

THE HARD WAY



James
Boedeker

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by

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Growing up dirt-poor in the Wyoming wilderness as part of the white-trash Childress clan, Jonah learned life's lessons fast, the hard way. At six years of age, Jonah learned to hunt to help feed his family. He also learned to fight to protect his sister.

With a drunken abusive father and a hapless lazy mother, Jonah had no hope, but vowed somehow to save his little sister Gail from their hell on earth. Then along came Kevin O'Malley, a soldier awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, in Wyoming with his wife for a vacation hunting trip.

Kevin took notice of the remarkable Jonah Childress. He couldn't allow this boy's life to be wasted. When Kevin's wife Stacey agreed to take on the care of the two children, Kevin was all-in to save Jonah and Gail. His first order of business was to get the boy and his sister away from their abusive situation. That turned out to be no easy task, especially when Jonah had learned to trust no one, and the Childress clan wasn't about to let go of one of their own without a fight.

Kevin was the type of man who'd never give up. He had long-range plans for Jonah. But, in the end, what would it really cost him – all of them?

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O N E

Jonah Childress and his little sister Gail looked out the window, waiting in the dark cabin for their parents to come home. No one had lit a lantern for light, and the fire in the hearth had long since burned out. It hadn't taken long for the temperature to drop. The window glass kept icing over from their breath.

The baby had finally stopped crying, and the cabin was quiet. Gail broke the silence, whimpering that she was cold. Jonah went and got a blanket from the bed they shared, and they cuddled together for warmth. The cabin had been built sometime after nineteen hundred, more than fifty years before five-year-old Jonah had been born. It was situated over a small creek, perched in an embankment. Half the floor was wooden planks with spaces between, and the other half was dirt. The cabin had three windows, but one was boarded over because the glass was broken. The only door let cold mountain air blow in through the gaps around it. The pitcher of water had frozen over and both Gail and Jonah were thirsty.

Jonah had wanted to go out to get more wood for the fire, but didn't for fear of punishment. They weren't allowed outside when their parents weren't home. He wasn't allowed to tend the fire either. Winters in the mountains of Wyoming were cold and harsh, all the more so during a storm. Jonah and Gail waited as long as they could and finally went to bed shivering. Jonah dressed his little sister in extra clothes and covered the baby with another blanket before crawling under the blankets with his sister.

He woke up when his parents finally staggered in sometime during the night. From the sound of it, they were drunk, as usual. Jonah pretended to be asleep, but overheard his father complain about the fire. Jonah was glad they were home because his toes were so cold, they hurt. His father carried wood in and lit a fire in the woodstove.

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His mother went to bed before his father finished.

Jonah was awakened, being yanked from his bed and shaken like a rag doll. The cabin was warm now, but his father was in a fury and screaming at him about letting the fire go out. Jonah knew not to cry; to do so would invite a beating. Jonah saw his mother at the table glaring at him as his father screamed. For some reason, his father made him look at the baby. Baby David was still sleeping, even with the yelling.

In disgust, Jonah's father threw him across the room. Jonah bounced off the hard log wall, falling to the floor. "He killed the baby!" Jonah's mother shrieked. Jonah looked over at the sleeping baby and wondered who had killed him.

Jonah's father told Jonah to take his coat off and stand up. That meant a beating was about to happen. Jonah pulled his coat off as fast he could. To take too long only made it worse. His father yelled, "Go get a switch, boy!" Jonah ran outside as fast as he could. His father was waiting for him on the porch as he ran back with the switch. His father weighed the switch in his hand and nodded. "This'll do. Pull your pants down and bend over and grab those ankles. And, mister, you best not cry, because a Childress don't cry, no matter what." His father always bellowed about that between whacks from his belt or a willow switch.

No sooner than Jonah was bent over, he heard the switch whistle through the air. The beating had begun. Hit after hit, the switch burned its lesson into young Jonah's back, legs, and buttocks. The pain was unbearable, and still Jonah remained silent. The hits kept coming and the burning became too much. From somewhere in his belly he felt his wail of anguish begin. It came out as a high pitched 'Eieeee!' As it started, Jonah felt something snap, and he couldn't control it. He felt his heart beating so fast, he couldn't breathe – yet the beating continued. He couldn't hear what his father was screaming at him, only his own squeal of agony.

Jonah woke to a silent cabin. He was lying on the dirt floor, his sister Gail sitting next to him, sucking her thumb. Jonah couldn't move, the pain was simply too much. Gail was whimpering and tried

to curl up next to him. She accidentally touched his back, and Jonah threw up on himself, then passed out.

Jonah woke only for brief moments over next few days. He would carry the scars for the rest of his life. From this experience Jonah learned the hard way that a relatively minor beating was far better than incurring his father's full wrath. Jonah was slow to recover, but lessons were learned. When his parents were home, he would fetch in as much firewood as possible before they left. He would also follow exactly the tracks to the stream where they got water, to hide any evidence of his wrongdoing. Jonah was never beaten as severely again, but only because he made sure he never made his father so angry again.



T W O

Hunting in Jonah's clan was how food was put on the table. Hunting at night was normal because Jonah's father didn't believe in having to pay for a license to hunt. He reasoned that the state didn't pay for the deer, so why should he?

Jonah started hunting with his father when he turned six years old. For his birthday his father gave him a single-shot .22 caliber rifle. To Jonah it was the most beautiful gift he had ever been given. Along with the rifle, Jonah received a box of bullets.

Jonah's father took him out to learn how to shoot the rifle. After a few words of coaching, Jonah was finally allowed to shoot, and he was a natural at it. With a nod of approval, Jonah was told that now he could start to earn his keep. His job would be to hunt rabbits and squirrels. This was just fine with Jonah because he loved the outdoors, and too many days they went without food because his father was too drunk to hunt.

Jonah shot his first rabbit, and they ate rabbit for his birthday dinner. It would be many years before Jonah would see a real cake much, less eat any.

Jonah poached his first deer a week later. It was a small doe standing in the middle of the weed patch his mother called the garden. Jonah shot the deer dead center between the eyes, just as he had been taught. He dressed it out and proudly waited for his father to get home. When his father saw the deer, he cuffed Jonah hard enough to knock him off his feet. "Boy, you always gotta learn it the hard way, don't you? You ever see me killing deer in the fucking yard? No, never - 'cause that's how you get your ass arrested. Now help me drag the damned thing in the shed."

Jonah fought back his tears. He had learned the hard way that tears would result in another beating. Men didn't cry, and the

Childress clan weren't no pussies.

They hung the deer, and his father skinned the first half and let Jonah do the rest. While Jonah worked, his father hit the bottle and watched. "Well boy, you're dumber than a box of rocks, but you can shoot, and that's a fact." This was as close to a compliment that Jonah had ever received from his father. When Jonah finished, his father was barely able to stagger to his feet. They would let the deer hang for a few days before cutting it up.

Jonah knew his father was happy about the kill. It meant that he would have more time for drinking. Even so, his father said, "Go cut a switch, boy. You know you got to answer for fucking up again. A man takes responsibility, and I'll be damned if any son of mine don't learn that lesson."

Jonah cut a good switch; he had already learned what happened if he tried to cheat his beating. His father must have been in a good mood because, after eight whacks, he threw the switch down and ordered Jonah to pull his pants up. Like a good Childress, Jonah never cried or showed the pain. 'Discipline makes the man,' his father liked to preach. Jonah reasoned if this were true, then he was already a man because he never cried from his beatings.

* * * * *

Two weeks had passed since Jonah shot his first deer, and his father was in the mood for a hunt. He woke Jonah up and told him to grab his rifle; they needed to fill the freezer. They took back roads to a big ranch where deer were always thick. Tonight was different though, because Jonah's dad wanted beef. They stopped when his father saw a group of steers standing just a little ways off the road. "Pick a fat one, boy, and put him down. Be quick about it, because we ain't got all night."

Jonah stepped from the truck and took a rest off the hood like he had been taught. Within seconds, his little .22 cracked, and a steer lay kicking with the little bullet buried in its brain, dead center between the eyes. He took no pleasure from that kill and learned that

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night where the beef came from that they had on occasion. At six years old, he learned a good many things about the Childress clan. Not only were they a clan of drunks, but also a clan of thieves.

Jonah and his father couldn't take the whole steer because it was too big, so Jonah hurriedly quartered it and loaded the meat in the truck. As he worked, his father watched and was hitting the bottle hard. Just as they were pulling away, they saw headlights coming up the road, and his father burned rubber getting away from the rancher. His father escaped the rancher by taking quite a few shortcuts and logging roads. In the dark with no moon, somehow his father followed the roads well enough to drive with the lights off, but Jonah knew that more than a few times they just narrowly escaped going off the road and down a vertical cliff.

The action-packed ride terrified Jonah, and the entire time his father cursed him for being so slow dressing the steer. Jonah knew that when they got home, he was going to have to cut a switch. The fact that his father could have prepared the meat much faster or could have helped didn't seem to matter. It was all Jonah's fault – everything was always Jonah's fault.



THREE

Jonah was walking home from where the bus dropped him off from school. He was the only twelve-year-old in his class. He had started school two years late and only because the state threatened to take the kids away if his parents didn't send him. As a result, Jonah got teased by kids his own age in the grade he should have been in. On this particular day, a group of boys followed him to the overgrown gravel driveway to his house, taunting him as he walked. The final straw was when one of the boys pelted him with a rock in the back of the head. Jonah whirled around and went after his tormentors.

Jonah was a bit small for his age, but he had cousins who liked to fight. In the Childress clan, fighting was an art form, and they were all expected to be able throw down with the best. Jonah was no stranger to using his fists. Up to that point, Jonah had never fought anyone other than cousins. He taught his hecklers real quick that three-to-one was no sure bet. Two boys ran for home crying, leaving their friend to face Jonah's wrath alone. Jonah felt the years of humiliation pour out of him as he punched the other boy in the face. He felt the rage of being helpless and being blamed for anything and everything. The boy who by chance had been the one who threw the stone learned the hard way, don't fuck with a Childress.

By the time the boy's mother arrived, her son was beaten unconscious, and Jonah stood over him, his hands covered in blood. The mother didn't waste time yelling at Jonah as she gathered her son up and ran for home. The boy would be in the hospital for a few weeks and would never look the same, but he would never taunt Jonah again.

When the police came, Jonah's father stood up for him for once. "Three on one, and Jonah kicked their asses. Now that is a real

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Childress!” he said to anyone who would listen. The clan was poor, but proud, damn it.

The police warned that Jonah had gone too far, and next time they would arrest him. His father pointed out the lump on Jonah’s head and the fact that the boys had followed him damn near a quarter mile just to jump him from behind. “A man has a right to defend himself,” his father protested. Jonah could tell the cops were afraid of his father – most people were. Jonah learned early what fear looked like. He could even smell it sometimes. Jonah was rewarded with a soda pop after the police left.

* * * * *

Jonah may have started school late, but he wasn’t stupid. His mother, for all her faults, had been teaching him how to read and write, so he wasn’t all that far behind. The school, out of fear that Jonah might lose his temper on the younger children, moved him to a class his own age. It didn’t take him long to catch up. It helped that his teacher took an interest in him and spent extra time bringing him up to speed. Mrs. Larson was the first woman Jonah loved.

Mrs. Larson had grown up with Jonah’s father and knew all about the Childress clan. She didn’t know for a fact the abuse Jonah suffered, but she had a pretty good idea. She made it a point to stay in Jonah’s life as he advanced through the grades. Unfortunately Jonah would learn that not all teachers were as compassionate as Mrs. Larson.

Growing up poor was hard for anyone. Growing up poor and a Childress had its own problems. Everyone in town knew about the Childress clan, and no one liked any of the clan – all were rumored to be drunken thieves and outlaws. Most folks tried to avoid the Childress clan at any cost. A Childress was a problem waiting to happen. In a small town like Dubois, Wyoming, a little bad goes a long way.

Given all that, Jonah was the best behaved of any of the Childress boys in his generation. Several of his cousins were already

locked up and looking at some years in juvi prison before they would be set free. He had only had one run-in with the law, and that was when he was fifteen.

Because she was a despised Childress, Jonah's sister Gail was targeted by her schoolmates. Jonah would endure a lot of taunting himself but tolerated none when it came to Gail. His reputation as the quiet but deadly Childress should have set them all to running, but Gail's tormentors failed to notice a very angry Jonah running towards them. Jonah hit the group of boys before they knew they had trouble. Kids ran for a teacher as Jonah started the beating. Some boys landed some hits on Jonah, but having grown up enduring real pain, he was able to ignore their pitiful attempts. As a Childress, Jonah knew a fair fight was one you didn't lose. He used his teeth and kicked in the balls. A bigger boy grabbed Jonah in a headlock. Jonah responded by grabbing the boy's balls and squeezing with all his might. When the boy let go of Jonah, Jonah rewarded the boy with a kick in the head.

By this time, teachers arrived to break up the fight. Jonah sat in a room by himself with a split lip and bloody nose. His right eye was nearly swollen shut. Even a Childress can be hurt, and taking on a pack of six will always result in taking some damage. The other boys didn't look so good either, and one needed to be carried to the nurse's office.

Jonah could hear his father arguing with the principle. "Jesus Christ! Six on one, and you're blaming my boy? Those boys were after my little girl, and you don't think her brother has a right to defend her? What kind of man are you? Maybe in your clan, you don't mind your women being set upon, but in mine we defend them. Seems to me you ought to be thanking my boy for doing your job for you. Those bastards will think twice about picking on little girls now."

Jonah's father might be a drunk and a thief, but the man could intimidate and argue with the best of them. Two hundred and forty pounds of mean redneck standing six foot three was bad enough, but a deep growling voice and razor-sharp wit made him a force to reckon with. No one wanted to be trapped in a room alone with a Childress,

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and Jonah's father was known to be the meanest of them all.

The principle was a small man from Casper. He was used to people who were civil and supportive of school discipline. Before he knew it, he was agreeing with Jonah's father, if for no other reason than to avoid getting beat up. Jonah was allowed to stay in school, and the principle promised to make sure the offending boys would be punished. Jonah's father offered to do the switching. Even Jonah flinched at the thought of allowing such a man to administer the punishment.

On the way home, Jonah's father stopped and bought Jonah a soda pop and some candy. His father was never more proud. Six on one, and Jonah held his own. They made the rounds to a few local bars. Jonah's father had bragging rights and wanted to strike while the fire was hot. At one stop Jonah, was ordered to go in the bar and show off his black eye, then tell how he kicked some serious ass. Jonah hated being put on display, but did as he was told. He had no desire to piss off his father and learn another lesson the hard way.

By the time they got home, it was dark, and both children were starved. They had steaks for dinner to celebrate.

