

CHAPTER 1

“This is a mistake.”

From atop Fiedler’s Knob, Josiah Rush surveyed his hometown for the first time in seven years. The granite perch afforded him a sweeping view of the coastal town of Havenhill.

In the harbor below, a pair of merchant ships cozied up to each other. The smaller craft appeared bereft of activity, its masts and yardarms as bare as trees in midwinter. Next to it, the larger ship, a snow, good for coastal and short-sea trade, had apparently set anchor a short time ago. Featureless sailors scurried about the rigging, fearlessly hauling in huge canvas sheets. A rowboat waddled its way toward the ship to inspect the recent arrival.

Josiah, throat parched and bone weary, hitched up the worn, leather haversack slung over his shoulder and knocked the mud from his shoes. He stank of five days’ journey.

From here the postal road made a gradual descent into the town. Noticeably absent were any cherubim and a flaming sword barring him from reentering his personal Eden.

“Would that I were so fortunate,” Josiah murmured to himself. “Adam had a mere armed angel with which to contend. I have Eunice Parkhurst.”

A familiar wind, moist, tangy, and smelling of spring, leaped the

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granite ledge. With it came memories of happier days—days of swimming and making sailboats, of flying kites and shooting marbles and exploring creeks.

Josiah winced, stung by nostalgia. He'd anticipated having these feelings, but he'd underestimated their strength. Tears of regret blurred his vision as his gaze jumped from landmark to landmark—First Church, the meetinghouse with its bell tower; the graveyard on the opposite side of the road; the village green; the schoolhouse; the gristmill; Bailey's Tavern.

Nabby's house.

Josiah's heart seized at the sight of the two-story yellow structure. His eyes felt the pangs of a seven-year hunger for just a glimpse of her as they searched the residence for movement, a door opening, the brush of a curtain.

If only his first glimpse of her could be from a distance . . . a trial run for his emotions. Maybe then he could keep himself from gawking or mumbling incoherently and generally making a fool of himself when he saw her face-to-face.

But the curtains of the yellow house were still. The doors remained shut. No movement except for two chickens pecking at the muddy ground between the house and the barn.

He would have no morsel of satisfaction today.

With a heavy sigh, Josiah lifted his eyes again to the wharf, the section of town most changed since he had seen it last. The new warehouses were twice the size of the old ones, a tribute to Philip's leadership. All that remained of the original structures was a portion of one wall, jagged, its bricks charred black with soot.

Why would they leave that portion of wall standing? A memorial to the three who died?

Josiah closed his eyes as the screams from that night echoed in his memory. Little girl screams . . .

Kathleen Usher—four years old, round brown eyes, always barefoot, the edges of her dress dirty, clutching her straw doll. She was never without that straw doll. Molly, wasn't it?

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Mary Usher, Kathleen's older sister by a year. Her face so covered with freckles that some of them merged into oddly shaped brown spots. The thing Josiah remembered most about Mary was that she got scolded every Sunday because she couldn't sit still during the sermon.

The third voice of the screaming trio of that horrible night belonged to an adult male, Rev. Parkhurst. He had been the spiritual leader of Havenhill, Josiah's mentor, and the father of Nabby, the only girl Josiah had ever loved.

The townspeople had found the three bodies huddled together. Rev. Parkhurst's arms had been wrapped around the Usher girls, attempting to shield them from the fire with his own body.

A fire Josiah had started . . .

All this pain—three lives lost; his own life ruined; and a town nearly destroyed—because of one senseless, drunken, muddleheaded night! The crazy part about the entire incident was that Josiah had never been drunk before that night, nor had he taken a drink since.

One night. One lousy night.

But lousy nights, no matter how bad, could not be undone. And Josiah could no more change the events of that night than he could take back a misspoken word. That night was history. The town's. His. They would forever be linked by tragedy.

What made him think he could ever convince the town to forgive him?

"This is a mistake," Josiah said again.

He stepped away from the ridge. The postal road offered him a choice. One way descended into Havenhill; the other way led back to Boston where he wouldn't be reminded every day of his monumental sin.

"Having second thoughts?"

The voice startled him. Josiah swung around to see a man sitting tall on a horse.

"Philip! Back so soon from England?"

"The return winds were favorable."

For only the second time in seven years, Josiah gazed at his oldest and dearest friend. During their encounter in Boston a month ago,

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Josiah had found it difficult to believe this was the same Philip he'd grown up with. Even now it was hard to catch glimpses of the old Philip behind all the finery and polish.

This Philip appeared sophisticated, a gentleman sitting straight-backed on an exquisite horse. The last time Josiah had seen Philip on a horse, Philip's legs had flailed uncontrollably as he tried to stay atop Deacon Cranch's old field nag that had bolted into the cornfield. Josiah had nearly split his gut laughing, until Deacon Cranch got home and saw the path that had been plowed through his cornfield.

Could the horseman in front of him—with his tailored green coat, white silk shirt and stockings, and impressive wig be this same Philip? That wig. From this distance, Josiah couldn't be certain, but Philip's wig—pulled back and tied with a black ribbon—appeared to be made of human hair. Josiah had never known anyone wealthy enough to own a wig made of anything other than horsehair or yak hair.

"You look like you're having second thoughts," Philip said again.

"It's that obvious?"

Philip dismounted. He'd changed, and it was more than just the clothes. His demeanor, the way he carried himself, was different. Deliberate. Self-assured. Gone was the youthful slouch and impish smirk.

In the old days, they were inseparable. Philip, the prankster; Josiah, the philosopher; and Johnny Mott, the muscle. Oh, the pranks they pulled! And the unforgettable summer days of roughhousing, swimming, lying on the bank next to the water without a care in the world.

"Actually, your indecision is impressive," Philip said. "A sign of maturity. Only a fool would do what you're doing without reservations."

So solemn. So businesslike. As though an unfamiliar adult spirit had taken over the body of his friend.

"You were quite honest about the situation when you approached me in Boston," Josiah replied, matching Philip's tone. "I know it won't be easy, but it's something I want to do."

"Excellent!" Philip cried, allowing himself a smile.

"I want to thank you for standing up for me," Josiah said. "I know

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the only reason I'm being given this chance is because of you."

Philip's smile widened into one Josiah recognized. A shudder of joy passed through him at the sight of his old friend.

Philip leaned over and said quietly, "A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.' Isn't that what the Good Book says? Besides, I think everyone deserves a second chance."

"That's all I'm asking."

Philip dismounted. Leading his horse, he inclined his head toward town. "Then let's greet your parishioners, Rev. Rush."

As they walked the postal road into Havenhill, Josiah brushed his nose repeatedly.

"Something wrong?" Philip asked.

Conscious now of what he was doing, Josiah lowered his hands. "It's nothing. Just something I picked up in Boston."

The tickling sensation grew worse. It was all Josiah could do to keep his hands away from his nose. If the pattern held, he knew what was coming next, and it wasn't a sneeze.

On cue, a wave of pleasure swept over him with nausea close on its heels.

Philip stopped and cocked his head in concern. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"It'll pass. I'm fine. Really."

Two years ago, when Josiah had first begun exhibiting these symptoms, he'd mistaken them for signs of a physical ailment. He knew better now. These physical manifestations weren't physical in nature at all. They were spiritual. He also knew what they indicated, and it wasn't good. It wasn't good at all.

As they reached the edge of town, the pain in Josiah's gut doubled him over. It was a sign of what awaited him, not unlike Dante's warning at the gates of hell: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."