

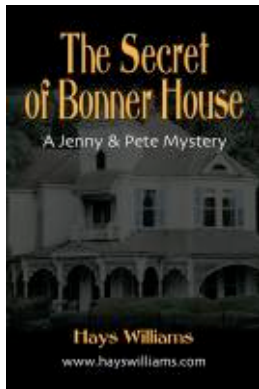


The Secret of Bonner House

A Jenny & Pete Mystery

Hays Williams

www.hayswilliams.com



Jenny is frightened when she and Pete discover a secret door in her basement. It leads to an underground tunnel and several rooms, and a man is living there. Who is he? What is the strange light and humming sound? Are they connected to the shooting lights in the night sky? What's going on in Hamilton? What strange secret lies beneath Bonner House? Jenny and Pete must find the answers.

The Secret of Bonner House

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The Jenny & Pete Mystery Series:

The Mystery of the Dogman

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Although the town of Hamilton is loosely based on a real town, this book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

Chapter 1

Jenny stared at the steps, and the darkness below. "Pete, don't you dare tell..."

Pete didn't wait for her to finish. "I won't, Jenny. Let's cover this up. We'll have to wait until..."

"At least until Monday." Jenny took a deep breath, her face white beneath the streaks of black soot. "Both our moms will have a fit if they knew what we found."

Pete's face was flushed beneath his own layer of soot. Fighting the fire at Dr. Ferguson's left them both a mess. For the last few weeks, ever since the day they met, they'd worked hard to figure out the dogman mystery, and who hid the loot in the woods, and they knew it was somehow connected. It turned out well, and Jenny finally thought she had relief. But now she looked at the black hole in the closet floor, and wished it would disappear.

They replaced the mat over the door and Pete maneuvered some heavy boxes onto the mat.

"Come on, Jenny. We don't want the grownups asking questions."

"No, we don't. And I can't wait to get in the shower."

"Me too." Pete sensed her apprehension. "Don't worry, Jenny. That door probably leads to a root cellar."

Jenny gave him a grateful look and hoped she could follow his advice. Since moving to Hamilton she'd had enough worry to last a lifetime.

Jenny thought about the robbers. They now sat behind bars, and she knew she'd never again fear the woods. And the 'dogman's' identity delighted all of them, especially Jenny's mom.

"Jenny, I think it's terrific that your mom and Dr. Ferguson are old friends."

"Me too. Uncle Rudy just told me about him a few days ago."

"Mr. Mitchell and Dr. Ferguson should be back with the pizza soon. Guess I'd better go hit the shower."

"Same here. Pete, wouldn't you love to see Katie's face right now? When I told her Rusty is alive, she started crying."

“Yeah, I bet she did.”

Pete’s answer reminded Jenny that he didn’t know what to do when a girl cries.

Katie was devastated when Rusty went missing. That hit-and-run driver had fully intended to kill him, as he had other animals in the Hamilton area. Now he was behind bars where he belonged. The list of charges, robbery, burglary, killing animals, and attempting to kill Jenny, would put him away for a long time.

“Don’t you love happy endings, Pete?”

Pete blushed. “Sure. I think everybody does. Well, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Jenny rushed upstairs and tore off her clothes. After her bath she put on her best jeans and the blue blouse her dad bought her. Then she combed her long brown hair and ran down the stairs.

“It’s about time. Your mom had to put the pizza in the oven to keep it warm” Uncle Rudy teased. “And that reporter lady’s here. Said she’s supposed to take some pictures of you kids.”

Bobby and Lucy arrived and the reporter took several shots of all four of them, with Sam sitting in front. Jenny made a mental note to do something special for Lucy, maybe invite her to dinner or an evening of TV and popcorn. Lucy’s keen observations played an important role in saving Dr. Ferguson’s cabin, and Rusty’s life. The afternoon’s events hadn’t given Jenny time to think about it, but she owed Lucy a debt of gratitude. And Lucy needed to feel important. Jenny knew that from the look on her face while The Daily Herald reporter took the pictures.

It was almost dark when Uncle Rudy got up to leave. Jenny gave him a goodnight hug. “Thanks Uncle Rudy, for helping me and Mom.”

“Anytime sweetheart. Remember, you’re my best girl.”

“I’ve got to go too,” Dr. Ferguson said. “Got to feed the animals and check on Rusty. It will be a while before he can go home. That car really banged him up. He’s lucky to be alive, just like you kids and Sam are.”

On Monday afternoon Jenny glanced at the clock on the classroom wall. The three o’clock bell rang, and she cringed.

"Hurry up, Jenny." Pete stuffed his books and papers into his backpack. "We've got to pick up flashlight batteries and get home. I can't wait to see what's at the bottom of those steps."

"Well I sure can." Jenny remembered how dark the steps were and she wished she could stop thinking about them. *What's beneath my house and why was that door sealed so carefully and then hidden?* She couldn't remember a thing from today's classes for worrying about the possibilities.

On the way home Pete reminded her of their Friday conversation. "I think we're going to find the Bonner family's secret room, where they hid from the Yankees during the war. What else could it be? It has to be that, or a root cellar. And I'm not trying to scare you, Jenny, but I've been thinking real hard about this. Why would anyone hide a *root cellar*?"

"I don't know, Pete. All I know is this whole thing is frightening." Jenny's heart pounded.

"Aw, come on Jenny. I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

She glanced at Pete and smiled. He was an unlikely candidate for knighthood, but if he grew to look like his father he'd make a very handsome knight.

Suddenly Jenny stared toward the woods and the thought of a chivalrous Pete flew out of her head. A big man stood near the dogman tree. She looked at his shaggy dark hair and beard and thought of Dr. Ferguson, but this man wore patched overalls and a blue plaid shirt.

"What is it, Jenny?" Pete turned toward the woods and the man raised his hand and waved at them. They waved back, wondering who he might be. He picked up a bag and walked into the woods and they watched until he was out of sight.

"Have you ever seen him before?" Jenny asked.

"Nope. Can't say I have. Boy, Hamilton is getting to be a *very* interesting place."

"That's for sure."

At home they let Sam out of his pen. After dumping their books on the kitchen table, Pete hurried to the apartment and Jenny ran upstairs. They had to change into old clothes.

At 3:45 they walked into the basement closet. "I put our bikes out of sight in case anyone comes looking for us," Pete said. "If our moms or Mr. Mitchell asks, tell them I heard about some bike thieves, and that really is the truth. We have to be careful."

"Okay." Jenny held up the cordless phone from the kitchen. "Not sure how far away this will pick up a signal. Let's watch the screen and see. I hate to be without it if Mom calls."

"Excellent idea, Jenny. Even if we have to leave it close to the steps, maybe we can hear it, if it rings."

He didn't say 'from wherever we are', but Jenny knew he wanted to.

Pete moved the heavy box he'd placed on the mat and pushed it into a corner. Jenny held her breath as he removed the mat and pulled open the door. She looked at the dark hole and wondered what might be down there. All of her courage was gone, but Sam wagged his tail.

Pete turned on their flashlights and handed one to her. Jenny hung a plastic shopping bag on his arm. She filled it with candles and matches earlier, but she hoped they wouldn't need them.

"I'll go first, Jenny. Wait until I give you the okay before you start down. Go slow and be careful when you do."

"Okay."

Jenny pointed her flashlight downward, as Pete lowered himself onto the first step. For the first time she saw a glimpse of the bottom step and what appeared to be a floor. Only it didn't look like a regular floor. It was made of old brick.

"It's okay, Jenny. You can come on down, but watch your step." Pete moved the large flashlight around in exploration. "It's a room, Jenny! Can you believe it? There's a secret room right under your house." Turning back to the steps, he aimed the light to guide Jenny's way.

By the time she reached the bottom step, Jenny felt the cool atmosphere—cooler than her air-conditioned house. She shivered, but not from the cold air.

Sam scratched the closet floor, waiting for Jenny's command.

"Okay boy. You can come on down."

The steps were steeper than the staircases in the house. Sam moved to the bottom with little effort, in spite of the cast on his leg.

"This isn't really under my house, except for the corner where the steps are located."

"You're right. It wouldn't make sense to build it under the house."

"Guess we might as well check it out, Pete. It's certainly not going to obey my wish and go away."

"Okay, but first we need to mark our way. Looks like a tunnel leads from this room toward the river. Since we don't know the size of this place, we can't take any chances even if Sam is with us. It's a good thing you thought of these candles."

Jenny held up the phone. "We're losing the signal. Guess I'd better leave this back at the steps. Pete, do you think this place is safe? Could it fall in on us?"

Pete examined the walls and the ceiling before answering her. "Jenny, this place is solid as a rock. The floor and the walls are brick, and look at that ceiling. Those cypress logs look like they're petrified. Whoever built this wanted it to last. I think I was right. This must be the Bonner family's hiding place."

Pete lit a candle and dripped hot wax onto the floor. Then he anchored the candle in the small pool of wax. They moved through the tunnel and he repeated this at every curve and turn. After a while the floor began a downward slope. Jenny knew it led toward the river.

"Look, Pete. Is that another tunnel?"

She pointed to an offshoot to their left. It appeared to lead back toward the house at an angle, but it was smaller and not as wide as the main tunnel.

"Yeah, but I think this is the way to go. Bet we're getting close to the river." Suddenly Pete slowed down and his voice dropped to a whisper. "What's that?"

Ahead of them and around a turn, an eerie bluish light radiated against the tunnel walls. Jenny's heart did a flip-flop and she dropped her flashlight. It hit the brick floor with a clatter. The strange light vanished, replaced by a dim and more natural light. She and Pete made the turn and reached the tunnel entrance—just in time to see a man running toward the river. Sam ran ahead of them and barked at the man

as he got into a small camouflage rowboat. They watched the man paddle his way through a maze of willows and out of sight.

A low humming sound filled the air. Jenny's ears popped and Pete covered his. They looked around as it gradually faded into silence.

Sam barked and wagged his tail. Pete placed a finger to his lips. "Shhh."

Jenny stepped back into the shadows and was startled when something cold and wet hit her arm.

"Jenny, look at that," Pete pointed toward the willows. "It's like a little island with a levee. Looks like the river has dumped enough dirt there to hide this place, maybe even in the wintertime. And those willows are so thick—I doubt anyone passing in a boat would ever notice it. It's high enough to be pretty safe from the water."

"That's good." Jenny knew it would be terrible for anyone else to discover the tunnel. One person was bad enough. She hoped the man didn't know about the entrance into her home, but she felt certain he did.

"That narrow inlet seems to be the only water coming in from the river," Pete said. "Looks like it's barely deep enough for that little boat."

"Pete, do you think the man was fishing, or maybe exploring the tunnel?"

"Could be either one, Jenny, but I'm wondering why he ran away when he heard us. And what was that weird humming noise?"

"I wish I knew," Jenny said. "It really hurt my ears. I don't know what made the noise. It seemed to be everywhere, so I couldn't tell where it came from."

"Yeah, I know. It made me feel a bit off balance."

"Me too. I didn't see anything but the man and his boat. Well, at least he didn't try to hurt us, so maybe he's okay. Where *is* that water coming from? I'm really getting wet." Jenny turned around and aimed her flashlight at the tunnel wall. High on the wall a tiny stream of water poured out of a small crevice and landed on a rock, where it had formed a bowl-shaped pool. From the pool a narrow waterfall fell to the floor and ran out toward the river. The water hitting the pool splashed and hit Jenny in the face.

“Hey, that’s really cool, Jenny. It’s a natural spring, probably the best water you could find. Somebody put that rock there, probably when this place was built. A natural supply of fresh water for whoever used this place.”

Pete stopped talking and looked back into the tunnel. “Jenny, remember when I thought Homer might be a homeless man?”

Jenny laughed. “And you couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“Yeah, well how was I supposed to know?” Pete stopped short of saying what she was thinking.

“It’s okay to say it, Pete. Homer *is* an angel—my own guardian angel. And yours too, I think.”

“I’m having a little trouble believing that, Jenny, but I know you do and that’s good enough. Anyway, what I was about to say is that all the folks in town talk about a homeless man. Say he’s been around here forever and he looks kinda like a hobo. He never bothers anyone so they just ignore him.”

“So he might be using this tunnel for a home?”

“Something like that. Why don’t we find out? Come on.” Pete headed back into the tunnel. Sam ran ahead of him as if he knew the way.

Jenny looked at her watch. “Okay, but we have to get back to the house soon. If Mom calls she’ll be worried.”

“We have to do this, Jenny. Today is the perfect time to look around, since we know for sure he’s not here. This won’t take long.”

With Sam in the lead, they aimed the flashlights and headed back. As they moved through the tunnel, Pete blew out the candles and left them in place. “We might need these again.”

Sam turned into the tunnel’s offshoot and his unexpected barking echoed against the walls and ceiling. They heard a hissing sound and Jenny looked up. A black cat with brilliant green eyes sat on a cypress ledge just above him.

“Guess you must be guarding the place,” Jenny said, moving closer. The cat watched her but didn’t move.

“That confirms it, Jenny. That cat wouldn’t be here by itself.”

“I know, and I feel like we’re trespassing, entering someone else’s home. Wish we had some other way to do this, but if he’s living down here I want to know more about him.”

“Only one way to do that. We have to figure out a way to meet...what are you grinning about?”

“Come on, Pete, I have an idea.” Jenny turned toward the steps. “Let’s go back to the house. I’ll explain on the way.”

When they reached the basement, Pete shook his head in agreement. “That’s great thinking. If he is homeless, this should break the ice and we might get to meet him.”

A few minutes later they went back into the tunnel and out to the river. Jenny looked around and found a good spot, one the man couldn’t miss when he returned—a smooth rock at the entrance.

She placed a zippered bag of chocolate chip cookies on the rock, along with a note. She looked around and found some small rocks to anchor it from the breeze coming off the river. The bright red bow stuck to the cookie bag should catch the man’s attention. She wondered what he would think, and she hoped the note wasn’t a big mistake.

“It’s okay for you to be here. Don’t worry. We won’t tell anyone.”

Chapter 2

“This is just a precaution, Jenny. I feel sure that man is harmless.” Pete pushed the heavy box onto the straw mat. “There’s no way anyone can push the door open with this on it.” He looked at Jenny over his wire-rimmed glasses. “Our secret, right?”

Jenny nodded. “My mom would go berserk if she knew. We have to keep quiet.” She wished she could tell her mom everything, and she felt guilty for not doing so.

She looked around the dark basement, remembering Friday afternoon when she and Pete discovered the secret door. Working to solve the dogman mystery threw them into an adventure she’d never forget, and it left her drained. Neither of them realized the danger they were in until it was too late. She thanked God it ended well, and now she and Pete shared two special secrets—things they couldn’t tell anyone. Who would believe they met a ghost dog and he helped them solve the crime? And who would believe a guardian angel could look like a homeless person? Remembering Homer’s last words, she smiled. *“We’ll be seeing you.”*

Still, she was glad it was over. She hoped life could be normal, but discovering the hidden door changed everything. Could they be asking for trouble, again?

She remembered her term paper research and the historians’ comments about antebellum homes having secret passages. She tried not to think about the possibility, but Pete loved it and he’d been itching to go down those dark steps ever since they discovered them. Jenny was unnerved by the discovery that part of her house sat on top of a secret room and a tunnel. Suspecting a homeless man was using it for shelter didn’t help a lot.

Monday night Jenny baked a double batch of brownies, telling her mom she wanted to take some to school. She planned to do that, but she wanted part of the brownies to take to the tunnel. If that man was homeless and living down there, the brownies would be a rare treat for

him—and it might show him that she and Pete wanted to be friends. They agreed the man wouldn't have run away if he were dangerous.

Later in her room, she wrestled with her conscience. She hated hiding anything from her mother, but telling her could lead to another upheaval and Jenny hated the thought of that. She didn't know what to do, and it wasn't like she was deliberately lying. Besides, sharing secrets with Pete was fun.

With Sam beside her, she went to the window to look for her star. When she found it, she knelt down and said her nightly prayers, "*Dear God, please watch over my Dad.*" She was silent for a moment before continuing. "*And please forgive me for not telling Mom everything. I don't want her to worry, and I know she would if she knew about the tunnel. And please watch over me and Pete and Sam. We have to find out more about that man, even though I have a feeling he's harmless.*" She looked up at her star and whispered, "*Good night, Dad. I love you and I miss you so much.*"

Suddenly a streak of light flew across the night sky. Jenny stared, unbelieving. She'd seen shooting stars many times and this one was not ordinary. It appeared near the woods where they ended close to the ridge and moved in a horizontal direction across the eastern sky. Her star watched faithfully, giving reassurance.

"I'm so glad I've got you, boy." Jenny wrapped her arms around Sam's neck and hugged him. She stroked his fur and thought of her friend, Katie, and her dog, Rusty.

Tuesday afternoon Jenny looked toward the woods and smiled. *They really are beautiful*, she thought. The tall trees and thick foliage of the underbrush combined to create a perfect home for wildlife, a cool haven from the summer heat. A rabbit ran across the road and into the woods. Jenny stopped to watch, laughing.

Pete gave her a curious look. "Never seen a rabbit before, Jenny?"

"Only in cages. I've never seen one living in the wild. Are there many of them?"

"Oh yeah, the woods and fields are full of them."

At home Jenny made some peanut butter sandwiches. She wrapped them carefully and then packed some brownies in a disposable

container. She put the food into a bag and they went to the basement. They decided not to disturb the man until they proved he could trust them, and that would take a little time.

Pete took the food and some matches. At the bottom of the steps he lit the candle they left there earlier. It would burn for several hours, hopefully long enough for the man to find the food.

Wednesday afternoon they made another trip to the tunnel, this time leaving a bag of chips and a bottle of soda. The sandwiches and brownies were gone. Jenny held the flashlight to light the steps, while Pete lit a fresh candle.

Thursday afternoon they stopped at the supermarket. Daily trips to the tunnel had almost depleted the kitchen's snack section. Her mom hadn't noticed. If she did, Jenny hoped she would assume she and Pete came home hungry every day. Just in case, she spent part of her allowance and bought peanut butter, jelly, bread, and chips.

"Pete, I think the man lives in that offshoot section, where we saw the cat. There's nothing in the main room, so he's not staying there."

She and Pete had already decided to take Sam and visit the tunnel again and, hopefully, meet its occupant.

"I'm sure that's it. We'll try to find out more today." Pete stopped his bike at Sam's gate and examined the latch. "Jenny, he's gone again."

"It's my fault. I'm sorry, Pete. I completely forgot we were going to take him with us today. He was so miserable locked in the pen that I left it open. Sam's so smart. I don't think he'll ever try to cross the road again if a car is coming, and I just don't have the heart to keep him from visiting Dr. Ferguson and the other dogs. Remember how he herded all of them away from that fire?"

"Yeah, that was something to see alright. I knew Sam was special the minute I met him."

"Well, Dr. Ferguson sure chose the right profession. Being a vet suits him, the way he loves dogs, and the way they love him."

"Jenny, do you think he'll stop being a recluse, now that's he's planning to open a new clinic?"

"I sure hope so. Pete, did you see the way he and my mom looked at each other?"

“Sure I did.”

“They were sweethearts in high school. At least they were until Mom met my dad, and according to Uncle Rudy, it was love at first sight. He also said it broke Dr. Ferguson’s heart, ‘cause he really loved my mom.”

“In that case, I’d bet anything that Dr. Ferguson’s finished with being a recluse. Your mom’s a pretty lady” Pete hesitated. “Does all of this bother you, Jenny?”

“Only a little. I know my mom is lonely, and Uncle Rudy thinks so highly of Dr. Ferguson. I just want my mom to be happy again.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling.”

Jenny knew he did. She’d wondered how his mom coped with being without her husband. She stayed busy and tired from working two jobs. Still, five years was a long time.

Pete interrupted her thoughts. “You ready to feed our homeless man—if that’s what he is?”

In the secret room, Jenny placed a bag of cookies near the candle. She followed Pete into the tunnel. When they turned into the offshoot, Jenny stopped.

“Pete, wait. We can’t do this to...to whoever lives here. Everyone has a right to privacy, and we’re invading his. It’s just not right. Let’s go home.”

Pete looked at his feet. “Yeah, you’re right. I wouldn’t want someone snooping in my house either.”

They headed back to the basement. Suddenly a deep voice called out “Hello”, and a man stepped out of the darkness, into the path of Pete’s flashlight. Pete stepped back, lost his balance, and fell to the floor. The man towered over him and Jenny thought of the big statue in front of the supermarket. It always made her think of Paul Bunyan.

Jenny’s heart raced and she watched as the man reached down and pulled Pete up.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Sam’s bark interrupted them. He ran in from the tunnel and straight to the man. The man knelt down and hugged him. “Hi Sam.”

Jenny swallowed hard. Water dripped off of Sam's fur, but the man didn't seem to mind.

He looked up at her and Pete. "Thank you for the food." His speech was slow, almost careful. "My name is Amos."

"Mr. Amos, we don't want to cause trouble for you, but we did want to meet you." Pete held out his hand. "I'm Pete Montgomery, and this is my friend, Jenny Evans. Jenny lives in Bonner House, and my mom and I live in the garage apartment behind her."

Amos shook Pete's hand, then ducked his head down a bit. "I've seen you from the woods and I wanted to meet you too. I already met Sam." He scratched Sam behind the ears.

"How did you meet Sam?" Jenny asked.

"I was walking in the woods one day and he was there. I guess he followed me back to the river, 'cause he found his way here two days later."

Jenny didn't want to be nosy, but she had to learn more. "Have you been living down here very long? What I mean is we don't mind that you're here. We're just wondering."

Amos looked thoughtful. "I reckon I've been living here since I was about thirteen, and I think I'm now close to fifty-three. It's hard to keep track of time when..."

He stopped, but Jenny knew he was about to say "...when you live like this."

"But why?"

Pete took over. "Mr. Amos, it's okay if you want to talk. I promise we won't tell anyone."

"I believe you, but it's a long story. And it's not a very good one." Amos's voice was quiet, and sad. "You sure you want to hear it?"

"We're sure, Amos. Is it okay to call you that?"

"Sure, Pete. Calling me mister sounds strange. I'll tell you about myself, but it might take a while and we might have to finish it another day. Follow me, so we can have a place to sit down."

Amos led them into the tunnel and then into the offshoot where they saw the black cat. The cat was on the shelf and hissed once as they approached. Amos reached up and stroked her. "Hush Emerald and behave yourself. We have visitors."

An appropriate name, Jenny thought, remembering the cat's green eyes.

To their surprise, the offshoot tunnel led to a furnished living area. There were several rooms, each with its own furniture. All of it was made from unfinished cypress, turned silver gray with age. There was room enough for several families. Jenny looked at the tables, chairs and bunks, and realized Pete had guessed correctly. This *was* the Bonner family's hiding place. Nothing else made sense.

Amos stopped in one of the rooms and lit a kerosene lamp. "Sit down. I'll get us a glass of water. Will that be okay?"

Jenny and Pete both nodded and looked around at Amos's living quarters. Bunks lined the walls, stacked two and three high, but only one bunk held a thin mattress and bedding. One was filled with folded clothes and towels, and other personal items. Two of the bunks were stacked with books. *So that's why he speaks so well*, Jenny thought.

She saw the familiar titles and remembered a conversation with her dad. She'd complained about having to read a novel as an English assignment.

Her dad looked surprised. "*Reading is a gift, Jenny, and books are treasures. TV is okay in small doses, but nothing can replace reading. Remember that, sweetheart. Some of our greatest leaders educated themselves by reading.*"

Amos poured water from a large jug into three plastic glasses. Jenny looked at the cleaning supplies sitting on a shelf to his right. He has everything he needs, she thought, but how? She couldn't wait to hear his story.

Amos handed them a glass of water and smiled shyly. "It's spring water, the best kind."

Jenny drank half of hers and realized she'd never tasted water so good before.

Pete laughed. "Yeah, we saw the spring. And Jenny almost took a shower in it."

"It's good for that too." Amos said, "But you have to get used to taking a cold shower."

Jenny shivered at the thought, and Amos laughed.

“It’s not too bad in the summertime. In the winter I usually heat some water and take sponge baths in here.”

“But how?” Pete asked.

“How do I heat water? Come and I’ll show you.” He led them out of his room and to the end of the offshoot tunnel.

Amos pointed to a large cast iron stove with a metal chimney and a stack of firewood. “This is where I heat my bath water and do a little cooking, but I have to be careful and do it at night. And I have to put the fire out before sunrise. In the daytime smoke would draw attention.”

They went back to his room and he refilled their glasses.

Jenny checked her watch. “Amos, we need to get back to the house in a few minutes. My mom will worry if I don’t answer the phone and she usually calls before she leaves work. Would you rather wait until tomorrow, or start your story now?”

“I can start now and tell you more tomorrow. As I said, it’s a long story. Or would you and Pete prefer to wait?”

Jenny shook her head, and he continued.

“I used to live in your house, Jenny, many years ago. Me and my mother, and my sister, Mary,” Amos hesitated and took a deep breath. “And my father.”

When he spoke the word ‘father’, he got a strange look in his eyes, like he was afraid to say it.

“My father was a mean person. Do you know why he named me Amos? He wanted me to know and to never forget it. He said the name Amos means ‘burden’. He said children are a burden their fathers must bear in this life, so he thought it was a good name for me.”

“And your father’s name?”

Amos continued in a low voice. “My father’s name is Jeremiah Polk.”

Jenny gasped, remembering something she discovered in Bonner House—something she planned to keep to herself.

Chapter 3

When they returned to the house, Jenny told Pete about the prayer closet and the stuff she found in the picnic basket. She'd planned to honor her grandmother's wish and keep it a secret, but meeting Amos changed everything. She knew her grandmother would understand.

Pete was fascinated and remained quiet as she told him the story.

She first noticed the basket while searching a hallway closet for something else. It sat on a high shelf in a corner. She assumed it belonged to her grandmother and thought it was empty. She was busy with unpacking and didn't bother it. Later, when she took it down, its weight surprised her, but its contents shocked her more. There was a wooden cross, several bookmarks printed with Bible verses and an old Bible with some names written in it. Handwritten papers dated decades earlier filled the bottom of the basket. On top of them was an open note in her grandmother's handwriting. Jenny sat down on the closet floor and read it.

"I found this in the attic today, hidden behind some other things hanging high in the rafters. I thought about giving it to the historical society, or to the police, but I quickly changed my mind. Best to leave it alone. I don't want to revive the investigation the Realtor told me about. Bonner House is too beautiful, too wonderful a place, to be associated with something evil. Prayer closet, my foot! I'll decide what to do with this later."

"Jenny, when did your grandmother write that note?"

"She didn't date it, so I don't know. My grandparents bought the house before Mom was born, and I assume Grandma found the basket when they were restoring the house. Mom said the restoration took over five years."

"So what did you learn from all those papers?"

"Too much, Pete. It was awful. Amos had a terrible life here. I hid the basket in my bedroom closet, so Mom wouldn't see it—and I planned to honor Grandma's wish and never speak of it to anyone."

Pete listened quietly as she told him the rest.

“Jeremiah Polk wrote about religion. He sounded like a crazy person, the worst kind of religious fanatic. He believed it is a man’s right, even his duty, to beat his wife and children, and they are supposed to serve him like slaves. He used the ‘prayer closet’ for his writing and so-called praying, telling his wife and children that God spoke to him there and gave him instructions.”

“If that’s how he explained the abusive behavior, the guy was a lunatic.” Pete rolled his eyes. “Poor Amos.”

Jenny nodded. “Pete, do you think we could get away with skipping our last class tomorrow?”

“Sure. Bobby can write down any assignments for us. What are you planning?”

“Let’s go to the library and see if we can learn what happened to Amos’s family.”

At the library Friday afternoon Jenny and Pete hurriedly searched the archives of Hamilton’s newspaper. They took a calculated guess and searched through the last two years before her grandparents began the restoration. Twenty minutes later they found a headline:

LOCAL FAMILY VANISHES

The news story said the Jeremiah Polk family, who occupied Bonner House, had disappeared. The police found a tiny amount of blood close to the living room fireplace, but the rest of the investigation turned up nothing. The Hamilton city authorities eventually took possession of the property, selling it to Jenny’s grandparents.

“Now I understand why Grandma and Grandpa never mentioned this, and I don’t blame them. What do you think happened, Pete?”

“Beats me. One thing’s certain. Something happened, but I don’t think Amos did anything wrong. Guess we’re fixing to find out.”

Jenny picked up her backpack. “Yeah, we’d better run if we want to hear the rest of his story. I think we need to keep this news story between us for now and not mention it to him.”

“Jenny, I heard something at school today, but I feel sure it’s got nothing to do with Amos. I heard some boys talking about a lady being robbed. Yesterday just before dark she was walking home from the store. A man grabbed her purse and ran. She said it happened so fast

she didn't get a good look at his face. All she could tell the police is that he was big, with shaggy brown hair and a beard. He was wearing overalls and a plaid shirt."

Jenny frowned, amazed at how fast the story spread through Hamilton High School. In her old school in Boston she rarely heard gossip or stories. "That's a good description of Amos, but he doesn't strike me as someone who would do that."

"I agree with that. It could be anyone."

Amos was waiting for them. He smiled when Jenny handed him a dish of leftover lasagna.

"Thank you, Jenny. I'll have this later tonight."

In Amos's room they settled in for his story.

"Like I told you yesterday, my father was a mean man. He hurt my mother and me and beat us for no reason. With my sister, Mary, he was different. For a long time I was glad of that. Then, as Mary began to grow into a young lady, Mama figured out why he was different with her. He had plans for Mary, and they weren't good."

Pete looked puzzled, but Jenny cringed when she realized what he meant. She remembered when one of her classmates in Boston was taken from her parents because her father abused her. Later the father was sent to prison.

Amos continued, "One day I came home from school and found a note from Mama: *Amos, we have to take Mary away from here immediately. I packed your suitcase and I'm taking it with me. Run as fast as you can and meet us at the bus station. The bus leaves at 4 o'clock, so please hurry. I love you. Mama.*"

"I put the note in my pocket and started to the front door. That's when my father stormed in. He looked around and demanded to know where Mama and Mary were. I pretended not to know and he hit me. I thought of Mary and I got so mad I told him he would never find them if it was up to me. That's when he came at me like he was going to kill me. He pushed me into a corner and kept me there, looking at me like a crazed animal. He kept telling me over and over what he would do to me. All I could think of was what he planned to do to my little sister. I shoved him away. He came at me again and hit me. I hit him as hard as

I could and then threw myself at him. He fell backward and his head hit the fireplace. I knew he was dead because he was bleeding and I couldn't hear any breathing."

Jenny dabbed at her eyes. "Amos, that wasn't your fault. You were defending yourself."

"That's right, Amos," Pete said. "What else could you do?"

"I was too scared to think straight. I knew the bus would be gone before I could get there. Mama and Mary were safe, but I had to get out of there. That's when I thought of this place."

"Wow!" Pete said. "You already knew about the secret rooms?"

"But how?" Jenny asked.

"I found the door one day when my father was away on a trip. Mama asked me to take some things to the basement for storage. I got curious and looked around. There was something about the closet that caught my attention, like why was it crammed full of boxes when there was so much room in the basement for storing them."

"I knew my father would be gone for a few days, so I decided to check it out. I told Mama I was going to do some clean-up work down there. She hated the basement and never went there, so she was glad to hear that."

"So all you had to do was move the boxes out and you found the door?" Pete asked.

"That's it. The boxes were heavy and labeled, mostly full of old books and newspapers, but I finally got them out and stacked them against the basement wall out of the way. After I found this place, I wanted to keep it a secret, so I put enough boxes back in the closet to hide the floor. Then, when my father would go away on a trip, I would come here and explore. I learned everything about this place."

"But how did you hide the floor after you came here to live?" Jenny had to know the answer.

"I'm getting to that. On that awful day I went through the house and gathered up everything I knew I'd need to live here. It took several trips to get it all. I took most of my father's clothes, and on my last trip, I got my father's money. He always kept a lot of it hidden in a special place. I saw him go into it one day, count it, and then put it back. I'm not sure,

but I think Mama knew about it too, and that's how she got the bus tickets. I guess she was afraid to take all of it."

So that's how he buys things, Jenny thought.

"After my last trip, I took that old straw mat and some glue and hid the door. Then I stacked all those boxes back into the closet, and I prayed no one would ever take them out."

"I couldn't just leave my father's body there, so I put a note in the mailbox asking the mailman to call the police. Then I snuck down to the river and took a boat I'd seen there. In a few minutes I was back in the tunnel by way of the river. That's how Sam visits me."

"What a story," Jenny said softly.

"Yeah. It really is," Pete added.

"Does that mean you don't believe me?" Amos asked.

"Oh no, we believe you," Jenny said. "What we meant is it's a terrible experience for a thirteen-year-old boy to go through."

Pete nodded. "And then having to live down here all these years. Man, that's really tough."

"I guess it's better than I deserve, after killing my own father. The worst thing of all is I'm glad he's gone, accident or not. He kept Mama and me terrified all the time. And we couldn't stand what he was planning for Mary. If he lived, he might find them, so I'm glad he's dead. Sometimes I wake up screaming, afraid he's still alive and has come to get me." Amos turned his head and wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

Jenny and Pete looked at each other and silently agreed to keep quiet about what they learned at the library, at least for now.

"I'm sorry," Amos said. "I've never told all that to anyone before. Guess I needed to talk it out."

Jenny hugged him. "That's okay Amos."

"What about the boat?" Pete asked. "Didn't the owner ever come looking for it?"

"I thought of that before I took it," Amos said, "But I knew who owned it, so I wrote him a note saying I was sorry and that someone really needed the boat. And I asked him not to tell anyone. I put the note and some money in a bag. No one was home, so I thought it was safe and I hung the bag on his back door knob. Then I took the boat and

snuck round to the tunnel. I think it was enough money to buy three or four boats. The note was printed and I didn't sign it. And I hoped he'd be so glad to get the money that he would keep it a secret."

Jenny wanted to tell him she was certain the man kept his mouth shut, for there was nothing about a stolen boat in the news stories. Pete shot her a warning look to remember their agreement.

For a while no one spoke. Finally, Pete broke the silence. "How did you manage to live down here for so long?"

"It was difficult for a while," Amos said.

"Do you go out much?"

"I didn't at first, Jenny. I was too scared. But I finally got up enough courage to take the boat and go out at night, mostly to find food. The river's full of catfish, so I never went hungry. And there's lots of gardens around Hamilton. I only took a little from them, and hoped it wouldn't be missed. The hardest time was in the winter when there were no gardens."

"Some folks saw me and they gave me strange looks, but they never bothered me. A few of them must have felt sorry for me, 'cause I started finding food in the places I often went to. I didn't go out in the daytime for over three years. When I ran out of matches and lamp oil, I had no choice. I had to buy more and the closest store closed early. I was much taller by then and my hair was long, and I was growing a beard. Thank goodness I don't look like my father. No one recognized me, or at least that's what I thought."

"Someone did?" Pete asked.

Jenny held up one of Amos's books. "Someone named Miss Luna?" She opened the book and read the inscription: *'Dear Amos, I guess if reading by an oil lamp worked for Abe Lincoln, it can work for you too. Miss Luna.'*

"I'm sorry Amos. I shouldn't have bothered your books, but this one looked so interesting. I think it's a first edition." Jenny turned around and put the book on the stack behind her.

"That's okay, Jenny. Miss Luna used to be a school teacher, back before all the bad stuff happened. She saw me in the store one day and talked to me. I hadn't talked to anyone in over three years, and it felt good."

Pete leaned forward, "Are you talking about Looney the witch, the old black woman who lives close to the river?"

Amos laughed. "Yes, but Miss Luna is no witch. She's a fine lady with a kind heart. And she's been good to me."

"Boy, this is a surprise. All my life I've heard stories about her. And lately they're claiming she's doing some kind of magic, 'cause they keep seeing strange lights over her place at night." He glanced at Jenny. "All the kids are afraid to go near her house."

"That's probably the way she wants it, Pete, but she's no magician. She keeps to herself and has ever since she lost her family in that terrible fire. She won't talk about that, except to say someone set the fire on purpose." Amos looked at the floor. "And I think my father is the one who did it."

"Why?" Jenny asked.

"Because he hated anyone who was different. He especially hated Miss Luna's husband because he refused to move over in a store checkout line and let him go first. I heard my father talking that night, saying he was going to get him for that. Two days later Miss Luna's husband and little girl died in that terrible fire. My father didn't know Miss Luna was away visiting a sick relative."

Pete scratched his head. "Amos, about your father. Can you think of anything that might have triggered his behavior that day?"

"Well, Mama used to talk to me about leaving Father, but I always thought she was too afraid to do it. Maybe that's why he went crazy. Maybe he discovered she was planning to leave him and that's why he rushed home." Amos's shoulders slumped and his voice softened. "If he hadn't come home so early, I would have been gone too."

Chapter 4

After they left Amos and returned to the house, Jenny and Pete agreed they didn't dare tell him his father might not be dead.

"Jenny, remember what the newspaper story said about a tiny amount of blood being found near the fireplace?"

"Sure. What of it?"

"Well, Amos talked like his father was bleeding, so I figure Mr. Polk must have cleaned the floor up pretty good before he left. Probably to keep the police from searching for him as a criminal."

Jenny nodded. "And Amos is still terrified of that man after all these years."

"Yeah, and that's a shame. I like Amos, and I wish he could leave that place and have a real life. Think he could, Jenny?"

"I think he could have a regular life, though it might take some serious adjusting on his part."

Pete pulled out his homework assignments. "Let's get this stuff done, so it won't spoil our weekend."

"Okay. I did part of mine at school, so it shouldn't take too long."

When the homework was finished, Jenny got lemonade for both of them and they went to the den.

"I think he'd rather stay down there," Pete said. "The only thing that might get him out would be..."

"...would be to see his mother and sister." Jenny finished the sentence for him. "That's it, Pete. We have to find them."

"Yeah, well good luck with that, after all this time. I'm glad you thought to tell him we can't see him again until Monday."

Their conversation was interrupted when Bobby Roland knocked on the back door.

"Hey you guys, I brought your assignment. You didn't miss anything important. That lemonade looks good, Jenny."

"Okay," Jenny laughed. "Be back in a second."

"Bobby, do you remember telling me about your mom leaving food out for that homeless man?"

"Sure, Pete. She feels sorry for him. What about it?"

“Nothing important. Jenny and I were talking about homeless people today and I remembered you talking about that man. Do you think Hamilton has a homeless problem?”

“Nope, just that one guy as far as I know. Lots of folks have seen him, and I think some of the ladies leave food for him. I can’t figure out why someone would choose to live like that.”

Jenny returned in time to hear part of their conversation. “Maybe he has no choice, Bobby.”

“I don’t know Jenny,” Bobby said. “Everyone’s always thought he was harmless, but now they’re not so sure. Some guy robbed a lady yesterday and she thinks it was the homeless man.” He gulped down his lemonade and got up. “Well, I gotta go. Got chores to finish. I came by right after school, but nobody was here.”

Pete walked him to the back porch. “We had some things we had to take care of. That’s why we skipped class.”

“Well, Jenny, it looks like we’ve got another bad guy in Hamilton,” Pete said when he returned to the den.

“Who got robbed?” Jenny asked.

“Some lady over on 4th Street. Said this guy sneaked up behind her and grabbed her purse. That’s about all we know for now.”

“You don’t think Amos is a suspect, do you?”

“Sure hope not.”

On Monday Miss Oliver, the school secretary, caught Jenny and Pete as they walked out of their last class.

“Pete, my computer is acting up again and I can’t find Mr. Douglas. Can you stay and help me?”

“At your service Madam.” Pete performed an exaggerated bow. “You go on Jenny and I’ll see you at home.”

Jenny wasn’t surprised to discover Sam was gone again, but she wished he wasn’t. She wanted to visit Amos. She got butterflies at the thought of going alone, but she knew Pete would come down when he got home.

After hiding her bike in the garage, she ran into the kitchen and turned on the radio. She cut two slices of chocolate fudge cake and

wrapped one of them in foil. Grabbing a fork she devoured the other slice. Her mom made the best fudge cake in the world and Jenny loved it. Her last bite stopped in mid-air when the newscaster began talking about a fugitive. *"The suspect is well over six feet tall, with a large frame, and he probably weighs over two hundred pounds. Witnesses described him as having long dark hair and a beard. Although he is not considered dangerous, he is wanted for questioning by the local authorities, and also by the FBI."*

The description fit Amos, but Jenny knew it couldn't be him. She spread her books and homework out on the kitchen table, hoping Pete would follow her lead and do the same before he came to the tunnel.

As she approached the offshoot tunnel, Jenny heard someone talking. Could Amos have a visitor? Cautiously, she followed the sound to a small room at the end. Amos was on his knees, praying.

She turned and tried to tiptoe out, but her shoe caught on something and she fell. Moving with lightning speed, he grabbed her.

"Jenny, why were you spying on me?"

Jenny trembled and her voice was weak when she spoke. "I'm sorry, Amos. I heard someone talking and I thought you might be in trouble. I had to find out."

Amos let her go. "I'm the one who's sorry, Jenny. I didn't mean to scare you like that. Guess I'm not used to anyone being here but me. You heard me praying?"

"Yes, and I shouldn't have intruded. Please forgive me."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Jenny. Thanks for checking on me. That's a nice thing to do. I pray pretty often, like my mama taught me to do, but I still feel guilty for pushing my father and making him fall. And no matter how much I pray, I'm still glad he's gone. Maybe that's why I can't forgive myself."

"It was an accident, Amos. Nothing more. God loves you and He has taken care of you all these years. And somewhere out there He's taking care of your sister and your mother. You have to believe that."

Amos's eyes filled with tears. "I think so too, Jenny. I just wish I could see them again."

"I believe you will, when the time is right. Just wait and see."

Jenny looked toward the tunnel, wondering what was keeping Pete. To her surprise, Homer stood a few yards away watching them. He motioned for Jenny to join him.

"I'll be back in a moment, Amos."

As she walked into the main tunnel with Homer, she wondered if she was in some kind of danger. That's when he usually showed up, or was she wrong about that?

"I'm proud of you, Jenny. Maybe now Amos can find some peace."

As Homer walked toward the river entrance, Phantom ran to meet him. Jenny watched as they faded into nothing.

"Jenny! Did you see that?" Amos stood a few feet behind her.

"You actually saw them?" Jenny asked, but his face answered her question.

"What was that?"

"Let's go sit down, Amos. It's a long story."

Jenny told Amos about Homer and Phantom and how Phantom helped in solving the dogman mystery. Because of his visits to the woods, Amos knew about Dr. Ferguson's cabin, the dogs, and the pet cemetery, but he'd never seen Homer or Phantom. When she explained Homer's identity, Amos laughed with delight.

"Mama used to tell me and Mary we had a guardian angel. She said we might never see him, but I know mine has been here with me many times 'cause I get this feeling. It's something I can't describe."

"I know exactly what you mean, Amos. I get goose bumps every time I see Homer, but knowing who he is makes me feel wonderful, and safe."

"And Phantom is the same dog that's buried in the pet cemetery?"

"That's right. It was hard for me to believe too, until Pete did some research on ghosts. Seems some of them stay behind to take care of unfinished business."

Amos scratched his beard. "What other business could Phantom have, now that those robbers are behind bars?"

"That's a good question. I guess we'll have to wait and see, and hope we learn the answer."

"The answer to what?" Pete strode in and gave them a quizzical look.

"About why Phantom is still here," Amos said, grinning. "Jenny's been telling me all about Homer and Phantom, and how you two heroes helped catch the robbers."

Jenny laughed. "Sam's the real hero. He's the one who trapped that bad robber in his car. You should have come earlier, Pete. Amos had the pleasure of seeing Homer and Phantom pull their vanishing act a little while ago."

"I think maybe Phantom is being rewarded for helping us. Staying with Homer must be what he wanted to do. Most folks can't see 'em, Amos, so you must be pretty special. Welcome to the club."

"The club?"

"Yeah. I just now gave it a name. We'll call ourselves 'The Angel and Ghost Watcher's Club'. It was just Jenny and me, but now you're an official member."

The black cat walked into the room and startled Pete when it jumped into his lap.

"Emerald! Watch your manners." Amos reached for the cat, but she curled herself against Pete's chest and yawned. Jenny noticed that some of the black fur was turning gray and she wondered how old the cat was.

Pete stroked Emerald's back. "She's okay, Amos. I think she likes me."

"Well, that's a little unusual. Miss Luna says she doesn't usually like strangers, but she took up with me pretty fast. She keeps me from being so lonely, so I'm glad she decided to stay."

Jenny looked around the room. "I wonder when all this was built. Do you know?"

"A long time ago, Jenny. If you and Pete promise to keep it between the three of us, I'll show you something."

"We promise."

Amos laughed at their quick reply. Then he went to his book collection and reached behind some neatly arranged volumes, bringing out a wooden box. The box was handmade of cherrywood, with a hinged lid. It was beautifully carved with the figure of a dove carrying

an olive branch and finished with layers of stain and varnish—a true work of art. Amos placed the box on his table and ran his hand over it.

“I found this box the day after I discovered the secret door. It contains Mr. Theodore Bonner’s personal journal. This tells everything about the Bonner Family and the plantation, but I’m not sure I would call it a journal. Miss Luna gave me a dictionary and it defines a journal as a daily account with dates. Mr. Bonner wrote this more like a story. Maybe that’s what makes it so interesting. It’s a wonderful book, Jenny”

Amos opened the box, revealing a thick leather-bound journal and a Bible, side by side. A one-page letter lay on top.

To whoever finds this:

I’m writing this as a permanent record of my family’s trials during these hard times. If we survive, God willing, there will be no need for it and I will leave it here in this secret place.

Theodore Bonner

Amos lifted the journal from the box and handed it to Jenny. “If you promise no one will see it except you and Pete, you can take it back to your house and read it.”

Pete answered for her. “You can count on it, Amos. We won’t tell a soul.”

“That’s a promise, Amos,” Jenny said. “Can we keep the journal for a few days?”

“Sure, Jenny. Just be careful.”

“I will, Amos, and I can’t wait to read this. We’ll get it back to you Wednesday. That will give us an afternoon to read it.”

“And now we gotta go before someone misses us,” Pete said. “See you Wednesday, Amos.”

“We’ll have to do our homework at school tomorrow, or stay up late to get it done. Otherwise we won’t have any private time to read this thing.” Jenny hugged the journal to her chest as Pete lowered the door and replaced the mat.

“We might have a few minutes today if we’re lucky.”

The phone rang. Jenny handed the journal to Pete and ran to the stairs.

When she turned off the phone, she giggled. "Guess who has to work late, Pete?"

"Great, let's get reading."

Jenny carefully opened the book.

My family and I have lived here in this secret place since the Yankee soldiers invaded Hamilton. That includes all of my workers, except for one who didn't make it. I love all of them and they are part of the Bonner family. They have been faithful and devoted. I honor each of them now with a place in this journal.

"Mr. Bonner had more slaves than I had imagined," Jenny said, turning the pages carefully. "Look how much of his journal he devoted to them."

"I can see that, Jenny. And I think it's great that he never refers to them as 'slaves' and says they were part of his family."

"Pete, I think Mr. Theodore Bonner was a very special man."

She turned a page and they continued reading.

From the first grumblings and signs of war, I prayed the South would be victorious. I thank God daily that He gave me the foresight to prepare for the worst. When Bonner House was completed, I called my family and workers together and explained my plans and the reasons for them. Until then my optimism had soothed their fears, so my own fear was a difficult thing for me to confess. But I knew I had no choice and that our lives might well depend on these preparations.

Building these secret rooms and the tunnel was a long hard ordeal. Knowing it was for all of us gave my workers the stamina and drive to complete the job with the utmost speed. Swearing them all to secrecy was not difficult once they realized the danger we might face in the event of war.

I purchased brick for the tunnel and the rooms, which have brick floors and walls. For the ceiling, we used thick cypress logs, sealed with mortar. On top of this, we placed several feet of rich soil where we planted trees and other vegetation.

God has been with us throughout, for we discovered a natural spring near the river. It was surrounded by a tiny island covered with a dense thicket of willows and some evergreens. The little island had grown through the years, from the rich soil washed up by the Mississippi, and I prayed the mouth of the tunnel would be hidden even if there were no trees there. We ended the tunnel at that spot.

From the beginning, the Bonner House basement was planned as a storm shelter, large enough to accommodate all of us. What better place to hide the secret door leading to the tunnel, which would end at the east wall of the house? Old Mose took charge of that job, constructing a large storage closet in one corner with a door that lifted from the floor. Cypress steps led down into the tunnel and we found a thick mat to hide the door.

Every adult on the plantation knew the location of that door. Supplies of every kind were carried there and rotated on a regular basis. If the worst happened, the rooms would be ready.

When word arrived that slavery had been abolished, my workers asked me if they must leave. None of them wanted to. Here on the plantation each family has a home. I told them the decision was theirs. They were free to leave, but they had a home here if they wanted to stay. Not one of them left the plantation, and from that day forward they were paid weekly wages.

Word soon came that the Yankees had arrived. Within the hour everyone on the plantation gathered their personal things and moved into the tunnel. The only one who did not join us was Old Mose. He chose to stay behind and remove all traces of our departure so the rest of us could be safe. He showed me a stack of old boards with fresh cut ends.

Mose had already measured the basement closet and the cypress boards looked as old as the rest of the basement floor. He held up a pail of old nails he planned to use. He explained that he was going to pile in a bunch of the basement junk when he finished.

"I promise you, them Yankees won't never find the secret door."

When I started to protest, Mose shushed me. "My Annie gone now, and I don't got no young'uns to worry bout...ain't like I got much time left."

At nightfall he planned to take the fishing boat and sneak around to the tunnel via the river and join us.

"Don't you worry none. Old Mose kin take care of hisself."

Mose never made it to the tunnel. I fear for his welfare, and I pray for him

"It sounds like he cared a lot about the slaves, Jenny. No wonder they chose to stay on the plantation."

Jenny nodded. "Look at this, Pete. He sure believed in giving detail on life in the secret rooms. This explains why Amos was able to adapt to living down there at such a young age. Mr. Bonner told him what to do, step by step. Amos knew what he'd need and what precautions to take."

"Yeah, it's enough to give you the willies, like it was part of some kinda big plan."

"Maybe it was, Pete. My dad believed God directs the steps of some people in order to help others. Maybe Amos's family moved to Bonner House because God knew Amos would need a safe place to hide. Come on. Let's finish this."

We are all thankful for the bravery of one of my young workers. Gabe volunteered to 'go for a swim' once each week and wander into town to check the situation. He was careful not to raise suspicion and had a story ready in case the Yankees stopped him. There was always a fishing pole on his shoulder and a bucket of fresh-caught catfish in one hand. Only once did Yankees soldiers stop and detain him, taking the fish for their supper.

Afraid of what he might find, Gabe did not go near Bonner House during this time. He allowed the few townspeople who knew him to think he was living in the woods. When asked about the Bonner family, his reply was always the same. "They gone. Got outta here when them Yankees showed up."

When Gabe learned the Yankees were leaving, he kept it to himself for two weeks. He was afraid it wasn't true and didn't want to get our hopes up. Finally, when he was convinced they were really gone, he came to Bonner House and checked on everything.

The place had been ransacked and cleaned of everything the Yankees could take with them, but the house itself had very little

Hays Williams

damage and most of the furniture was still there. The workers' cabins, used by the Yankees for sleeping, were left intact.

Gabe returned to the tunnel, this time in the fishing boat, to give us the happy news and to get some tools for removing the boards from the closet floor.

After the children were bedded down that night, I led all of the adults into the main tunnel where we held a quiet 'family' meeting, preparing everyone for the return to plantation life. Everyone promised to never talk about the secret hiding place. The basement would be the official storm shelter, when needed, but we hoped the tunnel and rooms would never again be needed. It would be best if no one else knew about them. Gabe's wife, Honey, said she planned to tell her little ones that the whole time in the tunnel and rooms had been like a bad dream—one they should try to forget. The older children were sternly warned about what could happen to the Bonner Plantation if anyone else learned about the tunnel and the rooms. The place would be overrun with story seekers and curious folks. The children had learned from the long period underground not to take the good plantation life for granted, to guard and protect it. They were told to not talk about their time underground and to pretend it never happened. One of the parents suggested something to serve as a code or reminder to say every day to themselves and to each other, when needed: "I love the Bonner Plantation!" They all agreed this statement would remind them to never speak of the secret place.

There was no sign of Mose anywhere, until Gabe returned from a walk two days later and came to see me. He found a fresh grave in the family cemetery. Old Mose's favorite hat and coat were tied to the grave's marker, a rough handmade cross. We kept the cross, but moved it to the foot of the grave. A few weeks later we placed a nice headstone where the cross had stood.

Mose Bonner

*Here lies a true American Hero
He gave his life that others might live*

The Secret of Bonner House

It will take years for the Bonner Plantation to return to normal, but with God's help we will recover.

I asked Gabe to build a box to hold this journal and one of my favorite Bibles. He has created a work of art, something worthy of holding both of these books. This journal deserves a Bible for a companion, for God's hand brought us through our difficult time.

I leave them now in this secret place. Perhaps someday they will be found—

Theodore Bonner

Chapter 5

“Whew, what a story!” Pete pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. “Too bad you can’t use that when you write your term paper about Bonner House, Jenny. When we saw that grave marker I assumed Mose was a soldier. Never dreamed he was a slave. I guess the slaves were given the Bonner name.”

Jenny closed the journal’s cover and looked around. She finally understood how special Bonner House was, and she couldn’t tell anyone. It wasn’t fair, but she knew she’d never break her promise to Amos.

“Well, at least we know now who Mose Bonner was and why he was labeled a hero.” Jenny leaned back against the sofa. “Even Grandpa didn’t know that. He told me the only information in the records was that Mose saved someone’s life. I wish he could have known the rest of the story. The Bonner Family Cemetery used to be part of the plantation, and now it’s...”

“...just another little country graveyard.” Pete finished her sentence. “Kinda sad, I know, but at least it’s part of Hamilton’s history. Everyone knows that.”

Wednesday afternoon Jenny ran to her room to get the journal from her closet. She slid it into a tote bag, in case Uncle Rudy popped in without warning. She and Pete laid out their homework on the kitchen table before heading to the basement. Amos stood at the bottom of the tunnel steps, waiting, and they followed him back to his room. He took the journal from Jenny and carefully placed it in the box next to the Bible. Jenny saw the worried look on his face.

“What’s wrong, Amos?”

“I’m not sure. I had to go to the store yesterday. I always go right before dark, so there won’t be too many people out. And something didn’t seem right. Folks usually ignore me, but this time I got some strange looks. They’ve never acted that way before. I think they were afraid of me.”

“Jenny, don’t you think we’d better tell him what happened?”

Jenny nodded.

“Amos, somebody robbed a lady Monday night. It was dark, so she didn’t see the man’s face, but she got a good look as he was leaving. Some of the local folks may think it’s you because of his size.”

“And he had hair and a beard like you too,” Jenny added. “But don’t worry, Amos. We know it wasn’t you.”

Amos gave her a grateful look. “Now I’m afraid to go anywhere.”

“I don’t know how,” Pete said, “but we’ll find out who did it. Guess you’d better stay put until then.”

“You’re right,” Amos said. “It’s strange to think there’s someone out there who looks like me.”

Jenny wanted to make Amos feel better and her mind raced. “Just remember, all they have to go on is the hair and beard and the way he was dressed. How many people have seen you in the past year or two?”

“Well, lots of folks have seen me in the past few years, but they don’t bother me.”

“Jenny, you thinking what I am?” Pete asked.

“Yes. I think so.”

Amos gave them a questioning look.

Pete pushed his glasses up before speaking. “Since so many folks have seen you and know how you dress, it would be easy for any guy with brown hair and a beard, wearing overalls and a plaid shirt, to pass for you in the dark. The robber made sure the lady didn’t get a good look at his face, so...”

“So he wanted everyone to think I did it.”

“Sounds that way, Amos,” Jenny said. “Now the question is how do we prove it? Where do you get your overalls and plaid shirts?”

“One of the ladies in town leaves them for me. Why?”

“Well, that bit of information might help us,” Jenny said.

“We’ll figure this out, Amos. Right Jenny?”

“You bet we will, Pete.” Jenny forced herself to sound cheerful.

“Thanks for letting us read the journal, Amos.”

“You liked it?”

“It’s a wonderful story, even if some of it is sad.”

Pete spoke up, "Yeah, and now we know who Mose was. Took a lot of courage to stay behind so the others could be safe. Now that's what I call a real hero."

"Pete and I can bring whatever you need, Amos. Just make a list and have it ready when we come to see you. Okay?"

"Thank you, Jenny. I just wish they would catch that robber."

"We'll make sure they do, Amos, so don't worry. Just give us a little time." Jenny spoke with a determination she didn't feel, but Amos was scared and somehow they had to help him. "Now we'd better get back to our homework."

Pete frowned, but got up and they headed back to the main tunnel. Suddenly a familiar voice called out.

"Hey Pete. You and Jenny down there?"

Amos stepped back into the darkness, a shocked look on his face, as Bobby descended the steps.

"Wow, who would guess this place was here?" He stared at Amos. "Who's that?"

"He's our friend, and it's a long story, Bobby. And please stop staring. It isn't polite," Jenny scolded.

"Sorry man, I didn't mean to be rude. This place is really something..." Bobby's voice trailed off when he saw the scared look on Amos's face.

"Be quiet for a minute, Bobby. We need to explain you to our friend. "Amos, this is Bobby Roland. He's my best buddy, and you can trust him. I promise you that."

Amos looked doubtful and Jenny felt sorry for him. "Bobby's mother is one of the ladies who's been putting food and treats out for you."

"Yeah, and we had to move recently," Bobby said. "Mama's been hoping you'd find where we live. She really likes helping you. Says it makes her feel good. Now we live over on the corner of Pecan Street, in that little white house with the green shutters." Bobby grinned at Amos. "So you're the so-called homeless man, but what are you doing down here?"

"He lives here, Bobby. We'll explain later, if that's okay with you, Amos."

Amos didn't answer.

"Now I have a question, Bobby," Jenny said. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Jenny. I didn't mean to be nosy. When I got to your house, Mr. Mitchell was leaving your garage with a rake. Said he broke the handle on his. He told me to go on in, that you guys were home. When I couldn't find you anywhere, I remembered the basement and thought you might be down there getting something. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I heard voices..."

Pete looked guilty. "Guess I forgot to close the closet door, Jenny. Sorry."

Amos's silence worried Jenny. "Amos, is it okay for us to explain everything to Bobby? He's really a good person and he won't tell anyone."

Pete chimed in. "She's right, Amos. Bobby helped us with that dogman mess and he didn't tell a soul through the whole thing. You can trust him."

Amos hesitated. "I guess, since you know him so well."

"Well, Bobby, it all started on the day of the fire."

Jenny smiled. Pete loved telling stories as much as she loved writing them. As Pete talked, Bobby's expression changed from surprise to disbelief and then to delight.

"You don't have to worry about me, Mr. Amos. Cross my heart, on scout's honor, I won't tell anyone." Bobby promised and placed his right hand over his heart. "And I'll do everything I can to help Pete and Jenny find out who's trying to frame you, 'cause it's certain somebody's trying hard to do that."

Relief washed over Amos's face. "Thank you, Bobby."

Jenny stood up. "Okay guys, we've got to do homework."

"One more thing before we leave, Jenny." Bobby turned to Amos. "Mr. Amos, when the robber is caught, wouldn't you like to leave this place and have a normal life?"

"I don't know if I could, Bobby. And please call me Amos."

"Okay Amos. I was just thinking. Mr. Mitchell lives in that big old house all by himself. He might be willing to take in a boarder in exchange for work around the place."

Pete's face lit up. "Hey, what a great idea. And Dr. Ferguson might need a helper in his new clinic. Jenny and I can only work a few hours a week. Would you like that, Amos?"

Amos looked overwhelmed.

"Okay guys. We'll let Amos think about all this, but first we've got to figure out who robbed that lady. And right now it really is homework time. No more stalling, Pete."

In the kitchen Jenny poured cold lemonade and they munched on oatmeal cookies.

Bobby gulped some lemonade and reached for another cookie. "Well, I'd better go."

Pete looked up from his book and started to speak. Bobby held up one hand, stopping him. "You guys know I can keep a secret. See ya'll tomorrow."

Jenny went back to her math homework, but her mind whirled and she couldn't concentrate. "Amos knows he'll have a chance at a normal life when the robber is caught, but he doesn't seem too pleased about the idea."

"You know the reason for that, Jenny."

"His father?"

"Yeah. After all, he thinks he killed him. If we tell him the truth, I'm not sure how he'll take it."

"Do you think Jeremiah Polk is still alive?" Jenny frowned.

"I don't know. If he is, he'd have to be pretty old, maybe in his late eighties. Guess we could do a search, but there might be a hundred Jeremiah Polks listed. And he might have changed his name when he left here."

"I bet he did," Jenny shook her head. "Poor Amos. Will he ever be free of that worry?"

"There ought to be a way to figure out who else has clothes like the ones Amos wears."

The back door flew open and Bobby ran back in. "I got it! We can ask some of our friends to help, but we won't tell them about Amos. We can say we believe the homeless man, whoever he is, is innocent—that we're certain someone impersonated him. Everyone should keep

their eyes and ears open for any clues that might lead them to the real criminal.”

Jenny looked thoughtful. “Bobby, that’s a great idea, but why don’t we do it in a different way?”

“How?” Bobby and Pete spoke at the same time.

“Let’s ask Mom if we can have a costume party. She’s been wanting me to get better acquainted with my schoolmates. We’ll call it an ‘old-fashioned dress-up like your grandparents’ party. Everyone can dress like their grandparents did when they were young, and the more country-looking the better. We can all check our attics and closets for old clothes. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone will find the plaid shirt and patched overalls worn by the criminal.”

Jenny had a troubling thought. Could the criminal be a member of a classmate’s family? Even so, they had to prove Amos didn’t commit the crime, and the guilty party deserved to be found and punished.

“I’ll talk to Mom tonight. I’m sure she’ll say it’s okay, but I’ll let you know. Pete, you can help me print out some quick invitations to pass out at school. In fact, we can create them right now.”

“And pass ‘em out tomorrow.” Bobby flashed a bright smile. “That’s great, Jenny. Will it be Saturday?”

“Yes, the sooner the better. Bobby, you meet us at the bike rack tomorrow morning. We’ll divide the invitations up, so we can get this done between classes.”

After Bobby left, they finished their homework and Pete stuffed his things into his backpack. Jenny went into the pantry and returned with a bottle of vitamins.

Pete read her thoughts. “For Amos?”

“He’ll be stuck inside for a while, Pete, so we need to run down there tomorrow afternoon and see what he needs. And he needs to take vitamins for sure.”

“You’re right. Why don’t I run down there right now and see if he has a list ready? I can take those with me.”

“Okay. I need to get our dinner started. Mom’s always tired when she gets home.”

Pete made a fast trip to the tunnel and returned with a short list and some money. “He had this ready for us. I told him we’d see him

tomorrow afternoon. You know, Jenny, he's concerned that his friend, Miss Luna, will be worried about him. She's used to seeing him once or twice a week."

"I suppose we could visit her and let her know what's going on. Do you know where she lives?"

"Sure. All the kids do, but none of them go there. They all think she's a witch." Pete laughed.

"Then we'll let Amos know what we plan to do. We'll tell him about the costume party and that we'll let Miss Luna know he's okay. We can go see her Friday afternoon before we come home."

"Are you planning to decorate for the party?"

"Maybe a little. Some crepe paper streamers in autumn colors might be nice. That would be a quick way to do it. We'll borrow Uncle Rudy's big cooler. Maybe he'll take it and fill it with ice Saturday morning for the soft drinks," Jenny paused. "We can have three kinds of sandwiches and chips."

"And cookies," Pete added.

"There's only one problem, Pete."

"What's that?"

"Entertainment. What can we do to entertain everyone, other than music?"

"Well, since it's an old-fashioned party, how about some old-fashioned games?"

"I don't know any, but I'll bet Uncle Rudy does. Hey, we could borrow some of his old long-playing record albums. Show the kids what music used to sound like."

"Looks like he read your mind, Jenny. Look who's here."

Uncle Rudy tapped on the back door glass before walking in. "Hi kids. Got your homework finished?"

Jenny laughed. "Uncle Rudy, are you checking up on us?"

"Nope. Just teasing you. I know both of you are good students." He scratched his beard. "Now why did I stop by here?"

"Mental telepathy, Mr. Mitchell. Jenny was just talking about you."

"Oh, you were? Was it good, or bad?"

Jenny told him about the party plans and he grinned. "A get-acquainted party, and old-fashioned costumes? Now that sounds like

fun, and I think your mom and I can make it even better. We can show you kids some of the old dances, and I mean real dancing. Not like the stuff the young folks do these days.”

“You mean like the jitterbug?” Jenny remembered seeing that one in an old movie.

“That one goes back before my time, Jenny, but my mother taught me how to do it. In my young days we did the bop and the two-step. If the dance was formal, we sometimes did the waltz. Now that’s a real dance, one that never leaves us. There’s nothing like a pretty waltz and people still love it. I must say I like your party idea, but why did you decide on the old-fashion theme?”

Jenny didn’t want to be dishonest. Searching her mind, she quickly answered. “Well, Uncle Rudy, it might be fun dressing up like our grandparents and it would be a bit of a history lesson for everyone.”

“That’s true. What can I do to help?”

By the time Jenny’s mom got home, the plans were finalized. She picked up on Uncle Rudy’s enthusiasm and said it was a great idea. “You and Pete go get those invitations ready while I finish dinner.”

“Okay, Mom.”

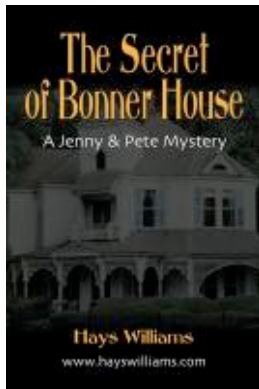
They ran up to her room and went to work. Pete tapped out the words dictated by Jenny, while she sketched orange and brown streamers around the edge of some blank paper. The first invitation came out of the printer looking perfect. Pete quickly printed the rest. They folded them letter style and divided them into three groups. Tomorrow they would pick up the crepe paper and tape for decorating. Jenny’s mom could do the food shopping Friday afternoon.

At bedtime, with Sam beside her, Jenny went to the window and looked up at her star. *“Dad, it’s getting better here, even though we do have some strange things happening. Who would ever guess that someone had to live like Amos has for all those years? I hope we can find out who robbed that lady. Maybe then Amos can come out of hiding and have a normal life.”*

The star blinked, and Jenny stared in wonder. *“Good night, Dad. I love you.”*

Hays Williams

She knelt down by the window seat and said her evening prayers, asking special help for Amos. When she stood up Sam nudged her leg and stuck his nose against the window. Homer and Phantom stood at the edge of the woods, watching the house.



Jenny is frightened when she and Pete discover a secret door in her basement. It leads to an underground tunnel and several rooms, and a man is living there. Who is he? What is the strange light and humming sound? Are they connected to the shooting lights in the night sky? What's going on in Hamilton? What strange secret lies beneath Bonner House? Jenny and Pete must find the answers.

The Secret of Bonner House

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