

Chapter Four

Throwing Off The Dogs

Halfway back to where I had spotted Joshua Banks, my horse suddenly shied to the left, dancing, rising as if she wanted to rear and then run. “Whoa, girl, easy now, easy now,” I said as I patted her on the neck and gave her enough rein to put her head down and get past whatever had spooked her.

I let her travel fifty feet or so, climbed down, pulled out my rifle, cocked it, and walked back to where she had shied. And there lay Joshua Banks, dead as a stone, some ten feet from the road with his head against a big old white oak, his face turned improbably far to one side, his eyes open and staring.

It was turning out to be a most improbable summer. So far I had seen two men dead and in neither case did I feel the least regret. I let the hammer down gently on my rifle and stepped into the woods. Before I squatted down to check the body, I leaned the rifle against a tree, close to hand, for at that point I knew not what might have caused Joshua’s demise.

I checked for a pulse in his neck, and then at his wrist, but he was indeed dead. I stood up and looked toward the road and then back at the body, and it was then that I noticed the bruise on his head. Had someone clubbed him to death? I looked around, but the only disturbance on the ground,

freshly upturned leaves, several sheep's laurel plants flattened, had been made by Joshua.

I walked back out to the road, but that provided little help. With all the dry weather the road was so hard that I could barely make out the tracks of my own horse. I looked up quickly. The horse! The riderless horse! My horse! He must have panicked, run head first into the tree, and broken his neck.

The next question was what to do. He might have been acting on his own, but it seemed more likely that he had been sent as an emissary from Pell's crusaders, and if he were found so close to Jane's, having died in such a strange fashion, it might well give them the proof they needed to mount a full scale raid. Whether that conclusion was valid or not, it seemed to me that I had to act upon the assumption that it was at least likely.

The plan took shape quickly. I would load him onto the mare and then cut off through the woods well away from any road, coming back down to the road at the next crossing, leaving him where he would be easily found. The one step I didn't much care for was having to provide a more obvious cause for his dying. I'd have to put a ball in him, and I'd have to do it where I left him so there would be some blood. That meant firing my rifle where it would be heard. I felt as if I were wading a river whose depth I had not previously defined.

There was nothing but to be done with it. I fetched the mare, tied her securely, then hoisted the body up onto the saddle, letting it hang down on both sides. I slid my rifle into the scabbard, and consoled myself with having been at least intelligent enough to have brought Joshua's musket with me, not wanting someone to find it close to Jane's.

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It took me nearly an hour to thread my way through the thick woods and finally I stood on a rise above the crossing. There was nothing moving for as far as I could see, but I kept to the most dense cover as I worked my way down the rise. At the bottom, I pulled Joshua from the mare and laid him facing back the way I had come. Then I laid the musket by his side.

Still I did not mount, but led the mare back up the hill a hundred yards or so, tied her to a tree, and took out my rifle. I had to dodge around some before I could find a clear path to shoot through, and then I waited again, listening for human sounds. When I was certain it was quiet, I lifted the rifle to my shoulder, aimed, and fired.

The ball struck Joshua in the head right in the middle of the bruise. The body jerked and fell to the side. Seconds later I was astride and headed off into the woods, keeping my head down and letting the horse pick her way along.

I had only just turned south on the North Road when I heard the bell sound in the East Parish church. Three times and then silent. Three times and then silent. That meant they had found Joshua. It would have been smarter to have responded to the alarm, but dressed as I was, my appearance would only arouse suspicion. I just turned my back and kept it turned until I tied up at the General's hitching post.

Rebecca Blake answered my knock. "Why, Mr. Chandler," she said, her smooth black face breaking into a broad smile. "We haven't seen you in some time."

"At least unaccompanied by Mr. Stroud," I said.

"When anyone arrives with Mr. Stroud, it's more like they had brought an army with them." She smiled. "I assume you'd like to see the General?"

"Yes, ma'am, if he's not too busy."

Robert Holland

"I'm sure he's not. Talks about you all the time. 'That Stoddard,' he says, 'now there's a young man going places, mark my word.' Now, you just follow me."

I smiled and offered a short laugh. "To be sure, he's overstating the case," I said.

She looked back at me, a quick glance, and I had the distinct feeling that Rebecca missed very little. "How you coming with that wild mare?"

"I expect to ride her by the end of the week."

"Just as Samuel said. 'Rebecca,' he said, 'I'd bet a gold piece that young Mr. Chandler has Dancer dociled out by the end of summer.' "

"That's quite a compliment, coming from Samuel."

"Mr. Myers didn't want him spending time on her." She smiled. "And to tell you the truth, I was relieved. Don't need any accidents to Samuel." She stopped. "Now, you wait just a second, and I'll tell the General you're here."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She stopped and looked directly into my eyes. "That's the second time you called me that."

I hadn't thought whether I had or not, but I had. "Yes, ma'am," I said.

"You don't have to do that."

"It's a simple-enough sign of respect."

"Then please call me Rebecca, the way my friends do."

"I'm honored to be so described," I said.

She shook her head, looked down at the floor and then back up, and in her wonderful deep black eyes, I caught for a second, what it must have been like to have lived as someone's slave. "You mean that, don't you?"

"Only if you'll call me Stoddard."

She smiled. "Well then, Stoddard, you just wait here and

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I'll fetch up the General for you."

I watched her walk toward the back of the house, a short, slender woman with a quick businesslike step, and I realized that once I'd begun to wonder about Rebecca and Samuel Blake, they had become people, and they were by no means ordinary people. I wondered whether I reacted the same way to white people, and I thought that in all likelihood I did. People, after all, were just people until you got to know them.

The General stepped into the hall and waved as he strode quickly forward. "Stoddard, how are you, my boy?" We shook hands. "Come on into the study. Glad you stopped by."

"Good to see you, General," I said and then followed him into the small front room, its walls lined with rows of books, a sight more rare than a minister with a sense of humor.

He closed the door and crossed the room, his long spindly legs covering the distance quickly. For an old man, he was supple and sure, and his eyes were clear, his gaze intense. "Sit down, sit down, what can I do for you?" He sat in an upholstered chair by the black mouth of the fireplace and I sat in a similar chair opposite him, as he had directed.

"Well, first things first, I guess. Mother asked me to find out what sort of clothes I ought to have for Yale."

He grinned. "Simple enough. I'll make a list for you. Lot of future ministers there, so you'll fit in best with a somber wardrobe. Shouldn't need more than two suits, I think. Mr. Fowler, the tailor over in Putnam, can fix you up quickly enough." He crossed to his desk, sat down, took out a piece of paper, and began writing. "Best get to it, though. These things take time, and you've only but a month or so left." He finished writing, and looked up. "These clothes might be

costly.”

“Mother said we could afford them.”

“Stoddard, don’t hesitate to ask if you need money. I’d be delighted to make you a loan.”

“Thank you, sir, that’s very generous.”

He folded his hands in his lap. “Now, what else have you got for me today?”

“I expect to ride your mare by week’s end.”

“You can’t mean it! That horse is half devil! Bit anyone who tried to get close, twice she tried to trample Mr. Myers.” He grinned. “Eben said you had a way with animals. Perhaps you won’t need a loan after all. Your fee for training my horse ought to cover two suits of clothes and then some.”

“She’ll be gentle enough by the end of summer, but whoever is going to ride her will have to get to know her. She didn’t get much attention as a foal, I’d guess.”

He nodded.

I had a number of things begging to be talked about, but I decided to get another question out of the way first. “I have a question about Samuel and Rebecca.”

“Oh?” His bushy gray eyebrows shot up to tangle with the creases in his forehead.

“I’m not meaning to pry into your affairs, sir, but I wondered why their children don’t go to the school?”

“What makes you think they should?”

“It strikes me that Samuel and Rebecca are a good deal smarter than a lot of folks, and I sort of assumed that their children might be as well.”

“Right on both counts.”

I had the feeling that he wanted to leave it there, but the impatience of youth is not easily turned aside, and often enough drives you to carry a thought beyond propriety. “Is

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there some reason I don't understand for them not to go?"

He stood and walked across the room, his hands clasped behind his back. When he stopped and turned he looked every bit a general, his back straight, head up, chin out, not a man to be trifled with. "Stoddard, some things are difficult to explain. Both Rebecca and Samuel were born into slavery. Some in this town still see them as slaves, though they are decidedly not. Those same people see them as inferior to whites. Now, if I were to send their children to the school and their children were to prove smarter than some of the white children, which I don't doubt for a second, it would only cause trouble. Whatever came my way, I believe I could deal with easily enough, but I can't be certain they could. I've seen the way Negroes are treated in the South, and I want none of that behavior in this town. Especially, I don't want to see those children hurt."

I saw immediately that he was right. Bigotry and prejudice are, after all, basic to mankind. But I wasn't ready to let go. "Is there some other way?"

"It's good you brought this up, Stoddard. I've thought for some time to correct the situation, but like you, when it comes to taking care of certain business, I temporize. The answer is simple enough. I should hire a tutor."

"What about Mr. McHugh?"

"No, Angus has enough to do, and he isn't getting any younger. By the time he gets through a school day, he's tired and he needs his rest. No, I had something else in mind. I had thought to write to George and ask him to find me a black man who's been educated. I'd buy his freedom and then travel down and bring him back. I could, perhaps, tempt Eben with such a journey. He and the President see eye to eye on most everything." He smiled. "By God, but it does

rankle John Adams that Eben has the President's ear while he has to follow proper channels. If he weren't so cantankerous it might be different, but he's never understood that." He crossed to the desk, sat down, and made a note. "I'll write to George this very day. Perhaps in some small way I can strike a blow against this odious slavery business. It will have to go sometime anyway, but it will be a good deal easier if there are free and educated Negroes to look to." He shook his head. "I think we will pass through some dark times indeed before this lie is erased. I only hope the country survives the process." He sighed. "We may be independent, but we have a good way to travel before we command any respect in the rest of the world."

"We may have some dark times ahead of us right here," I said, "and they may come a good deal sooner."

He looked up at me, his pale eyes focused as if he were looking far, far into the distance. Then he nodded. "I've heard the rumors," he said.

"It's more than rumor, General."

"Oh?"

I told him what had happened, and I took particular care to tell him about what I had done to move suspicion as far from Jane Bancroft as I could.

He sat at his desk, looking down at his hands, and it was some time before he spoke. "You know the story then."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah, what a terrible business ... what a miserable devilish sort of affair is man when he follows blindly the ravings of a lunatic." He looked directly at me. "You handled it very well, Stoddard, very well indeed. I must confess your ingenuity is startling. And you did well not to kill him outright. I wish that on no man. The worst part of any war is having to send

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young men out to kill. In a way it is worse than their dying, for you have no way of knowing what sort of monster you might unleash. I say this, because I am certain it will come to that again, and you may well be in the way of it. The next time you will not have the luxury of hesitating." He stood and walked out from behind the desk and I stood as well. "I'll send a messenger to Concord this day to summon Eben home. In the meantime what will you do?"

"I'll keep watch by night. They won't risk daylight. Mrs. Bancroft has a safe hide that Eben arranged for her. I don't know where it is, and I'm sure Eben has chosen well, but Pell is the Devil himself and ... well, I'd just not sleep knowing Jane Bancroft had to face him alone."

"Tell no one."

I nodded.

"Slip away from home in the night. Talk to no one, stay out of sight as Eben has taught you. From now until this is concluded you are behind enemy lines at all times."

"Yes, sir."

"Get what sleep you can and behave as normally as possible. Go to Putnam for your clothes, train your horses, do the usual ordinary things. They know you are closely connected to Eben, and they fear him almost as much as they fear Pell. They may decide to take you hostage in order to control Eben. Ride in the open, approach all cover with the utmost caution. Keep your rifle primed. Do you have a horse pistol?"

"No, sir."

He crossed to a cabinet, opened it, and drew forth a brace of nondescript looking thirty-six caliber pistols. Have you fired a pistol before?"

"Eben taught me."

"I was certain he had. Take these ..." he handed me the

pistols, "and these." He pulled a pair of saddle holsters from the cabinet. "They're small enough to conceal with any sort of drape, and they are very accurate and quick to hand. Away from your horse, they hook around your waist."

I slipped each pistol into its holster.

He pulled out a bag of thirty-six caliber ball. "You'll need these," he said, and he reached back into the cabinet for a bag of patches. "And these. Powder I suspect you have."

I nodded.

He dropped his hand onto my shoulder. "With luck, Eben should be here within forty-eight hours, but until then you have a mission as dangerous as any I ever sent a man upon."

"I understand, sir."

"When I sent men into battle it was against other soldiers. These were ordinary men, fighting to preserve what they believed, while staying alive. They were led by other generals and officers and fought with the discipline provided by those officers. This battle is not in the least similar. These are men led by a madman. They will stop at nothing and will give no thought to taking extraordinary risk. They are zealots feeding on faith and belief in a religious cause. There is no more dangerous and unpredictable human being, as history has proven."

I nodded, yet another time.

"God keep you, Stoddard ... God keep you well."