
The Witch At Kerner's Cross



Chapter One

Buckskins

The General had sent over a two-year-old mare, asking that I break her. Mr. Myers, his farm manager, had gotten nowhere with her, in part because she was every bit as headstrong as the mare who had foaled her. I was well acquainted with headstrong mares. But I found it curious that Mr. Myers had not given the horse to Samuel Blake, Rebecca's husband. He was a good man with animals, gentle and kind, and I had once seen him talk a stubborn team of mules into pulling a load they had refused. I was certain he could have trained the horse.

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Instead, they had to walk her the three miles because she wouldn't follow another horse or a wagon, and Walter Myers, apparently unwilling to let Samuel take the horse in hand, had led her the whole way, and he was as crotchety as a snowbound woodchuck in April.

"Damn fool horse anyway," he snarled as he mopped the sweat from his brow. "Ought to put her to the plow." He cooled himself at the pump before climbing into the wagon next to Samuel, who showed the faintest flicker of a smile in his dark eyes. "I'm hanged if can see why any man would risk his neck on such an animal as that."

I nodded and looked up. "She'll be all right," I said. "Horses are like people, they grow up at different speeds."

"Well, I hope you're one for praying, 'cause you're going to need all the help you can get. Worse part is, she bites. You get close, she waits till your back is turned, then nips you."

"She got a name?"

"Dancer," he said. Then he turned to Samuel. "Get us home, Samuel, we got work to do. Now I don't have to minister to that damn fool horse, everything else is downhill."

With a smile which betrayed his great amusement, Samuel twitched the reins against the rumps of the team.

I watched them go, wondering about Samuel's smile. He and his wife and children were the only Negroes I had ever seen, and I suppose I had never thought much about them, beyond the fact that everybody said blacks were a lesser breed of human. But his smile had put the lie to that. And then there was the matter of Rebecca, the healer everyone sent for in times of trouble. I decided to find out more about the Blakes. Why didn't their children go to school? Samuel's smile had not come from a man of inferior intelligence.

At the moment I had a more pressing problem, though

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judging by the way the mare stood so quietly at the end of the lead line, I wasn't so sure it was all that pressing. I turned to the horse and immediately she set up to run, her nostrils flared, her eyes wide, her ears up, but I ignored that and led her to the paddock, allowing the full length of the twenty-foot lead line between us. Once inside, with the gate closed, I stopped. "Well, Dancer," I said, "you'll find things different here, I expect, and perhaps even a good deal more to your liking."

She was not deterred by sweet talk, and she was dead afraid of people, but she looked a little less wild, and moving deliberately, I walked closer, going hand over hand on the line so she could watch. Before I unhitched her, I waited for her to get my scent. Each time she got a whiff, she'd toss her head and dance around, but each time she came back for another whiff, and each time she danced a little less.

Finally, I reached up and placed my hand on her nose. "You're not so desperate as you've been made out to be, I think." I unhitched the line, took hold of her halter, and led her to where I had left a quarter-full bucket of water.

Then I let her go. She danced to the side and I stepped back ten feet or so from the bucket. She wanted the water, but she didn't want to lower her head until I gave her more room. Now I'd find out what I was dealing with. She'd been out in the sun for some time, and she'd had no water along the way, so I knew she was thirsty. If she was mean, sooner or later she'd put her ears back and try to drive me away from the water.

I never took my eyes off her. She kept her ears up and now and again she scraped her right forefoot in the dust, and nickered, but that was her most aggressive posture.

So I backed off a step. She looked at me carefully, gauging

my distance from the bucket, then tossed her head. I backed off another step, and when she tossed her head again I gave her another step. Quickly, she stepped to the bucket, lowered her head and drank, keeping her eyes on me the entire time, her body tense and ready to run. I held perfectly still until she had finished the water and walked away. Then I walked to the pail, picked it up, and left the paddock through the small gate.

I expected some surprises lay ahead, but at least we were off on the right foot. She wasn't mean, just scared, and I guessed no one had spent much time with her when she was a foal. All animals are born wild and without a chance to adjust to humans they never trust them. Dogs come first to mind. You have to look a puppy directly in the eyes until it begins to look back at you. Horses are different because they run to greater anxiety over the animals that walk on two legs, eat meat, and smell like it. Only with time do horses allow predators onto their backs, but they never fully trust them.

The mare walked slowly around the paddock and stopped where the barn cast a patch of shade. In a while I'd offer more water and then some grain and hay.

"So that's the mare that has Walter Myers terror-struck," my father said as he came up behind me, followed by Arthur and Henry. Nobody in the family had ever explained why my brothers carried the names of English kings, particularly since both of them had been born when English kings were not much in favor in the Colonies. On the other hand, Grandfather Chandler was named Arthur and Grandfather Stoddard was named Henry, so that was the more likely explanation, which also explains my given name as well.

Arthur leaned down onto the top rail. "Doesn't look so nasty as I've heard."

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"She's not," I said. "Frightened is all."

"Stoddard," Henry asked, "in your gallivanting about, have you heard any odd rumors?"

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. I took a load of wheat down to the mill, and while I was there I heard some talk about the Witch."

Father's eyes were ablaze. "What did you hear?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. There was a lot of grumbling about the weather, and I think there was some jealousy about the quality of our wheat."

"And they blame it on Mrs. Bancroft, is that it?"

"As near as I could tell. But they weren't from the East Parish. These men were from all over."

"Who were they?" I asked.

"Well, there was William Peck and Robert Tuttle and George Hawkins, but I gathered someone else had left before I arrived, and he might have been from over east."

Father shook his head. "I thought we'd collared all the fools the last time, but men are still too easily seduced by myth. The weather is the weather, and Jane Bancroft is no more a witch than any of us. She's a healer and I'll not tolerate any words against her. Any man who threatens her will answer to me!" He dropped his broad forearms onto the rail next to Arthur and looked over at the mare standing in the shade. "What manner of fool is so easily led into believing that any human being could influence the weather?"

"I suppose those fools who allow themselves to be convinced that she's not human," I said.

"And who would be doing the convincing?" he asked.

"Pell," I said.

"He's why it always starts in the East Parish," Arthur said.

Father looked around at Henry. "What sort of light would you cast this talk in?"

"No more than talk to pass the time, I think. Peck and Tuttle and Hawkins are good men, are they not?"

"They are," Father said. "But even the most ridiculous of stories becomes true if it's repeated often enough. Worse, those fools in the East Parish will believe anything that devil Pell tells them, isn't that right Stoddard?"

"The most dangerous men, I think, are those who have a command of words." I grinned. "Look at what happened to the English when they ignored Adams, and Madison, and Jefferson and Franklin? They ignored the fire when it was small and could have been stamped out. Pell is a madman, and he can twist words so well that the most improbable lie sounds absolutely true." I grinned. "Have you ever thought that maybe free speech is the most dangerous weapon ever devised?"

I could feel Arthur and Henry staring at me and I should have quit, but I just couldn't. "Makes me wonder if that's why it's so feared by the nobility. Of course, we could get around that simply by hanging liars as quickly as we hang murderers."

Arthur laughed. "Wouldn't be many folks left."

"Probably could stand some thinning out, though," I said.

"A man's word," Father said, "is as sacred as his prayers."

And on that we trooped to the house for dinner. Afterward, helping Mother clean up, before going out to put the finishing touches on the carriage (at least I completed one job that summer), I asked about the Blakes.

"Just what are you leading to?" she asked.

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"He seems to me to be a perfectly intelligent man, and I wondered why I knew so little about him, and why his children don't go to the school?"

I'd seldom, if ever, known Mother not to have an answer, but she seemed completely nonplused. "I can't say. I can't even say I've thought about it."

She emptied the dishpan, rinsed it, and set it out to dry. "I don't know very much about Samuel," she said. "He and Rebecca were slaves in Virginia and the General bought their freedom. But I don't know why the children don't go to school. I don't know that we would keep them from going. Surely not because they're Negro, but I can't even say that for sure."

"I think I'll ask Mr. McHugh."

"Why not ask the General?"

I nodded. "I could do that."

"On another subject," she said, "do you know what sort of clothes you'll be needing at Yale?"

"I'd never given it a thought."

"You can ask the General that too. I expect they'll be much the same as his son wore to Harvard, but we'll need to prepare."

"Looks as though I've plenty of reason to pay a call."

"Well, it best be soon, Stoddard. And I think you might spare a few minutes to talk with Elizabeth. She's up to that now, and she's very grateful to you and to Mr. Stroud."

I must have squirmed in my chair more than I thought.

She smiled. "Perhaps after supper this evening."

I nodded. I had dreaded those visits, though even now I can't say why. But once I started, I came to value them highly, for through Elizabeth Phillips I began to understand the sort of pain one human can inflict upon another.

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For the next week I kept pretty much to the barn, finishing the carriage. I had decided to paint it black, and finally I gave in to vanity and added some gilt stripes here and there. It took longer than I had thought, but mostly because I also spent a good deal of time in the paddock with Dancer. Within days I had got her to come to me, simply by offering a handful of grain. After a couple of days she let me touch her, and then the training began to move forward rapidly. Simple trust. How often I've applied the lessons I learned training dogs and horses to my dealings with humans. Never once have those lessons failed me, and yet according to all I heard in church, they should have. Man was the superior being, elevated to a plane well above the rest of God's creatures. That was what they taught me, and yet what I learned from experience was far different. In the end I wrote it off to human conceit and kept to ideas which were founded in fact and not in belief. And I made sure to keep my mouth sealed on such subjects, as speaking up would have been regarded as heresy and served no earthly purpose.

I was not alone in having such thoughts, however, and though the subject never came up directly, I knew that Eben Stroud's opinion in such matters fell close to mine.

As it happened, Eben stopped by on the day I had decided to try getting Dancer to accept the bit. No horse easily accepts having a big chunk of metal shoved into its mouth and Dancer was hardly an exception, but I kept talking to her until finally, on the fourth try, she let me slip the bit between her teeth and fasten the bridle. Then I walked her around the paddock, holding the reins, talking softly to her until she stopped fussing. I unfastened the bridle, took out the bit, and put her halter back on. Finally I dug a handful of grain from the bucket and stroked her and talked to her as she ate the

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grain from my hand. When the grain was gone, she turned and trotted across the paddock, stopping in the shade.

"So that's the nasty horse that nobody could get close to?"

I hadn't seen Eben standing there in the shadow of the barn and I startled. "Where'd you come from?"

"Nowhere in particular." He nodded toward the horse. "You've got a fine touch with animals, Stoddard."

I grinned. "She trusts me, is all."

"Who taught you how to gain that trust?"

I shrugged, opened the gate, stepped out, and closed it behind me. "I go at her pace," I said. "Just common sense."

He laughed. "It is, of course, but the wonder of it is how few men ever see that." He folded his broad arms across his chest and I noticed that his buckskins were newly cleaned.

"You going calling?"

"I'm wanted a bit up in Concord. Be away a week or so, but I thought I'd let you know, just in case something came up." He shook his head. "Been a strange summer."

"It has at that. Now there's talk about people in the East Parish blaming the bad run of weather on Jane Bancroft."

His scowl was so dark I thought it'd bring rain for sure. "Some people never seem to learn," he said.

We walked off toward his horse, standing, as he'd been told, in the shade of a big sugar maple.

"What's drawing you to Concord?"

"Politics, I expect, though the message didn't say." He looked back at Dancer, trotting now and tossing her head, and looking like the most normal of horses. "Last time I saw that horse she was ready to tear the hide off anyone who came close."

"I don't think Mr. Myers liked her very well."

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"Still, it's a great accomplishment."

I shrugged. "They only need enough room and time to be what they will."

He smiled and I was surprised at the warmth of it. "Just as old Angus said, 'wise beyond his years.'" He put his foot into the stirrup and swung himself up onto the stallion. "Got a favor to ask of you."

"Consider it done."

"Might not be easy now, with the rumors starting."

"I'll do my best, Eben."

"Jane Bancroft wants some looking after now and again."

He ignored my gaping surprise.

"She'll need little, if anything, but I've made it a habit these past years to ride by once or twice a week. I took the liberty of telling her to expect you." He cleared his throat. "You've likely heard all the stories, of course, but they are nothing more than the wild rumors people concoct when boredom reigns. She's a healer, maybe the best that ever was, but that's all she is. And in the matter of witches, truth be known ... well witches are something religious people thought up to get rid of anyone who could undercut their influence." He smiled in a way I had not seen before, almost wistful. "She's a fine woman, Stoddard, and she has knowledge that goes well beyond what the doctors know. She cured me of the gangrene one time and got me through pneumonia another. Should've died both times."

"If she needs but little, why do you stop by?"

"Company, Stoddard, company. We all need human company from time to time."

I nodded. "I'll be sure to see her," I said.

He smiled again, this time the irony dancing in his eyes.

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"She'll not be what you expect," he said, then turned in the saddle, pulled a package from his near-side saddle bag and handed it to me. "Took some time to get this done properly. A Mohegan woman made it for me. An old friend." He grinned like a wolf. "Time you wore some proper clothes," he said, then turned his horse and trotted off toward the road.

I opened the package to reveal a complete set of brand new buckskins, and I turned for the house, eager to put them on. Wait 'til my brothers saw this!

But the reaction, when my brothers came in for supper, fell more under the heading of one man's meat being another man's poison. Derision was what I harvested.

"Look at that now," Arthur said, "Eben Stroud with a full head of hair!"

Henry wasn't far behind. "Got more fringe than a fancy woman's Saturday night gown."

I laughed and let them have their fun, for the alternative was to knock one of them down, and Father was death on any fighting between brothers. Not that I'd have stood much chance against either one. They were both taller, older, and stronger.

Neither Father nor Mother said a word, though I saw a flicker in Father's eyes, and I think for the first time he understood that I was not going to be a farmer. But, as always, he waited to see which way the wind would settle in to blow.

Wearing the buckskins did not turn me into Eben Stroud, but I spent the next day or so sorting through the ideas that surfaced. I managed to get my buckskins soiled with one thing and another, and because I wanted them perfect, I finally had to give them to mother for washing.

It was the first chance she'd had to look at them closely, and she examined them with great care, paying particular

attention to the stitching in the seams. "I have only once seen such perfect stitching, and all done with sinew and not thread. Did Mr. Stroud say who made them?"

"A Mohegan woman, he said."

She smiled. "Sally Tallflowers! I suspected as much. I saw her work a long time ago when I traveled to Ledyard. Eben must stand in high regard with the Indians. Sally only makes clothes like this for the bravest warriors. They say she sews a spell into them, protecting the wearer from harm. No man who wore them died of other than natural causes. I'd lay odds that you and Eben are the only white men ever to wear clothes sewn by Sally Tallflowers."

Astonished. Once again. My mother had been as far as Norwich! And she knew Indian legends! It was ever the trouble with growing up. I spent far too much time being astonished. On the other hand, I don't think I have been less often astonished as an adult, simply because there has always been something even more astonishing to learn.

But I did not tell her I was headed north to visit the Witch at Kerner's Cross. The rumors were rife and growing wilder by the day, and I didn't want to worry her. I had grown up with stories about the Widow Witch. Parents had even been known to tell their children that if they didn't behave they'd be sent to live with the Witch. I had heard no such stories from my parents, but it seemed as if nearly every other child had, and each story was more fabulous than the next.

Beneath all of that, however, lay a true story, and it was one I had not heard, one that the adults kept to themselves. I had always assumed it was just too horrible for a child's tender ears, though now I began to wonder if perhaps something else had driven them to silence in matters of Jane Bancroft.