

Chapter Three

The Witch

The shortest route took me a mile from Child's Store and I turned that way, allowing that I had the remainder of the day before me, and therefore, was in no rush to reach Mrs. Bancroft's. Curious, I was, to be sure, but equally anxious. Not everyday did I meet a witch ... even if she was a witch only by reputation.

Besides, the store was a good place to hear the latest rumors, and while such tales may be well removed from truth, they cannot be denied as the instigator in matters of what men may do. In the relentless heat I let the mare walk and that made the ride wearisome. The only benefit from the lack of rain was that it had cut the numbers of greenheads and horseflies.

At the store, I tied up to the hitching post, shaded now by the building, nodded to the men on the porch, and went inside. Caleb was alone and, talkative as always, he started right in.

"Have you seen Mr. Stroud?"

"He's up in Concord," I said.

Caleb grunted. "He's due to return soon?"

"A few days," I said, wondering about Caleb's sudden concern over Eben's whereabouts.

Again he grunted, a sound which defined his worry as extreme. "Have you heard the rumors?" He leaned in close, keeping his voice low so the men on the bench out front could not hear.

"Rumors?"

"About Jane Bancroft."

"I've heard."

He smiled, pleased to discover in my tone of voice that I did not approve.

"Good," he said. "At least there's some of us haven't lost their senses. What about your father?"

"I shouldn't choose to be the one who bothered Mrs. Bancroft," I said.

"Pell is stirring them up, you know. Every Sunday that's all he talks about, and now he's taken to calling on people."

"Are they listening?"

"Some strange people live up there, Stoddard. God knows why they all settled in the same part of town, but they did. Then they went and intermarried so nobody can tell who belongs to who. Never saw a bunch so willing to blame trouble on devils and witches. Least little thing comes along and"

He broke off as the door opened and Richard Banks, a farmer from the East Parish, walked in.

"Morning," Caleb said. "What can I do for you?"

Banks looked at me, staring, a wild light pulsing in his eyes. "The time is near," he said. "Only God's hand can stay the evil that has befallen us."

"I take it your corn is drying up too," Caleb said.

"It is the Devil's fire!"

"The weather is God's business," I said.

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“And who be you? By what right does a mere boy interrupt the conversations of adults?”

I laughed at him and, in truth, if I had struck him, he would not have reacted the way he did, recoiling backward onto his heels, his mouth open.

“You see what the world has come to Caleb Child! Children laughing at their betters! Surely the Devil is loose ... surely Armageddon is nigh. There can be no other explanation!” His eyes, wide and round, flashed even in the dull light, darting from side to side as if he expected to see old Beelzebub come lashing out of the shadows and bring him to his knees. I had never seen a full grown man so spooked, so stricken with terror.

“I think you may have insulted him, Richard. I’d count it your great good fortune that he decided to laugh. You are, after all, talking to Mr. Stroud’s partner.”

“Stroud!” His eyes widened and rolled up into his head and for a second I thought he was going to pass out. “Stroud! The Devil incarnate! The man who put a murderous bullet through the saintly Thomas Phillips! No one is safe until that man is destroyed.”

“He did it to save Pell,” I said.

“Lies! All lies! The man was merely hanging a picture on the wall. The good Reverend told us the story, and the proof of Stroud’s devilry is how he used his silver tongue to convince the authorities that he was blameless.”

“Believe what you want, sir, but Phillips and Pell had been using a whip on Elizabeth and Charity.”

“Only the whip can drive the Devil out!”

There was no point in arguing with a man whose mind was locked against reason.

“What can I do for you, Richard?” Caleb asked again.

"Nothing. I can see this is a Godless enterprise and I shall take my business elsewhere!" He whirled and stamped out.

"Doesn't have any money," Caleb said. "Spends all his time reading his Bible, beating his wife and children, and listening to crazy old Pell. Whole farm has gone to rack and ruin. Sad story, Stoddard. At one time you'd have been hard put to find a finer farm in town. It's what comes of listening to madmen."

"How far will this go?" I asked.

"I'd feel a good deal better if Eben were about."

His words and those of crazy Richard Banks hung in my mind as I turned my horse north. Notions of devils and witches die hard, even in bright daylight, and in the mind of a boy only just edging up on manhood, imagination lies close to the surface. I tried to set it aside as ranting and raving, but perhaps that was more difficult because of the second of my errands. I was, no matter how you accounted it, going to pay a call on the Witch at Kerner's Cross. But I kept my wits and when I reached the house, as Eben had instructed, I rode through the gate and around to the barn where I left my mare where she could not be seen from either road. Only two other horses in town were so easily recognizable, and no one needed to know I had come calling. I crossed the barnyard to Jane Bancroft's house, and the closer I got to the door, the greater the weight of rumor and calumny fell upon my shoulders. But what finally carried me across the yard to the door was the knowledge that Eben had sent me here, and he would not have done so without some higher purpose.

I took a deep breath, knocked, and waited, and when the door opened I almost laughed. What had I expected? Some old hag of a woman, wrinkled and sere, looking out at the

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world through red little pig eyes? I suppose. But that is not what stood before me, smiling, and offering her hand.

“Please come in, Stoddard. Eben said you would come by, and I’m delighted you did.”

Her voice was like music, sweet and lyrical, and so pleasant to hear that you did not want it to stop. It reminded me at once of wind through white pines, or a soft running brook, or wind in the tassels of the corn, or the sound of rain on the roof. In spite of myself, I smiled as I stepped through the doorway into a bright and cheerful kitchen.

“I expect you would like something to eat,” she said. “I’ve fresh bread and cheese, and some vegetables from the garden.” She turned toward the sink and then smiled back over her shoulder. “One of them I expect you won’t eat.”

“I hadn’t meant to come so close to dinner,” I said.

“I’m delighted to have someone to share my food with. I’ve got quite used to living alone, but I’ve never adjusted to eating alone.” She began preparing the food, continuing to talk as she worked. “Eben said you might stop at the Hayeses.”

I shook my head and grinned. “How is it everyone knows so much about what I might or might not do?”

She set the bread and cheese on the table. “I expect you’ve mentioned Hannah to him and he simply put it together, don’t you think? After all, you are about the same age.” She looked up at me, her smile soft, and warm, her deep green eyes bright in the light from the south-facing windows.

I nodded and sat down. Jane Bancroft was not old by most any standard. She had not a sign of gray in her long black hair, and few, if any, wrinkles in her face, and she was slender as a girl. How could anyone who had seen her think she was a witch?

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"As always, he heard everything I said, and the way I said it, and remembered it."

"It's his way. He hears and sees what passes others by. It is a gift, an enormous gift. Because of it others seek him out. He sees what they cannot."

"What I've learned from Eben, I could not have learned by ordinary methods."

She set two plates and knives on the table and then a large plate of vegetables. "I've milk or water."

I was stunned. There in the middle of the vegetable plate sat two big round red vegetables. Tomatoes. Everyone knew tomatoes were poisonous.

"Stoddard?"

"Oh, uh, milk please."

"And now you're wondering," she said, "if I am the witch people claim, for certainly none but a witch could suggest eating the deadly poisonous tomato!" She poured the milk into a large pewter cup and set it before me.

"Do you really eat them?"

"Not only are they not poisonous, but they are quite tasty. Eben brought me the seed from Virginia."

I remained skeptical and it must have shown.

"Here." She took a bite from a tomato.

I watched her eat the whole tomato, expecting her to keel over at any second. "Stoddard," she said, "you look as though you'd just seen a ten-legged horse."

I tried to recover, but I wasn't making a very good job of it. "I, uh, I mean, I" Maybe, I thought, the poison took more time to get into the system, like a rattlesnake bite.

"You just stay with your bread and cheese, and later, when you see I haven't dropped dead, you might like to try one."

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“Yes,” I said, “yes, that’d be fine.”

Just as it had with Eben, my age produced no barriers to discussion. She listened to me as if I were her contemporary. From that conversation, which lasted well into the afternoon, I came away with a mystery which took some time to resolve. She and Eben had known each other a long time, yet their relationship defied classification by ordinary words. Of course, classifying relationships happened to be coursing through my mind just then, so it seemed quite natural to wonder whether something as simple as friendship would offer an explanation.

For the moment, however, I set such thoughts aside. I had fallen under her spell, and though it came from no sort of conjuring, it was a spell of considerable force. She was magnetic, and in the display of such properties and their effect on me, I understood why men so easily labeled her a witch.

A beautiful woman, particularly an unattached beautiful woman, often enough causes the men in a community to behave irrationally. They can’t have her and they know it and what begins as frustration ends as anger. Usually, it also plays havoc with the women, who view her as a threat. Yet neither of my parents had reacted to her as threatening in any way. Instead they were protective. But Pell, for example, saw her as a great threat. Or was it opportunity?

For now I pushed such thoughts as far to the side as I could and basked in her presence.

“Do I understand that you are going off to Yale?” she asked as she sat across from at the table.

“I am,” I said, and then in the vacuum of her silence I added, “I hope one day to read the law with Tapping Reeve.”

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"The redoubtable Tapping Reeve," she said. "I should think you will do well with Mr. Reeve, though I wonder whether he won't learn as much from his student."

It was not meant as flattery, but a statement of fact, and that made me uneasy at first, though such comments with Jane Bancroft, I came to find, were quite common, and were in fact part of what made her so extraordinary.

"What made you decide to pursue the law?"

"We're the first country in the history of the world to build a government based on the rule of law, the first ever to work from a basis of universal principles instead of following the whim of individual rule. To survive we will need people trained in the law to uphold those principles, so we are indeed, all equal before the law. Not even the president is above the law. It is a wondrous notion, so simple to say, so easy to understand, and yet no concept is so broad, so revolutionary, or so complicated to enforce. Once men are free, they are free to act as they choose. Only the threat of punishment will keep them in check. If that threat is not constant, then I think anarchy will reign."

She sat back in her chair, eyebrows raised, watching me intently. "And will you run for president one day?"

"President?" The idea had never once occurred to me, but I knew the answer. "No," I said. "I would like one day to be a judge, but nothing higher."

"I begin to understand," she said. "I've heard a good deal about you, Stoddard, first from Hannah and then from Eben. The reports were exceptional, so exceptional I was hard put to believe them." Suddenly she changed the subject. "And did you enjoy your visit with Hannah?"

I grinned. "No wonder you and Eben are friends."

"Does it seem as if we have some great mystic power?"

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"Only to the uninitiated."

"Of course it took no great power to guess. I had only to mention her name and your eyes gave you away."

"I'm new to courting," I said.

"All men are new to courting," she said, "but I shouldn't worry overmuch in this case."

I wondered at her meaning, but I could not find the words to frame the question. In fact, I was altogether stuck for words.

"At least you're off to a good start."

"How could you know that?"

"You are most entertaining, Stoddard. Can you imagine what sort of humor you'd have been in had things not gone well? You see? Nothing mystic, just common sense and a little reasoning. But you haven't half satisfied my curiosity."

"I think you know the answer," I said.

"But I'm more curious than that, and maybe even somewhat protective."

"Of Hannah?" It had never occurred to me that Hannah needed the least bit of protection.

"I am her godmother."

That information exploded with the force of a cannon.

Jane Bancroft seemed much amused. "There is much you do not know about your town, I suspect."

"I've only lived here as a child," I said.

She shook her head. "Such an extraordinary thing to say."

"But I'm growing up quickly. I think the first measure is that a month and a half ago I thought I knew a great deal."

"And Hannah? What attracts you to her?"

I knew well enough but I felt as if I were walking on a quaking bog. Each step might easily be the one which caused

me to break through the tender crust of vegetation and sink out of sight. I decided to try enigma. "If you took away her beauty, you would still have a beautiful woman," I said.

Jane clapped her hands and laughed, producing a music as alluring as any I have ever heard. "Such a good answer," she said. "Such a wonderful answer. At once what I might have expected, and yet disturbingly clever. I wonder. Do you know how exceptional Hannah Hayes is? No. You couldn't know that. Not yet. But you suspect it and certainly will know that one day."

She was right, yet not altogether, because I did know, and that was why I knew I was in love with Hannah. But how could anyone know such a thing? No rational line of reasoning could lead to such a conclusion, and the only alternative was to blame the heart, a notably unreliable source of information.

"She takes me by surprise," I said.

"And that pleases you."

"It does."

"As it should, though most men I think see it differently."

For what seemed a long while, Jane sat quietly, looking down at the table and the remains of our dinner, including the big red tomato I had yet to try. Finally she looked up. "You have learned something this day, Stoddard, something you ought never to forget. A man can think two ways, though most will only trust one. A woman trusts both. She is born trusting both. Men can learn the second way, and the best always do, but it can take a lifetime to learn to trust the ideas which come from there. There is even a name for it ... intuition."

Without question that made me uneasy, because if I had

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guessed correctly, it was why Mother always seemed to know when I'd been doing what I ought not to have been doing. It was why Hannah had been so forceful and direct. She knew I loved her and she knew how I would react, and she could not let me go without helping me discover what I had avoided knowing for so long. It was a risk I could not have taken, it was ... the next thought blew through my mind like a hurricane. He had known! Eben had known all along, and he had talked to Jane about it. He'd had two purposes. He'd known I would ride past the Hayes farm, and he knew I'd somehow contrive an excuse to stop. He had manipulated me into manipulating myself. It should have made me angry, it should have sent me stamping off in a fury, and it might have, except that I was not much given to fury, and in the end I had gained a great deal.

Jane carried the dishes to the sink, and when she turned she was smiling, her eyes dancing like fire in the light from the windows. "And now have you figured out that too?"

"What?"

"Eben's little plan."

"I have."

"Are you angry?"

I smiled. "In fact, I am flattered."

She watched me carefully then, weighing whether I was simply being polite, or whether I had meant what I said. She made a decision but she said no more. I was on my own.

I made a decision too. Seeing as she hadn't yet dropped dead, I picked up the tomato and took a bite. It was delicious, and I kept on 'til I had consumed all but the stem base.

She laughed and clapped her hands. "Such courage!"

"Do they all taste like that?"

"When they're ripened on the vine."

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"Could you save some seeds for me for next year?"

"Of course," she said.

"But it took no courage. I'm very much an empiricist."

"So when I didn't fall into a swoon, you decided to try the ... deadly ... tomato."

"Yes."

"Eben told me he learned to eat them that very way."

"Is there any chance he might return sooner?"

"Is there a need?"

"There are some wild rumors flying about. Well, maybe even more than rumors. The dry weather and the fears for their crops have made everyone edgy. Tempers are short and superstition runs high."

"Pell?"

"Yes."

She sighed. "Eben will return when he's needed." Again she changed the subject. "Now, before I forget, I have a packet for your mother." She crossed to the cupboard, took out a small sack, and handed it to me.

"How do you know my mother?" I asked.

"Much to learn, Stoddard, much to learn, but you'll guess soon enough, though I would advise against discussing this with anyone. I am always ready to help anyone in need, but only the women know. Only the women ever came."

"Here? The women come here?"

"There are ways."

"But why so secretive?"

"Because of the way things have worked out for me," she said. "I was born with a gift. I can heal people. But not everyone can accept that it is merely an accident of birth. Some believe I sold my soul to the Devil. Instead of accepting a simple, rational answer, they seek explanations in a

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complicated and dangerous realm. For me to travel openly would invite their slander and worse, their retribution.”

“From who? Certainly not from those you have healed.”

“From the church.”

I could see the bitterness well up in her eyes, an anger too strong to be contained, and too dangerous to be given any rein.

“What sort of madness is this?” I asked.

“If it were madness, I could have exposed it as such. This is in the name of God. What makes it so hard is that I have always believed in God. I have never questioned His existence. And the more I learned about how to heal people, the stronger my belief grew. What I fear is the church and its hunger for power over others. God does not rule by fear but the church has no other way to spread its hegemony.”

How long had I known this? It seemed like always. Sunday after Sunday I had listened to the lessons and the warnings and I had seen the church turn people out, seen it attack others. “Any competing system of belief,” I said, “must assume, as a basic tenet, that the other system of belief is flawed. I think that’s why those who designed the Constitution disallowed the state from establishing any religion. That way no one religion could become powerful enough to challenge the state. Not much help here, though.”

“Stoddard, you should not come back here.”

“I’ve given Eben my word and I’ll not go back on that.”

“Talk to your mother.” She reached out and laid her hand on my arm. “Will you do that?”

“My father will not abide any attack on you.”

She smiled and pulled her hand away. “It is good to know I have such friends. Not even Reverend Coleman will stand

against your father.”

We walked out into the yard and crossed to the barn. I tightened the cinch on my mare, patting her gently and talking to her, as always, and then I swung up into the saddle as Jane walked close to the horse.

“Careful,” I said, “she’s testy around strangers.”

“She’s fine, Stoddard.” She reached up and stroked the mare’s nose. “She is a fine, quiet horse with those she trusts.”

Jane stepped back. “I think Sally Tallflowers outdid herself with your buckskins. Quite handsome.”

I smiled. “My mother knew the work right off,” I said.

“You don’t know much about your mother, do you?”

She asked the most surprising questions. It was as if she could read my very thoughts. “Does anyone know much about their parents?” I asked.

“In time they learn.”

“There certainly does seem to be a lot to learn.”

“There is,” she said. “I put some instructions in the packet I gave you. I expect Elizabeth will be a good deal stronger within a week. Your mother will understand,” she said.

“I won’t be far off,” I said. “I gave my word to Eben.”

“Use the greatest care, Stoddard.”

“Just the way Eben taught me.”

She smiled. “I will sleep all the better knowing that.”

I touched the mare with my heels, and she walked out of the barn. When we reached the road, I let her trot a short way and then slowed her to a walk. I was in no hurry to get to the General’s, and I needed time to sort through all I had learned. It seemed as if every way I turned I was confronted by people who moved along the edges of society, and while I had been taught to avoid such people, I had suddenly discovered that

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they were the very people I was most comfortable with.

The question was why I found those who possessed the spirit of rebellion so attractive. Because I was seventeen? It seemed a likely conclusion. But shouldn't I have to pay a price for moving in such a direction? Hadn't that always been the lesson? Parents, teachers, ministers, adults in general, all had the same miserable message to deliver. If you rebel against society, you must suffer its wrath.

And yet, through Eben and now through Jane, I understood that there were some who lived outside the pale, and were not only tolerated, but welcomed for what they had to offer. Fear Eben they might, but when the Devil switched his pointed tail, they called in Eben to negotiate.

What a riddle, what a marvelously complicated conundrum, and I could see only one way to resolve it. At bottom, they were terrified of Eben Stroud. He was a man whom no one crossed. Further, he was beyond ordinary reach. No traditional method of bringing someone to heel would work on Eben: ostracism would be useless, force of no avail.

No matter how hard I sought an explanation, I could not find parts enough to make a whole the size of Eben, and I began to suspect I never would. He was larger than life itself, a man like Washington, or Hamilton, or Franklin. And how improbable was it that such a group of men should appear in one small country at the very same time? It was the sort of question for which only God could supply an answer ... or, looking at it from the darker side, the Devil. What you believed would depend on how you favored our country. For us it would, of course, be God who provided the wherewithal for such an explosion of talent. For England, it would have been the Devil.

Only two other choices remained. Accident and fate. I

shivered. The concept was simply too large to hold comfortably, for it offered far more unknowns than knowns.

With my thoughts running at such a pace, I was oblivious to the outside world, and would have passed by as ignorant as a stone, but for my mare. Suddenly her ears pricked up, she swiveled her head to the left, and then stopped. It brought me to full alert. I waited, holding her still, barely breathing. It was dead quiet. The heat had even driven the birds back into the coolest deep of the woods. In the distance I heard a locust buzz, and I picked up the rustle of a squirrel in a grove of white oaks.

The mare turned her head slowly and when she stopped, I turned that way, and then the sound came very softly. Someone walking through the woods well back from the road. I reached down and loosened my rifle in its scabbard. There were no farms close by and the woods were dense, the land rising and falling sharply, covered with rocks and trees and heavy underbrush. The only house was the one I'd just come from, and I tried to measure the distance in my mind. A half mile? No more, certainly, though it was hard to be sure because I'd been so busy thinking that I had paid scant attention to my passage.

I slipped my rifle free, dismounted, led the mare into the woods, and told her to stand. Then I climbed onto a large rock and stood with my back to a tree to break up my profile, and now the buckskins and my gray tri-cornered hat did their work. I was all but invisible.

About two hundred yards off I spotted him, stepping from one tree to another. A man with a musket. He looked familiar but at that distance, through the stippled sunlight and shadows of the trees, I could not have said for sure whether I knew him.

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What was he doing? Hunting? It seemed the only logical conclusion. But then I saw him slip his head around a tree and stare out toward the road, and I held perfectly still, making sure my eyes were shaded by the brim of my hat. From where he stood, I knew he could not see either me or my horse. Finally, satisfied that no one was watching, he stepped into the open and began working his way west, staying parallel to the road. His course would take him directly to Jane's. I allowed him a short head start and then followed, slipping off into the woods, moving as swiftly as I dared. The practice I'd had in stalking deer, added to what I'd learned from Eben, allowed me to move both silently and quickly even over the dry floor of the forest, and in minutes I had moved to within fifty yards of him. It was Joshua Banks, Richard's brother.

Believing he was alone, he walked rapidly, making a considerable noise in the dry leaves, and it took no great effort to hold my distance. Like most farmers or townsmen, in the woods he stayed within sight of a known reference point, in this case the road, though it would have been a good deal faster to have cut up over the hill.

Clearly, he was not at home here, and he kept turning his head from side to side as if he expected an Indian to pop out of the cover at any second. But he also walked like a man on a mission, charging along, and that allowed me to close the distance until I was a scant twenty-five yards behind.

There I stayed until he stopped, as I feared, on the low hill above Jane's garden, concealed in a patch of huckleberries, watching her working there, carefully weeding the exotic plants she grew along with her vegetables. She worked bent over, her long black hair tucked up beneath a gray cap, moving down one of the long rows, pulling weeds and stuffing them into the sack she dragged along behind, all the time

coming closer. She wore the same strange gray clothes she had worn when I was there, and as I watched, I discovered that those clothes had a most unique property. Perhaps it was something in the way they had been woven, or in the way differently colored threads had been worked into the weave, but the result was that she was as hard to see as a deer, even in the open.

At the end of the row she stopped and stood straight up, staring directly at the huckleberry patch. It unnerved Joshua. He stood, threw his musket to his shoulder and took aim at Jane. I was so startled that I almost did not react in time. Even then it was a chance shot, a wing shot, the sort you made at a flying bird, your aim more instinct than preparation. That it went true was the product of Eben's tutelage.

My sixty-caliber ball smashed into Joshua's musket barrel just ahead of the end of the stock and tore it from his hands. He howled as if he'd been shot, looked at his hands, and seeing no blood, whirled toward me. All he saw was the woods, for I was well out of sight. Jane too had disappeared, dropping down among the plants.

In the deepest voice I could summon, I shouted; "Run, Joshua, run! Run lest the demons of the Dark Prince steal your soul!" The effect was far greater than I would ever have guessed.

He began to scream and run in circles, his hands clapped over his ears. When he spotted the road, he made for it as fast as he could, falling over fences and rocks, scrambling along on all fours until he could get to his feet, and finally running out onto the road and, without once looking back, flying for home.

I grinned, whistled for my horse, and walked out into the open. I retrieved his musket before heading down toward the

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garden, expecting to find Jane there, but she was gone and I assumed she had run to the house.

Reasoning that she would be guarding the door, I stopped well to the side and called out.

“Stoddard? Is that you?”

“It is.”

Seconds later she eased the door open and out came the maw of a great old blunderbuss. “Stoddard, thank God” She lowered the gun, eased the hammer down, and stepped outside.

“Are you all right?” I asked

“Yes, I’m fine, but what happened? I saw him stand up and I heard a shot and I dropped to the ground, and then there was a lot of wild screaming and this great booming voice came out of the woods.”

I explained what I’d done, keeping my role to as modest a track as I could, and Jane listened carefully.

“Why didn’t you shoot him?”

“I’ve never shot a man. He has a family and No, that has nothing to do with it. I just didn’t want to kill him.”

“You were right, you were right not to kill him, but”

“But Eben would have.”

“Yes, but for reasons you might not know.”

We both looked up as my horse came thundering into the yard, lather flying from her flanks, her head up, as she tried to pick up my scent. She spotted me and dropped into a walk.

“Take her to the barn,” Jane said, “it’s cool there and there’s water from a spring.” She smiled. “I need a cup of tea.”

“I could do with one myself.”

After I had unsaddled the mare and left her in a back stall

with hay and water, I crossed the open yard to the house.

She knew I was there before I knocked. "Come in, Stoddard, I'm just ready to pour."

I took off my gray tri-cornered hat and sat at the table.

"You don't know the story, do you?" Jane said.

"What story?"

"It happened before you were born, but not by a full year. It will take some time, but I think you need to hear this."

I nodded, noticing that my hat and Jane's dress appeared to be the same color, and in as much as Eben had given me the hat, I had to assume it was probably the same material, though somehow thicker and stiffer so it could be made into a hat.

She set a cup in front of me, and as she poured the tea she began. "I came here with Tom Bancroft when I was eighteen," she said. "My parents and my two sisters had died from smallpox and pneumonia, and I lived with my grandmother until she died. Then I went to Concord to live with an aunt. I was just seventeen, and my aunt, who had no children, lived in a small cottage and worked as a seamstress. I had no dowry, and no position, and the eligible young men of Concord were much taken by such things.

"To make matters worse, I had inherited my grandmother's gift. I knew how to heal people and my grandmother had taught me all she knew. So, in Concord, I made a living as a healer, which greatly discommoded the doctors. Most of the people I treated got well, while they could hardly make the same claim.

"Tom had family there and he had been a surveyor in the west, but had given that up, and moved back east, where he married and built a farm, this farm, here in Woodstock. Some years later his wife died of smallpox. He had come home to

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visit his sister in Concord and fallen ill. They sent for the doctors, of course, but he worsened and his sister sent for me. Luckily, I was able to nurse him back to health.

“He was nearly twice my age, a widower, and not a handsome man, but as I got to know him, I discovered a man of fine intelligence, a man who exuded kindness, and a man who stood firm in the face of the social parasitism of Concord, which, it turned out, was what had driven him west. In the time I nursed him, he fell in love with me, and I fell in love with him.

“But my aunt, fearing the loss of income, opposed the marriage, so one night we slipped away to his farm. The next day we were married by Pell and began our life together. Tom took surveying jobs when they were available, and he raised and trained oxen, and I began healing. We met the Hayeses first, and then one by one the other families in town. We joined Pell’s church, but we were not the sort of people who built our lives around the church. We went on Sundays and kept to that, a practice which Pell found it hard to abide.” She reached up, took off her cap and let her hair fall free. The raven black of that shimmering river of hair against her clear pale skin nearly took my breath away. But if Jane noticed my reaction, and I’m certain she did, she made nothing of it.

“My success, our childlessness, and Tom’s way with animals made us suspect. There were no doctors here then, or in fact, none ‘til you got to Norwich. Our very success aroused the ministry against us. They began to spread stories that I was descended from a long line of famous witches from Concord and sent by the Devil to steal souls destined for God.”

Suddenly I understood that I should have shot Joshua, and worse, what a colossal blunder I’d made. He would

spread the word that the Devil himself was protecting Jane Bancroft and a rumor like that becomes the truth in eager ears. Especially now. Aberrant weather does strange things to farmers' minds. The longer it lasts, the sooner they seek answers in superstition.

I shook my head. "What a fool I was."

"But you didn't know."

"But shouldn't I have guessed? Shouldn't I have questioned why he would want to shoot you?"

"It is not your fault, Stoddard. You saved my life and you showed great compassion for your fellow man. No fault can be found in that."

I nodded, but I was not satisfied. Eben would have shot him. It was perfectly defensible, and it would have stopped what was now certain to come.

"There's more," Jane said. She sipped her tea and held the cup with both hands as she talked. "As the talk increased, fewer and fewer people came to seek my help. No one in the East Parish dared come near for fear of incurring Pell's wrath. He was, by then, openly preaching that I was a witch and needed to be brought to trial. But the town fathers would have none of it. They told Pell to desist. Instead he redoubled his efforts, and one night they came, riders carrying torches, singing hymns, all of them armed. Tom stepped outside and before he could speak someone from the crowd shot him dead. In the torch light I could see them erecting a post and gathering brush which they laid in a pile at the base. They were in no particular hurry, assuming they had only a defenseless woman to deal with. The only weapon I had was fear. They believed I was a witch, and my only chance lay in convincing them of my power.

"From the windows I spread gunpowder by the front step

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and then wrapped a small charge with a fuse. I made several packets of princess pine dust and waited. When they drew close, I threw open the door, hurled my packet of powder with the fuse already lit, and at the same time set off the powder by the step and threw the princess pine dust into it making a great to-do. When the smoke cleared the door was closed and I was out of sight. At first I had thought to run, but I had a debt to repay. I sat at a table with Tom's musket and his blunderbuss loaded with nails. When they burst through the door I would take as many of them as I could.

"It took some time for Pell to build up their courage, and I could hear him goading them, rallying them to finish the mission they had come on: a mission from God. But I had a protector I did not know, a man I had heard of only as rumor, a man whose name people seemed afraid to speak aloud.

"When they rushed the house I heard a shot and one of the men cried out. Then a great voice came out of the night. It was a voice such as I had never heard, and it sent chills running along my spine. I suspect it would have stopped most where they stood, but my attackers were in a full frenzy, and they fired back at the voice. Then one of them cried out, and then another, and finally another. It had grown deadly quiet, and I moved to the window, and in the torch light I could see two men lying still on the ground, and Pell sitting, holding his shoulder, but still alive.

"This time the voice came from another direction. It told them to gather their wounded and ride off. It told them they had five minutes to be gone or each of them would die where they stood. In three minutes they were gone.

"But I was no less frightened, for I'm as given to imagination as any other, and I had begun to think that indeed the Devil had become my savior." She smiled. "Nothing so grand,

I fear, though some might dispute that, for it was Eben who had come to save me; a man I did not know, a man to whom I shall ever be thankful."

"How did he know?"

"Because he's Eben Stroud. He always knows. He hears what others never hear, he sees what others are blind to. There had been rumors about what might happen, and he had set out to confront the leaders. On his way he crossed the tracks of the riders, and without a second's hesitation he came to help."

It was like a pistol shot inside my head. I understood why Eben had stayed in Woodstock. Jane Bancroft. He had stayed to protect her, and he had trained me to serve when he could not. But why hadn't he married her?

Jane must have seen the question in my eyes, for her vision was every bit as sharp as Eben's, and almost certainly she knew what conclusion I had reached.

"And now you are wondering why we have not married."

I nodded.

"Fear. I was certain that Eben would one day find himself in the same corner Tom had."

"But Tom was a different sort of man, was he not?"

"To be sure, he was not an Eben Stroud. There is only one ... though I think perhaps there is another in the making."

"A shadow, nothing more."

"But you see the problem. No man can protect himself from the assassin who lurks unseen."

"Not, I think, unless the target is Eben Stroud."

"It is too much to ask." Her eyes changed, assuming a softness she had not shown before, and yet, having seen that very light in Hannah's eyes that morning, I understood.

The Witch

"I think you should ride home with me," I said.

"It isn't possible, Stoddard. I am a pariah. Whoever I stay with is at great risk now. I will not be the cause of good people losing their lives. These men, when aroused, will stop at nothing. They would kill their own wives and children if they stood in the way. They have been poisoned by lies."

Had I not seen the look in Joshua's eyes, had I not seen the way he behaved, his ability to reason gone, driven only by superstition and fear, I would not have understood.

"Now, you must go. What happens is in God's hands."

"They won't risk daylight again," I said. "Do you have a safe place to hide?"

"Eben took care of that long ago, and that's where I shall be each day before sunset." She looked directly at me then, her eyes revealing the fear she felt. "You cannot come back here," she said. "You cannot allow yourself to be any part of what happens. Stoddard, you have to promise me that ... now!"

"I cannot," I said.

"But you must, don't you see?"

"Yes," I said, "I see perfectly, but they will never see me, anymore than they saw Eben that night, anymore than Joshua saw me today, anymore than Doghead Johnson saw us when we got the General's horse back. If these men were driven by hard, cold reason they would be far more dangerous. Driven by passion they are convinced of their invincibility and that blinds them. I can come and go as if I were a ghost. I will be out there, and I will be there until Eben returns, and then there will be two of us. Perhaps we can bring this to an end."

"If anything happens to you, no one in this town will ever forgive me. You must be as silent as a cat, as vigilant as a wolf."

Robert Holland

I smiled. "Eben would tell me to remember that I am the predator and they are the prey, and you have just said the very same thing. And remember, I wear buckskins made by Sally Tallflowers and she only makes such clothes for great warriors. Some say they carry a spell."

"Do you believe that?"

"No. I believe that only the powers we are born with and then hone to a fine edge protect us on such occasions."

"Yes," she said. "Now, go!"

I nodded and rose from the table, trying to hide the enormous uneasiness which had suddenly crept in. Something would end here.