

# Chapter Two

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Hannah Hayes

The next morning I saddled up, left a note for Mother, and headed north toward Kerner's Cross, dressed in my clean buckskins. To say I felt good about myself would have been an understatement. I felt as if I owned the world, as if I could do no wrong. Fortunately the delusion was short lived, for a young man wandering loose in the world with such a notion clouding his thinking is bound to come to a sad end.

I turned to thinking, wondering as I rode, how that place had come to be named Kerner's Cross. Usually such places were referred to as a crossing or a crossroads, but never just a cross. It seemed particularly ironic that a woman widely regarded as a witch should be living at a place designated by a cross, and it provided a distinct note of unease.

The country itself provided even greater cause for worry. We'd had no steady rain since June and here it was August. A couple of passing thundershowers in July had allowed the corn to grow tall, but without rain the ears would not fill out. Now the stalks stood tall, but the leaves were curled inward and beginning to droop, a sure sign that disaster could not be far off. We could, I thought, be looking at a terribly long winter. The only hope was that the towns well to our south had not suffered so severely. New England weather being what it is, such an occurrence was entirely possible. I had even

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seen a summer when the rain fell so precisely in the same location that one farm would get none, while the other was well watered by each passing shower. This year, however, all the nearby towns had been denied rain. It could be a long, long winter, indeed.

And then, with a shock, I remembered that I wouldn't be here. I would be in New Haven. A city. Whatever travails occurred here, I would know of only by post. The idea was so improbable that I had no choice but to set it aside. I turned my mind to more immediate concerns. The road north leads past the Hayes farm and because of the heat and because the road leads uphill most of the way, I decided to stop there for water. I could have stopped elsewhere, for even in this drought I knew where there were springs, but I hadn't seen Hannah since school finished, except at church.

Mrs. Hayes came out to greet me. "Well, well, Stoddard Chandler. The stories we've been hearing about you this summer! Fetching back stolen horses, solving a murder ... dashing about the countryside with the likes of Eben Stroud! What brings you this way?" She looked me over from head to toe, carefully appraising my new buckskins and then shaking her head. "Next thing we know you'll be going off west." I could hear the accusation in her voice and I countered quickly.

"Not likely, ma'am," I said as I dismounted.

Mrs. Hayes was one of those people you liked from the instant you clapped eyes on her. She was sharp-featured and slender with ash blond hair, and a ready smile lighting her gray eyes.

"Thought I might get some water for my horse," I said.

She looked at me now as if she had never seen me before. "Water we got ... at least for a while."

I let my mare take a long draught.

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"Can't get over those stories about you and Eben Stroud."

"Yes ma'am," I said. Mrs. Hayes was renowned for her rapier wit and acerbic tongue and until I discovered which way the wind was blowing, I took a noncommittal tack.

"There never was a finer woman than Charity Phillips."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

Well, that was one too many "yes ma'ams" for Mrs. Hayes.

"Now see here, Stoddard Chandler, you must have more to say than that!"

I did, but there wasn't much I wanted to say just then. Still, I had to say something. "We're lucky to have a man like Eben Stroud living here," I said. "Never was a better man for figuring out what people are likely to do."

"Except he should've shot old Pell in the bargain. Minister, huh! Just another two-bit scalawag!" She shook her head. "Why don't you tether your horse. I was about to make tea, and Hannah is just finishing churning."

"Thank you, ma'am," I said and suddenly I knew that water had nothing to do with why I'd stopped. All she had to do was mention Hannah's name and my heart took to pounding as hard as it had the night I stole up on the guard in Doghead Johnson's horse pound. Some things forever remain a mystery.

I followed her into the house and just as I sat at the table, Hannah came in from the back room, and I stood up quickly. She was slender like her mother, with long honey colored hair and those same bright gray eyes.

"Hello," I said, trying not to sound like the fool I felt.

There never was a girl who had a twinkle in her eye like

Hannah Hayes. "Good morning, Stoddard," she said, as if she had been expecting me all along.

And there I was, tongue-tied, searching busily for something to say, but with little success. "Sure need some rain," I said, wondering what idiotic thing I'd do next.

She grinned at me and carried the butter to the sink for wrapping before she carted it out to the ice house. Her steps were long, quick and sure ... like a filly, as Eben had said, but no filly I'd ever seen could match her.

"How's Elizabeth faring?" Mrs. Hayes asked.

"Much better now. She even takes short walks in the evening when it's cool."

Mrs. Hayes nodded. "Worst thing ever happened here."

"Jonah Creed's working for Amos Fitch now. Talks a mile-a-minute."

"Maybe something good will come from this after all."

Hannah came back in from the ice house. "When do you leave for New Haven?" she asked.

Mr. McHugh was a bigger talker than I'd guessed, and I made a note that this very day I'd tell my father before he heard it from someone else, if he hadn't already. I truly hoped that hadn't happened, but in small towns there are few secrets.

"September," I said.

"How long will you be gone?"

"'Til Christmas." I felt utterly foolish, standing there, trying to find something to do with my hands, trying to think of something to say. "I get the summer off too."

"I'll miss you at school," she said.

I stood a little straighter. Was it possible that this girl I knew so well, and yet so little, thought I might be worth some

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consideration in the matter of beaus?

"It'll be lonely not seeing you every day," I said.

I could see Mrs. Hayes watching us carefully, a little surprised by how much ground we had covered so quickly. "Why don't you both sit down and I'll pour the tea."

"It was wonderful when you won the spelling bee," I said.

"Even though I beat you?" She had a way of wrinkling her nose when she'd decided to tweak me a little, and I'll be hanged if I didn't think that was one of the cutest things I'd ever seen.

"I was just glad to see you get what you deserved."

She looked up at me, holding my eyes with hers for several long seconds. "You do mean that, don't you?"

I nodded. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't."

She dodged my gaze, shifting her eyes away from me, then quickly back, smiling. Suddenly she jumped up. "I forgot to take the rest of the butter out." She scooped up the second package and headed out the back door.

"That was a nice thing to say, Stoddard," Mrs. Hayes said as she handed me a cup.

"Hannah's very smart," I said.

"Girls, I think, would usually rather be pretty than smart."

"Then she wins on both counts."

"Smart girls don't easily find husbands," she said.

That had me wriggling in my seat, I can tell you.

She set a plate of sliced bread on the table with some of the fresh butter Hannah had just churned. "You ready to run off yet?" she asked, her mouth set slightly to the side in one of those famous ironic sort of smirks she was so well known for.

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There was little I could do other than laugh. "No, I guess not until Hannah drives me off."

"Not likely that will happen. Never saw two so perfectly matched. And your mother and I have been in agreement on this for a very long time."

Well, that fairly took my breath away, I can tell you.

She put her hand to her mouth. "I shouldn't have told you that. Hannah would have my head. But one thing I'm not is patient."

I was absolutely at sea. Each time I thought I had a grasp of the conversation it went off in a direction I could not predict. Everything was soft and treacherous underfoot, and my only defense was to say as little as possible.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"It has," I said.

"And a pretty good hold it has, I'd guess."

"At times I favor a strong cat," I said.

She laughed warmly. "I like a good dry wit," she said.

At the sound out back, she looked around at me, her eyes wide, her voice hushed. "Don't you say a word about this, Stoddard, or Hannah will never talk to me again!"

I nodded.

Once Hannah returned, the conversation drifted to neutral ground. We got the weather worked over, and the local news, and the only subject which fell outside the pale was my description of Eben Stroud. Like everyone in town, they were eager to learn more, though what astonished them most was learning how his counsel was so often sought by the men who had wrested our wonderful land from the British.

Most likely I talked too much. I avoided making myself out to be a hero but in relating the story about Doghead Johnson, I painted myself into something of a corner.

Hannah Hayes

"Where were you while Mr. Stroud was shooting at them?" Hannah asked.

"I went to get the General's horse out of the pen."

"Didn't you say they had a guard there?"

"I did."

"Stoddard!" Hannah leaned across the table toward me. "Stop making me work so hard! Just tell me what happened."

"I had my knife, but I didn't want to kill him, so I crept up on him in the dark and knocked him out."

"With what?"

"My fist. I just hit him as hard as I could." Somehow you can't say a thing like that and make it sound matter-of-fact.

"Good gracious," Mrs. Hayes said. "I've seen men fight plenty of times, but I've never seen one felled by a single blow."

"I took him by surprise," I said. "He just wasn't ready and I hit him pretty hard and he was smaller."

"I had no idea," Hannah said.

"About what?"

"That you were so strong, Stoddard."

I tried to laugh. "I didn't either. Only Eben knew that and he told me later that he knew I wouldn't use my knife, though I haven't the least idea how he could have known. But that's the great mystery with Eben Stroud. He knows things. He simply knows things that others can't even guess at." Of course I had to finish the tale, but I did not reveal who the real thief was, since it had been settled.

I pushed back from the table. "I have to be getting along," I said. "My horse needs the work and I have to pay a call on the General."

We stood and I thanked Mrs. Hayes for the tea, hoping

that Hannah would walk me out, though I could see she wasn't sure she ought to. Her mother, as always, helped.

"Hannah, why don't you walk Stoddard to his horse?"

She blushed then, and I thought my heart would stop, and I understood that I was in love with Hannah Hayes, and that I had been in love with her for a very, very long time. What a strange business growing up becomes.

We walked side by side out to where my mare stood in the shade cast by the porch.

"She's a beautiful horse, Stoddard," she said, and then she walked up to the mare and patted her gently on the neck, and that horse stood there as if Hannah had been doing that since she was a foal.

"You're the only one, aside from Eben and me, who's ever gotten that close to her," I said.

"She seems gentle enough."

"Only with those she trusts."

And then like a squall breaking over the trees, Hannah changed. "Stoddard, I'm afraid I'll never see you again."

"It won't be for long, Hannah, and before I go ... well ..." I could see the uncertainty in her wonderful eyes, and I wanted desperately to reassure her. "It's a bold thing to say, but my intention is to come courting."

Her eyes flashed. "Do you mean that?"

"I do," I said. "But until now I didn't know it."

She smiled and looked up at me. "I always liked the way you never treated me as if I were just a girl."

"But you never were just a girl. You're not like anyone else I know."

"Do you know what you're doing to my heart?" she said.

"Probably the same thing you're doing to mine."

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"Then for Heaven's sake, do something about it, Stoddard!"

Stuck. I was absolutely stuck. What on earth could she mean? The wonderful thing about Hannah was that she never left you in the dark for long.

"Just kiss me, Stoddard!"

So I did, and because I'd never kissed a girl before I didn't make a terribly good job of it, though that may have been because my knees were weak as any newborn foal, and when we kissed, the chills danced across my spine.

The kiss lasted a long time and then finally, I just held her against me, her soft, sweet-smelling hair brushing my cheek. After a bit we pulled apart and I still held her, my hands wrapped around her arms. "Going away is going to be a lot harder now," I said.

"I know. But we've still got the rest of the summer. And we can write, and you'll be home form time to time, and I can wait." She grinned and in that grin I saw that fine sense of play that I liked so much. "After all, I've been waiting since the first day of school when I saw you for the first time. What ever took you so long?"

"Boys are slow sometimes."

"Well, everyone knows that."

"But we do catch up." I leaned down and kissed her again, lightly this time, but the effect was no less powerful.

"Will you sit by me in church on Sunday?" she asked, clearly testing my commitment.

"I will," I said. "Because I want everyone to know that I'm courting Hannah Hayes and she welcomes my intentions."

"I guess you do catch up," she said. I untied thereins from the hitching rail. "I'll be by tomorrow," I said. "Most likely around the same time."

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"I'll expect you," she said.

I vaulted up onto the mare in one motion, showing off as would any young man who has just discovered that the most beautiful, wonderful girl he has ever seen thinks the same of him. There are a lot of victories and successes that will put zip in a man's stride, but none quite like that. Perhaps I only think so because I've never been victorious in battle, or been elected President, but on that day I could have been, for nothing could have stood before me.