



FIRST BLOOD

1740

Whatever ye do, lad, donnae take yer eyes off his vitals.”

Ian M’Kethe felt his grandfather’s hot breath close on his left ear, and the old man’s coarse whiskers felt like the hairy legs of a spider crawling across his cheek. For an instant all he wanted was to lower the gun and scratch.

But he was too excited for that. Shivers ran through his lanky frame, and he feared that the thundering of his heart would betray their position. Its pounding reminded Ian of the marching of Connecticut militia through the main street of Hartford, fifteen miles down river, the fifers trilling, and the drummers beating time.

That was all good and well for a parade, but it would never do in the dense back woods of the upper Connecticut Valley. Announce yourself with fifes and drummer boys in these woods and every creature and savage would descend like a falcon on a field mouse.

“Steady, lad,” whispered the old man. “Wait—ye must learn to wait. Meanwhile, keep yer mind on yer duty, and yer

eyes on his breast.”

A drop of moisture fell from the curve of an oak leaf where Ian’s breath had melted the frost. In spite of the cold autumn air, he blinked back beads of sweat that seemed bent on blinding him—and just now when he desperately needed to see well.

“Lead costs money, lad,” his grandfather reminded him in a chiding lilt, though barely audible, “to say nothing of the powder.”

Pushing his three-cornered felt hat farther back on his head, Ian blinked rapidly. Powder did cost a good deal of money, and he’d often heard his grandfather bemoan that the best source was from the dubious Frenchman who lived alone in Powder Hollow. If he missed, it would mean yet one more charge of powder to buy from Claude le Faux. Squinting down the long barrel, he drew in breath, set his jaw, determined to hold steady. But the gun had never felt so heavy, and his left arm began to quiver under the weight of the cold steel.

“Wait, now, lad. He turns.”

All was silent in the forest save for a crackling rustle as a faint breeze moved softly through the flame-red oak leaves in the canopy above. Winter came early in New England, and only the hardiest songbirds remained before taking leave of their homes for the bitter season. A robin’s cheerful tune drifted faintly from behind the pair, but in it Ian detected a hint of warning, and he feared it might betray them.

He blinked again. He desperately wanted to wipe away the sweat and the condensation where bursts of his hot breath met the dark walnut stock. How could he hold steady when everything seemed so wet and clammy? He took a gulp of air and held it.

“Ready yerself, lad.”

Ian pressed the barrel hard against the sturdy oak behind which they lay in ambush, and he winced as the rough bark gouged into the back of his left hand.

“Ye’ll rarely hit yer mark if ye merely aim at his body,” his grandfather’s words tickled in his ear. “One shot’s all ye’ll ever get. Wait for the one shot, and aim true at his vitals. But ye must breathe, lad, slow and steady.”

Ian’s heart thudded in his temples as he slowly exhaled. The unsuspecting living being aligned with his barrel—what was his heart doing just now? And what would become of his vitals if Ian’s aim was true and hot lead ripped through all? If his aim was true?

“Ye’ll have no better shot than now, my lad,” his grandfather’s voice brought him back to the task at hand.

Swallowing hard, Ian screwed up his face. Then, bracing his jaw for the recoil, he hooked his finger around the trigger—and pulled.

Blam!

The forest erupted with noise. Echoing off stones and ridges, the retort gradually diminished, until it lingered only like the clapping and pattering of children at their play.

Peering through the smoke, Ian’s grandfather spoke softly. “He doesnae move.” The old man rose to a crouch, drawing his dirk from his belt. “After downing yer adversary, lad, always approach with care.”

Ian opened his eyes. Gulping in a lungful of air, he felt a catch in his throat and coughed at the bitter gray smoke. His eyes smarted, and he shook his head in a vain attempt to clear the ringing from deep in his right ear. Trembling in his every part, he lowered the gun and scrambled after his grandfather.

“Why so, Grandfather?” asked Ian. He couldn’t explain

why his stomach churned like the foamy Enfield rapids or like the surface of the river when a squall of wind came on and black thunderclouds unleashed their fury.

“What’s that?” said his grandfather.

“Why so with caution?” he asked again, desperately trying to steady his voice as he fell in behind his grandfather and tried to match his crouching posture and the rhythm of his stealthy advance.

“There may be others,” said the old man, his voice hollow. “Ye must be ready for others.” He broke off, then softly added, “There’re always others.” The old man’s voice trailed away.

“What happens then?” asked Ian.

The old man slowed, and Ian heard him heave a great sigh that seemed to catch in his throat and come out more like a sob.

“What happens then, lad, is that ye may find yerself unready to protect those ye dearly love, those who depend upon yer protection, yer doing yer duty for God and for him that ye love so dear.”

Ian barely breathed. His grandfather had halted, and Ian saw the old man’s eyes brim full with water. This happened more often since his grandfather had passed his seventieth birthday. Or perhaps Ian had only become more aware of it. He wasn’t sure which. A tear breached the dam and fell into the old man’s gray and sandy-colored whiskers. Ian tugged at his right ear lobe and waited in silence.

Wiping a homespun tweed sleeve across his eyes, the old man sighed again. “Never gloat, lad. Ye might make a clean shot of it and down yer prey—but never gloat.”

“Gloat, Grandfather?” said Ian.

“Aye, gloat, I say. Never do it. When ye gloat ye’re nae

giving God the glory—nor are ye ready for the others, for those that would come after and do ye and yourn harm. I ken of what I speak, here, lad. I ken too well of what I speak. Aye, so never gloat.”

“I’ll never gloat, Grandfather,” promised Ian, but disappointed that his grandfather seemed unwilling to tell more. There must be more to tell.

“Aye, now follow with care,” said his grandfather. And with that they resumed their approach.

Moments later, when the prone figure came into view, his blood strewn about the brittle leaves and twigs, Ian felt a choking of pity in his throat—even guilt—at the sight. He’d done this. With this beautiful lean gun, he had done this. Now he felt the water rise in his own eyes.

“Now, lad,” said his grandfather. “This is where it can happen.”

“Where wh-what can happen?” asked Ian.

“He might not be dead,” said his grandfather simply. “Only bluffing.”

“Bluffing, Grandfather?” he said, working his jaw trying to clear away the last of the humming in his ear.

“While we’ve been closing these fifty yards,” said the old man, pausing to look over his shoulder at Ian, “wounded, he’s been plotting his revenge and rises up and turns all his fury on us. Aye, lad, ye must be ware.”

“He doesnae look like bluffing,” said Ian.

“Aye, the good ones never do,” said his grandfather. “Now if this were a bear, lad,” he continued, “and if yer shot had only stunned him—reload and be ready’s the word, lad. Nothing quite so dangerous as a wounded bear.”

“Or a man?” said Ian.

“Aye, or a man, lad. I’ve heard tell of a savage Pequot

with no less than three mortal shots in his breast rise, fueled by fury, and hurl his tomahawk one last time, and with deadliest aim. He did nae look like bluffing either.”

“But whatever could the likes of him do to us,” said Ian, nodding at the ground, “even a big ’un like that?”

“Aye, ’twas a fine shot, m’lad. Nothing to fear from this big Tom,” said his grandfather, grunting as he lifted the plump fowl by its neck and weighed it up and down. “What a fine Sabbath roast yer mother’ll make of him!”

“I’m thinking we should be getting back, then,” said Ian, his tongue straying to his lips.

“Aye,” agreed his grandfather. Then looking soberly at Ian, he said, “Be on yer guard when it’s a mere turkey—and ye’ll not be caught unawares when it’s yer enemy.”