

Chapter Five

And Still The Rain Held Off

Just before midnight the moon dipped behind a thick bank of clouds. The wind began to shift, winding around the compass until it settled in the southeast, and for the first time in two months I could smell moisture. The damp air lifted my spirits and made up entirely for the loss of the moonlight. For a long while I waited, watching the house from my lookout across the road. From where I sat, I could see anyone passing. The north side of the house was protected by a dense laurel thicket.

To be sure a man with his wits about him would have come only from that direction, but a wild-eyed pack of zealots would take the shortest path to their objective. They would not reason beyond the deed, and they would have no need to escape unseen. After all, they were doing God's work.

I had often sat on stand in the woods, waiting for deer or turkey to cross, but never had I sat so long. And yet despite the occasional stirring needed to keep my legs from going dead, I experienced no great difficulty, in part because while my body remained quiescent. But my mind raced ahead like a horse with the bit between its teeth. And for once, no negative thoughts welled up. The thought of the coming rain and the effect that would have on the community drove my thoughts to the positive side of the ledger: to Hannah and Yale and a future that now seemed as if it might be possible.

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And then the wind began to fall off. Within an hour it had died down to only an occasional breeze, and I could feel the dry air returning, soaking up the moisture with its warmth. I shook the cobwebs from my brain. What manner of fool would follow a man like Pell? What could induce them to kill a healer, the one person who stood between them and death? Did I truly understand the nature of such madness? I looked up, startled by a new idea. Or was it madness at all? Wasn't it more like some sort of urge controlled by society and its rules? Once you were free to give reign to that urge, all else fell before it. What provided the freedom to act was a cause that could be justified. You could kill easily in the name of God. The cause justified the behavior.

Such bursts of thinking, entertaining as they may have been, gave way after a time to a kind of trance, a kind of waking sleep in which thoughts occurred at random. At one point I found myself thinking about the dark itself and how I always think I won't be able to see, but in time discover that even on the darkest night I can see surprisingly well.

To relieve the boredom, now and again, I raised my rifle and sighted on some object near the house. I did not doubt that I could hit whatever I aimed at. I was about seventy yards away on a low rise, and my view was clear.

I had no plan. Perhaps the best idea was to shoot the leader, and in the confusion that followed, close the distance to the house so I could use my pistols. One thing had become all too clear. I was going to have to shoot someone. Men driven by the power of pure belief do not suffer reason.

The night dragged on, the great horned owls hooting away to each other from one hill to the next, and now and then I heard a bobcat cry. But for those sounds and the rustle of the deer mice, I was alone, and that suited me well.

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From time to time I dozed, knowing I would wake at the least sound, because I had long ago learned to sleep and stay alert. Before dawn, just when the dark began to thin, I awoke with a start and stared down at the house. I thought I had seen something move, and I concentrated harder. When I saw it again, I was not at all sure what I had seen. It was as if a piece of the scene before my eyes had relocated itself.

Not until it moved away from the background of the trees did I make out a human form, and then I recognized Jane in her gray clothes, moving ever so slowly through the smoky dark. Once she was inside, I waited, watching the sky lightening in the east. The clouds lay gray and heavy above and not a breath of air moved. It looked as if it must rain, but the air carried no such message. It remained uncannily dry.

I slid down into the dry leaves and slept, deciding to return home after my father and brothers had gone to work. If I had to explain, it would be easier to talk to Mother.

I had expected to awake to rain, but the wind had shifted to the east and blown the sky dead clear. How odd it was to have a strong east wind and no clouds. I ascribed it to another strange occurrence in an already strange summer. The ride home was long and slow, and I had just finished washing up when Mother came in from gathering the eggs.

"Well, the prodigal tomcat returns. Where, pray tell, have you been? Have you had anything to eat?"

"I was just going to fix myself something," I said.

"I'll take care of that." She set the eggs on the counter. "I'll fry up some eggs, and there's plenty of bread and milk. Will that be enough?"

"Yes, thank you," I said as I dried my face and hands.

She turned and looked at me. "This will have, I expect, something to do with Jane Bancroft."

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"It does," I said. "Eben's gone off to Concord, and he asked me to stop by and ask after her."

"And that required an all night vigil?"

"There are rumors again."

"Yes," she said. "And growing strong."

"General McClellan has sent for Eben, but until he arrives there is no one else."

"You seem to have quite a high opinion of yourself."

It certainly had sounded boastful, and I tried to mitigate my error. "It's only because of what Eben taught me," I said.

She looked around from the range, her eyebrows raised. "What am I not being told?" she asked.

There was no choice but to lie, and I made that choice, knowing that I would have to set it right. "No," I said, "there's nothing else. But you know what Pell is like."

"And you expect to deal with them alone?"

"Yes," I said.

She shook her head, and I could hear a trace of regret in her voice. "You've grown a great deal this summer."

"It's been an unusual summer."

"To be sure."

She finished cooking my eggs, put them on a plate, and carried them to the table. Finally she poured a cup of tea for each of us, and sat down. "You know the story then."

"Jane told me."

"And Eben's part in it?"

"Yes."

"Did you believe her?"

It was a surprising question, if only because I had never once considered whether Jane had told me the truth. "I did."

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"And what do you think of her?"

"I doubt there's a better hearted person in this town."

"Correct again, though I confess, you've surprised me. That is not what men usually see in Jane Bancroft."

"She is a beautiful woman."

"Yes, that is what the men see." She sipped her tea. "I wonder how it is you see so much more?"

"I listen."

"Surprising in one who talks so much."

"Sometimes people say more than they intend, if they think you aren't listening."

"I suppose they do."

"What mystifies me is why Jane has been excluded."

Mother smiled. "It is the greatest of hypocrisies. The deacons and the ministers allow her to practice, but condone it only if she shows the greatest discretion. She does not travel openly about. The women in town banded together long ago to make sure Jane could continue her work. Any with loose tongues were excluded. As a result, a good many people in this town are alive who otherwise would have died. Most of them were children. Until you are a parent, it is hard, I think, to understand the desperation one feels when a child is dangerously ill. And here we had a healer among us, and for reasons based in treachery, she was not going to be allowed to heal. Most men think of women as weak and inconsequential. But a woman roused to protect her child is ruthless." She stood and walked to the window, searching outside as if to make sure we were indeed alone. She turned. "Rebecca," she said. "You know Rebecca."

"I do."

"Jane trained Rebecca. She can come and go unnoticed. When someone is sick, Rebecca consults with Jane and then

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goes to help. Only in the most dire circumstances will Jane herself travel, and she always does so disguised as Rebecca."

"The General is going to find an educated Negro, buy his freedom, and bring him here to tutor her children."

"When did you hear this?"

"Yesterday. I stopped to find out what clothes I'll need, and asked the General why the children weren't in school."

She shook her head and sat back down at the table. Suddenly she laughed, a burst of pure merriment that set her blue eyes dancing in the light. "What a gift you are to the world. No wonder Eben singled you out." Suddenly she leaned forward, looking at me closely. "And what are your intentions toward Hannah Hayes?"

It was a question I had not seen coming, and it left me quite speechless, my mind churning frantically, my panic so obvious that Mother could only laugh.

"Men always think they know everything, and as usual they know nothing about the important things. Every mother in town knows that you and Hannah are a perfect match, and they've known it for years and years."

"I plan to marry her," I said.

And that produced the warmest smile I ever saw on Mother until the day Hannah and I finally exchanged vows.

"You could have made no finer choice. The wonder is that it took you so long."

All I could do was smile.



That afternoon, on the way to take up my vigil, I stopped by to see Hannah. I saw her eyes stray to the pistols strapped

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ahead of my saddle and then the rifle, but she said nothing. We walked out from the house, down the long lane between tall sugar maples toward the brook below, and my tongue would not be stilled. On and on I rattled, talking about Yale and Tapping Reeve, and how I hoped to one day be a judge. It is not unnatural, I suppose, for a young man to act so before the girl he loves, particularly when that love is new. I stopped when I began to hear myself.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"About what?"

"My unconscionable boasting."

"Oh, Stoddard, I don't mind." She smiled. "How else would I know what you wanted out of life?"

Her question, rhetorical to be sure, seemed at first to go no further. Certainly a woman wants to know what the man she loves has in mind to pursue, but there was something else. It caught in my mind like a leaf in an eddy, and then was swept away by a stronger current.

"How long have you known Jane Bancroft?" she asked.

"I first met her two days past."

"She comes by here."

"I thought she didn't travel out."

"There's a path through the woods."

"Does she come often?"

"Often enough." The tone was decidedly guarded, much as my mother's had been at first.

"I know about her," I said. "My mother explained."

"She came by at supper time. I heard her tell Mother about what happened."

Hannah was going somewhere with this conversation, but I could not, for the life of me, determine just where. Perhaps, had I been able to divine the result, I should have been more

careful, but perhaps I would have acted no differently.

"She told us about Joshua Banks. And then we heard that he was found dead. Somebody shot him, we heard."

"Yes," I said. I felt as if I were being cornered, and I chose to tell her the truth, understanding as I did so, that I was risking something impossibly precious. Still, it was better that she hear it from me than by some other, more circuitous route where rumor would distort events beyond recognition.

I told her then, omitting not the tiniest detail of what had occurred. And when I finished she was silent for some time, and I could see in her eyes, when finally she looked at me again, that I had succeeded in creating a worry where none had existed before. Nothing could change what I had said.

Hannah Hayes did not shrink from anything, not even her own fears. "How could I not have known that you could act in such a fashion? I thought I knew you so well. I thought there was nothing you could do that would surprise me. Yet this is far beyond anything I could have guessed."

"I did what I thought was necessary to protect Jane," I said. "She is too important."

"But what a risk to take! Suppose you had been caught?"

"I knew the risk. I reduced it by doing the things I know how to do, and the things Eben taught me. Once I was a good hunter. Now I can come and go through the woods in daylight or dark and only Eben Stroud can see me."

She shivered. "I think he is the most terrifying man I have ever seen."

"Do you know him?"

"Only by sight."

"The way he looks is calculated to produce just such a reaction. If you believe he is indomitable, then he is."

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“And his effect on you. What effect has he had on you, that I don’t know about?”

I smiled. “Little, I think, that is not salubrious. I am clear now on what I am capable of, clearer still on the depths to which people will sink. And I am most clear on Eben Stroud. He is simply not what he seems, but I think you ought to ask Jane about him, for she knows him better than anyone. All these years he has been her protector. I don’t know what passes between them, but it is something, I expect, close to love, if not the very item itself.”

“Jane and Eben Stroud? Stoddard, that’s preposterous!”

“Only because you don’t know Eben. Nor, for a fact, do I. But this I am certain of. I would trust him with my life.”

“Eben Stroud? *The* Eben Stroud?”

“The very same.”

“It is too much to take in all at once.”

“Jane Bancroft is why Eben stays in this town, I think.”

“What about now? Is he protecting her now?”

“No. He was called away to Concord, to meet, I think, with John Adams and some others. He was Washington’s scout. He knows Jefferson and Franklin and Madison and I don’t know who else. He’s traveled to every state and out into the west. He has read widely.” I grinned. “And yet to most he is little more than a wild man, living alone, always mentioned when some dark tale rises up.”

“I want to believe you, Stoddard”

“Do you not? Hannah, do you imagine I would lie?”

“No. Of course I don’t think that. You’ve never lied about anything and now, when it might have been better to lie, you didn’t. Do you know what a risk you took?”

“With anyone else I would not have taken it.”

"I don't even know whether that's a compliment."

"I meant it that way."

"And now you are protecting Jane."

"Until Eben returns. General McClellan sent a rider for him, and with luck he may arrive tonight, but until he does I'll keep watch."

"And who is there to help you?"

"I'll be alone. It's better that way. The dark is my ally."

"It seems only yesterday that we were nothing more than school children. And now? Now, you are taking on responsibilities which most grown men would not dare. And all I can do is sit and wait."

"Women have always had the harder role in such things."

"I don't think I wanted to grow up so soon."

I put my hands on her shoulders and drew her close against me. "I'm sorry," I said. "But when you marry me, it will be no different. I will keep nothing from you."

She put both hands against my chest and pushed back. "Did you just say what I thought you did?"

"You did. But I should have asked. Will you?"

"Yes," she said. "I will marry you, Stoddard."

"It can't be right away, I think."

"I am patient enough when I have to be."

"I love you, Hannah."

"And I love you, Stoddard. I've loved you all my life."

We kissed then and it lasted a long while, neither of us wanting to draw away. And when finally we did, Hannah grinned. "But I won't marry you in buckskins," she said.