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AUTHOR OF *SPEAK*

# FEVER

1793

"The plot rages like the epidemic itself."

—*The New York Times Book Review*



## CHAPTER ONE

August 16th, 1793

*The city of Philadelphia is perhaps one of  
the wonders of the world.*

—Lord Adam Gordon  
Journal entry, 1765

**I** woke to the sound of a mosquito whining in my left ear and my mother screeching in the right.

“Rouse yourself this instant!”

Mother snapped open the shutters and heat poured into our bedchamber. The room above our coffeehouse was not large. Two beds, a washstand, and a wooden trunk with frayed leather straps nearly filled it. It seemed even smaller with Mother storming around.

“Get out of bed, Matilda,” she continued. “You’re sleeping the day away.” She shook my shoulder. “Polly’s late and there’s work to be done.”

The noisy mosquito darted between us. I started to sweat under the thin blanket. It was going to be another hot August day. Another long, hot August day. Another

long, hot, boring, wretched August day.

"I can't tell who is lazier, Polly or you," Mother muttered as she stalked out of the room. "When I was a girl, we were up before the sun . . ." Her voice droned on and on as she clattered down the stairs.

I groaned. Mother had been a perfect girl. Her family was wealthy then, but that didn't stop her from stitching entire quilts before breakfast, or spinning miles of wool before tea. It was the War, she liked to remind me. Children did what was asked of them. And she never complained. Oh, no, never. Good children were seen and not heard. How utterly unlike me.

I yawned and stretched, then snuggled back onto my pillow. A few more minutes' rest, that's what I needed. I'd float back to sleep, drifting like Blanchard's giant yellow balloon. I could just see it: the winter's day, the crowds on the rooftops, the balloon tugging at its ropes. I held my breath. Would the ropes break?

The devilish mosquito attacked, sinking its needle-nose into my forehead.

"Ow!"

I leapt from my bed, and—*thunk!*—cracked my head on the sloped ceiling. The ceiling was lower than it used to be. Either that, or I had grown another inch overnight. I sat back down, wide awake now, my noggin sporting two lumps—one from the ceiling, one from the mosquito.

No balloon trips for me.



To work, then. I got to my feet and crossed the room, ducking my head cautiously. The water in the washbasin was cloudy, and the facecloth smelled like old cheese. I decided to clean up later, perhaps next December.

A squeaking mouse dashed by my toes, followed by a flash of orange fur named Silas. The mouse ran to a corner, its claws scratching desperately on the floorboards. Silas pounced. The squeaking stopped.

"Oh, Silas! Did you have to do that?"

Silas didn't answer. He rarely did. Instead he jumped up on Mother's quilt and prepared to pick apart his breakfast.

Mother's best quilt. Mother abhorred mice.

I sprang across the room. "Get down!" I commanded.

Silas hissed at me but obeyed, leaping to the floor and padding out the door.

"Matilda?" Mother's voice called up the stairs. "Now!"

I made a face at the doorway. I had just saved her precious quilt from disaster, but would she appreciate it? Of course not.

No more dawdling. I had to get dressed.

I fastened my stays and a badly embroidered pocket over the white shift I slept in. Then I stepped into my blue linen skirt. It nearly showed my ankles. Along with the ceiling getting lower, my clothes were shrinking, too.



**D**uring the summer of 1793, Mattie Cook lives above the family coffee shop with her widowed mother and grandfather. Mattie spends her days avoiding chores and making plans to turn the family business into the finest Philadelphia has ever seen. But then the fever breaks out.

Disease sweeps the streets, destroying everything in its path and turning Mattie's world upside down. At her feverish mother's insistence, Mattie flees the city with her grandfather. But she soon discovers that the sickness is everywhere, and Mattie must learn quickly how to survive in a city turned frantic with disease.

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—*The New York Times Book Review*

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