

# Chapter Eight

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## Evil Finds Its End

Later, as Eben and I rode through the cool night, I pulled bits of the long conversation with the General from my memory and examined them the way you would an unexpected bit of treasure. I had known that Eben Stroud was possessed of high intelligence, but until that afternoon and evening, I'd had no way of measuring that.

That day I learned that I wanted to spend my life in the company of intelligent men. I wanted to be part of the discussions that would shape the future of the most unique country in the world. I had not understood before how dangerous our government must seem to the rest of the world, every country governed by a king or a queen, some of them nothing more than city states. And I understood for the first time that the difference between success and failure was the Atlantic Ocean, which isolated us and allowed us to shape our government without interference as we amended the failures which could not have been anticipated.

We'd ridden some distance before Eben broke into my reverie. "We've got a piece of business ahead of us that will require our full attention." He adjusted his backside on the saddle. "It occurs to me that we'll set aside for now any digging up of graves and lay a trap instead."

“Why now?”

“I suspect Tom Phillips can feel us snapping at his heels, and a man so positioned, most always resorts to some desperate act. Once he claps onto what he thinks he needs to do, nothing will turn him aside. That’s also when a man is most easily trapped. The only time you can take a cat by surprise is when he is focused on another target. Then, for an instant, he’ll disregard the signs of danger.” He chuckled. “That’s not always reliable, but it does produce good odds.”

I nodded.

“By now, Phillips will have figured out that Jonah is either at your place or he’s staying with Amos. He’ll more likely try the latter first, rather than risk tangling with your father and brothers.”

“Will he bring Pell with him?”

“No. This job he’ll do alone. He has to kill Jonah Creed. Then he’ll turn to Pell. With both of them dead, he’ll have no witness against him, and that will leave him free to claim that Jonah killed Charity because he couldn’t have her and then killed Pell because he was a witness. So we set a snare, conceal it as well as we can, and run Tom Phillips to ground.”

The moon was riding full by the time we got to the farm, a great, dented silver disc that seemed to pull the mist from the watercourses in the valleys. Far to the west some clouds were drifting in and that gave us time. Not until the moon dipped behind those clouds would Tom Phillips move to destroy the evidence of his perfidious behavior.

Sometimes the most effective trap is the most obvious. We made a dummy, dressed it in Jonah’s clothes, and set it at the table before a candle with its back to the window. Amos was to sit at the upstairs window, and when he saw Phillips move into the light from the window, wait a few seconds,

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and then call out. That would force Phillips to shoot quickly. Too long a look and he might suspect something.

But it still looked like a dummy to me. "How can you be so sure it'll work?" I asked.

"It'll work," Eben said, "just like a trap does on a beaver. As long as everything that happens abets him in fulfilling his purpose, he'll not be turned aside."

"But you're guessing," I said.

"What do you think, Amos? Is it a guess?"

"A man's state of mind can blind him to anything."

"We'll be waiting on Boyd's Hill," Eben said. "Once Phillips fires, you climb to the attic window and signal us with a lantern, then we'll light out. Stoddard, you ride for the General. It would be best if the most reliable witness in town were on hand at Pell's. Wait behind the carriage shed back of the church where you can watch the back door of the parish house. I'll watch the front."

"Why wouldn't he shoot from outside? Just creep up and fire through the window?"

"He isn't going to shoot Pell," Eben said.

"But I thought ...."

"He's going to take a hammer to him."

"To make it look like Jonah killed him."

"That's my guess."

"Is he smart enough to think of that?" I asked. "Mother says he was pretty dull in school."

"Desperation may brighten the dullest mind."



The trap worked just as Eben had said it would. Tom Phillips arrived once the house was in the shadow of the clouds,

shot the dummy, and retreated off into the night. Seconds later Amos signaled from the attic window.

Rousing the General proved unnerving, to say the least, as no one wants his rest disturbed, especially a man the General's age, but once awake, he dressed quickly as I saddled his horse and we rode at a canter most of the way over to the East Church, following the road through the smudgy dark that comes before the dawn.

Finally we slowed, letting the horses walk and cool out in case we needed to run.

"It's come to mind, Stoddard, that you've grown considerably this summer."

"Indeed I have, sir."

"Hard lessons, to be sure, but lessons we all come to learn at one time or another."

He was right, of course, for until now I'd had no idea, despite all the sermonizing I had sat through in church, that men could fall to such depths.

"It's put me on my guard," I said.

"Valuable knowledge then." He sighed wistfully. "Still, innocence is not surrendered easily."

"Except when you're young," I said.

He turned completely in the saddle, his eyes straining against the dark. "You're right, of course, though such thoughts usually come with age, which is when we are most given to regretting not being young. Only those who have suffered life's travails regret such a loss. In truth, it is only the old who suffer from loss of innocence, mostly because they have come closer to the end than the beginning."

"I look forward to every day," I said, "knowing that each day will likely produce something I did not know before."

He smiled. "A fine habit. Life is a surprise, and all you

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need is an open mind. Such a mind can override the aches and pains that come with time, and even soften the passage through to each man's inevitable end."

I listened closely, and now, buried in his remarks, I saw a strong hint of heresy in his assumption that life, and not Heaven, was the greater reward.

Halfway up the hill to the East Church I turned onto a woods road that led to a long string of back pastures.

"How is it you see so well at night?" the General asked.

"I know by the trees against the sky."

"And where did you learn how to do that?"

"Hunting," I said.

We threaded our way through a long string of back pastures, enclosed by stone walls and guarded by barways. It was troublesome, having to dismount at each gate, but it was the safest way to come up on the church. Eben was waiting at the top of the hill by the stable.

"None too soon," he said.

We stopped outside the window of Pell's study. In the pale glow from several tapers, he paced back and forth, wringing his hands. Minutes later we heard footsteps on the stone walk, and then a great pounding on the door, the thuds echoing into the dry still night.

Eben signaled for us to stand watch by the window, and then crept to the corner of the house. He waited 'til the door opened and closed, and once Phillips and Pell had entered the study and closed the door, he slipped inside.

"It's done," Phillips said.

"You're sure?"

"The ball hit him in the back, just behind his heart." He turned to the window and we ducked quickly out of sight as he crossed the room and stood looking into the dark.

"Praise the Lord," Pell said.

"There's more yet to be done."

We crouched close against the wall until we heard him walk away from the window.

"But what? Creed is dead. We're done with it."

"Have you forgotten about Elizabeth?"

"But I don't see ... oh, yes ...."

We peered up over the window sill.

"I'll have to deal with that later."

"But on the other hand, what can they say? Men have the right to beat their wives. And if it comes to that, I will testify that we were merely trying to dispossess her."

"It's her brothers I fear in this." He moved past the desk.

"But at least I can make this end of things square up." He drew the big hammer from beneath his coat.

"What are ... my God, man! Surely you don't think...."

"One witness left. Just one."

Pell leaped from his chair with surprising agility as Phillips slowly closed on him, driving him into the far corner of the study, and then with a crash the door flew open, and there was Eben, his rifle level, aimed at Tom Phillips.

"Put it down," he said.

But Tom Phillips was long past any ability to change his course. He was driven by a single thought, and he raised the hammer and rushed at Pell.

The blast of the rifle was so loud I thought the walls would surely buckle outward, and the smoke was so thick that neither I nor the General could see. We walked quickly around to the front of the house and then into the study.

Tom Phillips was dead and Reverend Pell sat with his back against the wall, his eyes wide and staring. The General walked over to him and waved his hand in front of Pell's eyes,

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then held his hand in front of his face to determine whether he was breathing. "I believe he's dead, Eben."

Eben, slowly, methodically rammed a patched ball down onto a fresh charge of powder, and leaned the gun against the desk. "Not from being shot." He crossed the room and knelt down next to Pell, putting his ear to the skinny chest. "Heart's still going," he said.

"Must be shock, then," the General said. He looked around at me, remembering that I'd probably never seen a man killed before. I wondered why I was not upset, and I've even worried that my failure to panic or throw up was somehow emblematic of a deep callousness. But it was clear the General did not see it that way, and he had seen only too often how men react to horror. That Eben never troubled himself over how I would react, I took as a compliment.

Next day the sheriff came, though he had little left to deal with but a body and a parson who could no longer speak. All Pell did was sit and stare across the room, his eyes fixed on space. Some string had snapped in his mind, the General said, though I thought it must have been more like a rope in size. He gave no indication that he heard when spoken to but the strangest thing was the way he never seemed to blink.

That state of mind did not last long. Within days he began to come around, and I heard from others that he seemed a good deal more subdued than before, and a great deal kinder toward his parishioners. Some said it was as if he'd been reborn as a gentle, kindly soul, but I set no faith in that pronouncement, and as events later proved, I was right.

Thus our investigation came to a finish. Some loose ends remained for a time, but even they resolved. Mrs. Phillips went to live with her much younger brother Ezekiel, and though she remained a somber woman to the end of her days,

both Zeke and his wife, Lydia, considered her an asset to a household with eight children.

She and my mother became fast friends once again, and she even smiled from time to time, though that did not happen until her scars had healed and she felt free enough to go abroad among the people she had known her whole life.

Jonah stayed on with Amos and the change was remarkable. He spoke without stuttering, and he nearly wore his eyes out reading the books in our small town library. It was three years later that Amos married Hattie Borden and that year Jonah leased the Phillips farm, which he eventually bought. He too married, a handsome woman, a widow from Pomfret, whom he had met at the fair.

It almost seemed as if the good that once was Charity Phillips found a way not only to survive, but to flourish and in so doing wipe away the pain and anguish which had dominated so many years. Or perhaps I have simply taken comfort in believing that, as a way of honoring the memory of someone whose life benefitted all who knew her. How such a man as Tom Phillips could have fathered such a daughter defied all logic.

The end of the investigation, however, only plunged me deeper into yet another adventure, though of a quite different sort. I began to find excuses to stop at the Hayes farm, and though at first I did not admit that it was the fiery-eyed Hannah who drew me there, I soon enough came to see that she was the only reason I stopped by. Everyone else, of course, understood from the start, including Hannah ... sweet, sweet Hannah, first a girl and then a woman who will never be equaled.