take Curzon along with her. Achieving her mental freedom, in other words, is framed as the first step to Isabel eventually achieving physical and legal freedom.



## SLAVERY AND DEHUMANIZATION

As a novel about slavery, *Chains* necessarily dives into the dehumanizing treatment that enslaved people suffered in Colonial America. Isabel, the 13-year-old protagonist, believes at the beginning of the novel that she'll soon be free from slavery—but since her recently deceased owner's will (which guarantees Isabel's freedom) is missing, Isabel is powerless to advocate for herself. Instead, Isabel and her five-year-old sister, Ruth, are sold to the Locktons, a wealthy and cruel New York couple. Though some people—such as Master Lockton's elderly aunt Lady Seymour and the paid maid, Becky—often treat Isabel with kindness and compassion, they still do and say things that they seem not to realize are cruel or threatening. For instance, Becky becomes one of Isabel's closest allies and coaches her in how to stay safe



at the Locktons'. But she also introduces herself with a veiled threat when she says that she's fine with enslaved people—as long as they do as they're told. In this way, *Chains* shows how slavery normalizes the dehumanization of Black people, even among those who don't own slaves or who feel conflicted about slavery. As Isabel's experiences show, this constant, socially accepted dehumanization is what makes resisting slavery—and holding onto one's dignity and humanity—so hard, though she discovers that it's essential for victims to resist in order to survive.

Because she's enslaved, Isabel is almost constantly abused and traumatized in ways both overt and subtle—and this treatment is dehumanizing. Over the course of the novel, Isabel is accused of lying, beaten with paintings and riding crops, and branded with an I for "insolence" on her cheek. She's yelled at, given a new name, and is otherwise verbally abused on a daily basis. Moreover, as an enslaved person, Isabel has no say in when, how, or to whom she's sold—and when Madam decides to sell Ruth, she drugs Isabel so that Isabel can't resist. All of this, it's important to note, is legal for Madam and other white slaveowners to do under the system of slavery. And this legally-sanctioned abuse works together to make Isabel feel more like property than like a human being; she's constantly afraid for her safety and emotional well-being. But overt abuse and violence, like what Isabel suffers at Madam's hand, isn't all that makes it difficult for her to hold onto her humanity. Slavery is so normal in Isabel's world that even those who don't own enslaved people still abuse those who are enslaved, albeit in more subtle ways. Becky Barry's insistence that she's fine with enslaved people, but only if they do what they're told, is extremely threatening—Becky implies that if Isabel steps out of line at all, Becky might *also* become violent and put Isabel in her place. So, Isabel is powerless to defend or stand up for herself—and living in this constant state of fear makes it difficult for Isabel to hold onto her humanity, or indeed, her own identity.

However, the novel also shows that many white people are ambivalent or are opposed to slavery, and their small kindnesses help Isabel hold onto her humanity. Becky, for instance, doesn't seem to realize how threatening her introduction to Isabel is—and so for Isabel, who is mostly willing to do as she's told, Becky soon becomes a trusted ally. She coaches Isabel on how to survive in the Locktons' home and how to avoid Madam, and when it comes out that Ruth suffers from epilepsy (which Madam believes means that Ruth is possessed and evil), Becky helps Isabel protect Ruth from Madam. Because of Becky's kindness, Isabel is sad when Becky disappears after the British invade—Becky is the only person in the household who treats Isabel like a fellow human being. Isabel also comes to trust Lady Seymour because of the lady's small kindnesses. Again, Lady Seymour isn't perfect—though she doesn't believe in buying and selling *children*, she implies

that she's generally fine with slavery. But whenever Lady Seymour sees Isabel, she makes sure Isabel gets a nourishing meal, calls Isabel by her given name instead of the name the Locktons give her, and later gives Isabel warm winter clothes and a pair of new shoes. People like Lady Seymour and Becky show Isabel that there is good in the world, even when there are also evil, cruel people like Madam—and that if Isabel seeks out those who are kind, it's easier to stay hopeful and resist dehumanization.

Ultimately, *Chains* shows that resisting slavery and dehumanization is essential for Isabel's survival. Whenever Madam discovers Isabel doing something she doesn't like, Madam is extremely threatening. She makes sure to tell Isabel outright that she can have Isabel beaten or even hanged if she wants—and when she discovers Isabel passing notes for the Patriots, Madam vows to sell Isabel to someone who will be an even crueler owner than she's been. This shows Isabel that if she wants to survive and rescue Ruth (whom she discovers is actually on the Lockton estate in Charleston, and hasn't been sold), she must resist Madam by running away. Isabel starts to emotionally heal and come to terms with her trauma when she engages in her final act of resistance: forging a pass, which will allow her to travel out of New York and get away from Madam. In forging the pass, Isabel has to decide what her name is. And rather than write that she's Sal Lockton, a name that signifies Isabel's dehumanizing status as an enslaved person to cruel owners, Isabel gives herself a new name, Isabel **Gardener**. Choosing to identify herself in this way helps Isabel regain her humanity and remind herself that only by reclaiming control of her body, her mind, and her identity will she be able to survive—and hopefully, rescue Ruth and help Ruth do the same.



## THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

When Isabel, a 13-year-old enslaved girl, first arrives in New York, she cares little about the Revolutionary War brewing around her. All she cares about is protecting her five-year-old sister, Ruth, and securing their freedom as soon as possible. But very soon, Isabel is swept up in the rebel cause, as Isabel's new friend Curzon promises her that his master will help free Isabel and Ruth if she spies for the Patriots. Isabel vacillates between supporting the Patriots and the British soldiers, depending on who she thinks can help free her—and the novel shows that Isabel isn't the only person whose loyalty changes depending on which side seems likely to win, or which side's win would be most advantageous. Politics, *Chains* suggests, isn't as simple as one group of likeminded people versus a group of people who think the opposite—people don't always fit neatly on one side or the other, since no person has the exact same concerns as anyone else. With this, *Chains* shows how personal politics can be and suggests that it's impossible to simply ignore political goings-on—after all, they have the ability to seriously affect

people's lives, for better or for worse.

At first, Isabel doesn't think politics should matter to her at all, but she soon discovers that politics isn't something she can ignore. Isabel's initial belief is reflected in the way she narrates the brewing Revolutionary War as she leaves Rhode Island and during her first few weeks in New York. When Isabel is in Rhode Island, the war doesn't seem important to her—Pastor Weeks mentions that Miss Finch's will isn't accessible because the lawyer who wrote it left Boston during “the blockade,” but neither Isabel nor the white men she's speaking with expand on what they mean by “the blockade.” In reality, they're referring to the Siege of Boston, which was the opening portion of the Revolutionary War. But to Isabel, the fact that a war is taking place doesn't matter, because all she cares about is her own freedom. But Isabel quickly learns that she can't just outright ignore politics and the war. Within minutes of meeting each other, an enslaved boy, Curzon, asks Isabel to spy on the Locktons (who are Loyalists) for the Patriots (the Americans seeking freedom from the British). And not long after, as the paid maid Becky shows Isabel around the Lockton home, Becky insists that since the Locktons are Tories (a reference to their pro-British political stance), the household staff are all Tories too. At this point, Isabel doesn't care about either side, or the war more generally. But she starts to suspect that political conflict is going to affect her on some level, whether directly if she agrees to become a spy, or by association since a Loyalist family owns her.

Isabel soon starts to see politics and the war as things that *do* matter and have the potential to impact her life—and she realizes that everyone, herself included, gets involved with a particular party or side because they believe it's going to help them. Isabel agrees to spy for the Patriots, believing Curzon's promise that his master, Bellingham, will be willing to help Isabel become free—in other words, Isabel only devotes herself to the Patriots because they'll supposedly be able to help her attain her goals. But when the Patriots won't help her, and she learns that British soldiers are the ones freeing enslaved people, Isabel's loyalty shifts; she seeks out a British officer, Captain Campbell. Again, Isabel's loyalty isn't to the British cause—she only offers to serve the British because she believes they'll free her. However, Captain Campbell reveals that the British will only free enslaved people whose owners are Patriots, which means he can't help Isabel due to the Locktons being Loyalists. This is an earth-shattering moment for Isabel, as she realizes that neither the Americans nor the British care about helping her—and so politics and the war seem even more pointless to her than when she arrived in New York. The novel shows that the same general rules apply to other people, especially those who aren't enslaved: a person's political affiliation depends on which side they think is going to help them. Despite Becky's insistence that identifying as a Tory will protect her job, she ultimately leaves the city when the British

invade—she's afraid of the supposedly violent British soldiers and presumably sees the Patriots as less dangerous. Master Lockton, as a wealthy merchant with ties to British aristocracy, has a vested interest in keeping the British in power: continued British rule is how he'll stay powerful and continue to profit in the colonies. And Curzon remains dedicated to the Patriots, especially once Bellingham agrees to free Curzon if Curzon signs up for military service in his place; the Patriots seem more likely to give Curzon freedom than the British do. In this way, many characters in the novel align themselves with certain political groups primarily out of self-interest.

Ultimately, the novel seems to suggest that politics should be less about parties and sides, and more about helping people find a belief system that guides their actions and shows them what to fight for. Isabel comes to this realization after reading Thomas Paine's political pamphlet [\*Common Sense\*](#), which insists that Americans have a moral reason to oppose British rule. So at first, it seems like reading the pamphlet should push Isabel to affiliate with the Patriots. But Isabel still sees the Patriots as untrustworthy—and irrespective of its political position, the pamphlet encapsulates many ideas that resonate with Isabel. It proclaims that all people are the same, that no one person inherently deserves to have power over others, and that it's important to stand up to injustice. These sentiments empower her to mentally resist the dehumanizing treatment she experiences as an enslaved person, and to recognize that she (and other enslaved people) deserve freedom and equal rights. In this way, Paine's words help Isabel develop her own political philosophy and decide what's important to her—and this personal growth and knowledge, the novel suggests, are far more meaningful than just choosing a side.



### IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND FAMILY

When readers first meet 13-year-old Isabel, she feels unmoored and alone without family members to guide her. Though she has her five-year-old sister, Ruth, to care for, the girls lost Momma a year ago to smallpox, and Poppa four years before that when he was murdered at a slave auction. And Isabel's sense of her own identity is shaken again when, after her owner dies, Isabel isn't freed as her owner stipulated in her will. Instead, Isabel is sold to a wealthy New York couple, who rename her Sal and eventually sell Ruth. In order to mentally and emotionally protect herself, Isabel tries to forget about Ruth and her other family members. But as Madam Lockton becomes progressively crueler to Isabel, Isabel discovers it's actually comforting to remember Momma, Poppa, and Ruth—and to use their advice as she starts to think about her burgeoning adult identity. Through Isabel's process of coming of age, *Chains* suggests that a person's identity forms not just as they decide who they want to be, but as they remember their family members and those loved ones' wisdom and advice.

*Chains* shows how the institution of slavery fractured Black families, making it difficult—if not impossible—for enslaved Black people to retain connections to their ancestors. And being unable to connect with her ancestors hinders Isabel's coming of age. Early in the novel, Isabel notes that according to Momma, ghosts can't cross bodies of water—and this means that if a descendant travels far away from an ancestor's burial site, the ancestors' ghosts aren't able to spiritually protect their living descendants. So when Poppa, for instance, was kidnapped in Africa and forcibly brought to the Colonies, his ancestors weren't able to follow and protect him, thereby leaving him vulnerable to the horrors of slavery. Momma's story shows how slavery then continued to fracture families in North America, as her ancestors were abducted in Africa and sold in the Caribbean islands—and Momma herself was then sold to someone in Rhode Island. This means that Momma has ancestors in Africa and in the Caribbean, none of whom can protect her. So, especially when Isabel and Ruth are sold to the Locktons, who live in New York, Isabel feels lost: she has to leave Momma and Poppa's burial sites in Rhode Island, so she fears that she'll entirely lose her parents' protection. Moreover, without a parent to guide her, Isabel is forced to step into an adult, caregiver role for Ruth. And yet, Isabel is still a naïve, innocent child, and in many ways her emotional development is stunted due to the trauma of being enslaved. So, Isabel is unable to be a child—but she's also unable to truly function as an adult, either.

To protect herself from the trauma of losing her parents (and, eventually, losing Ruth), Isabel tries to forget her family. Though Isabel is distraught to be leaving Momma and Poppa behind in Rhode Island, she also doesn't see much of a point in dwelling on it—she has bigger things to think about, like keeping Ruth safe from Madam's ire. So at first, Isabel's attempts to try to forget her parents are merely practical: if she's too busy grieving Momma, she reasons, she won't have the mental and emotional energy to make sure that Ruth is safe and cared for. When Madam sells Ruth, though, Isabel's commitment to forgetting starts to eat away at her and causes her to mentally shut down. Isabel blames herself for failing to protect Ruth, so in addition to her emotions about Ruth's absence more broadly, Isabel also believes she wasn't adult or competent enough to protect her little sister. So Isabel goes out of her way to forget Ruth and to forget what she perceives as her own failure—she feels like a swarm of angry bees have taken up residence in her brain and body, making it impossible for her to think of anything aside from her household tasks, let alone grieve. As Isabel turns inward, tries not to think of her family, and focuses on her chores, Isabel also stops hoping for a happier future, as that seems impossible with Ruth gone. So as a result of so much trauma (Isabel has also been beaten, branded, and imprisoned since Ruth was sold), Isabel's spirit is broken, and she essentially stops developing. She reasons that it's not worth it to hope for freedom, which is what Momma

wanted her to do—so trying to forget her family also traps Isabel more fully in slavery as well.

Ultimately, though, Isabel realizes the way forward—the way to heal, and the way to come of age—is to remember her family and to take their advice to heart. Isabel starts to heal and feel more at peace with her life when, on Christmas, she recalls Momma's advice to “keep Christmas,” or to not forget that Christmas is, to Momma and Isabel, about performing acts of service for others. Isabel bakes a bread pudding, just like Momma used to, and gives it to a houseless family in the city. Also, though Isabel burns with the desire to somehow take revenge on Madam for selling Ruth and abusing her so cruelly, Isabel decides to listen to Momma's wisdom and take the high road, choosing kindness whenever she can. Remembering Momma, and remembering her advice to be kind, generous, and protect her family, culminates in Isabel deciding to run away from the Locktons to rescue Ruth (Madam reveals that she never actually sold Ruth; she's on the Lockton estate in Charleston). And as Isabel enters the upstairs drawing room to gather a map and a pass so she can escape, she sees herself in the mirror for the first time in a long time—and realizes that in her reflection, she can pick out features from both Momma and Poppa. But she also realizes that her face is entirely her own. Isabel then decides to take inspiration from Poppa's facial scars, which he earned in a traditional ceremony and signified that he's transformed from boy to man. She decides that the I branded on her cheek stands for Isabel, not “insolent”—and that just as Poppa's scars signified his adulthood, her I is something beautiful that marks her as an adult. In this way, Isabel is finally able to make some of her parents' traditions her own and use them to develop her own totally unique identity, which culminates in Isabel giving herself a new last name: **Gardener**. With this, Isabel symbolically comes of age as she figures out how to connect to her ancestors—and with their help, she finds the strength to look forward to the rest of her own life.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## SEEDS, PLANTS, AND GARDENS

The various seeds, plants, and gardens that Isabel encounters symbolize her burgeoning identity, as well as her (and others') humanity. When Isabel and Ruth are first told that they're going to be sold after Miss Finch's death, Isabel looks around for something she can take that will connect her to Momma (most of the things she thinks of don't technically belong to her, as an enslaved person). She settles on some seeds Momma collected before her death, which Isabel later decides to plant in the Locktons' bare garden. Isabel

doesn't know what kind of seeds they are, but she figures it's the only way she can remember Momma and honor her in some small way. When the seedlings perish in the frigid winter before Isabel figures out what they are, at a time when Isabel feels totally lost and dehumanized, it suggests that Isabel will have to find other ways to connect to her family and hold onto her humanity.

While Isabel doesn't find these attempts very fulfilling for most of the novel, she eventually decides to use her love of seeds and plants to create a name that's totally hers. When Isabel is preparing to run from the Locktons' home for the final time in the novel, she must fill out a pass, which will allow her to move freely through the city and escape punishment (enslaved people can't travel certain places without a pass). In an act of defiance, Isabel refuses to write the name the Locktons' gave her—Sal Lockton—on the pass. Instead, she takes the opportunity to give herself a last name that will honor her parents: Isabel Gardener. This symbolizes Isabel's final step of coming of age and deciding who she wants to be: someone who will continue to grow and define her own identity over the course of the next two novels in the trilogy.

Other people's gardens that Isabel encounters also serve as markers of those characters' humanity and compassion, or the lack thereof. The Locktons are cruel to Isabel and Ruth, and their bare garden reflects their moral bankruptcy—they don't feel the need to nurture anything, whether that be other people or plants, since they can buy whatever they need. Lady Seymour, on the other hand, keeps beautiful roses in her garden that Isabel notes Momma would love. The lady's thriving garden is a sign that she's caring and kind, and she shows Isabel kindness and compassion throughout the novel.



### RUTH'S DOLLS

Ruth's baby dolls symbolize the fact that both she and Isabel are innocent children, and the dolls highlight the cruel, dehumanizing treatment the girls endure because they're enslaved. Ruth is unable to take her original baby doll with her when they're sold to a couple in New York, as it doesn't technically belong to her—because they're enslaved, Ruth and Isabel don't legally own anything. Ruth cries for weeks about losing her baby doll, something that highlights just how young and innocent she is. She's just a five-year-old girl who wants her favorite toy, like so many other young children—but because she's enslaved, Ruth is denied this small comfort. And though Isabel makes Ruth a cornhusk doll to replace the original baby doll, when Madam sells Ruth, Ruth isn't able to take her new doll with her, either. Again, Ruth is dehumanized and isn't treated like a real child, deserving of love and a doll to cuddle.

With Ruth gone, Isabel adopts Ruth's doll as her own. Even though Isabel is much older than Ruth, at 13 years old, she's still

a young girl whose childhood has been stolen from her due to slavery. Just like Ruth, Isabel snuggles the doll, kisses it, and sleeps with it for comfort. When the cornhusk doll is then lost in the massive fire, it symbolizes the end of Isabel's childhood—and shows again how dehumanizing slavery is, as Isabel loses track of the cornhusk doll because she's also trying to save Lady Seymour's prized possessions at the same time. Isabel is essentially forced to prioritize serving the people who own her over her own desires and comfort, and this effectively denies Isabel a childhood.



## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Atheneum Books for Young Readers edition of *Chains* published in 2010.

### Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ On the hearth stood the jar of flower seeds that Momma had collected, seeds she never had a chance to put into the ground. I didn't know what they'd grow into. I didn't know if they'd grow at all. It was fanciful notion, but I uncorked the jar, snatched a handful, and buried it deep in my pocket just as the privy door creaked open.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Momma/Dinah, Mr. Robert Finch, Ruth

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 13-14

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Robert has just brought Isabel and Ruth back to Miss Finch's house to collect their blankets and shoes before he sells the girls, and Isabel is searching for some memento to take with her (she doesn't technically own other things in the house, such as Ruth's baby doll).

This passage establishes Momma's seeds as symbols for Isabel and her development. Momma never got the chance to reach freedom, as she died a year before of smallpox—but she desperately wanted her daughters to be free. So as Isabel takes Momma's seeds with her, she's essentially taking on Momma's quest for freedom as her own. The seeds also connect Isabel to Momma and give her some memento to hold onto, which is especially important for Isabel as she believes that Momma's ghost won't be able to follow her over the water to New York, where Isabel and

Ruth are eventually sold.

The seeds are like Isabel in a lot of ways: just as Isabel doesn't know what the seeds are going to grow into, Isabel doesn't know what she's going to become when she grows up, either. But snagging the seeds is a commitment on Isabel's part to nurture her past—her connection to Momma—and also a promise to nurture herself as she starts to come of age.

It's also worth noting that taking the seeds illustrates Isabel's defiant, independent nature. She doesn't say, for instance, that she can technically take the seeds because they belong to her—it seems the case is really that the seeds are small and inconspicuous enough that she's able to sneak them into her pocket. Given the seeds' symbolism, this shows how committed Isabel is to achieving freedom: she's willing to break the rules if it means becoming free.

☝ “We don't hold with slaves being auctioned on our front steps. Won't stand for it, in fact.”



“I thought this was a business establishment,” Mr. Robert said. “Are you opposed to earning your percentage?”

“You want to listen to my Bill, mister,” Jenny said. “Advertise in the paper, that's what we do around here.”

“I don't have time for that. These are fine girls, they'll go quickly. Give me half an hour's time on your front steps, and we both walk away with heavier pockets.”

Jenny's husband pulled out a rag and wiped his hands on it. “Auctions of people ain't seemly. Why don't you just talk quiet-like to folks? Or leave a notice tacked up, that's proper.”

**Related Characters:** Mr. Robert Finch, Jenny (speaker), Isabel, Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 15

### Explanation and Analysis

In Newport, Mr. Robert is trying to convince a couple who own a tavern (Jenny and her husband Bill) to let him auction Isabel and Ruth on their steps. First, it's worth paying attention to the way that Mr. Robert goes about trying to convince Jenny and Bill to let him auction the girls on his steps. He makes it clear that though Jenny and Bill don't own enslaved people themselves, they can still profit from the slavery system by facilitating auctions and taking a cut of the seller's profits. This helps explain why slavery is so normal and accepted in the American colonies, even though

not everyone owns enslaved people: slavery is still a lucrative industry, and there's money to be made even if one doesn't directly profit from enslaved labor.



It's because slavery is so normalized in society that Jenny and Bill don't object to selling human beings outright and instead just object to Mr. Robert's desire to hold an auction. So while on the surface they seem sympathetic to Isabel and Ruth—they don't want the girls to go through the humiliation of being auctioned off like livestock—they also don't seem to object morally to slavery on the whole. Indeed, they give Mr. Robert advice on how to make slavery seem less horrific than it is: by still selling people, but by doing so quietly and discreetly rather than out in the open. To be clear, this doesn't actually improve things for Isabel and Ruth. All it does is help white people who aren't entirely comfortable with slavery, like Jenny and Bill, ignore it.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ Momma said that ghosts couldn't move over water. That's why kidnapped Africans got trapped in the Americas. When Poppa was stolen from Guinea, he said the ancestors howled and raged and sent a thunderstorm to turn the ship back around, but it was too late. The ghosts couldn't cross the water to help him so he had to make his own way in a strange place, sometimes with an iron collar around his neck. All of Momma's people had been stolen too and taken to Jamaica where she was born. Then she got sold to Rhode Island, and the ghosts of her parents couldn't follow and protect her neither.

They kept moving us over the water, stealing us away from our ghosts and our ancestors, who cried salty rivers into the sand. That's where Momma was now, wailing at the water's edge, while her girls were pulled out of sight under white sails that cracked in the wind.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Momma/Dinah, Poppa, Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 25

### Explanation and Analysis

As Isabel and Ruth travel to New York after the Locktons buy them, Isabel explains how slavery fractures Black families and disconnects people from their ancestors and their traditions. While Isabel never fully explains the spiritual system she mentions here, where ghosts can protect living people, it's clear that this system is extremely important—not just to her, but to many enslaved people in

the Americas. The ghosts of her ancestors, she implies, are able to protect her and guide her, assuming she stays geographically close to them and doesn't cross any major bodies of water. But slavery makes this impossible. Isabel explains that spiritual and ancestral connections were first severed when African people were abducted and brought to the Americas; both Poppa, and Momma's ancestors, lost their close connections with ancestors when they were kidnapped and brought across the Atlantic. Then, in the Americas, slavery continues to decimate families and destroy spiritual connections. Isabel, for instance, is cut off from her ancestors many times over: she can't connect with ancestors in Africa, ancestors in Jamaica, and now, her mother's ghost stuck in Rhode Island. It's also interesting to note that while Isabel and Ruth are the ones who are alive and suffering right now, Isabel is far more concerned about Momma's ghost's emotional turmoil at the moment. This speaks to how important these connections are: they don't just serve those who are still alive, but those who are deceased as well.

slavery is. She's not loyal to Lockton in a positive sense—she doesn't respect him, she doesn't want to please him, and she's not grateful to him. Rather, she realizes that there's a huge power imbalance between them. As Curzon points out, Lockton has total control over Isabel and Ruth's lives: he can make their lives livable, or he can have them murdered without a second thought. And all of that is legal for him to do. So Isabel fully understands that in order to keep herself safe, she should express some loyalty to Lockton. If she's "appropriately" loyal, he'll have no reason to hurt her, after all. But this doesn't make Isabel's loyalty sit well with her—in fact, feeling loyal to Lockton in this way is physically painful. Likening saying she's loyal to Lockton to having burrs in her shift suggests that thought exercises like this are painful and exhausting, but also impossible for Isabel to ignore (just as she probably wouldn't be able to ignore a burr irritating her skin).

Curzon is trying to get Isabel involved in politics by asking her this question (Lockton is a Loyalist, while Curzon and his owner, Bellingham, are rebels). But for Isabel, Lockton and Curzon's political affiliations don't matter right now. The war in the colonies doesn't matter to her. What matters is taking care of Ruth and, eventually, securing their freedom. So this passage shows how Isabel doesn't want to involve herself in politics because she doesn't see how politics apply to her.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ "You feel beholden to Lockton?"

"Pardon?"

"He's going to feed you and your sister, give you a place to sleep. He can order you sold, beat, or hung, if the mood takes him. That could make a person feel a kind of loyalty."

I stopped, considering this. "Someday I'll find that lawyer and Miss Mary's will and that'll free us. Until then, we need to eat, work, and stay together. So yes, I guess I'm loyal to Lockton."

The words tasted bitter. Being loyal to the one who owned me gave me prickly thoughts, like burrs trapped in my shift, pressing into my skin with every step.

**Related Characters:** Curzon, Isabel (speaker), Master Elihu Lockton, Ruth, Miss Mary Finch

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 39

### Explanation and Analysis



Curzon is showing Isabel where to get water, and on their way to the Tea Water Pump, he tries to gauge how loyal Isabel is to the Locktons—and whether she might be willing to spy for the rebels.

The mental gymnastics Isabel goes through as she decides that she is loyal to Lockton speaks to how dehumanizing

☝☝ "They won't say anything in front of me."

"You are a small black girl, Country," he said bitterly. "You are a slave, not a person. They'll say things in front of you they won't say in front of the white servants. 'Cause you don't count to them. It happens all the time to me."

**Related Characters:** Isabel, Curzon (speaker), Master Elihu Lockton, Master Bellingham

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 41

### Explanation and Analysis

Curzon has asked Isabel to come to him if she hears Lockton (who's a Loyalist) talking about British troops—but Isabel isn't convinced that Lockton will say anything in front of her. This is because Isabel still has a firm grasp on her humanity. She knows she's a person, and despite how dehumanizing slavery is in general, her former owner, Miss Mary Finch, did treat Isabel like a person. She taught Isabel to read, said please and thank you when she asked Isabel to do things,

and even specified in her will that Isabel and Ruth should go free upon her death. So Isabel has a very specific idea of what it's like to be enslaved: she'll work for no pay, and it will be dehumanizing in many ways, but the fact that she's a sentient person who can pay attention to what's said has never been a question for her.

Curzon insists, though, that things are different in New York. Here, white people won't see Isabel as a Black enslaved *person*; they'll instead see her as little more than a piece of furniture who performs necessary tasks when ordered. Saying that Isabel will be "a slave, not a person" highlights this. The implication is that enslaved people aren't seen as people—being enslaved deprives people of their humanity.

While Curzon doesn't dwell on it, it's also worth noting that he implies that enslaved people owned by Loyalists and rebel sympathizers suffer much the same dehumanizing treatment. His owner is a Patriot and is fighting for the colonies' freedom, while Lockton is fighting to keep the colonies under British rule. These political differences don't matter, though, in that people from both belief systems still profit from slavery.


## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ "Listen to me good. Them that feeds us"—she pointed upstairs—"they're Loyalists, Tories. That means we're Tories too, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." I nodded. "But..." I hesitated, not sure if I was allowed to ask questions. "Master Lockton claimed he was a Patriot on the docks."

[...] "He was faking to protect his skin. Some folks switch back and forth. One day they're for the king, the next, it's all 'liberty and freedom, huzzah!' A tribe of Mr. Facing-Both-Ways, that's what you'll find in New York."

**Related Characters:** Becky Barry, Isabel (speaker), Master Elihu Lockton

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 46

### Explanation and Analysis

As Becky and Isabel open windows in the parlor and notice rebel soldiers in the street outside, Becky explains the political situation to Isabel. Essentially, Becky proposes that for her own and Isabel's safety and continued employment, it's in their best interest to side with the Loyalists. It doesn't matter what they actually think; what matters is that they

keep their jobs (and in Isabel's case, that she stays safe from any physical violence she might suffer if she voices opinions her owners don't like).

Hearing that the Locktons are Loyalists is confusing for Isabel, as she heard Lockton saying he was a Patriot an hour ago. This shows where Isabel begins her process of developing her political consciousness: Isabel thinks that what a person says about their political leanings is true, just because they said it. She also implies that she doesn't expect people to change their political affiliation. It's something that she believes should be static and unchanging.

Becky saying that Lockton (and everyone else in New York) is constantly changing their stripes, though, shatters Isabel's naïve beliefs. Becky makes it clear that everyone changes their loyalty depending on the day—or depending on who around them has power, and who they're trying to impress. This introduces Isabel to the idea that she too can change her political affiliation, and she does just that, first seeking out the Patriots for help and then asking the British when the Patriots refuse to protect her.

## Chapter 9 Quotes



☝☝ "What is your name, girl?" she asked me.

"Isabel, ma'am," I said. "Isabel Finch."

"Ridiculous name," Madam said. She opened her fan and waved it in front of her face. "You are called Sal Lockton now. It's more suitable."

I forced myself to breathe in slow and regular instead of telling her that my name was not her affair. "Yes, ma'am."

**Related Characters:** Lady Seymour, Isabel, Madam Lockton (speaker), Miss Mary Finch

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 55

### Explanation and Analysis

When Lady Seymour asks Isabel for her name, Madam takes the opportunity to rename Isabel to something "more suitable." First, note that Isabel has already been with the Locktons for more than a week—and yet this seems like the first time that Madam expresses any interest in learning Isabel's name. (When Madam met Isabel and Ruth in the tavern in Newport, she referred to them as "the big one" and "the little one.") The fact that it's taken a week for Madam to learn Isabel's name—and that she's not even the one who initially expressed an interest (Lady Seymour

did)—illustrates how little Madam cares about Isabel.

Then, Madam's disinterest becomes cruel and sinister when she deems Isabel a "ridiculous name" and gives Isabel a new name, Sal. Renaming Isabel allows Madam to flaunt her total power over Isabel. Under the laws of slavery, Isabel has no right to assert that Sal isn't her name and insist on being called Isabel—her name is Madam's domain. So renaming Isabel is a way to make Isabel feel powerless and dehumanized. It works: Isabel knows she has no standing to assert her identity and stand up for herself, so she can only focus on her breathing and accept that she can no longer go by Isabel.

It's also worth noting that Sal is a comparatively simple and plain name compared to Isabel, and that Isabel has biblical and royal origins (there have been Spanish and English queens named Isabel or Isabella). This no doubt plays into Madam's desire to rename Isabel—Madam wants to make Isabel feel as low and powerless as possible, and depriving her of such a beautiful name is an easy way to do that.

## Chapter 15 Quotes



☝☝ "The child's curse will poison us all. I want her sold, Elihu, sold today."

[...]

"They are sisters, Anne. One must remember that."

"Please, Madam," I said. "She's too little. She'll be hurt."

**Related Characters:** Madam Lockton, Master Elihu Lockton, Isabel (speaker), Ruth, Becky Barry

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis

Ruth has just suffered a seizure in front of Madam. Madam believes that epilepsy is a sign of demonic possession or a curse, so she insists that her husband must sell Ruth.

While it's important to consider that Madam's viewpoint here was common for millennia (and people with epilepsy still suffer some stigma today), her beliefs and her desire to sell Ruth are still dehumanizing. As Isabel points out, Ruth is only a small child—she's five years old, too young to be able to easily adapt to being separated from her big sister. For Madam, though, this isn't a concern because she doesn't see Ruth as an actual child. Up until now, Ruth has been a delightful little doll for Madam and a help around the house, not a child to nurture and care for. And now, Ruth is just a

body that possesses a curse, which Madam seems to believe will harm everyone else in the house. So while it's not new that Madam is dehumanizing Ruth, her methods have changed somewhat as she's learned more about Ruth's condition.

Lockton, for his part, is no hero—he's callous and cruel to Isabel at times, he sees no problem with owning human beings, and he seldom tries to protect Isabel from Madam's abuse. But here, he shows that he does see Ruth and Isabel as human (albeit humans to exploit and abuse) when he reminds Madam that the girls are sisters. He acknowledges, in other words, that they have emotions and form emotional bonds with each other, as all people do. But this is something Madam refuses to acknowledge.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ "She is not suffering her particular ailment, is she?" Madam asked, her voice cutting like a blade.

"No, ma'am," I lied again. "She helped carry out the ashes this morning, and it tired her."

Madam glared a moment longer.

Lady Seymour stepped in front of Madam. "The heat affects small children more than most. Make sure your sister drinks some water before any more chores."

**Related Characters:** Madam Lockton, Isabel, Lady Seymour (speaker), Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 121

### Explanation and Analysis

Ruth is having a small seizure in the street on the way home from church. For Isabel, this is an extremely stressful moment—that Ruth is having a seizure, and isn't just ill or frightened (there are cannons going off), isn't immediately obvious to people who don't know she suffers from epilepsy. Madam, though, knows Ruth experiences seizures and believes they're a sign of demonic possession or that Ruth is cursed. This is why Isabel is so frightened of Madam's "cutting" voice; Isabel knows that Madam does not want to be humiliated in public if it were to get out that she owns a person who experiences seizures. Madam sees Ruth as a liability, both in terms of Ruth's supposed curse and because Ruth could now damage Madam's reputation. Isabel knows that Madam wants to sell Ruth, so she's going out of her way to make it seem like Ruth is fine—she doesn't want to give Madam any excuse to decide it's time to sell her sister.





It's unclear if Lady Seymour is aware that Ruth has epilepsy, but whether she does or not, her response is still pretty compassionate. Stepping in front of Madam is a way for Lady Seymour to physically put herself between the girls and Madam, which is a display of her power—she doesn't like it when Madam treats Isabel and Ruth this way. She also recognizes that Ruth is a child and, like all children, is more likely to be affected by extreme heat. Then, referring to Ruth as Isabel's sister highlights that she knows Isabel and Ruth are related by blood—and that it matters that they're sisters. She wants Ruth to be well, and she also wants to make sure that everyone involved in this exchange knows that *she* knows that Isabel and Ruth are people and family members.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ As the crowd marched off to make bullets and celebrate liberty and independence in the taverns, I realized dark was fast falling, and I had tarried overly long. I picked up a sliver of lead that lay in the street. It was fringed with gilt; my own piece of majesty. *Tyrants beware*, I thought as I put it in my pocket.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Madam Lockton

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

The Continental Congress has just declared independence, and Isabel has stopped to listen to a recitation of the Declaration of Independence and watch Patriots pull down and cut up a statue of King George. The statue was painted to look gold, but it was actually made of soft lead.

Public statues like this are designed to convey that the person they depict—in this case, King George of England—are powerful and wealthy (a gold statue the size of this one would be wildly expensive). So seeing the statue brought down and made to show its true colors is transformative for Isabel. It starts to introduce her to the idea that powerful people in her life are, perhaps, not as powerful as they seem. They, too, could perhaps be taken down if Isabel were able to figure out a way to do that. Isabel doesn't specify anyone in particular, but her main antagonist is Madam Lockton, so she's probably the "tyrant" Isabel warns as she pockets the piece of lead.

This experience also helps stir Isabel's support for the Patriots, or at least for their ideals of equality and justice. Various writings—including the Declaration of

Independence in this chapter and, later, Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense*—insist that all people are created equal, and that people like King George have no right to subjugate others just because they're wealthy. Seeing the statue come down crystallizes these ideas for Isabel so that later, though she's not entirely sold on the Patriots themselves, she decides that she does believe in their rhetoric.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ I would turn myself over to the rebels. I had helped them fair and square. Now it was their turn.  
We were all fighting for liberty.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Colonel Regan, Madam Lockton, Ruth

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 137

### Explanation and Analysis

Isabel is running away from Madam—Madam sold Ruth, and Isabel has insulted Madam. She decides her only option is to ask the Patriots for help.

Isabel decides to turn to the rebels—Colonel Regan specifically—because she recently passed intelligence to them that Lockton and the Loyalists were plotting to assassinate General Washington. The colonel promised to help free Isabel and Ruth in exchange for "useful" information. Isabel believes that she's held up her end of the deal and now it's time for the colonel to pay up. But as what happens next reveals (Isabel is returned to Madam, imprisoned, and branded), Isabel is wrong to believe that the Patriots are going to treat her like a fellow human being who deserves help and dignity. She may have helped them, but they still see Isabel as property—and property that doesn't belong to them.

In this moment, though, Isabel believes that she and the rebels are all fighting for the same thing: liberty. This is an oversimplified view of the Revolutionary War; taxation without representation on the part of the colonists is in no way the same as slavery. But Isabel is still using the rebels' rhetoric to inform how she thinks about her own situation, something the novel insists is still valuable. Rebel rhetoric helps Isabel figure out who she is, and what she believes, even if she remains focused on her own fights and not as much on the Revolutionary War.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☹️ The fire in my face burned on and on, deep through my flesh, searing my soul. Stars exploded out the top of my head and all of my words and all of my rememberies followed them up to the sun, burning to ash that floated back and settled in the mud.

A few people at the edge of the crowd had fallen silent. They walked away with their heads down.

My momma and poppa appeared from the shadows. They flew to me and wrapped their arms around me and cooled my face with their ghost tears.

Night crept into my soul.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Poppa, Madam Lockton, Momma/Dinah

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 148

### Explanation and Analysis

Isabel has just been branded with an I on her cheek as punishment for being insolent, trying to run away, and hitting Madam (which Isabel didn't do). The way Isabel describes the branding illuminates how dehumanizing this experience is. It's physically painful, but it's also emotionally excruciating—it deprives Isabel of all her memories and her ability to even think in words. It scars her soul and allows “night” to creep in. Given how Isabel behaves after this point, she likely uses “night” to refer to depression, trauma, and hopelessness, as this experience makes Isabel feel like it's not worth it to keep fighting back. Being branded communicates to her that she's a body to be bought and sold, not a person with bodily autonomy and dignity.

The people who leave the crowd with their heads down perhaps pick up on this—that what they just witnessed is something horrifying, not entertainment. Isabel previously described an excited, jeering crowd, so she seems to recognize that not everyone is excited to see another person mutilated. But as happens so often in *Chains*, these people are unwilling to help Isabel, or they don't have the power to do so.

Then, it's impossible to tell whether Isabel is hallucinating her parents' ghosts or if they've truly come to comfort her, but the fact remains that in this moment of trauma, her parents appear to help her get through it. Following this, though, Isabel commits herself even harder to forgetting her parents, as it's too painful for her to think of the life they all should've lived together—free. So even as Isabel's connection to her parents starts to emotionally (and

perhaps physically) heal her here, she's still not fully ready to face her trauma and remember her parents when she's not in an actively traumatic situation.

## Chapter 25 Quotes

☹️ Melancholy held me hostage, and the bees built a hive of sadness in my soul. Dark honey filled up inside me, drowning my thoughts and making it hard to move my eyes and hands. I worked as a puppet trained to scrub and carry, curtsy and nod.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Madam Lockton, Ruth

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 157

### Explanation and Analysis

After returning to the Locktons' home after being branded (Isabel recovered from a fever and the branding at Lady Seymour's house), Isabel essentially shuts down. Part of this also comes from the fact that Madam sold Ruth, so Isabel is now alone at the Lockton house.

At this point, Isabel's grief becomes totally overwhelming. She's been traumatized—being branded and contracting a fever that kept her in bed for days was physically and emotionally traumatizing—and she's also reeling after not being able to protect Ruth from Madam. Isabel feels trapped by her grief; it's “h[olding] [her] hostage” and filling her with “honey” that makes it impossible to do anything but exactly what she's told. The way that Isabel talks about the bees suggests that the bees are a metaphorical manifestation of her trauma—they, like her trauma, are living inside her and making it impossible for her to move on. Isabel won't be able to heal until she banishes the bees from her head and body, thereby freeing herself to heal.

All of that trauma is dehumanizing, and the result of being dehumanized this way is that Isabel's spirit is temporarily broken. She can't think or even really notice the world around her. Referring to herself as a puppet—an inanimate object that someone else controls—is a way of saying that Isabel no longer feels in control of her body, her mind, or anything else. This is probably more or less what Madam wanted to happen—Madam, after all, is very interested in having as much power over her staff as possible, which is why she wants to own enslaved people rather than take on indentured servants, for instance.

“Listen,” he started. “Our freedom—”  
I did not let him continue. “You are blind. They don’t want us free. They just want liberty for themselves.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, no. I understand right good,” I countered. “I shouldn’t have believed your rebel lies. I should have taken Ruth and run the night we landed. Even if we drowned, we would have been together.”

**Related Characters:** Curzon, Isabel (speaker), Ruth, Colonel Regan

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 160-161

### Explanation and Analysis

Becky has sent Isabel outside to tell Curzon to go away, and Isabel and Curzon’s conversation turns into an argument about whether the Patriots really care about helping enslaved people become free.

Curzon is extremely idealistic. He believes it when the Patriots say that all men are created equal, and all people deserve freedom—he believes he, as a Black enslaved man, is included in that. This is why he’s fully on board with the rebel cause and why he’s encouraged Isabel to spy on the Locktons for the rebels.

After the Patriot Colonel Regan was unwilling to intervene and save Isabel from Madam, though, Isabel is no longer willing to share in Curzon’s idealism. Her innocence has shattered somewhat, and she’s no longer willing to believe that people will help her just because they believe all people deserve freedom. Generally, Isabel is now disillusioned with politics—she believes it was a mistake to get involved in politics at all, and she blames her involvement for her inability to save Ruth. So now Isabel believes it would’ve been better to just skip politics altogether and run away with Ruth. Noting that she’d rather drown and be with Ruth than be alone now speaks both to how connected Isabel is to Ruth—and how wholly disillusioned she is with anyone ever being able to help her.

## Chapter 26 Quotes

“A second man, this one with neatly trimmed hair, leaned on his shovel. “Dunmore freed the Virginia slaves so the crops would go unharvested and ruin the planters. The British care not for us, they care only for victory. Some Patriots own slaves, yes, but you must listen to their words: ‘all men, created equal.’ The words come first. They’ll pull the deeds and the justice behind them.”

**Related Characters:** Isabel

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 164

### Explanation and Analysis

At the Tea Water Pump one day, Isabel listens to the men around her discussing a British man, Lord Dunmore, who recently freed enslaved people in Virginia. The men are arguing about whether the British or the Americans will be the most helpful to enslaved people.

The fact that this conversation is taking place at all highlights the idea that politics is personal. Politics isn’t just about choosing a side and sticking with it—people choose a particular political party, or aggressor in a war in this case, because they believe it’s going to help them. To the enslaved people in New York, the particulars of the conflict between the British and the Americans aren’t as important as the question of which side is committed to helping free them.

And on the surface, it seems like the answer should be easy: the Patriots, who say things like “all men, created equal.” The man speaking here clearly believes that Black enslaved men and women are included in this sentiment, so he’s loyal to the Patriots. And he sees that there’s a political motive for Dunmore to free enslaved people in Virginia, too. If the crops go unharvested, white slaveowners won’t get any money for their crops. This destroys them financially, and depending on the crops in question, it also creates huge problems in the American food supply chain. In other words, it’s not about freeing enslaved people who deserve to be free at all—it’s just a war strategy.

This man also makes it clear that in his understanding, it’s necessary to make some allowances for the fact that the Patriots aren’t perfect. Some of them own enslaved people. But the ideas are there—they clearly believe in the ideal of equality, even if they’re not fully willing to get behind it yet and extend freedom and equality to everyone.


## Chapter 32 Quotes

“All I had lost in the confusion was Ruth’s doll. All I had lost was everything.”

My bees a’swarmed back into my brainpan. They hummed loud so I need not ponder on the baby doll. The burned-over district looked like the inside of me. It was hard to tell where one stopped and the other started.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Ruth, Lady Seymour

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 197-98

### Explanation and Analysis

Isabel has recently rescued Lady Seymour from the devastating fire that destroyed part of New York. In the fire, Isabel did lose Ruth's baby doll.

Prior to the fire, Isabel clung to Ruth's baby doll as a symbol of Ruth herself. The doll symbolized Ruth's youth, innocence, and helplessness, and it helped Isabel feel close to her sister. Clinging to the doll also pointed to the fact that while she's 13, Isabel is also still a child—a doll is still a comfort to her, just as it was to Ruth. So losing the doll causes Isabel immense grief, as she's lost not just her sister, but her own innocence as well.

This causes the bees—manifestations of Isabel's grief and trauma—to overtake her brain. Their buzzing causes her to not be able to think about the doll, which temporarily protects Isabel from having to think about something so painful. But this time when the bees appear, Isabel fears that she's never going to recover, since she feels like the fire has literally destroyed her soul. While being branded burned Isabel's soul and let a darkness into her soul, she now feels totally burned down. Isabel is, at this moment, at her lowest point in the novel.

## Chapter 36 Quotes

💬 “Please, ma’am,” I tried again. “How did you know?”

Her gaze returned to the logs in the hearth. “Take care how you go, Isabel. Many people think it is a fine and Christian thing to help the prisoners. I do not think my niece is one of them.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I whispered.

**Related Characters:** Isabel, Lady Seymour (speaker), Curzon, Madam Lockton

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 227

### Explanation and Analysis

One afternoon, as Lady Seymour writes a list of errands for Isabel to run for her, she reveals that she knows Isabel is taking table scraps to the prison—and warns Isabel that

Madam will be very angry if she were to find out.

The novel never reveals how Lady Seymour knows Isabel is taking food to prisoners, and not knowing is extremely worrying for Isabel. It makes her question where she messed up, where she left evidence of what she's doing for someone like Lady Seymour to find. This speaks to how anxious Isabel is in general: she knows she's putting herself in danger by taking food to the prison, and it's essential that few, or no, people know what she's doing.

Lady Seymour, however, doesn't share how she knows and instead warns Isabel that she must watch out for Madam. This is the first time that Lady Seymour says anything that shows she doesn't approve of how Madam treats Isabel (though Lady Seymour has shown through previous actions that she doesn't appreciate Madam's cruelty). With this, she more formally aligns herself as Isabel's ally—but Lady Seymour's power is also slipping. She's currently ill, and so can't place herself between Madam and Isabel like she once could. For now, this warning is all she can do to help Isabel.

What Lady Seymour says about Madam also highlights how cruel Madam is. To Lady Seymour, Isabel, and apparently other Loyalists around town, it's good and generous to take food to prisoners who are freezing and being starved. They're people in need of a bite to eat, even if they don't align politically with Lady Seymour. But to Madam, simply being Patriots marks the men as worthy of death.

💬 A thought surfaced through my ashes.

*She cannot chain my soul.*

Yes, she could hurt me. She'd already done so. But what was one more beating? A flogging, even? I would bleed, or not. Scar, or not. Live, or not. But she could no longer harm Ruth, and she could not hurt my soul, not unless I gave it to her.

This was a new notion to me and a curious one.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Madam Lockton, Ruth

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 346-47

### Explanation and Analysis

On Christmas, Isabel gets the afternoon off and walks all over New York. Earlier, Madam warned Isabel to not go to the prison anymore—but Isabel starts to realize that she doesn't actually have to listen to Madam. She doesn't have to give Madam her soul.


Essentially, what Isabel realizes in this passage is that for now, at least, freedom for her might not look like being legally free and making her own money at home in Rhode Island. Given her current circumstances, she must settle for a different kind of freedom: the freedom to think her own thoughts and to control her own soul. Isabel realizes this because she's at such a low point right now after being branded, after Madam sold Ruth, and after losing Ruth's doll in the devastating fire. In this passage, Isabel starts to heal by realizing that she doesn't have to let Madam tear her down and destroy her, as these other events have destroyed her. The physical pain is something Isabel can deal with if Madam does become violent with her—but the most important thing to her survival, Isabel realizes now, is that she doesn't let Madam break her spirit.

## Chapter 40 Quotes

☝ “You named him after the King?” Hannah asked.

“Perhaps,” Sarah said cheerfully. “We never figured the colonists would hold on this long. My man was saying the other night that mebbe the King should stop the war. Mebbe the babe and us might stay here, not sail home. ‘Plenty of room here,’ he said.” She kissed the baby’s nose. “A name like George is a good one on either side of the ocean.”

**Related Characters:** Hannah, Sarah (speaker), General George Washington

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 259

### Explanation and Analysis

Sarah, a soldier’s wife living with the Locktons, has just given birth to a son she’s named George. She and her husband (who’s fighting for the British) are considering staying in the colonies.



Sarah’s choice to name her baby George symbolizes the novel’s insistence that politics is personal, and that people choose to identify with one side or the other because they believe their side of choice is going to help them somehow. Sarah won’t reveal whether she named baby George after King George of England because, if the Americans win the war and she and her husband decide to stay, she can always claim that she named him after General George Washington. This is what she means by George being a good name “on either side of the ocean.” She, like everyone else in New York, is more than willing to change her mind

when confronted with new information (such as that the colonists are holding out longer than expected) and make different choices about what to believe and do with her life. Indeed, she’s being kind of cagey, but she also seems to be really close to saying that she believes the colonists should be free—something that probably isn’t considered appropriate for her to say, as the wife of a British soldier.

☝ It would have eased her mind if I thanked her for wanting to buy me away from Madam. I tried to be grateful but could not. A body does not like being bought and sold like a basket of eggs, even if the person who cracks the shells is kind. “Isabel?”

She awaited some word from me. I did not know how to explain myself. It was like talking to her maid, Angelika, who was so much like me and at the same time so much different. We two had no string of words that could tie us together.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Lady Seymour, Madam Lockton, The Dutch Maid/Angelika

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 261

### Explanation and Analysis

Lady Seymour is ill and will probably die soon. To clear her conscience before she does, the lady tells Isabel that she tried and failed to purchase Isabel from Madam, expecting this to be a gift of sorts to Isabel. For Isabel, though, it’s not a gift or a comfort to hear that Lady Seymour wanted to buy her. She can acknowledge that Lady Seymour would’ve been a much kinder owner than Madam has been—Lady Seymour isn’t violent, calls Isabel by her given name, and makes sure Isabel gets something nourishing to eat whenever she sees her. But none of this, Isabel explains, excuses the fact that Lady Seymour would still have owned another human being, something that’s dehumanizing and inexcusable. It turns Isabel into something inanimate and useful, like a basket of eggs. Indeed, referring to Lady Seymour as “the person who cracks the shells” in this analogy is subtly violent—cracking eggs destroys them, and Isabel is saying that even being enslaved by Lady Seymour would continue to destroy her spirit.



The issue, Isabel realizes, stems in part from the fact that she and Lady Seymour speak what seems like different language when it comes to slavery. To Lady Seymour, slavery is normal, and it’s not bad—assuming one doesn’t buy or sell children, separate families, or beat the people one owns. But

this ignores again the fact that enslaved people are still *people*, and it's this idea that Lady Seymour doesn't seem to grasp. So while Lady Seymour speaks a language where slavery is normal and expected, Isabel speaks one where slavery is terrible, dehumanizing, and not at all desirable—no matter how kind someone is to an enslaved person. No matter how kind Lady Seymour or other people are to Isabel, their kindness isn't enough to make it okay that they don't think she should be free.

## Chapter 42 Quotes

☝ I laid down one long road of a sentence in my remembrance: "For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever." Way I saw it, Mr. Paine was saying all people were the same, that no one deserved a crown or was born to be higher than another. That's why America could make its own freedom.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 271

### Explanation and Analysis

Isabel finishes reading Thomas Paine's political pamphlet *Common Sense* the night before the ball. This is a transformative experience for Isabel, as it gives her the language to articulate not just why Americans have the right to be free—but why she, as an enslaved person, *also* has the right to seek her freedom. Isabel reads Paine's words not just as saying that it's inappropriate for someone like King George of England to "to set up his own family in perpetual preference for all others for ever." She takes this a step further, to read it as saying that it's inappropriate for white people to decide that they're better than the Black people they enslave. Isabel now has the language to say that she believes she was born equal to the white people who enslave her, and this is why it's totally appropriate for her to continue to believe that one day, she should be free.

This is significant in part because, while Isabel seems to now believe fully in the Patriots' cause, she's applying their rhetoric to her own situation. Her interest doesn't lie with the war itself. She's interested instead in how the war, and how the writings that justify the war, apply to her and to her life.

## Chapter 43 Quotes

☝☝ Everybody carried a little evil in them, Momma once told me. Madam Lockton had more than her share. The poison had eaten holes through her soul and made room for vermin to nest inside her.

[...]



The evil inside of me woke and crackled like lightning. I could wrap my hands around her throat. I could brain her with a poker, thrust her face into the flames. I could beat her senseless with my fists.

I shook from the effort of holding myself still, clutching the crumpled paper. Momma said we had to fight the evil inside us by overcoming it with goodness. She said it was a hard thing to do, but it made us worthy.

I breathed deep to steady myself.

I threw the Captain's note into the fire.

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Madam Lockton, Momma/Dinah

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 280-81

### Explanation and Analysis

Madam has just discovered Isabel is delivering messages for the Patriots; she's beating Isabel with a riding crop and insisting that Isabel hand over the note. But though Isabel is paying attention to Madam, her mind is elsewhere. Over the last few weeks, Isabel has gotten more comfortable thinking about Momma and remembering Momma's advice. Here, Isabel uses Momma's advice to choose nonviolent resistance to get back at Madam.

For Isabel, remembering Momma's words helps her better understand Madam and how Madam came to be so evil. Madam, in Momma's understanding of the world, hasn't fought the evil inside of her, and so it's spread, turning her into the cruel owner Isabel now fears. But Madam is a fully developed adult, and Isabel is still a child. She still has a choice as to what kind of person she wants to be as she grows. So though Isabel is well aware that she could injure or kill Madam, and that doing so might feel cathartic and make Isabel feel powerful, Isabel knows that in this situation, she should follow Momma's advice and choose not to engage. Burning the note is, of course, still resistance—and Madam continues to throw a tantrum about Isabel's behavior after Isabel burns the note. But this choice allows Isabel to keep her conscience clean, and to continue to follow in Momma's footsteps as she grows and

develops her adult identity.

☝ I touched it, smooth and warm, flesh made silk.

The scars on Poppa's cheek had been three lines across his cheek, carved with a sharp blade. He was proud of his marks. In the land of his ancestors, they made him into a man.



I traced the *I* with my fingertip.

*This is my country mark.* I did not ask for it, but I would carry it as Poppa carried his. It made me his daughter. It made me strong.

I took a step back, seeing near my whole self in the mirror. I pushed back my shoulders and raised my chin, my back straight as an arrow.

*This mark stands for Isabel.*

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Poppa, Grandfather, Madam Lockton

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 286

### Explanation and Analysis

Isabel is in the second-floor parlor, stealing the items she needs (a map and a pass) to run away and find Ruth in South Carolina. She's just seen herself in the mirror for the first time since being branded.

In this moment, Isabel starts to confront her trauma and vows to no longer try to forget her ancestors. Receiving the brand on her face was extremely traumatizing—she did nothing to deserve it, and the judge who allowed this punishment even noted that it's not a punishment normally handed down for enslaved people who commit the same crimes as Isabel (those people are whipped instead). Madam insisted that Isabel be branded in an attempt to humiliate and dehumanize Isabel forever, as Isabel will never be able to hide from the *I* burned into her skin. In Madam's understanding, it forever marks Isabel as insolent—and as an enslaved person.

But in this passage, Isabel starts to see things differently. She's spent most of the novel lamenting that she can't connect to her ancestors, but here she realizes that she can connect to them in different ways. As Grandfather, the man at the Tea Water Pump counseled Isabel months ago, Isabel doesn't need to see her brand as something shameful. Rather, it's proof that she survived what was essentially a trial by fire (Isabel had a fever during that time and described feeling like she was literally burning). Isabel has



now emerged on the other side, damaged but whole. And deciding that her *I* is like Poppa's scars, and that they make her a woman, suggests that Isabel is coming of age in this moment. Her experiences have been traumatizing, but she is moving past them and into adulthood. And the final aspect of this is deciding that the *I* stands not for "insolent," but for Isabel. In this way, Isabel incorporates the brand into her identity. She sees it now as a part of her and as something that she welcomes, not something that marks her as inferior.


☝ I was not a Lockton. Nor a Finch. Isabel Rhode Island? That would not do. Isabel Cuffe, after Poppa, or Isabel Dinah, after Momma?

I closed my eyes and thought of home; the smell of fresh-cut hay and the taste of raspberries. Robins chasing bugs in the bean patch. Setting worms to work at the base of the corn plants. Showing Ruth what was weed and what was flower...

I opened my eyes, dipped the quill, and wrote out my true name: *Isabel Gardener, being a Free Negro* [...]

**Related Characters:** Isabel (speaker), Poppa, Ruth, Madam Lockton, Momma/Dinah

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 287

### Explanation and Analysis

Isabel is filling out a pass, which will allow her to get past guards if she runs into anyone in New York. It will essentially free her, and she has to come up with an appropriate name for herself.

In this passage, Isabel finally completes her coming of age journey and asserts her preferred adult identity. Right from the start, Isabel rejects the name the Locktons gave her: Sal Lockton. Sal Lockton is a name that signifies that Isabel is enslaved and is in no way her own person, since Madam changed Isabel's name to Sal specifically to dehumanize her. It's an easy choice to throw out Sal for this reason.

But while it's easy for Isabel to know that her first name is Isabel, it's much harder when she has to come up with a last name for herself. Finch is the name of Isabel's original owner, Miss Mary Finch. So though Miss Finch was kind to Isabel and even stated in her will that Isabel should be freed upon her death, Isabel doesn't want to identify herself as an enslaved person. Then, Isabel considers naming herself

after her parents. While her parents have been major forces in Isabel's life, and while their advice has guided her development, it doesn't feel right for her to choose one parent or the other to inspire her last name.

Choosing Gardener reaffirms gardens—and Momma's mystery seeds—as symbols for Isabel's growth and development. Isabel might not have gotten the seeds to grow into anything identifiable over the course of the novel, but by choosing a name that affirms Isabel's love of

nurturing and helping things (including herself) grow, Isabel shows that she's committed to her continual development. The name also connects her to Ruth, as she and Ruth share so many happy memories in the garden in Rhode Island. And with this name and the pass, Isabel sets herself free. Her freedom isn't absolute—the pass is forged, so Isabel is still legally enslaved. But now that Isabel is secure in her identity, she's found that she's mentally and emotionally freer.





## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Since Momma always said that the best time to talk to ghosts is just before sunrise, Isabel asks if she might run ahead of the wagon. Pastor Weeks is driving with Old Ben, an enslaved person he owns, next to him. Isabel's little sister, Ruth (who has a "peculiar manner of being") sits next to the coffin that holds Miss Mary Finch, and Mr. Robert Finch rides behind. When Pastor Weeks explains to Mr. Finch that Isabel has family buried nearby and would like to visit their graves, Mr. Robert's face screws up. He arrived a few weeks ago to visit his aunt, Miss Finch—and moved in when he heard her wet cough. He stole her money before her body was even cold and is now improperly hurrying her burial along. But he gives his permission for Isabel to run ahead.

Isabel hurries past the white graveyard to the Black graveyard, where she picks a few violets. Momma's grave is marked by a big stone and a wooden cross; she died a year ago of smallpox. The disease left Isabel and Ruth covered in scars. Kneeling by the grave, Isabel asks Momma to cross over for a bit, but she doesn't see Momma's kerchief appear in the mist. As Isabel begs Momma to visit her, the wagon carrying Miss Finch reaches the graveyard gate.

Nothing happens. Maybe Momma is angry because Isabel couldn't bury her properly, but Isabel didn't know what to do—she only said some prayers. As the men unload Miss Finch's coffin, Isabel leaves an offering of an oatcake smeared in honey. She turns and races back to the wagon when Mr. Robert shouts for her. He grabs her arm roughly and tells her to "go pray for her that owned you."

*Since Isabel has to ask permission to visit her own mother's grave, this establishes her as being enslaved like Old Ben—which means she doesn't have the power to dictate anything about her life. The fact that Mr. Robert seems so annoyed that Isabel wants to visit Momma's grave marks him as uncompassionate and cruel, especially given how he also treated his aunt in her final days. He's greedy and selfish—and since Isabel is enslaved and therefore considered valuable property, this could mean that he poses a danger to her.*



*Though Momma is deceased, Isabel hasn't stopped relying on Momma's ghost for advice and protection. Describing Isabel begging Momma to visit while the wagon approaches the graveyard gate adds tension—Isabel apparently doesn't have much time to make her plea.*



*As Isabel describes possibly burying Momma wrong, it's clear that being enslaved has cut Isabel off from old traditions. Slaveholders often forced enslaved people to convert to Christianity to purposefully distance them from tribal traditions, which seems to be what's happened here. And Mr. Robert makes it clear that he thinks Isabel's focus should be on her former owner—not her own family.*



## CHAPTER 2

Once the funeral is over, Isabel knows this is the moment she's been waiting for. She must be bold. Isabel stands, takes Ruth by the hand, and asks Pastor Weeks for a moment of his time. She then asks where she and Ruth should go to work and sleep. When Pastor Weeks says Mr. Robert owns the girls now, Isabel says that Miss Finch freed them in her will. At this, Mr. Robert snorts—his aunt didn't need a will. But Isabel says she saw the lawyer write it, and Miss Finch asked Isabel to read it to her later. Pastor Weeks confirms for the incredulous Mr. Robert that Isabel does know how to read; Miss Finch "had some odd notions."

Then, when Mr. Robert asks where the lawyer is, Pastor Weeks says he went to Boston just before the blockade. Mr. Robert insists that Isabel must be lying then, since there's no way to prove there was a will or what it said. Isabel argues, but Pastor Weeks tells her to remember her place—and he assures her that Mr. Robert will be a good master. Isabel is cold with fear as Mr. Robert asks to borrow the pastor's wagon so he can sell the girls in Newport. Isabel wants to run; she's been sold once before. Ruth was just a baby, and "they" had separated Momma, Ruth, and Isabel from Poppa. The white men beat Poppa when he resisted.

## CHAPTER 3

Mr. Robert takes Isabel and Ruth back to Miss Finch's house so they can collect their shoes and blankets. Isabel can't take anything else—not even Ruth's baby **doll** made of bits of calico, or the bowl Poppa made her—since nothing else belongs to her. But she grabs a handful of **seeds** that Momma collected before she died. Who knows what they'll grow into.

Several hours later, Mr. Robert reaches Newport. He leads Ruth and Isabel into Sullivan's Tavern, which is filled with mostly country people and a few rich couples. Everyone is arguing about British soldiers, taxes, and war. Ruth covers her ears. She's "simpleminded and prone to fits," and loud places and excitement can bring on the fits. Mr. Robert tells the girls to stand in the corner and approaches the proprietor.

*Isabel is essentially asking for her freedom—something that, as an enslaved person, Isabel is in no way encouraged to do. This is why it's such an anxious moment for her. And Mr. Robert and Pastor Weeks' response shows that Isabel has good reason to be apprehensive: they have no interest in believing her, let alone helping her figure out where to go. Enslaved people were usually forbidden from learning to read, so the fact that Isabel is literate may make her seem like a dangerous liability.*



*The way Isabel approached Pastor Weeks implies that he's someone she trusted to take her seriously and advocate for her. But she learns here that she can't always count on people who are kind to her to take that kindness all the way to helping her become free—and assuring her that Mr. Robert will be good to her just rings hollow. Isabel knows that being sold could put her in grave danger, given what happened to Poppa last time the family was sold. The fact that the family was separated also shows how little regard white slaveowners have for Black families: family bonds simply don't matter.*



*It drives home how powerless Isabel and Ruth are when Isabel notes that she doesn't technically own anything. Ruth, who's a small child, can't even take her baby doll—which shows how dehumanizing slavery is, that a child is denied this small comfort. But Momma's seeds emerge as a symbol of hope and the future—perhaps Isabel, like the seeds, can grow into something great.*



*It's still a mystery as to what exactly plagues Ruth, but it's clear that Isabel has a lot of anxiety surrounding keeping Ruth from experiencing a "fit." Noting that everyone is talking about British soldiers and the war suggests that the Revolutionary War is a huge concern right now. But Isabel has other things to worry about (like Ruth, and being sold), so the war doesn't seem as important to her.*



The proprietor's wife, whom a patron calls Jenny, looks familiar to Isabel. Jenny frowns as her husband refuses to let Mr. Robert auction the girls on the tavern's steps—that's not considered proper here. Jenny tells Mr. Robert to talk quietly to people, or to put an ad in the paper. Jenny argues with Mr. Robert until her husband tells her to take the girls into the kitchen to get them some food. Mr. Robert only agrees when Jenny says she won't charge him.

In the kitchen, Jenny serves Isabel and Ruth bowls of stew. She tells Isabel that it's not worth it to run, and that she wishes she could help—it's the least she could do for Dinah, their mother. Jenny explains that she was an indentured servant working on the same farm as Dinah; Dinah was very nice to her. Isabel quickly explains what's happening and asks if Jenny could buy her. But Jenny refuses just as her husband enters and says Mr. Robert wants the girls.

Just outside the kitchen, Mr. Robert is standing next to a middle-aged woman in an expensive gown. She asks what's wrong with Isabel and Ruth; there must be something wrong if they're so cheap. Mr. Robert explains that he's dealing with his aunt's estate. Then, the woman's husband walks up and asks if Mr. Robert supports the king or the rebellion. When Mr. Robert says he supports the king, the man introduces himself as Elihu Lockton and his wife as Anne. Mr. Robert offers to buy them a meal and discuss the sale, so Isabel and Ruth stand with their backs to the wall and watch them eat.

Mr. Lockton is tall and overweight. He's a merchant, and he gripes about how much the uprising in Boston is costing him. Missus Lockton clearly hates the food, but Isabel can't tell what kind of a mistress she'll be. Finally, the men light their pipes, and Missus Lockton calls Ruth and Isabel forward. She inspects their bodies and asks Isabel what they can do. Mr. Lockton asks why his wife can't just "procure another indentured girl" in New York, but Missus Lockton snaps that indentured servants just complain and steal. She then asks if Ruth is "simple." Isabel says Ruth is "a good simple" and does what she's told. Then, Missus Lockton says she wants the girls—Ruth could be "an amusement in the parlor" and Isabel can help Becky. She tells Isabel to call her Madam.

*What Jenny offers as supposedly better alternatives to a public auction suggests that she sees slavery as something shameful—it's not considered appropriate for Mr. Robert to flaunt that he owns two children and is selling them. But note that she still seems okay with him selling Isabel and Ruth in general, so her negative views of slavery only go so far. She does show compassion to the girls, though, when she feeds them for free.*



*Indentured servants were required to work for a set amount of time to pay off debts, after which they could go free. While she was indentured, it seems that Jenny formed close relationships with enslaved people on the farm—but now that she's free, she's unwilling or unable to help her former friends become free like her.*



*It's jarring when Anne speaks about Isabel and Ruth's possible defects as though they're inanimate objects and can't hear her—she doesn't see them as people. There's no need for her to speak politely about them in front of them, since she doesn't even see them as human. Making the girls stand and watch the white adults eat is a way for Mr. Robert and the Locktons to flex their power. It's a reminder that the girls will never eat this well—they can only watch.*



*Mr. Lockton seems pretty ambivalent to slavery. It's unclear why he feels this way, but he suggests that he'd rather make use of indentured servants than people who are enslaved. Missus Lockton starts to reveal her true colors as she explains why she'd rather buy enslaved people: she can lord far more power over them. And saying that Ruth can be "an amusement in the parlor" suggests that Missus Lockton plans to treat her like a doll, not like a human being. This is dehumanizing for Isabel and Ruth, but they're powerless to object to being spoken to and about in this way.*



Mr. Robert names his price. Then, Jenny says that she'll buy Isabel and Ruth. This is unheard of, but she offers to pay cash. Isabel prays to God that Jenny will be able to buy them—but Madam says the girls are a deal at twice Mr. Robert's asking price. Jenny can't top it, so she hurries for the kitchen. Lockton deems her behavior disturbing; this is why they need the King's soldiers to step in. He pays for Isabel and Ruth and asks Mr. Robert to bring them to the ship. As Mr. Robert drops the bag of coins in his pocket, it sounds to Isabel like the sound dirt makes as it falls on a coffin.

*It's a huge show of kindness that Jenny offers to buy Isabel and Ruth. But it shows how powerless she is, even as a free white person, when the Locktons prevail anyway. Simply being white doesn't make her powerful. In the same vein, Mr. Lockton insists that it's essential for the Colonies to remain under British rule, as that's the only way to maintain a social structure where someone like Jenny remains powerless. None of this matters much to Isabel, though, since she suspects that being sold to the Locktons is going to be dehumanizing and traumatizing.*



## CHAPTER 4

The journey on the *Hartshorn* from Newport to New York takes two days. Isabel and Ruth stay below deck with livestock, three Scottish families, and crates stamped "Lockton and Foote." Isabel vomits most of the way, but on the second night, she climbs the ladder to look out over the sea. Rhode Island is gone now, and perhaps the ship will sink—or somehow land in a country where people don't buy and sell children.

*That Isabel and Ruth travel with livestock and cargo shows how powerless they are in the colonial system. The Scottish families below deck, presumably poor, show again that just being white doesn't mean people have the same power that the Locktons have. Isabel thinking about the ship sinking suggests that to her, it may be preferable to die than to be bought and sold—which speaks to how dehumanizing slavery is.*



According to Momma, ghosts can't move over water. This is why kidnapped Africans got stuck in the Americas. When Poppa was stolen from Guinea, his ancestors tried to turn the ship around with thunderstorms. They failed and couldn't follow, so Poppa came alone. Momma's people were stolen and taken to Jamaica; she was eventually sold to Rhode Island. Her ancestors in Jamaica couldn't follow her to Rhode Island. Isabel knows Momma is crying now at the water's edge as her daughters are carried away.

*One of the things that's traumatizing for Isabel as she travels to New York is that she's been forced to give up her spiritual connection to Momma, since, according to her beliefs, Momma's ghost won't be able to follow Isabel and Ruth to New York. This passage also shows more broadly how slavery fractured Black families: it didn't allow generations to connect, since families were so often separated.*



## CHAPTER 5

Just after the *Hartshorn* docks in the morning, a sailor brings down some wormy biscuits for Isabel and Ruth, and Madam Lockton shouts for someone to bring the girls to her. A sailor beckons to Ruth and Isabel to follow him onto the deck. There, the girls stare at all the men bustling around—and at the tall buildings built near so many docked ships. There are soldiers, maids, and more Black people than Isabel has ever seen in one place. Beyond the end of the dock, a wagon and then a carriage drawn by gold stallions stop. Isabel leads Ruth along the dock and then stumbles as soon as she reaches solid ground.

*New York is like nothing Isabel has ever seen before—it has taller buildings, more people, and specifically more Black people than Isabel has seen in her life. This speaks to how provincial her life was in Rhode Island and makes it clear that Isabel is navigating totally new territory. The carriage drawn by gold stallions is a sign of how wealthy the Locktons are, since they can afford such fancy, matching horses.*



Near the carriage, Madam tells two men to take a handsome walnut chest to the carriage, not to the warehouse. But a soldier stops the men and informs Madam that they must inspect all cargo—even personal belongings. Master Lockton assures his wife everything will be okay as a round man he calls Charles bustles out of a wagon. Charles hisses that Lockton shouldn't have come back at all, and then curses when he sees another man, Bellingham, coming. Following Bellingham is a tall, thin man and an enslaved boy in a red hat. Charles murmurs that Bellingham is desperate to arrest Lockton.

Bellingham greets Lockton as Lockton hisses to his companions to act like “happy rebels.” The enslaved boy sets up a portable writing desk and stool for the thin man to write at as the Locktons exchange pleasantries with Bellingham. Lockton insists to Bellingham that he wasn't in London; he can't stand the taxes. But Bellingham responds that according to rumors, the Locktons “still lick the King's boots.” Madam is offended, but Lockton insists he's just a merchant—Bellingham won't find British soldiers stashed in his cargo. In a low voice, Bellingham says the Committee of Safety is certain Lockton is a Tory and therefore an enemy.

Bellingham tells the soldiers to search the cargo and agrees that Lockton and Madam Lockton can go home. But rather than follow her husband, Madam Lockton asks Bellingham if he has the authority to look through a lady's private linens. She sits on her walnut chest and insists on taking it with her. Isabel keeps herself from laughing—this is hilarious. Ruth, though, lets out a giggle. Madam Lockton flies at the girls, and when Isabel says she's the one who laughed, Madam Lockton slaps her so hard that Isabel almost falls. With a sigh, Bellingham tells his soldiers to carry the chest to the Locktons' carriage. Nobody acknowledges Isabel. She imagines pushing Madam Lockton into the water.

Instead, Isabel takes Ruth's hand and follows Master Lockton and Madam Lockton to the carriage. Madam tells the men to put Ruth up with the driver; Isabel can go fetch clean water. Lockton points out that Isabel has no idea where to get water or where home is, but Madam says that Charles will help Isabel. Curzon, the enslaved boy, steps up and offers to help Isabel, since he's running an errand for Bellingham in the same area. The Locktons agree and warn Isabel to not dawdle. When Isabel doesn't answer “yes, sir” immediately, Lockton laughs that she might be “simple” too. They drive off, and Isabel kneels to a puddle. With the water, she scrubs the spot where Madam hit her.

*Readers follow Isabel's experience as she narrates, so much of what's going on here doesn't make total sense—it's unclear who Charles and Bellingham are, for instance, since nobody bothers to explain anything to Isabel. But this also highlights how little Isabel's white owners think of her: it's not worth it to explain anything, or to introduce these people to her. Bellingham, at least, reads as somewhat wealthy since he owns an enslaved boy, though he seems to be on the side of the Patriots rather than the Loyalists if he wants to arrest Lockton.*



*Lockton begins this exchange pretending he supports the Patriots' cause—this seems to be how he'll get into the city safely, if Charles is right that the Patriots want to arrest him. Bellingham corroborates Charles's earlier assessment when he accuses Lockton of being a Tory and an enemy. Meanwhile, the enslaved boy setting up this writing desk and stool highlights that at this time, it's enslaved labor that makes life function—and those enslaved people go unseen. The boy isn't even named, which speaks to his low status in society.*



*While Isabel understands that it's essential to never laugh at her white owners, Ruth doesn't seem to have grasped that yet. And Madam Lockton's violent slap suggests that she's not afraid to severely punish the people she enslaves—laughing at her will not be permitted. But though Isabel was just the victim of some shocking violence, notice that nobody else acknowledges what happened or seems to care. As a Black enslaved person, it's not surprising that she'd be hit. This shows how normalized slavery and its dehumanizing violence is for these characters.*



*While Madam is still in sight, Isabel has no time to acknowledge that she was hit and to nurse her painful slap. It's not until her owners have left that Isabel is able to scrub off the sting of Madam's hand. Separating Isabel and Ruth at this point suggests that Isabel might not be able to keep as close an eye on Ruth as she'd like while the Locktons own them—the girls now have very different jobs, and that will keep them in different parts of the house (or town) from now on.*



## CHAPTER 6

Curzon tells Isabel to follow and then runs off without looking back. Isabel runs after him, begging for him to slow down. When he finally stops, she angrily asks why Curzon moves so fast, and why she's buying water; do people not dig wells here? Curzon insists that country girls are slow and annoying. Finally, Isabel apologizes. Curzon explains that rich people get their water from the Tea Water Pump, since it tastes the best. He's running an errand for his master here, at the stationer's shop, and then they'll head for the pump. Curzon goes into the shop and returns a moment later with packages and two steaming, buttered rolls. He leads her to a courtyard where a **garden** is just starting to come up and then offers Isabel the rolls.

Curzon sits and asks if Ruth is Isabel's sister, and if that's why Isabel took the hit meant for Ruth. He says that Lockton is a "dirty Loyalist," but Isabel says she doesn't care. Curzon then asks if Isabel feels loyal to the Locktons; Lockton can feed her or hang her whenever he'd like. Isabel considers and says that for now, she is loyal to Lockton. But she hates this thought. Quietly, Curzon whispers that Isabel would be better off giving her loyalty to the rebels. She might hear things at the Lockton house.

As Curzon talks about the brewing war and the significance of New York to each side, Isabel's mind drifts. She needs to get back to Ruth. But it finally occurs to her that Curzon wants her to be a spy, and she notes that they'll torture her if they find out. Curzon tells her that the Patriots will reward her for her help; Captain Regan might even send her back to Rhode Island. All she has to do is listen for talk of the King's troops. Isabel spits that nobody will talk in front of her, but Curzon insists that they will. She's "a slave, not a person." If she hears anything, she should come to him; Curzon tells her where to find him. Isabel refuses.

## CHAPTER 7

It's a mile walk from the Tea Water Pump back to the Lockton house. Isabel forgets how much her arms hurt when Curzon points to the huge house, which is four floors high with tall windows. Curzon points Isabel around the side of the house. In the back, Isabel finds a cistern, a privy, a sad **garden**, and a small stable. An angry shout from a small woman startles Isabel's reverie, but the woman's anger disappears when Isabel introduces herself. The woman is Becky; she warns Isabel to stay away from Curzon and then puts water on for tea, complaining about the Locktons suddenly reappearing after eight months and wanting tea.

*Not even other Black enslaved people are very helpful or welcoming to Isabel at first. Curzon makes it clear that he sees Isabel as an outsider, since she's a "country girl" and clearly doesn't understand how things are done in New York. But despite Curzon and Isabel's rough start, Curzon also seems to genuinely want to help and make Isabel feel better about being here—giving her the steaming rolls, for one, is a huge improvement over the wormy biscuits Isabel and Ruth had for breakfast. It's also unclear where Curzon got the biscuits, or why; there may be someone in the stationer's shop who sympathizes with enslaved people.*



*For Curzon, the war and the tense political climate are extremely important—he's calling Lockton a "dirty Loyalist" because the issue is important to him. But Isabel's concerns are more personal. She doesn't like or respect Lockton, but she knows she depends on him now to feed her—and not to hang her. So for now, it makes more sense for her to identify with the Loyalists.*



*Isabel doesn't think she can trust anyone yet in New York—Curzon especially, since he's inviting her to do such dangerous things. For Isabel, it's far more important to do what she believes will keep her and Ruth safe. That means doing what she's told for the Locktons, and definitely not sneaking out to talk to Curzon. This passage also implies that Isabel's experience being enslaved in Rhode Island was better than it will be here. She expects the Locktons to treat her like a person, who will pay attention to what other people say—but per Curzon, Isabel will not be treated like a person here.*



*Isabel's shock at seeing the Locktons' home highlights again how different New York is for her; she's presumably used to homes that are much smaller. The Locktons' small garden symbolizes their unwillingness to help anyone grow or flourish—nurturing things isn't important to them. Becky, though, seems somewhat more interested in helping Isabel. It's unclear now why she warns Isabel away from Curzon, but she seems just as annoyed with the Locktons as Isabel is.*



Once water is heating, Becky tells Isabel the rules: do what Madam says. Isabel will go to the Tea Water Pump daily, and she shouldn't wander too far—people will think she's trying to run. Isabel asks where Ruth is. Becky asks if Ruth is "slow" and if Ruth is going to cause trouble. Then, she says Madam told her to give Ruth a bath and a meal. Ruth is in the privy now. Isabel turns to head outside and get Ruth, but Becky tells Isabel to stop. Ruth will spend her afternoon peeling potatoes, and Isabel will work inside. Isabel lets out a sigh when Ruth settles to her task, and she accepts a broom from Becky. Becky warns Isabel that Madam is a harsh mistress to enslaved people, but Becky gets along just fine with enslaved people if they do what they're told.

Becky leads Isabel through the house, pointing out Master Lockton's library. She leads Isabel into the parlor, where Isabel opens windows and they wipe them down. Seeing soldiers outside, Becky explains that since the Locktons are Tories, she and Isabel are Tories too. Isabel notes that Lockton said he was a Patriot on the dock, so Becky explains that in New York, people are constantly switching sides to protect themselves. But what will never change is that Madam wants lemon cakes with tea. Lady Clarissa Seymour is coming this afternoon; she's Lockton's rich old aunt. The Locktons treat her like a queen—to her face, at least.

## CHAPTER 8

Since Becky lives at a boardinghouse, it's Isabel's job to get the fire going first thing in the morning. Becky cooks, but Isabel does all the washing and tasks like beating eggs for cakes. When she's not in the kitchen, Isabel sweeps or polishes furniture. She saves the cobwebs she removes, since cobwebs are good to stop bleeding from cuts. Madam complains whenever she sees Isabel, so Isabel makes sure she always knows where Madam is. Madam doesn't do much but write letters and play a spinet. One night, Madam and Master Lockton argue loudly—and Lockton calls Madam rude names and storms out. Isabel feels lost. She doesn't know how to fix her life.

The morning after the big fight, Madam sends for Ruth. Isabel, distraught, wants to know why, but Becky gripes that Madam's desires never make much sense. Maybe she'll task Ruth with ripping out stitching on some old dresses. Hours later, Ruth hasn't returned. Becky eventually takes up tea and cookies to Madam. When she returns, she says that Madam wants to use Ruth as a "personal maid"; it'll make Madam look richer to have an enslaved girl dressed in fine clothes. Anger courses through Isabel, and Becky reminds Isabel to keep control—Isabel is clenching her fists. But Isabel doesn't think it's right for Madam to treat Ruth like a toy.

*Becky's introduction to Isabel is interesting: she goes out of her way to make sure Isabel understands how to act so that she doesn't get in trouble, and she seems to genuinely care about keeping Isabel and Ruth safe from Madam's ire. But saying that she gets along with enslaved people provided they do what they're told is still a veiled threat. It implies that Becky will be nice—unless Isabel acts out, at which point Becky sees no problem being violent like Madam. But Becky doesn't seem to realize she's saying anything threatening, and the threat doesn't seem to even register for Isabel.*



*At first, Isabel seems to think that in general, people choose a political side and stick with it. But Becky explains that this isn't actually the case—people say what they need to say to stay safe, even if they're lying. And she also makes it clear that this is something everyone in New York is doing; Lockton isn't unique for doing this. This suggests that Isabel, and readers, shouldn't take what people say about their political affiliation at face value—Becky herself might be lying about being a Tory, for instance.*



*Becky living at a boardinghouse shows that she's a paid maid; that means she can leave the Locktons' employ when or if she feels like it without consequences. For Isabel, working in the Locktons' home is wearing her down. Keeping an eye out for Madam is exhausting, and Isabel has to witness the Locktons' marital issues as well. For now it's a mystery why Isabel is saving the cobwebs; it seems she expects cuts, but it's unclear why.*



*Isabel wants to keep her sister safe, and Madam has already shown Isabel that she's not a safe or trustworthy person. So this is yet another anxiety-inducing experience for Isabel. When Isabel finally figures out what's going on, it feels like a slap in the face. Madam is treating Ruth like a living doll—which is ironic, given that Ruth is a child who has recently been deprived of her own doll. This dehumanizes Ruth, and being powerless to change anything is extremely difficult for Isabel.*



Becky says she's sure Isabel doesn't like this, but she has to be careful—Madam isn't afraid to beat enslaved people. The Locktons keep about six in their Charleston home. Then, Becky says that several years ago, there was another enslaved girl here who talked back. Madam beat her regularly, and once with a fireplace poker. The girl's arm broke and didn't heal right, so Madam sold her. Isabel can't control herself—she says that Madam had better not hurt her or Ruth. Becky warns Isabel to never say something like that again; Isabel won't jeopardize her job. And Ruth won't be hurt by wearing pretty dresses. From this moment on, Ruth spends most of her time with Madam. Isabel thinks often of Curzon's offer.

*It's somewhat unclear how Becky feels about what Madam is doing to Ruth—she seems to realize it's not right, but she also suggests it'd be dangerous if she or Isabel decided to protest. For Becky, the consequence would be losing her job—but for Isabel, the worry is serious bodily injury or being sold to someone who might be even worse than Madam. Because Isabel feels so powerless to help her sister, Curzon's offer starts to seem better. Realizing politics might help her pushes Isabel to consider getting involved and spying on her owners.*



## CHAPTER 9

Isabel is on the back steps, sharpening dull knives—an extremely boring task. She imagines using a sharp knife to cut right through the ocean so that she and Ruth can walk home on the exposed sand. Ruth is upstairs with Madam; Master Lockton is in his library. Becky is watching General Washington and his soldiers parade down the street. When Becky gets back an hour later, Isabel is still lost in thought—so she doesn't hear the first time Becky says that Madam wants Isabel in the parlor. Lady Seymour wants to see Isabel. Isabel quickly washes, puts on a clean apron, and follows Becky to the parlor.

*Isabel's tasks during the day are mind-numbingly boring, so she has nothing to distract her from worrying about Ruth. The fact that Becky is watching General Washington parade in town suggests that she might have been lying about being a Tory—though Isabel never specifies if watching parades like this is something everyone does, or if it's something someone does only when they support whoever's marching.*



Becky waves Isabel inside. Isabel instantly notices Ruth, who looks like “Madam's pretty pet.” Ruth also looks like she's been crying, but she stays silent. Isabel curtseys to Madam and to Lady Seymour, and she gives her name when Lady Seymour asks. Madam deems Isabel a “ridiculous” name; Isabel will go by Sal Lockton from now on. Madam says that Isabel must also wear shoes in the house. At this, Ruth steps forward and says Isabel's name, but Madam roughly reminds Ruth to be quiet. Madam sends Isabel and Becky away, and she instructs that Isabel should serve the men in the library.

*Isabel has been at the Locktons' for a while now—and so it's shocking that Madam is only now getting around to asking Isabel's name. This speaks to how little Madam cares about Isabel. Then, renaming Isabel on the spot heightens the sense that Madam doesn't care about Isabel as a person and just wants to control her. Madam's controlling nature shines through when she then reprimands Ruth.*



In the kitchen, Becky pulls down a big silver tray and loads it with food. She fills a second with wine and goblets. Isabel, though, can't stop thinking about the tears in Ruth's eyes. Becky insists that Master Lockton won't care about Isabel being barefoot as she leads Isabel to the library. Inside, two walls are lined with bookshelves, and there's a painting of horses jumping over a hedge on the third wall. Lockton is entertaining three men. When Madam calls for Becky from the parlor, Lockton tells Becky to go serve his wife. He asks if Isabel knows where the wine is—and Isabel answers that she does. Everyone stares at her; she spoke out of turn. But Lockton just tells Isabel to keep everyone's plate full.

*For Isabel, figuring out why Ruth is crying is the most important thing on her mind right now. But nobody else seems to care that five-year-old Ruth is suffering, which speaks to how dehumanized Ruth and Isabel are by their owners. In the library, Isabel is so distracted that she does the wrong thing by speaking for herself and saying she knows where the wine is. But while Madam might have punished Isabel for this, Lockton seems far less concerned. He seems to see Isabel not as an automaton, but as a person (albeit one he can still boss around without consequences).*





Becky leaves, and Isabel fills the men's goblets. She then stands in the corner while the men return to their conversation. They're arguing about whether the King's soldiers are actually going to invade New York, and Isabel listens carefully. As they argue, one man finishes the meat on his plate, holds up his plate, and grunts at Isabel. Isabel reminds herself that the rules are different here as she reloads the man's plate and returns to her corner. She's hungry, so to distract herself, she reads book titles. She wants to read, or to tell the men to take her home. But Lockton sends Isabel to fetch more bread and apricot jam.

Isabel listens at the parlor door for a moment and, hearing no mention of Ruth, moves on to the kitchen. It takes her too long to slice bread and locate a crock of jam. But just as she returns to the library, she hears Lockton say that "There's enough money here to bribe half of the rebel army." Through a crack in the door, Isabel can see Madam's linen chest open inside—and in it is money. The men are talking about bribing rebels with money and land. Isabel enters, sets the tray down, and goes back to her corner. The men continue to talk; Isabel feels invisible. She knows what she has to do.

## CHAPTER 10

Eventually, Lady Seymour and the men leave. Becky, Isabel, and Ruth eat the guests' leftovers, and since Ruth is exhausted, Isabel takes her down to bed. Ruth won't tell Isabel why she was crying earlier, but Isabel is certain Madam beat her. Momma wouldn't let anyone beat her children. As Isabel settles Ruth in bed, Ruth asks for her baby **doll**. Isabel reminds her that Mr. Robert stole the doll and promises to make her another doll later. She sings Ruth one of Momma's favorite lullabies from the islands. Then, an hour later, when Ruth is asleep, Isabel puts her skirt back on.

Isabel sneaks through the kitchen—she can say she's going to the privy if anyone catches her. Her heart pounds, though, as she slips around the side of the house to the gate. She can't open it—she'll get in so much trouble. But Isabel silently asks Momma to protect her, opens the gate, and runs. She figures getting to Bellingham's house and Curzon will be easy, but that's not the case. Isabel dodges soldiers on watch and spilling out of taverns. Finally, she emerges on the wharf and spots Bellingham's building.

*This is an odd experience for Isabel, as she starts to see that Curzon is right: her white owners are willing to talk openly in front of her, without any acknowledgement that she may be interested in what they have to say. It's also shocking to see the man request a refill so rudely—to Isabel, behaving in this way is unheard of. The fact that the man can grunt at her like this shows how privileged he is: he's so privileged he doesn't have to be polite to anyone.*



*Again, it's shocking for Isabel to get proof of her own invisibility. It's dehumanizing, but it also gives her an opportunity—provided Curzon was telling the truth about the Patriots being willing to free her and Ruth in exchange for information. This also reveals why Madam was so insistent on not letting Bellingham inspect her chest on the docks; judging from the contents, she's fully committed to helping her husband and winning the war for the British.*



*Isabel can't protect Ruth the way she'd like to, but she's still being forced to grow up before she's ready. At this point, she's like a parent to Ruth, since Momma isn't here to care for her children. And Isabel feels like she's failing at parenting Ruth, as she can't keep Ruth safe from Madam's physical abuse and couldn't ensure that Ruth got to keep her doll. Ruth asking for the doll, moreover, highlights that Ruth is an innocent child—she just needs some comfort.*



*For Isabel, leaving the Locktons and seeking out Curzon is a huge risk. As an enslaved person, she has no rights if she's caught—the Locktons can punish her however they want. But for now, her desire for freedom, and her trust in Curzon, wins out over her fears of what might happen if she's caught. This marks Isabel's first foray into getting involved in politics.*



At the window Curzon told her about, Isabel taps the glass. Nothing happens—until Curzon emerges from the shadows across the courtyard. Isabel tells him all about the Locktons' trunk and asks if this is enough for Bellingham to be able to send her home. Curzon tells her to go home; he'll pass on the information. For now, Isabel has to just be "the new Lockton girl." Curzon gives Isabel directions to get back home and praises her.

*Notably, Curzon doesn't say whether Isabel's information is enough. It's possible Curzon doesn't know if it's enough, but it's also possible that Curzon isn't certain whether Bellingham is actually so willing to help. But for Isabel's safety, what matters now is acting normal—that is, acting like she's an automaton, not a thinking, feeling person who dreams of freedom and can make her own choices.*



## CHAPTER 11

It seems like Becky shakes Isabel awake as soon as Isabel falls asleep. All day, Isabel hurries through her work. Madam is in a mood, too, so she tells Isabel to do things like air the sheets—and then yells at her for airing the sheets on a rainy day. Isabel is relieved that Madam doesn't want Ruth. Ruth hums as she scrubs the steps, which reminds Isabel of the sound bees make. Isabel keeps an eye out for the rebels—soon, she and Ruth will be sleeping like ladies on a ship bound for Rhode Island. Becky, though, interrupts Isabel's daydreaming: they have to prepare the drawing room.

*There are consequences to running around the city at night: Isabel is exhausted, and that makes it harder to perform her tasks to Madam's liking. But it seems impossible to please Madam, if she's telling Isabel to do things and then scolding her for doing as she was asked to do. This speaks to how powerless Isabel is, since Isabel has no standing to suggest it's perhaps not a great idea to air sheets on a rainy day.*



The second-floor drawing room is just a big parlor, not an art studio like Isabel thought at first. As she rips sheets off the furniture, Becky mutters that it's ridiculous that Madam wants the drawing room prepped when there's no real staff and the city is about to explode. Just then, there's a beating at the door. Becky leaves Isabel to finish and goes downstairs—and when she opens the door, Isabel's heart sings. It's Master Bellingham and patriot soldiers.

*Again, Isabel's provincial upbringing shines through when she expects an art studio; she's not accustomed to having so many parlors in this expansive city house. Becky is able to voice Isabel's thoughts about Madam: that what Madam is asking them to do is ridiculous. Because Becky is white and paid, she can say these things. Isabel can't, as she can't put herself in danger by seeming upset.*



Madam races downstairs, enraged, as Bellingham's men start to remove the windows with metal bars. As Master Lockton appears, Bellingham explains that everyone must make sacrifices: the patriots need the lead to make bullets, and it should be an honor for a patriot like Lockton to support the cause. Lockton insists this is an outrage as the soldiers head upstairs, without putting the first-floor windows back. From upstairs, a soldier shouts that they found "it."

*The way that Bellingham speaks to Lockton is mocking and sarcastic—he knows Lockton isn't a Patriot, and he knows he's taunting Lockton by suggesting Lockton should be proud to give up the lead in his windows. Then, Isabel realizes that stealing lead from the windows is just a cover story: the soldiers are here for the trunk—presumably, on her intelligence. Freedom seems close at this point.*



Isabel follows everyone upstairs to the Locktons' bedchamber, where Madam is again sitting on the walnut chest and refusing to let the soldiers open it. Lockton tells his wife that there's nothing to worry about—and she relaxes and gets up. Isabel watches Lockton smile as a soldier digs through dirty underclothes and nothing else. Isabel knows there's a false bottom to the chest, but she can't say anything. Is Bellingham going to blow Isabel's cover now that it looks like she lied? Bellingham instead arrests Lockton for suspicion of aiding the enemy. He and the soldiers escort him out. Madam watches blankly, tells Isabel to get on with washing the linens, and faints.

*Because Isabel is enslaved and therefore powerless, she doesn't feel safe speaking up about the chest's false bottom—after all, there's no way to guarantee that she won't be punished for betraying her owners. Ultimately, though, Isabel emerges from this experience physically unscathed, though she's frightened and anxious. Seeing Lockton arrested like this makes the war feel more real—for Isabel and, apparently, for Madam too.*



## CHAPTER 12

Becky sends Isabel to fetch Lady Seymour, who lives just north of Trinity Church. Isabel locates the house and walks around to the back, where there's a **garden** with beautiful roses that Momma would love. A maid with the palest skin Isabel has ever seen opens the door. She speaks to Isabel in a strange language and slams the door in Isabel's face, but a few minutes later, Lady Seymour herself opens the door. The lady shows Isabel in—calling her Isabel rather than Sal—gives Isabel a mug of milk and a cookie, and asks Isabel to tell her what happened. Lady Seymour isn't surprised Lockton was arrested and says that Madam should under no circumstances leave for Charleston, which is what she wants to do. Lady Seymour says that once Isabel has had more milk and cookies, she must run some messages around town for her.

*It's a symbol of Lady Seymour's kindness and compassion that she keeps such a lovely garden—it contrasts with the Locktons' cruelty and their poor excuse for a garden. Then, Lady Seymour starts to establish herself as an ally to Isabel when she calls Isabel by her given name and not by Sal. Clearly, she is at odds with her nephew and niece-in-law, and she doesn't agree with how they treat the enslaved people they own. But it seems that though Lady Seymour generously gives Isabel milk and cookies, she's either unwilling or unable to help Isabel in any other way.*



## CHAPTER 13

As Isabel is coming down the stairs with Madam's full chamber pot the next morning, Master Lockton comes in the front door. He clearly doesn't suspect Isabel of spying and heads upstairs to Madam, who's frantically packing. When Isabel gets back inside after washing out the pot, she can hear the Locktons shouting and joins Ruth and Becky at the foot of the stairs to listen. They can hear them throwing things, and then Madam cries in pain. Becky explains that Master Lockton wants to be obeyed, and he doesn't want to go to Charleston. A bit later, the fighting stops, and Isabel takes ale and a cool compress upstairs to Madam. Madam puts the compress on her split lip and scolds Isabel for leaving candle wax on the floor for her to slip on. Isabel apologizes for the crime she didn't commit.

*Madam is the victim of domestic abuse—she's not as free in her own home as one might expect, given that she's a wealthy white woman. She still has to obey her husband, and under the standards of the time, it's within his rights to violently make sure she does. This, of course, doesn't excuse the abusive way Madam treats Isabel, and this doesn't mean that Madam has compassion for others. Indeed, she perpetuates a cycle of violence when she scolds Isabel and makes Isabel apologize for a misdeed she didn't commit, all to make it seem like Lockton didn't hit her.*



In the following weeks, Isabel regularly serves Lockton and his friends. Nobody says anything interesting, though Isabel discovers that Lockton suspects one of his friends of exposing him to the patriots. Every day, Becky returns from the marketplace with gossip. Isabel tries to take Momma's advice to ignore it.

*If Isabel is serving Lockton and his male friends, it shows that Lockton trusts her and doesn't suspect her of spying. Again, this is simultaneously dehumanizing and a relief: Isabel isn't treated like a person, but she's not in danger, either.*



Isabel comes to love her trips to the Tea Water Pump. A week after Lockton returns home, Isabel stands in line with Curzon and gives her buckets to the old enslaved man who works the pump. He has marks on his cheeks from an African coming-of-age ritual, just like Poppa, so Isabel is always very nice to him. Curzon calls the man Grandfather, which shocks Isabel—she didn't know Curzon had family here. But Grandfather explains that he's just everyone's grandfather.

Once Isabel and Curzon are a few blocks from the pump, Isabel asks why nobody has arrested Lockton. Curzon says the patriots need solid proof, like letters or maps. Isabel jokes about procuring the King from the pantry, and Curzon says she'd get a medal for that. Isabel would rather get a fast ship home, but Curzon insists she can't sail now. She'd be captured by British ships and sold in the islands. Soon, Curzon says, they'll be free, along with the rest of the country. He warns Isabel that the patriots have more to worry about than two little enslaved girls, but Isabel retorts that she has more to worry about than Curzon's patriot army.

As it starts to stay light longer, Isabel airs out her and Ruth's pallet and blanket. She makes Ruth a new **doll** out of cornhusks. One night, when Isabel is restless, she sneaks out of bed after midnight and sneaks into Lockton's study. She pulls [Robinson Crusoe](#) off a shelf and reads by the fire until she starts to fall asleep. The following night, Isabel plants Momma's **seeds**. They're a comfort, though Isabel doesn't know what they'll become.

## CHAPTER 14

The next day, Isabel carries home a basket of eels. She loves eel pie, and apparently, Master Lockton does too. But when Isabel gets into the kitchen, Madam comes in, sweaty and impatient. She says that Isabel will serve Lockton and his guests, ignoring Becky when Becky notes that Lockton said he doesn't want to be disturbed. Madam loads the tray and says that the mayor of New York is extremely important; they must welcome him. She then tells Isabel to follow her. The tray is almost too heavy for Isabel to carry, but Madam makes no move to help her or open the library door for her. Lockton opens the door grudgingly and says that Isabel can stay and serve, but Madam needs to go away.

*Isabel wants to connect to her family members, which is why she latches onto Grandfather like this. Grandfather implies that he doesn't mind this at all: he's here to support everyone, whether they're related by blood or not. He will, in other words, be happy to be a chosen family member to other enslaved people, thereby helping ease the pain caused by slavery splitting up people's families through sales and murder.*



*The differences between Isabel and Curzon start to shine through here. For Curzon, it's important to support the Patriots because of what they espouse: that all men should be free. For Isabel, the words are nice, but not if the Patriots can't (or won't) actually help her. Her main focus is protecting herself and Ruth, and so while she can't entirely escape politics and the war, she's choosing to seriously limit her involvement unless it becomes clear that one side or the other can help her.*



*It helps Isabel to feel competent and like she can protect Ruth when she makes Ruth this doll. Now, Ruth can have the comfort she craves. Planting Momma's seeds is a way for Isabel to connect with her past—and planting them symbolizes the start of Isabel's own coming-of-age journey. She doesn't know what she'll become—but she's starting to grow and change, just like the seeds.*



*Madam is clearly desperate to insert herself into Lockton's conversation with the mayor, so it's somewhat gratifying when he tells her to go away. But at the same time, letting Isabel stay and serve speaks to the fact that Lockton doesn't see her as a real person—she's more like a useful piece of furniture than a sentient being. Lockton's willingness to so openly tell Madam to leave him alone also highlights how powerless Madam is in her own home. The war affects her, but she has little or no say in how her family is involved.*



There are two men with Lockton in the library, one whom Isabel calls Goldbuttons and one who she figures is the mayor. They're studying a map on the desk, but Lockton rolls up a corner for some of the plates. As Isabel returns to her corner, Goldbuttons says it's been difficult to bribe the patriots. They don't care about the land the King promises them; they just want peace and to farm close to their families. Isabel stifles a yawn as Goldbuttons brings up the fact that the Continental Congress is apparently close to declaring independence.

But then, the mayor says it's time to "unsheathe our swords." He insists they have to make sure the rebellion dies—and there's a plan to do so. Isabel thinks that she's like a bookcase as the mayor says that they must kill General Washington. Lockton insists they can't kill a gentleman like Washington, but the mayor says he's committed treason—and the punishment for treason is being drawn and quartered. There's a man loyal to the Tories close to Washington; he'll act when he gets the signal.

Lockton pulls a key out of his snuff jar, unlocks a desk drawer, and pulls out more money than Isabel has ever seen. Then, Lockton asks the mayor to write down the names of everyone involved; if the rebels catch Lockton and the Loyalists don't rescue him, he'll give the list to the rebels. Isabel pretends to fall asleep as Lockton asks for more wine. He sends her to fetch another bottle from the kitchen—just as she hears screams coming from the kitchen.

## CHAPTER 15

Ruth is lying at Madam's feet, convulsing. Madam shrieks that it's the devil and hits Ruth with the broom, but the seizure means that Ruth can't defend herself. Isabel shouts that Ruth is just sick and throws herself over her sister, taking the blows. Finally, Lockton appears, shouts, "Enough!" and takes a chair out of Madam's hands. Ruth stops shaking as Madam says she won't have a "demon-child" in her house. Isabel talks gently to Ruth, who looks confused. Ruth's head is bleeding where she hit the floor.

*The Patriots that Goldbuttons has unsuccessfully been trying to bribe seem a lot like Isabel: they care about things affecting their safety and wellbeing, but not so much about what the war actually means. Goldbuttons implies that for them, choosing a side seems silly—at some point, they'll go with whatever side seems most likely to help them get what they want. For now, the Loyalists are not that side.*



*For Isabel, it's shocking to hear the mayor speak so openly about assassinating General Washington in front of her. The fact that he's willing to speak so openly tells Isabel that she doesn't matter—to the mayor, she's not human. Learning that there's a Tory close to Washington shows again that people don't always tell the truth about where their loyalties lie.*



*Lockton is fighting for the much larger (Tory, British) cause as he involves himself in the plot to assassinate Washington. But his concerns are also very personal: he wants to make sure that if things don't go well for him specifically, everyone else involved will also suffer. Hearing the screams from the kitchen creates tension—something terrible seems to be happening.*



*For a long time, people thought seizures and epilepsy were signs of demonic possession, which is why Madam reacts this way to Ruth's seizure. In beating Ruth for having a seizure, though, Madam reveals yet again that she doesn't see Ruth and Isabel as people—Ruth is only five years old, just a child, but Madam sees her as a dangerous threat. And as Isabel notes, Ruth is just ill.*



Lockton sends Becky back to the library with wine and then asks how often Ruth experiences fits. Madam interjects that she won't allow evil in her house—they must sell Ruth today. Lockton insists that the girls are sisters, and Isabel begs Madam to not sell a five-year-old. Ruth gets up and starts picking up the peas she dropped when she fell. Isabel tells Lockton that Ruth experiences seizures sometimes daily, and sometimes once every few weeks. He insists that Ruth will stay and work in the kitchen and returns to his study—but Madam warns Becky to keep Ruth away from the milk so it doesn't curdle. She vows to make her husband “see reason.” Becky tells Isabel things will probably be fine; it's hard to hire help now, with everyone leaving out of fear of the coming war.

*Again, Lockton seems far more sensible and is willing to look at Ruth as a child who's sick. This is especially apparent when he notes that Ruth and Isabel are sisters, the implication being that it would be cruel and unethical to separate them. Madam, though, remains unconvinced—though in this case, having to submit to what her husband wants is a good thing for Isabel, as it means that Lockton will be able to keep Ruth safe. And Becky notes that what's happening in the world right now will also work in Isabel's favor, as people are so afraid of the coming war that there will be nobody to replace Ruth.*



## CHAPTER 16

Once Ruth falls asleep that night, Isabel knows what she has to do. Madam's threat is serious—the girls have to get out of the city. Isabel knows that Bellingham won't listen to her after the linen chest debacle; she'll have to go straight to the army. When she can hear Lockton's snores, Isabel sneaks into the library, pulls the key out of the snuffbox, and finds the sheet of names from earlier. Isabel slips outside and, evading soldiers as she moves, creeps to the Patriot fort at the southern tip of the island.

*Again, Isabel throws herself back into political involvement now that she sees how politics can help her. When politics and the war were just theoretical, they didn't matter. What matters now is how her political involvement can help her achieve her goals and protect Ruth. But Isabel still isn't willing to trust Curzon and Bellingham again; she knows she must take matters into her own hands.*



Isabel winds through the tents until a sentry at a gate blocks her way. She tells the truth: that she has a message for Colonel Regan, and that her master is a Loyalist who will beat her if he finds out she's here. Yawning, the sentry leads her into the fort and into a small room, where a man is sitting at a writing desk. When Isabel tells the man nobody can vouch for her except for Master Bellingham's boy Curzon, he sends her away. Isabel struggles and says that she has proof the Loyalists want to kill General Washington.

*When the man at the desk sends Isabel away after hearing her mention Bellingham and Curzon, it suggests that Bellingham might not be trusted or liked by other Patriots—and maybe Isabel had the right idea in not fully trusting Curzon. But whatever's going on here, Isabel knows that she has to share what she knows. It's the only chance she has at freedom.*



The sentry and the man at the desk stop yelling at Isabel when Colonel Regan stands up from where he was sitting by the fire, hidden in shadows. He tells the men to leave and then asks to see Isabel's paper. Isabel says that she'd like to propose a trade; she and her sister were wrongfully taken from Rhode Island. Colonel Regan promises to help if Isabel's information is actually useful.

*Promising to help, but only if Isabel has useful information, is a way for Colonel Regan to avoid having to fulfill specific promises. It's up to him to decide what constitutes as useful, after all. So though Isabel is hopeful, it seems very possible that things could go wrong here.*



Isabel gives Colonel Regan the list and tells him everything she knows. He calls in other men, most of whom insist this is nonsense—until Regan says this confirms intelligence he's been getting all day. He tells Isabel to put the list back in Lockton's desk and come to him with any new information. In the future, there's a code word to get into the fort: *ad astra*. Isabel promises to remember.

*It seems at this point that Isabel's information is useful: she's confirmed that the Loyalists are plotting to assassinate General Washington. Giving her the fort's password also makes her feel like she belongs with the Patriots and is part of something bigger.*



## CHAPTER 17

Isabel is so exhausted that she falls asleep in church the next morning. Things seem normal for the next two days; Master Lockton is busy visiting the mayor, and Madam stays upstairs. Madam insists that only Becky can serve her, since she's afraid of Ruth. Becky and Isabel don't keep Ruth away from the milk, they just hurry Ruth downstairs whenever they hear Madam coming. Ruth is oblivious to all of this, but she helps Isabel check the "mystery garden" every morning. The shoots are two hands high now.

Isabel repeats "ad astra" over and over until it feels like a prayer. Becky's gossip from the market gets wilder and wilder, and the weather gets even hotter. Two days after Isabel's visit with Colonel Regan, there's a pounding on the kitchen door. It's Goldbuttons, dressed in a cloak. He runs right upstairs to the Locktons' bedroom—and moments later, Lockton bellows in anger. The plot to kill General Washington has been uncovered. Isabel runs to fetch Madam home from a friend's house.

When Isabel and Madam return, Lockton is pacing. He says he's sent for a cart, and they must burn all his papers. Madam sends Isabel for firewood—and when Isabel gets back to the library, Madam accuses Lockton of abandoning her. He insists she'll be fine; she has to stay here so the Patriots don't steal everything. Madam throws things and refuses to be left behind, but Lockton hits her hard enough to send her tumbling to the ground. He's going, and it's her duty to stay. Later, a man arrives and nails Lockton into a crate labeled "cheese." Once he's gone, Madam spends the day burning her husband's papers.

Soldiers arrive at dawn and find nothing, so they stomp away. Becky heads for the market, and when she returns, Madam demands to hear the news or gossip. Madam's face is bruised, and it's clear she's sore and hurt. Becky lists the people who were arrested and says that a man named Hickey, who served with Washington, revealed the plot. She insists that Lockton is safe.

*For now, Isabel can only hope that Captain Regan is doing something useful with her information. And until she gets confirmation either way, she has to focus on keeping Ruth safe. Becky again shows that she's an ally as she helps Isabel protect Ruth from Madam. The growing garden symbolizes Isabel's development—she's starting to feel more secure and sure of herself.*



*Likening "ad astra" to a prayer—that is, to something religious—shows how much Isabel is starting to buy into the Patriot cause (or, at least, what the Patriots can do for her). And when Goldbuttons reveals that the Patriots uncovered the plot, it seems like Isabel's bet paid off: the Patriots are getting what they want, so soon, she hopes, they'll help her get to freedom.*



*Again, in this passage, Isabel witnesses the uncomfortable fact that Madam isn't as powerful as one might expect. She's wealthy and white, but as a woman, she still suffers violence when she tries to stand up for herself and what she wants. Lockton's selfishness also shines through here—he won't take Madam with him because he's afraid of someone stealing all his things in her absence. He's prioritizing his own belongings over his wife's wishes, in other words.*



*So far, it doesn't seem like Becky, Madam, or the gossip mill know that Isabel played a huge part in Hickey's arrest and in Lockton needing to leave town. This is important for Isabel, as it means she's not going to be in danger from Madam—who would no doubt be enraged if she discovered that a person she owns betrayed her husband.*



## CHAPTER 18

On Friday morning, Becky insists that Isabel take Ruth and go watch Thomas Hickey's hanging. Madam will be fine without the girls' help, since she's stayed drunk since Lockton left. Isabel hopes she can get Colonel Regan to escort her to the wharf afterwards, so she agrees to go. She leads Ruth north with everyone else. Ruth clutches her **doll** as Isabel steers her to where other enslaved people are gathered near the Tea Water Pump. Isabel entertains Ruth with cat's cradle until they hear people shouting. They stand and look forward. Isabel can pick out Washington and some other notable officers, but not Regan. They're all in formation, and Isabel feels silly for thinking she could catch Regan privately.

Curzon surprises Isabel by whispering in her ear. He tells Isabel now isn't the time to ask questions and then lifts Ruth onto his shoulder so she can see, tossing his hat to Isabel. Isabel notices the hat says "James," but Curzon doesn't acknowledge Isabel when she says the name. In a whisper, she asks when Colonel Regan will help her. Curzon says the world is changing every day.

The drums beat faster and then stop. A guard marches Hickey from the prison to the gallows while the crowd throws rotten fruit and a dead cat at him. A captain cuts off Hickey's epaulets and buttons, and Ruth stops giggling. A preacher then leads Hickey to the gallows. Curzon says it's only appropriate that Hickey is crying. Ruth starts to fuss and cover her ears, so Isabel helps her down and holds her close. Isabel watches the hangman tie the rope around Hickey's neck and read Hickey's sentence. She closes her eyes when the hangman kicks the bucket away.

## CHAPTER 19

On Sunday morning, Isabel is afraid she'll be stuck in church forever. Trinity is an Anglican church, and the reverend spends a long time talking about the royal family. These days, the church is mostly empty, since so many folks have fled to the country. Everyone left is a Loyalist, so the reverend doesn't have to worry about insulting any rebels. As Ruth plays with her baby **doll**, Isabel prays to God to let Colonel Regan get them home. The sermon seems to last forever—but then a boy bursts through the doors and announces that the British have sailed into the harbor.

*Isabel reads as somewhat naïve as she hopes to be able to leave New York immediately following the hanging. The fact that the army has to follow certain protocols for events like this isn't obvious to Isabel, in part because it's not a comfortable thought. It's far more comforting for her to believe that the Patriots care about her freedom just as much as she does. Ruth is much happier now that she has a doll. Her happy, engaged demeanor contrasts greatly with how agitated she was when Mr. Robert sold them in the tavern—this small comfort seems to have made all the difference.*



*The novel doesn't return to the mystery of why the name James is on Curzon's hat—but it suggests that Curzon isn't Curzon's real name, or perhaps that the hat belonged to a family member named James. Curzon's identity is a mystery, but because Isabel is so concerned about her own freedom, the novel doesn't delve into Curzon's mysterious identity after this.*



*Witnessing Hickey's hanging makes the war real for Isabel and Ruth. While it was possible, more or less, to ignore the bigger goings-on when it was just Lockton shuffling in and out of the house and hosting friends, Isabel now sees that people are dying for one side or the other. Ruth also seems to grasp the gravity of the situation, despite being a small child—she's starting to grow up, too.*



*The war again becomes more real with the announcement that the British have entered the New York harbor. It seems, for the moment, that perhaps the British are gaining the upper hand, since so many rebels have fled and the British are invading. This doesn't bode well for Isabel, since she's placed her trust in the Patriots—Colonel Regan may have a harder time helping her now.*





Isabel and Ruth follow Madam and Lady Seymour to look at the docked British ships. Madam is thrilled, but the rebels in the crowd are furious. Several rebels set off cannons. Isabel wonders if she should run for Colonel Regan as a man barks for everyone to go home. But as Isabel turns to follow Madam and Lady Seymour, Ruth freezes—she’s having a small seizure and can’t walk. Isabel begs Ruth to walk and finally picks Ruth up when she goes limp. Madam asks if Ruth’s “ailment” is acting up, but Isabel lies that Ruth is just tired after strenuous chores this morning. Lady Seymour notes that the heat can affect children worse than adults; Ruth should drink water when they get home.

British ships sail up the river all day and all the next night. Madam tells Isabel to polish the silver; she hopes they can entertain British commanders soon. When Isabel takes dirty tablecloths to a washerwoman in the morning, she discovers that the washerwoman fled the city. Many people have done the same. Isabel sets up to wash the tablecloths herself in the courtyard and gives Ruth a bucket and a pair of stockings to wash. Ruth seems unaffected by her seizure earlier. When she finishes with the stockings, she dumps rocks in the bucket—they’re dirty. Isabel lets her wash the rocks until Ruth puts the muddy rocks in the rinse bucket with a tablecloth. Only then does Isabel realize that Madam has been watching. They have to escape.

## CHAPTER 20

The week passes slowly. Militia units enter the city and frightened civilians leave it. Madam is alternately excited for the impending British victory and upset that the British won’t invade. She carries around a calming elixir the doctor prescribed and stops wearing shoes in the house so she can sneak up on Isabel.

A week after Hickey’s hanging, Becky gets sick with the sickness that’s plaguing all the soldiers. Isabel goes to the market for her and looks for Curzon while she’s there, but she never sees the boy. Ten days after the British ships arrive, the news arrives that the Congress declared independence. Men read the Declaration from the steps of City Hall. Isabel watches them celebrate—and then watches, shocked, as the men topple a gold statue of the King on a horse. Then, men start to hack the statue apart with axes. The King is made of lead, not gold. Isabel picks up a small piece of the statue and puts it in her pocket.

*Isabel and Madam’s political differences shine through: for Madam, this is an amazing turn of events. For Isabel, the British invasion might spell the end of her involvement with the Patriots. But Isabel is reminded of what her real goal is when Ruth has another seizure. Lying about what’s going on is a way for Isabel to protect Ruth—Madam would probably be very upset if Ruth had a bigger seizure in public, given how much stigma epilepsy had at this point. Lady Seymour’s assessment, though wrong, is also very generous—she sees Ruth as a child in need of extra care, not as a mere possession and potential liability.*



*Again, it’s clear that the British arrival is amazing for Madam, as she may soon have the opportunity to entertain and regain some semblance of a social life. But things aren’t so great for Isabel, since Isabel now has extra work (due to service people like the washerwoman leaving the city) and feels like she has to keep an extra close eye on Ruth. Isabel is trying hard to let Ruth be a child—washing rocks makes sense to a kid who understands that dirty things should be cleaned, and it’s a way to keep Ruth busy. But with Madam lurking, letting Ruth be a kid like this could be a liability.*



*If Madam has a prescribed calming elixir, she’s probably extremely anxious. But she’s taking her anxiety out on Isabel by trying to sneak up on her. Essentially, because Madam feels so powerless, she’s doing her utmost to make Isabel feel even more powerless.*



*Isabel is listening to the Declaration of Independence, the United States’ founding document. It’s a surprise for Isabel when the statue of King George turns out to be lead (a comparatively soft metal) rather than gold. This suggests that British rule is something of a sham—it appears nice from the outside, but it’s something entirely different on the inside. Pocketing the bit of the statue suggests that Isabel is getting swept up in the excitement, and may genuinely support the Patriot position now.*



When Isabel gets back to the Lockton house, the lights are on in the front parlor. Becky says that Madam visited the reverend's wife and came home a changed woman. She asked Becky to give Isabel and Ruth sweets and baked gingerbread for the girls herself. Madam also made some spiced milk. Ruth is with Madam and her friends, dressed up. Isabel asks if Madam hit her head, but Becky tells her to enjoy this—Madam will be awful again by morning. Isabel enjoys her milk and gingerbread and then is so tired that she walks down to the cellar. She falls asleep. She'll never forgive herself for that.

*From what Isabel knows of Madam, it seems reasonable to wonder if she can actually trust Madam's sudden kindness—especially since this chapter ends so ominously. Something bad is bound to happen. But Isabel accepts Madam's sweets and is willing to trust her because she's so starved for kindness—she craves being treated like a person. So when Madam seems to suddenly acknowledge Isabel's humanity, it's almost intoxicating.*



## CHAPTER 21

Isabel dreams that she's on a beach staring at a huge map. The map turns into eels that frighten her, but they ultimately return to the sea. Isabel wakes with a start. There are no eels around her—and no Ruth. Figuring Ruth is in the privy, Isabel walks out to find her sister. Ruth isn't in the privy or in the kitchen. Suddenly nervous, Isabel calls for Becky and asks where Ruth is. Becky looks down. She's clearly been crying. Sniffing, Becky starts measuring flour for bread and says she should've stayed to do it last night, but Madam wanted a quiet house. She wouldn't have left had she known.

*Everything in this passage, from Isabel's frightening dream, to Ruth's mysterious absence, to Becky's cagey replies and emotional state, suggests that something terrible happened last night. Ruth's absence in particular suggests that Isabel was right to not want to trust Madam's kindness—it seems likely that Madam has somehow gotten rid of Ruth. The fact that Becky seems to blame herself shows that she wants to protect Isabel and Ruth, but she can't always do that.*



Isabel shakes her head and runs down the hallway, yelling for Ruth and ignoring Becky's warnings. Becky grabs Isabel and says that Madam sold Ruth—the milk last night probably contained a sleeping potion. When Becky arrived this morning, Madam was coming back in the carriage and said that Ruth won't spoil the milk anymore, since Ruth is in Nevis. Nevis is in the islands, and Ruth will be a house maid for a physician's family, so she'll be cared for. Isabel says that Madam is a "spiteful, hateful liar."

*Becky's roundabout responses in the last passage contrast sharply with her straightforward answers here. It seems like she was hoping Isabel would let the matter go—but now she sees she'll have to be more direct. It's also unclear how much of what Madam says is trustworthy—she played a horribly cruel trick on Isabel and Ruth, after all.*



Just then, Madam comes down the stairs and asks what's going on. The paintings of her dead ancestors on the wall watch her. Becky says she was giving Isabel her instructions for the day, but Isabel asks the "miserable cow" if she sold Ruth. Madam tells her to go away, and as Isabel slowly climbs the stairs, Madam threatens to hang her. Becky opens the front door, and Isabel turns—and Madam grabs a painting and hits Isabel with it, causing her to bleed. Madam screams, and Becky tells Isabel to run.

*Isabel was willing to put up with Madam's abuse when she still had Ruth—but now she sees just how heartless and cruel Madam is. And now that Isabel is asserting her humanity and her agency, Madam is wildly uncomfortable. Indeed, Madam seems to find Isabel threatening. Note that Madam is also the one to actually get violent in this passage—she's hurting Isabel emotionally and now physically.*



Isabel runs as fast as she can. She decides not to trust a blacksmith who offers to help her—she can't trust anyone. She runs to the fort and shouts, "ad astra!" A sentry brings her to Colonel Regan's quarters, where an enslaved barber is shaving Regan's face. Isabel begs him for help just as Madam and a tall gentleman squeeze into the room. Madam says that Isabel committed a crime and must be punished and demands her property back. She says she'd be happy to sell Isabel to the army, but Regan says he doesn't need any women. Isabel quietly asks Regan if she may stay, but he says he must follow the rules. Ignoring the barber's subtle head shake, Isabel bolts for the open window.

*To Isabel, it seems like her only option is to go back to Colonel Regan—the one person who seems likely to and able to help her. But he reveals here that he's not interested enough in helping Isabel to be willing to break the laws governing how runaway enslaved people are dealt with in the Colonies. He's unwilling to put himself in legal danger to acknowledge and support Isabel's humanity, in other words. So Isabel sees no choice but to try to run, even if doing so is a dangerous proposition.*



## CHAPTER 22

Isabel wakes up with a gun poking her under her chin. Male hands grab at her while a woman shrieks. The hands drag her from place to place, and Isabel's thoughts won't straighten out. She's bleeding and missing teeth. The men tie Isabel's hands together and tie her to a cart. They drag her down the street. Isabel can't even remember her own name; she has no idea what's happening.

*Isabel is at least extremely traumatized, if not concussed, since her thoughts won't "straighten out." And to make this experience even more dehumanizing, Isabel can't even remember who she is—and she's dragged through the street to humiliate her even further. Isabel is totally out of control and has no bodily autonomy in this situation.*



Men take Isabel to a dungeon under City Hall. She's in a cell with a madwoman who pulls her hair out and laughs when it sounds like there's a battle raging outside. Isabel stays awake for two nights so the rats won't bite her in her sleep. On the third morning, the jailer takes Isabel to the courtroom. The woman who shrieked so loudly days ago, and who threw a painting at Isabel, speaks. Isabel finally remembers that the woman is Madam Lockton, and she sold Ruth. Madam pretends to cry in her handkerchief and tells lies to the judge.

*Again, it's clear how traumatizing and horrifying this experience of being imprisoned is for Isabel. And it also seems like she's suffered a head injury that affects her memory, since it takes her a while to remember who Madam even is. But Isabel is still focused on Ruth: she knows that Madam sold Ruth, seemingly before she remembers anything else about what happened. Ruth was the center of Isabel's world.*



The judge sighs that Isabel has broken the laws of the colony and rolls his eyes when a lawyer corrects him that they're an independent state now. Regardless, the judge says, Isabel's crimes of insolence, property destruction, and running away aren't bad enough for the death penalty. Madam asks that Isabel be branded with an I, to convey to everyone that Isabel is insolent. The judge notes that a whipping would be more appropriate, but he ultimately agrees.

*Being punished by being branded is extremely dehumanizing—and Madam pushes for this punishment over a whipping because she knows that the brand will be forever visible on Isabel's skin. This is a power trip; she wants to mark Isabel as a dangerous dissenter forever, thereby depriving Isabel of any anonymity in addition to denying Isabel's bodily autonomy.*



## CHAPTER 23

A man pulls Isabel to the courtyard and locks her head and wrists in the stocks. Another man sticks branding irons into a nearby brazier, and Isabel's knees give out. The man next to her—she can't see him—growls at her to stay standing and to not scream; they want her to scream. Isabel notices steaming puddles and sunburnt prisoners as a court official comes up with a man in a leather apron. By now, there's a crowd on the other side of the brazier. Isabel thinks she sees Curzon, but then she loses sight of his red hat. Soon, everyone in the courtyard is shouting.

As the men approach Isabel, she thinks of Rhode Island. One man holds Isabel's head and presses the branding iron to her cheek. It seems to burn right into Isabel's soul—and Momma and Poppa's ghosts appear and cool Isabel's cheek with their tears. It feels like night is creeping into Isabel's soul.

*Even though nobody is swooping in to rescue Isabel from the humiliation and dehumanizing experience of being branded, this doesn't mean she's totally alone. The unseen man next to her coaches her through how to maintain some of her dignity and her humanity by not screaming. And possibly noticing Curzon opens up the possibility that Curzon might help Isabel, too.*



*Isabel conveys how dehumanizing this experience is by describing how the brand essentially scars her soul. Her soul, in other words, is no longer innocent and untainted. But in this moment of darkness, Isabel is able to finally connect with Momma and Poppa's ghosts—so as horrific as this is, there may be a small silver lining.*



## CHAPTER 24

Soon, all of Isabel's body is on fire. She sees Poppa, but then he turns into another "son of Africa." Momma visits but then transforms into another older woman from Jamaica. The woman sings and tells Isabel to sleep. Isabel asks about Ruth often. Curzon tells Isabel to get up, and fortunately, he doesn't turn into a dead person. Then it's dark again, and Isabel can hear a baby crying. Strangely, there's a hive of bees living in Isabel now. They crowd out her thoughts as her body continues to burn.

Isabel wakes up in a neat attic room, lying in a comfortable bed. She has no idea where she is. She tries to stand, but the room spins. The door opens, and Lady Seymour's maid enters and leaves again. A moment later, Lady Seymour enters and offers Isabel a cup of water. Isabel reaches up to touch her aching cheek, but Lady Seymour tells her to leave it for now; a healer put a salve on it. Lady Seymour explains that Isabel has been here for six days. Isabel was beaten when she tried to run away, contracted a fever while in the City Hall prison, and then was branded. Curzon came and told Lady Seymour that Isabel was about to die in the stocks, so Lady Seymour arranged for Isabel to come here.

*While Isabel is in this state, she's able to connect emotionally to her deceased ancestors. But then, when it seems like she's perhaps starting to return to consciousness, Isabel becomes aware of the hive of bees. The bees seem to be a trauma response; they make it so she can't think about what happened to her, which also means she can't heal from the trauma of what's just happened.*



*Waking up in a bed is no doubt unsettling for Isabel, after sleeping on a pallet at the Locktons' and then being imprisoned. It makes more sense, though, when Isabel realizes she's at Lady Seymour's house. Lady Seymour continues to establish herself as someone who's compassionate and sees Isabel as a person who deserves care. The lady also confirms that Curzon did help Isabel, so Isabel learns that she has friends willing to help her throughout the city. Learning about what happened speaks to how traumatizing Isabel's experience was—whether because of the fever or her mind trying to protect her, Isabel doesn't remember fully what happened.*



Lady Seymour says that while Isabel's reaction to the news about Ruth was "unfortunate," it was also understandable—she finds buying and selling children "repugnant." She doesn't know where Ruth is. Isabel asks if she works for Lady Seymour now, but Lady Seymour says that Madam wants Isabel back and there's no legal way for Lady Seymour to keep Isabel. Once Isabel has bathed and eaten, she'll walk Isabel over. As Lady Seymour gets up to leave, she asks if Isabel misses her parents—Isabel spoke to them like they were in the room when she was ill.

Angelika, Lady Seymour's maid, draws Isabel a hot bath that smells lovely. They don't understand each other, but they smile at each other. Isabel puts on her clean clothes and enjoys a meal of fried eggs, toast, and fruit compote. Angelika winces at the sight of Isabel's brand, which is now clean and dry. As Isabel finishes her meal, Lady Seymour enters and says it's time. Isabel follows the lady to Madam's house and, at Madam's prodding, goes around to the back door.

## CHAPTER 25

The bees "buil[d] a hive of sadness" in Isabel's soul, and their dark honey seems to fill her up. The honey makes it hard to think or do anything but scrub and carry. Madam refuses to speak to Isabel and gives her orders through Becky. If Isabel is working in the kitchen, the bees trick Isabel into seeing Ruth's ghost. When that happens, Isabel feels like she's burning again. Once, Becky apologizes for what happened, but Isabel instantly forgets what Becky says. Curzon tries to talk to Isabel through the fence most days, but she ignores him.

As July turns into August, British ships continue to arrive with soldiers. Two weeks pass without rain, and rebel troops experience outbreaks of smallpox and dysentery. Isabel prays that Colonel Regan will die a terrible death for betraying her. Near the end of August, the British row to Long Island. Becky sends Isabel to the marketplace since she's too afraid to go herself. In public, people only see Isabel's scar, not "the girl hidden behind it." Later that evening, Becky says that Isabel needs to tell Curzon to go away. Madam wants him arrested.

*Lady Seymour is trying to sympathize with Isabel, but pay attention to what she's not saying here: that she's fine with slavery in general, when those enslaved are adults. So she sees Isabel as someone who deserves compassion and care, but only until Isabel grows up and becomes an adult herself. Lady Seymour also shows that she's not as powerful as Isabel might expect. She can't win against Madam or the law, despite being wealthy and respected.*



*The bath and the meal make Isabel feel more like a person after her traumatizing and dehumanizing experience. But she's starting to see that her life will never be the same—people are going to have visceral reactions to her brand, as Angelika does here. And this brief reprieve from Madam's abuse comes to an end; Lady Seymour can't—or won't—protect Isabel forever.*



*Isabel is clearly suffering. It's too painful for her to think about Ruth, and the "bees" in Isabel's soul keep Isabel from really addressing what happened. Describing being filled up with the dark honey suggests that Isabel is feeling fuzzy and stuck, as though she's trapped in something sticky and can't move. And this make sense—Isabel is currently trapped in the system of slavery, and she doesn't have the mental space or strength to think about how to improve her situation.*



*The novel highlights Isabel's low status when Becky sends Isabel to the market because she's too afraid to go herself. Becky can conceivably refuse to do something that scares her—Isabel, as an enslaved person, has no such luxury. Isabel finds that her identity has totally changed since she was branded. Now, people see the I only—though she doesn't say whether people treat her like a troublemaker, or if they respond with pity.*



Isabel only goes outside when Becky says it'll be Isabel's fault if Curzon is beaten. As soon as Isabel opens the gate, Curzon says they have a lot to talk about. Isabel tells him to go away and refuses to accept his apology. He looks different to Isabel, but she can't figure out how (lots of things look different after the branding). Curzon asks if Madam has gotten letters from Lockton, and Isabel snaps. She says that the rebels don't want to free enslaved people, just themselves. She should've taken Ruth and run the first night here—at least they'd be together. Curzon grabs Isabel's hand, but Isabel bends his thumb back until he lets go. As she slams the gate in his face, he says they all have scars.

*Isabel has no interest in connecting with Curzon, since it seems like he betrayed her (funneling information to the Patriots on his advice landed Isabel where she is now). But she also doesn't want him to suffer the way he has, so she's willing to speak to him if it means Madam won't hurt him. Isabel also believes that politics stole her attention away from Ruth, so she no longer sees the point in being involved at all. Curzon's remark that everyone has scars is interesting—it begs the question of what scars he has, for one. But it also highlights that Isabel is far from the only enslaved person who suffers in the colonial system, even if this story is mostly about her.*



## CHAPTER 26

The worst storm Isabel has ever seen hits the city that night. Lightning strikes and burns a house three blocks over, and it kills 13 soldiers. Isabel has to clean up the mess in the front parlor, since the windows now leak. They continue to leak in the following days, since there are no spare carpenters in town—they're all getting ready for war. Becky starts to talk about leaving for her uncle in Jersey.

*Isabel is far more concerned about the storm than she is about the increasingly tense political climate. For Becky, though, things are getting scary enough to consider leaving the city. This reflects Becky's privilege—she can leave, where Isabel can't. But it also suggests that Becky might be a Patriot (and fear the British army), no matter what she told Isabel during their first meeting.*



When Madam calls for tea, Isabel takes her buckets to fetch water. Bees fly out of her head as she walks; the fresh air and the pain in her hands help clear her head. Since so many people have fled the city, Isabel is surprised to see a crowd at the water pump. The chatter stops as people stare at Isabel's scar. Isabel is relieved when they resume talking about a Lord Dunmore in Virginia, who supposedly will free any enslaved people who run away and join him. Another man says that Dunmore only freed enslaved people to ruin the crops in Virginia; the British only care about victory. The Patriots, though, say "all men, created equal," and they'll be the ones to free enslaved people. The bees go quiet in Isabel's head. The British will free her.

*It's interesting that Isabel feels better outside of the house—it may be that simply being away from Madam's oppressive presence helps Isabel feel better. The pump community, though, doesn't help Isabel escape her sadness. Rather, even the enslaved people are caught up in picking apart the political climate. But notice that they're all trying to figure out who will free them—they're out for themselves, just like white people such as Becky and the Locktons are. For Isabel, hearing that the British are freeing enslaved people thrusts her back into caring about politics—now she sees a way forward.*



The argument continues, and then someone asks Curzon what he thinks. Curzon steps forward and looks different, but Isabel still can't figure out how. He says he's an American soldier. Isabel realizes what's different: Curzon is dressed in dirty clothes, not like a house servant anymore. One man laughs and says that Curzon is enslaved, just like the rest of them. Curzon argues that Bellingham is going to free him in exchange for joining up in Bellingham's place, but the other men laugh.

*It's hard to tell whether Curzon is right to trust Bellingham and the Patriots or not. The anonymous man is right; Curzon is enslaved, so he doesn't yet have the rights of a free man. And the implication seems to be that it doesn't cost Bellingham anything to promise Curzon freedom in exchange for joining the military—Curzon could die, and then Bellingham will have just condemned Curzon to death.*



Grandfather tells the men to be quiet and calls Isabel forward. But people continue to argue about whether they can or should trust the British or the Patriots. At one point, Grandfather chuckles. He says the young people around him are funny. This isn't their fight—they must choose their own sides and journey until they reach the River Jordan. One man points out that there's no River Jordan here, but Grandfather says that everything between a person and their freedom is the River Jordan. He calls Isabel close to him, takes her hand, and kisses her scar. The kiss feels like a butterfly. He says it's a sign she's a survivor and tells Isabel to look for her River Jordan. Curzon helps Isabel carry her buckets home, but she refuses to look at him.

*Grandfather essentially suggests that it's silly to get involved in this fight, since the Revolutionary War isn't about slavery. Enslaved Black folks and their rights aren't the focus—so it's every person for themselves for now. Recall that Grandfather has facial scars from a coming-of-age ceremony, like Poppa did. His kiss and advice helps Isabel to start thinking differently about her own scar and her identity—she got the scar in a traumatic way, but Grandfather seems to imply that if Isabel can cross her River Jordan (a reference to the border of the Promised Land in the Bible), the scar might start to mean something else.*



## CHAPTER 27

The British win a battle in Brooklyn, capturing or killing 1,000 Patriots. It then promptly starts to rain. Madam paces, and Isabel wishes the bees would come back to her brain so she doesn't have to think about asking the British army for help. In the morning, it's foggy—and when the fog lifts, the Patriots are gone. Washington spent all night ferrying 9,000 men across the river. Isabel quietly curses as she eats her supper, ignoring Becky's chatter about the gruesomely injured men she saw earlier. Becky says she'd become a nurse, but she can't stand the maggots that will be all over injuries in the morning. Isabel's supper suddenly looks like maggots to her.

*Now that Isabel has a plan forming in her mind, the bees are gone—which confirms that the bees are a coping mechanism and a trauma response that keep Isabel from moving forward. Now, she's starting to move forward. With this development, Isabel also starts to regain some of her humanity after being branded. Achieving freedom—however she ends up doing so—will allow Isabel to function in society as a person with rights and dignity, the exact opposite of her situation now.*



Becky says that this supposedly proves that God is siding with the Rebellion; He created the fog to help the Patriots. Isabel thinks that if God wanted to help, He would've destroyed the British fleet before it left England. But Becky suggests that perhaps turning the church bells into cannons will displease God, so maybe He'll switch sides. If he does, Becky is heading for Jersey—she won't let the redcoats carve her up. A week later, Isabel finally sees Curzon around. It's a relief that he's not dead.

*Becky finally confirms that she is a Patriot and only said she's a Tory to please the Locktons—if she were actually a Loyalist, she'd be thrilled by the turn of events. Instead, she's afraid of suffering violence. Notably, Isabel is also afraid of suffering violence—as an enslaved person, she's more at risk than Becky is. Isabel doesn't have the ability to pick up and leave for Jersey, so her risk remains high.*



## CHAPTER 28

While Isabel is in church the following Sunday, the real invasion of New York begins. After three cannon blasts shake the church, Isabel follows everyone outside. Madam asks an officer what's going on. He says that war is here, but the generals are taking care of things. Civilians should go home and lock their doors. Since Becky has the day off, Isabel serves Madam her midday meal. Madam is surprisingly calm. When she's done eating, Madam says she's writing a list for Isabel. Isabel is to go to the shops once the dishes are done. Isabel is terrified, but she remembers a man at the pump saying that if the British win, the enslaved people will be free. Isabel vows to join the British.

*When the Patriots controlled New York, things were tense—but not this tense. Isabel now has to deal with the fact that Madam is thrilled about the invasion and sees no reason to worry, since it's her side that is invading. It's unclear how dangerous things are on the streets, but given what the officer says, Isabel really shouldn't be out doing Madam's shopping at a time like this. Madam just doesn't care for Isabel's safety, since she doesn't see Isabel as fully human. However, Isabel starts to feel better about going out when she realizes that the British might be on her side as well.*



This thought seems to wash away the dead bees that have been filling Isabel's brain. It's simple: the British will free her and give her work, and Isabel will save so she can afford to rescue Ruth. Madam angrily calls Isabel back to attention and asks if she's ill. Isabel says she's fine, but the errand might take some time, with the war happening right outside.

Isabel leaves the house and finds herself going the opposite direction as all the patriot soldiers. She finally slips into the abandoned chandler's shop and sets her basket on the floor. Ruth's **doll** is in the basket. Isabel watches people passing outside and urges the British to land soon, before Madam decides to send someone to find Isabel. Finally, things are quiet outside, so Isabel crawls back through the window.

## CHAPTER 29

Isabel is the only person on the street. She heads for the waterfront, wondering how long she has before Madam becomes suspicious. At the Patriots' campground, Isabel peeks in a tent. The soldiers abandoned everything. She hurries away, back to the wharf, where she watches British soldiers arriving in boats. When Isabel sees an officer land, she swallows her fear and asks him for a word. Another man calls the officer Captain Campbell and says that the rebels left all their camp supplies behind. Isabel interjects that she can cook, wash, and sew, but he tells her to leave him alone.

Another British soldier approaches Captain Campbell and says that the rebel camp is totally empty. Campbell tells him to prepare Washington's headquarters for their Major General, but the man doesn't know where Washington's quarters are. Isabel says Washington has been at Number 1, Broadway; his wife has been at the Mortier house and his offices are up Broad Street. Campbell praises Isabel but says he doesn't want troublemakers. He asks what the mark on her face means. Isabel tells the truth: it's an I for insolence, and she got it after trying to run away when Madam sold her little sister.

Captain Campbell deems this "regrettable" and understandable. But then he asks if Madam is a rebel supporter. Isabel says Madam supports the Tories; she can't wait to entertain the soldiers. At this, Campbell's face hardens. He says he can only employ enslaved people who have run away from rebel owners. Campbell turns to deal with some well-dressed civilian passengers arriving on the next boat. He quietly tells Isabel that he doesn't believe in slavery, but he can't help.

*Isabel is young, naïve, and idealistic, so it seems unlikely that things are going to be as simple as she thinks they'll be. But even if Isabel is wrong in this regard, simply having a plan helps her move forward and start to process her trauma, since the bees disappear for the moment.*



*Isabel isn't free yet, so she still has to worry about what Madam might do if she realizes Isabel is planning to try to free herself. This shows that Isabel is starting to mature some—she no longer blindly trusts that showing loyalty to a side is going to protect her from Madam's ire.*



*Isabel has to work up the courage to speak to Captain Campbell in much the same way she worked up the courage to speak to Pastor Weeks at the beginning of the novel. She's still fully committed to securing her freedom—so despite the trauma she's experienced, Isabel hasn't yet broken down and accepted that she's going to be enslaved forever. Indeed, she realizes she needs to make it clear that she has marketable skills—though it's unclear if Isabel will be successful in this situation.*



*Isabel knows all these things about General Washington's quarters and offices because she spent so much time listening to Lockton and his friends before Lockton left. So Isabel shows in this passage that she is human, and she is listening—and she'll use what she hears to get what she wants. Isabel feels she has no choice but to tell Campbell the truth about her scar. Hopefully, this will stir some compassion in him, and he'll be willing to help.*



*Campbell's explanation is like a slap in the face for Isabel. She learns here that neither the British nor the Patriots actually care about freeing enslaved people for those people's sake—they care about freeing people if it hurts their enemies. And Campbell's personal belief that slavery is wrong isn't enough to convince him he should go against orders and help Isabel. Indeed, he seems pretty apathetic about it.*





Isabel feels “chained between two nations.” Bees in her head make it difficult for her to see as the men come ashore—and one of them is Master Lockton. He calls to Isabel. She pulls out Madam’s list and says she’s headed for the market. Lockton asks about the l on her cheek, pinching her chin so he can get a good look. Calmly, Campbell says it’s probably for “insolence” and says that Isabel thanked him for rescuing the city from the rebels. Isabel says she “prayed for liberation.” Lockton says it’s “quaint” that enslaved people are getting political and joins the other men at a nearby tavern. Isabel completes the shopping trip, but she doesn’t remember it.

*Captain Campbell does help Isabel out here when he doesn’t reveal her true purpose to Master Lockton. However, his help results in Lockton belittling Isabel—saying it’s “quaint” that even enslaved people care about the outcome of the war implies that Lockton doesn’t think enslaved people have any reason to care. This, of course, ignores the fact that enslaved people are people, with concerns and dreams of their own. Lockton’s words are dehumanizing, while caring about politics is a way for enslaved people to assert their humanity.*



## CHAPTER 30

The next day, the Locktons agree to house two British soldiers. Isabel is now the only staff in the house—Becky vanished. But it doesn’t matter to Isabel, since she feels empty. Isabel roasts the chicken too long since she polishes silver and irons tablecloths while it’s cooking. It doesn’t matter when Madam scolds her for the dry chicken. That night, Isabel puts her head down next to Ruth’s **doll**, though she no longer kisses the doll goodnight. The next night, Madam makes Isabel stay up all night making rolls. Isabel ruins two batches and then makes cornbread—but it burns when she falls asleep.

*Isabel is shutting down. She no longer has the emotional bandwidth to react to Madam’s anger—and it doesn’t seem worth it to her to seek out small comforts, like kissing Ruth’s doll goodnight. The fact that Isabel has apparently been sleeping with the doll since Ruth was sold, though, shows that Isabel—like Ruth—is still a child who needs comfort. She might be a teenager, but she’s in no way an adult and isn’t yet able to handle her trauma and emotions.*



Three mornings later, Isabel carries a note to the Locktons. It’s from Lady Seymour—she needs Isabel’s help, since her Dutch servants left and she has a dozen Hessians staying at her house. Madam says she can’t do the housework herself, but Lockton says they owe Lady Seymour. And hopefully, he says, Madam regrets selling Ruth—it’d be nice to have the extra help right now. Angrily, Madam tells Isabel to clean the kitchen and then leave. But Lockton tells Isabel to leave now.

*It’s interesting that Lockton scolds Madam for selling Ruth in this moment—it shows his humanity, and it suggests that he has the capacity to be empathetic and kind to the enslaved people he owns. He might be crass and rude, but it seems he is capable of seeing Isabel and Ruth as people—at least when it’s convenient. And now, it’s convenient, as it’s a way for him to also shame his wife and gain some power over her.*



Isabel gathers an apron and Ruth’s **doll**, and then dawdles on the way to Lady Seymour’s house. She’s heard that Hessians breathe fire and are always covered in blood, so she figures they’re as bad as Madam. She’s somewhat correct: they spit when they talk and eat their meat rare, and their language sounds like eating rocks. Lady Seymour speaks German and tells Isabel that when the men say “Danke,” they’re thanking her. She says they’re just men far away from home—and they like her cat, so they can’t be that bad.

*Taking the doll highlights Isabel’s desire to keep Ruth’s memory alive, even if she’s otherwise shut down emotionally. Lady Seymour encourages Isabel to look at the Hessians (German soldiers hired by the British) with compassion. Just as Isabel is far away from home and upset about it, the Hessians are also normal people navigating a totally strange world.*



The work at Lady Seymour's is exhausting, simply because there are so many people to care for. But Lady Seymour makes sure Isabel eats a real meal three times per day, and Isabel sleeps in the attic bedchamber. Lots of people in town grumble, including Lady Seymour. Some Loyalists return to the city to find that soldiers have taken over their houses, but Lady Seymour is upset that the British let one unit's horses practice in a church. With so many new people in town, Isabel sees few familiar faces at the Tea Water Pump. Grandfather disappears, and five more Hessians move into Lady Seymour's house. Isabel is glad to finally lie down to sleep that night with Ruth's **doll**. She can't bring herself to pray. Hours later, Isabel wakes, and everything is on fire.

*Even if the work at Lady Seymour's house is difficult, it seems easier for Isabel because Lady Seymour is kind and makes sure she has the food necessary to keep going throughout the day and gets a good night's sleep. As the conflict starts to get closer, the war becomes more real for Loyalists in town—it's harder to support the cause when the British are doing things like letting horses into a church, something Lady Seymour no doubt sees as disrespectful. So even Lady Seymour is out for herself in this war: because of her wealth she wants the British to win, but she also takes issue with some of their methods.*



## CHAPTER 31

Isabel wakes up coughing. Outside her window, the fire is as bright as day. The house next door is on fire, and the flames blow right at Lady Seymour's house. Isabel puts her shoes on, grabs Ruth's **doll**, and heads down the stairs, screaming "Fire!" Lady Seymour is just coming out of her room when Isabel passes. She asks Isabel to help her carry a trunk containing her valuables out of the house, but it's too heavy. Isabel says they must leave, so Lady Seymour opens the trunk. She shoves packets of letters, a portrait of a blond man, and two small boxes at Isabel. Isabel leads Lady Seymour down the stairs through the smoke—but the lady collapses. Isabel drops her doll and the boxes, hauls Lady Seymour up, and drags her to the street.

*For Isabel, saving Ruth's doll is essential. It's the one thing she has of Ruth's, and losing it in the fire would be like losing Ruth entirely. But hanging onto the doll becomes more difficult when Lady Seymour insists on saving her own precious belongings. To Isabel, Lady Seymour is being ridiculous—an entire trunk of valuables isn't worth risking one's life over. But she also realizes that Lady Seymour deserves to live, even if she's being irrational, and so helping to rescue some of her valuables is the only way to get the woman out of the house. Losing the doll shows how slavery forces Isabel to prioritize the needs and desires of her white owners over what she wants.*



The sky is swirling with fire and soot. Isabel knows they need to move or die, so she drags Lady Seymour away from the fire. Finally, they collapse at the edge of a graveyard. Isabel comes to her senses some time later. Lady Seymour mumbles about the bells—Isabel realizes she's asking why the church bells didn't raise the alarm. The church bells, though, have been melted into cannons. Isabel lifts Lady Seymour, who's now crying, and helps her down the street. They pass people in their nightclothes—and piles of charred bodies. When they get to the Locktons' home, they enter through the front door.

*Given the horrors that Isabel and Lady Seymour encounter on their walk to the Locktons', it's clear that they were extremely lucky to get out of the fire alive—and to have a place to go. They survived because of Isabel's quick thinking and her commitment to getting Lady Seymour out, no matter the cost. And Isabel did choose to help Lady Seymour when she didn't have to—she could've saved herself. Even though she's been abused and traumatized by Lady Seymour's family members, Isabel still believes that the lady deserves to live.*



## CHAPTER 32

The fire destroyed about 500 homes, leaving many families homeless. The burnt area is now known as the burned-over district. Loyalists insist the rebels started the fire; Patriots insist it was God's judgement on the British. Soldiers search for arsonists and hang several people without even giving them a trial.

*This fire was a real historical event, and to this day, nobody knows for sure how it started. The fact that the British and the Patriots each blame the other shows how integrated the war has become in everyday life: nobody seems to consider that the fire might have been an accident.*



Isabel coughs up soot for days and her eyes hurt, but her body is fine. She lost Ruth's **doll**—and it feels like she lost everything. Bees swarm back into her brain, humming loudly so she doesn't have to think about the doll. The left side of Lady Seymour's body no longer works, so Lockton insists she recover in the Locktons' bedroom. One day, Lady Seymour calls Isabel to her bedside and tries to thank her. Isabel gives her the portrait and the letters, which makes Lady Seymour cry.

*Both Isabel and Lady Seymour have suffered greatly as a result of the fire. But while Lady Seymour is happily reunited with her precious belongings, Isabel has no such luxury. Instead, the bees return and keep Isabel from addressing her grief or her trauma. Ruth now seems to be gone forever now that the doll, a symbol of Ruth, has burned up.*



Three days after the fire, 11 British soldiers from Kent move in with the Locktons. The Locktons start sleeping in the front parlor, and Lockton gives his study to Colonel Hawkins (he wants to impress the colonel). Five soldiers and their wives join Isabel in sleeping in the cellar. The wives ease Isabel's burden some, as they cook and clean too. The new boss in the kitchen is Sarah; she's pregnant and not very friendly, but fortunately seems uninterested in beating Isabel. Isabel misses Becky. It's odd to sleep in the cellar with others—and after a soldier steals Isabel's blanket one night, Sarah lets Isabel sleep upstairs by the kitchen hearth. It's lonely without Ruth's **doll**.

*Even though the Locktons are wealthy and privileged, they're not exempt from having to pitch in and house British soldiers—it no doubt takes them down a peg to have to sleep in their parlor. But Isabel can't take any pleasure in this, since there are so many more people to care for and Sarah isn't friendly. Isabel's loneliness is compounded by losing Ruth's doll and that symbol of Ruth. Again, Isabel is still a child, and the doll provided comfort she couldn't get elsewhere—but now it's gone.*



## CHAPTER 33

That fall, everything is gray thanks to the ash from the fire. Isabel's skin is ashy too, and she wonders if anyone notices if Ruth's skin is also dry. Isabel half wonders if she actually died in the fire and just can't enter heaven. But she also hears Curzon's voice telling her to join the rebels—and she tells that voice to be quiet. Isabel figures Curzon is at Fort Washington with the other troops. Sarah and the other wives help around the Lockton home, but since they spend most of their time helping at the regiment's campground, Isabel has to do the worst jobs. And Colonel Hawkins makes Isabel run errands for him. The Locktons don't struggle when the price of food quadruples, but many people turn to begging.

*Isabel is so beaten down that it seems totally reasonable to her to wonder if she might actually be dead. She's without her sister, she lost Ruth's doll, and she hasn't yet secured her freedom. Now that Isabel realizes the British won't help her, she thinks more about Curzon's loyalty to the Patriots. Isabel is intrigued by the Patriots' rhetoric about freedom and equality—the words are compelling, even if the Patriots themselves don't care about freeing enslaved people. But for now, getting involved in politics seems like too much of a risk.*



One day, Isabel notices that the plants from Momma's **seeds** died in the frost. Isabel forgot to care for them. She collects some seeds from the flowers. As the weather gets colder, Lady Seymour's health improves. In private, Madam grumbles about this—she can't wait for Lady Seymour to die. One day, after Madam reads an article aloud about British soldiers looting the local library, Lady Seymour comes suddenly to life. Isabel starts helping her walk outside, and Lady Seymour hires a seamstress to make her some new clothes. She also orders a heavy cloak and skirt for Isabel and refuses to let Isabel pay for them, since Isabel saved her letters from the fire.

*The dead plants make Isabel feel like she's failed—she couldn't protect Ruth, and she couldn't keep Momma's memory alive by cultivating the seeds. Collecting more seeds, though, will allow Isabel to try again in the future. Her journey of coming of age isn't over yet. As Lady Seymour returns to life, she also becomes more compassionate. Making sure that Isabel is properly clothed for the winter is a way she can thank Isabel for her life—and for her mementos.*



Soon after, more British soldiers move into the Lockton home and start sleeping in the second-floor drawing room. From her chair outside the room, where she sits in case the soldiers need food, Isabel hears that they hope to finish the war by New Year's. One afternoon, as Isabel walks to the Tea Water Pump, everyone starts running and shouting. Isabel follows the crowd to the Commons, where British soldiers are ushering American soldiers into the Bridewell Prison. Isabel spots Curzon, muddy and injured, among them.

*The Patriots might have given Curzon some freedom and agency by allowing him to serve as a soldier. But Curzon is still vulnerable to whatever happens to the Patriot army, such as being imprisoned now. Finding Curzon being imprisoned contrasts wildly with Isabel's experience of the war: it's mostly boring and mindless, as her involvement ends at making sure the soldiers have food.*



## CHAPTER 34

Madam throws a celebratory supper complete with turtle soup. She hires the cook from a well-known tavern and chooses the prettiest of the soldiers' wives to wait at the tables. Isabel's job will be to ferry food upstairs and dirty dishes downstairs. Crates of food and turtles start arriving before dawn, and soon after, a hairdresser arrives to do Madam's hair. Madam tells Isabel to fetch her hot chocolate and then stay in her chamber to tidy, so Isabel watches Madam apply her makeup. After putting white paste over her whole face, Madam carefully glues false eyebrows made of mouse fur over her eyebrows. She then sends Isabel to help seat Lady Seymour at the lavish dining table before the other guests arrive.

*The recent British win is the opportunity Madam has been waiting for. Now she can show off her wealth and her power by hosting this lavish supper. The fact she can throw this party at all illustrates just how wealthy she is—food and labor shortages don't really matter to her. Witnessing Madam applying her makeup (which is comical by today's standards) gives Isabel the opportunity to offer commentary on Madam's vanity. Isabel doesn't see the mouse eyebrows as beautiful, for instance. They more aptly show the absurd lengths Madam is willing to go to in order to make herself look good.*



Midway through bringing up trays of turtle soup, Isabel peeks into the drawing room at the dinner party. Master Lockton is well-dressed, but it's obvious he's overworked. Madam's tall hairdo looks ready to fall at any moment, and Lady Seymour looks like "an elegant spider." Isabel watches the servers dish up tongue and pour wine and carries tray after tray up the stairs. By dessert, the room is warm, and the heat is melting the glue holding Madam's mouse eyebrow on—but Madam doesn't notice.

*It's cathartic and humorous to see Madam seemingly ready to fall apart just when Madam has gotten exactly what she wanted. However, notice that Isabel never offers her own thoughts or judgements on what's happening to Madam. Emotionally, she's not in a place to be able to take any pleasure in Madam's humiliating misfortune.*



The men discuss the 3,000 prisoners they took at the recent battle. There are so many prisoners that in addition to housing them at Bridewell, prisoners are also being held in storerooms around the city. One man hopes a plague will kill the prisoners; another suggests they shoot them all first. Lady Seymour suggests they take care of the prisoners, since the Patriots also hold British prisoners. One man jokes that the Patriots would have to capture prisoners first—but everyone goes silent when Lady Seymour notes that the Patriots did just that after their victory at Breed's Hill.

*This conversation makes it clear that Isabel isn't the only person in colonial America who's suffering dehumanizing treatment. Wishing a plague on the prisoners, or suggesting just killing them all, is horrifying, as it suggests the speakers here don't see those prisoners as people, just like them. Lady Seymour's compassion shines through, though. She's willing to acknowledge the humanity of all people, even if she doesn't agree with them.*



Madam changes the subject and raises a toast just as her eyebrow falls into her rice pudding. Isabel continues ferrying food and coffee up and down the stairs until her knees are weak. Finally, the women head to bed and the men split up to play billiards or study their maps. Isabel is tasked with taking the table scraps to the privy; the Locktons don't care about spreading scraps on their sad **garden**. Isabel shivers in the cold, thinking of Curzon. Something inside her shifts, and Isabel stashes the bowl of scraps at the back of the yard.

*Isabel's descriptions of climbing the stairs until she can barely climb anymore makes it clear that this is just a fun night for the Locktons and their friends. Isabel is the unseen worker who makes the dinner happen—and being unseen and unappreciated contributes to her dehumanization. Isabel is presumably saving the scraps for Curzon, which suggests that Isabel might have found a reason to keep going—and to start resisting again.*



## CHAPTER 35

Isabel's chance to sneak to the prison comes three days later, when Madam and Lady Seymour leave to visit a friend—and in their absence, the soldiers' wives leave to visit *their* friends. Isabel lines her shoes and cap with newspaper to keep out the wind, grabs her scrap bucket, and walks to the Bridewell Prison. She stares at the prison; voices in her head tell her she shouldn't do this. But another voice says that Curzon is Isabel's only friend, and that he freed her from the stocks. She knocks on the door, and a towering guard answers. He's more interested in the rice pudding in the bucket than Isabel's lies (that Madam sent her and that Curzon is her brother), so he invites her in.

*Isabel knows she could get in big trouble for bringing food scraps to the prison—Madam, after all, didn't seem to have a problem with the men speaking so cruelly about the prisoners at the supper. But Isabel decides it's more important to support those she considers friends, like Curzon, than to keep herself safe at his expense. In this way, Isabel differs from most white characters she's encountered. Even those who have been kind, like Lady Seymour, have still been unwilling to take substantial risks to help her become free.*



The guard leads Isabel to a cell at the end of an aisle. It's filled with men and boys, all of them freezing. The guard takes Isabel's scrap bucket "for further inspection" and a short man points Isabel to Curzon, who's laying in the corner. He reveals that he was shot in the leg, but fortunately it didn't hit the bone. Curzon explains that during the battle, he helped a militia boy who had two muskets. Curzon loaded one while the boy shot the other—until a British cannon ripped the boy's head off. Curzon kept shooting until the colonel surrendered. Now, officers are kept in boardinghouses and can walk around the city.

*The fact that the guard is so interested in the food in Isabel's bucket suggests that the British soldiers aren't that much better off than the poor people in town who now have to beg for food. In this way, the soldiers and prisoners are bound by a shared enemy: hunger. Curzon's description of the battle is horrific, but he describes himself as acting heroically. This is because Curzon still genuinely believes in the Patriots' cause, so putting himself at risk seemed worth it to him.*



The guard returns with the bucket, which is now half empty. As soon as the guard leaves the cell, a man called Private Dibdin snatches the bucket from Isabel and says enslaved people shouldn't get to eat while the rest of them starve. But a short man, who's a sergeant, scolds Dibdin. He explains to Isabel that they haven't eaten in three days and asks if she might share. Isabel refuses, but Curzon says it's fine—they all fought together, after all. The soldiers pass the bucket around, each taking a tiny piece.

*It doesn't matter to Private Dibdin that Curzon fought bravely alongside him—he reasons that because Curzon is Black and enslaved, he's less deserving of food than the other free white men in the cell. Curzon takes the high ground by insisting on sharing the food in the bucket anyway. But Dibdin's behavior is a sign that perhaps the Patriot army isn't going to give Curzon what he's looking for, since Patriots are clearly still racist.*



As the bucket makes a second round around the room, the sergeant whispers to Isabel and asks if she'll carry messages to their captain for him. Isabel insists she's not foolish and refuses. When the guard comes back and tells Isabel it's time to go, she tries to give Curzon her cloak. He refuses; it will be "borrowed" if he keeps it. But he accepts the newspaper from her shoes and promises not to go anywhere.

*Isabel is willing to help Curzon out for personal reasons—they're friends. But she's wary about getting involved with the Patriot army again, especially after Colonel Regan refused to help her months ago. Right now, it only feels safe for Isabel to focus on her friends, not the bigger political issues.*



## CHAPTER 36

Lady Seymour comes down with a fever after the visit to Madam's friend, so Madam calls the doctor. When the doctor is done seeing to the lady, Madam asks if it would be better for them to move Lady Seymour to their Charleston estate, where it's warm. The doctor is aghast and insists she'd die early in the journey. Isabel figures that's exactly what Madam wants. But soon after, the Locktons decide that Isabel will tend to Lady Seymour, and that the lady's room will be kept hot. This is nice for Isabel, as it means she doesn't need to wear her too-small shoes.

*Especially when the Locktons assign Isabel to caring for Lady Seymour, it seems as though Isabel and Lady Seymour form an alliance of sorts against Madam. Madam doesn't care for either of them and actively wants Lady Seymour to die—so they have a common enemy. This, however, does show that Lady Seymour's power is waning. She can no longer bully Madam into being nice.*



Lady Seymour reads as many newspapers as possible, and Isabel reads what she can when Lady Seymour falls asleep. In this way, Isabel follows the war's progress. The Patriots are doing poorly; they don't have enough ammunition, and the Congress have fled Philadelphia. Isabel is stunned when she reads that Newport, Rhode Island, fell to the British. She hasn't thought of Rhode Island in months.

*The opportunity to read helps Isabel hold onto her humanity, as she's able to read the papers and come to her own conclusions about what's going on. Realizing she hasn't thought about Rhode Island in a long time shows Isabel how far she's come—she's a different person now than when she left Rhode Island.*



In the Bridewell, conditions have improved slightly. Civilians have donated some blankets, and the British now give prisoners hardtack biscuits and pork—but the pork is spoiled, and there's no fire to cook it over. For one visit, Isabel saves her own slice of mince pie for the guard, so he leaves the potato skins and mutton fat for the prisoners. Inside, there are frozen bodies stacked up awaiting burial. Curzon is feverish and refuses to talk.

*Even though conditions have improved somewhat for the prisoners, things are still dire: Curzon clearly isn't doing well, and given the frozen bodies, it seems likely that he could die soon. The improved conditions are also still dehumanizing—not allowing the prisoners to cook their spoiled meat shows how unconcerned the British are for their prisoners' wellbeing or safety.*



The next afternoon, Lady Seymour gives Isabel an errand list. Since the lady hasn't eaten, Isabel suggests she eat a biscuit with honey—but Lady Seymour points out that if she eats less, the prisoners get more food. She warns Isabel that while many people think that feeding prisoners is a Christian thing to do, Madam doesn't agree. Isabel must be careful.

*Lady Seymour doesn't say it outright, but she implies that she's one of those who believes it's good and Christian to feed the prisoners. This also solidifies her alliance with Isabel against Madam, as she's reminding Isabel that feeding prisoners could be dangerous—and given Lady Seymour's poor health, it's unclear how long she'll be around to protect her.*



Isabel takes the list to the stationer's shop Lady Seymour specified so she can purchase the lady's books. The shopkeeper is busy studying a pamphlet with a customer, so Isabel browses the books. She stops when she encounters *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* by Phillis Wheatley. Momma told Isabel about Miss Wheatley, how she was kidnapped in Africa and was later freed. Isabel picks up the volume, wondering if she has the skill to read poetry—just as the door closes, startling her.

The young man behind the counter accepts Isabel's list and says he's happy Lady Seymour is feeling better. As he wraps the books, he asks if Isabel knew Curzon; Curzon brought Isabel here once and convinced the man to share his rolls. Isabel apologizes for taking the food, but the man says it's fine—courting the baker's daughter means more bread. Sadly, he says she now lives in Pennsylvania. Then, he asks if Isabel feeds the prisoners in the Bridewell. Isabel insists she doesn't and blushes, but the man leans forward and asks her to tell the boys that people are trying to help. Then, he pushes a volume toward Isabel and says it's for her. He scoffs when she says she can't read and tells her to pass it on when she's done.

## CHAPTER 37

As Lady Seymour's health improves, Isabel no longer spends her days in the lady's warm chamber. Christmas preparations begin, and Madam crafts a long list of sweets she requires. Isabel is constantly fetching wood and beating eggs. One day the woodpile freezes, and two of the soldiers' wives, Hannah and Mary, argue about whose turn it is to fetch water from the Tea Water Pump. They're about to start brawling as Sarah, now heavily pregnant, comes into the kitchen. Meekly, Isabel offers to go early in the morning. The women agree—and now Isabel has an excuse to check on Curzon, since the prison is near the pump.

The next morning, Isabel heads up the island before the sun rises. But when she gets to the door, a man she's never seen answers—and says that civilians can't enter the prison anymore. They can only pass food through the cell windows. Isabel hurries to the back of the prison, where the burial pits and Curzon's window are. She calls for him, but Dibdin comes to the window. Dibdin says that Curzon is asleep and the sergeant is dead—he's in charge now. Isabel refuses to pass in the bucket until Dibdin wakes Curzon up. She's afraid he's dead.

*Phillis Wheatley was the first published Black person in America, and that made her extremely famous—famous enough that even Isabel and Momma have heard about her. For Isabel, Miss Wheatley is a role model. She represents what Isabel could achieve, if only she were allowed to be free and develop her talents rather than do housework as an enslaved person.*



*For Isabel, it's fraught and anxiety-inducing to speak to the young man about feeding prisoners and about the food he gave her. As far as she knows, most Patriot sympathizers left the city when Becky did, if not before—so she doesn't expect to encounter any. And before she's sure of what the man is getting at, she also fears that he might reveal to the Locktons that she's literate and has been feeding the prisoners, which could jeopardize Isabel's security. Giving Isabel this book, though, suggests the man realizes the pressure Isabel is under—and he wants to help.*



*As the days get colder and Christmas approaches, Isabel's tasks change, but life proceeds mostly as usual. But even as things around the Lockton home seem normal, Isabel can no longer ignore the fact that Curzon is freezing, hungry, and unwell in the prison. She can't ignore the impact of the war anymore. So even her mundane tasks like getting water take on a political overtone, as she decides to use the chore as an excuse to make sure Curzon is okay.*



*Since Dibdin was so rude and racist the last time Isabel spoke to him, she has no reason to trust what he says about Curzon. Dibdin doesn't care about Curzon as a person; indeed, he sees Curzon as an annoying obstacle between himself and more food. But in this situation, Isabel also has some power she didn't have before—being outside the prison, instead of going through the sergeant, gives her the power to decide whether to hand over the bucket or not.*



A moment later, Curzon appears in the window. He's shivering, clearly ill, and missing his hat. Curzon can't even hear Isabel, but Dibdin jokes that it's terrible how disease is ravaging the prison. Isabel ascertains that Curzon's cellmates are stealing his blanket and his rations, so she curses at Dibdin. Dibdin curses back and says that of course enslaved people will be treated worse than free men—but Isabel can remedy that by passing a message to Captain Morse, who can get a doctor into the prison. Isabel agrees, and men in the cell drape a blanket around Curzon and give him his hat back. Isabel passes scones to Dibdin and says she won't come back if Curzon dies.

It's not hard for Isabel to find Captain Morse. He's a well-fed man, and he's enraged to learn how the prisoners are being treated. He also promises that Curzon will receive help, just like the other soldiers. Captain Morse asks for Isabel's name so he can thank her. Isabel tells him her name is Sal but insists she has no last name (Lockton "taste[s] foul" to her). Back at the Locktons', she has porridge and tea going by the time the other servants wake up. She vomits later out of fear—the brand makes her recognizable, and she'll be hanged along with the prisoners and Captain Morse as soon as Madam finds out. But she visits the prison daily from then on.

A few nights later, Lockton and Madam fight. Lockton plans to get the next ship to London, and Madam wants him to either stay or take her. Once they're finally asleep, Isabel sits by the fire, too cold to sleep. After midnight, Isabel feeds the fire and pulls out the book the stationer gave her. It's by Thomas Paine and is called [Common Sense](#). According to Momma, common sense isn't common—so it's special when you find it. The first sentence, though, doesn't make any sense to Isabel at all. It takes her four tries to understand what Paine is saying. Isabel desperately wants to sneak [Robinson Crusoe](#) out of the library, but she moves on to the second sentence.

## CHAPTER 38

On Christmas Eve, Isabel's trip to the prison is fast—Captain Morse's doctor has tended to the prisoners, and Curzon is doing better. Isabel then spends her morning cutting holly for Madam and helping to decorate the house. She's never seen a house decorated for Christmas like this, but the tree branches and rosemary inside are beautiful. Isabel struggles to decide what to do with her day off on Christmas—Christmas used to mean Momma's bread pudding and reading the Bible with Momma and Ruth. The memory makes Isabel cry. She decides she'll walk the whole island.

*To Dibdin, Curzon's poor health is a joke—he doesn't see Curzon as a human being who needs care and compassion. On the outside of the prison, though, Isabel possibly enjoys more power than she ever has, as she can curse at Dibdin without consequence and barter with him so that Curzon is treated better. And significantly, Isabel is only willing to start carrying messages for the Patriots when she knows it's the only way to help her friend. Once again, politics doesn't matter to her until it becomes personal.*



*The British considered Patriot officers to be gentlemen, so they weren't put in prison like soldiers of lower rank. But despite having this power and privilege, Captain Morse seems more than willing to make sure that Curzon isn't treated worse than the other soldiers. Introducing herself is a difficult prospect for Isabel, as her legal name isn't the name she identifies as. Sal Lockton marks Isabel as an enslaved person—and she's not willing to accept her continued enslavement.*



[Common Sense](#) was a political pamphlet that argued that the Americans had a moral imperative to oppose British rule, and it was wildly popular in colonial America. But simply having it puts Isabel in danger—the Locktons would surely object to her having this kind of reading material. Though Isabel would rather escape into an adventure story like [Robinson Crusoe](#), the fact that she persists with [Common Sense](#) suggests that she's coming of age. She's starting to do her own research and figure out where she fits politically.



*This is going to be Isabel's first Christmas without either Ruth or Momma, so Isabel is struggling with feeling alone and unmoored. For now, she doesn't feel like she can, say, make Momma's bread pudding and read the Bible without Momma and Ruth there—that would be too upsetting. So Isabel decides on the walk so she can keep moving and hopefully not dwell on the people she's lost in the last year.*





On Christmas morning, Lady Seymour gives Isabel a new pair of shoes that fits her properly. Madam gives the soldiers' wives money and gives nothing to Isabel. After the church service, Madam says that Isabel must serve the midday meal before she gets her day off. Once the meal is over, Madam tells Isabel to wash the dishes and bring in firewood before she can have the day off. Lady Seymour glares at Madam, but Madam ignores it. Then, once Lady Seymour and Lockton excuse themselves, Madam says she knows Isabel has been going to the Bridewell Prison.

Isabel's heart stops as Madam says that Lady Seymour insists she's sending Isabel to the prison, and that it's good work. But Madam then says that Lady Seymour is a "blithering idiot." Isabel must not go to the prison again. Isabel shakes; Madam can do whatever she wants to punish Isabel. Madam continues that she can't do anything until Lockton is gone and Lady Seymour is dead—but Isabel should live in fear of that day.

When Isabel is finally free for the afternoon, she's still trembling. Will Curzon die now that Isabel can't carry messages for Dibdin? Isabel thinks as she walks. She feels powerless as blisters form and pop on her feet. Isabel then walks barefoot until the blisters freeze and stop hurting. When she gets to the edge of the river, Isabel thinks of the ancestors waiting at the shore, waiting for their children to return. Suddenly, it occurs to Isabel that Madam can't "chain [her] soul." Madam can hurt Isabel's body, but she can't hurt Ruth or hurt Isabel's soul without Isabel's consent.

Everyone is asleep when Isabel gets home. She stokes the fire and remembering Momma's reminder to "keep Christmas," slices a loaf of bread. Without thinking, Isabel bakes a maple syrup bread pudding. While it's cooking, Isabel bathes and notes that she's grown so much that her clothes barely fit anymore. And when it's done, Isabel dresses warmly and heads to Canvastown, the new name for the burned-over district. There, she prays and introduces herself to a family living in a canvas tent. She convinces them to take the bread pudding and hums on her way home. Isabel finally feels at peace.

*Lady Seymour's kindness in getting Isabel shoes contrasts sharply with Madam giving Isabel nothing—and then postponing the start of Isabel's day off. But it also seems like Lady Seymour's power over her niece is waning, since she isn't comfortable or able to do anything more than just glare at Madam. And Lockton's relative quiet in this passage highlights his ambivalence—he's not outright cruel to Isabel, but he's not going out of his way to do anything nice for her, either.*



*Isabel understands that Lady Seymour is covering for her and trying to protect her. But she also discovers that Lady Seymour's protection is in no way absolute. Indeed, Madam seems intent on making Isabel's life hell once the people who can stand up for Isabel are out of her way. This gives Isabel some urgency—she has to do something to secure her freedom, as things will only get worse otherwise.*



*This is a transformative moment for Isabel. She begins her walk feeling powerless, believing she has to do what Madam says. But then she realizes that freedom can mean different things to different people. Isabel might not be able to figure out how to achieve legal and physical freedom at the moment. She can, though, decide to make sure her soul stays free by making her own choices and not letting Madam break her spirit.*



*Isabel never defines what "keep Christmas" means, but given that she takes this advice and goes on to make a bread pudding for a houseless family, it seems to be advice to use Christmas to serve others. Doing something kind for someone else helps Isabel feel like she's in control of her life—Madam can be upset with her, but Isabel isn't going to let Madam make her bitter or cruel. She can still choose to be kind and generous, and she realizes choosing kindness will help her hold onto her humanity.*



## CHAPTER 39

Two days after Christmas, Isabel accompanies Sarah to the fish market. Sarah is close to giving birth and is uncomfortable, so she needs Isabel to carry the fish home. It's a struggle to find halibut and as they walk through the market, Isabel thinks about not visiting the prison this morning. She's still confused about what to do. But Isabel gets lost in thought and loses track of Sarah—and Captain Morse appears. He says he has news just as Isabel spots Sarah heading back for her. Isabel agrees to visit him later and hisses for him to go away.

As Isabel and Sarah head back down the street, Isabel asks if Sarah has heard Madam say anything about her. Sarah says that Madam doesn't want Isabel fetching water anymore, even though nobody else is awake in the morning to do it. Isabel insists she doesn't mind, and Sarah says she'd be grateful if Isabel keeps fetching water. She promises not to tell Madam.

That afternoon, Isabel overturns the water pitcher. Sarah is suspicious but allows Isabel to fetch more water. Isabel races to Captain Morse, who gives her a loaf of bread—there's a note baked in, bearing the news that General Washington led a surprise attack on Christmas and beat the Hessians. The war isn't over. Isabel doesn't want to carry the note (it could get her in trouble) but ultimately agrees to take it. At the prison, she whispers to Dibdin that there's a note in the loaf and runs away. Minutes later, cheers erupt from the prison.

## CHAPTER 40

The rebels enjoy another victory just after New Year's Day, so the British promise to feed prisoners boiled peas and butter. It's still bitterly cold, though, and the prisoners can't have fires. Lockton's trip is moved up so he can tell Parliament the bad news. Isabel continues to visit the prison early in the morning, terrified Madam will find her out. Her fears seem to be coming true when on the morning Lockton will leave, a British soldier shouts for Isabel and hurries toward her. It's the guard who first let Isabel visit Curzon. He asks if she'd bring him some food sometime and then asks if Isabel's master ever hires her out. Isabel lies that he does—working away from Madam would be a treat. The guard introduces himself as Fisher and promises to keep an eye on Curzon in exchange for cake.

*Captain Morse has treated Isabel and Curzon with kindness, but he seems not to understand that he's putting Isabel in danger by speaking to her in public like this. Isabel can't trust Sarah to keep it a secret from Madam if she does notice anything. And just because Isabel has decided physical pain won't damage her soul doesn't mean Isabel doesn't still have a vested interest in keeping herself physically safe.*



*Sarah may be more of an ally to Isabel than Isabel thought, if only because she needs the extra help when she's heavily pregnant. It also seems like Sarah, much like Becky, isn't totally loyal to Madam and finds Madam demanding and ridiculous. Being white and not technically in Madam's employ, Sarah has some power to do what she wants here.*



*Isabel is taking a major risk by carrying the message into the prison. But the cheers that come out of the prison once the men learn what the note says suggests that Isabel isn't just participating in politics and intrigue—she's giving the prisoners a reason to stay alive and believe in their cause. The bread, of course, doesn't hurt either, since the prisoners are still presumably still very hungry.*



*Now that the British might face consequences for the cruel way they've treated their prisoners, they improve conditions in the prison. For Isabel, though, the improved conditions don't excuse her from visiting daily to make sure Curzon is still doing okay. She's concerned for her friend, so she feels compelled to check on him and not just trust that the British (and Curzon's cellmates) will be honest. Isabel also discovers that food can help her make friends in unexpected places. Fisher might be able to help keep Curzon safe—and perhaps even get Isabel away from Madam for periods of time.*



As soon as Lockton leaves, Madam goes to play cards with a friend. In her absence, Sarah gives birth to a baby boy in the cellar. Isabel desperately wants to watch, but she doesn't dare. Instead, she slips down after to see the baby, whom Sarah named George. Sarah says she and her husband might stay in the colonies—and George will be a good name “on either side of the ocean.” The other wives are aghast. The next day, Sarah and George move to a house for mothers and babies associated with the army. Isabel tells Lady Seymour about the new baby and offers to see if Sarah will bring George to visit, but Lady Seymour shakes her head. She's too ill.

As Isabel goes to put a log on the fire, Lady Seymour asks Isabel to sit so they can talk. This is very improper, but Isabel sits. Lady Seymour says she's going to die soon, and she seeks forgiveness. She wanted to buy Isabel right after they first met, but Madam wouldn't sell Isabel. Lady Seymour says she should've demanded to take Isabel once Lockton returned from exile. Isabel would've “suited [her] household.” Isabel knows Lady Seymour expects a thank-you, but Isabel isn't grateful—she doesn't want to be bought and sold, even if her buyer is kind. It's like Lady Seymour speaks an entirely different language.

Isabel runs downstairs when she hears Colonel Hawkins shouting. He curses Isabel and says the room is cold. Isabel chooses the dampest logs she can and an hour later, to escape the smoke, Colonel Hawkins leaves for headquarters. Then, since Madam is guaranteed to be playing cards for some time and Lady Seymour is asleep, Isabel reads [Common Sense](#) by the fire. She understands that Paine is arguing that the Americans should overthrow the British, that wealthy people aren't born to rule, and that fighting injustice is the right thing to do.

## CHAPTER 41

The next morning, Madam demands hot scones and a seamstress. Queen Charlotte's birthday ball is in 10 days, and Madam needs a new gown for the occasion. Hannah, who is now the boss in the kitchen, is talking about the ball when Isabel returns from the market. She explains that the Queen herself won't come; it's just in her honor. All the rich people in New York will be there. Then, Mary and Hannah argue about whether they've seen the Queen.

*Sarah saying that George is a good name in England and in the colonies comes from the fact that both General Washington and the King are named George—so feasibly, depending on who wins, Sarah can say that baby George was named after either the King or Washington. She, like everyone else in the novel, is going to do what's best for her and what's going to keep her family safe and happy. Saying this at all also shows that some of the British soldiers might be doubting their cause—being in the army doesn't guarantee their loyalty.*



*Lady Seymour wants to make it clear to Isabel that she cares about her and wanted Isabel to have a better life than she has. But as Isabel notes here, Lady Seymour's methods aren't perfect—she doesn't realize she's actually being insulting by wanting to keep Isabel enslaved, rather than wanting to free her. Lady Seymour, in other words, wants Isabel to be cared for and happy—but she's not willing to see Isabel as an equal. The inequality is also why Isabel can't tell Lady Seymour that hearing this isn't helpful or kind.*



*Isabel is able to sneakily gain power over those who are cruel to her—as by building the worst fire she possibly can for Hawkins to punish him for cursing at her. Reading [Common Sense](#) is transformative for Isabel. Though she might not totally support the Patriots (since they won't support her), the pamphlet still gives her the political theory and the language to articulate why she should keep fighting for her freedom.*



*For Madam, the ball is as exciting for her personally as it is politically. She'll get to show off her new gown, which feeds into her vain nature and her desire to look wealthier than everyone else. But the ball for the queen is also a show of British power—it suggests they're secure enough in their position that throwing an expensive party like this isn't a problem.*



After dinner, Lady Seymour suffers a fit. In the morning, the doctor comes and says there's nothing to do but make her comfortable. Isabel again takes over caring for the lady and hears Madam asking the doctor when Lady Seymour will die. She figures that Madam wants Lady Seymour to die soon, but not before the ball—if that happens, Madam can't dance since the house will be in mourning. A week before the ball, Madam moves Lady Seymour downstairs so she can have her bedroom back. She tells Isabel to scrub the room and then, when she's ready to go to bed, asks Isabel to warm the sheets for her four times.

It's icy the next morning; the linens on the line are frozen. Isabel knows Ruth would love the sparkly ice—and it startles her that she has the thought at all. But Ruth will never see the ice. Isabel tells herself it doesn't do any good to think of Ruth, Momma, and Poppa, or the life Isabel and Ruth were supposed to live. These thoughts just make Isabel restless and cause her mind to fill with angry bees. She blames Lady Seymour's confession for the way she's feeling. Did the lady never think to *free* Isabel? Isabel would like to ask, but Lady Seymour's mouth no longer works.

As Isabel brings the frozen sheets inside to dry, she thinks of Phillis Wheatley. Momma said that Miss Wheatley's master freed her when she got famous—he "looked the fool for keeping a poetical genius enslaved." Isabel has heard of other enslaved people who bought their freedom by working on Sunday afternoons. Madam will never allow Isabel to work.

## CHAPTER 42

The doctor visits Lady Seymour twice daily. The lady's mind is still sharp, though she can barely move her body. Madam's seamstress also visits often to work on the red, navy, and gold ballgown. Hannah and Mary talk incessantly about the ball. Isabel hears that at noon, guns will fire a royal salute, the warships in the harbor will respond, and the ball will start at six. At midnight, fireworks will signal the start of the banquet.

Isabel finishes [Common Sense](#) the night before the ball. The words are dangerous, and Isabel knows she should burn the book, but she can't do it. She commits one line to memory: "For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever." She hides the book and lies down, but she can't sleep. Why can't she seek freedom if an entire nation can seek freedom? She could steal a pass and act free, but she'd have to sneak past guards and walk for miles. She could row across the river, but they'd shoot her and she'd sink. Isabel curses whoever decided New York should be on an island.

*As Lady Seymour's health worsens, her power to keep Madam in line declines. Moving Lady Seymour downstairs, and then calling Isabel four times to warm the sheets, are ways for Madam to flaunt the power she now has—she can condemn Lady Seymour to life in a living room, and she can demand that Isabel do whatever she wants. The day Madam warned Isabel about—when neither Lockton nor Lady Seymour are around to protect her—seems to be drawing near.*



*Isabel is starting to heal; thinking of Ruth like this doesn't seem as traumatizing as it has in the past. But Isabel is uncomfortable with letting herself truly grieve. For now, it's easier to just try to forget her family and resign herself to being enslaved. Lady Seymour's confession weighs so heavily on Isabel because Lady Seymour probably did have the power to make a fuss and free Isabel—but she chose not to.*



*Isabel can't even comfort herself by thinking of other ways to secure her freedom. Madam will never willingly free Isabel, and she'll never let Isabel purchase her freedom. For now, she feels trapped and like it's useless to even hope for a better life.*



*Isabel's tone, and the way she frames the information in this passage, suggests that she's sick and tired of hearing about the ball. It isn't something that concerns her—it's not like she can go, after all. At most, it will get Madam out of the house for a night and give Isabel some peace and quiet.*



*Isabel might be disillusioned with the Patriots themselves, but their words are still powerful. The line she memorizes essentially says that all men (and she takes "men" to mean people of all sexes) are created equal, and that means that it's no one person's right to decide they're better and can subjugate others. In her mind, essentially, this shows that slavery is immoral, too. This causes her to start thinking about freedom and escape again—but for now, becoming free doesn't seem likely or possible.*



Visiting Curzon at the prison and then passing by the tavern where Captain Morse works is, these days, an ordinary errand. Curzon is thin, but healing; and Captain Morse never needs Isabel. So it's odd when, on the morning of the ball, Morse signals to Isabel and says he needs her to do him a favor: he made a bet with a Captain Farrar that the British wouldn't hold this "ridiculous" birthday celebration. But the event is on, and officers are confined to their lodgings today—the British fear the Americans would stage an insurrection otherwise—so he needs Isabel to carry a penny to Farrar. Isabel is confused since the task seems so silly, but she figures that Madam will be too busy preparing for the ball to notice Isabel's absence.

At midday, Isabel is peeling a turnip when cannons roar outside. She jumps in fear, but Hannah laughs that that was the royal salute. Later, Madam invites a friend for tea. When the friend accepts, Hannah sends Isabel to fetch more water. Isabel does, and she takes a detour to deliver Captain Morse's penny. Captain Farrar laughs and accepts the penny, and Isabel leaves. But Farrar calls her back and asks her to take a note to Morse. He says it's not a wager—it's news. Isabel is annoyed and doesn't have time to carry the message across town, so she fetches water and heads back to the Locktons'.

Isabel is still annoyed when she enters the kitchen and puts the water down. Just as she starts to boil water, Madam storms into the kitchen with a riding crop and hits Isabel in the face with it.

## CHAPTER 43

Hannah enters the kitchen as Madam hits Isabel across the shoulder. Madam tells Hannah to stay and then mimics her friend, who saw Isabel talking to Captain Farrar. She says she's humiliated; Isabel can't breathe. Madam says her friend saw Isabel accept a note from the officer. She asks for the note and hits Isabel's forehead so hard it bleeds when Isabel says she doesn't have a note. Finally, Isabel pulls out the note. Momma always said that everyone contains a bit of evil. Madam has a lot—and now, Isabel feels like her own evil is waking up. She'd like to beat Madam with a poker, but she remembers Momma saying they must fight their evil. Isabel throws the note in the fire.

*It seems that things are starting to look up if Curzon is healing—and Isabel is clearly still getting away with visiting the prison, no matter what Madam says about it. What Captain Morse says about the ball highlights that the ball is political, not just a fun night out for people. It's a show of British strength—though the British clearly see it as a potential liability, if they're keeping Patriot officers on house arrest all day. It seems like there's more to this bet and the penny than Isabel realizes, which could speak to her youth and naivete.*



*There does seem to be something more going on with the penny, though Isabel and readers are kept in the dark as to what it is. Isabel also behaves in this passage like she's starting to feel as though she has some power over the captains—she'll carry the note on her terms. She can't act like this with Madam, for instance; in this situation, Isabel has some leeway to make choices for herself.*



*It's a mystery why Madam is suddenly so abusive with Isabel. But her message is clear: she's not afraid to be violent, and she doesn't see Isabel as a person who doesn't deserve to be hit.*



*Everything starts to come crashing down for Isabel here. Madam now knows that she's spying and carrying notes for the Patriots. But notice that Madam is far more concerned about her reputation than she is for the state of British intelligence. In other words, Madam is upset that Isabel is embarrassing her, not that Isabel seems loyal to Madam's political enemy. As Isabel flashes on Momma's advice to fight her evil, she finds the power within herself to resist Madam. Isabel realizes she can fight back with quiet defiance, and that will be more successful than hitting Madam back (which could get Isabel hanged).*



Enraged, Madam shrieks that she'll sell Isabel on Monday—and will sell Ruth too. Hannah leaves to answer a knock at the door, and Madam mocks Isabel for her shocked look. Madam spits that nobody would buy Ruth, so she shipped her to Charleston. Now she'll have the estate manager there toss Ruth in the swamp. Hannah returns; it's the hairdresser at the door. Madam tells Hannah to lock Isabel in the potato bin and then help her upstairs.

In the potato bin, Isabel bites back screams. She can hear preparations happening all around her and when things go quiet, she hears Hannah coming. Hannah opens the bin and passes Isabel a chamber pot, a blanket, and some water, but she refuses to let Isabel out. Isabel feels like the bees are taking over her body. She must be about to die; then the bees can haunt someone else. But then Isabel hears a roar and realizes it's coming from inside her. Ruth is alive in South Carolina. Isabel can walk there. Isabel starts to kick at the inside of the potato bin, looking for any wood that might be soft after rain. She kicks a hole in the box and crawls out.

Isabel creeps through the silent house to the upstairs drawing room. She digs through the maps on the table until she finds one of the colonies. Charleston is very far away. The crackling fire startles Isabel, and she thinks she sees a ghost, but it's just her own reflection in the mirror. She doesn't recognize herself and creeps closer to inspect herself. Her face is thin now, but she has some features that look just like Momma and some that came from Poppa. For the first time, Isabel studies her brand. It's like a pink ribbon, and it reminds Isabel of the scars on Poppa's cheek. Those scars made Poppa a man, and Isabel decides her brand is like his. It makes her who she is—and the I stands for Isabel.

Isabel knows the best way off the island is in a boat. She finds a tide chart and is thrilled to discover that the tide won't turn for several hours. Then, she digs around for a pass and finally finds one. Isabel writes the date, January 18, first. She hasn't written in a long time, so her letters are wobbly. But she then has to write her name. She writes Isabel and stops. She's not a Lockton or a Finch. Should she give herself a last name honoring Momma or Poppa? Isabel thinks of home and of Ruth and decides her last name is **Gardener**. She writes that she's a "Free Negro" and has permission to go where she wants. Isabel wishes one of the fancy signatures at the bottom was Queen Charlotte's. Isabel Gardener now shares a birthday with the queen.

*It's a huge revelation that Madam didn't sell Ruth—it totally changes Isabel's outlook. But the fact that Madam kept it a secret that she never sold Ruth shows just how cruel and manipulative she is. She seems to know that Isabel lost her will to fight once she thought Ruth was gone forever—and that worked in Madam's favor, as Madam wants only to crush Isabel's spirit.*



*Like so many others in the novel, Hannah is willing to show Isabel some kindness—but in a way that's not going to get her in trouble. So it ends up still being dehumanizing, since Hannah's actions suggest she's still okay with Isabel being locked in a potato bin like this. But in this state, Isabel comes to a realization. She has a purpose now, since she now knows exactly where Ruth is, and it's theoretically possible to get there. The drive to protect Ruth is strong enough to spur Isabel to keep fighting.*



*As Isabel studies her reflection in the mirror, she realizes that she can't just ignore or forget her parents' memories. Momma and Poppa are a part of her—their love, their features, and their blood make Isabel who she is. With this realization, Isabel is also able to reframe the brand on her cheek. She chooses to see it not as a sign of her dehumanization, but as Grandfather encouraged her to do earlier in the novel, as a sign that she survived. And deciding it stands for Isabel is a way for Isabel to assert her identity and her right to live and thrive.*



*Being literate gives Isabel this opportunity to again assert her identity—and start to take the freedom she knows she deserves. As she chooses her new last name, Isabel honors both her parents and her burgeoning adult identity. Isabel is interested in helping herself and other enslaved people grow, so the name Gardener is a nod to her nurturing side. Noting that today is now her birthday suggests that Isabel sees herself as reborn in this new identity. And despite identifying with the Patriot rhetoric, Isabel is still willing to appreciate the queen.*



## CHAPTER 44

Isabel gathers her papers and then sews her map into her cloak hem. She puts on all the clothes she owns and gathers some food, and then she adds *Common Sense*, her **seeds**, and her piece of lead from King George's statue to her pocket. Just as Isabel is about to leave out the front door, she realizes that nobody has fed Lady Seymour's fire for a while. She's old and might be cold, and it'll only take a moment. Isabel stokes the fire—and as she turns to go, she notices a purse hanging on the back of a chair. Isabel feels bad stealing from a woman who was kind to her, but then again, Lady Seymour let Madam sell Ruth.

Isabel fishes the coin purse out of the larger purse, and then realizes Lady Seymour is awake and watching. Isabel apologizes and says Madam is going to sell her. She helps Lady Seymour drink water and then asks for forgiveness. Isabel offers to put the money back, but Lady Seymour shakes her head—Isabel rescued her husband's picture. Then, Lady Seymour says something Isabel can't quite hear. Isabel leans in close, and Lady Seymour whispers, "Run."

Isabel leaves out the front door. She plans to steal a rowboat, row to Jersey, and walk to Charleston; hopefully the Queen's ball will provide cover. But when Isabel gets to the place where she normally turns to go to the Bridewell, her feet stop listening—they head for the prison. She remembers how Curzon cared for her. It'll be impossible to sneak him out without a pass, but Isabel has a debt to pay.

At the prison, Isabel finds Fisher and says that Colonel Hawkins sent her. Apparently an inspector is coming. Fisher is annoyed, but he lets Isabel in (after taking a roll from her basket) and warns her to breathe carefully. Prisoners are dying of fever. Isabel takes a wheelbarrow and cleans the first cell, pitching the waste into the burial pit. She skips the next several cells and stops at Curzon's cell. A man at the gate says that Dibdin died this morning; Curzon is curled up in the corner. Isabel knows she should leave him, but instead, she whispers for him to be quiet. Nobody helps her load him into the wheelbarrow. She snatches his hat and covers his body with a nasty blanket. On her way out of the prison, Isabel tells Fisher she has a nasty load.

*The extra items Isabel grabs highlight what's important to her: the words that justify her fight for freedom, seeds that connect her to Momma and to her future, and the proof that not everything is as powerful as it seems. Then, Isabel again shows her own generosity and humanity by deciding to stoke Lady Seymour's fire one last time. Isabel believes that Lady Seymour doesn't deserve to freeze to death—but she also doesn't deserve Isabel's unquestioning respect anymore.*



*It's one thing for Isabel to think about stealing from Lady Seymour when the lady is asleep, and another thing when Lady Seymour is watching. But by giving Isabel the coin purse, Lady Seymour essentially tells Isabel to not feel guilty and to do what she needs to do. Giving Isabel permission to run also shows that Lady Seymour knows running away is Isabel's best chance. She's well aware of how cruel Madam is.*



*Isabel desperately wants to get across the river to safety and then move on to rescuing Ruth. But after everything Curzon has done for her, she can't in good conscience leave him to die in the Bridewell. Her concept of "family" is starting to expand.*



*Intellectually, Isabel knows that entering the prison is a bad idea, especially if a contagious illness is going around. She could get sick, and needing to care for Curzon will slow down her journey to freedom and could put her in danger. But for Isabel, she believes her duty to Curzon is too important; she couldn't live with herself if she left him. And though he doesn't know it, Fisher proves an important ally in this passage—he lets Isabel in and doesn't inspect her wheelbarrow load because he trusts her.*



## CHAPTER 45

Isabel pushes the wheelbarrow halfway to the wharf as fast as she can. But then she encounters British guards and a dog sitting around a fire. Isabel backs into the shadows and tells Curzon to get up. He can barely stand, but he leans on Isabel, and they creep across the street. The dog notices them and barks, but just then, the fireworks go off over the river. Isabel drags Curzon to the wharf and thanks Momma as she helps him into a rowboat.

As Isabel rows, blisters form and pop until her hands are bloody. Fireworks explode overhead, and Isabel feels like her wits are leaving her about the time her hands start to bleed. In the fog on the river, Isabel sees people, but not well enough to identify them. Ghosts can indeed travel over the water.

Isabel opens her eyes and is certain she's died and ended up in heaven. But Isabel realizes heaven isn't supposed to smell like woodsmoke—the rowboat is just stuck in a tangle of bushes. It's just before dawn. Isabel, Curzon, and the branches above are all coated in ice—and Isabel can see New York across the river. She's free. Curzon is alive and asks where they are. Isabel says they crossed the River Jordan and asks if Curzon can walk.

*Isabel and Curzon's escape might not be full-on American insurrection, as the British feared would happen tonight. But the queen's ball still provides useful cover for their escape. The fact that Isabel thanks Momma for her protection suggests that Isabel is now feeling better about remembering her family.*



*Isabel may very well be hallucinating as she rows—but what matters is that, unlike at the beginning of the story, she now believes that ghosts can travel over the water. This helps her feel protected and supported, as now Momma and Poppa's ghosts can look after her no matter where she goes.*



*Having successfully crossed the river, Isabel and Curzon have achieved physical freedom. Their journey isn't over by any means—they still have Ruth to rescue. But with this success to buoy them, and Isabel's newfound comfort with her identity, they have the drive to keep going and fighting for their legal freedom.*







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