

A Place in His Heart

PROLOGUE

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The door shuddered with each pound, and Ann Horton drew a deep breath to quiet the wild beats of her heart. She held her husband's gaze. Barnabas's slight, almost imperceptible nod conveyed an unspoken signal to implement the long-practiced plan.

He moved to the children gathered in a circle on the floor, the older at work studying their letters while the youngest played beside them. Joseph sat with Benjamin pulled close, and Barnabas paused only a moment before he motioned the men to gather at the back of the house.

The soft scuff of chairs caught the children's attention. Anne picked up Benjamin. "Jay, pick up your horn-table and follow me. Quietly. Helen, bring the children. Quickly." Her voice was low and calm. The women and children moved to the back hall as if on cue.

The pounding erupted again as the last man slipped out the back. Ann moved toward the front door and paused while the ladies took their seats, embroidery work laid out on the extra chairs.

"What say you? Prithee, identify yourself or go away." Her voice took on a confidence she did not feel.

"By order of Bishop Laud, you must disperse this meeting. By His Majesty's command, open this door."

"As you say, but by your leave, you shall identify yourself before I open."

"'Tis Robert Welch and my men. We are here on orders of Bishop Laud and His Majesty the King."

The door inched open and Ann raised her chin as she looked Welch in the eye. "We are flattered, sir, that His Majesty has any interest at all in our meeting. Do come in." Her heart drummed in her chest, but her stare did not waver.

Welch scanned the room. His men moved to the back hall and observed the children practicing their letters. He eyed the Bible left open on the side table. An arrogant smile played on his lips as he seized it.

"Are you to say that we may not open our sewing meeting with a prayer and Bible verse, Mister Welch? We may be women, but we do love our Lord."

"Aye, I am certain you do, madam. Pray tell, which of you reads?"

"Why, I do, Mister Welch. And unless the law has much changed, I do believe I am within it."

Welch closed the Bible and placed it on the table. He strummed his fingers on the worn cover before he turned to face her. "Are you the lady of the house?"

"I am here for our meeting only. Now, sir, you have found nothing amiss, and you are frightening our children. I must ask you to take your leave. With haste." She opened the door and stood back, permitting the men to file out, their gaze shifting everywhere but toward her.

Welch was the last to leave, but hesitated at the door, a leer in his eyes. "We shall be watching this house, you may be certain."

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“Good morrow, Mister Welch.” A cold wind caught the door, and she heaved her tall frame against it. She drew the plank to bolt the door. Her breath escaped as she turned to the women. “Helen, does he know ye? Have you seen this man before?”

“Nay, I do not believe so.”

“That is good. It is best if he does not learn our names.”

The ladies’ upturned faces bore their fear and she prayed Mister Welch and his men would not tarry. A drum of hooves on frozen dirt answered her prayer. She moved to the door at the back and cracked it. A thin shaft of light fell on the frost-covered path. Barnabas would know they were safe and the men could disperse to their homes.

Ann pulled on her cloak and adjusted the hood about her face. After her sons were bundled, she lifted the plank from the door and stepped out into the cold air. She scooped Benjamin up and took Joseph by the hand. The women bid each other farewell and Godspeed and departed with a hasty look toward the woods hedging the grounds.

As she neared their house, Ann allowed a nervous glance over her shoulder. She tightened her grip on Joseph’s hand and led him cautiously through their doorway, peering into the darkness. A shadow moved. She stopped short and held her breath.

Barnabas quickly wrapped them in his arms. His whisper was urgent. “Who was it?”

She lifted her face to her husband and the hood fell away. “He said his name was Robert Welch. He claims to be on orders of the King.” Her voice finally trembled.

“Did he ask ye your names? Do you think he knows who ye are?”

“Nay. I cannot say for certain, but I do think he believed ’twas as I said. I asked him to leave before he could ask more questions of us. I am frightened, Barnabas. We cannot keep meeting this way. People are being whipped for prayer meetings. We have our children to think of.” She set Benjamin down and both boys clung to her skirt.

“Aye. I know, my love. I’ve had earnest talks with Jeremy and Thomas. We think it is time to give serious consideration to sailing for the colonies.”

“Your brothers have wanted to go for a long time. Your parents shall be saddened, but I want you to know when all is ready, I shall be too. My heart will follow you wherever you go.”

He drew her near and rested his head on hers, his warm breath close to her ear. “Mistress Horton?”

“Yes, Barnabas?”

“Have I told you how much I love you?”

Ann laughed and relief warmed her. “Yes, Barnabas.”

He looked down on their young sons. “I promise you, Ann. I shall not forget tonight. I shall keep you and our boys safe. We shall go to the colonies and it will be a new life for us. I promise you that.”