

Chapter Three

What Jonah Knew

I found him sitting on the edge of a straight-backed chair, his hands spread over his knees, sweat pouring down his face as if he'd just finished hoeing an acre of corn in July. I got a chair and sat across from him, trying to think what to say, and for a while saying nothing, as I tried to guess at what might be running through his mind. I took more time trying to figure out how to start, and then I threw my carefully laid out words aside and just followed my instincts.

"I know you didn't kill Charity," I said.

No reaction. In fact, his face did not change at all. He sat in the chair, his back perfectly straight, his eyes wide and round, his fingers white where they dug into his knees. I had never seen anyone so terrified.

"Only three people know where you are, and we aren't telling a soul but we need your help, Jonah. We need to know what happened." I could see his jaw muscles working and I continued talking. "If you were there, then you know what happened. At least one other person knows, and that's whoever killed Charity. Once we know where to start, we can figure out how to get the killer to admit to what he did."

Suddenly his mouth moved and he began to talk, stuttering in a flat, expressionless tone. "M-my n-n-name is J-J-

Jonah C-C-Creed. I c-came from E-England on a sh-sh-ship. Cha-cha-Charity was m-my f-f-friend. E-Everybody thinks I am a ha-ha-half-wit, but I c-can read and I c-can write."

"I know you can, Jonah. Charity told me that."

"My fa-fa-fa-father b-beat m-me be-because I was sm-smart and I wou-wou-wouldn't work as a c-cobbler with h-h-him. I k-k-k-killed him! With a ha-hammer."

It was a stunning piece of information, and it deflated me considerably. I had to stand and walk across the room to regain my composure. Finally, I stepped to the sink and dipped a cup of water from the bucket. "Whatever you do, Jonah, don't tell anyone, not even Amos, about that. Do you understand why?"

He nodded.

"You just stay here and keep out of sight. Amos will take care of you. He's a good man, Jonah, none better. Trust him. Trust me, Jonah. Can you do that?"

Again he nodded.

I sat down. "Were you in the barn?"

He nodded.

"Did you see what happened?"

"N-no."

"Who else besides you and Charity were in the barn?"

"R-R-Reverend P-Pell a-and Ph-ph-phillips."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

He shook his head hard from side to side. "T-too f-fast."

I decided to back off rather than get him more agitated. Maybe, given time, he would remember, but in any case I wanted to talk with Eben before I pushed this any further. I stood up. "Take your time, Jonah. Try and remember every detail of what happened. Start at the beginning and write

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down each thing you can remember. Can you do that?"

He shifted in the chair and began to release the grip on his legs. Slowly the color came back into his hands, and then I noticed a raw red circle around his right ankle. Only one thing made such a mark.

"Where did you get that?" I pointed to the angry welt.

He looked down at it and seemed to recoil as if he had seen a deadly snake. "Whip! H-he had a wh-wh-whip!"

"Who had a whip? Mr. Phillips?"

He nodded, jerking his head up and down, his chestnut colored hair flopping madly. He winced and ran his hand up over the back of his head.

I stepped behind his chair. "Let me take a look," I said. I parted his hair. He had bump the size of a goose egg with a long scab across the center. "How'd that happen?"

"D-don't know. Can't re-re-remember."

I sat down at the table, took out some note paper and a small lead, and began making notes.

"Wh-what are y-y-y-you writing?"

"Just what you told me." I folded the paper, slipped it and the lead into my shirt pocket, and stood up. "Just keep out of sight and try to remember what happened. I'll be back either tomorrow or the next day." Then I wondered whether Amos had either paper or a lead. I pulled a second folded sheet of paper from my pocket, dug around 'til I came up with another lead, and gave them to Jonah. "Try to write it down. Will you do that?"

He nodded and I smiled.

"It'll turn out all right, Jonah. It'll turn out all right."

He shook his head. "Charity's dead. Sh-sh-she h-h-helped m-me. Sh-she was m-my f-f-friend."

It took a while to get any words past the lump in my

throat. Finally I put both hands on his shoulders and looked him squarely in the eyes. "We can't bring her back, Jonah, but at least we can find who did that to her. I give you my word. I'll find him."

His eyes went round with fear, and suddenly I understood what he was so afraid of. He thought he might have killed Charity without even knowing he'd done it.

"Jonah, you could not have killed Charity. Nothing could have made you do that." I dug my fingers into his shoulders and slowly, he began to relax. "She was a sister to you, she loved you like a brother. Try to remember what happened in the barn, try to separate it from England." I let go of his shoulders and straightened up. "And remember this. You have friends. True friends. Strong friends."

He nodded and for the first time since I'd come into the house, I saw in his eyes that he wanted to succumb to hope. "I'll be back," I said. "That's a promise."

"Did he say anything?" Amos asked as I stepped into the shade of the maple.

"Not much. He was there, but he can't remember. I gave him a lead and a piece of paper so he can write down whatever he can remember."

Amos started. "He can write?"

"After I'd seen the scars on his back, I asked Charity about him, and she told me that not only can he read and write, but he can cipher faster than Mr. McHugh."

"She never said a word about that," Amos said.

"Did you ask?" Eben looked directly at him.

"Can't say as I did."

"Them that asks" Eben chuckled. "Keep him out of sight, Amos. Tell no one anything. My guess is we'll see the sheriff a few days from now, and he's not the quickest study

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I ever clapped eyes on. He'll arrest Jonah, and once they get him in court he's done for. He's the easy answer to something that no one wants to dwell on."

"You got my word on it, Eben."

Both men nodded. We mounted up and headed back out to the road, saying nothing until we had cut onto the road and turned out of sight of the farm.

"He told you something you're chewing on."

"It's a good thing we got to him first."

"That bad?"

"He told me he killed his father ... with a hammer."

If it took Eben by surprise he did not show it. "Tells us one thing," he said. "He knew what was used to kill her."

"I suppose it does." It also said a whole lot more but I didn't want to go beyond calling it a coincidence just yet. "He was smart and he refused to be a cobbler like his father, so his father beat him with a whip."

"Best you stay away from hammers for awhile."

"What?" Suddenly the similarity stuck me and all I could do was laugh. "I guess as long as Father stays away from whips, we'll not come to more than harsh words. But that reminds me. Jonah's got a whip mark around his right ankle and a great bump with a scab on it on the back of his head."

"So there was a scuffle of some kind."

"Reverend Pell was there."

"Care to hazard a guess?"

"About what? You mean about what happened? I don't think I could guess. Maybe I don't want to yet."

"Well, suppose you got yourself caught by Gabriel Hayes in the barn with Hannah?"

I jerked back on the reins and set my mare to dancing like

a spider on a skillet. Such a contemptible thought never entered my mind, and I could feel the blood rush to my face.

"Calm yourself, Stoddard. The world isn't nearly so full of moral and upright folks as you've been led to believe. The Doghead Johnsons of this world aren't even the worst criminals, only the easiest to understand because they're driven by greed. Men driven by passion commit far worse crimes, and what we have here is a crime of passion. What brought that on is what will tell us how the deed was done, and most likely by whom. Now, let's get back to the subject of Gabriel Hayes' barn. What would you do?"

"Run"

"And leave Hannah to face her father alone?"

"Not run. No. I'd ... I'd ... I'm damned if I know what I would do!" My mare had calmed some, but she was still edgy and she didn't like the unsettled tone in my voice.

"Suppose he came up on you quietly, from behind, and suddenly turned a whip on you? What then?"

"I guess I'd defend myself."

"And most likely with whatever came to hand, and in a barn, like as not, that'd"

"... be a hammer."

We rode quietly for a ways. "But that assumes Charity had taken up with Jonah, and she was set to marry Amos. She couldn't have taken up with Jonah!"

"What was she doing in the barn with Jonah at night?"

"Teaching him. She always taught him at night. That was the only time Phillips didn't work him into the ground."

Eben smiled and nodded. "Once again you surprise me, Stoddard. You're a most interesting young man. When confronted with a question you cannot answer you seek information, so that even if you can't fully answer the question

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you can at least understand why you asked it." He resettled himself in his saddle. "I have a question. Why didn't you tell any of this to Amos Fitch?"

"Amos is an honest man."

"So the less he knows, the less he is likely to reveal to someone with greater guile."

"Yes."

"Why did Jonah go to Amos, whom he hardly knew?"

"Because he trusted Charity and she was going to marry Amos."

"Right again, I think."

We'd come to the north crossroads and without hesitating Eben turned east.

"Where to now?" I asked.

He reined in and looked around at me, those yellow eyes bright in the sun. "How many people were in the barn?"

"We don't know."

"Oh, but we do know. Jonah has two marks on him: one from a whip, one from something else, an ax handle most likely. What does that tell you?"

I saw it immediately and was immediately dumbfounded that I had overlooked something so obvious. "One mark was inflicted from a distance, the other from close up, which means that there were at least four people in the barn."

"Exactly right."

"Who lives over east that ... Reverend Pell!"

"I thought we might pay a call on the crazy old pastor at the East Church. From what Amos said, I'd guess he didn't spend all those evenings at the Phillips' just reading the Bible. It looks to me like we have the oldest of quarrels to deal with here. One woman, two men, one of them spurned and likely as not, plotting revenge, which, from what I know of the

Reverend Pell comes quite as natural as stepping outside to take a piss."

"But he's a minister! A man of God!"

"Human, still. No matter what titles we gather along the way, in the end we're all human, and we're all given to the same passions. Some respond to those passions more quickly than others. Some carry on in ways ordinary folk cannot understand, simply because it makes no sense."

My education was expanding at an enormous rate. What I was learning was every bit as valuable as what I had learned in books, with the exception of the works of William Shakespeare. This was the very sort of thing he wrote about, however much he cloaked his plays in the garb of kings and queens, and it was edifying to see it made real.

Eben checked the sun. "Best we pick up the pace. I always like to catch a minister in the morning when he's most likely to be working on his sermon. Today be Thursday?"

"It is."

"He'll be close to the end of his sermon for Sunday, and he'll be irritated at having to interrupt his work at that point, because he'll have been looking forward to getting the last words down before lighting into a big dinner."

We broke into a trot and then, when the road ran smooth and straight, we cantered for the better part of a mile. Not much talking gets done when you're bouncing along at such speed, so there's plenty of time for thinking, and while I had plenty to chew on, what most occupied me were Eben's assumptions about Reverend Pell. How could he be so certain that the man was involved, unless, of course, he was better acquainted than I knew with the good Reverend's habits?