

# Chapter Five

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## Home Again

But before I got to that, I had to abide the chiding of my brothers and father, who thought I was on a fool's errand. They were men who applied themselves to their work with great vigor.

"You plan to stay under this roof," my father said over dinner, "then you'll earn your keep. You can either hay with us or get to work on that old carriage Mother talked me into buying from Elton Krieger. What's more, you went to the trouble to train a team of horses to draw it, and you still haven't got anything to pull." He bit into a piece of bread. "Of course you could help us hay the south lot, if that's more to your liking."

I liked haying, I liked the sweat and the heat of the summer sun and the smell of the hay as we pitched it up into the wagons, but I also liked tinkering, and for now, that was the best choice because it kept me where I had other business.

"I'll work on the carriage," I said.

"Can't eat a carriage," Arthur said.

"Can't take a hay wagon to church," I shot back.

"Always did before," Henry said. "I don't much like putting on airs." He was the eldest.

"Mother shouldn't have to ride to church in a hay wagon,"

I said. "And anyway, it's not a fancy carriage."

Then Father surprised me. "Stoddard's right," he said. "A woman needs to hold up her head now and again."

Henry looked a little disconcerted. "I didn't mean to say Mother wasn't entitled to that," he said.

He left it there, but we all knew what was on his mind. He'd been courting Eliza Waterford, whose father, Ben, ran the sawmill. He should have been the wealthiest man in town, but he was lazy and a sloppy worker, much given to drinking. He was plainly worried that the carriage would irritate Ben and interfere with the courtship.

I thought he had cause to worry. Ben Waterford was not only drunk most of the time, but he was nasty when he was sober, and the one thing he resented was people being rich. More than that, he hated having it show.

"Well," Mother said, "I shouldn't want some fancy brougham. Just something comfortable and dry."

And that was just what I was making of the old carriage. I'd already replaced all the rotted wood and the top and, in truth, I had only the painting left, and I had planned to paint it a dark brown with none of the fancy gold leaf work that had once adorned it. "It'll be quite plain," I said.

Father, Arthur, and Henry pushed back from the table.

"You'll work on the carriage, then," my father said.

"I will, sir."

"See that you do."

"I'll be off with Eben again tomorrow morning."

The whole business had my father considerably confused. "Can't see why he'd want someone so young to help find a murderer," he said.

Mother smiled and looked at me quickly, and I kept my mouth shut, watching them drift on out the door and climb

## Home Again

onto the wagon. As they lumbered out of the yard and down the road, I turned to clearing the table.

"You haven't got enough work with the carriage?"

"I need to talk to you," I said.

And because it was the first time in my life I had ever uttered such words to her, she stopped and looked around at me, studying me carefully, before smiling and shaking her head. "I'd like to know more about Eben Stroud."

"What do you want to know?"

"No man courts rumor as he does,"

"He's not what people think. Most see only the rough exterior, but there's another side. He's lettered and he's read a lot of books. He has a prodigious sense of justice and a sharp sense of humor with a penchant for the ironic." I stopped and looked at her closely. "But I would not advise any man to cross him. He's as strong as an ox, he sees in the dark like a cat, he can shoot the wings off a fly at a hundred paces, and he moves without making a sound even in the driest woods. Did you know he was a scout for General McClellan and General Washington?"

"No. I hadn't heard that." She smiled. "But I'll bet you'd never guess how many women's hearts he's stirred."

It was hard to think of Eben as the object of any woman's affection, though I understood how they could be drawn to his indominatable strength. And then I remembered old Pell and his remark about how women were so often drawn to scalawags. Clearly I had a great deal to learn. "What I want to know is if you can tell me anything about Mrs. Phillips."

"Now there is a curious question." She turned from the dishes in the pan, her hands still covered with soap. "Why do you want to know about her?"

"Eben thinks ...."

"Eben? You call him Eben now?"

I nodded. "And he calls me Stoddard." Slowly I dried a plate and set it in the cabinet. I could see a shadow shift across her face. "I don't mind telling you, Stoddard, that I have some serious misgivings about you traipsing over the countryside with Eben Stroud.

"He's taught me a great deal," I said.

"That is what I fear."

"You needn't fear what he has to teach," I said. "Most of it is knowledge I would have come to sooner or later."

"But will it be of any use to you at Yale?"

I dropped the dish I was drying, and by some miracle it landed edgewise on the braided rug and flopped over upside down without so much as chipping an edge.

She looked down at the dish and then up at me and shook her head and grinned.

"How did you know?"

"Women have their ways," she said. "Now pick up that plate so I can wash it again."

I scooped the dish from the floor and handed it to her.

"I'm guessing you're not quite ready to tell your father."

"Yes," I said.

"Best you get it done. He'll shout and stamp around, but in the end it will make him proud. And you've no need to worry about your brothers. They never had any use for school." She set the plate to drain. "At least Eben Stroud won't be pulling you off to the West."

"What I want to explore is here. Once I finish at Yale, I'm planning to read the law with Tapping Reeve over in Litchfield."

She shook her head and then tucked a lock of her chestnut

## Home Again

brown hair behind her left ear. Her blue eyes seemed to see right into me. "You are something of a wonder, Stoddard. Tapping Reeve, no less. But then you always did set your sights high." She shook her head again and when the lock of hair escaped her ear, she ignored it. "Your father knows you're not like his other sons. He watched you train the mare. He knows it from the way you hunt and the way you remain above argument. In a way I think he'll be greatly relieved. Young men are easily influenced, and he senses your restlessness and independence, and his fears about Eben Stroud are much like mine. I suppose Mr. Stroud selected you to help him because he sees much of himself in you."

It was the longest speech I had ever heard her deliver and its effect left me almost mute.

"Tell your father."

"I will."

"When?"

I picked up another plate. "It seems like a repudiation of the way he lives," I said. "I don't want him to think that."

She emptied the dishwasher, wiped her hands on her apron, and then laid her right hand on my arm. "I knew from the day you were born, you'd not be a farmer. How a mother knows such things about her children I could never guess, but I knew it and I wrote it in my diary, and now it's come to be." She crossed to the table and sat down. "Now, about Elizabeth Phillips. What do you want to know?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. Whatever you can tell me, I guess."

"If you want to know what she was like when she was young, I can tell you a great deal, because we were the best of friends then. Even after we married, we stayed close. I was there when Charity was born, and she was here when Henry

was born, and yet again when Arthur was born, but then things changed. We had families to care for, and it's natural to drift away then, especially since the farms are nearly six miles apart.

"But we talked after church, and though I began to see a kind of sadness in her that I'd never seen before, I assumed it was because she had yet to have another child. Then for over a month no one saw her, and finally I went to call. I found her in bed. She was weak and pale and she'd lost a lot of weight as the result of having miscarried a third time.

"The house was a shambles. Charity, poor little Charity was as brave as you could ask. I got Mrs. White to go over to the house as often as she could, and I brought meals at least twice a week. Others in the parish helped as well.

"But the stronger she grew, the more she seemed to resent anyone's help. She wasn't ungrateful, just standoffish. I thought I knew her so well. All her life she had been bright and cheerful. She had never complained. Everyone liked her and suddenly she was turning people away, not literally, but by her behavior.

"Even after she had recovered, she seldom came to church, and when she did, she spoke to no one, and always left as soon as the service finished."

She caught again at the errant wisp of hair and tucked it away, taking care to secure it this time. "It is a terrible sad thing to lose a friend, especially a friend from childhood. It's as if a part of you died." She caught the tear before it hardly formed, then cleared her throat, and sat straight up in the chair. "Well, in as much as you're the one going off to read the law with the famous Tapping Reeve, what do you make of that?"

I smiled to myself, appreciating her remark and the way it

## Home Again

alerted me to the remarks I could expect in the future. "Why would anyone cut themselves off from their friends? Was she ashamed? Did she have something to hide? If so, it must have had something to do with Thomas, if only because so few other possibilities existed."

"You'll make a fine lawyer," she said. "The wonder is that I never thought of it myself." Her eyes were suddenly sharp and hard. "When a woman hides that way, it's because she has something to hide, and usually what she has to hide are bruises. I never, truth to tell, cared much for Thomas Phillips. As a boy he was a coward and a cruel bully."

"Maybe it was the beatings that caused the miscarriages."

"Good Lord! Of course! And I suppose it's why she couldn't have any more children! Poor, poor Elizabeth! And what anguish she must be suffering now!" In a flash she was up, gathering things, putting them into a large basket. "Saddle up Brownie, Stoddard. I'm going to pay a call."

"I'll go along," I said as I thought about the side of Thomas Phillips no one seemed to know. He could be a dangerous man, and I was not about to let my mother sail into uncharted waters without help close by.

"Yes," she said, "you'd best do that. I'm not sure I'd want to be alone with a man who beats his wife and most likely beat his daughter as well."

She picked up the basket and looked at me, and I could see a sadness creep into her eyes. "You've got a lot to learn, Stoddard, and some of it will be unpleasant, but now's as good a time to start as any." She headed for the door and we walked side-by-side out to the barn.

"Some men are weak," she said, "weak inside. They turn on those who are weaker, using whatever means they

can to keep others under their control. Thomas Phillips was a bully as a boy, always picking on those who were weaker. He stayed well away from men like your father because he knew he'd suffer a terrible thrashing. And he made sure when he picked on someone there were no witnesses, especially no witnesses like your father, who would have interceded."

I bridled and saddled old Brownie and took my mare from her stall. She stood still as stone as I slipped her bridle on, and then the blanket and saddle.

"She is a wonderful horse, isn't she?" Mother said.

"None better," I said. "Smart and loyal, though I'd not put any other rider on her back." I grinned. "I suspect she'd allow Eben to ride her."

I offered my hand to help her up, but she simply pushed her skirts to a more convenient position and swung up onto Brownie as easily as any man could have done. I set the basket on the feed bin, climbed up onto my mare, picked up the basket, and we started out of the barn. Suddenly Mother reined in.

"I didn't leave a note," she said.

"I'll do that. You go ahead. I'll catch up."

"Shouldn't be much trouble for that horse."

"She can run," I said, "but not so fast as Eben's big black stallion. He overtook the General's bay from behind without even straining." I turned the mare toward the house.

"Another time I shall want to hear a good deal more about Eben Stroud," Mother said.