

Chapter Four

A Short Surprising Visit

As we waited outside the parish house, I was certain Eben had guessed wrong. False expectations too often lead to dashed hopes so you could have knocked me over with a dandelion puff when Reverend Pell greeted us at the door.

“Mr. Stroud, Mr. Chandler, come in, come in. I was just putting the finishing touches on my sermon for Sunday.”

“Perhaps we should come back another time,” Eben said, though I knew he had no such intention.

“No, it’s a long ride on any day. Come in. Please.” He beckoned with his right hand, a long fingered, bony sort of contraption that looked more as if it belonged on a man recently arisen from the grave. We followed him into the cool dark of the house and along the hall to his study.

“Please sit down,” he said, pointing to the two straight-backed chairs by the front of his desk. He looked as if he hadn’t eaten in months, his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks a match for his bony, cadaverous hands. His hair was wispy and gray, and he had an uncompromising set to his jaw, but most important were his icy blue eyes. You could feel the force of his personality radiating outward from them.

“We’ll not take much of your time,” Eben said. “We’ve been asked to look into the death of Charity Phillips.”

"How does that bring you to me?"

"As a suitor, you had some interest in Miss Phillips"

"I was no such thing!" Pell roared in his finest blood and thunder fashion, rising with surprising suppleness from his chair, his right hand raised like a politician clamoring to be heard above the general tumult, except that he was the general tumult. "I visited with Thomas and his poor, sickly Elizabeth, on many, many occasions, but never did I express any intentions toward his dear, departed daughter and I will brook no such accusation, especially not under my own roof!"

I slid my feet back, ready to rise and leave, but Eben's sudden burst of laughter stopped me.

"Guess you didn't read your Chaucer," Eben said. "Probably kept your nose in the Bible and ignored everything else."

I was stunned. Eben had read Chaucer? It didn't seem possible. I turned to look at him and watched the merriment go out of his eyes, replaced by the dangerous blade-like glint I had seen the day we'd come barreling into his yard.

"Sit down, Pell. Sit down and count your blessings. If somebody hadn't killed Charity, she'd have married Amos Fitch, and then you'd have gone off your rocker the way you did that night at Kerner's Cross. Only this time you would not have escaped."

If Reverend Pell had looked like a corpse before, now, with the color drained from his face, he looked like a specter turned loose to haunt some innocent and gullible soul, or at least how I imagined such a vision might appear.

Slowly, an inch at a time, he lowered himself back into his chair like a pig bladder with the air being slowly let out. "How did you know?"

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Eben sat as impassive as a stone.

"It was a ridiculous pretense," he said as he waved his bony hand through the air. "Indeed, I asked for her hand, but Thomas wouldn't hear of it. As close as we were, he told me that I was simply too old. It was a terrible blow, but not altogether unexpected. I kept after him and finally he agreed, but by then Charity had turned me down, mostly, I suspect, because she had fallen under the spell of that ignorant farmer, Amos Fitch."

Eben showed no mercy. "So then you took it upon yourself to assassinate Mr. Fitch's character."

"The man is a heathen! His soul is black as the Devil!"

Just by the timing of revealing what he knew, Eben had quickly raised the tension 'til Reverend Pell was at his mercy.

"And when that didn't work, you murdered Charity to keep her from marrying Amos Fitch."

At first he said nothing, and he sat so absolutely still I thought his heart had given out. Eben stalked the shrunken figure with his gaze, and waited out his silence the way you wait for a deer to come into your sights. Outside the katydids seemed to have multiplied into millions of harsh, strident voices ... say you did it ... say you didn't ... say you did it ... say you didn't

Reverend Pell pulled himself up in his chair, straightening his back, looking down at his thin hands spread like spider webs across the desk. "Think what you like, but I did not kill Charity Phillips." Still the katydids rasped ... say you did it, say you didn't "I wanted her for my wife. I loved her!" He raised his head, glancing my way, uneasy about my presence, though I suspected it had less to do with my age than my serving as a witness. In his eyes, where I had

expected to see sorrow, I saw only rage as he turned back to face Eben. "Do you understand? Do you? Do you understand how much I wanted her as my wife? Do you think I didn't know what people were saying? A sorry old man ... a dried up old husk of a man ... but none of that mattered compared to what I face now. Loneliness. Emptiness. Only Heaven is left to offer any reward for a lifetime of helping others. God strike me down, but I wanted a secular reward. For a long time I would visit and Charity would join us in the parlor, and then along came that half-wit, and Charity made it her business to try educating him. From then on when I came to pay a call, she would be out in the barn schooling him. Alone with him. No chaperone. No one to make sure that propriety was observed. All I could do was wonder."

Like most who make their living talking, he fed on the energy of his words. Suddenly he stood and began pacing back and forth, his hands locked at the small of his back.

"But apart from the impropriety of the situation, how could I find fault with someone so dedicated to helping that unfortunate boy? I even encouraged her work, though I suggested the lessons be moved into the house. Of course, the situation was hopeless, anyone could see that, but I hadn't the heart to discourage her." He stopped, lowered his head and he seemed to flag. "As if that weren't enough, that heathen Amos Fitch suddenly turned up. A Godless man. Scorned by the Shakers!"

I wasn't sure that being scorned by the Shakers ought to be marked down against anyone, but Reverend Pell seemed to hold them in high regard.

"And Charity was drawn to him. It is the scourge of womankind to be drawn to scalawags and scoundrels. It is the lesson of the Original Sin, played out over and over."

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He stood behind his high-backed chair, his hands wrapped around the spindles that held the back together. His knuckles were white with the pressure of his grip, and yet none of that tension showed in his voice or in his expression. I marked it down for later discussion with Eben.

“By then Thomas was on my side, interceding on my behalf to ensure an honorable marriage for his daughter.” He took a deep breath and drew himself upward. “I was there that night. Oh yes, I was. I’d come to plead my case yet another time, to beg, yes, even to fall upon my knees and beg for her hand, if it came to that. I’d no pride left, I’d have crawled in the very manure of that barn, groveled like a beaten cur, begging a rotted scrap of meat.” He shook his head. “But it was of no use, for what is not known generally about Charity is that she was an uncommonly stubborn woman, and not in the least afraid of her father. She even seemed to have some power over him that I could not define. Each time he started the discussion, she would turn and stare at him and he would cease.” He let go of the chair, walked around it and sat himself at the desk again. “In the end, all I could do was leave, resigned that I was not to wed Charity Phillips.” He looked straight into Eben’s eyes, saying nothing for what seemed a very long time.

Such ministerial gazes may have produced disquiet in some men, but Eben only smiled, a humorless, ironic smile that no one could read. Many lesser men might have fallen before that gaze, but it had no effect on Eben. I was surprised to find that I was equally unaffected.

In the end, Reverend Pell gave way yet again. “I confess it! I gave in to rage and anger and vanity. I even cursed both Charity and Thomas, and I double cursed Jonah Creed and Amos Fitch for the Godless men they are.”

Eben was not so easily put off the scent. "And what was Jonah Creed doing while you were arguing with Charity?"

"Creed?" He seemed puzzled.

"Why were you in the barn?"

"I went there with Thomas because I wanted to talk to Charity, and she was out there as usual, wasting her time with that half-wit mute. But now that you mention it, I don't recall seeing Creed there. Perhaps he was in his room. No. At the end. He showed up just at the end. I had become, I am afraid, quite irrational, and I was shouting at Thomas and Charity, and suddenly he was standing next to her as if he had a right to be her protector. He came out of the shadows like a ghost." He shivered. "A dangerous man, a half-wit like that. You never can tell what they'll take it in their heads to do, but it is well known that they come to do the Devil's bidding far easier than others."

"Jonah is not a half-wit," I said.

Pell drew his chin up and looked down his nose at me. Clearly he was not used to suffering the arguments of anyone he considered to be still a child.

I did not let him bait me. "He can read and he can write, and he's a good deal smarter than many men I've known."

My information was met with a dismissive sort of snort. "If he's not a half-wit, then he can only be insane or possessed. There is no other explanation."

Eben laughed. "Possessed? Is that what you think?"

"Is there any other rational explanation for his silence?"

"I can offer one," I said. "He carries the worst scars I've ever seen. Scars made by a whip wielded by his father. He is quiet because he does not trust other men. He keeps to himself because he fears the whip and being beaten again."

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“Those who fall under the lash, deserve the lash!” he said, his tone rising righteously. “It is all they understand. But even when they have been led to see the light, they are dangerous. They will turn the way a whipped cur turns even against the hand that feeds it. I say find Jonah Creed and you will have the man who murdered Charity Phillips in cold blood.”

Eben stood up and I followed suit.

“I wish I had your gift for seeing the world in such simple terms,” Eben said, “but the motives of men in such crimes are seldom simple. A grown man is the most dangerous animal in the world, if only because he can lie so easily and conceal the darkest secrets of his soul until he is ready to strike.”

Another astonishing piece of information. Eben thought of humans as animals! It was a notion beyond understanding. Humans were ... humans were ... well, I was pretty sure they weren't simply animals but I also knew I was going to spend a lot of time thinking about it.

“It would do,” Eben said, “to remember that just as hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, so some men suffer no greater rage than to be scorned by the woman they have chosen.”

It brought old Pell to his feet, his face flushed with rage. “Sir! Are you suggesting that I, a leader in the church, a man of indisputable good standing, could possibly, could possibly even consider”

“As often as not,” Eben said, “such men are the most likely to indulge their outrage, if only because they believe their standing among other men renders them invulnerable. They usually begin by invoking that privilege.”

“This is an absolute travesty!”

Eben suddenly stepped toward the desk and now his sheer size and power, and the fire in his eyes, drove Pell back-

ward, stumbling into his chair and only barely managing to stay upright. "The travesty is that somebody killed Charity Phillips! Everything else pales by comparison, and in as much as I've been assigned the task of finding out who killed her, I intend to pursue my job without scruples, without sympathy. There will be no rest for the guilty until they confess."

"Confess? No one confesses to such horror!"

Eben grinned and the wolf had returned. "What a man may confess to often depends on the encouragement he is provided."

I didn't know then just what Reverend Pell was guilty of, but there was no question in my mind that he was guilty of something, and that he was lying. It was why his knuckles had been so white as he gripped the chair, why he had confessed to his own frustration and anger. You can't grow up as a boy and not know that it is better to confess to the lesser crime, for having once confessed to something, it is far easier to deny the rest.



Back on our horses, we traveled west toward the Hill, saying little as we thought about what we had learned. For me it had been one of those times, like many other times I would experience as I grew older, when the scales fell from my eyes. I had never before thought about the way you got a wife. I guess I had supposed it was a simple sort of process. You met a girl you liked, you courted her, and if you fell in love, you got married. There were certain hurdles, of course. The parents had to accept you, but coming from a respected family, I had assumed I would encounter no difficulty along those lines.

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What took me by surprise was the emotion and the rage and the jealousy. Jealousy. What an odd word. What an enormous word. The only jealousy I could recall feeling was when one of my brothers had something I coveted. But to be jealous of another man for his success in courting a woman had never occurred to me, though the truth of it was immediately apparent.

"Well," Eben said, "we know he was in the barn around the time Charity was killed, and we know that Thomas Phillips and Jonah Creed were there as well." He turned in the saddle and looked around at me. "What else?"

"I don't know what it takes to drive a man to kill, but if rage and jealousy be part of the mix, then Reverend Pell is capable."

"Even more important, he had no pride left. By his own admission he had fallen to the level of a whipped dog, but not just any whipped dog, because he's quite right, a whipped dog will often turn. No. He had fallen to the level of a whipped dog that expects nothing more than whipping after whipping and no longer questions it. And yet he is still a man, driven by greed and the need to possess what he desires. The question is, simply, could that have pushed him over the edge?"

"He's also lying," I said.

Eben grinned. "What brought you to that conclusion?"

"When he was standing behind the chair. His knuckles were bone white, and yet his voice and his demeanor showed an entirely different character."

"Very observant, Stoddard, very observant indeed."

We stopped at the crossroads on the Hill. "Time to think things over," Eben said. "We'll meet tomorrow at Fitch's, just after sunup, if that suits you."

I nodded.

"Does your mother know Mrs. Phillips?"

"She does, though I've no idea how well."

"See what you can find out."

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm not sure." He ran his hand over his shaven head.

"It'd help if I knew what questions to ask." Eben smoothed his mustache. "It troubles me that no one mentions her."

"She's a sickly woman. The only time I've seen her is at church, and even then she doesn't come more than once a month." I couldn't see the use in knowing about Mrs. Phillips, but something was stirring in Eben's mind, and I'd learned by now that he wouldn't rest 'til he understood it, so I resigned myself to asking questions of my mother. It was a situation I did not relish. Mother had a way of reading into what you said, and in the process discovering a good deal more than you had intended to say. And, of course, I still hadn't told my father about Yale and leaving the farm. "I'll ask," I said.

"Get everything you can. Every detail, no matter how small, no matter how insignificant, might be important here." He gathered his reins. "We'll hold a council of war at Amos' in the morning." He loosed the reins, touched the big black on his flanks, and trotted off down the road, the dust billowing up and hanging low against the road in the still air.

I watched until he rode out of sight, then turned my mare toward home. It would be dinner time when I got there, and afterward I could help clean up the kitchen and that would be a good time to talk.