

Chapter Three

From Out Of The Dark

When I woke the dark seemed absolute, but slowly my eyes adjusted until even in the shadows of the pines, I could see tolerably well.

“Get your rifle,” Eben said. “We’ll need to be done before the moon rises.”

And off we went, on foot, through the darkened woods. Only instead of going around the swamp, we went through it, wading waist deep most of the way, and the only good thing I could say about that was that the bottom was hard with only an occasional patch of mud that threatened to suck my shoes from my feet. To be sure, I had hunted in this country, but I had avoided the swamp. Now I was smack in the middle of it, fighting the mosquitoes and the footing and wishing I was wearing buckskins of the sort Eben wore. The leather is tough, but even when it’s wet it’s not so heavy as homespun, and it dries quickly while remaining soft and pliable. I just hoped I didn’t have to do any running until I dried out.

When the swamp ended, the land turned uphill into another stand of virgin timber, hardwoods this time, enormous oaks and maples and beech, and with no underbrush and all the tree branches high overhead, we moved almost at a trot, despite the inky blackness. I stumbled now and again, but Eben traveled cat quiet, and I marveled at how he could move

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so sure-footedly over ground I could see only well enough to navigate at a walk.

The first hint of how close we'd drawn to the camp came on the breeze. Wood smoke. And then a hundred or so yards later I could hear talk and laughter. We stopped in the dense black of a hemlock grove at the edge of the clearing. Eben pointed to a large boulder maybe fifty yards from the fire.

"I'll do the shooting," he whispered. "You just keep down and load."

I nodded, pleased that he wasn't calling on me to waylay some poor soul, thief though he might be, from the dark.

Eben pulled a black deerskin hood over his head and face 'til only his eyes and mouth showed. He handed me one like it to cover my blond hair and pale face which would have glowed like a moon in the dark.

We crouched low and moved across the opening to the rock, scooting along, bent close to the ground. For a minute we sat with our backs to the rock, still warm from the heat of the day, as Eben listened. Then he nodded, picked up his rifle, slipped the barrel up over the rock, and cocked back the hammer.

"Don't look at the flash when I fire," he whispered. "It'll blind you."

I looked away as he pulled the trigger and the muzzle flash seemed to light the entire clearing, the roar bouncing and rolling off the hills as the ball clanged into the big black cooking kettle hanging above the fire. The noise seemed at least as loud as the bell in the church, and it sent the men scrambling for cover. Eben took my rifle and ran through the low brush while I loaded his rifle. So far as I knew there were the only two such rifles in town. Most men had muskets with smooth bore barrels, but these barrels were rifled and were

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accurate even at very long range.

The second shot sent a great shower of sparks as it slammed into the fire and then Eben came out of the dark, exchanging rifles and running off in the opposite direction to fire a third shot, just missing one of the men lying out in the open. He had them pinned, unable to reach their guns, and I handed Eben the loaded rifle and began loading the empty one.

“Doghead Johnson!” he shouted. “Stay put, you’ll stay sound. You’re in a crossfire.”

Someone cursed, and he made a good job of it, running out his words in a long, solid string, crammed full of enough blaspheming to have supplied Reverend Coleman with sermon material for the better part of a year, not that he needed much help in the matter of discovering sinful behavior. I never met a man who could find the Devil lurking in so many innocent places, at least until I met Reverend Pell.

“Stroud? Is that you? Stroud, what in hell is this all about?”

“We’ve come for the General’s horse.”

“I ain’t got” the rifle ball whistled off the ground and crashed into the trees, followed by another line of artful cursing. “I didn’t take his damn horse, Stroud!”

“But you’ve got it.”

“I bought it. Yesterday.”

In the firelight we could see Johnson looking quickly left and right, trying to figure out where we had men positioned. The horse pen stood off to the west of the hemlocks and I could tell from the snorting and stamping that the animals did not much care for all the shooting.

Eben turned toward me. “Slip into the woods and around to the horses. Take your time. Stop and listen. I only count

seven of 'em, so there's probably a guard by the horses. Keep your knife in hand and ready."

I kept as low as I could, using the boulder to screen me from the fire until I reached the woods. There I stopped and listened before moving through the hemlocks and then onto drier ground and a stand of beech. At first I thought to make a straight line for the pen, skirting the beeches because I knew how crunchy the ground would be under those trees.

"I'll sell him to you!" Johnson called. "Fair price too."

Eben laughed and the sound of it made me glad I'd not taken up stealing horses as a career. I pussy footed along through the beeches, and then into a stand of birches where I made good time, moving low and fast, my knife in hand as I reached the pen. The horses were milling about, dancing this way and that, and from the sound I guessed there might be as many as twenty horses. For the life of me I couldn't think how I was going to locate one horse.

I jumped when Eben fired another round and a man cried out. In the dark, just ahead of me I heard a man draw a deep, quick breath.

"Hang it all, Stroud! Why'd you have to go and do that?"

"I told you to keep still. Besides that I got a grudge against thieves, particularly of the horse variety."

"Take the foolish horse! I don't want no trouble with you."

It was a lie and I knew it as well as Eben. He was trying to buy time and maybe set a trap. I stared into the dark toward where I had heard the guard breathe and finally I spotted him, crouched down, ten, maybe twelve feet away. I put my knife away. I'd been in a fight or two, like any boy, and I had a fair idea of my strength, and though I knew Eben would

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have preferred greater certainty, I took the risk and rushed.

I hit him in the side and took the wind out of him, and then with all the strength I could muster, put my fist into his jaw. At first I thought I'd killed him anyway, but when I put my hand on his chest I could feel him breathing.

Slowly, I pulled out two of the rails in the pen and stepped inside. Having a way with animals is a gift I guess you're born with. I could even walk right into the chicken house and gather the eggs with no trouble from the hens or the persnickety old rooster who lit into everyone else. With larger animals all I had to do was lay a hand on them and they quieted right down. Still, you can never be certain about a stallion. All it takes is the sniff of a mare about to come into season and even the most benign stallion starts to rant and tear. The General's bay was dicey enough without that.

As I put my hands on the horses, moving through the pen, I talked to them softly, and here I got some benefit from what was left of the fire, giving me enough light to spot that white blaze. But after I'd been through every horse, I'd come no closer to finding the bay, and I began to wonder if they kept him in a separate enclosure.

"Stroud. Why don't I go fetch the horse and"

"Stay put."

"Be reasonable, Stroud!"

It was taking too much time. I glanced at the campground, and I could see all heads turned my way, and I wondered whether they were waiting for the guard to make a move against Eben, or whether they had heard the horses rustling as they shifted about.

And then I remembered Eben asking whether I could recognize the bay if someone had covered the blaze, and I went back through the horses, wiping every nose with my

hand. I found him maybe ten horses in, and I guessed they must have fed him something to keep him quiet, because he looked sleepy as any carriage horse.

Carefully, I pushed the other horses aside, checking the bay as well as I could to be certain I had the right horse. I didn't think Doghead Johnson would give us a second chance, unless, of course, we killed him and all the rest of his men.

When I'd satisfied my curiosity, I pulled a length of rope from my pocket and quickly fashioned a bridle. I led him to the back of the pen, pulled out the rails, and led him off into the woods. I stopped at the back edge of the hemlocks, reached up, and broke off a dead branch just as Eben had told me. The crack in the silence sounded as loud as a pistol shot.

"Who sold you that horse?" Eben called.

"Never saw him before."

"What'd he look like?"

"It was dark. I never got a good look."

The shot that followed startled me so badly I thought for a second I'd been shot. Suddenly, Eben came out of the hemlocks and in the background I could hear Doghead Johnson shouting.

"I told you the God's honest truth Stroud! I never saw him in the light! It's the truth! You hear me, Stroud?" On and on he went, shouting the same things over and over.

By the time he stopped shouting we'd covered half the distance to the swamp, and none too soon, for the moon was just about ready to burst over the horizon. We moved a little faster and I cut in a prayer or two just to be on the safe side.

The water in the swamp seemed colder than I remem-

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bered, but even had it been the dead of winter I'd have welcomed it. Nobody could track us through that. On the far side of the swamp, back on dry ground, we stopped to listen. I could hear only the summer sounds of the woods; crickets, a locust in the distance, and the usual tree frogs and toads.

"They're at the edge of the bog," Eben said

In the old-growth woods we moved at a slow trot, never slowing, never stopping, and when the ground offered better footing, we increased our speed. Where we'd left the horses, we stopped only long enough to loose the tethers and mount up. A couple of hundred yards later we cut out onto the North Road just as the moon burst up over the low hills to the east.

With the light of the moon on the road we took off at a gallop. You have to have very good reason to gallop a horse at night, but there was a nearly full moon and what we couldn't see, the horses could. We held that pace for nearly a mile before Eben slowed his horse and we settled into a walk.

"Did you kill him?" I asked.

"Didn't need to." He grinned. "From the scuffling I heard, I'd guess you had a little trouble."

"Surprised him," I said.

"Did you kill him?" He was taunting me.

"Knocked him out. I've never used a knife on anyone, but I've used my fists a few times."

Eben nodded. "Looks like they quieted the General's horse some."

"Did us a favor. He's a lot more tractable this way." I looked back the way we had come, wondering if they would be able to get back to their camp, mount up, and lay an ambush for us. "Won't they try to get the horse back?"

"Not likely," Eben said.

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At first I couldn't think why it wouldn't be likely, but then I remembered Doghead Johnson saying how he didn't want any trouble with Eben, so I guessed maybe that was all there was to it. I added that piece of information to my growing list of what I knew about Eben Stroud. It was most interesting to have learned that a pack of outlaws did not want a confrontation with a single man.

"Sam McClellan's well into his sixties now," Eben said, "He is."

"Children gone off."

"His son's practicing law in Boston. His daughter married Tom Wales."

"Just two hired hands."

"Mr. Myers and Samuel," I said.

At the crossroad we turned south. "We'll lay up at my place for now and tomorrow night we'll pay a call on Howard Phipps."

"What's Mr. Phipps got to do with this?"

Eben grinned. "A little patience now, Stoddard. Just a little patience." With that he spurred his horse into a trot. The road from here on was well-traveled and as it was uncommonly free of stones, we made good time.