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."

Two

I rode before first light, not wanting to say more good-byes, not wanting Aunt Sassy's tear-stained face to be my last memory of home. Loaded down by my bag and Mr. Heath's gifts of blankets, a set of clothes, spirits, and all the food I could carry, I still made good time.

We'd long heard that Northern prisons ran cold, and prisoners north and south near starved. Fort Delaware's pox epidemic had killed more than 150 Confederate prisoners, even some Union soldiers. I carried all the supplies I could, but it was little enough.

I reached Elkton as the sun's rays warmed my face, and made Delaware City long before the light waned. I searched the docks, eager to find a boat to take me across the river to Fort Delaware, Pea Patch Island. The pier bustled with fishing and supply boats, all pulling in.

"You'll have to wait till morning, son. Nobody's putting out this time o' day." The brawny fisherman looked me over, tossing his torn net ashore. "Fort Delaware, you say?" I nodded. He glanced up and down the pier. "You can likely go over first thing with Tom Ames," he said, jerking his head toward a boat just

pulling in. "He supplies the fort every day or two. I don't think the *Jenny* was over today. He'll probably put out tomorrow or the next." I thanked him and was about to walk away. "Most people try to get out o' that fort, not into it."

"My cousin's there. I've come to see about him," I answered.

"Union or secesh? That'll make the difference, you know." He eyed my bundle, then squinted his suspicion toward the river.

I felt my heat rise. "He's a prisoner, my ma's people. But I'm Union, through and through."

"You ain't in uniform." He spit to the water, then turned and eyed me hard. "And you ain't from around here. I 'spect I know every family up and down this river." His mate stood beside him then, and the look between them turned me cold.

"I will be. Soon as I'm of age." I walked away, feeling the shame I'd felt when boys from church had signed up and left with their regiment, ladies cheering and handkerchiefs waving—the shame and threat I'd felt when I'd returned to our buckboard one Sunday to find the seat tarred and chicken-feathered. Lots of boys had lied about their age to join early. I wished again that I'd not promised Pa I'd wait. I thought hard of him for asking such a thing during war, especially when the Union needed more troops. Well, I'd get there, and soon.

"Mr. Ames?" I called to the gray-haired man climbing ashore from the *Jenny*. "Captain Ames?" I ran after him.

"No catch today, son. See us tomorrow." He threw up his hand behind him and shuffled up the pier.

"I'm not wanting fish, sir," I called, stepping up behind him. "I've come to see if you'll take me across to Fort Delaware."

He stopped short and eyed me over his spectacles. "Fort Delaware? Why? Why do you want to go?"

I thought about lying to make it easier, but I was no good at that. My face'd heat up like a smithy's fire. "I need to find my ma's cousin. He's a prisoner there."

"How long?"

"Ten months."

"Ten months." He paused. "Gettysburg?" I nodded, and his face softened. "It was a hard time. A lot of those men didn't make it. You from around here, son?"

"Below Elkton."

"But he's your family? Your people?" I nodded again. "Well, a lot of folks have people down south. Different sympathies." He waited, but I didn't answer. "He'll be grateful for the company." He stroked his beard. "I'd take him food, if I was you."

"Yes, sir. Will you take me?"

His eyes bored mine, then looked away, as if he tried to decide something.

"First light. Be on the *Jenny* at first light."

"Thank you. Thank you, sir!" I stood while he limped, one leg shorter than the other, up the pier. Halfway he paused, and limped back.

"You have a place to stay, boy?"

"Not yet. I came straight to the docks."

"You might have a speck of trouble if folks know you're going to the fort for kin."

I figured he spoke true. "I'll get my horse and sleep outside town."

"Wouldn't do that if I were you." His eyes traveled to the two at the end of the pier, the two who'd eyed me hard ever since I'd told them I was going to the fort. "There's a storm brewing and you'll not want to be caught in it." He turned his back on the men and took out a paper, scribbling an address with the stump

of a pencil. "There's a boarding house two blocks west from the dock. Couple by the name of Maynard. They'll take you in and be glad of the business. Got money, do you?"

"A little," I admitted.

"Don't advertise where you're staying. Walk off this pier with me, get on your horse, and don't look back. There's a stable at the boarding house. Go to the back door. Tell Ida Maynard to send me one of her apple pies." He shook hands, placing the paper in mine, tipped his cap, and walked away.

I followed on his heels, mounted my horse, and rode off, just as he'd said. A block from the dock I opened the paper. I checked and rechecked the address, then found the house as the first lamps were lit.

"Certainly you'll stay with us, young man!" The landlady pulled me into the kitchen, calling her husband to stable my horse. I offered to see to him myself, uneasy about turning Mr. Heath's horse over to a stranger. Mr. Maynard took that in stride and showed me the stable, offering anything I needed.

The Maynards made me welcome, and over supper I felt free to tell my story—at least the part about Cousin Albert and Emily. I could tell from their talk they had a son volunteering for the Confederacy in Virginia. That explained why I was their only boarder. Try as I might, it was hard not to think of them and their son as traitors.

"As you can imagine, we are no longer held in high regard by our neighbors, nor welcome in our church." Mrs. Maynard spoke quietly. "If they could only realize that we are in as much anxiety and fear for our Stephen as they are for their sons."

"But they can't, my dear. War makes everyone shortsighted." Mr. Maynard lit his pipe. "But you, young man, will be a welcome sight to your cousin. If you think they'll let you take food,

we'll be glad to send whatever we can—for your cousin or anyone else. We've heard those boys are in a sorry state."

"Thank you, sir. I've brought a fair load of supplies, myself. I don't know what they'll allow."

The Maynards exchanged a look I didn't understand. I put it down to the hard times they'd had with neighbors.

That night, remembering the hard look between the two at the pier, I sorted my bundle. I decided to carry the food and spirits, the blankets and clothes. Cousin Albert would surely need all that, and if he didn't—if I didn't find him—other prisoners could make good use of those things. Once I found him I'd pull out Emily's gifts.

Mrs. Maynard sent me off early next morning with a hearty breakfast and a hot apple pie for Captain Ames.

He grinned ear to ear when I set it in his hands. "A good woman, that Ida Maynard!"

No matter that it was nearly June, the cold river wind ripped through my jacket and trouser legs. It was all I could do to clutch my bundle for Cousin Albert, to keep it dry. That boat rocked and tossed, then dipped through every swell just to make me mind my belly. Each time I thought it might settle, it slapped me awake with an icy spray to start the torment all over again.

"Not one for open water?" Captain Ames chided. I gripped the side rail, slippery from the spray, shaking my head. "Ever been inside the fort?"

"No, sir." That was all Captain Ames needed to shout a first-rate history lesson into the wind while I heaved my breakfast over the side. "She wasn't built as a prison at all, but the war changed that. Filthy, overcrowded, a haven for smallpox and dysentery . . . and just wait till the hot weather steps in—mosquitoes and a

whole new breed of the ague . . ." I tried to listen, but only wanted off that boat. "Officers' quarters for prisoners stand above the sally port."

"Sally port?"

"The fort's entrance. Enlisted prisoners are kept in those long barracks outside the fort. You can see them from here. Makes escape a little easier than the Federals would like." My eyes followed his finger to the long yellow buildings.

"Ah! Here we are, then! Land ho!" The captain gave me a friendly slap ashore, chuckling over my weak stomach and probably my green face. It was a relief to set my feet on Pea Patch's marshy ground—ground that didn't move. "Boy!"

"Yes, sir?" I stumbled, trying to get my land legs under me.

"God bless you for being merciful to them as can't repay your kindness." He eyed the fort, then shook his head. "Poor wretches." He secured the ropes. "I'll wait for you when I'm done unloading."

"Thank you, sir." I hadn't expected that much.

I'd never seen a real fort before. I'd pictured it like the wilderness forts out west sketched in the dime novels—hundreds of tree trunks standing tight, side by side. But these were massive, thick gray stone walls, parapets and ramparts, and windows spouting cannon—a solid, monstrous thing and enough to put the fear of God into anybody. I squinted into the morning sun to see the top of it, and couldn't imagine how such a thing could be built, let alone stand on a marsh island in the middle of a river. Did they cart every stone across by boat?

What looked like a still creek bed ran around the fort. It called to mind tall tales of knights and castles and drawbridges.

But the guards standing duty against the stone walls were real enough.

"Visitor?" The private stood near my height, not much older.

"Yes, sir." I pulled Emily's letter from my jacket.

"Close kin? We only allow close kin visitors."

"I'm the closest that could come. I'm looking for Col. Albert Mitchell, 26th North Carolina."

The boy private raised his eyebrows but ignored the letter. "No officer here by that name."

I swallowed. "You mean he's dead?"

"I mean I never heard of him. There's no officer here goes by that name. I know every one of them." The private gloated, then looked me up and down. "Sure you got the right prison, Johnny Reb?"

I felt my heat rise. "I'm Union, same as you."

"You're here to see a secesh, and you ain't in uniform. But you're old enough to be in uniform, ain't you, boy?"

"I'm seventeen." I didn't want to answer him.

"We got us a Johnny Reb in here twelve years old, and we can't get you Union boys to sign up when you're near growed." I wanted to knock the smirk off his face.

"Is there trouble here?" A captain, quick and brusque, stepped through the sally port.

"I'm here to see a prisoner, Col. Albert Mitchell, 26th North Carolina. I have a letter from his daughter, my cousin, asking me to come see about her father. He was captured last summer, at Gettysburg, sir." I rushed it all out in a breath, glad to sidestep the boy private.

"I told him there ain't nobody here by—" but the officer cut him off.

"Albert Mitchell? Colonel?" The captain raised his eyebrows,

read Emily's letter. He smiled, as though I'd just explained something he knew all along. "Follow me. General Schoepf might wish to see you."

The boy private glared but stood smartly aside. I stepped light to keep stride with the captain, who was already halfway through the stone entrance tunnel. "Do you know him, sir? Albert Mitchell?" He didn't answer. I could only trail him across the parade grounds, jumping the night's rain puddles and black mud churned up by the soldiers' morning drill.

"Wait here," the captain barked. Any friendliness I'd fancied disappeared as fast as the heavy wooden door slammed behind him. "Here" was a stone step. But the fort kept me out of the wind, and I leaned against the sun-baked wall. Minutes dragged on. A half hour passed. I wondered if the captain'd forgotten me. I piled my bundle against the wall and sat down, determined to wait.

I tried to bring Cousin Albert to mind. He was taller than Pa. I shifted my seat. I'd never liked the way Ma looked up into his face, or how the lights in their blue eyes caught. His manners were polished fine, and he doted on Ma, stood closer than a first cousin ought, in my mind. I pushed away those memories, knowing that some of that was how they did things in the South, not wanting to think on if it was more.

I'd learned a lot from Cousin Albert. Besides the tutoring, he taught me how to shoot and care for a gun. I had admired the way he ran Mitchell House, his plantation next to Grandfather's Ashland, and the better way he treated his slaves—until the night I begged him to stop Jed Slocum, Grandfather's overseer, from beating Jeremiah for running away. But Cousin Albert refused to step in, no matter that Slocum had just axed the foot off an older slave for running. He said those slaves were

Grandfather's property to do with as he wished.

I realized then that it didn't matter how well you treated someone, that power of one human being over another is evil looking for a home. And I'd never believe God gave him the right to own another person. That night our paths forked.

If I found Cousin Albert alive, what could I say to him now, five years later? Besides my stand for abolition, besides the fact that my own ma lived next door to him instead of home with Pa and me, we were at war. As a Confederate officer Cousin Albert would be bound to shoot Pa as a spy—or me on the battlefield once I enlisted for the Union. But I'd also be bound to shoot him. I wondered if I could do such a thing. I prayed I'd never need to know.

I must have leaned back and closed my eyes. The door jerked open, and I fell onto the captain's boots.

"Up, boy!" he fairly shouted. I scrambled to my feet, pulling my bundle together. "General Schoepf's given permission to escort you through the prison barracks. We want you to identify your cousin."

My hopes stood up. "Thank you, sir." But something about that didn't ring right. "You mean he's not listed?"

The captain eyed me sharply, then stared across the parade ground. "Some of our prisoners are wounded and can't speak. A few have forgotten who they are—shocked from battle. We don't have a Col. Albert Mitchell on the roll, but you may help us find him among the enlisted men. If he is an officer he is entitled to better quarters, better fare. You'd be doing him a favor by identifying him."

That sounded fair, good for Cousin Albert. I shifted my load. Maybe that caught the captain's eye.

"What do you have there?"

"Food, clothing, blankets, spirits for my cousin."

"All gifts to prisoners must be searched."

"Yes, sir." That seemed natural enough, and I'd nothing to hide, save Emily's bundle sorted into small packets beneath my jacket. We trekked back through the parade grounds and entered the sally port. The same surly boy private stood on duty.

"Jenkins," the captain barked. "Search this prisoner bundle."

"Yes, sir!" It was the first time I'd seen a spark to Jenkins. He jerked the bundle from my arms and dumped the contents on the ground before him. The captain marched toward the fort's entrance.

"Wait! What about my load?"

He stopped, not turning to face me. "It will be searched. What is permissible will be passed to the prisoner. If you'd like to find your kinsman I suggest you follow me." I looked back and saw Jenkins had made two piles—one of a solitary blanket and some of the food. The second pile was everything else. From the grin on Jenkins's face I knew which one Cousin Albert would see. It was a mercy I hadn't pulled out Emily's gifts.

The captain marched fifteen steps ahead. I hustled after him, across the moat and out to a field covered in a couple dozen long plank buildings. Most were yellow washed, with six windows on a side, none on the end. They didn't look like houses—no regular chimneys—but didn't look like barns either—no silos.

The captain signaled two guards, then led me through the door. He pulled the guards aside to speak. I couldn't hear what he said. I'd never seen such a crowd of men swarming in one place.

There must have been more than two hundred scarecrow men packed into that building, bone-thin men in every sort of

filthy, torn, and patched uniform and rags of uniform you could conjure. The smell ran powerful rank, like a twelve-hole outhouse. I pulled my sleeve over my nose and mouth, tried to get hold. Three plank rows, floor to ceiling, ran front to back along both sides of the eighty-foot walls. Men packed row after row, wedged tight, laid like spoons. It made me think of the hold in slave ships I'd heard tell of, only spread out in broad daylight.

"Look into every face and see if you recognize your man." The captain pushed me along the rows. But I could hardly look at the men, and I couldn't keep from looking at them. Their eyes were sunken, their faces thin, some yellowed. Those that took notice scratched vermin from their bellies and armpits. None of these men looked anything like I remembered Cousin Albert. And if he was here, how would I know him? "Can you identify him?" The captain kept talking.

"No. No, sir."

"You realize he might have changed some. These men were in dire shape when captured."

I didn't believe they were all in this bad shape when they came here. Even if I found Cousin Albert, I knew he wouldn't be getting the food and blankets, the clothes Mr. Heath sent. These men didn't have a solid, warm blanket between them. "He's not here."

"We'll try the next barracks." The captain led me through three more buildings just like the first one. I'd looked into so many hopeless faces I didn't think I could look into one more. I didn't even want to find Cousin Albert there. I didn't want to imagine he'd ever lived in such a place. Dying on a field of battle would be one thing; rotting in Fort Delaware was another thing, a vile thing. "Look carefully, son."

"He's not here. He wouldn't be here. He'd never be here."

And that is when I saw him on the top row of plank bunks. I saw him, and he saw me. Ma's deep blue eyes blinked in a man's hollow face. I started to speak. He looked away, dipped his head, and pulled back. I walked on.

"Did you see someone you know, son?" The captain kept steady, but I sensed his urgency. Why would Cousin Albert pretend not to know me? Why would he turn away? "Well?" the captain snapped.

"What?"

"Did you see someone you know?" Why would this officer care so if I found him? If he'd wanted to help him, he wouldn't have ordered that boy private to help himself to the bundle I'd brought Cousin Albert.

"Look again."

"What?"

"Look again," he growled. "Walk down this row a second time. There are a number of prisoners in this barracks from the 26th. Look carefully." I had no choice, and I couldn't help glancing up at him, though I dipped my head and tried not to show it. He was so changed—not only thin and unshaven, but unkempt and bent in ways that Cousin Albert would never be, could never be. I looked away, but was drawn back. And that was telling. "Michaels," ordered the captain, "stand down." Nobody moved. "Michaels! Stand down."

Half a minute passed before Cousin Albert uncurled himself from his place on the top row of plank bunks. Everything in the room stood still. Not a man spoke. Not a man moved, and yet the air crackled like they'd all jumped up and screamed. He took his time climbing down, row beneath row. At last he stood before the captain and stared him in the face. He never once looked at me.

"Is this your cousin?" The captain kept his eyes level with Cousin Albert's. "Look carefully." I couldn't catch my voice. I didn't understand why Cousin Albert wouldn't look at me. "Col. Albert Mitchell, didn't you say? Speak up, boy!"

"Yes, sir. I mean it looks like him, but—"

"How about it, Col. Mitchell? Do you recognize this boy? Says he's your cousin, come to visit you. How sociable." Cousin Albert didn't blink. He raised his chin and glared in the captain's face. The captain pulled a piece of paper from his coat and waited. Nobody breathed. "He carries a letter from a young lady, a young lady with a fine hand." The captain unfolded the letter and flaunted its signature in Cousin Albert's face. "Your daughter, I believe, Michaels. Do you have a daughter at home, all alone? Emily Michaels. Or is it Mitchell?" The captain smiled, taunting him. "Miss Emily Mitchell?" That is when Cousin Albert broke.

"Put this man in irons." The captain smirked. The order wasn't out of his mouth before the barracks exploded.

"Leave him! He ain't done nothing!"

"Get out! Get out, you filthy Yankee—!"

"You got no call—" The men who'd looked too weak to stir swarmed from the bunks to the floor, angry and cursing, shouting threats at the officer and his men. Two prisoners pushed between Cousin Albert and the guard, a living shield. A shot rang out, then another. Prisoners fell back. The two who'd shielded him lay dead on the floor.

Cousin Albert raised his hand. The room fell silent, as if they all, Northern and Southern, answered his command. He dropped beside the dead men on the floor, but the captain jerked him to his feet.

"Get back to your bunks!" the captain barked again. Two

prisoners stepped up to flank Cousin Albert. "Confine those men!" the captain shouted, but he was shaken. "Get Mitchell out of here!" The guards shoved Cousin Albert forward with the barrels of their guns, and me behind them.

"Traitor! Yellow belly! Spy!" Men from the bunks hurled their hate on me.

"You'd best move now if you value your neck," the captain warned.

I spun on the captain. "You said he'd be treated better! You said—"

"And he will . . . once he's out of solitary." He pushed past me.

"Solitary? For what? How long?"

"That's up to Gen. Schoepf, who, by the way, will see you now."