

Chapter Four

Setting the Trap

The next morning I was none too eager to get home, considering what I had ahead of me. What I'd set my mind on was to go to Yale and then read the law with Tapping Reeve over in Litchfield, and thanks to Mr. McHugh, I had been accepted at Yale starting in the fall. Father, I was sure, would have a different idea of what I should do with my life, but I was determined to be on hand when they called the roll at Yale.

I saddled my horse at daylight, thinking I was leaving the rest of this adventure to Eben. He stood on the porch, chewing on a birch splinter and watching me as I gathered the reins and swung up onto the mare. "You ought to figure to be back here by two at the latest."

"I thought my part was over," I said.

"I'll need some help on this next part as well," he said. "You should expect to stay over well into tomorrow." He offered his wolfish smile as he glanced up at the clear summer sky. "Good haying weather like this, your going off ought to make your father fairly poisonous, but you just tell him I'm needing your services a while longer."

I grinned back at him. "Most likely you'll hear him hollering from here."

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"I expect I will," Eben said. "I expect I will. Good for a man to holler. It exercises his lungs."

I reined the mare around. "I'll be here at about two." With a touch of my heels against her flanks the mare broke into a smart trot, picking up her feet as if she didn't like the feel of the ground.

Poisonous wasn't half strong enough to describe Father's reaction. "Just what in Sam Hill is this about? We got hay to get in! You think the animals will go the winter without hay? What the devil kind of farmer goes running all over the countryside, free as a parson on his rounds, when there's hay to be got in?"

I unsaddled the mare and began brushing her down. I had not ridden her hard, because I had no idea what Eben had in mind, and I wanted her fresh and ready to run.

"You can just forget about that crazy gallivanting all over the countryside, mister. We got honest work to do here, and you'll spend the afternoon and every afternoon from now on making hay, until it's all got up!"

My father and I were the same height, which made us the tallest in the family, and we were both stout through the arms and shoulders, and equally stubborn. I take after him in a great many ways. Our eyes are the same pale blue, our hair the same dusty yellow, and we even wear it the same way, pulled back and tied at the top of the neck. Both my brothers have cut their hair short in the new fashion. The similarities end with that, for we are not the least bit alike in the way we think. I take after my mother along those lines, and he knew it, and it rankled him because he'd never figured her out either.

But he had the advantage of age, which, if nothing else, produces confidence when confronting a younger man, and

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he knew I was not much given to going against his wishes, let alone defying him. I had learned a long time ago that with Father it was always best to let the kettle cool before adding fuel to the fire. It took a lot longer for him to build up steam that way. Even better, there was another way. He was a sucker for a good story, and I had one to tell.

"I don't know what young people are coming to these days." He peered at me from beneath the brim of his tri-cornered hat. "Look at your brothers. Good farmers. Hard workers. Keep their minds on their work and get it done. And there you are riding all over hell's half acre looking for a fool horse that's been stolen and can't never be found!"

I saw the opening and I took it. "We found the horse."

"Walking around in some greener pasture, most likely."

"We took him from Doghead Johnson." I stepped out of the stall and closed the door behind me.

"Doghead Johnson!" He adjusted his hat. "How the devil did you manage that?"

"Mr. Stroud kept them pinned down and"

"Stroud! You've been out traveling with Eben Stroud?"

"Didn't Mr. Williams tell you that?"

"Sent his boy over from the store. Just said you'd not be back 'til morning."

"Those Pursuers couldn't find their own shadows in full daylight," I said. "Mr. Stroud convinced them that it'd be a good deal less costly in the long run, if they just hired him. Then he asked me to go with him."

The fire was dead cold under the kettle now, and I told him how we had "surrounded" Doghead Johnson and got back the General's horse. He hung on every word, and I could see my value as a potential human being had shot up several notches beyond fetch and carry.

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"We still haven't caught the thief," I said, "and that's why Eben asked me to come back. He's got a plan and he needs my help. Couldn't do it without me," I said, exaggerating some, the better to secure my new position in society.

Father rubbed his chin, his pale blue eyes narrowed down as he squinted into the bright daylight hanging at the maw of the barn. "He does, does he? Needs your help. Can't do it without you" He left off rubbing his chin and began worrying his left ear as if a fly had set up housekeeping inside. What came next took me completely by surprise. "Guess you'll have to go then. Eben asks, you go."

I hadn't known that Father knew anything at all about Eben Stroud, but suddenly it was quite clear that he knew a great deal about him. More to the point, he respected him, and that was even more amazing, because the only man in town that Father respected was General McClellan. "About the hay," I said. "I'll work extra when I get back.

"No need," he said. "We'll struggle along 'til you get back. Got through last year when Arthur broke his leg trying to prove he could ride that mare of yours. Got through then, we'll get through now. Fact of the matter is, we're ahead by a good bit over last year."

"I can work till dinner."

He nodded. "You had breakfast?"

"I have, but I could squeeze in another round. Eben's rations run mostly to the dried and thin."

He grinned. "On the move a lot, I expect."

I got to tell the story again over breakfast and while Arthur and Henry tried to figure out whether I was lying, Mother only looked worried.

"I don't like it," she said, her green eyes hard and fiery. "I don't like it one little bit. Traipsing all over the countryside

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with Eben Stroud.”

Most women hewed to similar opinions when it came to Eben Stroud, though you could see an odd wild light come up in their eyes. I saw no such light in Mother’s eyes, instead I saw a sadness I could not account for.

“Nothing wrong with Eben Stroud,” Father said.

“Nothing that a good wife couldn’t fix.” Mother stood up and began clearing the plates and Arthur, Henry, and I cleared the rest of the table before sitting back down to finish our tea.

Despite the standard, mother-like variety of solutions she offered up on such occasions, Mother had shown more than once that she could hold very risky opinions and could be swayed by logical argument. I decided to offer some bits of information to see which side of the fence she was walking.

“Walks through the dark like it was daylight,” I said.

“No call to be out in the dark, roving about like some Boston brigand.”

“Knows about people,” I said. “I’ll bet there’s not a thing goes on in this town that he doesn’t know about. What he doesn’t know, he figures out with logic. It’s amazing how much he understands about why people do what they do.”

“I hear he’s a dead shot,” Arthur said.

“Rides a great black devil of a horse,” Henry said.

I nodded. “That horse comes when he calls it and it’ll stand without a tether. It’s a full-blooded stallion.”

Mother hauled the kettle from the stove and filled the washtub in the sink. “Now where does a man like that, a man with no job, no farm, where does he get the money for such a horse?”

“General Washington gave it to him,” I said.

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Well, didn't that piece of information leave a hole in the conversation. Dead silence. Then there was a little foot scuffling under the table and Mother began washing the dishes.

Father cleared his throat. "Thought he was out in the West the whole time."

"He told me Washington gave him the horse."

"Maybe he was a spy," Henry said.

I shrugged. "He didn't say."

"I heard he was a scout for Washington," Arthur said. "Even after the war."

Father stood up quickly. "Enough of this. We got hay to make. Drink up and we'll get started. Stoddard, you stay here and see if you can get that fool carriage fixed, and then help pitch the hay into the loft when a wagon comes back."

They left and I lingered a bit over my tea.

"Best you get to work," Mother said.

"What do you know about Eben?" I asked.

"He's helped people from time to time, all right, there's no denying that, but he's not a church man, and I never met a minister who had the least good thing to say about him."

I grinned, saying what came into my mind and knowing I'd have to run for the door. "Sure wouldn't hold that against him," I said and lit out before Mother could turn.



I spent the afternoon broadening my education in tracking and shooting. I had accounted myself a good shot until Eben picked a partridge out of the air with a single rifle ball, and then several minutes later repeated the feat as if to prove it wasn't just luck. I understood why Doghead Johnson's men had not shown much inclination to go crawling about.

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What I still hadn't figured out was why we hadn't returned the General's horse. Not until after supper, which consisted of two fine roasted partridge, corn bread, and some wild greens I had never eaten before, did Eben let me in on what he had planned.

He opened an old trunk and took out a long black hooded cloak. Then we went out to the horse hovel and saddled the General's bay. We mounted up and headed out to the road as Eben explained his plan. Like everything he did, it hewed to the plain and bold. I wasn't sure I could carry it off, but buoyed by Eben's confidence, I did as instructed, and pulled on the cloak while Eben took cover in the trees. Then I spurred the big bay, galloped right into Howard Phipps' dooryard, and reined in. "Phipps!" I called. "I want to talk to you!"

Through the window, in the candle light, I could see him rise from a chair and then he disappeared from sight. It made me feel a good deal better, knowing that Eben was lurking back in the shadows with his rifle trained on the house.

"Phipps!" I called again.

This time the door opened a crack but no one came out.

"Who's there?" The voice floated from the doorway.

"I've got McClellan's horse!"

He had to look to be sure, and he poked his head around the door frame, his eyes about the shape and size of a badly disgruntled owl. At that distance, in the rising moon, he could not mistake the star blaze, and I heard him gasp.

"I want the money back," I said, concealing my voice by making it huskier than usual. "I'll want twenty pounds additional, or McClellan finds out who stole his horse."

When he hesitated I knew we had our man.

"Leave the money in the hollow tree where the North Road and the Putnam Road cross. Noon tomorrow." I let the

bay drift closer.

"Twenty pounds! I haven't got"

"Get it! I won't come back a second time." I jerked the bay's head around, and when I drove my heels into his flanks he exploded into a gallop, and I left the light from the house behind, and off we went into the blue, moonlit night, me praying he could keep his feet under him, and at the same time thrilled with his speed. Surely, I thought, Eben had been wrong. No horse could run faster than this, and then suddenly there he was coming up alongside, that big black horse simply eating up the ground. It seemed to take the gumption out of the bay, and I could feel him slow. That settled several things. First, Eben did not exaggerate. Second, I knew which stud I'd put my mare to when she came into season. Third, though he'd never met Howard Phipps, Eben knew a great deal about him. I needed to find out how he did that.

"What do you think, Stoddard," he asked as we slowed to a walk, "have we got the right man?"

"He sounded like he'd seen a ghost."



By eleven the next morning three of us waited in the woods behind the hollow tree. It was another hot, clear day with not a cloud in the sky, a day to make the farmers restless, always glancing toward the sky in hopes of spotting a thunderhead or maybe a good, solid bank of rain clouds.

They had cause for worry. The ground had begun to dry, and once the sun baked the water out of the first six inches of topsoil, the water in the ground seemed to drop by the hour. The last drought had been ten years ago, and though I barely remembered it, I didn't feel that way because of the

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stories I'd heard over and over.

But General Sam McClellan did not seem particularly worried, and, in fact, never mentioned it. A long, thin rail of a man, he sat on a rock in the shade of the woods, swatting at the deer flies and recounting the campaigns he'd been on with General Washington. I don't think I've ever been more entertained, in part because he had a way with a tale, but mostly because he had seen things I had never heard of before. I was thunderstruck to hear how close we'd come to losing the war.

But his stories raised another point of interest, and that was the exact status of Eben Stroud in the Washington camp. He was the chief of scouts, not just a scout, and he came and went like a ghost, to hear General Sam tell it, providing the information that allowed Washington to win when he most needed to win.

And he'd made short work of enemy scouts or somehow managed to send them back with information which caused their leaders to make mistakes, attacking when they should not have, retreating when they could easily have won.

Despite my fascination, I was restless, shifting position, watching the road, working the muscles in my neck to relieve the tension. I had never been a still hunter. The only time I can sit in one place is when I'm reading or writing. Worse, the deer flies, which never seemed to bother Eben, were thick. Even the horses, tucked back into the deep shade, were stomping and tossing their heads.

General Sam, turned and clapped his deep blue eyes on me. "So, Stoddard, it's to be Yale then, is it?"

My jaw dropped and I tried to stammer out a reply, but I made not a sound and my discomfort sparked a low chuckle from the General.

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"Want to be lawyer, Stoddard, you'll need to practice concealing your surprise," he said.

"Yes, sir." I shook my head. "That's still a long way off." I shook my head a second time.

"Not so far as you think. You'll be eighteen soon, as I recall, and after that you never get any older and time moves much faster."

"I still haven't told my father," I said.

He grinned. "Stern man, Ezekiel Chandler."

"He is," I said.

"Well, I suspect he'll bend somewhat in this matter. We're a very young country, and we'll need all the bright young men we can find. If we're to survive, someone's got to follow in the footsteps of Washington and Adams, Franklin and Jefferson, Hamilton and Madison, and that burden will fall to your generation." He sat up straight, resting his hands on his bony knees. "I suppose I could have a talk with your father, but not only do we need smart young men, we need young men with strong wills to stand against the English and the Tory sympathizers who remain." He pulled out his pocket watch and marked the time at eleven-thirty. Then he took a deep breath, ready to launch on another long tale, when Eben reached out and clapped one of his huge hands on the General's skinny arm. In the distance we could see a small cloud of dust rising above the road.

"What do you make of it, Stoddard?" Eben asked.

"Lone horse and rider," I said. "Looks like they're coming right for us."

"So they are."

We sat very still, watching the dust come closer, and then as the rider came slowly up out of the long dip in the road, the dust and the rider came together and there was Howard

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Phipps, walking his horse, looking uneasily to the right and left as he approached the hollow tree. He reined in, drew a packet from inside his coat, dropped it into the tree, turned, and went back the way he'd come.

"How did you know?" I asked.

Eben smiled. "Pride and greed are what seem to drive most men. Mr. Phipps has suffered mightily these past few years. Each race day his stallion has come a yard shy of beating Sam's bay. It's not just a matter of pride, of course, because a certain amount of money changes hands over those races, and Mr. Phipps, wealthy though he may be, always seems to need more money."

I'd heard that Mr. Phipps was well off, but mostly it was rumor. When rumor becomes gospel, it always takes you by surprise.

"Nice piece of work, Eben," the General said. He smoothed his shaggy gray hair. "Takes an interesting turn of mind to understand your fellow man so well."

"Doubt is all that's needed," Eben said.

It ended there. The price of the horse went to the church for helping those less fortunate, and the rest, which Eben called the fine, went into his pocket along with the compensation he got from the Theft Detecting Society.

One surprise remained. A day later the General paid a call on my parents. He never mentioned Yale, but he left no stone unturned in praising me for my part in the recovery of his horse. I don't remember, after that, being asked to fetch and carry, even by my father.

It also put an end to horse stealing in Woodstock, though nearby towns continued to lose horses to Doghead Johnson, until finally the High Sheriff, guided by Eben, raided the horse pound. Two men were killed in the raid, and the rest

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scattered, never to return. Doghead Johnson went back to being a horse dealer, operating under his false name, but he was never again associated with stealing. He didn't dare. Eben was watching.

Looking back on those events, I count it a most grievous turn of mind that led me to have craved trouble, but after I'd had a taste of adventure, I longed for excitement. Later that summer, when the Society had to call on Eben again, I suffered profound guilt over thinking that I could have elected trouble as a form of entertainment.