
Why Charity Phillips Had To Die



Chapter One

Another Difficult Decision

In a community of five hundred souls, anyone's dying affects everyone left alive. But when the word murder crops up connected with that dying, it's as if someone had made a law saying that for the next several weeks no one can speak above a whisper.

The first exception to that law came in Reverend Coleman's sermon, a diatribe that left the congregation looking hangdog guilty, but did not succeed in forcing the murderer to reveal himself, which had been Reverend Coleman's intention.

The second exception came at the special meeting of the Theft Detecting Society called by Major Smith. As usual we

met in the Major's particularly large front parlor, a pack of sweaty men (and me); men made especially irritable by the furnace which had become our abnormal summer. No one could sit still, either squirming in their seats or wiping their foreheads to keep the sweat from filling their eyebrows.

The Major, however, looked cool and not the least uncomfortable, which as far as I was concerned, was cause for suspicion, though I could not have said what crime I thought he had committed, beyond pomposity.

"We've been asked by Thomas Phillips to step in," Major Smith explained to the fifteen men in the room. "As you know, he employed one Jonah Creed, a half-wit, as a hired hand, and he's not been seen since the night of the murder. So I suggest we begin with him."

General Sam McClellan sat quietly in a chair next to Major Smith's desk, watching us with what I took to be great care, and I'm afraid, watching me closest. I assumed he was wondering whether I'd worked up enough sand to talk to my father, and I'm sure he'd have been disappointed to learn that I had not. Instead I'd spent the better part of the last three weeks sneaking off with Eben, improving my skills in tracking, shooting, and finding my way through the woods like an Indian. That such skills would serve me precious little at Yale, I ignored, trusting instead to the notion that I was somehow getting in touch with some basic human instincts which I had failed to develop. I also had convinced myself that this was an unusually pure form of education. I rationalized the time away from the farm by telling myself that most of what we learn never directly applies until it does. Even then, the application depends upon the circumstances. But this I did know, even at such a young age. Life constantly twists and turns and no one can say what you might have to face next.

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The only way to ensure your survival is to be prepared for whatever comes your way.

“Jonah Creed is not a half-wit,” I said.

Major Smith sighed. Argument rests uneasily on the military mind. “Why is it, Stoddard, that your contentions always seem to fly in the face of accepted fact?”

I wished I could have summoned some long and learned argument to refute him, but the best I could manage was simplicity. “He’s not a half-wit. He may be shy, he may not speak out, but he reads from his Bible every night, and he has committed vast portions of it to memory. Every half-wit I’ve ever known was illiterate.”

The information exposed an unprotected flank, but he wheeled his phalanxes quickly, pulling himself up in his chair, his voice rising. “Will you at least acknowledge that his disappearance does not augur well for his innocence?”

“I can think of other reasons why he might have run off.”

“And what might they be?” Elijah Williams asked, his voice assuming the tone of authority we all despise as children and seem unable to avoid as adults.

“He might have seen the man who killed her. Jonah is not a man to fight. He is terrified of other men,” I said. Large though the parlor might have been, with the windows and doors shut it had gotten very close.

Major Smith wheeled again. “That, of course, is not the issue at hand. What we have to determine is whether we will abridge the rules of The Society, rules which allow us only to aid members. The question, gentlemen, is whether we will send the Pursuers after Jonah Creed.”

I began to wonder whether Major Smith might not have been more comfortable as an English squire, for certainly his

view of our society and mine were an ocean apart. Whenever I thought of pursuing anyone, I thought of our first pursuit, and how we went tearing off willy-nilly in the wrong direction with not a single clear notion of where we were headed or who we were chasing. Of course my thinking hadn't been preconditioned by military notions. Major Smith expected to find the enemy located in a prominent position where he could be attacked in proper military fashion. And of course he expected to prevail. I had few such illusions.

"Does anyone know where Jonah might be?" I asked.

No answer.

"Then I don't see what we gain by a pursuit. We'd have to search every house, every barn, every hovel in town. Not only would that take the devil's own amount of time, but that would constitute illegal search and seizure. No one has such authority without being authorized by the courts."

Major Smith's temper had run to the end of its tether, probably because nothing confuses an adult more than a knowledgeable youth. "Hang it all, Stoddard, why are you so bent on protecting Jonah Creed?" Finally the heat had gotten to him too, and he mopped his brow with a clean linen handkerchief.

I tried a diversion, because I was in fact, determined to protect Jonah, but I didn't want to admit that just yet. "Suppose he is not the murderer. If we go dashing all over creation, we'll put the real murderer on notice that we're looking for him. He'll not likely make many mistakes after that."

General McClellan pulled himself up in his chair, ran a hand over his unruly gray hair, and cleared his throat with the dry rattle common to smokers. "That makes sense, Stoddard, and yet, with due consideration given to the Major's concern over violating our charter, we have, or so it seems

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to me, a clear moral obligation to help a neighbor here, be he member or not. Can you propose a solution?"

"Eben Stroud," I said.

Major Smith snorted. "The man's an irregular. He's half brigand himself."

"Still," the General said, "he got my horse back."

"I'm confounded if I can see, General," the Major said, "how such an undisciplined, unruly heretic could produce aught but a greater dilemma."

"We should send for the High Sheriff," Caleb Child said.

"I did," Elijah said. "Be here in a week or so." The sweat was dripping from his nose, but he seemed to pay it no mind.

"He got here three days after Eben and Stoddard got my horse back," the General said. "Must be horse thieves leave town quicker than murderers."

"Maybe murderers don't leave as many tracks," I said.

Neither remark did much to lighten the mood. In truth, nothing could have. Charity had been as pure a soul as ever lived. At twenty-five she was considered an old maid, who took care of her ailing mother, and in keeping with her name, traveled about ministering to the less fortunate. On Sundays she instructed the children at the East Church in their religion. And yet someone had picked up a heavy hammer and stove in her head. It left us with the feeling that if someone like Charity could not live safely, then none of us could afford to sleep too easily.

The General cleared his throat again. "We've nothing to lose by hiring Eben," he said.

"'Cept money," Caleb said.

"Do you work for nothing, Caleb?" the General asked.

"No. I thought not." He turned toward the rest of us. "Gentlemen, we have the means to pay Mr. Stroud, and we cannot fail here to find the killer. Not only do we have a clear moral obligation, but from a purely pragmatic standpoint we have a killer among us, and who can say when he might strike again? I for one, will not rest easy until we have that man in irons, and certainly the womenfolk will suffer even greater distraction."

I was short of knowledge in a lot of things, but on the subject of women I knew absolutely nothing, nor did I count myself eager to learn more about feminine ways. What with training four horses, and not having told my father about Yale, I'd courted more trouble than anyone with the least common sense would assume. But I could hear my mother muttering about "people not being safe in their beds," and I understood the effect that had on someone day after day, always wondering if the murderer was the very person you happened to be talking to, or sitting next to in church.

"Would we offer the same arrangement?" I asked

"We going to be paying you too?" Caleb asked.

"Only if Mr. Stroud asks me to help."

Major Smith looked as if he'd eaten a bad piece of meat. He liked riding out at the head of the Pursuers, galloping over the roads armed to the teeth. I suppose that made up for his never having fought in a battle in the recent war. "I still can't abide the man," he said. "A scoundrel if ever I saw one!"

The General smiled, but his words were a whiplash. "There's only two men in this room who know the least thing about Eben Stroud. I'm one, Stoddard is the other. I can assure you that Eben Stroud knows more about the ways a man's mind works than anyone I ever met. Five times he held me

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out of battle until he thought the time was right, and each time his advice brought victory. But you don't have to take my recommendation, oh no. You can get one from President Washington."

The quiet was so profound that you could hear Wilson Fowler's leather braces squeak as he breathed.

"It's settled then," the General said, his pale blue eyes going from face to face. "Stoddard, you talk to Mr. Stroud and let us know what arrangements he'd like."

"We're supposed to vote on things like this," Caleb said.

"All those in favor raise their right hands," the General said.

Only Caleb and the Major failed to raise their hands.

"Opposed?"

No hands.

"Abstentions?"

Two hands came up slowly.

"Let the record show the vote was fourteen in favor, two abstaining." He turned to me. "Stoddard, you'd best get started."

"Yes, sir," I said, and then I rose and walked out to where I had tethered my horse to a ring in the barn wall. I was eager to start, eager to carry the news to Eben, even as I began to wonder whether I was right. Did Eben's abilities extend to finding a murderer, particularly this murderer? I felt quite certain that whoever had killed Charity Phillips had not fled. But without a witness I could not see how we could identify the killer. And despite what General McClellan had said about Eben's abilities, finding a murderer was quite a different affair from deciding when to enter battle. I even wondered whether Eben would be the least bit interested.

Robert Holland

Would he agree to look for the man who had murdered Charity? And then another thought crept in. Could it have been a woman?

It was a most disquieting thought. I swung up into the saddle and walked the mare out the drive to the road. I looked at the corn and shook my head. We needed rain. Everything had begun to wilt and the corn looked especially poor, the leaves curled in, the plants beginning to droop.

Off to the west I could see the thunderheads piling up the way they do on hot summer days, and I hoped they'd drift our way. If it didn't rain soon, it would be a long hard winter. Another couple of weeks and the wheat and the oats would fail along with the corn. That had not happened in my lifetime, but it had happened before, and my father remembered it well, though it was not a subject he cared to dwell on.