

Chapter Six

Judgement

As a precaution, I walked in a wide circle around Jane Bancroft's farm. Here and there I found paths, one leading to a fine bubbling spring just under the hillside to the north, another to a promontory from which you could see the steeple in the East Parish and the one on the Hill. Yet another path led to a small glen in a grove of gray beech, another to a stand of sugar maple, all of which had been carefully tapped each spring.

Four times I circled, each time a little farther out from the house, but I saw no sign of anyone having passed that way. It would have been a good time to have had a dog, and I vowed that some day I would have such a dog, big and black, and trained to my hand. No human is a match for a dog in matters of gathering scent and hearing distant sounds.

Satisfied that she was in no danger, I rode into the East Village and stopped at the store. Three men sat on the porch, scowling out at the world as I tied up my horse. I could feel the malevolence in their gaze as they followed my progress up the two steps and into the store. The storekeeper, William Benefit, looked as if the Devil himself had just come waltzing up to his counter. He said nothing. He did not move.

"Need a pound of cheese," I said.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was soft, the words hissing snakelike into the room. "You don't belong here!"

"None the less, I'm here and in need of some cheese."

“Go away!” he hissed at me. “Go away before you bring the black rain of judgment down upon me!”

Suddenly the two pistols beneath my buckskins felt warm and comfortable instead of cold and lumpy.

“Will you sell me some cheese or not?”

“It’s gone too far for that now! It’s gone too far.” His eyes grew wide with fear. The curse the witch has set upon us must be lifted. Those who side with her cannot stand before God’s scouring tide!”

Mad. Absolutely mad. A man I had know all my life, a kindly man, with a wife and family, had somehow been driven to complete distraction. I had badly underestimated Pell’s power. What sort of spells did he weave to control a man’s mind?

I reached under my shirt and laid my hand over the haft of the pistol, turning just enough to see the door, and then I heard my horse whinny and a man curse, and I burst out onto the porch to see a man on the ground, a knife in his hand, just before the mare’s front hooves crashed into his head and killed him.

“It’s a devil horse!” One of the other men shouted, and the man with him leaped up and they drew their muskets from under the deacon’s bench where they had been sitting.

“HOLD!” I shouted as I aimed both pistols at their hearts. “Hold and set your muskets on the floor!” They set their guns down and backed away. I stepped toward them, backing them off the porch and into the road. “Now, run! Run before I lose my temper and decide to shoot you both just to be rid of you!”

They turned and ran off down the road without once looking back. I stuck my pistols under my belt and one at a time, picked up the muskets and broke off the stocks against

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one of the posts that held up the porch. Quickly I stepped to my horse, grabbed the reins, and swung up into the saddle. "William Benefit!" I called. "Charles Tompkins lies dead before your store. He tried to kill my horse and died in the process. Tell the people in this parish that the rains are coming. There is no spell, there is no curse. That is all the ranting of a deranged man. Those who follow him will die! Tell them, Mr. Benefit. Save the lives of good men driven to the edge of madness by a far, far greater madness!"

I whirled my horse around and left at a full gallop, certain that a call to arms would follow. I would have to be ready.

Around midday I stopped and ate, then curled up beneath a big white pine, and slept until well on toward dusk. I fed and watered my horse, and rode out from the safety of the deep woods to assume my vigil on the knoll across from Jane's house, hoping to see some sign of Eben, but I was alone and whatever fate befell me, I would have to deal with on my own.

Once again the clouds moved in from the distant sea, damp and smelling of rain, but no rain fell. And yet I knew, somehow, that the rain would come this time. I just hoped it would come before Pell could send his fiends against Jane, for surely if it rained they would believe the curse had been lifted, and Pell's power over them would falter and fail.

They came at dusk, a band of perhaps thirty men, moving up the road in a long double column like soldiers. They marched in steady sure strides, men set on restoring the world to rights.

And there was only me to stop them; to stop them by shooting them, for there was no other way. I knew them all, and though I tried to rationalize by saying that they were not, in truth, the men I knew, they were, and every one of them

who died would leave a wife and children behind.

What I did next, I did not think of until I did it.

"HALT!" I shouted from the cover of the rocks and trees.

Pell turned. "Don't listen! It's the Devil you hear!"

"The rain will come tonight! Pell's curse is broken! Remember the story! Remember how he did this same thing once before and it cost the lives of your friends and neighbors. He seeks revenge. It is he who cast the spell to hold off the rain! But the rain is coming and Pell will be cast down!"

I could hear my voice bouncing off the sharply rising hills that surrounded the crossroads. What's more, they had stopped, and I could tell from the way they turned and looked that they could not locate my voice because of the echoes.

"Do not be deceived!" Pell shouted. "It is the Devil you hear! I warned you! I told you this would come! If you falter now, the witch's curse will remain and you will starve this winter coming!"

Then I got a little carried away with myself, but frankly I could think of nothing else to do short of killing them. "THIS ... IS ... THE ... VOICE ... OF ... GOD!" I roared. "Pell is the Devil and by his works shall ye know him! Is it not Pell who has drawn you away from your farms? Is it not Pell who has left you in rack and ruin? Consider your children who quail before Pell! Do you imagine I work in such ways? Am I not forgiving? Is it not my love that shields you from the Devil?"

I thought it was working, despite Pell's attempts to restore order. He dashed about like a madman, scurrying from man to man, trying to maintain his hold. I did not think I could overcome the years of his influence, but I had stopped them and I had held them, so there was still hope.

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“LISTEN TO WHAT HE TELLS YOU!” I roared. “LISTEN TO HIS WORDS! ARE THEY NOT THE WORDS OF THE DEVIL? WOULD I LEAD YOU TO MURDER A DEFENSELESS WOMAN? A HEALER?”

I was rapidly running out of ideas, and while I had brought things to a standstill, I had no power such as Pell’s. It had come down to desperation. I was going to have to kill any number of them, shooting and moving, reloading on the run as Eben had taught me. I decided to start with Pell, and I raised my rifle to my shoulder and took aim at the side of his head, clearly visible in the failing light because of the great crop of white hair.

And then something hit me in the eye and I looked up. It was starting to rain.

I lowered the gun and called out. “AS PROOF, I HAVE BROUGHT YOU THE RAIN!” Sometimes you get lucky, for no sooner had I spoken, than a great flash of lightening tore through the sky, followed instantly by a deafening clap of thunder. I decided to finish the job. “BUT I ALSO BRING THE LIGHTNING AND THOSE WHO FOLLOW FALSE IDOLS WILL FEEL ITS POWER AS NEVER BEFORE!”

The storm had broken directly above us, and in quick succession three enormous bolts burst through the night, one of them slamming into a pine by the road, shattering the trunk, and sending the needles up in flame.

In the flash I saw Pell lurch and fall to the ground. And with that the men broke and ran, and the skies opened up in the most prolific downpour I have ever seen. For several minutes I stood, my face up into the rain, watching it dampen the fire that the lightning had brought down.

Then I turned, walked back into the swale behind me, untied my horse, and led her down the hill to the road and

the body of the Reverend Pell. He looked very small, his clothes already sodden from the rain and I squatted down to see what had felled him. It was nothing more than a piece of pine from the splintered tree. It had flown with such speed that it had pierced his head from one side to the other.

The leading edge of the storm had moved on, but it continued to pour rain like a waterfall. The sound of the water everywhere, hammering on the hardened road, trickling along the edges of the road was indeed a breath from Heaven. I stood up quickly, led my horse to the side of the road and pulled out a pistol as I heard the hoofbeats of an approaching horse. And then I relaxed. I'd have known the sound of that horse anywhere.

I awoke late in the morning four days later, fixed myself something to eat and walked out to the barn to put the finishing touches on the carriage.

I was some surprised to find Father examining my handiwork. He wasn't so much concerned with the paint or the gilt, but instead was lying on his back on the floor of the barn examining the new wood and springs, both of which were a good deal sturdier than the originals.

I bent at the waist looking under the carriage at him. "Everything all right?"

Father pulled himself from under the carriage and stood, brushing the dry dust from his clothes. "First rate piece of work here, Stoddard." He smiled. "Your idea to use stouter springs?"

"It was," I said.

"Might stiffen the ride some."

"Ab says they'll soften with use." There was never going to be a better time to tell him what I had put off nearly the

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whole summer, but I still couldn't think of a way to start and I shuffled my feet in the dirt.

He folded his arms over his broad chest and leaned back against the carriage. "What really happened to Pell?"

"God's will," I said, and then, knowing he wasn't satisfied, I shrugged. "Well, with some urging, perhaps." I told him the story, detail by detail and when I'd finished he shook his head. "Could you have shot him?"

I nodded. "And as many more as I could have taken down."

"Strikes me," he said, "the things you've done this summer, and I mean no harm in saying this, don't fit with the sort of things a farmer might do."

He'd given me the opening and I took it. "Mr. McHugh wrote to the people at Yale this past spring," I said. "I can go there should I choose."

Either he was a better actor than I'd ever guessed, or he was truly taken by surprise. "Yale is it."

"It is," I said.

"And you've got a notion to go?"

"I have. Then I'd like to read the law with Tapping Reeve."

He clapped me on the shoulder, offering a broad smile. "Well, by God then, Stoddard, that's what you'll do."

For once I didn't at all mind being surprised.

He laughed. "I suppose your mother has known for some time about this."

She has," I said. "I meant to tell you sooner, but I was afraid you might think I thought less of the way you've lived your life."

"You've come to a sound decision," he said. "A father can't ask more than that."



The rest of that summer I visited around, though most of those visits were to see Hannah. Together we visited Jane Bancroft as often as we could, and every time we appeared, Eben was there. Once, when we were off by ourselves, he asked me what I thought about the lightning bolt that night, and how that one splinter had managed to strike Pell.

"God's will? Fate? Coincidence? Luck?" I shook my head. "I think the answer depends upon your cast of mind."

"So it does." He smiled. "In the face of such things," he said, "the weak mind resorts to superstition."

Other things changed as well. Jane traveled openly, calling on those who were sick, and sometimes Eben accompanied her. Even then he did not ride openly with her in the buggy, but he was there, drifting as silently as a ghost through the woodlands, keeping watch. Others may not have known that, but it was Eben who trained me to see what most others cannot.

It was always as if there were two worlds, one belonging to those who lived in the open land and one to those who lived in the woods, and then there was Eben and me who lived in both, coming and going as if we were traveling through time.

If it bothered Hannah, she never showed it, and our love for each other only grew, making my departure more dreadful by the hour.

Reverend Coleman proved to be a man of substantial mettle. He visited every family in the East Parish, working what I thought of as miracles. It was as if a great dark cloud had hovered over that part of our town for as long as anyone

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could remember, and now it had lifted. Reverend Coleman was there to restore faith and hope, and he convinced others in town to open their hearts and offer help.

I delivered the General's horse ahead of schedule, and he presented me with a list of things he had worked out for me in New Haven. He had arranged for me to board with his cousins, who lived quite near to the school, in exchange for getting their firewood and whatever else needed tending to, as they were both older than the General, and needed looking after, as older folk often do. It was hardly a burden.

Early on the morning of the day I was to leave, I rode to Hannah's and we walked again down toward the little stream.

"I don't want to go," I said. "I want to stay here with you."

She was having none of it. "Stoddard, you have a destiny. You have no choice. You've been singled out."

"But, Hannah, I"

"No. I'm not listening to you."

"Perhaps once I'm there, I can arrange to find a place for us and we can marry and"

"Stoddard!"

"Are you angry?"

"No. I just don't want to have too much to hope for. It will make waiting that much harder."

"Then I'll make you a promise. We'll post the banns this winter and marry when I return in the spring."

She smiled and squeezed my hand. "Only if you make another promise. We will not live here. We will live in New Haven and then in Litchfield. Only when you are a lawyer can we come back here."

I saw where she was headed. "What if we never came

back here to live?"

"We will, but only when we're ready."

I marveled at her certainty. How could she be so sure of the future when I couldn't predict a single second ahead? What was it she knew about me that I could not see? It was years before she told me, and it turned out to be alarmingly simple. Jane had told her never to forget that Eben had chosen me. The amazing and mystifying Eben Stroud, a man who became the conscience of an entire town and, though hardly a soul ever knew, the conscience of an entire nation. He set me on the course I had chosen by leading me, while still wet behind the ears, to understand that I could fulfill my dreams. And by doing that he contributed one life to the most important of careers. The law. For ours is a nation driven by laws, and we sorely needed men who could bring others to understand that only the law could ensure our continued freedom, but only if even the law itself were contained.

I did not know that then. All I had was my belief in myself which got considerable bolstering from Hannah. God had no more love to give than I gave to Hannah Hayes.

And so I left for Yale, wearing my buckskins, carrying my school clothes in a pair of heavy saddlebags, my rifle in its scabbard, my pistols draped in a pair of heavy holsters across the saddle. What awaited was my future, a future that never seemed to follow a normal course, a circumstance which certainly provided both challenge and travail from time to time, but one which always proved ... interesting.