

# Chapter Six

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## Confrontation On Muddy Brook Bridge

The ride to Phillips' passed quickly, time evaporating in the face of our talk. I had always thought Mother was a quiet woman who kept her thoughts to herself, but once she got going she was a cyclone of words and ideas. It was also the first time she had ever talked to me as if I were an adult, and I discovered, in very short order, that she was a woman whose counsel would prove valuable. And as if that were not astonishing enough, I was considerably taken aback by the realization that until then I had never suspected that she was anything more than my mother.

We dropped the horses into a walk along the hilly stretch of the West Running Road, and now my words came easily. "Did you know that Reverend Pell was courting Charity?"

"Now that's an interesting bit of information."

"Mr. Phillips turned him down several times, but Reverend Pell kept coming back."

"Have you been to see him yet?"

"This morning."

"With Eben?"

"It was his idea."

"And what about Jonah Creed?"

As well as you know someone it is impossible to guess at

how they will react to such information. So it was with some hesitation, that I told her what Jonah had said.

"There are those, I suspect, who would leap to the obvious conclusion," she said.

"Some would," I said. "Major Smith for one."

"No bigger fool in the whole county."

"He's a worse windbag than old Pell."

She laughed. "That he is. But not as dangerous. Age has not calmed Reverend Pell, and a man who can rally others to his cause is dangerous, as he has proved more than once."

For a second I thought she was going to launch into the story of the Witch at Kerner's Cross, a story I'd only heard mentioned in hushed voices, but she changed the subject.

"When we get to the farm, it would be best if you stayed outside. I expect Tom is out haying with weather like this, but I have no idea in what sort of state I'm likely to find Elizabeth, and your presence might confuse things."

"I need to look around in the barn," I said.

"I'll call you if you're wanted."

From there to the farm the road ran to gravel and sand, and we set the horses into a trot. No matter what anyone claims, you cannot carry on a conversation from the back of a trotting horse with your innards flopping about like a fish out of water.

We tied up out front. "I would like to talk to her," I said.

She nodded. "We'll have to see."

"There's another life at stake here," I said.

"Poor Jonah." She shook her head. "Is he safe?"

"Anyone who wants him has to go through Eben."

She grinned. "That ought to give them pause."

"I suspect it might."

## Confrontation On Muddy Brook Bridge

She climbed the steps to the house as I watered the horses then led them into the cool of the barn. It gave me an excuse to be inside should Mr. Phillips suddenly appear. I didn't think he would know that the Society had hired us to find Charity's murderer, but as he was one of three people who could have killed her, he would certainly be suspicious of anyone he found prowling around in his barn.

And prowl I did, beginning with Jonah's room. It made me uneasy, digging through another man's life, but I simply had to know more about Jonah. I found precious little. His room was neat, the floor carefully swept, and the bed neatly made. His single change of clothes had been washed and hung on pegs on the wall. The books which Charity had loaned him were carefully stored on a shelf nailed to the wall: Chaucer, Shakespeare, a dictionary, the Bible.

Out in the barn, I examined the dirt floor. It showed where Charity had fallen and where her blood had seeped into the sand. I could see where someone had picked up her body and carried it away, and where Jonah had stood, and where he had fallen after being clubbed. I found the narrow tracks of Reverend Pell, and the broad prints left by Mr. Phillips' heavy boots.

With a lead and paper, I made a careful drawing of where everyone had stood, and how they had moved about. When I finished I just sat and looked around, trying to let my mind light on what my eyes had not discovered. On the wall behind where Mr. Phillips had stood, there was a nail and the clear imprint of a coil of something which had hung there a long time. It could have been rope, or it could have been the whip he had used on Jonah.

Search as I might, I could not find the hammer, though I did find the ax handle which had been used to strike Jonah

down. The blood showed plainly, and from where I found it, I assumed Reverend Pell had wielded it, though I did not let my mind fasten to that conclusion. I may have had little experience in such matters, but I thought it best to keep an open mind.

I checked the horses, tightened the girths, and I was leading them out of the barn when Mother came rushing across the yard. I could tell from the way she hurried that all was not well, and further, that she had hit upon a course of action which she was determined to follow.

“Elizabeth tells me there is a buggy in the barn. Hitch Brownie to it and bring it to the house as quickly as you can. We’ll be taking her back with us. Move quickly, Stoddard, I don’t want him to catch us.”

I had a bit of trouble getting Brownie into the traces. She hadn’t been driven in a good while and, in truth, had never cared for dragging things about. The buggy was in sorry shape. It had one seat and a box back, and it was rickety and full of dry rot. And the grease on the axle hubs looked dry. I found where he kept his lard, scooped some into a box and put it in, wanting to make sure a wheel did not freeze up and strand us.

Without Mother’s help, Mrs. Phillips could not even have stood, let alone walk, and it took both of us to get her into the back of the buggy and settled on several blankets. She had to lie with her legs bent at the knees. I used Brownie’s saddle with some blankets to make a pillow.

“When we reach the halfway point, you ride for Rebecca Blake and ask her to come as quickly as she can.”

I nodded and swung up onto my mare as Mother climbed onto the buggy and picked up the reins. More surprising news. I had never known Mother could drive, but drive she

## Confrontation On Muddy Brook Bridge

could, and Brownie seemed to understand that this was no time for fussing. She broke into a nice steady trot, and we headed out of the yard to the road.

I kept well back of the carriage so I could hear anyone coming up fast from behind. When I turned in the saddle I could see the dust hanging in the still, hot air, and I hoped it would settle quickly. The buggy tracks showed plainly, but the dust in the air would tell anyone with a sharp eye how far ahead we were, and give them the chance to circle and wait in ambush.

I'd have felt a good deal easier if I knew whether Thomas Phillips was a man likely to shoot from ambush. I unlimbered my rifle, checked the prime, and rode with it across my saddle. If he came riding up at a gallop, it would give me an advantage. Even so, an ambush seemed unlikely. I'd hunted over most of this country, and the woods here were thick, and a rider would have to walk to get through. Eben could have found a way to get ahead of the buggy, but I was pretty sure no other man could have done that. Mostly, I just tried to keep myself ready for whatever might transpire, even as I hoped nothing would.

Considering what happened, transpire is not a fair characterization. Explode seems closer, because just as Mother started onto the Muddy Brook Bridge, Reverend Pell arrived at the far side, reining in his horse in a great cloud of dust and flying stones. The bridge was only just wider than a hay wagon, and he turned his horse broadside, effectively blocking off the road, or so I thought. I had not counted on Mother's determination. Instead of pulling back on the reins, she applied the whip to Brownie's broad backside, and the horse broke into a gallop and bore down on the startled minister.

Robert Holland

I dug my heels into the mare, and she shot forward as fast as a newly launched cannon ball, but we were too far back to provide the least help. It was up to Mother and Pell, though, as it turned out, it was mostly up to Pell's horse, which decided against being run down, and leaped in one great vault from the road, and disappeared into the swamp.

By the time I reached the other side of the bridge, Mother had fled out of sight round the next turn. I reined in and sat looking down at Pell. His horse had sunk into the black muck of the swamp a good foot above its back, and that left Pell nearly waist deep in the muck, still sitting astride. It was a comical enough sight, and I particularly enjoyed the fat glob of mud which had somehow contrived to light squarely on the end of his nose. It provided a sharp contrast to his inflamed visage.

"Get me out of here!" he bellowed.

There had once been a boy, who at a minister's command, would have gone stepping and fetching without a question, but somewhere between his first pursuit and the clearly droll sight before him, that boy had discovered how human frailty was mitigated neither by occupation nor uniform. He laughed.

"Get me out of here this instant!"

"You got in, now you can get out," I said, and then picked my head up quickly, looking back the way I'd come. I looked back at Pell. "Lucky you've got a sensible horse."

"I demand to know who was driving that wagon!"

"It was a buggy."

"Immaterial! Absolutely immaterial! Who was driving?"

I laughed again, looking down at him, still sitting astride, trying to pull his legs from the thick, black mud. The horse

## Confrontation On Muddy Brook Bridge

had sunk no deeper. "Why did you stop in front of the buggy?"

"I had my reasons."

"But you didn't even know who was driving."

"I assumed anyone driving so recklessly must be a thief."

I shook my head and sighed. "Only a fool would have risked having his horse throw him into the path of an oncoming buggy. You might have got yourself trampled and maybe upset the buggy and killed the driver in the bargain."

"I am a man of God!"

I could hear a horse coming closer now, and my mare stamped her feet and pricked up her ears. The thunder of a galloping horse makes every horse, no matter how well trained, want to gallop off. I patted her neck. "Easy, girl, easy now," I said. She calmed some, but now her head was locked in the direction of the onrushing horse.

"Not only fools do foolish things."

"The instant I get free, I'm going to have a talk with your father. I never saw a boy so in need of a sound thrashing."

"Be my guest," I said, "but he's not likely to listen. It was my mother driving the buggy."

Suddenly he heard the horse and looked up, but his head was well below the level of the road.

"That'll be Mr. Phillips," I said. I swung the rifle barrel forward and cocked the hammer. Indeed it was Mr. Phillips, and I had no idea why his horse was still on its feet. It was an old bay, and I could see the sweat flying from him, and the look in his eye showed he was just about done in.

Phillips reined him in and the horse stood there, his head down, panting in the summer heat. He couldn't go another step. Phillips dismounted and walked the rest of the way, but

whatever he expected, neither I nor Pell were on his menu.

"What is this? Who are you? Never mind that! Give me your horse. My wife's been abducted and I need your horse." He stepped too close and my mare reared up and lashed out with her forefeet. Phillips raised his arm to protect his face, stumbled backward, catching his heel on a plank, and landed with a solid thump on his backside.

I calmed the mare and looked down at him, sitting wide-eyed, certain he was about to be trampled.

"Stoddard Chandler," I said. "And the fellow stuck in the mud there, well, that's the Right Reverend Pell, with whom I had thought you were acquainted."

"I know who that is!" Phillips scrambled onto his feet.

"Your wife is in safe hands. My mother's taken her to our place to look after her."

"You've no right! You can't just go into a man's house and make off with his wife!" He looked over at Pell and shook his head. "There's going to be trouble over this," he said.

"Not much worse than what you've already got," I said.

"Don't listen to him, Tom, he's Stroud's man."

Phillips took several steps backward.

"They came to see me about Charity this morning. I was on my way to tell you."

"Stroud ...." Tom Phillips shook his head.

"Why did you take a horsewhip to Jonah?" I asked.

The question caught him unprepared.

"Get tired of beating your daughter?"

He battled silently against the sudden rush of rage, and the knowledge that Jonah Creed had friends; dangerous friends, or at least one dangerous friend, and that was enough.

## Confrontation On Muddy Brook Bridge

With a great sucking sound, Pell managed to pull his legs free and scramble up onto the saddle. Then he did the most amazing thing. He simply stepped off into the swamp. Perhaps he thought that while a minister might not qualify as a water-walker, he ought to be able to dance across some mud. He was wrong, of course, and now he stood nearly neck deep, stuck a good deal worse than he had been before.

"Get me out of here!" he shouted. "Tom, I'm stuck!"

"I can see that, you old fool," Phillips said, "and as far as I'm concerned you can stay stuck until I get through dealing with this boy who thinks he's a grown man."

It was a hollow threat, if only because he wouldn't come close to my horse. I goaded him further. "Which one of you killed her? The good reverend there took the ax handle to Jonah, but who took the hammer to Charity?"

"Creed did," Phillips said. "We both saw it." His voice was flat and calm, but his eyes were furtive as a rat.

"Tell him, Pell."

"It was Creed," Pell said. "He crept up on her from behind and hit her in the head before either of us could stop him."

"Where'd he get the hammer?"

"From the bench," Phillips said.

"And he came out of his room?"

"That's right," Phillips said. "He came out of his room, took up the hammer, and hit poor Charity."

"She came rushing out when she heard us in the barn," Pell said. "Then he dashed forth and killed her."

"And then you used the whip on him," I said to Phillips.

"It was all I had to hand."

With a crash his horse stumbled, pitched forward onto the floor of the bridge, rolled onto its side, and lay still. Phillips

whirled around and looked at the horse. "And now you've made me ride my horse into the ground for nothing," he said. "I'll have you up on charges for that."

I slid my rifle into its scabbard and came down off my horse, closing the distance between us with three steps, and without breaking stride, I hit him as hard as I dared. He went down almost as fast as his horse, but he wasn't out, which made me wish I'd hit him harder. "How'd you like to find out what it's like to be ridden to death? Get up! I want to see how many times I can knock you down before you can't get up again!"

Like all bullies when challenged, he stayed put, rubbing his jaw. I whistled once and the mare trotted alongside. I vaulted into the saddle, grabbed the reins, wheeled her around, and broke away at a gallop, leaving Phillips sitting in the road and Pell still stuck in the mud.

I'd four miles to go to the Hill and the General's big house where Rebecca Blake lived, but I couldn't gallop the whole way. I settled the mare into a fast trot. I had a long afternoon ahead. First Rebecca and then off to Eben's to tell him I knew for sure that Tom Phillips had killed his own daughter, even if I didn't have any idea why. Nor was it clear that I could prove it.