

Chapter Two

Killing Time

“Rest your horse,” Mr. Stroud said. “Don’t let her drink too deep. Just be a minute.”

He took hardly more, which told me that Eben Stroud always kept his horse saddled and his firearms ready, and that, I thought, fell into the category of facts worth knowing, especially since it seemed to be a good deal more than anyone else in town knew about him, though somebody had known enough to have us pay him a call, and I wondered who among us had been so prescient.

He tied his horse to the rail at the front of the cabin, watching as I brushed the dust from my mare. I had grown vain about the way she looked, and I liked to keep her black coat as shiny as wet paint.

“Now, young Mr. Chandler, just how much do you know about the General’s bay horse?”

I continued brushing. “I used to think he was the biggest horse around ‘til you brought your horse out,” I said. “It’s a blooded horse, like yours. Never been beaten in a race.”

“Would you know him if someone dyed the blaze?”

I thought carefully. “When you come up to him, he always dances three steps to his right, stands, and dances three more.”

Stroud smiled and nodded. “Could you spot his tracks?”

Robert Holland

"No."

"Runs right in a trot, straightens out in a gallop."

I stuffed the brush back into my saddlebag.

"You ready?" he asked.

I climbed up, noticing how calm my mare seemed, and wondering what had come over her.

Stroud mounted and we walked the horses down the road, giving them their head so they could pick their way along.

"Anything strike you as odd about this?"

"Not that I can think of."

"You've been in the General's barn?"

I nodded, trying to guess at his point, and then it came to me. Whoever had taken the horse knew which stall in that great barn the General had picked for his favorite horse. That might not mean much except that to reach the bay's stall, you had to take two turns, one of them through an indoor paddock at the back of the barn.

"I see by the look on your face that you've likely guessed at my line of thought. No ordinary horse thief." He chuckled. "Catching him will be the second thing we do. The first is to get the horse back before it's too late."

"Do you think we can find the tracks?"

"No need. I know where the horse is."

To me, that meant but one thing, and I reined in.

Mr. Stroud turned his head, but did not stop. "Good to see you jumped to the obvious conclusion, Mr. Chandler. I like an impetuous man." He laughed, but I found precious little comfort in the sound. It went too well with his smile, which put me in mind of the chained-up dog at Chamberlain's Store.

I urged my mare alongside. "If you know where the horse

Killing Time

is, why didn't you tell Major Smith?"

He grinned and when he spoke the irony was clear in his voice. "To avoid a cavalry charge."

"But"

"And now, I expect, you're wondering if perhaps I've talked myself into some easy money."

"The thought did come to mind."

"As well it should in an active mind, but the truth lies elsewhere. Had I told that n'er-do-well major and his band of farmers and storekeepers where to go, they'd have gone rushing in and sure as bears get fat come fall, someone would've got shot."

"But Major Smith could have led them and"

"Your famous Major Smith never raised a musket."

I slapped a deer fly as it lit on the back of my head, noticing as I swept the fly from my hair that Stroud did not seem bothered by them, despite having neither hair nor hat.

"About eight miles from here there's a horse pound up on a hill, and most horses that turn up missing turn up there. One trail in, one trail out. Some of Israel Putnam's former fighting men holed up there after the war and went into the horse business, under the leadership of Mr. Doghead Johnson. Not a man to underestimate, though he's grown careless of late. He used to post sentries but now he only keeps a watch on the trail. It'd take a small army to drive him out of there. Some horses they buy from thieves, some they steal. Then they move them off west into Pennsylvania, one and two at a time. The General's horse ought to bring a good price out there." He turned in the saddle and looked at me and then at my horse. "How is it a young man like you comes mounted on such a fine horse?"

"My father had it in mind to sell her."

Robert Holland

"Looks to be one of Justin Morgan's breed."

"Half. The other half is Phillip Smith's blooded stallion. He lives over Sturbridge way."

"So, your father couldn't handle her."

I nodded, wondering at his ability to know things I counted obscure at best. "He said she was too thin and too touchy." I grinned. "And she is with those she doesn't like."

"Behaves well enough."

"I wouldn't want to seem boastful, but I kind of have a way with horses." I had to admit though, she was behaving particularly well just now, and I suspected she was quite taken with Mr. Stroud's stallion, being that color herself, but for four white stockings and a star blaze just below her eyes.

"Will she stand if you leave her?"

"She will."

"Anyone can ride her?"

"My brother Arthur tried. Ended up with a broken leg."

He laughed, a great booming sound, rich with genuine merriment. "No doubt," he said. "Not but two or three men in the county, horseman enough to ride her."

My confidence had climbed considerably since starting out eating dust. He'd called me a man and now he'd put me in the rarefied category of horseman. Even with that, the easy drift of our conversation made me uneasy. Somehow the talk and the pace of our pursuit did not jibe with chasing horse thieves, and I couldn't seem to find a comfortable spot in my saddle, though, in truth, I've always had a hard time sitting still.

"How is it, I've never heard of this Doghead Johnson?"

"You'd know him as Thomas Paddington."

Killing Time

"The horse dealer from Pomfret."

"The very same."

"But his real name is Doghead Johnson."

"It is."

"How many men does this Doghead Johnson have?"

"Eight, last count. Could be more. Could be fewer. Hard to know whether they're all to home at once."

"Armed?"

The wolf smile showed clearly as he looked around.
"Thieves they be, Mr. Chandler."

"And just one trail in and out."

"I expect that's the way they see it, but these boys aren't woodsmen. For those more determined, there's a back way in through the bog to the north of where I run a trap line."

"I've hunted there."

"Saw you passing through once or twice."

"It seems you know a good deal more about me than I know about you," I said.

"It was why I picked you," he said. "You were moving with hardly a sound in a dry woods. Not many can do that. More to the point, Mr. Chandler, you took me by surprise, and nobody's ever done that before."

Another compliment and that made three, which outside of my school master was the most I'd ever got in my whole life. "It's hard to think of myself as Mr. Chandler," I said.

"All right. Stoddard then. You call me Eben."



Walking the horses the whole eight miles took the rest of the afternoon and then, in a rare grove of virgin white pine, we tied the horses and Eben offered bread, smoked venison,

Robert Holland

and water. We sat on the soft needled mat in the cool of the pines and ate. I found it hard to believe that this man, a man who had been legend since I could remember, had singled me out. Some of it made sense. I was tall and broad through the shoulders like my father, and there was the matter of horses, and he knew how quietly I moved through the woods. On the other hand, I had no experience in matters such as this. Beyond a scuffle or two with other boys, it would have been hard to find anyone my age so wet behind the ears.

"You're finished school now?" Eben asked.

"I am."

"You going to stay on at the farm?"

"I haven't decided," I said, wishing the subject hadn't come up because at least for a while I had escaped from the quandary which plagued me like a swarm of mosquitoes, hovering close so that the threat was worse than the sting.

"Not much interested in farming, I take it."

"I like raising and training horses well enough."

"Good living in that."

"Hadn't thought about it."

"Plenty of opportunity out west."

"But you've stayed," I said.

He grinned. "So I have," he said, his mouth tipping into a smile which for the first time showed some real warmth. "I'm comfortable here. Now and again I might wander some, but I always seem to come back."

I knew he had no family here, and while he might have some friends, in all the stories I had heard about him no such information had surfaced. He had a reputation as a loner, did Eben Stroud, a violent man, or so folks said, who'd rather shoot than argue.

"But you're thinking about going somewhere," he said,

Killing Time

"and I'd guess you're thinking about getting more education."

I shook my head, marveling at his canniness. "How could you have guessed that?"

"You're not going west, you're not going to be a farmer, and somehow I couldn't see you moving to the city and working as some sort of an apprentice. And you're not one of those desperate, aimless men who just drift away their lives."

I caught the sudden mirthful glint in his eye.

"And then too, I heard old Angus one night at the tavern telling General McClellan that he'd never had such an intelligent student."

"Mr. McHugh said that?"

"Aye, he did."

"To General McClellan?"

"None other." He stretched his long legs and leaned back against the rough side of an ancient pine.

"Maybe if Mr. McHugh keeps boasting about me, it'll be easier to tell my father."

"He's not all that ferocious."

"When he's been crossed, he's mean as a weasel, and this will cross him. He's had it all worked out for years. My oldest brother, Arthur, gets the farmhouse and Henry and I get lots to build on, and we all work the farm in common."

"Sounds like a tidy plan."

"It is, except that not one of us can agree with the other over anything, and that will get a good deal worse when there's money to be divided." I shook my head. "Nope. I'm going my own way. I'm going to be my own man. Maybe that way I can escape being what everyone thinks I am, just because they've known me since I was born."

Robert Holland

“Brought more than one man to a sad end, trying to be something he wasn’t.”

“Not me.”

“Tell me how you knew the thieves hadn’t headed south?”

“Too many farms that way. Too many chances to be seen. Even in the dead of night. Farmers are up and about, tending a sick animal, helping a cow to calve. But if they went north, they’d only one farm to pass before they reached the Dudley Road, and then, if they turned west, they could travel twenty miles or so before they hit another farm. By then they’d be so far from Woodstock that nobody would think a thing about a couple of men passing by leading a horse.”

“Perhaps you ought to take up thieving as a line of work.”

“Didn’t you reach the same conclusion?” I shot back.

He laughed. “I did at that, Stoddard, but then I knew where to find the horse. You had to think your way through it. Had to lay out the facts, study them, and come to a sound solution.”

“I wonder now if perhaps the pursuers went south in order to come by your place.”

“I thought as much, but I suspect that was an accident. I think they assumed a thief would strike out south because he’d have wanted to travel fast and would take the best road, the better to make good time in the dark.”

I shook my head. “The road is stonier going north. It might be slower, but it’s harder to track on, and the thief had no need to hurry. No one was chasing him, so he could walk the whole way without hardly turning a stone.”

“Right a second time.” He looked off to the west. The sun had set, leaving a soft summer glow behind. “Best get some

Killing Time

sleep," he said. "We'll likely have a busy night."

In seconds he'd fallen asleep, and I stretched out on the soft brown needles and draped my right arm over my eyes, but I was too tightly wound to sleep. Instead my mind raced zigzag like a rabbit chased over open ground. These men were armed, and I presumed they'd not surrender the horse without a struggle. I'd never shot at anything more than a deer, and the thought of pointing my rifle at a man and then pulling the trigger made my stomach turn. I tried reasoning my way through: The men were thieves, they had broken the law, and having assumed such a position, they had no rights. If they fired on us we had every right to return fire, if only in self-defense. But more importantly, we would be acting to protect the community as a whole, to preserve law and order and enforce the right to freedom from wanton criminal acts. It worked fine until I got to the point where I had to pull the trigger. Was Eben planning to ambush these desperadoes from the dark? That would hardly be self-defense. On the other hand, looking at things more realistically, it was two against eight. These men had stolen a valuable horse and ... well, at least Eben had said they'd stolen it. In truth I could not prove that and if I couldn't prove it then ... no. I had to put such notions out of my mind. Our job was to get the General's horse back and not get killed in the process.

And if I had to shoot at someone to do that, I'd have to shoot. I knew well enough that I could hit what I shot at. The reason I had my own rifle was *because* I could hit what I shot at. Neither my father nor my brothers could hit the side of the barn. And when my father discovered that I could shoot, he bought me a brand new Pennsylvania made rifle and turned me loose on turkeys and deer. The way he saw it, the more wild animals we ate, the fewer of our own we

Robert Holland

had to slaughter for food, and that increased the amount of money the farm made because we had more animals to sell. Once he got an idea like that he could not be shaken.

He had another idea, of course, and what I had in front of me was having to disabuse him of that notion. Most likely he'd disown me, but whether he did or didn't was not going to change my plans. I took considerable solace in knowing that my Mother would be on my side, and that she was a formidable ally in matters of books and learning, and Father took special care to avoid any confrontations with her over such matters. So did I, for that matter, as she was a stern taskmaster, particularly zealous in matters having anything to do with morality.

Fortunately, that subject did not come up beyond regular admonitions to follow God's path. What did come up was the feeling that no matter how well I did anything, it was never done well enough to suit her. I was always left with the feeling that somehow I would never pass muster.

And yet, in truth, that produced a picture of her that was not wholly accurate, for she was a compassionate woman, well-liked and respected in the community. How many times had she nursed her three sons through diseases that killed other children? More to the point, I was certain I could talk to her about this and she would react calmly and rationally. How had I not seen that before? Most certainly I could talk to her, and seeing that, I felt a good deal more sanguine than I had in some time.