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William Henry IS A FINE NAME

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THE JUNE SUN SMOLDERED uncommonly hot, so hot that William Henry and I chose to forget our chores, borrow hot cornbread and cold cider from Aunt Sassy's kitchen, and take off for Tulley's Pond, home of the best smallmouth bass this end of Cecil County. By late afternoon we'd swatted a million mosquitoes, snagged somebody's old wagon wheel, and hooked a few sunnies not worth the fat to fry. It was getting late and we were about to give it up and go on home to chores and supper when Jake Tulley showed up on the opposite bank. William Henry elbowed me in the side.

"You boys be trespassing." Jake knew our names as well as he knew his mama's, but Jake was a year older and calling us "you boys" made him feel smug.

"Trespassing?" William Henry's eyes opened wide, showing all their white in his black face. He turned to me and in a voice that held all the shock of a September snowstorm, said, "Robert Leslie Glover? Is we trespassing? Is that what we're doing here?"

"I thought we was fishing." I kept my face straight.

Jake pushed a greasy hank of hair off his forehead and hitched up his pants. "I guess whipping your pa for trespassing

last week wasn't enough, William Henry. We'll see who thinks he's funny when I tell my pa that darkies and white trash is stealing our fish."

I felt William Henry's muscles tense beside me, but his mouth never twitched. "Why, Mr. Jake, we meant no harm! We was just passing the time with these fishing poles while we waited for a fresh crop of ivy poison!" William Henry could talk himself out of a whipping or work, but even I looked at him like he was crazy when he said that.

Jake lifted his chin. "What are you talkin' about, William Henry?"

"I'm talking 'bout ivy poison, Mr. Jake. Last summer when you caught that fearful rash I felt so bad I figured I just had to help find a cure."

Jake eyed him suspiciously. I still kept my face straight, wondering what William Henry was up to now.

"Well, I took myself on down to Granny Struthers. She don't usually get mixed up in white folks' ailments and cures, but she told me that all a body need do not to ever get the ivy poison rash again is to eat a whole handful of fresh young ivy poison sprouts. Mind you, Mr. Jake, that only works if you ever had it real bad—at least once. Like you, sir." The "sir" and "Mr." and the know-nothing smile on William Henry's face reeled Jake right in like he was aching to bite bait.

"You sure about this?" Jake winced into the sun. Everybody knew Granny Struthers had the gift for all kinds of outlandish cures that mostly had to do with plants and mostly worked. Maybe Jake thought he was onto something big—him being white and all. "You sure you're not making this up to get out of being whipped for trespassing?" I felt William Henry's muscles tense again and I knew he was thinking of his pa, who'd only taken a shortcut across Tulley's fallow field.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Jake. I mean, no sir, I'm not tryin' to spoof you. What would I be doin' sittin' in this bed of ivy poison myself if it hadn't worked for me? But I wouldn't want you to try it, Mr. Jake. No sir, I wouldn't." William Henry solemnly shook his head. Jake frowned and strained his eyes toward us. He was squint-eyed and couldn't have spotted ivy poison if he was half as close.

Jake pressed his fists into his hips. "And just why not? I'll be bound it's good enough for me if it's good enough for you!"

"Oh, it ain't that, Mr. Jake. No, sir. It's just that this is a highly scientific experiment and Granny wants to make sure it works on poor folks of color like me before she'd ever try it out on you fine white folks. After a time I reckon she'll take the cure on up to those Philadelphia lawyers, then they'll confer with them kings of England and it'll get to be known all over. Then'll be the time for you to try it, Mr. Jake." William Henry nodded, looking as wise as Judge Mason up in Elkton, and went back to his fishing.

Jake stood, undecided. He shifted his weight from one dusty bare foot to the other. Finally he said, "If it's good enough for Philadelphia lawyers it's good enough for me." He yanked up the nearest handful of ivy poison leaves and stuffed them into his greasy mouth. William Henry feigned horror and I didn't need to pretend at all. I knew we were in for it now. But William Henry shook his head slowly and whispered, just loud enough to carry across the pond, "That Mr. Jake is bound to go down in scientific history."

Jake hitched his britches as he gulped the last mouthful of sticky leaves, then slurped a handful of pond water to aid the process. He swiped his sleeve across his mouth and stood tall. "You boys go on home, now. I won't tell on you fishin' this time. But mind you don't come back here again!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Jake," William Henry said. "Thank you, sir." We scooped up our string of sunnies and stick poles to head home. William Henry stopped in his tracks and turned. "Mr. Jake? Would you like these fish? It would be our honor for you to have them—you a gentleman of learnin' and all. Nobody need know we caught them. They can be yours."

Jake's mouth watered. His ma dearly loved fresh fish and Jake was no good at fishing. He didn't know how to sit still and never used good bait. "Why, I expect so. I guess it's fittin' since they be from my pa's pond. You don't tell my ma you caught 'em."

"I'd not think on it." William Henry waded straight across, and from waist-deep water handed up the catch of sunnies, pulling us off the hook.

Jake strutted off in his most kingly strut. William Henry kept a solemn face till we'd walked a quarter mile down the road, then we both broke out in rip-roaring, doubled-over laughter.

We whooped and hollered, tripping over each other as we tore through the woods. "That'll teach those Tulleys to mess with Joseph Henry!" William Henry's laugh cut the edge of reason.

"You don't reckon it'll kill him, do you?" I didn't want to be run in for murder.

"No, I'm half sorry to say. I'll go by Granny Struthers later and tell her the Tulleys be needin' her help." He shrugged. "It'll keep him miserable for a time, but Granny'll fix him up." That eased my mind, and we took off running again.

By the time we dropped on the banks of the Laurel Run, tears ran and our sides ached. But ours was minor suffering, all things considered. We knew we'd be late for evening chores and in trouble, but the moss bed under the beech tree called our names. Besides, this was the first time in forever that

William Henry and I had escaped our mothers and outwitted Jake Tulley all in one fine day.

William Henry was my best friend. His ma and pa, Aunt Sassy and Joseph Henry, worked for Mr. and Miz Heath, same as my pa, only my pa was foreman of Laurelea. I taught William Henry to read when we were little. Everything my ma and Miz Laura Heath taught me I practiced on William Henry by scratching it in the dirt behind the barn. Pretty soon he could outread and outwrite me and liked it better. So when Mr. Heath loaned me a book I just passed it on to William Henry, who inhaled it by candlelight. He'd return it a few days later, giving me the gist and a few particulars. Then, when Miz Laura or Mr. Heath questioned me, I could reel off the facts and figures enough to make them believe I was up and coming. I felt a little squeamish about deceiving those I loved, but figured it was the lesser of two evils and that I'd get around to being a genuine scholar someday.

William Henry and I talked about anything and everything. That day I asked a question I'd puzzled over for some time. William Henry might not know the answer, but there was no one else I dared ask. "What do you reckon ladies wear under those hoopskirts?"

"Don't suppose they wear nothin'," William Henry replied. "Why would they?"

"Oh, I think they must wear something. I've seen lots of white things hanging on Ma's wash line that I've never seen her wear on the outside. I reckon they're down underneath, but I can't think why she'd bother."

"My mama don't wear nothin' under her dress. She says that old kitchen's hot enough. I guess white folks wears extra things. Maybe that pale skin keeps them cold."

I knew William Henry was messing with me. "Well, I'm white and I don't wear nothing extra. If I had my way I wouldn't be wearing nothing at all right now, it's so all-fired hot."

"Well, you're different, Robert. I'd say you're pretty nearly colored in your druthers." William Henry lay back against the creek bank, sucked the juice from a reed, and chuckled to himself.

I turned my back on him. He ought not get so uppity and fresh.

"Last one in chops wood!" William Henry screeched. Quicker than a firefly flickers, he stripped down to his sleek black skin and dove headfirst into the run. I was still vexed, and then more so because I had to chop wood. But that was fair and it was hot, and I'd have done it to him if I'd thought about it first. So I stripped down, took a running start, grabbed the rope hanging off the big beech tree, and swung out over the middle of the run. For one glorious moment I stopped dead, straddled the air bowlegged, then dropped straight down into the cold June water. We whooped and hollered and nearly drowned each other before the quitting bell rang outside the Heaths' house. We hadn't finished our chores and now we'd be late for supper, too. William Henry could talk his way out of anything, but my tongue failed me whenever I lied, and I could feel my face heat up like a smithy's fire.

William Henry flew over the ridge, pulling his pants up with one hand while shoving the other through a damp blue shirt.

By the time I reached my back porch stoop, I'd straightened most of my buttons, slicked my hair with my fingers, and was as sweated as if I'd never cooled myself in Laurel Run. I shoved two crusted feet in my shoes and held my breath as I creaked open the back porch door. If there's a way for a half-

starved boy to slide unnoticed to a table loaded with steaming cornbread, ham, fried potatoes, and cold canned peaches, I didn't know it.

I slid in and bowed my head to pray. That might soften Ma and give me a minute to catch my breath. The Lord might also appreciate being noticed.

I raised my head to find Pa surveying my shirt collar. His mouth drew a line, but the blue lights in his eyes caught mine. I knew then that I wouldn't get licked and that Pa knew exactly where I'd been. It was lucky Pa remembered being a boy.

"Robert Leslie Glover." Ma used my full name whenever I stepped out of line. "Yes, Ma?"

"Supper was served at six o'clock."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where are your socks, Robert?" How she knew I didn't have socks on when my feet sat under the table, I didn't know.

"Right here, Ma." I pulled two powerfully dirty socks from my back pocket and held them out for her over the ham platter, thankful I hadn't left them down at the run.

"Robert! Not at the table!" Ma's mouth turned down and her brow wrinkled. It was a shame, for Ma was young and pretty, but frowning aged her.

"Sorry, Ma. I thought you wanted to see them." I stuffed my soggy socks down the insides of my shoes.

"'Mother,' Robert. Not 'Ma.' And I prefer to see socks on your feet, where they belong. Why ever did you take them off?"

"Well, Ma—Mother—you know how Miz Laura likes her flower beds weeded. Well, me and William Henry—William Henry and I—"

"William Henry, again!" Ma was fit to be tied.

"Caroline," Pa cautioned her, but cocked his eyebrows

toward me. He'd understand swimming at the run with William Henry anytime, but he'd not tolerate a lie. Ma, on the other hand, wouldn't understand swimming, especially skinny-dipping in broad daylight. She didn't like me larking with William Henry, and she believed that sticking bare feet in cold spring-water before the middle of July was next to taking your life from God's hands into your own, and that was surely a sin and tempting the Lord ever so severely all at once. I swallowed, felt my face heat up, and started again.

"The truth is, Mother, that it was so hot today that everything I wore began to itch me something fierce and I feared I'd break out in a rash from the heat in my body and the wool in my socks mingling together, so I took them off and kept them safe and clean—clean as possible—in my pocket." Pa picked up his fork. He knew it wasn't the whole truth, but he let me off just the same and I thought well of him for it. Ma studied my face, then tugged with little patience at the tatted edges of her cuffs. Pretty soon she sighed, eased her brow, and passed me the cornbread.

Ma was no ordinary woman. She loved me in her way, but a war seemed to be forever waging inside her, a war I couldn't see.

Granny Struthers, who lived near the bend in the run, told me that Ma was raised at Ashland, a big tobacco plantation in North Carolina, the only child of a well-to-do planter. Ma was just ten when her mother died in a buggy accident. A spooked horse ran wild, throwing the buggy against a tree, ripping the seat apart and crushing Grandmother. Grandfather shot the horse in the head and beat the driver, an old family slave, near to death. After that he gained a fearful reputation with a whip among the slaves, men and women alike. Granny Struthers figured Ma suffered most for losing her mother at

such a tender age, but vowed Marcus Ashton may as well have followed his wife to her grave for all the love he gave his daughter after that.

Ma had missed out on family but she'd had everything else in this world. Granny Struthers said Ma grew up talking the most proper kind of southern English and spreading a host of silver spoons and forks beside her dinner plate. She'd been waited on and fussed over by slaves every day of her life. Even Ma said that falling in love with Pa in his military uniform at a Washington, D.C., ball was the first thing she ever did by herself.

But Grandfather wouldn't take a Massachusetts man for his daughter, not even a West Point graduate. He feared all Northerners were "dyed-in-the-wool abolitionists." Still, Pa was smitten, so he wrote to Isaac Heath, a family friend in Maryland, asking for a job. He left West Point and Massachusetts both and took the foreman's job at Laurelea, about halfway between his home and Ma's. Then Grandfather swore Pa was no better than a deserter and dirt farmer, living low. Ma ran off and married Pa anyway. Grandfather disowned Ma, swearing that he was no kin to any Yankee abolitionist and that the day she set her slippered foot off North Carolina red clay soil was the day his only child died. When I was born Ma wrote her pa a letter, begging him to come. He never answered.

That's when Ma settled in at Laurelea. Miz Laura and Aunt Sassy took her under their wing, taught Ma how to cook and get along the way regular folks do. Even so, Ma bristled around anybody of color. She hated being taught how to do by Aunt Sassy. I figured it was just the way she was brought up, owning slaves and all. But sometimes her ways shamed me in front of William Henry and Aunt Sassy. I knew her ways shamed Pa, who'd had to learn a new way of life, too. Sometimes, he took little patience with her.

Granny Struthers told me all this one day when I stopped to see her for herbs for Miz Laura's garden. Granny Struthers is no real kin to me. She's William Henry's granny for real, Aunt Sassy's ma. Granny's as black as the crow that flies, like William Henry. She has a way of knowing things that folks don't speak outside their four walls, and of what's on a person's mind before he speaks it.

The mantel clock bonged seven-thirty. Supper was long cleared. I'd finished filling the wood and kindling boxes, and hauled water for morning. Daisy hadn't liked that I was so late milking her, and let me know with a sharp crack of her tail against my cheek. I'd skimmed the cream for Ma and set the pail to cool in the springhouse. My chores were finally finished.

Sleepy summer sounds of wood thrushes and night owls drifted low on the evening breeze. A Carolina wren sang its lullaby. I stretched long on the hearth rug, my hands locked behind my head, and stared up into the beams of the ceiling. Pa tamped his pipe, lifted his heavy black Bible off the shelf, and sat down by the west window so the light could find his page. Ma folded her mending and placed it square in the basket at her feet. She pushed a pesky curl, the color of chestnuts just ripened, from her forehead, closed her eyes, and gave herself over to listening.

I never minded the evening read. I loved the music in Pa's voice when he took up the Book. Words didn't sit still on the page in black, block letters for him like they did for me. They leaped into the night sky, casting shadows among the fire dancers, conjuring battles and bloody sacrifices. Long, treacherous journeys, spoils of war, and riches beyond anything I could imagine in daylight played through the air while Pa read.

When he read Solomon, I loved a woman with my whole

heart and soul, even though I'd not raised my eyes to a girl in town. In Acts, I believed myself in far-off Jerusalem, breathless from the heat of the mob and bruised by the sharp edges of rocks that stoned Stephen. I lay limp on the floor when the lifeblood and water dripped out of Jesus on the cross.

Some place deep inside me cried over the tenderness of an Almighty God who counts the hairs of my head precious and keeps track of each sparrow, who would search night and day until He found a lone, lost lamb, intent on returning it to the fold.

I wondered how the God of the Bible and the one Preacher Crane railed about on Sunday mornings could be one and the same. Preacher Crane screamed about a God of vengeance, and lakes of fire and brimstone. But when Pa read, I saw a God of peace and mercy, grieved by war and one man's meanness to another. It seemed to me a great, long journal written since the beginning of time, and in it I could learn, little by little, the secrets of life.

I Have Seen Him IN THE WATCHFIRES

CATHY GOHLKE

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

One

Late May, 1864

Our worst spring storm broke on the edge of midnight, a river thrown from the sky. By dawn the Laurel Run had overflowed its banks and was busy stripping the lower fields clean. I knew it even as I lay in my bed, listening to the downpour.

Maybe it was the wind and thunder, or maybe my mind so bent on worry for our new crop, but I never heard the parcel thrust inside the parlor door, never heard so much as a knock or footfall. When at first light I found it, battered and beaten, bound by twine, I knew that the messenger had taken care to keep it dry. But the seal on Emily's letter was broken, proof that somebody knew our business.

It wasn't that violation that made the heat creep up my neck as I tore open the letter. It was the first words Emily'd ever penned me: "Dearest Cousin Robert." She'd written on Christmas Day—five long months before. Still, it was a miracle that it had come at all, the mail from the South being what it was.

"Yesterday," she wrote, "I was visited by Lt. Col. Stuart Copeland, of the 11th North Carolina, lately a prisoner, exchanged

from Fort Delaware, Pea Patch Island. Lt. Col. Copeland informed me that Papa—Col. Albert Mitchell—there, I've written his precious name—was chest wounded, and captured at the battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 3rd July, along with his remaining men from the 26th North Carolina. He said that Papa, like so many prisoners at Fort Delaware, suffers gravely from smallpox."

It was the first news she'd had of him in more than a year, and she was desperate to know if he lived . . . "I beg you, by all the love of family we have ever known, to forget the estrangement of this maddening war and do all you can for Papa."

I raked my fingers through my hair. It was a hard request. I'd turn the world over for Emily, if given the chance, but Cousin Albert was another matter. I figured him to be the reason, or a good part of the reason, Ma never came home.

"Gladly would I go myself," she wrote, "but the railroads are a shambles, and Uncle Marcus is not well. I do not know if he will see the spring." I couldn't imagine Ashland without Grandfather, or Ma without him—and why was all this left to Emily's care? She was no older than me. I took up the letter again.

"I would send Alex, but Papa sent him to school in England for the duration of the war, and we have heard nothing from him in two years. The blockades prevent all such communication."

I felt my jaw tighten, remembering Emily's younger brother. Alex's first priority was always Alex. I couldn't imagine him risking life and limb to help anyone, his father included, if it meant he'd inherit Mitchell House, and possibly Ashland, sooner. That was his life's goal, even before his voice began to squeak.

"As you can imagine, this horrible war has taken its toll on

us all, especially your dear mother. I promise that Cousin Caroline will want for nothing that I can provide in this life as long as I live and am able to care for her. If there is any way you or Cousin Charles can come to her aid, I urge you to do so. But I beg you to see about Papa first."

My heart raced to think of going to Emily, and to Ma, that they might need me, might want me. It was the first news I'd heard of Ma in months. I tried to conjure their faces, but they wouldn't come. I remembered that Emily was a younger, darker version of Ma, that Ma's eyes were blue and Emily's brown. But four long years had passed since Ma'd left, it had been longer still since I'd seen Emily, and there was not so much as a tintype to remind me. I forced myself back to the letter.

"With this letter I enclose a parcel of comforts for Papa. I have no hope that they would reach him if I sent them directly to the prison. We have heard such stories of the prison guards. . . ."

I set the letter on the parlor table and counted the days since the battle of Gettysburg. After ten months, stuck in a Union prison—chest wounded, and with smallpox—I couldn't hope that Cousin Albert lived. But for Emily's sake, and for all she'd done and bound herself to do for Ma, I vowed to heed her plea, to go and see and do my best by him.

As soon as I'd seen to Cousin Albert I'd head for North Carolina, no matter that Grandfather had disowned me and forbidden Pa or me to set foot on Ashland. Grandfather couldn't keep me from Ma if she needed Pa or me. And Pa was gone south more than a year now, drawing maps of back roads and terrain for the Union, though no one was to know.

Pa'd gone as a civilian, not willing to carry a gun. He said he wanted to help secure the Union's power to settle the slavery

issue, but he wouldn't fire on his countrymen. It didn't seem to me that the secessionists, the secesh, were our countrymen anymore. But Pa figured it was the politicians that seceded from the Union, that the Southern people weren't our enemy. He'd long ago decided he'd not take the life of another man. It angered me that Pa would not protect himself, that he'd march into enemy territory without a gun. It was the only thing in life that stood between us. I didn't know if he was still alive.

So it was up to me. I'd bring Ma home—Emily and Grandfather too, if they'd come. But it must be done quickly. My eighteenth birthday was in two months, and I wouldn't wait one more day to enlist. I wanted Ma and Emily out of the South before then. It would put to rest every worry I carried over fighting the Confederacy.

I packed my bag before walking up to Mr. Heath's to tell him and the Henrys I'd be going. I almost packed Pa's heavy black Bible, the one from the mantle that we'd always used for the evening read, then set it back. I wanted it to be here, to be waiting when Pa and I returned. I'd kept that read all the months Pa'd been gone, every night. I could never make the words stand up and sing like he did. I didn't know whether I'd ever draw the faith or strength from the Word, same as him. But I knew that reading it was a path to life, and that you never reach a thing without setting your feet straight and walking toward it. Leaving it seemed a pledge that I'd make it home, that we'd all be together again.

I set my bag in the parlor, by the front door, and picked up Emily's letter. I stopped the pendulum of the mantle clock. Already the house felt empty. But it wouldn't be empty long.

When the rain had stopped, and the wind died to a stiff breeze, I walked the lane to Laurelea's Big House, straddling the

puddles. I pulled my collar high, tight around my neck, and bent my head to my thinking.

I knocked on Mr. Heath's open study door. He'd been snoring in his chair by the fire, though I don't think he wanted me to know. When I gave him Emily's letter he pushed his lap rug aside, pulled his spectacles over his ears, and carried the letter to the window, catching the late afternoon light to read.

Aunt Sassy walked in, balancing a tray of steaming sassafras tea and fresh molasses cookies. My mouth watered at the sight, the smell.

"You'll leave soon?" Mr. Heath asked.

"First light. I'll do all I can for Cousin Albert—if he's still at the fort—still alive. Then I'll leave straight for Ashland, and Ma." I didn't say, "and Emily."

"Ashland?" Aunt Sassy's bronzed face jerked toward mine. She sloshed tea across the tray.

Mr. Heath didn't answer, but nodded, handing the letter back to me. "That he's a colonel should help him. They generally treat officers better than enlisted men." His brow furrowed. "I only wish Charles were here."

"But he's not, and Emily said Ma needs me." I wouldn't back down. "I know I promised to stay till I was eighteen, but it's only two months, and I—"

Mr. Heath waved his hand. "I understand that. I know you must go, but you're nearly of age now. It won't be so simple to pass through the South out of uniform."

Aunt Sassy teetered. "What about our crop? You can't leave Mr. Heath with no crop!"

"The crop doesn't matter, Sassy," Mr. Heath interrupted. We'll replant what we can when we can. We have enough workers. Robert has to go."

"They shoot you for a spy." She trembled, and the pot of tea slipped, crashing to the floor. "They shoot you and not know who you are or where to send your dead body."

"Sassy, that's enough," Mr. Heath warned her gently. "Robert has no choice if Caroline needs him."

"Miz Caroline got along fine without you these past four years." Aunt Sassy'd never spoken against Ma. "Don't be taking off. Don't leave us, Robert."

I bent to pick up the broken pot, to mop the floor with her tea towel. I wouldn't look in her eyes.

Aunt Sassy and her husband, Joseph Henry, were slaves when Mr. Isaac and Miz Laura Heath freed them the year before I was born. Aunt Sassy had cooked for the Heaths for as long as I could remember, and Aunt Sassy'd nursed Miz Heath—Miz Laura—through her long illness, till the day she died. Two days later the Henrys' only son—my best friend, William Henry—was killed, hit by a train. Those losses shadowed her every day.

"I'll be back with Ma, and maybe Emily and Grandfather if they'll come, before my birthday, Aunt Sassy. I promise." I didn't look at her, didn't say I'd be going off again, enlisting for the Union right away. But they knew my plans, had known them all along.

Her mouth set, grim. She swayed, taking that in, rocking back and forth softly.

I finished mopping the tea and set the broken pot pieces on the tray.

"You be needing this, then." She pulled a small, round tin from her pinner pocket. "Mama brought it up here this morning, said to give it to you, make sure you take it along."

I reached for the tin. "What is it?"

"Salve. Some kind of salve she concocted. Said it's for rope burns, that you be needing it."

I swallowed. I didn't want to ask how Granny Struthers, Aunt Sassy's ma, knew I'd be needing a salve for rope burns, what that meant, or how she knew I'd be going off. Granny Struthers was an old midwife and herb doctor, black as the crow that flies, small and ancient, bent and gnarled like an old apple tree. She knew things before they were spoken and understood what went on inside people's four walls—even in their heads—long before they did. The salve wasn't a good sign.

Mr. Heath squeezed my shoulder. "Robert, your times, like every one of ours, are in God's hands."

"Yes, sir," I said, knowing Pa would've said the same. But Granny Struthers' salve made it hard not to wonder.

Aunt Sassy cooked my favorite meal that night, a feast of roast chicken and hot dandelion greens poured over potatoes. She baked apple dumplings, cinnamon and molasses oozing out the tops, and brought out the last of the coffee. "You be thinking on this cooking when you're off half-starved, and come on home."

"Yes, ma'am." I grinned. "Fast as I can." Since Miz Laura and William Henry had died, since Ma and then Pa left, the four of us—Mr. Heath, Aunt Sassy, Joseph Henry, and me—took our meals together at Mr. Heath's table. We made a family, two black, two white, bound by missing those we loved most.

"Be careful visiting that prison. They's sickness of every kind there, and no secesh, kin or no, is worth you dying for," Aunt Sassy fussed as she heaped another ladle of sweet cream over my dumpling.

"Sassy, don't be filling this boy's head with your bitterness." Joseph Henry shook his head at his wife.

"I want this boy back to this table, safe and sound!" Aunt Sassy shook her dripping spoon. "I won't lose him too!" And then the brewing storm broke. Joseph Henry looked away. I stood and cradled her in my arms. The Henrys should've had a whole passel of kids to spread their love and worry over.

"You'll write as soon as you know anything about Albert, before you leave for Ashland?" Mr. Heath tried to steer the talk away.

"Yes, sir. As soon as I find him, or if I don't."

That night, once the lights of Laurelea were snuffed, I stole away to the colored cemetery, to William Henry's grave, and set a blanket next to his marker. It was a peaceful place, a place that kept the world and its troubles outside the gate. I talked things over with William Henry there, just like I'd done all my life, and his. Only more and more I'd start talking to William Henry and end up talking to God. I wondered if sometimes the Lord thought kindly of that roundabout prayer, but figured mostly He'd understand.

"I guess you know about Emily's letter. I've got to go, William Henry—you know I do. And I want to! I want Ma to come home . . . I'm glad Pa's not here. I want to be the one to go." I dug the twig I carried into the ground, worrying it back and forth. "Maybe she'll come with me, where she wouldn't come with him . . . I just hope we can get back through the lines . . . I promised your ma I'll be back for my birthday." I rubbed circles in my temple and sighed. "I'm tired of sitting home while every boy I know is off fighting the secesh. You'd feel the same. I know you would . . . I just didn't figure my first trip out would be to a Union prison." The twig snapped.

It was late, but I sat long, listening to the lonesome call of

the hoot owl and the baying of a far-off hound, watching the old man move across the sky.

I leaned back against William Henry's marker and looked up at the stars dancing, winking in their constellations. Cousin Albert had taught me their names. I remembered how we'd wondered if the Pleiades was really the home of God, like it said in Job. Those four years seemed so long ago. Now he was an officer—a colonel—and my country's enemy, locked in a Union prison. He was also my blood kin, and except that I resented that Ma had gone south to live near him, near all of them, I knew he was a good and decent man.

"But his view of slavery." My voice in the night prickled me. "He treats his slaves better than most, but it's still buying and selling, owning people." And Cousin Albert was willing to fight and die for the right to do it. I didn't understand that.

I didn't know what I'd find at Fort Delaware. I dreaded not finding him—for Emily's sake. Emily. My heart picked up a beat. I felt the heat travel up my neck at the memory of her, and tried to squelch the rising hope in my chest.

I hadn't seen Cousin Albert or Emily or her brother, Alex, or even my Grandfather Marcus Ashton since Christmas Eve 1859. That night, as they sang in church, then danced a midnight ball at Mitchell House, I'd run north with Jeremiah, Grandfather's son by a slave woman.

I could not abide that Grandfather'd planned to sell his own son, like he'd sold Jeremiah's ma, Ruby. So together we stole away. We were both thirteen at the time. It set my feet on a path, and I've never looked back, never been sorry, but for the loss of Emily's friendship and for wondering if things could have turned out different with Ma.

"Show me the straight path, Lord. Watch over Pa, wherever

he is, and Ma, and bring us home again." I knew God heard me. I also knew His will sometimes ran a mystery to mine.

I traced the letters of William Henry's name across his marker. "I'll be back, William Henry. God willing, I'll be back."