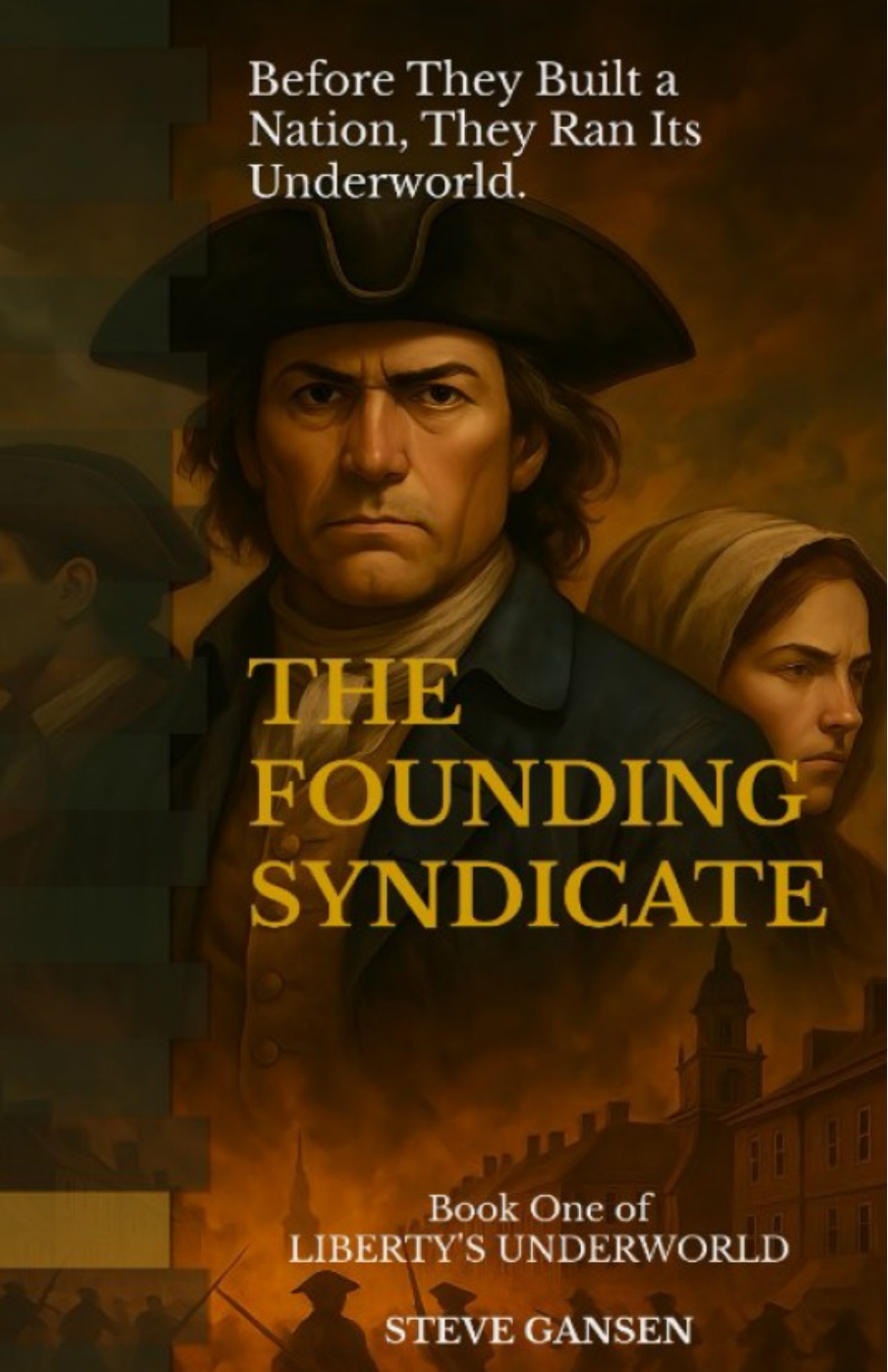




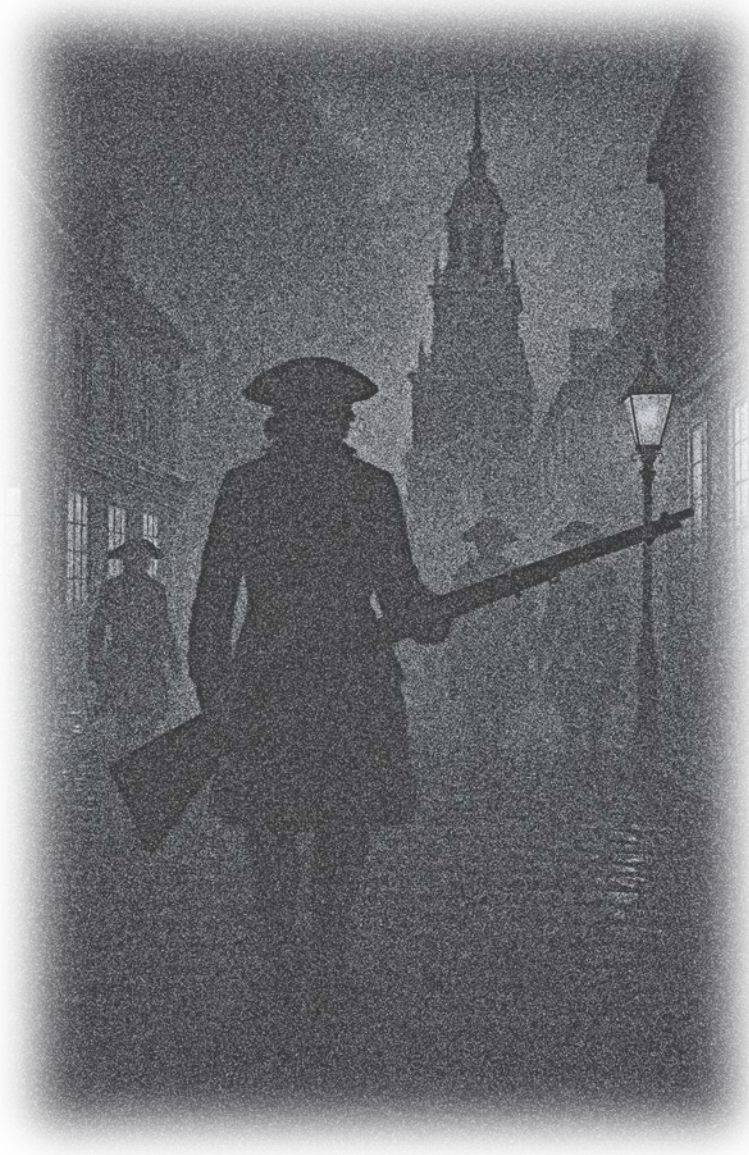
Before They Built a
Nation, They Ran Its
Underworld.

THE FOUNDING SYNDICATE

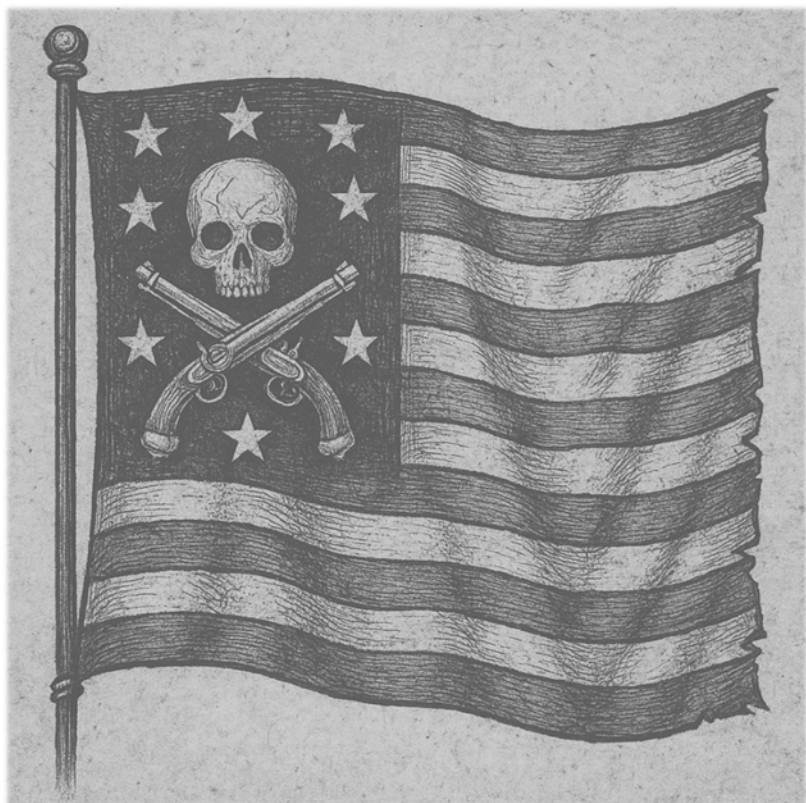
Book One of
LIBERTY'S UNDERWORLD

STEVE GANSEN





**THE
FOUNDING
SYNDICATE**



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LIBERTY'S UNDERWORLD

Steve Gansen

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*For S., G., and S. ~
my constant cause, my clearest truth,
my finest rebellion, and the only legacy worth leaving.*

*To D. ~
my Smoke Brother, twin in every way that counts.
He reads like a blade reads weakness. His notes strike
clean. The marks remain.*

*And to Jones ~
swashbuckling soul, steadfast friend,
who faced the tide with grit and grace.
The beard stayed bold. The stories, bolder.
I carried the ink forward. You carried the rest.*



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Chapter Nine: The Patriot's Noose

To preserve an idea, you must bury its author.

—D.

CHARLESTON. AUTUMN 1776.

Months after the ink dried in Philadelphia, Charleston kept its own counsel. Some pamphlets passed in daylight. Others moved through breathless dark, tucked in flour sacks or coat linings. This one traveled under soot and blood. It had no printer's name. Only a title:

THE PEOPLE'S DEFIANCE

*A Declaration Not from Men of Property,
but of Purpose.*

We hold these truths plain to any man who has wept with open eyes: kings feed only their own, empires tighten their grip with every mile gained. We have bled in silence, and now we rise in breath. This soil is ours because we endured it. This future is ours because we paid for it.

Claim liberty by lifting it. Speak with your chest and your quill. Let the vellum rise from the

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people and carry their pulse forward. Clear the savage wilderness. Plant order where law had no footing, and let the soil receive the covenant of a free people under God's eye.

We answer with blood set to parchment, with fire that moves from torch to torch, and with eyes fixed on what comes next. We stand steady. We write without pause. This declares intention.

—Issued in Defiance, by Hand Unknown.

Ink smeared. Parchment frayed. Still, it whispered.

A boy ran through alley smoke, clutched the paper like scripture. A boot landed beside him, scuffed and deliberate. The coat above it bore field-dyed wool, hand-mended seams, and shoulders shaped by command. The man knelt, took the page, read it once, and slid it into a pocket stitched for discretion. He walked on without pause, as if the message had already belonged to him.

INTERIOR. INTERROGATION CHAMBER.

Nathan Hale sat straight-backed. Wrists unbound. That had been the first surprise. The second: the men wore no red. No blue. Just coats too plain, boots too polished, and silence too practiced.

He cleared his throat. "You're not British."

"No," said Washington, scanning the sparse sheet before him. "Worse, perhaps."

The door creaked. Franklin entered with a smirk and a scent of ink. He nodded to Hale like a schoolmaster greeting a gifted pupil.

"A schoolteacher," Franklin said, lifting Hale's file. "Yale. Latin. Bad poetry. Good jawline. A pity we caught you."

Washington added, "He taught children in New London. Took in his brother's widow. Volunteered twice before someone noticed he could draw a map without misspelling it."

Franklin smirked. "Even offered to teach reading to slaves on his uncle's land. Heroism, or guilt? Hard to say."

Hale blinked. "I assumed it was the British."

"They'd have hanged you by now," Washington said, flatly. "We require . . . arrangements."

Washington's expression hardened. "He passed intelligence through a tavern girl in Ridgefield. Used a cipher we'd retired months before. Could've compromised two of our couriers if the girl hadn't been sharper than he was."

Hale winced, but didn't deny it.

Franklin's tone cooled slightly. "He trusted the wrong ideal. Thought he could outthink the Syndicate's structure. Mistook clean conscience for clear judgment."

Washington: "He mistook himself for a philosopher."

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Franklin glanced up. "He is one. And that is why he'll die well. Quiet, quotable, and convenient."

He set the file down. Slid a single sheet across the table to Hale.

"Your new script."

Hale read it once, brows furrowed.

"These aren't my words."

"No," Franklin replied. "They're better."

Hale said softly, "Do they know I begged to return home? That I asked for a post on the river, not the gallows?"

Washington replied, "They'll know what they need."

Franklin: "They'll love you for it."

He gestured to the pamphlet on the table beside it.

"Your death will be an echo of this."

Hale touched the broadside gently.

"It's beautiful," he murmured. "Almost makes me believe I believe."

Franklin leaned forward. "The people need a martyr. You'll do."

Washington spoke next, voice cold and correct. "Terms: your family receives exemption from conscription. A parcel of land in Connecticut. Quiet stipend from our reserves."

"In exchange for?"

Franklin: "You die on cue. With dignity. With our words."

"And my name?"

"Untouched," said Franklin. "We'll see to it schools are named after you. Streets. Sons."

Hale sat still. Then nodded once.

"Some men buy honor," Franklin said, softer now. "You'll be the rarest kind. The one who sells it."

OBSERVATION ALCOVE.

The record keeper watched the exchange through beveled glass. No notes. No ledger. Just memory. The way Franklin tucked something into his waistcoat. The way Hale touched the pamphlet like it could save him.

He hadn't betrayed the Syndicate. He'd simply failed to believe it was worth betraying the world for. That was always the more dangerous kind.

Later, she found it. A letter, folded tight and stashed beneath a false drawer. Hale's hand. Not the Syndicate's. Not the script.

She did not read it. She sealed it. Labeled nothing. Filed it where no one would ask.

There are truths that rot when opened too soon, she thought. This one will ripen in silence.

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PUBLIC SQUARE. EXECUTION PLATFORM.

Rain thickened over the square, too warm for winter, too gray for mercy. The scaffolds stood in triplicate. Two men had already died before midday. (One a deserter from the Continental line, the other a smuggler accused of supplying arms to Crown ships. Both had begged. Neither had been granted final words.)

Executioners wore aprons damp with blood and soot. Young assistants, conscripted from the ranks, looked away too often. One doubled over behind a wagon, his stomach rebelling. Another wept into a gloved fist.

A sergeant barked at them. "You shame your uniforms. Men must hang to keep order. This is the price of command."

The crowd grew thicker as Hale was led forward. Some watched with fascination. Others looked at the ground. Among them, wives clutched shawls tighter. Daughters were ushered behind sleeves and elbows. The King's last order had been spoken quietly, but its echo traveled fast.

HIS MAJESTY'S WILL IS THUS:

Strip the colonies of what they prize. Possession is a privilege of the Crown. Let them learn that nothing truly belongs to them. Not land. Not legacy. Not even the future they cradle.

The future they cradle. Hale knew what this meant. He had heard the stories. Women pulled

from homes under pretense, punished for the zeal of their husbands. Girls too young to count among the dead, still buried under the same fear.

He walked with deliberate pace. Clean-shaven. Chin high. He had memorized the script. Not just the lines, but the rhythm. The weight of myth before the noose.

He thought of his mother. His brother's widow. His sister, who still wrote him letters as if he might return. But he would return only as a name etched on a street. A bird-speckled monument in a forgotten square. A ghost they might whisper to, though never out loud.

He wondered if that would be enough to keep them safe.

He reached the platform. Looked once at the crowd. And then he spoke:

"I only regret that I have but one life—"

At that moment, the platform gave way with a crack, followed by a hush.

One woman in the crowd wept. A man touched his son's shoulder. A printer, watching from the edge, mouthed the lines to himself and walked off briskly.

A block away, ink was already being set.

CHARLESTOWN. WINTER 1776.

The kettle hissed. Gloves lay untouched. Dolley traced the stitching on her lap. Floral. Not a rose, but a sleepier bloom. Mercy noticed.

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"You've kept certain stories quiet," Mercy said.

"Some stories wilt when aired."

Mercy held her gaze. "And some decay. That boy—"

"Was a volunteer," Dolley said. "He liked the final line."

Mercy stood. Walked to the mantle. Lifted a small doll, its dress etched with a poppy motif.

"How long have you had this?"

"Long enough to know what it weighs."

Mercy turned it once in her palm. "They used to pack them in crates of tulip bulbs, didn't they? Holland to Boston. Opium tucked beneath petals and dirt."

Dolley didn't answer.

"I remember the rumors. Before the dolls, before the lacquered compartments. They used bulbs. Said DeVere ships out of Amsterdam did the same with gold guineas. Finance wars on one end, feed addictions on the other. The routes became riddles. Men would slice open tulip shipments just to see what spilled out."

She set the doll down gently. "Franklin taught you the math. But it's not the sums that concern me."

Her eyes met Dolley's. "It's the silence around the source."

"You mean the garden," Dolley said.

Mercy flinched.

"You knew the man who printed the pamphlet," Dolley continued.

Mercy nodded.

"And if someone kept his first draft—the crossed-out lines, the ink blot—would you call her dangerous?"

Mercy met her eyes. "No. I'd call her the future."

Dolley stood. Smoothed her skirt.

"Good," she said. "Because I haven't yet decided what to do with it."

She left the gloves behind.

ELSEWHERE.

Dolley sat alone in the back room of a former counting house, where ledgers had faded into memory. Shelves lined the walls, filled with folios that offered no titles, only weight. The oil lamp burned low, casting more shadow than clarity. Outside, the rain had passed, but the gutters still carried its voice.

She opened the unmarked folio with gloved fingers. Her actions moved unseen. The letter waited inside, its fold exact, its ink quiet. She kept it sealed. The moment for reading would arrive when it chose to be known.

She listened.

Some moments speak without sound. The snap of rope. The stillness that followed, caught like a

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pause in a hymn. The murmurs that rose after, shaped by reverence and fear. He had appeared clean. He had appeared calm. A tragedy, they said, arranged with care.

She had watched the Smoke Brothers move through the square like fog through timber. Hired blades dressed as shadows. Franklin's command. Washington's consent. Their boots left no prints, but she tracked them just the same. They were the ones who found him. The ones who cornered him with a kindness that chilled. One flanked him while the other held the map he'd drawn wrong. That was all it took.

Nathan Hale had not screamed. He had not begged. He had looked past them as if seeing something they couldn't.

She slid the letter back into its place.

He spoke his last line twice. Once on the scaffold. Once in his hand. They only recorded the one that served.

But the one in her drawer bled heavier.

She thought of his sister, the one who still wrote him letters in hopeful ink. She thought of the women he'd left behind, unsheltered now. King George had issued no order to protect them. Quite the opposite. The bureaucrats in red had turned cruelty into ledger entries. Wives listed beneath confiscated land. Daughters beneath soldiers'

rations. Mercy had once called it justice with a crown. Dolley had seen worse. She had lived it.

And when she closed the drawer, she paused. Her hand hovered on the wood, still and weighted, as if over a cradle.

There had been another name. A smaller one. Never written. Never buried.

The Garden of Dolls had no headstones, only silk.

She did not weep. Still, the ledger shifted beneath her, as if bearing something heavier than ink.

He wasn't the martyr they needed. He was the witness they couldn't use.

So they burned his body and saved his name.

The other awaits. Not forgotten. Just aging.



[illegible]

AMERICA
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