

Chapter Two

A Visit With Amos Fitch

I should have guessed that Eben would be interested but I could never have guessed at his eagerness. He grinned, and in his eyes I could see a sudden passion rise as he fastened onto the problem like an otter to a fish, his mind gnawing with obvious relish at the questions which arose.

He sat in his stout rocker by the fireplace, turning things over and over in his mind, his pipe hurling smoke upward in a steady stream. I sat on a chair by the table and I was neck deep to a tall horse in thought when Eben finally set his pipe aside and cleared his throat.

"In matters like this," he said, "where a woman's the victim, most of the possibilities that arise have to do with men. Might be she was carrying a child, and her lover killed her, lest word get out. Could be a suitor spurned." He looked up. "Don't think because she was a thin, plain woman that some man might not have coveted her."

"One man's meat is another man's poison," I said.

"And one man's daughter is another man's wife." He smiled, and I wondered if I would ever get used to the diabolic flash of his teeth below his great, sweeping mustache.

"Some fathers, after all, don't easily surrender their flesh and blood to another man."

Robert Holland

I couldn't see where he was leading so I stuck to the facts.
"Major Smith was set to run Jonah Creed to ground."

"You know Creed?"

"I do."

"They say he's a half-wit."

"So they say."

"But you say differently."

"Two summers ago I hayed with Jonah. Even on the hottest day he wore his shirt. A little at a time he grew to trust me, and once when we were working alone, he took off his shirt. His back is covered with so many whip scars I couldn't see a clear patch of skin. Later, I asked him about the scars, and he told me how his father had whipped him. One night he ran away, and hid on a ship, surviving on what scraps he could steal. When the boat put into Boston, he slipped over the side. Since then he's drifted from farm to farm. People think he's a half-wit because when they try to get him to talk, he stutters, and can't say a word anyone can understand. Left to his own device, he's a hard worker, never complains, and just wants to be left to himself."

"A man like that could only find two ways to defend himself. The first is to run. But cornered, well, as I recall, he's close to your height, but broader in the shoulders. And not many men would be a match. He'd fight harder than most, and because of the beatings, he can stand more pain."

"But would he kill a woman?"

"Anyone can kill. It depends on what drives them to it. We need to find him and try to talk to him. Consider, Stoddard, he lived close to where Charity met her end. Certainly he might have run because he killed her, but it's just as logical to assume that he ran because of what he witnessed."

"He's not hard to find," I said.

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"The old trapper's cabin on the Fitch place, back of Round Hill Bog."

I grinned. "Is there anything that goes on in this town that you don't know?"

"I can't tell you who killed Charity Phillips. Right now I can't even tell you why she had to die." He stood and tapped the ash from his pipe into the fireplace. "Rumor has it that Amos Fitch had gone a-courting."

"More than a rumor. I exercise horses on that road. I saw him there half a dozen times."

"He's got young Mr. Creed cutting firewood for him."

"What?"

"Thought that might surprise you." He started for the door. "Best we talk to Amos, and Jonah, then old Phillips, and finally the Right Reverend Pell over in East Parish."

"You think he's had a hand in this?"

Eben grinned as we stepped off the back steps and headed for the hovel. "You're going to be a lawyer, Stoddard, best you learn to cast a wide net and force everything down to the narrow end. Put another way, even the most carefully set trap doesn't always produce what you expect to catch. And men can set traps too, so it pays to conceal your intentions until the very last. And then too, there's two kinds of traps, the one you see and the one you don't."

And that's when I began to understand what General McClellan had meant. Most people saw Eben Stroud as only a trapper and a hunter who lived by means they little understood, so they shunned him. That was the trap they could see, and it left them vulnerable to whatever Eben had in mind. It is always the trouble with being young. You just get one idea down, and then you come upon some new information, and you have to reconsider what you thought you knew.

Robert Holland

I went through that three times the first day out. You can't live in a place with so few people but what you form opinions about them. Each time we talked to someone that day, my opinions wilted under the pressure provided by fact. It was strangely exhilarating.

Amos Fitch came first. He'd lived in town only five years, having inherited the farm from his uncle. For a time, he'd been a regular at church, he ran a good farm, and he kept his own counsel. No one accounted him a neighborly man, and most had placed him in the category reserved for loners who cause no harm and are best left alone.

Still, he earned the respect of his fellow men. His actions counted heavily. He was a hard worker, and when a neighbor needed help, Amos Fitch was there to offer his hand. And when he had started courting Charity, he had come a full step closer to being included in the community.

Plain and thin she might have been, but she had a ready smile and she was kind to everyone. Most wondered why she hadn't married earlier, for there had been suitors. Some said she was just too hard to please. Others said she wouldn't leave her ailing mother. But not a soul in town could find a harsh word to describe Charity Phillips, and most approved a match with Amos Fitch, a bachelor of thirty-five. Amos was every bit as plain as Charity. A tall, slender man with a narrow face, he was shy and slow to laugh, around most people, but any child could make him smile. He'd developed a reputation as a sharp but fair trader, and he liked neatness and order.

The longer the courtship lasted, the more the tongues clacked. Most had thought the banns would be posted by Christmas, but that came and went, and then the spring slipped by, and Amos kept a-courting.

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We found him sitting at a small bench by the barn door mending harness, and I got another surprise. He and Eben knew each other well.

"How you keeping, Amos?" Eben swung down from his big black horse.

"Poorly, Eben, poorly."

"Grieved me to hear about Charity," Eben said. "Ought to have come by sooner."

Amos nodded and watched me dismount.

"You know Stoddard Chandler?" Eben asked.

"By sight 'til now." He stood and offered his hand.

Like most farmers, Amos had a powerful grip, and though I had heard over and over how shy he was, I found nothing furtive in the way he looked at me, his blue eyes direct as he made no attempt to conceal his appraisal.

"Stoddard and I have been asked to look into Charity's passing by the Society," Eben said

"Didn't know the Major had that much sense."

"He doesn't." Eben grinned. "But young Stoddard here can be very persuasive, and I believe that General McClellan was equally eager to see something done."

It was a very high compliment, and only by exercising as much control as I could summon did I avoid strutting like some vainglorious fighting cock.

"We thought you might be able to help us, Amos."

He nodded. "I will if I can."

"We need to talk to Jonah Creed."

That he was not a man given to deceit showed in his eyes, and it explained, at least in part, why Charity Phillips had welcomed his attentions.

"Eben, that boy's not said a word since he showed up here that night. He couldn't even tell me what happened. Just sat

in the kitchen, wringing his hands, tears running down his face, and not making a sound." He rubbed at the back of his sunburned neck. "Next morning Reverend Coleman came by, told me what happened, and told me Jonah had run off."

"You don't think he did it?" Eben asked.

"Call me a fool, if you will, but I don't. And here's another puzzle. At first I thought he was just being stubborn and refusing to talk, but now I think he can't talk. Twice he's tried to answer my questions. His mouth starts working, but he can't make a single sound. Then he starts to cry."

"Some say he's a half-wit," Eben said.

"Nonsense. He talked to Charity. He talked to me. Got the worst scars on his back I ever saw, and I been to sea where whip scars on a man's back are as common as pock marks. I've come to think something terrible happened to him, and sent him into an apoplexy of some sort."

Eben nodded. "Knew a man once, ran into a pack of Mohawks. They lifted his hair and left him for dead but he survived. Took nearly a year before he said a word."

Amos swallowed hard, looked down at his feet, and slipped his thumbs under the straps of his braces. When he spoke his voice cracked with emotion. "Why Eben? Why would anyone kill Charity?" He shook his head. "If her father had consented, we'd have been married. Ten times I asked him for her hand and he turned me down. This week we were going over to Thompson to get married." Tears formed in the corners of his eyes and he wiped them away quickly. "Her like will not easily be found again."

"Phillips say why he wouldn't consent?" Eben asked.

"I knew right enough. He wanted her to marry that old fool of a minister over in the East Parish."

"Never had much use for old Pell," Eben said.

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"I tried to talk Reverend Coleman into speaking to Phillips for me, but he turned me down. Said it was no concern of his." He wiped a hand across his jaw. "I quit the church the day they buried Charity."

My mind dashed from pillar to post so quick I'd hung half the town until logic set in, and I began acquitting them one after another 'til I couldn't find anyone left to accuse.

"We wondered, Amos," Eben said, "if Jonah might talk to Stoddard. They know each other. I'd planned to stop by but I thought he'd think the Devil had come for his due."

That brought a smile from Amos. "No offense, Eben, but probably half the town thinks that way."

"Keeps them on their toes," Eben said and he smiled like a wolf, all teeth and no humor.

We waited in the shade of a big sugar maple, watching Amos ride out, taking the road that led over the flat of his cornfield to the woods on the far side. Looking at the corn made me think again about how badly we needed the rain.

"You got a girl you're sweet on?" Eben asked.

The question took me quite by surprise. "None particular," I answered as evasively as possible.

"None that struck your fancy?"

"Oh, they strike my fancy well enough," I said. "They just haven't struck that part of my fancy where you go all wobble-legged and make a big damn fool of yourself."

That brought a laugh from Eben, a big booming laugh you could have heard a mile off, and for the first time I heard no sarcasm in the sounds he made.

I grinned. "Hannah Hayes is pretty interesting, though."

"That'll be Gabriel Hayes' youngest daughter."

I nodded.

Robert Holland

"Blond hair, blue eyes, smooth gaited as your filly."

I hadn't thought of comparing her to a filly, but it seemed to fit well enough, though it'd have to be a bold filly, because Hannah was nothing if not bold.

"Bother you, if some young buck took to courting her?"

"She's just turned sixteen."

"Would it rankle you?"

I scuffed my right boot in the dirt beneath the tree. It was an area I hadn't explored, and I wasn't at all sure what I felt. The longer I took to think about it, the more I saw that it would indeed get under my skin, and that perhaps I ought to make some effort to at least toss my hat into the ring, just in case. "I suppose it would," I said.

"Well now, Stoddard, you keep that thought handy." He looked up as Amos and Jonah came down out of the woods riding double on Amos' plow horse. The waves of heat rising from the ground were so intense that the image seemed almost liquid in the way it wriggled in the air.

We waited in silence as they disappeared behind the barn, and finally, Amos appeared on his porch and waved me in.

We met in the front yard. "All he did was nod his head yes," Amos said, and then he shook his head sadly. "Can't think who could have beaten that boy so badly."

"His father," I said.

"He told you that?"

"Once, when we were haying together."

"Someone should have shot the man. Imagine, taking a whip to your own son ... hard to fathom." He shook his head again. "He's waiting for you in the keeping room."

I nodded and walked to the house, trying to figure out how I would approach Jonah, and not having a single idea.