

Chapter Thirteen

Isaac walked toward Princeton, puzzled at what had just happened. Toby followed silently, carrying the gun. As they arrived at the Pennington crossroad again, Toby asked, “Now can we take the back road?”

“Aw, hush up.”

The boys went to the right, down the Pennington Road. Isaac walked quickly, but Toby lagged behind. “Come on, Toby, keep up.” Toby hustled up, and walked side-by-side with Isaac.

Toby asked, “Who were those men?”

“I don’t know. Probably some militia, or stragglers or somebody. I don’t know.”

Isaac stared at the ground, walking slowly now, trying to figure out who those men were.

Toby changed the subject. “What do you think happened to our first father?”

“What? What does that matter?”

“I was just wondering.”

“You were wondering that now? We almost got killed.”

Toby said, “So, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“About our first father.”

“I hope he’s buried in the ground.”

“Why? Why do you say things like that? It wasn’t his fault. Maybe it was Ma’s fault.

You know how she is, always screaming and yelling. I can’t stand that myself. Maybe he couldn’t either.”

“No, it was his fault. He shouldn’t have left. He should have stayed and taken care of us or taken us with him.”

Toby’s pace slowed again. “I could never leave Ma.”

“I could. Instead, I was stuck with ‘Cowering John’ for a father.”

“John was nice. You know that. And if you went with Pa, we wouldn’t be together.”

“So what? Then I wouldn’t have a stupid kid hanging around me right now and forever and for the rest of my goddamn life.”

Isaac stopped and turned around. “I didn’t mean that. Come on, keep up.”

“I miss him, I think. The first one, if I remember him right. He taught us how to shoot. Me, anyway, not you.”

The sun had set long ago, leaving the boys in near-pitch blackness. Toby held onto Isaac’s belt like a plow on a mule. The trudge down the Pennington Road was slow and difficult. Even the moon couldn’t help, not due for another four hours. Isaac had to feel his way to keep to the road. He clutched at the trees to the right, careful not to stumble and fall.

Isaac was afraid. It was cold. It was dark. The trees bent their deadly tentacles across the road like menacing monsters, perfectly willing to poke out a boy’s eye at the least provocation. Only the stars gave the faintest glimmer of light. There were no houses, no barns, no fields, no smoke, no signs of life anywhere. It was almost eleven o’clock. Isaac searched desperately left and right for somewhere, anywhere, that they could find some shelter for the night.

They peered into the sky ahead. There was nothing but darkness, except for the stars. A particularly bright one, just to the left of the road, cleared the high trees with no trouble at all. Toby asked, “What’s that star?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a planet. Maybe Jupiter, or Venus, or something, I don’t know. We’re in trouble here, Toby.”

The star was the brightest in the sky, rising higher over the trees as they walked.

Toby asked, “Is that the ‘love’ star?”

Isaac shouted, “Toby, stop asking fool questions. We’re in trouble. I don’t know if we can find any place to stay. Damn. We could freeze to death out here.”

Toby said, "We can build a fire."

"And how are we going to build a fire? You lost the packs, remember?"

"I can shoot the gun. That'll start a fire."

Isaac thought about that. Yes, that could work. Complicated, but it could work. "All right. Let's get to the Quaker Road. Maybe there'll be some houses there, or something. If not, we'll build a fire."

The boys arrived at the junction of the Pennington and Quaker Roads. The Quaker Road ran southwest toward Trenton. Isaac said, "Here's the Quaker Road. Hurry, Toby, keep up. We have a long way to go, especially now."

The boys turned right, walked another mile, and heard a honking sound to the right, the cry of a winter goose. Isaac went off the road to search for it. "There's dinner. Here, goosey, goosey, goosey."

Isaac disappeared into the darkness. Toby went over to the west side of the dark road and searched for movement. "Isaac, come back. Where are you?"

Isaac ran toward the honking sound but slipped in the mud, fell on his back, and struggled up. He slogged another ten feet, but his left foot got stuck and he fell down again, this time on his hands and knees. He lifted his left leg and stood up, but his right foot was trapped in the deep ooze. Isaac tumbled backward and fell on his rump. The goose ignored Isaac, flitted past him, and rushed toward Toby on the road.

"Toby, shoot the goose. Shoot him."

"Isaac, where are you?" Toby raised his gun to his side and watched the big bird come at him. The goose slowed to a walk but marched straight at Toby, honking. Toby poured the powder in the pan with one eye on the goose. He pulled the hammer back, pointed the musket at the goose, and took careful aim.

The goose walked up to Toby, its neck slinking forward and backward with each threatening step. Toby pointed the loaded gun right at it and backed away slowly. His gun shook more with each snake of the goose's neck.

"Don't you come any closer."

Isaac watched from the other side of the road, too stuck in the mud to get out, and too amused at his brother's predicament to even care about it. "Toby, shoot. Shoot! Ha!"

The goose attacked. Toby backed up, but the goose's beak clung to his pants. Toby dragged the goose backward into the field. "Ah, ah! Get away from me! Ah." The goose let go, but charged at Toby again.

Toby kicked at the goose but didn't hit it. He fell down on his back, kicking. Instinctively though, he held the gun parallel to the ground so the powder wouldn't fall out of the pan. The goose avoided the kicks and charged again. Now it pecked at Toby's face. Toby held his free hand in front of his eyes and jumped up.

Toby ran away from the road twenty yards into the field. The goose chased him all the way, pecking. It was smashed-down cornstalks, dry terrain.

"Isaac! Ah! Get him off me. Isaac! Isaac!"

Isaac laughed. "Shoot the goddamn dinner, Toby."

Through the darkness, Isaac saw Toby running fearfully from the bird. Isaac shook his head and struggled to stand up, but swayed sideways because one foot was still six inches deep in the mud. He fell onto his back, tried to get up, and fell again, this time face-forward. Both feet were now stuck solid.

Isaac steadied himself upright. He slowly picked one foot out of the mud and placed it in what appeared to be a more stable location. He tried to withdraw his other foot, but the suction of the mud drew him back. His shoe came off. Isaac reached behind him to retrieve it, but in doing that, he fell on his face again. Isaac carefully stood up and lifted his shoeless foot out of the mud.

Toby managed to distance himself by ten feet from the enemy goose. He had a military advantage now, a death-at-a-distance weapon, a loaded musket, no match for a crazy bird. Toby aimed his gun again. He checked the powder in the pan. Loaded, but the goose just wouldn't quit.

Toby jogged to the side, but the goose followed him with every movement. He backed up into the cornfield and looked behind him, careful not to trip. Toby stopped and pointed the gun. No, he wouldn't shoot. He pushed the cock down onto the pan so it wouldn't fire. He flipped the gun and held it backward against the goose, pushing the stock away from him like a bayonet. The powder poured out of the pan.

Isaac had a shoe in one hand and a foot stuck solid. He carefully extracted his foot from the stuck shoe and reached backward to get the other shoe out of the mud. Now he had two shoes in his hands, but his feet were deep in the mud. Still, he could move more easily that way. Isaac trudged slowly toward the road.

Isaac spotted Toby and the goose facing off deep in the field. Both the goose and Toby stopped, daring each other to attack. Toby jabbed the stock of his gun at the goose. The goose ignored the threat and charged. Isaac mumbled, "Ah, Jesus Christ."

A musket blast pierced the silent night air from twenty yards away. The goose was obliterated, feathers all over the place. The boys turned toward the sound of the gunshot. Isaac stopped struggling in the mud and stood still.

A figure strode quickly and confidently toward them through the darkness. Both boys froze. Closer, closer, closer, then to Toby, "Give me that gun."

It was a girl in baggy men's pants and a bonnet. She took Toby's musket from his hands, dropped her unloaded gun on the ground, and walked onto the road. She looked at the pan of Toby's gun, no powder, but no matter. She cocked the gun and pointed it at Isaac's head.

Anna was seventeen and attractive. “Get out of there,” she said.

Isaac struggled out of the mud. He dropped one of his shoes and stooped to pick it up. At the movement, Anna backed up suspiciously and narrowed the aim of Toby’s unloaded gun at him as he inched along toward the road. Isaac looked at her closely as he passed. Anna stared back, but gripped the gun tightly. “Hands up.” Isaac and Toby marched as prisoners in front of Anna, their hands in the air.

A woman called out from the distance, “Anna, Anna. Where you? Whas you do? Who shoot?” Isaac and Toby were startled by the voice. A small house appeared a hundred yards away.

“I’m here, Momma, I’m all right. We have trespassers.”

Toby looked behind him and saw Anna following them through the field. Anna stumbled slightly on the corn stalks, but she never took her eyes off Isaac. She stooped to pick up her own gun, so now she had two unloaded guns. She kept Toby’s musket at her hip, continually pointed at Isaac’s back, and said, “Go. Over there. Now.”

Isaac was in the way of Toby’s backward view of his captor until Isaac moved to the side. Anna tripped again. She went down on her right knee, but her gun maintained a perfect angle on Isaac’s back. Her left arm went out to support herself. She recovered without even looking down.

Toby asked, “Where we going?”

Anna said, “To the house. Momma’s there.”

“You have anything to eat there?”