

CHAPTER ONE

“Stop, thief! Stop that boy!” The clerk ran out on the boardwalk in front of the store. He looked around for help. People turned to look, but no one saw a thief running away from the mercantile. Jonathan, however, saw a boy disappear between the buildings. He started to run after the boy, but decided that would draw attention to him, so he slowed his pace. By the time he walked into the alley between the buildings, he saw no one.

Jonathan turned and walked toward home with his package from the mercantile. The dampness in the late spring air was uncomfortable and Jonathan felt sticky from his own sweat. The dirt in the road was cool to his bare feet from the dampness settling to the earth. As he turned the corner at Penny Street, in the small village of Rome, New York, it turned into a misty rain. The rain did nothing to cool him off. He made it to the back steps just as the rain came down harder.

His stepmother looked through the kitchen window and smiled at Jonathan. Jonathan smiled back with genuine feeling for her. He no longer disliked her for taking his own mother's place, but he accepted her as a member of his family. He wiped his bare feet on the small rag rug, wiggling his toes to get rid of the sand sticking between them. He entered quickly, closed the door against the flies and mosquitoes, and placed the package on the table. “Smells good,” he offered.

The tomatoes had been stewing on the back of the stove for some

time. The spices that Catherine had added to the cooking food made the whole kitchen smell good. Even though he would be helping in his father's blacksmith shop for a little while before supper, he was pleased to think about how those stewed tomatoes would taste on a pile of mashed potatoes. The recipe was one of his own mother's favorite dishes to cook for Jonathan and his father. It had taken some explaining by his father for his stepmother to get the dish made to Ahijah's satisfaction.

"It's an old McManus family recipe, and it needs to be made just right," his father had encouraged. Jonathan smiled and put out both hands to the pretty child who toddled into the kitchen from the front room.

"Jon't'an," squealed little Grace, his two-year-old half-sister. "You pway wif me now?" she said in her squeaky voice.

"Not now, Gracie," he answered, "Here, let me sit you up in your high chair so that you can watch Mama."

Without waiting for a reply, Jonathan swung the little child up in the air, twirled her around and around several times, and artfully placed her in the chair before she could answer with her usual "No!" Both the young boy and the toddler had the similar Hamilton nose and jaw, but their hair coloring was opposite - Jonathan's sandy, wavy hair contrasted with the tight, dark curls of his stepsister.

"I'm going out to the shop now," Jonathan said to his stepmother.

Her answer was a smile and an affirming nod as she worked on the

piecrust for the family's dessert.

Jonathan entered the darkening shop to see that his father was busy measuring and sketching an iron part for a customer. Jonathan interrupted the blacksmith's thoughts by exclaiming "We're having stewed tomatoes and mashed potatoes for supper!"

His father smiled broadly at the news and said, "I'm glad to hear that, but c'mere and look at this, Jonathan - a real interesting problem." He explained what a customer needed, and how he intended to cut, hammer, and assemble the job. Jonathan was again impressed with the God-given skills his father had in making someone else's idea end up in well-crafted iron. Before they realized it, an hour had sped by and the call for supper came from across the side yard. Again his father smiled at Jonathan, and after a quick tidy-up of the quiet shop, they walked out together.

Amidst the polite slurping and the exclamations of how tasty the stewed tomatoes were, Jonathan described the boy he had seen on the street a few hours before.

His father thought he should steer clear of him.

"He could have the sheriff after him - for stealing or worse. Trouble waiting to happen," Ahijah said.

"Now, Ahijah," his stepmother gently disagreed, "we don't know anything about him. He could be lost or orphaned and needing a family to take him in."

Jonathan saw the scowl on his father's face, although he said nothing. The family discussion moved on to other things that had happened that day, but Jonathan was still thinking about the boy near the mercantile alley. He wondered why he looked so badly. *Was someone after him?*

"I think someone's chasing after him!" Jonathan burst out. His stepmother looked shocked at his sudden outburst. She stared open mouthed at him.

His father asked, "What *are* you talking about?" "That strange boy downtown," Jonathan answered excitedly. "My guess is that he's being chased!"

"Now, Jonathan, don't let your imagination get the best of you," smiled his stepmother. "Help me clear the table, please." Catherine said. Across the table from Jonathan, the little girl was barely awake. She had eaten most of her potatoes, but very little of the tomatoes her mother had served her. The family was beginning to notice that Grace didn't want to eat food that was red. All three of the other family members had stifled their laughs as the toddler's eyes closed several times toward the end of the family's meal together. Each time she had heard the suppressed laughter, the near-sleeping child would smile broadly as though she was enjoying their joke. This would bring even more laughter from the family.

"While you're clearing the table, Jonathan, I'm going to take Grace

up and ready her for bed. She's all tired out," Catherine said as she used a warm wet cloth to wash her daughter's hands and face.

Jonathan fairly ran back and forth from table to sink, and when his part of the task was done, he asked to go outside for a while. No sooner did he hear the 'yes' and he was through the door, and around the corner of the house.

Jonathan walked slowly up to the living room window, saw that his father was comfortably seated, reading by the lamp, and knew that he would be occupied for a while. Jonathan turned and ran as fast as he could down Penny Street toward downtown. He dodged away from the puddles of water that had collected in the uneven gravel-covered dirt roadway as he ran along.

The teen slowed as he neared the businesses on Main Street, and began to peer into the darkened alleyways between the shops. He walked quickly, his heart pounding from both the running and the excitement. Jonathan took several deep breaths and quietly walked toward the back of the mercantile and through the alley where he had seen the boy disappear. He stumbled over some wooden boxes, sucked in his breath and waited. No one called out, and no lantern light gave him away. He recovered his balance and his nerve then continued down the alley toward the darkness at the very end of the mercantile building.

There was no light back there at all, and as he waited for his eyes to adjust even more to the darkness, he reached his hand to the left

until he touched the rough wooden siding. He slowly reached ahead while scuffing his foot forward, repeating the process for many steps. Now Jonathan could make out the wall of the shed near the back door of the mercantile. Suddenly, a hand came out of nowhere and pulled him backward into the open shed.

“Whad’ya want? Ya lookin’ for me?” a young, raspy voice whispered.

Jonathan’s collar was being pulled so tight it cut off his breathing, and he struggled to get away.

“Stop it!” his captor hissed.

Jonathan stopped struggling at the same time the hold on his neck loosened.

“Let go of me! Leave me alone!” Jonathan said anxiously as he turned part way around to get a look to see if this was the same boy.

“Say, I’m not going to bother...” Jonathan started.

“You sure ain’t.”

The grip around his neck tightened once again.

Jonathan turned his head and asked, “Where’d you come from? What are you doing here?” He then choked as the other boy’s bad odor reached his nostrils.

The other boy answered through gritted teeth, “I’m on my way west. I’m tired of bein’ a Yorker. I’m just passin’ through town. What’s it to ya?”

“I was just wondering. I don’t mean any harm,” Jonathan returned as he felt the grip loosen ever so slightly.

“So, what are ya wantin’?”

“Nothing, honest. I just thought you might want something to eat.” Jonathan pulled an apple from his pants pocket and handed it to the boy. “Here.”

The boy’s hand came out of the dark to grab the apple, and Jonathan heard biting and slurping as the other boy gulped the apple down.

“Say, we had some leftovers at supper tonight - potatoes and stewed tomatoes. Want some? C’mon.” he offered.

As the two neared the end of the alley, where there was more light, the boy relaxed his grip altogether. Jonathan realized that the boy looked very tired and weak.

“I ain’t et a real meal in two days. Just some cheese my ma gave me.” He hesitated before he continued, “You won’t tell nobody you seen me? Your folks won’t tell nobody I stopped by, will they?”

“No, but - why - what are you doing here?” Jonathan repeated, trying to speak softly and kindly.

The other boy just stared at Jonathan, choosing not to answer. He shuffled his feet as if to remind Jonathan that he had offered food at his home. As Jonathan turned to walk back home, the other boy whispered “No, not on the street. This way.”

The boys started toward the edge of town away from Main Street. They picked their way in the darkness until they came out on the street leading to Penny Street. As they walked, they had enough light reflected from puddles and house lights to find their way.

As they walked toward the house, both boys were silent. Jonathan tried to think of something to say without asking questions that would offend the boy. Then too, he was thinking about how he would explain to his father the reason for being out so long. He had never brought home a complete stranger before, especially since his father had warned him to stay away from the boy.