

Rabbles

A novel set in the Civil War Era

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FORWARD

My belief is that an historical novel has three primary functions. The first is to preserve as much as possible the truth of the era – the way the people lived, the resources they had available, the general social and cultural structure, prevalent belief systems, and the problems, conflicts and challenges they faced.

The second function is to present an enjoyable and meaningful story, populated by an interesting and believable cast of characters who find themselves in pursuit of some relevant goal or the resolution of some problem, conflict or issue.

The third is to challenge the reader to thoughtfully assemble his own analyses of the important and universal challenges facing mankind that were highlighted in the presentation.

In this historical novel, the setting is Arkansas and traveling the Mississippi River north during the Civil war era – 1863. The three featured characters, a believable and unlikely set, I think, are on the verge of manhood, each one reflecting a past, a culture, and a belief system clearly at variance with the others. They set out on a perilous, life or death journey together and encounter serious threats both to their personal safety and to their beliefs. The dialect has been meticulously researched from diaries and accounts written at the time of the story.

As an author, although I hope to indicate probable answers and truths, I also strive to highlight important issues that have plagued mankind for most of its existence with the hope that informed and intelligent readers will take the next, necessary steps to preserve the human species in comfort, safety, cooperation and love well into the future.

[ATTENTION READERS: This book contains several graphic depictions of the horror of battle that may be inappropriate and disturbing to some younger readers.]

CHAPTER ONE

The Soldier Boy and the Black Boy

“It should be a routine patrol.”

Those had been Captain Block’s final words to the six, young, gray clad soldiers and their sergeant before they set out from the post that chilly, night of January 9, 1863. Sergeant Cahill, a cynical, hardnosed veteran of the battles up north at Cane Hill, Prairie Grove and Fayetteville, snorted. The boys didn’t understand how to take that.

Gary, Thomas and Michael were eighteen. Zachary, was seventeen and the other two – their names got lost – were sixteen. It seemed their General Churchill – actually, a Brigadier General although the six new recruits had no idea how the two ranks differed – had captured the *Blue Wing*, a Union cargo ship on the Mississippi River. It was loaded with armaments bound for Union troops in the South. He sailed it to the mouth of the Arkansas River and then north – upstream, some 50 miles – to a newly constructed Confederate garrison known as *Arkansas Post*. It sat half way up a low rise above a narrow passage, the back side of a good-sized horseshoe bend. The Union forces used that river for moving cargo south, and the Confederate troops were there to harass and slow down what had become a vital pipeline for the North. Properly supplied the post would be able to command passage in both directions. The generals hoped the commandeered guns and ammunition would at least prolong the service of the ill-equipped and undermanned fort.

General McClernard of the Union army gave chase after the *Blue Wing*. Word reached *Arkansas Post* that an

attack seemed imminent. It was manned by fewer than 5,000 men. Churchill needed accurate and up to date information about the size and position of that approaching Yankee force and, if possible, some estimate as to when to expect the attack. That night Sergeant Cahill's patrol was to move south along the north bank of the Arkansas River and determine just what they were up against.

The early onset, thick, slow moving clouds, typical of January night skies there in southeastern Arkansas, came as both a blessing and a curse. Although the members of the patrol felt relatively safe there in the darkness as they made their way through the sparse, scrubby, underbrush, seeing the enemy was nearly impossible. Three hours downstream they began hearing the telltale sounds of troops. Although a man of few words, Cahill had told the boys they could always tell a Union encampment from a Confederate encampment by the campfire songs. What they were hearing quickly identified it as Yankee.

The low, constant, hollow drone of voices and tramping feet grew significantly louder as the patrol topped a rise from where they could look down into the river valley. They crept some fifty yards down the gentle slope toward the water. The Sergeant motioned them flat on the ground and pointed toward the wide plain just across the river. There were hundreds of twinkling orange dots spreading for as far as they could see – campfires surrounded by thousands of Union soldiers. About half were breaking camp and beginning to move northwest along the river. It could mean but one thing – even the inexperienced boys understood; their Arkansas Post was to be attacked at dawn.

Cahill lay his rifle down beside him and packed his cheek with tobacco. The boys, fully ignorant of military procedure, shivered, wondering if they were going to be ordered to attack. They understood the certainty of death such a move would assure. Zachary figured if his time on Earth was that close to being over he at least deserved the answer to one question.

“Why did you snort when the Captain was talking to us before?”

The Sergeant turned his head toward the boys and

sniffed.

“Let me help you figure that out yourself. What kind of soldiers did we leave back at the post?”

The boys thought for a moment. Zachary attempted a response even though he could not see how it would answer his question.

“I suppose you’d call them seasoned fighters, veterans who’ve seen action in lots of other battles.”

Cahill nodded.

“And what kind of troops does a Captain want to take into battle and have protecting the post?”

Zachary nodded, believing he had that answer.

“Seasoned troops. I still don’t get it.”

“The Captain knows that you six, wet behind the ears, raw recruits won’t last through the first volley of a battle. That makes you expendable. It’s how war works. If we do our job and get the information back to him, that’s good, but if we don’t make it back, it’s just no real loss to his fighting force, you see.”

“So, he really didn’t mean this was routine. He just said that to make us feel safer?”

Cahill spit. It was all the answer the boys needed.

The sergeant surveyed the encampment through his binoculars for some time, then spoke again.

“Remember these figures. Looks to be roughly ten thousand men remaining here in camp and another ten thousand beginning to move up river toward Arkansas Post. I’m thinking the ones remaining behind will leave to join them well before sunup. It’s good soldiering to split up your force that way. If one comes under attack the other is safe and may even be able to provide support. Since they’re moving straight up along the river, it probably means more Yankees are already in place to come at the post from the north.

“Here’s your first order: During the next three hours, your only job is to get those numbers and that information back to the Captain. It’s a run, full-out, mission. Spread apart – way apart. If you can see each other you’re way too close and if you hear shootin’ or cries for help, keep going. If God’s with us tonight, at least one of us may get back to the post alive and in time, though anything our puny force up there will

be able to mount against them won't last long."

That was the last thing Cahill ever said. A shot rang out from up on the hill behind them. A slug pierced his back and he was dead; tobacco juice and blood drained from his mouth. Additional shots followed. It was Zachary's first experience in battle and he froze, laying there fully helpless, his fingernails digging deep into the grass. He hadn't tried to count the number of shots coming at them from the rise, but there were enough to light the area from the powder flashes and provide sufficient information to suggest it was probably well past time to begin praying.

Like all the young men who so bravely or recklessly lied about their ages and enlisted in the Confederate Army, Zachary had given some thought to how it would feel when that bullet pierced his skin and burned its way deep inside his flesh.

It had been worse than he had ever imagined.

* * *

Zachary couldn't be certain whether it was the sun shining into his face from directly above or the sound of the raging distant battle that awakened him. Neither would be the truth.

He heard someone groaning and soon understood the sounds were coming from him. He also understood *why*, as excruciating pain began to radiate from his left shoulder.

"Hell to damnation!" he said hurrying his right arm across his chest to clutch at the pain. That only magnified his discomfort.

Tears began to flow. His vision had been cloudy right from the start and try as he would he couldn't make out where he was. It was a confusing – incomprehensible – circumstance, to be able to see the light, and yet not really be seeing anything. The agony indicated to him he probably wasn't in heaven. Although he figured that should have provided some level of solace, it was difficult to see anything positive through the throbbing pain that left him spent and helpless there on his back.

"Hey, soldier boy. You's wakin' up? Thought ya never was gonna come to. Sorry 'bout the terrible hurt, but I figured it would be the best thing ta cut that Yankee ball outa ya

before ya woke up.”

“I can’t see you. Am I blind? Where are you? Who are you? Am I a prisoner?”

“I got yer head wrapped up in my wet shirt to keep yer fever down. Here, let me move it offin yer eyes. And no, ya ain’t no prisoner and I’s Amos and we’s right here.”

The person speaking to him – Amos, apparently – reached out and took Zachary’s hand in both of his. It had been his natural reaction to the terrible pain showing on the other boy’s face. It was the first-time Zachary had experienced anything close to feeling *safe* since he and his troop had spotted the Union encampment. Zachary was a thinker and the thought intrigued him – that the hands of a complete stranger with unknown intentions toward him could provide even a momentary sense of safety and well-being. Perhaps it was merely the human connection.

As Amos adjusted the wet shirt, the sun became brighter and told Zachary it was, indeed, straight up noon. That was when it began making sense. Light had been seeping through the wet shirt giving the world that bothersome fuzzy look. His first sight startled him – no, disturbed or disgusted him would better describe it.

“You’re a Negro – a black boy.”

“Can’t fool you, can I?”

It had been intended as a joke and the boy smiled as he knelt over the young soldier. It was not received that way. Zachary pulled his hand away and struggled, trying to sit up and move backward.

“I wouldn’t try that if’n I was you, soldier boy.”

“Why . . . ?”

With that Zachary fainted dead away and fell back hitting his head and jarring his shoulder.

“Told ya, soldier boy,” Amos muttered shaking his head at the unconscious lad. “Ya lost a lot a blood.”

Zachary’s rescuer and protector had constructed a low, sloped roof lean-to, hurriedly pulled together from slender saplings and covered with leafy brush more to hide in than for protection from the elements. He had collected leaves and arranged them as a place for his ‘soldier boy’ to lie. Though not approaching soft, it did blunt the discomfort of the rocky,

river bank. It sat within a few yards of the river, which lay just beyond a campfire. He had two fish cooking on wooden skewers laid between large stones on each side of the fire. The fire was for him; even with a clear sky and full sun it was chilly without a shirt. The water was for the soldier boy – to keep the cloth wet and his face and lips from chapping under the relentless fever. The fish were for both of them, provided he could convince the soldier boy to stay flat on his back and remain conscious for as long as it took to down a few bites.

Zachary groaned. His new friend – no, not friend, *companion*, perhaps – made no attempt to touch him or comfort him that time, not wanting to spook him into losing consciousness again. He just sat back and waited.

“What happened?”

“Ya tried ta set up and ya fainted. Like I told ya, only moments after ya took that nosedive, ya lost a lot a blood and that means ya only got so much left ta keep all yer parts a runnin’. Sit up and the blood leaves yer head fer yer feet and believe me, soldier boy, you ain’t a gonna be usin’ them feet fer some time.”

“You’re a Negro,” Zachary said as the cobwebs cleared again.

“I think we done established that a few minutes ago. Been one all my life if’n that helps any.”

Again, he smiled his broad, wonderful smile.

Again, the soldier didn’t.

“You got a name, boy?”

“Amos, like I done said. Named after my daddy. Massa Anderson sold him off when I was pretty little so I only remember a few things about him – like his big strong hands.”

“I didn’t ask for an autobiography.”

“A auta bi what?”

“Forget it.”

“I’m bettin’ you got a name, too, Soldier Boy.”

“Zachary.”

Amos became serious.

“Here. Take a few good-sized sips a this – Aspen and Willow bark boiled in water. Best pain killer I know. I got more makin’ in one a yer metal canteens. We’ll keep boilin’ it down til we git one full canteen. Jist sip er two a hour will soon begin

to help some. Won't kill all the pain, but it'll help dull it down.

Amos reached out the canteen toward Zachary.

Zachary hesitated for what seemed to Amos to be an unreasonable amount of time. Eventually he accepted it and put the canteen to his mouth and sipped. It was clearly a case of pain winning out over pride. He hesitated as if to ask a question.

"A little more," Amos said, understanding.

Zachary sipped again, nodded, and handed it back.

Amos returned the nod and pulled his outstretched legs up under his chin, arms crossed, resting on his knees.

"You got a mamma and daddy?" he asked.

"Of course, I do. My father owns the Pendleton Plantation across the river in Mississippi. I'm his only son. It'll be mine someday."

"Don't think so. Them Yankees ain't leavin' nothin' standin'. They's burnin' everything they can't use. If that place's south a here it's gone three er four weeks now."

"You certain of that?"

"Oh, yessa. Seen it all with my own eyes. I been travelin' north outa Louisian. What wasn't burnin' was ashes."

Zachary gave up his second attempt to right himself and just lay back.

He tried to nod – indicating he understood – but found even that too painful. Accepting his fully vulnerable position for the time being, allowed him to relax a bit, and relaxing allowed something else to come to mind.

"What about my friends – the other soldiers? You know anything about them? There were five of them – well six counting the Sergeant."

Amos' lower lip quivered and he stared down into his lap.

"They're all dead. Killed by the Yankees, I'm thinkin'. Sorry."

"Where are they?"

"They was with you up there on the hill. Now, they's in it. I buried 'em. I kept back some things from 'em fer you – guessin' they was yer friends and all."

"All of them?"

"Ya. They was all shot in the back. Looks like while ya

was layin' belly down lookin' at the river."

Zachary's first inclination was to cry, but tears wouldn't come. That was probably just as well, he thought. White men didn't cry in front of Negroes – well, white *men* didn't cry.

"I put their things over there in a pile."

He pointed just beyond Zachary's feet.

Zachary moved his chin down just far enough to get a quick look.

"Looks like you kept their uniforms and boots and backpacks."

"Yessa. And canteens. Figured they wouldn't be needin' them up in heaven. Anyway, that uniform yer wearin' is blood soaked. Be the devil to get it out now that it's dried. You'll need a different one if'n yer goin' back to solderin'."

Zachary moved his head slowly to the side so he could look at Amos.

"You're shivering, Amos. Why didn't you take one of their shirts?"

"A Negro boy can't just put on a white boy's shirt without gettin' permission!"

It seemed the full and obvious reason to him and had been delivered with wide eyes and a good bit of feeling.

Zachary understood.

"You got permission. You're small. One of the boys was small, too."

"One a the boys? Ya didn't know his name?"

"Frank or Fred, maybe. We really weren't friends. Only knew each other less than a day. There should be boots that will fit you, too."

"These feet's never been inside a boot and I reckon this really ain't the time to begin."

"What do you mean?"

"I still got hundreds a miles ta walk and that just ain't the right time ta be breakin' *these* feet into *them* boots."

"Your plantation is hundreds of miles from here?"

"Not what I said."

Amos looked away.

Zachary was confused for only a moment.

"You're a runaway, aren't you?"

"No plantation left ta run from. Burned ta the ground.

I'm thinkin' of it more like a extended vacation."

"You can be whipped or worse for what you're doing. It isn't right."

"What ain't right? The vacation er the whippin'?"

"The vacation, of course. I can't let you do that, you know."

"That's why I'll be movin' on before ya regain enough strength ta stop me."

"Your impudence is unpardonable!"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Ain't got a clue about neither impudence er unpardonable."

Amos stood and walked to the pile of clothes.

"Can I still take a shirt, considerin' you know about the impudence and unpardonable vacation an all?"

He paused and turned his head, looking Zachary in the face, clearly waiting for some confirmation of the previous permission.

Zachary returned the glance and held it. It was a very black face, with very black kinky hair and dark eyes, which seemed to float there as small dots over wide, white pools. He had always thought of a slave's eyes as just being white. His features were soft, more rounded than angular. His lips were large and his small ears stood out at a severe angle. He didn't wear the look of fear Zachary was used to seeing in a slave's face. That disturbed him. It went against everything his father had taught him about managing his blacks. Those few seconds represented the longest time he'd ever spent studying a Negro's face. That bothered him – that he had, in fact, taken that amount of time just then. Amos almost looked human, which caused him to shiver. His thoughts came quickly back to the boy's question.

"You won't be any good to anybody if you catch your death. Go ahead. The blue one as I recall. It will be the smallest."

He was used to giving them orders, so his words brought him a sense of familiarity, comfort, and position, and had been intended as a matter of business rather than in any way indicating a sense of compassion for the young man's discomfort.

Amos bent down to go through the pile, his bare back

facing Zachary. It bore the scars of lashings, a half dozen so recent they still held scabs. Zachary met it with no particular feeling, certainly nothing resembling sympathy or regret.

Amos hurried into the shirt – a long sleeved slipover that buttoned at the cuffs and half way up the front to the collar.

“How old are you, boy?” Zachary asked.

“I reckon I’m about fifteen.”

“You don’t know how old you are?”

“My daddy probably knows.”

“What about your mother?”

“She died birthin’ me.”

“I’d say you look about fifteen, alright. You seem strong. How are your teeth?”

“You plannin’ on sellin’ me at auction, Master Zachary?”

Zachary gave no response. It was a part of his heritage to think of folks with black skin as commodities to be worked, sold or traded. Strength and good teeth made for a top-level product. His father would have been proud of him for having taken note. For some reason – fully unfamiliar to Zachary – the revelations about the boy’s parents made it seem inappropriate to pursue the topic right then. The boy had spunk, he’d give him that. It was not usually a quality that increased a black man’s value, however, and undoubtedly had in some way contributed to the lashings.

“What did you do with our rifles?”

“They’s all safe and sound. I’ll tell ya where they is before I leave.”

The kid had a kind of smarts about him. Zachary had given very little thought to the possibility that blacks might be able to think on their own. It reminded him that he had some thinking of his own to do – big decisions to make about his immediate future.

Amos unwrapped the cloth from Zachary’s head and took it to the river. He dripped it back toward soldier boy – the temperature had virtually dried it. He returned to his side and paused.

“I need to feel yer forehead and check the temprachur. That okay?”

No slave boy would dare touch a white boy without

permission – Amos had known he was taking a chance doing all the things he'd done while the soldier boy was unconscious. The rules about such things hadn't come up, then, of course.

“Sure, I guess. You know about fevers and removing bullets and things like that.”

Amos couldn't tell if it had been a question or an assessment of his talent. He answered as if it had been a question.

“I've mostly lived with the single women – havin' no family a my own. It's them what does the doctorin'. I've learned a lot, I suppose. I'm pretty good with horses, too.”

He felt Zachary's forehead, holding his palm there for a good thirty seconds before beginning to re-wrap his head. Both were undertaken with gentleness and studied purpose.

“Temprachur still climbin'. Need ta git you outa yer heavy clothes and keep yer body wet. Now that ya's back awake, ya need to begin drinkin' a lot a water. I brought all the canteens over here ta the shade so there'll be good water fer a couple a days at least. Ain't tried the river water yet. It'll be filled with the leftovers from the battle for who knows how long. Already seen some bodies floatin' downstream. Mostly gray uniforms – just fer yer information.”

“So, how do we get me out of this uniform?” Zachary asked.

He couldn't believe his ears. He had just asked a black as night Negro kid for advice. His father would have whipped him with a belt for that – even at seventeen. He tried to let it go as Amos began unbuttoning the coat. It may have been the most humiliating experience of the 'white boy's' life, but he saw no alternative to allowing it – other than the likelihood of death, perhaps. He was proud, but not stupid proud.

“Gonna have ta cut off the left side a yer coat. Can't never get that shoulder outta that sleeve. Not a loss really, considerin' the blood an all.”

Amos removed a substantial knife from the rear of his pants and started working. The soldier boy noted it with some concern, but made no comment.

Zachary tried to make conversation to keep his mind off what was going on and to distract him from the occasional

bolts of pain when his shoulder was jarred.

“When did you come upon me?”

“Dawn.”

“Had the battle begun yet?”

“Both about the same time, I guess.”

“How did you happen to be here?”

“Followin’ them Yankees. They leave really good stuff behind. You gray boys don’t leave so much as a crust a bread. I been followin’ Yankees fer some time now.”

“They were on the other bank.”

Amos nodded.

“After I was sure they was all gone, I filled my pack and was on my way north. That meant crossin’ ta this side. Wide and shallow along here. Waded the whole way.”

His *pack* was a brown, gunny sack, carrying the pungent odor of all brown, gunny sacks. It was tied closed with a short length of rope.

“Seems you’ve done a good job. Seems I should probably thank you.”

“That’s what a black person would do, but I ain’t never been a rich white boy so I guess I can’t rightly say what a boy in your boots *should* be doin’. By the way, we need ta get them off – yer boots.”

Fifteen minutes later the coat lay in tatters beside and under Zackary and the boots had been removed.

“Gotta get those trousers off, now. I sure does hope ya’s wearing long johns, ‘cuz I know I could be hung fer lookin’ upon a white man’s privates.”

The trousers were removed and Amos would not be hung.

Amos unwrapped the cloth from Zachary’s head and felt it again – that time believing he required no permission.

“Lookin’ better, I’d say. Not risin’. Now, I’ll get this cloth wet and back in place, then start pourin’ river water on the rest a ya. That should really help.”

Another fifteen minutes passed.

“That does feel better, b . . . Amos.”

“Well, this *won’t* feel better. I gotta git back in there an look at yer wound – spoon out any pus that’s buildin’ up a infection. I had no way to stitch it shut so I just wrapped it tight

'pullin' it together as best I could with yer belt. Too tight might cut off circulation and that won't be good. I've seen that turn skin green. I gotta git a look an make sure.'

"Do it. How deep was the slug?"

Amos went to work, first rolling him onto his side and loosening the belt. Then he removed the bandage he had made from one of several pieces of cloth he'd found in one of the backpacks.

"Went halfway through your shoulder – right under that big flat bone."

He applied pressure around the outside of the opening and pulled it back. Zackary gritted his teeth. Amos noticed and picked up a green stick, putting it between the young soldier's teeth. He bit down on it as if by natural instinct.

"Didn't hit no bones er major lookin' blood tubes. It was the first time I got a good look deep inside a man's shoulder like that. Surprised to see muscles goin' every which way in there. Tried ta jist push em apart and not cut em. Suppose a Negro man's insides looks that same way?"

"I imagine so."

Amos began rewrapping the shoulder – tightly – with fresh cloth.

"Just wonderin', you smart white folks sayin' we's so different and all. I do know from experience us blacks is the same color as you inside. That's pretty interestin' ta me."

Zachary was really hurting and didn't like the nature of the conversation.

"Let's listen to the fighting," he said. "Sounds like it's died down."

"I noticin' that too. Been hardly any bodies in the river fer the past half hour."

"I hope the Yankees take prisoners." Zackary said. "I heard those men up there are about a quarter of all the Confederate troops we have left in Arkansas. It doesn't seem right to massacre a bunch of soldiers who are just doing what they were ordered to do. I have been told that Yankee soldiers are known to do terrible things, however."

"You'd be one a them up there, I guess," Amos said in a matter of fact manner. He turned to remove the skewered fish from over the fire. He used his knife and began dividing

them up on a flat rock. Just what a black boy was doing with a serious sized knife, intrigued Zachary, but again he'd hold the question until later.

"Maybe I was lucky to be on patrol. Cahill – our patrol leader – said there were twenty thousand troops here going against no more than five thousand up at the post. And probably more coming down from the north. I probably *would* be dead by now. Cahill said the six of us new recruits wouldn't last through the first volley."

"Why they let ya join up if'n ya was so useless?" Amos asked, a sincere and surprisingly reasonable question.

"I have no idea how to answer it. You really bother me, black boy."

"Do I get ta know why?"

"As soon as I know I will share it with you."

Amos thought it had been intended to be humorous so he chuckled and smiled. Zachary hadn't and didn't. He chose not to respond.

Amos heard it first – the breaking twigs coming down the rise from the stand of scrub bushes and small trees.

He put his finger to his lips.

"Shh! Somethin' jist up yonder."

He bent down low and moved inside the lean-to, hunkered down behind Zachary hoping it might lend cover if not any sort of real protection. Amos took out his knife. The soldier boy lay there all quite helplessly hoping there was some rule about not killing an unarmed enemy soldier who was out of uniform.

CHAPTER TWO

Add One Yankee

"I can see him," Amos whispered. "Looks ta be a Yankee – in uniform. He ain't got no gun. Ain't got no hat. Usin' a walkin' stick – sizeable, more like a weapon, I'd say – it's seven feet tall and maybe two inches thick. Can't really say he's limpin' like he been wounded and needs the stick fer support. Oh! Oh!"

"Oh, oh? What's the Oh, oh?"

Zackary struggled to turn his head and get a look. It met with no success.

"He's done got a bandage all skallywompered 'round his head coverin' his eye – left eye – like maybe he's been blinded. Shall we surrender?"

"No surrendering yet. Anything else about him?"

"Well, one thing, I guess."

"What is that?"

"He's no older than you are."

"Keep your knife out of sight."

"Put it away?"

"No, just put it out of sight."

"I never done slit nobody's throat before, Massa Soldier Boy."

"And you are not going to have to now. Let's just be quiet and see where he goes."

"If he gots a lick a sense he'll come over here and warm up by our fire," Amos said, suggesting the obvious.

Apparently, the boy in blue *had* a lick of sense. Amos could tell the very moment he first smelled the smoke. He

stopped and looked around, sniffing. He moved on down the slope beyond the brush. It allowed the best look at him yet.

"Gots long hair like you, but his is yellor instead a black like yous. About yer size."

Once on the narrow, level strip of ground that bridged the area between the hillside and the water he couldn't miss seeing the fire; he couldn't miss seeing the lean-to; he couldn't miss seeing the odd set of occupants inside it – a black boy hunkered down behind a white boy who was lying on his back clad only in soaking wet long johns.

The Yankee turned directly toward them and stopped. Although no part of his being was prepared to see humor in any aspect of life just then, he chuckled, all quite spontaneously, at what was to him an immediately humorous sight.

"Shall I surrender or take prisoners?" were the first words he chose to offer the pair.

"We should probably discuss that," Zachary said.

The boy took a half dozen or so leisurely steps in their direction, closing half the gap before he stopped. He appeared to be neither frightened nor dangerous.

"I'm Benny – well Private Benjamin Wilson, U S Army, at least for the time being."

"I'm Zachary Pendleton and this is my . . . this is Amos. I'm really not sure what he is – my medical staff I guess comes close enough."

"You been wounded?" Benny asked easing several steps closer, craning his neck to take a look.

"Took a Yankee – well, took a bullet to my shoulder – into the *back* of my shoulder."

The tone suggested he had reason to harbor more than a little contempt for the Yankees. That should not have been surprising, but the intruder really hadn't given much thought to the idea a Yankee's action could be suspect.

Amos felt the need to offer a further explanation.

"He got a ragin' fever and that's why for his state a undress and the cloth around his head."

"I'm sorry – about the Yankee slug. Seems to be a whole lot of that going on around here the past few hours."

"You been up at Arkansas Post?" Zachary asked.

“Where?”

“The fort up on the horseshoe bend.”

“Oh, we call it the Fort Hindman Garrison. Not sure why the difference. Has to be the same one. No others in the area.”

“It’s the same. I have heard it called that, too,” Zachary said.

Suddenly, Benny seemed more just like a seventeen-year-old and less like a Yankee soldier.

“Come in closer and warm yourself,” Zachary said. “There are several small pieces of fish left from the lunch Amos prepared some time ago. I’m off my feed.”

Benny took a seat, cross-legged close to the fire, but was careful to remain positioned with them eye to eye. He was clearly hungry and appreciative of any amount of food. Amos had been studying him in some detail and was amazed that a Yankee boy looked a whole lot like a Confederate boy. He wondered if they all had yellow hair.

“The guns have stopped up there,” Zachary said. “Can you tell us what happened?”

Benny hesitated and furrowed his forehead. He sighed before beginning, slumping his shoulders and offering a thoughtful set of nods.

“It’s terrible. Lots of blood. Lots of wounded. Lots of dead on both sides. The Rebs – sorry if that’s offensive; it’s the term I’m used to using – were smart enough to surrender no more than an hour or so into the battle, when they saw how out-numbered they were. I’m sure glad they did that. The killing was terrible. I heard they’ll be sent to a prison camp up the Mississippi. I suppose no prison camp is good, but I hope it beats being dead.”

Zachary pressed for more.

“You were a part of it, then – the battle, the shooting, the wounding, the killing?”

Benny nodded, slowly and deliberately. His face assumed a distant and detached expression. He looked down at the ground between his legs and drew a long, labored breath. His lower jaw quivered and his brow furrowed. He put his hands to his face and started sobbing most uncontrollably. None of them would have predicted the reaction.

Zachary hitched his head indicating Amos should go and be with him. If there was one lesson Amos had learned well during his short life, it was how to console sad and hurting people. He sat close and reached his arm out around the boy's back. Amos drew one hand from his face down to his lap and squeezed it. Benny allowed his head onto Amos's shoulder and continued to cry away the horror he had witnessed. It went on for some time. It may have been the first-time Zachary had ever considered that Yankees had feelings.

Eventually the new boy sat up straight and wiped at his face with the backs of his hands. In a dark sort of way, there was some humor in seeing the other two wiping their tears away as well. It seemed they had shared a meaningful moment, although none of the three figured it would ever be discussed.

"I can see I need to talk about it, but I don't want to make things worse for you two."

Zachary said what he thought needed saying – one 17-year-old to another 17-year-old.

"An injured Reb burning up with fever, stripped to his long johns, and a runaway slave boy, neither one with any sense of a future. I sincerely doubt if you can make things worse."

"You talk," Amos said patting Benny's leg. "I need to put more cool water on my soldier boy,"

The other two noted that Amos seemed to have taken possession of Zachary – "my soldier boy" – and they exchanged the first prolonged eye to eye with each other. There were also nods between them; the irregular kind that lingered on uncomfortably and didn't know how to stop.

As he focused his gaze back into the low flames inside the circle of stones, Benny sniffed, leaned forward a bit and began. His voice was soft – at the outset, a bland monotone showing little emotion.

"I'm a new recruit – two months, Sunday. I come from a farm in central Illinois along a river a lot like this one. My company sailed south on the Mississippi and met up with General McClerlarnd's forces just south of where the Arkansas River joins it. That was three days ago. I'd never

seen so many soldiers in one place before – smelly, filthy, soldiers all wearing blue – trousers to hats. Me and a dozen other young guys were the only ones with clean uniforms. The others really didn't want to have anything to do with us – the new guys, I guess. Maybe the inexperienced and likely undependable guys. I don't know.

“The next day we began moving northwest along the Arkansas. We camped somewhere close to here, I suppose, but on the other side – the plain's a whole lot wider over there – more room for all of us. We didn't know until last night exactly where we were headed. Our Captain said Fort Hindman. The order was made very clear – not to leave a fighting Reb standing. He emphasized that a man with no weapon and his hands up meant he was no longer a *fighting* Reb. They were to be taken prisoners. It seemed odd, but the Captain clearly didn't like killing.

“All of us new guys were formed into company 'A'. The plan was that we'd move up to the top of the narrow rise to the rear of the fort and open fire, drawing the garrison's attention up there. It was to be a distraction, you could say, while the others swarmed the gates from below. I'm thinking that job was given to us because we weren't valued as able bodied soldiers so if we got killed up there in the open nothing was really lost. Anyway, just before daybreak we circled up above the fort and took positions no more than fifty yards away looking down on top of them. They still had fires burning to provide light. It was like – what do they call it – shooting fish in a barrel. We could see right down inside. The order was given to fire. I loaded my rifle twelve times. I aimed my rifle at an enemy soldier twelve times. I squeezed the trigger twelve times.

“I never looked to see if I hit anybody, I just moved on to the next one. The really terrible part of it is I'm about the best shot in my whole County back home – I know I didn't miss anybody. Then some kind of cannon ball or grenade exploded in front of us. Most of my Company was killed or badly wounded. They lay there screaming like I've never heard screaming, with parts missing – legs, hands, feet, stomachs torn open and their guts spilling out. It was worse than any nightmare I've ever had. It took a few moments

before I realized my face had been hit – burned and that I couldn't see with my left eye. The pain suddenly became awful. We had orders to move out of the way to the rear if we became unable to fight effectively so I moved back. I lost my rifle someplace.

“In the rear, a medical officer washed my face and eye and cleaned me up. He bandaged my head this way and said to keep the light away from my eye for a week or two. It may take as long as a month to know for sure if my sight has been affected. He said I have a fifty/fifty chance of seeing out of it again. 50/50.”

Benny lowered his head into his hands and again sobbed quietly. Amos had taken care of ‘his’ soldier boy and moved to take a look at Benny’s eye.

“Look up at me. Shut your eye. I need to take a look. Soldier Boy will tell you I’m a pretty good doc.”

Without comment, Benny lifted his head making no attempt to stop the uncontrolled, irregular heaving of his chest or the flow of tears. Amos gently removed the bandage. It was wound around his head a half dozen times. It wasn't so much bloody as just sticky, and soaked in tears. Amos leaned in close to make his examination.

“Hmm. Huh. I see. Okay, then. Looks ta me yer Yankee doc did okay fer ya. I’m thinkin’ the tears helped the most, though. It’s all cleaned out inside. I see yer eyelid’s burned on the outside. Okay on the inside. We need some lard ta put on it. I don’t got no lard. Keepin’ it clean’s the best we can do. Your clothes smell like gunpowder, smoke, an puke. I’m sorry about all that for ya – all that up on that hill stuff ya had ta do.”

Benny looked at him and nodded. It was the closest he had ever been to a Negro. He had seen one at a distance at a county fair the summer before, but never imagined he would ever be close enough to one to touch him.

“Thanks for your sorry. I’m sorry, too, for what I did to those other boys. Soldiering is hell, you know. Hell! I don’t understand how men can just go from one battle to the next battle killing everybody who’s wearing the wrong color. I heaved more than once up there. I’m a terrible soldier. I actually felt happy – maybe relieved – when I got hit, thinking

that would end it all for me.”

“*Thinkin’* it would . . .?” Amos asked catching the less than clear inference.

“After the medic got done with me some officer came by and told me I was to meet back up with the troops down at the mouth of the Arkansas in three days. We were moving on to Alabama.”

“So, ya was still a soldier, yer sayin’.”

“*He* seemed to think so. *I* took a different turn to it. I swam the river just south of the fort, laid in the sun to dry off and then just started walking. I cut this trail stick to ward off copperheads and rattlers.”

“So, here you are,” Zachary said.

“Here I am – here we are the way it looks. *You* going back to fighting?”

“Interesting question. You see, I’ve really never been fighting. I got shot from behind before I raised my rifle for the first time.”

Having allowed himself to relate just that much, permitted Zachary’s private feelings to the surface, surprising even him. His tone quickly changed from guardedly neutral and inquisitive to plainly angry.

“Why doesn’t your Yankee Army just go home and leave us alone? I really hate you Yankees. I mean hate you from the top of your heads to the soles of your feet.”

The words had been simple, perhaps if overly drawn, but left no question about his feelings.

“I’m told we are fighting to preserve the Union – to keep the United States together,” Benny offered through an easy tone.

“Why is that so important to you?”

“I guess I never stopped to think about it. I just assumed it was true. For one thing to bring the law of the north back to the south and free the slaves, I guess. Why did your soldiers invade the north in the first place?”

“So, we could govern ourselves – have slaves if we wanted them – work out our own agreements with other countries, have our own money, save our only means of livelihood. There’s lots of reasons – good reasons. The plantation system can’t survive without slaves. If we paid to

have the cotton fields worked, the price of cotton would go so high there wouldn't be any place in the World that could afford to purchase it from us. If the plantations fail, the South collapses – financially and in most other ways.”

Amos had been listening and wanted to make sure he understood – because he was pretty sure he didn't.

“So, Benny, you Yankees really believes what yer fightin' fer is right. And, Zachary, you white southerners really believe what yer fightin' fer is right. How can both sides be right? What's the truth? I don't understand.”

Benny offered no more than a shrug. He tried to change the subject with no attempt to disguise what he was doing. He looked at Amos.

“How's Zachary's temperature doing?”

“Some lower. I'd say his body's doin' what bodys gots ta do ta handle the infection. He's young and strong.”

“You sound like an old man.”

“I seen a awful lot a life in my fifteen years, if'n that's what yer meanin'.”

“I guess I'm not sure what I'm meaning, Amos. Someday I'd like to hear about your life and your ideas about slavery and other things.”

“That sounds like yer plannin' to stick with us.”

“I guess I'm not sure about that either. That wouldn't me my decision, of course, me being the outsider, the intruder, here. I would need an invitation or at least not be told to make tracks.”

The remarks brought out into the open what they had all been wondering. Any way they cut it, traveling together they would be an odd assortment of humanity: the rich, well-bred and educated son of a plantation/slave owner; a runaway slave boy apparently long on life smarts if not school smarts; and the hardworking son of a poor, Midwestern Yankee farmer – none of whom had so much as a hint at that moment about what possibilities lay ahead for them.

They heard faint, familiar sounds upstream. Troops were moving back south on the other side of the water. Their hearts began to race and their bodies filled with that feeling that dependably accompanied danger or the anticipation of some pending exciting encounter. Often before, it had been

something for them to seek out and savor. Not then. It tied their stomachs in knots and sickened them. None mentioned it. All of them wondered what the others were feeling, suspecting they were all being braver about it.

“How would the Yankee intruder feel ‘bout helpin’ me move the soldier boy back into the woods a piece where it won’t be so easy ta see us? Neither one a ya would escape the Yankee wrath, I’m thinkin’,” Amos said – “Soldier Boy bein’ a Reb and you a mostly deserter type.”

“Sure. Yes. Of course. You’re right. A more hidden area. I just came through such a spot not twenty yards up the rise. Can you walk, soldier boy?”

“I doubt it. I keep taking headers into the ground every time I raise up. Doc here says it’s because I lost lots of blood.”

“You need to be drinking then.”

“That’s what my doc here says and he is seeing to it.”

“I’m sure I can carry you, conscious or unconscious,” Benny said.

He looked at Amos.

“Let’s take those things that are piled over there up the hill first and cut back some of the undergrowth to make a little open area. Shouldn’t take but a minute.”

Amos looked at Zachary for direction. He nodded. Still, Amos wasn’t sure – just going off with a Yankee soldier like that. Maybe he just wanted him out of the way so he could go back and kill his soldier boy.

He checked again with Zachary, presenting a major frown. Again, Zachary nodded. Amos felt under his shirt in back to make sure his knife was in place.

“Needs ta put out the fire, first. Ain’t much smoke, but smoke’s smoke an I’m guessin’ even a Yankee knows that means fire.”

They all ignored the implication.

Benny pointed.

“It’s straight north east. I’ll begin moving things.”

Amos went to work spreading out the fire. The boys could hear Benny up the hill working the brush. He returned for a second load, which pretty well handled the clothes and things Amos had saved. The sounds of the approaching

soldiers grew louder.

“No more than ten, maybe only five minutes away, I’d say,” Benny offered as he came back off the hill. “I’ll get Soldier Boy up above while you disassemble the lean-to.”

“Disassemble?”

“He means take it apart,” Zachary offered in a well-practiced, demeaning manner.

Benny flinched at what he considered had been uncalled for. He let it pass – that time.

“This will probably hurt that shoulder like a salt compress on an open wound, but I don’t know any alternative,” Benny said kneeling down and sliding his arms under Zachary. “See if you can hold on around my neck with your good arm.”

Amos winced as he saw the color fade from Zachary’s cheeks and the pain wash across his face. Zachary produced not so much as a groan.

“Just help me to my feet, here, Amos,” Benny said once he had Zachary well secured in his arms.

He was soon standing and began the slow trek up the slope. It was considerably more difficult than he had anticipated and with the extra weight and bulk, he had to select every step with care. It became necessary for him to move sideways from time to time in order to work them both between the saplings and trees. Sideways up a hill was no easy move when just carrying a backpack.

“You better stop and rest,” Zachary said at one point.

“I don’t believe ‘stop and rest’ is in our traveling orders today, Soldier Boy. You’re still conscious. That must be a good sign.”

Zachary wanted to respond, but he’d just spent all the energy he could muster.

It took most of ten minutes – twice as long as Benny had expected. His arms and back ached like they had never ached before. His body’s inclination was to drop the load with no regrets. He wouldn’t give in to that. They arrived at the new little clearing.

Amos had climbed on ahead and was busy arranging a pile of leaves to make a place for Zachary when Benny stepped into the small, grassy circle. He jumped to his feet

and offered help in managing Zachary onto the ground. The patient was clearly relieved the journey was over. So were the others, but they didn't allow it to be as obvious. All three ignored Zachary's tear drenched face. Benny privately took note of Amos's surprising strength.

By then the noise from the troops across the river had risen to the level of a din. There seemed to be no advantage in pausing to contemplate it.

Zachary had an observation:

"My torso was almost upright while you were carrying me and I didn't pass out. That has to be a sign of progress."

Amos nodded.

"Yer blood-builder seems ta be workin' pretty fast. Just need ta keep drinkin'. Ya probably oughtta try and sleep. I'll git more water an douse ya with it. You're still really hot an nearly dry agin."

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to go back to the river with the Yankees on the other side," Zachary said.

"Yankee's love us black boys. All the men back at the plantation says so. I'll jist wave and smile an I'll be fine. After all, Benny said it was us Negros they done come ta save."

"Looks like there are seven canteens," Benny began. "How many of them are full?"

"Four," Amos said. "I been usin' one ta carry water back an forth from the river and one ta carry the pain killin' brew. I been avoidin' havin' ta use them two fer savin' drinkin' water. It reminds me, Zachary, you needs ta take another sip a the willow brew."

Zachary complied without hesitation and offered it to Benny, who waved it off. Amos continued.

"We need ta get a new fire going. It's gonna be cold tonight."

"But the smoke?" Benny asked. "Those troops will be moving south for several more hours – well into the night.

"Let me go scoutin'. That kindlin' down at the river was fresh cut from a apple tree – makes lots a smoke, wet er dry. I seen some ash trees up here. They hardly makes no smoke at all. If I can find a ash that's long fallin', we can have a mostly no smoke fire goin' shortly, if we keeps it small."

He looked up at what sky they could see from their new

hideaway there among a stand of tall, old oak trees.

“Goin’ on four already. Sun’ll set by five. Already gitin’ chilly. Don’t look ta make rain. We gonna be jist fine.”

The two older boys exchanged a quick, fully unexpected, wink. Clearly, they were in good hands. It flashed through both of their minds that Yankees and Rebs must wink for same reason. Intriguing! They kept that observation to themselves. It had done nothing to alter the fact that one was Reb and one was Yankee.

Amos’s absence gave them their first time together alone. It provided a fascinating few moments – built, as it was, on the fact they were each depending on their enemy for their very survival. Zachary voiced it first. His position growing up as the Master’s son had made it natural for him to speak his mind and expect it to be accepted.

“I hate you, you know.”

“Sorry about that.”

Zachary seemed puzzled – displeased – at the response. He had expected to receive a tit for tat – to hear some comment that mirrored his own. He was trying to draw a line, but the Yankee wasn’t buying in.

“You’re a Yankee and I’m a Confederate. We hate each other.”

“You can hate whoever you want to hate I guess, but I don’t hate you.”

“That makes no sense. Of course, you do.”

Benny paused to collect his thoughts. It appeared it was going to be a difficult position to explain, but it was one he and his father had discussed many times. He figured he could find a brief version.

“I guess I hate it that the south wants to break up the Union. I guess I hate it that you Confederates fired the first shots at Fort Sumter and started this terrible war. I hate it that you think it’s alright for one man to own another man and treat him badly if you want to. I hate all that, but *you’ve* never given me any reason to hate *you*. Quite the opposite. You fed me and listened to me. You’ve let me stay with you – this long, anyway. Now, here we are hiding together from forces neither of us can call our own and both have reason to fear.”

It hadn’t been great oratory, but it apparently was clear

enough.

“You have an odd way of thinking,” Yankee. “I’ve never heard such a bucket of hogwash.”

“Again, I guess I’m sorry about that. I really don’t know how to respond. I’m not going to let you goad me into fighting you or hating you.”

Zachary remained silent, but his eyes didn’t move from Yankee boy.

Amos returned.

“Found what we need. Looks like lightning took down half a big ol’ ash some time ago. Dry as tinder. Look here.”

He dumped an armload of kindling onto the ground and handed over a small stick to each of them.

“Looks good. No smoke you say?” Benny asked.

“What little there is should git pulled up and spread out through those branches above us so it’ll never be seen.”

He pointed.

“Let me help you collect the wood,” Benny said getting to his feet. “I saw you built the fire inside a circle of stones down at the river. We need more stones?”

“Yeah. How about you bring back the wood and I’ll set some stones? They gotta be jist right.”

Zachary couldn’t understand why the Yankee boy just accepted that – it had clearly been both an order and a put down suggesting that slave boys could do a better job at something. Back at the plantation the boy would have beaten til he dropped.

“Just lead me to that fallen tree.”

Amos turned to Zachary.

“You be okay fer a few minutes?”

“I’ll be fine. I think I’ll sleep now. I’m both weak and tired.”

Amos understood Soldier Boy was taking his advice even though he couldn’t admit it. Benny understood the same thing, except he had no way of understanding *why* he wouldn’t admit it. He figured that single act probably went a long way to defining the two cultures and the confusing gulf between them.

“I’ll get us some more fish directly. I’m used to bein’ hungry, but I know you ain’t so we’ll get that fixed up by

sundown.”

Then, as if an afterthought.

“I can tighten up a belt around your middle. That’ll keep the hunger down fer a while.”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

Amos and Benny left.

“Thanks,” Zachary whispered, even though the others were well out of ear shot. He spit and tried to relax.

Soldier Boy suddenly had not one but two very disturbing people in his life. It was obvious that neither one of them had any idea about how the proper social order should work. He had to decide if it were worth trying to teach them or not. He was immediately asleep.

When he awakened, ninety minutes later, he found the three of them settled into a circle of subdued light some ten feet wide. Beyond that, the world had grown dark. The heat seemed plentiful and felt good. The fire was set at one edge of the area with tall, flat rocks standing upright behind it. They reflected the light and heat into the area. Fish were sizzling on skewers.

Zachary felt his long johns. They were dry. He wrinkled his brow indicating the question. Benny noticed his quandary.

“Doc here says you’re fever broke a few minutes ago, so now he says to keep you warm. I was just about to cover you with a blanket Amos retrieved from a backpack. There are three in all. You won’t believe what the lad got us for supper.”

The remark caused a brief smile to turn at the edges of Zachary’s mouth. However, coupled with the slightest frowning of his brow it became more a look of inquiry than pleasure or approval.

“Milk – cow’s milk! You believe that?” Benny said.

Amos proceeded to explain.

When I first run across you bleedin’ all over on the hill, I was chasin’ a cow. She was movin’ slow with a full udder. I knew she was ripe fer the pickin’. Once we had things set here this evenin’, I went lookin’ fer her. Found her grazin’ in the meadow up top. Milked her into a empty canteen and we got nice warm milk fer supper.

That time Zackary allowed more than just the indication of a smile. He managed a nod.

“Nice.”

Zachary’s comment stopped short of a ‘thank you’ or ‘good work’. That was just not something a white man said to a slave. He had tried it earlier, but even as a whisper into the wind it left such a bad taste he’d had to spit.

There was a good-sized fish apiece and a fourth to divide three ways. Zachary wanted to try sitting up to eat. The others helped him lean back against an oak on the north edge of their new home. They wrapped him in the blanket. He managed surprisingly well.

“At least you ain’t passin’ out, Soldier Boy. Maybe tomorrow ya can try standin’ up. Pricilla always says, ‘Git ‘em up and movin’ as quick as possible. Movin’s the best medicine’.”

“Pricilla?” Benny asked.

“She’s the woman what taught me most a my docterin’. She took care a all our ills. Learned from her mammy, she said.”

“You don’t have real doctors?”

“I’d say Pricilla’s a real doctor. Hardly ever loses a patient lessin’ they’re too far gone before she gits at ‘em.”

Amos was clearly proud of his association with Pricilla. She had been as close to a mother as he had ever known. They would have died for one another if that had been required. He understood that his time living with the women was soon to be over. He already worked the fields ten hours a day – just hadn’t been required to move into the bunkhouse with the single men yet. It had been one of several things on his mind when he decided to run away.

Again, it was *his* ever-alert ears that heard it first – the crisp snapping of the twigs that signaled only one thing. Someone was approaching their camp with heavy, steady, steps. They grew louder. Amos wished he had brought a rifle from his stash. He hadn’t.

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CHAPTER THREE And North it Would Be

A large man wearing an expensive looking wide brimmed, felt hat and carrying a rifle appeared out of the night. He stopped at the shadowy margin between light and darkness. They took note of a long, ugly scar on his left cheek, figuring that made him something less than a preacher. His appearance confirmed he wasn't a soldier – the boys' foremost fear at the moment. He carried the gun loosely under his arm, pointed at the ground. That seemed friendly enough. He looked them over for a long moment. Benny, a blanket draped around his shoulders, stood and offered his hand. It was ignored.

"Looking for a young black boy – a little younger than you two. A runaway."

As one, and without thinking of the possible consequences, Benny and Zachary turned to look at . . . well, at the spot where a certain young black runaway boy had been sitting just moments before. Zachary looked back at the man and spoke, thinking Benny's Yankee accent could only complicate things.

"Not sure who that would be, sir. A black boy, you say – twelve, thirteen, fourteen?"

It drew no immediate response.

The man moved a step forward and studied Benny.

"Them Yankee blue trousers under that blanket?" he asked raising his rifle a bit.

"They sure are. When I got my pants shot off me up at the fort I grabbed the first pair I found. Those Yankees *do*

make warm trousers. Gotta give ‘em that.”

Although Benny had tried to feign a southern accent it had been atrocious. Zachary tried to cover for him or at least distract the man’s concerns if he had any. He opened his blanket revealing his state of undress.

“At least old Benny here *found* some pants.”

It was worth a fairly broad grin and a belly rippling chuckle from the man. He nodded and lowered his gun.

“I’m from the Azalea Plantation, fifteen miles southeast along the river. If you run across him bring him to me. Be a good reward. Don’t beat him bad. I want that pleasure.”

He nodded as if being polite, turned, and left.

Benny sighed a man-sized sigh and sank, cross-legged to the ground. The two of them remained silent, as if frozen in place, listening until the breaking twigs faded into the night. They looked at each other and then back at the empty spot where Amos had been.

The muzzle of a Confederate rifle eased its way out of the darkness and into the light. It held steady doing nothing to relieve their fright from the past few minutes. A moment later a face appeared above it – Amos.

“You scared me half to death, boy,” Zachary said, sounding more concerned about his state of fright than the boy’s safety.

“Sorry Massa Zachary. Figured if he’d a found you two holed up with this black boy he’d a shot you both an dragged me back ta the farm.”

“How could you have possibly known who was coming?” Zachary asked.

“He wheezed just before he appeared. I’d know that wheeze anywhere. Been at the wrong end a his whip more times than I care ta remember.”

“I thought you said you were from Louisiana,” Zachary said.

“Did. Lied. Needin’ ta make it seem like lots a distance between here and my owner, thinkin’ ya might figure on returnin’ me otherwise.”

The other two nodded and let it drop. It was more confirmation that the boy had been born with a hefty portion of smarts.

“Where did you find that rifle?” Benny asked clearly puzzled.

Zachary took it upon himself to explain how Amos had stashed the rifles he and the other members of his scouting party had been carrying.

Benny nodded, immediately seeing the good sense in having done that. It did present an uncomfortable concern for the night, however: A rifle in the possession of a black man who had reason to hate the son of a plantation owner and, perhaps, an invading Yankee. He spoke, turning toward Zachary.

“I’m sorry about your loss – your six friends. It’s a terrible thing we’ve mixed ourselves into here.”

Part of Benny accepted the fact that after the atrocities he had committed that morning at the garrison he probably deserved no better than a bullet to his gut. Another part of him clung to the desire to live. He wondered when the horrific feelings of guilt and terror would leave him. He shook visibly every time his mind was revisited by the scene up on that hill – vague images, yet vivid flashes of colors, the horrific stench of the dead, the unrelenting screams of the wounded and dying, his own feelings of utter helplessness.

During the days before, he had overheard other soldiers talking about their exploits in battle, but never once had he heard one talk about feelings of guilt and terror, fear or disgust. Perhaps there was something wrong with him – perhaps he was less of a man than they were.

His church had taught him killing was wrong – well, his church had taught him that lots and lots of things were wrong. Just going by what he heard on Sunday mornings, he would have never gained the slightest sense of what was right. Then, one Sunday after the war broke out the minister preached about what a righteous thing it would be for the young men of the congregation to join and serve in the army and defeat the Godless Confederates. Defeating the Confederates meant one thing to Benny – killing more of the gray-clad soldiers than they killed of those dressed in blue. Apparently killing wasn’t always wrong – he must have missed that Sunday.

With his irreversible decision made, he had walked

southeast to Livingston County, where he told the recruiter he was 18. It was never questioned. They needed fighting men and apparently, any male over five feet tall with two legs, two arms and two eyes qualified. He figured there really wasn't much difference in looks between a 17 and an 18-year-old boy – *man*, as the officers had referred to him. He left his house at midnight without telling anyone about his plan. He hadn't said goodbye to anybody – not his parents or two younger sisters or Maddie – his special girl. They planned to be married when they turned 19. That was the acceptable age in those parts. He wondered how things would turn out considering what had already happened and whatever unknown whatever were yet to happen.

If he didn't return to his unit he'd be a deserter – plain and simple – and would be shot if he were captured – also, plain and simple. If he rejoined his unit, he was quite sure he'd never again be able to pull the trigger of a gun aimed at another person. That could only have one outcome. He would die during the first few minutes of his next battle. Neither would be an honorable way to die. Neither would be a meaningful way to die. He wanted to think about living, but dying seemed the only notion he could keep in focus.

While his 'A' Company had been working its way up the hill in the darkness before the battle, he had wondered if it would be better to be killed instantly so there would be no pain or if it would be better to linger just a while in order to understand what was about to happen. His wondering had been cut short at the command to commence firing.

"Hey, Benny. You okay?" Amos asked poking him in his shoulder to get his attention.

"What? Oh. Well, *no*, not really. But, sorry about that. I guess I got all caught up in my thoughts."

He pulled the blanket closer around his neck to keep out the growing chill – some from the night air, but some, apparently, from deep inside him.

"I think we need a plan," Zachary said.

He was still sitting up.

The others turned toward him, waiting.

"Like tonight. Do we let the fire die out so nobody can see it or does one of us stand guard while the others sleep?"

What do we do tomorrow?"

"I can tell ya the brush is so thick around here nobody from the river's gonna see the fire if'n that's what's on yer mind," Amos said. "I was no more than ten yards away and I was afraid I'd lost ya in God's Great Darkness."

It was a phrase the slaves used for 'night' – the only time in their lives which offered some promise of a respite from the harsh whims of the white man.

"That's really good information," Benny said, offering a nod in his direction.

"Still, I'd feel better if we took turns standing guard," Zachary said.

"If a black boy had a vote I'd vote fer that, too," Amos said nodding with some vigor as if wanting to leave no doubt about his feeling.

"I vote that the black boy should have a vote in all matters that come before this . . . whatever it is – rag tag troupe of rabbles," Benny said, measuring his gaze straight into Zachary's face.

"I imagine we can make decisions by consensus, don't you," he returned, neither boy blinking.

They each understood that exchange held far deeper considerations that would have to be confronted somewhere down the road.

"And what's consensus?" Amos asked.

"Reaching a general agreement among us after we talk something through."

It had been Zachary's response and Benny thought it was not only well explained but was a good idea – even if it didn't allow him to push Plantation Boy about extending decent rights to all men. It appeared there were going to be other opportunities and plenty of time for such things later.

"I'll stand first watch," Benny offered. "I'm in no condition to sleep right now. What, a three-hour watch?"

Zachary nodded and looked at Amos. Amos smiled broadly and nodded back, first at Zachary and then at Benny.

"I'm thinkin' that was my first ever consensus," he said. "Feels pretty good."

Amos was bright. He had some sense of that although it made virtually no contribution to his life. Pieces of property

were not generally characterized in terms of intelligence. If anything, it had worked against him. He had ideas – good ideas – but they just had to sit quietly inside his head. If expressed, and if they questioned the rules or the status quo, he was in for a world of hurt. It was one reason he liked doctoring the other slaves. There, he could put his good ideas to work well away from the eyes of the white men.

Zachary was also bright. His father had two years of college, unheard of except among the most privileged in the South. His mother was intellectually equal in every way to her husband. Zachary had been taught by a private teacher from the time he was five and had recently completed the course of study required of high school graduates. He enjoyed studying and learning. During the several months prior to joining the army his father had been training him in the ways of plantation owners – land, crops, sales, and slaves. He was an only child so there were no considerations about divvying up the family fortune. Zachary had never had to consider his future – he was destined to take over the plantation and live out his life there with a wife of appropriate social rank, which he would select only after serious consultation with his parents.

Of the three of them, Benny had experienced the most normal life – normal in terms of family, work, schooling, friends and things like that. His older brother had died of chickenpox when he was an infant. That put some unstated, if nebulous, pressure on him, he thought. There were two younger sisters – twelve and nine. The family lived on fifty acres – forty planted in corn, with a huge garden to meet the family's needs and some to sell at market. There were the required horses necessary for field work and transportation. There were cows and pigs and chickens to provide what they were intended to provide, and, Flash, the mix breed mutt, which was an ever-present staple of the rural, mid-western, family. He had boy friends from the surrounding farms. They tossed the ball, ran races, wrestled and enjoyed extended skinny dips on those sweltering, Illinois, summer days. They wondered together about a variety of important topics. He and his sisters attended a one room school with seven other youngsters from the immediate area. Benny's formal education had stopped after finishing eighth grade. It wasn't that school work was too

difficult – it was, in fact, just the opposite. Eight years was more education than most farm boys were allowed – six being typical. Farmers needed their sons to work the fields, but his father and mother both saw the value in knowledge. Like his parents, he continued to read on a variety of subjects. He enjoyed novels. It was what they did as a family evenings, at the kitchen table by the light of the kerosene lantern that hung overhead. He saw Maddie on Sundays at church and usually managed an hour or so with her on that afternoon. He had kissed her once and remembered it as the most wonderful experience of his life. He figured he probably hadn't been much good at it, but looked forward to having regular opportunities to improve through practice.

Amos readily handed over the rifle to Benny as if he weren't a Yankee. Zachary hadn't thought that far ahead, but by then it seemed too late for other suggestions.

"You need help layin' back down?" he asked turning his attention to Zachary.

"Probably, although I'm feeling pretty good, really. Let's get me into a pair of trousers first. My old grays looked to be clean enough. I'm getting chilly."

The others helped him. Amos added a shirt – less one sleeve – and re-cozied the blanket around his shoulders. His chills soon left.

"Who's going to take second watch?" Benny asked.

"I will," Amos said.

It was clear to the other two that Zachary had not yet come to see that he was in no shape to participate in the watches. Benny had already set his mind to a four-hour stint at the beginning. Amos would do the same; then it would be morning. Zachary would, no doubt mount a complaint about it, but he would understand and maybe even appreciate it – inside. The others had already sensed that Plantation Boy seldom appreciated or approved of anything other than things of his own making. Amos had experienced that kind of thinking all his life so he understood it as normal and expected. Benny most certainly did not.

Amos plainly had something on his mind while he busied himself arranging a place to sleep.

"What is it, Doc?" Benny asked.

Amos shrugged directing fleeting glances at each of them.

Benny extended his arms, palms up. "What?"

Amos nodded and began, head mostly down, but plainly peeking up at Zachary.

"I wanted ta say thanks fer what ya done – coverin' fer me with Wheezy like ya done."

"So, why would it seem so difficult for you to just say that?" Benny asked clearly baffled.

Zachary responded.

"It would be considered pandering for a black man to thank a white man unnecessarily. It could be reason for punishment."

Amos nodded up at Benny leaving no doubt about the truth in what Zachary had said.

"Has to be the dumbest thing I ever heard," Benny said not sparing his natural honesty. "No wonder the south is falling apart!"

Zachary clinched his fists and jaw as he lay there on his back. Amos scooted back a few feet as if preparing for the worst sort of fracas between the two of them. Instead, Benny spoke.

"That was uncalled for on my part, even if it was my true feeling. I suppose I – a white man – *can* say I'm sorry without feeling the sting of your whip, can't I, Plantation Boy?"

As an apology, it could not have been considered well done.

Zachary turned his head away. Benny picked up the rifle. Amos gasped still expecting the worst. Yankee Boy stepped out into the darkness to begin his watch. Amos began breathing again, rewrapped the blanket around himself, cocoon style, and stretched out on the nest of leaves he'd fashioned there.

The night spent itself without further incident. Daylight broke. At the conclusion of his watch, Amos placed the rifle back next to Benny who was still asleep, and made his way down the hill. For one thing, he needed to see what was going on with the soldiers across the way. They were gone, having left the area in clutter and disarray. A good thing he figured – that they were gone. He took the line and hook from

his rear pocket, caught a grasshopper, and began trolling for breakfast. He sharpened a fairly straight two-foot-long stick at each end and stuck one solidly into the moist ground of the bank. As he caught fish he slipped them down onto it through their gills – his version of a stringer. It was a good morning to be a fisherman on the Arkansas River – four in ten minutes. He cleaned them tossing the leavings to some appreciative black birds, and was soon making his way back up the slope.

Benny was just stretching himself back into the world of the conscious. Zachary remained asleep. As Amos eased back into the campsite he and Benny at once put fingers to their lips signaling silence so Soldier Boy could sleep in. It seemed humorous and garnered mirrored shrugs and smiles. Benny added wood to the fire. Amos arranged the fish on skewers. They both sat back in silence to wait.

Benny figured it was the smell of the fish that caused Zachary to begin stirring. Amos figured it was his pain. Neither of them had probably been wrong. In fact, a prolonged sniff followed by a groan seemed to prove them both correct.

Still on his back, he turned his head and looked at them, squinting.

“So, the rag tag troupe of rabbles survived the night.”

It had been a statement, but came off as much a question.

“Looks like it,” Benny said recognizing they had just said good morning.

“How ya feelin’?” Amos asked crawling over to feel his forehead.

“Cool as well water on a December morning,” he pronounced with a broad smile after only a moment of skin to skin contact.

Amos was still quite uncomfortable actually touching a white person. It continued to raise that lifelong knot in the pit of his stomach that accompanied the fear of overstepping the sacred boundary. Zachary was interested that it really didn't bother him the way it had in the beginning – some discomfort perhaps, but hardly a trace of anger. He could have let his new response bother him, but chose to move on.

“I think you forgot to wake me for my watch.”

“Probably not, really,” Amos said, the comment all quite

matter of fact.

Benny smiled at Zachary. It was returned, something of a surprise to both of them.

"I'll take a double watch when I'm able. You made a good decision about it, I think."

"Would it kill you just to say thanks?" Benny asked making no attempt to cover his growing disdain for what he saw as the boy's arrogance.

Zachary ignored it.

"I don't think we got as far in our plan last night as thinking about today," Zachary went on.

"First things first," Benny said. "Let's see how close you are to being able to travel."

"That seems reasonable, even though we have not discussed any travel plans."

Plantation Boy always had to win or at least get in the last word.

"I'm thinkin' leavin' as soon as we can travel ourselves outa here, plans er no plans," Amos began. "The Yankee soldiers is out ta shoot you, Plantation Boy. The Confederates is out ta shoot you, Yankee Boy. I got Wheezy searchin' fer me and who knows how many others he's done put on my trail with the promise a a reward. My back still stings from my last whippin'. Not lookin' forward to a next."

They looked at Zachary. For some reason, he had been assigned – or had more truthfully commandeered – the role of leader and it was at that moment it became obvious.

"Okay. I agree, first things first. Help me to my feet and let's see what our options are."

He was able to get to his feet with less help than any of them would have guessed. How much represented true recovery and how much determined grit, the others would not know.

He stood still with no assistance for several moments and then attempted a few steps. They worked even though the pain showed through.

"Let's get our bellies full of fish and then be on our way. I won't be able to keep to a ready pace, but stopping every so often we can at least put some distance between here and anywhere else – begin our journey."

“*Our* journey?” Amos asked.

“*Ours* unless you two decide to leave me behind. I wouldn’t blame you if you did. Really, I wouldn’t.”

“Who would I have to match wits with, if we left you behind, Plantation Boy? Amos here’s way to even tempered to be any fun.”

Amos smiled assuming it put him in a good light and had been meant in good humor.

Although Zachary offered no special expression, he did manage the merest indication of a single nod in Benny’s direction. He sat down under his own power. He had several ideas.

“We need to get civilian clothes and get rid of our uniforms. We need to find a way to manage the packs and supplies along with us. We must be about out of water – clean drinking water.”

“We can make a travois,” Benny said as if it were an everyday event in every teen boy’s life.

“What’s that?” Amos asked.

Zachary was beginning to appreciate the fact that Amos typically asked the questions he, also, had. It got him answers without having to appear uninformed.

“It’s a plains Indian conveyance – like a carriage without wheels. There are two long poles held together by a half dozen shorter ones tied between them. The cargo goes on top of them. The front is pulled by a horse or a man. The backs of the two poles drag along on the ground. A far cry from wheels, but better than you might think. It really reduces friction.”

“Friction?” Amos asked.

Benny decided to answer since it had come up in relation to his comment.

“Think of it as the slowdown or extra effort needed when two things drag across each other.”

Zachary nodded as if to say, ‘Well done, for a Yankee’.

“You guys are really smart,” Amos said.

The comment seemed to imply no indication of value or worth or any put down to him. He seemed to have only a vague grasp of the difference between knowing a lot of things because a person had studied about them, and being able to

learn new things rapidly – *informed* compared with *intelligent*.

“You and Amos are going to need another layer of clothes up top,” Benny offered, looking at Zachary. “Blankets aren’t good for traveling. I’m thinking the military coats Amos salvaged.”

“They all done got holes in ‘em, but I suppose ‘cept fer that, the rest a them would be warm,” Amos said.

“Makes sense,” Zachary said. “I am cold and I suppose I should keep that shoulder warm.”

The response did little more than give Amos permission to get Zachary a new coat, not speaking to the boy’s own needs.

“I suppose you can wear one, too,” he added like the afterthought of a king demonstrating his benevolence to a subject.

Benny thought it was the dumbest thing he’d ever heard of – two almost grown men unable to just reach out and help each other because it was the right thing to do – all because of some ridiculous, century old decree or whatever it was. His list of the ‘dumbest things ever’ was growing.

Amos selected the coats and helped Zachary into the larger of the two. He slit it underneath, along the armpit and managed it onto his wounded shoulder with a minimum of pain. He then slipped into the smallest of those remaining.

“Maybe you should wear gray, too,” Zachary said to Benny. “It will seem odd to anybody we meet – two Confederates and a Yankee traveling together.”

“I’m thinking it will be safer *this* way. Hear me out. If we meet up with Confederates, you two can say I’m your prisoner. If we meet up with Yankees, I can say you are my prisoners.”

“Very clever, actually,” Zachary said. “Okay, then, a mixed bag of rabbles it will be.”

Benny and Amos got to work on the travois. They cut two, strong, ten foot saplings for the side poles and smaller ones to span it, holding the poles three feet apart. Amos unraveled part of what was left of the coat Zachary had been wearing and they used that strong, thick yarn to secure the cross pieces.

At one point, Amos motioned Benny to step away from the campsite. He had something on his mind that apparently

was not for Plantation Boy's ears. Benny couldn't imagine what might be that important. Amos whispered.

"Does Yankees take suggestions from Negroes?"

"Of course, we do. What's up? I've seen it stewing in your head?"

"I was thinkin' if we fasten a strong stick across the two poles clean up at the front, then whoever's pullin' it could push agin it with his chest or waist and make it lots easier goin' on his arms."

"Brilliant. Cut the stick."

"If Soldier Boy asks, it has to be your idea, promise?"

'How sad is that?' Benny thought.

He managed a smile and nodded.

A half hour later everything worth taking was tied in place on the travois.

They doused the fire and scattered the stones they had used. With full stomachs, they were ready to leave.

"How about I pull the travois; Amos, you bring up the rear keeping watch to make sure we aren't being followed; and Zachary, you, walk in between us? Use my walking stick if it will help."

In reality it had been less a question, but a statement of the only reasonable way to arrange things. No one objected. Amos had one final whispered comment to Benny.

"When I start whistlin' it means Plantation Boy needs ta rest, okay?"

"Okay. Very good, in fact."

There they were, all set; Benny up front with the travois raised to his waist, Zachary standing behind it and Amos alert at the rear. They suddenly realized they hadn't decided which way to go. It was neither the time nor place to see the humor in it.

Benny spoke without turning back toward the others.

"North, I guess?"

He had intended it as a question. The others clearly didn't because they offered no response. Benny stepped off, intentionally with his right foot – his silent protest against the 'left, right, left' armies everywhere. After a hundred yards or so he determined pulling the travois was not only going to be possible, it really was not nearly as difficult as he had figured.

He and Amos had come close to defeating old man Friction and the crossbar up front did, indeed, prove to be pure genius. It was worth an extended smile into the world ahead of him.

Twenty minutes into their trek, Amos began whistling.

"I need to rest a while," Benny said, putting down the travois and wiping his forehead with the back of his coat sleeve.

It appeared the journey north was going take a very long time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Forward, Ho!

By noon they had stopped to rest on eight occasions. They had become tired and hungry and were still looking for a way to obtain different clothes. They had sufficient water, having refilled at a spring in a meadow. They had met no one. That was largely because they were moving overland, avoiding trails and roads. That also made the journey more difficult and tiring.

“Sure would be easier if we could float down some river,” Amos said.

Benny responded.

“As I recall there are only a couple north flowing rivers in the whole state of Arkansas and they’re clear up in the northwest corner, close to the borders with Kansas and Missouri.”

“Ain’t they free states?” Amos asked clearly perking up at the prospect.

It surprised both of the others that he would know such a thing.

“Yes, well, mostly,” Benny said. “Kansas is free by law as well as the inclination of the people who live there. Missouri is slave by law, but remains a part of the union. The people are very much divided about it there. I don’t think we’ll find it dependably safe for you.”

“Then I consensus we move in the direction of Kansas.”

“That’s 200 or more miles from here,” Benny said. “Not far ahead we’ll begin hitting mountains off and on all the way

up north. I figure we've only covered eight or maybe ten miles this morning.

Amos considered it for a few moments and then commented.

"So, that's only talkin' about 20 mornings away from here – ten days. Even add in some mountains an it still ain't no more than two er three weeks away."

Benny and Zachary did a double take. Amos noticed.

"So, I'm pretty good at numbers. One a the black men at Azalea had been a teacher once up north. He taught me lots a words, too. Got captured an brought down here – some fugie slave law he said. It give the slave owners the right ta go up into Yankee land an take any black men they wanted. That don't sound like a United States of America that wants ta protect Negros, if ya asks me."

"The Fugitive Slave Act," Benny said providing the correct name. "I know. It's a terrible law. Even Reverend Miller preached against it numerous times and he seldom veered far from the scriptures on Sunday mornings. I think it was passed to pacify the southern states – to try and keep them from leaving the Union."

"Nothing wrong with giving a man the right to get back property he'd paid for," Zachary said. "A strong Negro male of working age costs twelve maybe fourteen hundred dollars. You can't just let them decide to walk away. There had to be a law. What if one of your daddy's horses got loose and ran away. You'd think you had the right to go get him and bring him back."

"A horse is a animal. A slave is a human being."

"You just don't get it, Yankee Boy. Blacks was born to be slaves. They can't take care of themselves. They would die of starvation if we white folks didn't provide for them."

Zachary had thrown down the gauntlet.

Benny turned to Amos.

"Number boy, do some figuring for me. Say a slave costs \$1,400. Now, white field workers make about \$7.00 a month. How many months of farm work could you pay for with that \$1,400?"

"Two hundred months."

"At twelve months a year, how many years would two

hundred months be?"

"Almost 17."

"Now let's say it costs five dollars a month to feed and clothe a slave, how much would that be a year?"

"Sixty dollars."

"Take that times seventeen years."

"Just a tad over a thousand dollars."

"Add the \$1,400 – the cost of the slave – and that \$1,000 to care for him and what does it cost to own and keep a slave for seventeen years?"

"That would come ta two thousand and four hundred more dollars."

"Divide that by seven dollars. That'll show how many months a person could be paid going wages with that much money."

"Comes to three hundred and forty some months. I know what yer gonna ask next. Divide that by twelve ta get the number a years, an that would be over twenty eight years."

Benny turned back to Zachary.

"Your daddy tell you about *that* when he was telling you Plantation owners couldn't afford to pay field hands?"

Zachary had been checking the figures as Amos spit them out and realized they had been correct. He felt very uncomfortable, not entirely because of the conclusions Benny had arrived at, but also why his daddy had clearly not told him the whole story. There had to be some cost factors he hadn't yet shared with him. In his mind, the fact Negroes were incapable of functioning on their own still stood, making the plantation owner their benevolent savior.

Benny's figures had not been entirely accurate, but it was within the ball park and presented an interesting argument against the proposed dichotomy between either using slaves or have a failing economy. He could have also figured in that if the slaves had lived as free market wage earners they would have also been paying for their own food, clothes, and shelter – overhead the plantations owners could subtract from their costs of operations. The cotton market would also have survived a modest increase in the price of the raw product regardless of the plantations owners' contention. The evidence in favor of Benny's argument grew.

Both white boys understood that no amount of arguing over either their conflicting philosophies of human decency or such figures as Benny had spun would change either of their minds that day. Benny moved on to a more meaningful question.

“Anybody have any money? I got two dollars U.S. – my whole savings.”

“I got nothin’,” Amos said.

“I have five dollars, Confederate,” Zachary said.

“We should be able to buy cloths all around and have quite a bit left,” Benny said. “What we need to do is find a little town.”

“Have to follow a road, I’d think to come upon a town,” Zachary suggested, the previous socio-political-economic discussion apparently set aside for the time being.

“Good point,” Benny said. “We’ve been paralleling a road about a half mile north of us. We can close in a little and hope for the best.”

Amos was fully confused about what had been happening. One minute he was sure they were about to jump each other – perhaps kill each other leaving him alone to fend for himself – and next they were off buying clothes together. White boys were very odd creatures.

“You able to go on awhile, now?” Benny asked.

“Just watch me,” came Zachary’s answer. “By the way, I’m capable of saying when I need to rest so Amos can cut the whistling crap.”

Benny and Amos shared a shrug and made ready to leave.

In a few minutes, they were on their way. They had all grown hungry, but would not mention it.

“There’s smoke,” Amos said, excited because he figured it meant a town or at least a farm house. “Can’t be more than a mile away, you think?”

Without more words, Benny adjusted their course. They stopped at the ridge of a shallow valley just south of what looked to be small settlement. Zachary counted six houses and nothing much more. Several wisps of smoke were actually rising from a large field just beyond the houses. The residents were apparently burning brush they had cleared.

“I’m thinking only one of us should go in – in case there’s any trouble,” Benny suggested.

“And who should that be?” Zachary asked.

“Well, it can’t be a black kid and you’d fall on your face before you got there.”

Zachary nodded, ignoring any sarcasm he figured had been intended. None had been – Illinois farmers were merely a straight forward, honest talking lot. They called things the way they saw them. It was really pretty much what Plantation Boy had assumed in light of past discussions. Well-bred Southerners took their time to cozy up to each other and few things were valued more than being polite – well, polite, rich, and adept at social sparing. There was, of course, the occasional, mandatory duel.

“You two stay here. Can I have some of the Confederate money? I doubt if they’ll take mine.”

Zachary handed over two dollars.

“How are you going to explain the Yankee uniform?” he asked.

“You could take off the coat,” Amos suggested. “I always figure it’s really the coat that makes a outfit into a uniform.”

“Not bad. I’ll wait to shed it until I get close in – stay warm for as long as possible.”

“I got another idea,” Zachary said. “Take my gray trousers. It’ll be safer.”

The swap was made. It was a toss-up, which of them felt more uncomfortable in their new attire.

Benny started toward the houses. When he got close enough to see such things he realized there were no people around. It was well after noon. There should at least be kids and dogs outside. He grew cautious.

There was a barn at the far end of two rows of houses which sat facing each other across an open area. If he veered to his left, he would be able to approach one row of houses from the rear. He shed his coat and dropped it. He grew suddenly cold. Not until that moment did he realize it was going to be as hard to explain no coat as a Yankee coat. They could have planned it better.

Arriving at the back of the first house he cautiously

approached a window and peered inside. It was lit only by the light from the windows. Nobody was in sight. It was a kitchen and sitting room combination. He could see straight through and out the front window. He moved to the other rear window. Again, nobody. That was the bedroom, only half as deep as the kitchen and some darker, there being only the one window. There must have been two bedrooms on that side. There was a closet with no doors. In the closet were clothes, some men's – pants, shirts, coats. He went back to the door that sat between the windows and tried the latch. It was not locked. Carefully, he eased it open.

He found himself in the kitchen. He moved quickly into the bedroom to his left. With very little thought about the specifics of what he was doing, he removed three jackets, three trousers and three shirts. He returned to the kitchen and took the two dollar bills from his pocket, leaving them on the table.

"That you, Ezra?" came a woman's voice from the front bedroom.

Benny quickly let himself out the back and pulled the door closed. Without looking back, he took off at a full sprint reaching down to scoop up his coat as he ran. Half way to his comrades he figured things were going well – he hadn't been shot in the back. Three quarters of the way he was feeling even better, although larger lungs would have been welcomed. When he reached the others, he collapsed on the ground, breathing hard and turning over so he could sit up and look back.

"Looks like you done real good, Benny," Amos said picking up the clothes and beginning to match them into sets.

Benny sat up and hurried back into his jacket.

"Do you see anybody back there – anybody coming this direction?" Benny asked clearly worried.

"Nobody. You run into some sort of trouble?" Zachary asked.

"A woman's voice from another room. She must have heard me. I had no idea she was in there. We should have some time – until she either finds the clothes are missing or the money I left on the table."

"Ya paid fer the clothes ya done stole?" Amos asked

clearly confused.

Benny flashed an uncharacteristically cross look at Amos.

“I may be a Yankee and I may have killed a dozen Rebs, but I’m not a thief. You got that?”

“Yes, sir, Mister Benny. I sure does got that!”

Amos scooted back several yards.

“Look. I’m sorry, Doc. I was scared to death back there. I was expecting to feel a slug in my back any second. Something like that makes one a bit cranky. I do suggest, however, that we make tracks.”

Amos hurriedly rolled up the new clothes and secured them onto the travois. He helped Zachary to his feet – there had been no asking whether or not he felt ready to continue. Benny picked up the load and they headed straight west. It would take them back toward the river, but Benny figured losing a couple hundred yards would be a good trade off to quickly putting some distance between them and the houses.

He set a faster pace than before.

“Yer goin’ too fast, Yankee Boy,” Amos called from some distance behind him.

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. The others were lagging by twenty yards. He felt bad. He felt selfish. He pointed to a stand of trees by a small creek ten yards to their right. He made for it and the others followed. They were soon all sitting on the grass.

Benny was prepared to apologize for several things, but before he could begin, Zachary put his finger to his lips, slowly moved his hand down to his boot and removed a knife – a sleek, pearl handle with a six-inch blade. Amos wanted to ask where it had been the day he’d removed those boots, but waited. Benny became uncomfortable. Surely, he hadn’t done anything that would offend a southern boy to the point of pulling a knife on him. He immediately realized that was very likely a shaky premise. He was the enemy. Soldiers killed enemies.

Zachary moved the knife into throwing position above his right shoulder and let fly. They all followed the shiny blade with their eyes. There would be rabbit for lunch.

Without asking, Amos went to retrieve it. The rabbit

had just been sitting there – a case of wrong place at the wrong time, at least from the furry little animal’s standpoint.

“Some throwing,” Benny said, obviously impressed.

“We southern boys have a few skills up our sleeves.”

“Or down yer boot, more like it,” Amos said. “Where you bin keepin’ it?”

“For me to know and you to wonder about, Doc. You know how to dress out a rabbit?”

“I does fish real good. Figure a bunny ain’t much different than a furry ol’ fish.”

It provoked a much-needed set of chuckles.

Benny tried to begin again.

“Guys, I just want to . . .”

Zachary interrupted.

“Water over the bridge, Yankee boy. Forget it. We need to get a little fire going. Dry grass, kindling, and a hard rock to strike with the handle of my knife.”

By the time the bunny parts arrived – boneless, like no bunny parts either Plantation Boy or Yankee had ever seen before – the fire was going. Amos slid skewers through the meat and he and Benny took care of the cooking. Zachary lay down to rest with his head propped up on a roll of uniform trousers, which Amos had quickly fashioned for him.

“I have an idea,” Benny began.

He pointed to the travois. If we’d add another three feet to the front of the two main poles, by binding shorter ones onto them, it would make more room between the area that carries our things and the cross bar up front. I’m thinking if you – he looked at Zachary – would move in behind me, you could hold onto the poles and give yourself some support. Do you think that would make walking any easier?”

Zachary thought for a few moments.

“Seems like it should. My left arm’s not much good to me yet, but support from my right just might help. It would be worth a try. I know I’m slowing us down.”

“I was thinking of easing your pain, not winning a race with the next teen boy driven travois team we run across here on the plains of southern Arkansas.”

Zachary nodded. It could have been interpreted as sheepish. It seemed both of the white boys were feeling a few

twangs of guilt. After they downed the rabbit – one rabbit really didn't provide that much meat – they set about finding extensions for those poles and Benny began binding them in place with more yarn raveled from what was left of that gray coat.

Zachary tended to putting out the fire. Amos unloaded the clothes and began holding them up to get some notion of which might best fit whom. The fact was they would all fit Benny and Zachary quite well. It was the first time they had either paid any attention to their relative sizes. 'Two peas in a pod,' Benny's mother would have said. Amos would have to turn up the cuffs on both the trousers and the coat, but they would work. His sense of style would not be offended.

They went to work shedding the old and more or less familiar, and donning the new.

Before he made a move to follow suit, Amos had an announcement. It was clearly just being addressed to Benny.

"Us slave boys don't git undergarments, so be on notice. I ain't modest, but don't want ta be the cause a no embarrassment fer you."

He then proceeded as if it were a part of his daily routine. Benny turned away slightly, not to indicate embarrassment over it, but yet enough to give the boy a decent amount of privacy.

Clothes changed, they looked each other over.

"You two is lookin' like real people agin, I'm thinkin'," Amos said.

"You look pretty fine yourself," Benny said kneeling down and turning up Amos's pant legs.

Amos couldn't figure why he was expected to wear new cloths as well. Nobody could have mistaken his for any sort of uniform. Benny thought he deserved something better than rags and Zachary felt it reflected more positively on him if he were accompanied by a better dressed black boy – for any who might assume Amos was his property.

They had been too busy with the clothes to see the man come up behind them. He cleared his throat. They turned. He carried a double-barreled shotgun and had it in position to be raised and fired at a moment's whim. The boys stood there speechless. Amos moved between and slightly

behind the others.

The man spoke.

“Name’s Ezra.”

He reached into his coat pocket.

“I think these belong to you.”

He held out the two, one dollar bills.

The boys looked at one another figuring they’d been caught red handed and just might be in for a double blast of buckshot because of it.

Uncertain how to characterize their situation they offered a halfhearted attempt at raised hands.

“No need for that.”

Ezra stepped close to Benny and tucked the bills into his coat pocket. Amos moved closer to Benny.

“I don’t understand, Sir. I left that as payment for what I took. I’d never just steal something.”

“You a Yankee by the way you talk.”

“I suppose I am . . .”

He was interrupted.

“I’m Zachary Pendleton. My daddy owns the Pendleton Plantation, a thousand acres just across the river into Mississippi. This is my friend, Benny, and my boy, Amos.”

Amos moved closer to Zachary.

“North, south, white, black – makes no never mind to me. My wife and I figure you’re most likely in need of food and fresh water. We’d like you to come back and stay a spell with us. We have several good neighbors who will also be happy to help.”

“We don’t need handouts,” Zachary said stiffening his back and setting his jaw.

“Of course, we do,” Benny said. “We got nothing; we’re injured; we got no real plan, and we still have some three hundred miles to walk. Swallow your damn southern pride, Plantation Boy, and let’s be sensible.”

Amos moved back to Benny’s side.

Ezra pointed to the uniforms on the ground.

“The strangest regiment I’ve ever heard about – blue, gray, rags.”

He had made a point of letting them know he understood something was wrong in a most puzzling way.

Puzzling wrong was usually the most intriguing sort of wrong.

“Can we reach a consensus on this?” Benny asked.

Amos remained close to Benny’s side.

Zachary hitched his head in the direction of the houses, his reluctant indication of agreement.

“We have just a little more work to extend this travois,” Benny said, “then we’ll be ready. Can we have ten minutes?”

“Sure. Time’s of no consequence. That’s quite a contraption you have there. Works well, does it?”

He moved for a close look.

“It’s been doing what it was designed for,” Benny said.

He went on to explain about the modification. Ezra nodded. It was more than just a nod of understanding; it meant he thought the addition was quite clever.

While Amos finished tying the extensions in place and added a second pushing bar way up front, Ezra helped Benny fold and add the old clothing to the travois.

By two o’clock they were headed back toward the houses.

“Your settlement have a name?” Benny asked.

“We just call it *Loges* after the old man who built the first cabin here. He’s ten years’, dead.”

“You caught my Yankee accent. I think I detect Texan in yours.”

The man smiled.

“Good ear.”

It was the only response he would provide in relation to it.

Amos stuck close to Benny the entire trip and as far away from Ezra as he could. The arrival of white strangers had never been comfortable. Face it, white strangers had always been terrifying. It often meant they were looking to buy a slave or two and that was a sad time – having a member of his big family taken away forever or worse yet, perhaps himself. Although he contained his reaction, inside it remained close to terror – certainly something more than alarm or fear.

The feeling very likely had its roots in the day his father had been dragged away from him as he stood there struggling against Pricilla’s grasp, crying and screaming, having no way

at five to understand what was going on. Mostly what he remembered was that his behavior that morning had been cause for his first lashing from Wheezie. Since that day he had not allowed himself to drop another tear in the man's presence – and he'd been given lots of reasons to.

Zachary remained quiet having to deal with a new and also uncomfortable reality. He was about to take help from a stranger. It would have been as bad, of course, had it been from a neighbor – probably worse. Plantation Boys were self-sufficient. They were at the top of the social ladder, the top of the food chain. They were respected by the whites in their area and feared by the blacks. That was the social order as God intended it. He'd known that without question for as far back as he could remember.

As they approached that first house – Ezra's, Benny assumed – Benny expressed part of what was on his mind.

"I didn't see anybody around when I was here before."

"We were all out yonder clearing more land for crops come spring."

He pointed toward smoke in the distance.

Benny nodded.

"I'm strong. I can help."

"Me too, if'n I can stay with Benny."

"We'll talk about such matters later. Put your things down out here on the porch and we'll go inside. My wife should just about have a hungry boy sized lunch ready."

He pushed the door open and motioned them inside ahead of him. They lined up like wooden soldiers, having no idea what to do. Amos put his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor. Zachary bent his right arm and held it across his stomach, looking like a head waiter stripped of his towel. Benny grasped his hands behind his back and teetered, looking at the table, which was brimming over with *real* food – ham, yams, cornbread, a variety of vegetables, pitchers of milk, and one fried something dish he didn't recognize. Later he would learn it was okra – not something his northern taste buds were yet trained to accommodate.

The woman spoke.

"I'm Amy. My husband is sometimes short on the social graces. Hang your coats on the pegs by the door.

Wash up at the sink. You'll find soap and there's plenty of water from the pump so don't spare it."

Whether she was being generous or referencing their general grubbiness would never be revealed. Covering all basis, they nodded their appreciation for her generosity and put just a little extra effort into fingernails, wrists, and knuckles.

Finally, they had some direction. It seemed reasonable to Amos; women had been bossing him around most of his life. He suddenly felt more comfortable. Zachary bowed to no woman's wishes other than his mother's, but he followed the others, justifying it as something he would have wanted to do anyway. Benny felt comfortable in surroundings that seemed familiar. He sensed a good feeling there at Ezra and Amy's home. It made him think of home and that made him think of the hurtful way he had left them. He put on a smile and tried to make himself content in the moment.

As they were finishing the best, double crusted, apple pie of all time, they heard someone calling from outside. Ezra jumped to his feet and went to the door. A middle-aged man ran up.

"The fire got away from us. Wind shifted and it's blowin' it right toward the buildings."

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CHAPTER FIVE

His Stubborn Excellency

The boys didn't hesitate. They stood, thanked Amy and turned toward Ezra for direction.

"Grab your coats. Rakes, hoes and spades in the barn. We'll need to make a fire break. Understand?"

They all nodded. It was one thing boys from rural areas all understood. Once well under way, a field or brush fire could wipe them out before they could raise a hand against it.

They ran on ahead to the barn.

"We had a fire last summer," Benny said. "I learned a few good lessons."

They reached the big doors and pulled them open. Benny continued.

"Start digging the break close here to the barn and work it out toward the fire. That way we can make it as wide as possible before it creeps in on us. To start out twenty or so yards and work back may not give us time to spread it wide enough."

It made sense enough to the others to accept at face value. Ezra caught up with them in time to hear the suggestion.

"Let's get at it, then."

The other men arrived from the field. Two were driving teams. Ezra spoke to them.

"Hitch to plows and turn rows of shallow furrows. All we need is a thin layer of fresh soil and cutting it shallow will be easier on the horses and speed it up."

With no more direction than that, the nine of them had soon set to work in a remarkably well-organized manner. By the time the horses and plows arrived the boys had a two-foot-wide swath stripped bare at a point some twenty feet out from the barn. They would continue to work toward the fire line. The plows would fill in back toward the barn. It would keep the horses as far from the fire as possible. Horses, spooked by fire, would be worse than useless. That had also been Benny's suggestion – directive, actually. What he said was bein' accepted without question.

The creek made a natural boundary to the west – their left as they faced the fire. It bowed to within ten feet of the barn. There was a slate field thirty yards to the east of the barn – an area of exposed black rock that stretched on for forty yards. Their task was clearly defined. Set the break between the creek and the slate.

From time to time the wind let up slowing the spread of the fire if only momentarily. It would soon return whipping it into a raging inferno. The grass that covered the field was a typical January mix of dry and green – the green worked to slow the advance. Fifteen minutes passed. A half hour. An hour. They had each been fully absorbed with their own portion of the project and only acknowledged each other out of the corners of their eyes.

At last the break was fifteen yards wide. It seemed reasonable that should be sufficient to stop such a low burning fire. At any rate that would have to do. They could feel the heat from the fire that had drawn to within ten feet. Fortunately, there was virtually nothing in the field to detach and blow along above the fire line.

As if given an order, they all stood up at about the same time and leaned on their implements. Their glances moved between the front edge of the fire and wide stretch of soil they had just turned. They stepped back onto the dirt.

They were filthy. The boy's new clothes were filthy. The lot of them were exhausted. Amos and Benny had been so fully absorbed with their own tasks that they had not considered Zachary. They looked around. They spotted him at the same moment, lying face down in the dirt, still clinging to a hoe.

They dropped their spades and ran to him. Ezra noticed and hurried to join them.

“Hey, Soldier Boy, you okay in there,” Amos asked kneeling at his side and forcing his eyelids open.

“If I was okay *in here* would I be lying face down in a field of dirt?”

“Sorry. Dumb question. Let’s git him rolled over onto his back.”

“Whatever you think is best, Doc,” Benny said reaching his arms underneath his chest and rolling him over across his good arm.

Zachary’s eyes teared and he gritted his teeth. He managed the pain and was soon on his back.

“You shouldn’t a been workin’, child,” Amos said sounding like the old women he knew so well.

“I had one good arm – all a hoe needs.”

“Your shoulder’s bleedin’ agin. We need ta git ya tended to right now.”

During the time they had been with Zachary, the fire had burned itself out against the fire break. They heard the other men cheering. It caught their attention and they allowed a brief smile and glance toward the north.

Ezra motioned several of the men to come and help. They were soon carrying Zachary toward Ezra’s house. Amy met them some distance away and walked along side. Amos, figuring she’d be the one doing the doctoring, began the brief explanation.

“Three or four days back Zachary took a slug in his shoulder. While he was unconscious I cut it out. Probably a raggedy job a cuttin’, but I got it out. I poured lots a water over it ta clean it out and cinched it up as tight together as I could with his belt. Didn’t have no way ta stitch it up. He come a ragin’ fever so I kept a cloth wet on his head and his clothes soaked. Fever left a day er so ago. He’s been doin’ pretty good til he done this darn fool thing.”

“Let’s get him out of that coat and lay him face down on the table inside, then and we’ll get a look at that shoulder.”

Ezra spoke to his wife.

“The boys call Amos, *Doc*. I imagine he has earned that title, looking at the pair of patients he seems to have been

looking after.”

Amy nodded.

“Well, Doc, let’s get to work. After we get Zachary fixed up we’ll need to get a look at Benny’s eye – a burn I assume.”

“Yes, ma’am, from a explodin’ cannon ball er grenade I’m thinkin’.”

Amy unwrapped the covering Amos had tied in place.

“Started bleeding again, alright,” she said. “You did a first-class job of cleaning it out. No real infection I can see. How about you hold the gash closed while I get bandages from the bedroom. Benny, you and Ezra get his shirt off.”

A half hour later Zachary was trussed up in wide strips torn from sheets the way he needed to have been from the beginning. Reopening the gash had probably been a good thing for the long run. The flesh would be able to heal back together in proper alignment.

“Think he’ll get another fever, Doc?” Amy asked.

“I’d bet on it, but maybe not like before. I prepared pain medicine – boiled willow bark, mostly.”

Her question had made Amos feel both important and appreciated. That was partly what she had intended, of course. The other boys understood. Even Zachary managed the slightest smile indicating his approval.

“Shall we move him into the boy’s bedroom?” Ezra asked.

“Boys?” Benny asked surprised. Considering the focus of the moment it had probably been inappropriate.

“We raised three boys,” Amy explained. “They’re gone from home now.”

Benny nodded.

“Before you put him on my nice clean sheets he needs the bath of a lifetime. I’ll give you men fifteen minutes to get him cleaned up.”

She brought a large basin of water, a bar of soap, a washrag and a towel.

“I’ll be over at Fred and Emma’s.”

Although he was relieved to have escaped being given a bath by a woman, Zachary really wasn’t comfortable having his nakedness tended to by the others either. Ezra sensed the problem.

“Doc, why don’t you and me go get the tools cleaned up and put away back in the barn while Benny helps Zachary here?”

“Yes, massa! I thinks that would be a *very* good thing.”

They left.

“It has to be done, you know,” Benny said once they were alone.

“I know. Let’s get it over with.”

In the end, it really hadn’t been all that bad. Benny kept a conversation going, which at least distracted Zachary, if not entirely putting out of mind what was going on. Benny asked about the plantation, the livestock, the fields, the baling of the cotton – all things Benny was genuinely interested in. He had learned a lot, and felt he had come to know his new companion much better.

He carried him into the bedroom and covered him with a sheet and blanket.

“We need to get all our clothes washed – skin out. I’ll see to it. You be okay for a while?”

“I’ll likely be asleep before you’re through the door.”

It happened in almost that way.

Amy knocked at the front door and eased it open.

“Everybody decent?”

“Come on in. The patient’s cleaner than he’s been in three months. Sincerely doubt if the sheets will need to be burned. He’s already sleeping.”

They shared a smile.

“Time to look at your eye, then,” she said closing the door behind her.

She pointed to a chair near the front window. Benny sat. Amy unwrapped the old gauze, which by then was filthy, though became some cleaner as she reached the bottom layer.

“That doc of yours does good work. How’d he come by such skills?”

“At his plantation. Says he learned it from the woman who took care of the other slaves. Sounds like he’s had lots of experience.”

“Actually, you’re looking very good, Benny. Can you open your eye?”

“The medical officer told me to keep it shut from light for a week – that’ll be several more days.”

“I see. Let’s go with that, then. The lids look to be matted closed. I’m just going to pat them with a wet cloth to see if I can wash some of that away. If it hurts too much let me know.”

“You have a very gentle touch, like my mother. I suppose it’s a woman thing.”

Amy smiled and continued dabbing.

“Ma’am, we need to wash all our clothes and I mean ALL our clothes. What’s your suggestion?”

“You get a big tub of hot water going out back. There’s kindling there beside the fireplace. You’ll see everything. Fill the copper tub from the outside pump and put it across the grate. Gather up the clothes and put them in the water. Here’s soap; one cup should be enough. Then I’d suggest you and Doc hightail it over to the creek and take baths. Soap and towels under the sink. It’s probably too late for them to dry on the line yet today, but they’ll be ready first thing in the morning. You boys going to need another meal before bed?”

“No, ma’am. You filled us up good and proper. Doc and I’ll find a place to sleep outside.”

“Non-sense. Got neighbors our age – Fred and Emma, Joe and Betty – with beds going to waste, too. They’ll be pleased to have you overnight.”

“I should tell you that Doc – Amos – probably won’t go for being away from me for the night. We can share a bed.”

“I understand. You three must have interesting stories to tell.”

Benny smiled.

“Even the true versions are pretty interesting, I’d say.”

She clearly enjoyed his humor and understood that their stories would remain private.

Amos and Ezra returned. Benny explained how things were going to transpire – clothes into the copper tub, bath at the creek, and staying the night together at a neighbor’s house.

Amos nodded. It signified he both understood and approved.

They prepared the tub and set the fire. The boys shed

their duds and each one wrapped himself in a towel. They made a beeline for the creek. The air was more than a bit chilly.

“It gonna be cold, ya know,” Amos said.

“But we’ll be clean.”

That short exchange revealed important things about each of them: Amos lived most moments of his life concerned about pain, especially Wheezie’s whip; Benny, with being presentable, a necessity in a lifestyle that existed around the importance of establishing and maintaining close family and social activities.

The water wasn’t nearly as cold as Amos had predicted. It was a generally shallow, slow moving, stream, meaning the sun had warmed both the water and the brown and rust colored rocks that lined its bottom. Together, those things made it more than just tolerable. After a few minutes it seemed pleasant.

Once clean, they lingered for some time, just laying back and looking west toward the sunset. It brought the first sense of true relaxation and safety in days. For those few minutes, there was no war between the states requiring young men to kill other young men. There were no orders to fire or to get back into the fields – exhausted or not. There were no authorities searching for them. There were no whips or firing squads awaiting their return. There were no anguishing families awaiting word about their wellbeing. It wouldn’t last long, but they savored it for as long as it did.

Just as Amy had indicated, when morning came, there were clean clothes neatly folded at the foot of their beds. Benny and Amos slept in until seven – unheard of for either of them.

Amos picked up his bundle and put it to his face, sniffing.

“Them’s the most wonderful smellin’ clothes I ever done smelled. It’s like the ma’am’s soap. How she make that happen you think, send the smell from the soap into the clothes like this?”

“Amy clearly knows some fine trick about it.”

Benny didn’t feel an explanation of odor transfer was a priority that morning – not with growling stomachs, their

wounded fellow rabble in a painful, uncertain state next door, and still having no plan covering either their short term or long term prospects. In addition, he really hadn't the faintest idea how that smell got into the clothes.

Amos thoughtfully donned each item of clothing, pausing briefly after arranging each one in place. Benny noticed, but didn't comment. It was as if the boy were offering up a prayer of thanks at each juncture. Benny had to wonder if those eight pieces of clothing – including the socks and boots he refused to wear – were, likely the most he'd ever had at one time in his life.

Amos paused as he worked at managing his collar button. There was no mirror available. He turned to Benny who provided the needed assistance.

"You dream last night," Amos said.

It was not really a question and certainly not the one Benny wanted, but he tried a noncommittal answer.

"Guess I always dream. You?"

"I'm talkin' about *you*," Amos said becoming more direct. "Ya groaned and moaned and tossed your head around. I thought ya was gonna sprain yer neck. Ya screamed out a few times – not like from-pain screamin'. More like screamin' from yer heart I'd say. Fred done come in to check once. I told him I'd take care a ya."

"I did all that, did I?"

"Ya sure did. It was spooky as . . . all get out!"

"Sorry I bothered you."

"Didn't say, *bother*. I said, *spooky*. I'm guessin' it was bad memories from up on the hill."

"And you'd be guessing right."

I'm up to listenin' if yous up ta talkin'."

Benny moved around the bed and sat beside Amos at an angle, his shoulder resting back against the headboard. Amos drew his knee up onto the bed and adjusted himself so they could look directly into each other's faces.

"I just can't seem to shake those pictures in my head. It's like they're stitched in place in my brain. It's a two-layer thing – those pictures and the gut-emptying feelings – terrified I was about to die, disgraced and ungodly that I was actually killing those other boys down below, disbelief that human

beings would really allow such a thing as war to be happening.

“I heaved more times than I remember up there. I can smell the gun smoke and see the flashes from the caps, and hear the agony that was growing all around me. Amos, there was a boy on my left with his arm blown off. He screamed til he lost so much blood he fainted – died, really, I suppose. There was a boy on my right whose head was split right down the middle. Mercifully, I suppose, he never knew what happened. The air smelled like a slaughter house – that’s it. I knew I knew that smell.”

Benny leaned in toward Amos. His face showed he meant business.

“Promise me, if you see me dreaming like that again you’ll wake me up. I’m afraid if I let it go on it’ll get to be more than my mind can handle and I’ll just be trapped up on that hill forever.”

Amos nodded and reached out, patting Benny on his leg. It had been his natural and sincere reaction. Immediately realizing what he was doing, he withdrew his hand as if from, a hot stove. Fear spread across his face. Benny reached out and took his hand, returning it to where it had been. He patted it.

“We’re friends. It’s okay. In fact, it’s wonderful. It’s a way men say we are important to each other without stooping to using girly words.”

“In all my life, I never thought about havin’ a white friend. You sure?”

“I’m quite sure. You?”

Amos began a slow deliberate nod, which soon melded with a broad smile.

“But ya gotta understand that Zachary, even if he lives ta be a hundred-year-old, ain’t never gonna understand, so we better keep it jist ‘tween me an you.”

Benny’s natural inclination would have been to administer one huge bear hug, but, figuring that would have sent the boy into an irreversible state of apoplexy, he thought better of it. He moved them on.

“I’m thinking Amy probably has breakfast cooking. Let’s go over and check it out.”

They thanked Emma and Fred and left. When they

arrived back at Ezra's, Zachary was still asleep.

"Let him sleep," Amy said. "His body has been through hell."

Both boys did a double take. Neither one could remember every hearing a woman swear before. She noticed their uneasiness.

"Using, *Hell*, in that way is righteous profanity – merely descriptive and not vengeful in nature."

Benny thought he understood. Amos would ask for an explanation the next time he had his Yankee 'friend' alone.

Amy had breakfast ready, except for cooking it. The bacon was in one skillet. The eggs were ready in another. The flapjacks were already made, staying warm in a pan in the oven. She moved the skillets onto the stove top. The sizzling began almost immediately.

"Do I smell food out there?" came Zachary's cracking voice from the bedroom.

Benny and Amos turned and entered, eager to see how their . . . Plantation Boy was doing. They spoke one after the other.

"How ya feelin'?"

"You're looking pretty good."

Zachary nodded.

"Actually, I am feeling pretty good. Feel my forehead, Doc."

It was cause for an awkward pause between them. Benny had come to understand the reason for the hesitation, but for the life of him he couldn't understand it. The others understood all too well. Amos felt the forehead, leaving his hand in place for longer than seemed necessary. It may have been a test to see if Plantation Boy would allow it. It may have been a test to see how much nerve Amos had. Regardless, there were no repercussions.

"Not cool yet, but not bad. That's a real good sign. How the shoulder feel?"

Still mostly under the covers, Zachary scooted back, awkwardly arranging himself into a sitting position with his back against the headboard. He worked his shoulder – just a little, but more than he had before.

"It's coming along. I won't be skipping rocks with it for

some time, but it's coming along.

Amos smiled.

"That's your left shoulder. You'll be skippin' rocks within yer right."

"No, actually, I'm left handed."

Amos took step backward and his eyes grew big.

"But you ain't crazy."

"Glad to hear that, Doc."

Both of the others were confused.

"Crazy? What's with the crazy comment?" Benny asked.

Amos explained.

"I knowed since forever that bein' left handed causes crazy. I seen it once in old River Jim. Finally took him."

"How old was River Jim?"

"Old as the Good Book I reckon."

"And he'd been sane – not crazy – all those years being left handed and all?"

"That's right. Didn't git him til the end."

"Sometimes old people become what's called senile," Benny tried to explain. "They lose their mental faculties. They can't remember things and sometimes don't even recognize family members."

"That was jist like Ol' River Jim, okay."

"He wasn't crazy and being left handed had nothing to do with it. His brain just got worn out, that's all."

"You sure about that 'cause Pricilla said it was his left handed affliction what finally caught up ta him?"

"I'm not here to argue with Pricilla, Amos. I just know modern doctors don't believe that's how it works. I can guarantee you that Zachary isn't going to go crazy just because he's left handed. Now, I can't guarantee what the effects on him will be of having to put up with you and me."

Amos offered a quick smile in recognition of the joke and then nodded about the 'not crazy' message, although his response didn't indicate a great deal of commitment to the new theory.

"Okay. You knows things about modern doctors I don't"

"Let's get you dressed, Plantation Boy," Benny said.

"I'm going to try it by myself. One of you stay here in

case I take another header . . . Okay?"

It was obvious the, 'okay' had been an afterthought offered to gentle the sternness of his comment, which had been offered like a first sergeant to his troops. Perhaps there might be hope for Plantation Boy after all.

Amos left, figuring he'd been offered a way out so he took it.

"I must say you've had me fooled," Benny began, as he moved the clean clothes to within easier reach.

"Fooled?"

"You handled your right hand really good out there – your knife dead center through that rabbit at twenty-five feet. I was impressed, then. I'm more impressed, now."

"As well you should have been."

There was just the briefest moment of awkward silence as Benny tried to process the apparent arrogance.

"Kidding, Yankee."

"I should have known that."

"No. I suppose you shouldn't have known that. I'm used to being – what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Worshiped? Feared? Adored?" Benny suggested *not* really kidding.

"Close, I guess. I see you get my point at least. Being one of the three rabbles seems to require an approach with others with which I am fully unfamiliar."

"Different way of thinking about relationships, you mean?"

Zachary nodded, but didn't comment further. He began struggling into his clothes.

Benny wanted to offer help, especially when he saw the periodic pangs of agony evident on Zachary's face and the tears clinging to the surface of his eyes, but he didn't. That had to be Plantation Boy's call. He leaned back against the wall not so much watching him at that point as just waiting to pick his Stubborn Excellency up off the floor when he passed out.

In the end, that had not been necessary. He asked for help with his boots, but other than that had managed everything, even buttoning the fifteen oyster shell buttons down the front of the long johns.

“Feels good, doesn’t it,” he said to Benny as he struggled to his feet from where he’d been sitting on the edge of the bed.

“It does feel good.”

“We have lots of big decisions to make,” Zachary said as he stood, taking a moment to assess his sea legs. His eventual quick nod suggested he was satisfied they were going to work.

“Yes, we do. When we leave here I’m thinking we need to find a spot and just allow ourselves a whole day – or more if we need it – to talk it all out – sort out the good possibilities from the not so good possibilities – think about what we each really want – consider the consequences of it all.”

“It seems we have the first part of our plan in place, then,” Zachary said.

He offered his hand for a shake.

Trying to appear as though it had not been the fully unexpected, out of the blue, mind blowing gesture that it was, Benny accepted it willingly, eagerly even. So much sudden bonding that morning was certainly more than he had anticipated. It produced a flood of incompatible feelings: joy, fear, stability, uncertainty, responsibility, helplessness – maybe even love. It could have been overwhelming, but he chose not to allow it.

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CHAPTER SIX

A Mindless Requirement of Tradition

Amy and Ezra joined them for breakfast. Benny took it upon himself to make an offer. He directed it to Ezra.

“We appreciate all you’ve done for us and we’d like to stay long enough to work it off – the food, the clothes, the beds.”

“The way we see it, son, we owe you the fact our barn and houses are not laying in ashes around our ankles right now. You owe us nothing.”

Benny understood and wouldn’t push his offer. Anything further on his part would become offensive. Amos saw his opportunity. He turned to Amy.

“How da ya git that good smell from the soap into the clothes an towels?”

It was not a question she would have ever anticipated, but she understood and gave it her best.

“I use a special perfume when I make soap. It leaves traces of itself on everything it cleans up – sort of like its calling card.”

Amos had no idea what a calling card was, but from the rest he figured he had a sufficient answer – dirt out, smell in. Truth be known, *perfume* was as foreign to him as *calling card*, but he was very good at hooking up bits and pieces into things that made sense.

“When you boys planning to move on?” Ezra asked.

Amy shot him a look intended to express her private displeasure with his question. It sounded like he was trying to hurry them on their way. The boys saw it, but hadn’t a clue

about what it meant. They were wise enough to leave it alone.

Benny, having for some reason become the spokesman for the group that morning, attempted a response.

“We haven’t had a chance to talk it over yet. We’ll do that this morning and get back to you. Soon, I’d say.”

The other boys nodded. Amos had something to add.

“We figure out our plans with consensus – that’s like voting without needing to vote.”

It was a clear and complete explanation as far as Amos was concerned and, in fact, seemed fully sufficient to the others. Its importance to the boy was well beyond obvious.

They finished eating mostly in silence – suddenly into their own thoughts, one of which was shared even if unspoken. ‘What were the chances that around that one table in southern Arkansas, would gather an ex-rancher from Texas; his wife, a former school teacher from Vermont; a Yankee farmer boy / AWOL U.S. soldier from central Illinois; a rich boy from a plantation in Mississippi on the lam from the Confederate Army; and the blackest, cutest, fifteen-year-old runaway slave boy anybody had ever seen?’

The boys offered to do the dishes – well, Benny and Amos – but Amy scooted them away. They slipped into their coats and went outside, figuring the time had come to decide on that next step. They welcomed Ezra’s comment, which had nudged them toward it. They walked to the creek and arranged themselves in the sun on the ground to the east side of a sizeable oak. Benny lay on his side chewing on a long fuzzy weed. Amos bellied down, chin supported in his hands. Zachary sat cross-legged trying to look as though he was not in pain.

“North?” Benny asked by way of getting the discussion started.

“That’s toward Yankee land, right?” Amos asked.

Benny nodded.

“I’ve never been up north,” Zachary said. “Folks friendly?”

“That’s the way I’ve found them. I suppose everyplace has both its friendly and unfriendly types.”

It was worth a nod in return.

“What’ll they do ta me up there?” Amos asked.

“Do to you?”

Amos didn't respond immediately. He struggled to figure out how his question had not been clear.

“I suppose it depends on how far north,” Benny said understanding no clarification was soon to be forthcoming. “You won't be safe in Missouri, but you will be in Kansas or Iowa or Illinois. I suppose Canada would really be the safest place for you.”

“Sounds like there's a lot of states up in Yankee Land.”

Benny nodded. He truly wasn't even sure how many, anymore.

“Which is closest?”

It had been Amos.

Zachary answered.

“Missouri lies straight north of Arkansas. Kansas sits adjacent to the northwest tip of the state.”

“Adjacent?”

“Meets. Touches.”

Amos nodded. He was learning lots of new things from the other Rabbles. He still needed to ask them what that meant – Rabble. He figured it had to do with a group of misfits who moved around the country together either hiding from somebody or living just outside the rules. Since they qualified on both counts, it should be close enough.

“You two ever gonna rejoin up with yer armies?”

It had been the most burning of the issues the other two had been privately fighting in their hearts. They each understood that duty would demand the answer be yes. Each of them was still committed to preserving his way of life – freedom and well-spread wages for work in the north; unpaid slavery and concentrated wealth in the south. They each understood their old ways could not be preserved under any rule of law grown out of the other's way of construing the world. It was one of those perplexing, black or white issues that seemed to prove consensus was sometimes doomed to failure.

Benny came right out and asked the question.

“Zachary, would you go all the way north with us?”

“Maybe. I haven't decided. I suppose you two would get lost or starve if I wasn't along to keep you out of trouble.

What one part of me knows I should do is put a rope around the slave boy's waist, drag him back to the Wheezie guy, and try to rejoin my regiment."

"I sure does hope there's *another* part," Amos said visibly troubled.

"There is, but I can't get it all in place for some reason. Yankee boy has a way of confusing me."

"I know about *that*, fer sure," Amos said offering a series of deliberate nods.

"You?" Zachary asked. "How has he confused you?"

"Sometimes I used ta think about what it would be like ta be free, but never dwelled on it 'cuz I knowd it couldn't never happen. I listened ta the men talkin', but it all seemed like some impossible dream – some fairytale. I never said nothin' about it ta them 'cuz they seemed ta need it – like thinkin' it was possible made life tolerable fer em. I tried ta do my work good enough so I'd get supper every night and avoid the whip. I had that all pretty well worked out. I suppose deep down I even doubted there was any place where a Negro could live any other way – really be free. Thinkin' that, made life easier, ya see. Jist settle in and let life be what life was.

"Then Benny showed up. Unless he's not ta be believed, it seems there really is a place. Watchin' an listenin' ta the two a ya I can tell Plantation Boy knows it's all true – he just don't want black folks to know about it – so we won't git all stirred up and want it, I suspects. See, now I have ta wonder about how some other life might be. A heap load a confusion."

He turned directly to Benny.

"Life was a lot simpler before you."

"Sorry for any pain I've caused, but happy I could set the record straight. My daddy says it's always best to know all the options – all the possibilities – otherwise you have no chance of making the best decision."

Zachary shot him a look – powerful, but undefined – probably based in distress – maybe in anger – or both. He offered no comment to clarify it or confirm it.

Benny thought for a long moment, wondering if he should say what else was on his mind. Presently he plowed ahead.

“Back when I was with my regiment, our Captain gathered us all together to deliver some news. It seems that a week or so ago, on January 1st, President Lincoln signed what’s called the *Emancipation Proclamation*. It says any slaves held in the rebel states were set free. That means as far as the United States Government is concerned, you, Amos, are as free as Zachary or me.”

“One problem with that, Yankee boy,” Zahary said. “We are standing in territory that is part of the Confederate States of America and we don’t feel bound anymore by United States government laws and proclamations and especially our worst enemy – Mr. Lincoln. So, from a practical standpoint, Amos is still a slave.”

“What you two sayin’ – that I’m free now, but that I’m still a slave? You gotta know I don’t understand that.”

Benny really didn’t have an answer, but he tried.

“I guess it’s one of the things the war’s all about now, Amos – the north is trying to get the south back under its laws and the south is trying to separate so it can live under its own laws.”

“So yer sayin’ up in your Illinois I’s a free boy, but down here in Arkansas I’s a slave.”

“That’s it – Illinois and other states like I said before – Kansas, Iowa, Ohio.”

Another period of silence followed, clearly made uncomfortable by Benny’s news. Neither Zachary nor Benny decided to address it further at that time.

Eventually Zachary spoke, looking at Benny.

“You want to head back to Illinois, I suppose.”

It had, of course, really been a question.

“Hard to know. Suppose I could wait the war out someplace else and then go home and lie about where I’ve been and what I did. For the time being it would be like I had no family. Just showing up at home now would set me up for the firing squad as a deserter – if the army really cares enough to come after me. That’s not in any plan I ever had about my future.”

“I guess we may share more than I ever figured,” Zachary said. “Sounds like I probably have no home to go back to either – maybe no family. I’m a deserter, too, at least

at this point. I used to think it would be the greatest thing to get to kill Yankees, and send their armies home, but now I nearly get sick to my stomach every time I think about the stories you tell. It would have been easier to go out killing Yankees back before I really knew a Yankee.”

It was becoming clear that setting their plan – if, in fact there could be just one – was going to be more difficult than they had figured.

“The men in my regiment talked like most of the fighting up north in Arkansas was over,” Benny said. “Cane Hill, Pea Ridge, Fayetteville. I suppose that means most of the troops have moved out. As deserters, we’d probably be fairly safe if we could come up with a solid story.”

“But Amos wouldn’t.”

It had been Zachary’s addition, and surprised the others. Truth be known, it surprised Zachary as well. All three faces showed it. Benny and Amos turned theirs toward Rabble number two.

“What?” he said. “Rabbles take care of Rabbles.”

The mere force of his words as to provide justification for his remark.

It really didn’t answer the far deeper question Benny and Amos had, but neither did it seem like the proper time to pursue it.

“Can I consensus, here?”

The others broke smiles and nodded.

“Understand I ain’t givin’ myself ta ya, Plantation Boy. But I do has a idea. That rope around my waist thing you said. It give me this. We could *pretend* I was yer slave boy. Would that protect me?”

“Just might,” Zachary said, nodding to emphasize the good sense he thought the comment held.

Several moments of quiet thought followed.

Presently Benny nodded – not much of a nod that time, but clearly a nod.

Zachary looked Amos up one side and down the other.

“It could work, I suppose.”

“A problem would come up if we met any abolitionists,” Benny said. “They’d at least take Amos away from you to free him. Most likely they’d hang you and probably me. They tend

to be hot heads when it comes to slavery – vengeful, religious hot heads. I know it doesn't make any sense, but that's the way I hear they work. My grandpa says there aren't any scarier people than religious people who think their cause is the only just cause. They can do terrible things and never feel a twinge of guilt because they hide their hearts behind their beliefs."

Zachary had to wonder how much of Benny's sentiments had actually been aimed at the abolitionists and how much had been aimed at his kind – slave owners. He decided it wasn't the place so moved on – well, back to the more basic question before them.

"I suppose we could play every situation as it came up," Zachary said.

"You are so hard to figure, Plantation Boy," Benny said. "Are you indicating you've joined the anti-slavery side without so much as a fight about it?"

"Not at all. Don't even think it. But, it does suddenly sound like I may have cozied up a bit to the anti-Amos-as-a-slave side. Don't question it if you know what's good for" His voice trailed off. He couldn't find a path for the first part of that idea to follow.

Amos beamed, probably stretching his cheeks beyond repair.

"That must be as confusing as hell – in Amy's consideration of the term," Benny said.

"You have no way of knowing *how* confusing. I feel like a traitor on two fronts – to my daddy and my family name, and to my country – maybe to myself – *probably* to myself. Make it three fronts. That seems to be the most gut wrenching part of it all right now. It was so simple before – keep my slaves in line and my plantation life would be fine. Go kill the Yankees and my world would be fine."

There was a long silence. None of them felt immediately compelled to fill it.

A few long minutes later Benny spoke.

"I really like several things about us Rabblers. One is that we somehow find ways to be honest with each other without getting angry or upset – at least not in the 'gotta-kill-

that-SOB sense at least.”

Zachary added an almost smile.

Amos added what was the essential point from his perspective.

“And we all really listen ta each other. Nobody never done hardly listened ta me in my whole life before.”

Benny looked at Amos and nodded.

“And, we understand everybody’s listening because we’ve granted everybody the right to have his say, even though we know we certainly don’t agree in lots of cases.”

“Doubt if any three such different men can keep that up for long,” Zachary said all quite seriously bringing several things out into the open.

If they were going to pull off some truly equitable joint plan it would have to be done by men, not boys. If they just left the issues between them – among them – festering without resolution, the basic differences were bound to come to a head – boil over. That indicated the inevitability of open animosity – probably fighting – possibly killing. All three recognized it and all three suddenly sensed unwelcome, profound fears settling into the pits of their stomachs.

The best response seemed to be silence.

Benny thought about his family and his reputation.

Zachary thought about his family and his reputation.

Amos pretty well drew a blank. The points he had to ponder came with no preparation, points of reference, or memories whatsoever – freedom, being responsible for himself, earning a living, leaving his black world behind, fitting into the white world. There had been Jessie – he hadn’t spoken of her. It was assumed he and she would marry – most likely very soon. It couldn’t be said he had spent much time with her or that he even really knew her very well. Her family had only recently arrived. He and she were the only fifteen year olds on the Azalea Plantation. That was the way it was done.

The boys had not yet confronted what was perhaps the most basic bond among them; none of them was free. Amos, perhaps, for the most obvious reasons, as long as he remained in the south. Benny and Zachary because they were army deserters. In fact, where Amos might be free in the

north, neither Benny nor Zachary would be free in either the north or the south – deserter in one and enemy in the other. It was intriguing to speculate about which of the lot truly had the best possibility for a bright future.

Eventually it was Amos who forced the issue.

“So, when we headin’ up fer Kansas? I consensus the sooner the better.”

“I guess I agree,” Benny said.

They looked at Zachary.

“Just to make sure we all understand the danger,” he said. “There’s nobody the three of us together can count on between here and Kansas. The Confederate soldiers will grab Amos in a minute unless I can be very convincing that he’s mine. The Yankee soldiers will grab him regardless. They think he’s a free man. I have heard they are putting runaway slaves to work in central Arkansas, building things and hauling supplies for the army – for their keep and sometimes for pay. You and I, Benny, are soldiering age so we’ll be subject to suspicion to both sides for not being in uniform. We may even be interrogated as spies and I know for a fact that is not something we want to have to endure. If we don’t watch our step, we can end up in the middle of a battle – there are lots of roaming bands of soldiers on both sides who’ve been separated from their troops. And, like you said, Benny, those abolitionists cannot be trusted as far as I could toss Amos today. And then there are the mountains – the Ouachita’s first and then the Ozarks on north. Neither is really high, but they form a terrain that’s constantly up and down – rounded hilltops and broad valleys. We have almost no money and no supplies. And to begin with at least, we have me, who’ll be lucky to be able to make eight or ten miles a day for some time yet.”

“Sounds like you know the geography pretty well,” Benny said.

“*That’s* what you took from all that? We’re going to be putting ourselves and each other in great danger. The chances we will actually succeed with this plan is slim to none.”

“Can’t see how it can be more danger than it is sittin’ right here,” Amos said.

As his naiveté often allowed, he had cut to the crux of their situation; regardless of their destination, they would have to deal with ongoing and imminent danger before they arrived.

Zachary had one last salvo to launch.

“Are you two sure you really want to be burdened with me?”

“Rabbles takes care a Rabbles, the way I hears it,” Amos said quoting Zachary and looking back and forth between the others.

“Yeah,” Benny added. How you and I going to resolve this huge philosophic gulf between us if we don’t have more time to work on it?”

Zachary raised his eyebrows clearly saying, ‘as if that will ever happen’.

“I guess it’s settled, then,” Benny said looking from face to face.

He was met by two nods – one clearly eager and one clearly reserved.

Amos was on his feet first and turned ready to head for the house. The others followed, their bearing suggesting more a sense of reluctant necessity than eagerness.

Ezra was doing something at the travois. The boys didn’t understand. Since he didn’t shrink from his behavior as they approached they figured it must be legitimate.

“We’re leavin’ out,” Amos announced, smiling.

“I figured,” Ezra said straightening up.

“I rearranged things here a bit – better balance – and added a few items.”

“We can see that,” Zachary said.

Ezra explained.

“Nothing that can’t be undone. I figured you wouldn’t want to be caught with Confederate uniforms – by either side – so I removed them. They’ll make good strips for a braded rug Amy’s been working on for a while now. A coil of rope always comes in handy on overland treks. Flint and steel. Two metal buckets. A sewing kit – that was you know whose idea. Some paper and pencils. Three sets of gloves and extra pairs of britches. A shallow, light weight skillet and some utensils. Also, containers of salt, flour, lard, and sugar. Amy wrote out recipes for biscuits and the like in case you aren’t

cooks. Put all the food related things in this open crate. Looks like you already have some good blankets.”

“I see ya tied the rifles and ammunition packs underneath,” Amos said, puzzled.

“They have a good chance of staying hidden under there, just in case you come upon a situation in which they need to stay hidden. Each one is secured in place with a bow knot for quick release if that’s called for. You’ll need to check those from time to time.”

“It seems you’ve done this before,” Zachary said.

“Does it now?”

Ezra smiled without committing himself. He pointed to a row of lanterns hanging on the porch.

“I noticed them before,” Benny said. “Never seen that design before – square metal with a star cut out of all four sides.”

“Amos went right to them and unhooked one, oddly handling it more like it was some sacred icon than a lantern.”

He turned to Ezra.

“You a Conductor, ain’t ya?”

“I’m just an old Texas transplant, son,” he said with a wink.

Amos nodded. The others didn’t understand – clearly both Ezra and Amos did. They let it be.

“I don’t know what to say, Ezra,” Benny said. “You and these people have been so generous. There is no way we can thank you enough or repay you.”

“You just get yourselves to safety – that will be payment in full. I have the idea Amos can explain some things – later. Amy said to make sure you came in to say goodbye. By the way, I suppose you know you have two fairly safe routes north. One’s northwest to Kansas and Iowa. The other’s east to the river. Lots better chance of not being bothered on the Kansas trail, but way longer. Lots more dangerous people to deal with on the river, but much faster. If you’re traveling north, follow the creek – veers northwest for nearly thirty miles. Run you into the foothills.”

The boys nodded.

He motioned his arm toward the door. They entered.

“Time for goodbyes they say, Amy.”

Each in turn received the hug of all hugs – Amos willingly, Benny with proper decorum and Zachary with noticeable reluctance.

“Have a little trail food for you here. Been cleaned out recently so it’s mostly hard crust bread, salt pork and root vegetables from the garden.”

Thanks and good wishes were shared all around. They understood it was more than leaving, it was separating forever. The boys turned and left feeling the need to keep it short and to the point. Benny carried out the last box and secured it in place. He lifted the apparatus and worked it into a comfortable pulling angle. Zachary took his place behind him and Amos brought up the rear. The cargo was a slightly heavier than what they had been pulling, but Zachary found he could actually help some just by leaning forward. They would allow the trade of more supplies for speed any day.

Ezra, Amy and several of the neighbors stepped out onto the road behind them and waved them on their way. The boys chose not to look back.

The first ten minutes were consumed by silence, each of them getting used to the idea they were really on their way – beginning a long and treacherous journey – setting the plan into action. Benny set a relatively slow, though steady pace. His first words had to do with that and were directed at Zachary.

“Too, fast? Too, slow?”

“Pretty good. Probably have to slow up after a while. This is really a very clever arrangement – me in here behind you. Thank you.”

Benny smiled into the breeze – a thank you from Plantation Boy to a Yankee? Two days before, he would not have thought that possible and in fact had been some concerned there might be a shiv waiting for him the first time he turned his back.

Benny addressed Amos.

“So, what’s the Conductor thing and those odd lanterns?”

Amos trotted to a position beside them.

“A Conductor’s somebody that helps runaways move north. I heard about them, but figured it was just all another

fairytale.”

“What convinced you that Ezra was one?” Benny asked.

“The lantern design. That’s a signal to us black folks that help is right there. The Square Star Lantern. James done runaway once, but he got caught and brung back. He told us all about it – the underground road.”

“The underground *railroad*,” Benny said thinking he was offering an important correction.

“No, James said the *underground road*, I’m pretty sure.”

Benny wouldn’t pursue it and later would learn that was the term used across the Mississippi in the Kentucky and Ohio area.

“James said ta look for those Star Lanterns when ya got tired er hungry er sick. He said some a the people was free blacks and some was whites. I really never believed him. Couldn’t imagine white folks helpin’ black folks er black folks being free either, I guess. Sorry James.”

“Sounds like a dangerous thing to be doing this far south,” Benny said, “Conducting.”

Amos had clearly not considered the risk to them nor did it seem to concern him. He figured it was the running away that was the dangerous part of it.

Zachary remained silent.

“Can I say something?” Amos asked at last.

The others smiled. It seemed to them Amos always felt completely free to say his ‘somethings’. It was a part of him that Benny had grown to treasure. It still tended to make Zachary uncomfortable.

“Them was really nice folks. That was the first time I ever hugged a white woman. I hope that didn’t bother ya too much, Plantation Boy. “I guess I wasn’t thinkin’.”

“Forget it.”

It had been a terse and minimal response, but the others sensed it had been sincere – well, more or less – a work in progress.

A huge house came into view a half mile straight ahead.

“A plantation?” Benny asked.

It hadn’t really been directed specifically at either one of

the others.

“Probably the Sturgis place,” Amos said. “I’m told it’s a good place fer slaves. Two meal a day and no work on Sunday – and they’s easy on the whip.”

Neither of the others were happy with what they heard. Any whip seemed immoral to Benny. Two meals and a day off seemed way too lenient to Zachary. He had never openly weighed in on the whip.

At that point it was a half hour into their walk. Benny could feel the excess strain needed to pull the travois. It told him Zachary was getting tired.

“I consensus we stop and rest,” Benny said.

Coming from any one of them other than Amos the phrase seemed humorous and even lit a quick smile across Zachary’s otherwise pained face.

“By the stream or in the woods?” Benny asked.

“How about the stream,” Zachary offered. “I think I may need to start using a wet cloth on my head again.”

With the travois lowered to the ground, an obviously tired Zachary sat right where he was. Amos went to him and felt his forehead.

“You’s right. Not burnin’ up hot, but it would sure melt butter.”

He pulled a sizeable, thick rag out of his back pocket. It was one he had prepared.

“Here we go. See how I tore this so it jist fits around at the forehead and behind yer ears.”

He took it to the edge of the stream and wet it.

He wrung it out over Zachary’s head several times to soak his hair before getting down to the business of tying it in place.

Benny sat and watched.

“Good doctoring, Doc,” he said when the boy finished.

Amos looked at him and smiled. Benny figured the boy could have probably counted on his ten fingers the number of compliments he’d received in his lifetime – and would likely keep a good reserve available on the second hand.

“How about you layin’ down?” Amos asked.

To some it would have been considered a directive. Between the two of them it was clearly a suggestion over

which Zachary maintained full control.

“It’ll git you better rest that way.”

Interesting to Benny, that time Zachary didn’t delay following the suggestion like he had previously. Amos helped ease him onto his back.

“Looks to be about ten o’clock,” Benny said squinting up at the sky. “I think we made good progress. Zachary, you have to let me know when you need to rest. I don’t want to be pulling *you* on our travois along with everything else.”

Zachary managed a weak nod and soon appeared to be asleep.

“You mean that?” Amos said in a near whisper as he moved to sit close beside Benny.

“Mean what?”

“That you’d pull him if gets too weak ta walk.”

“Of course. I think you would, too.”

“Peculiar, ya know?”

“What?”

“Yer right. I’d pull him. A slave boy pullin’ a ailin’ Plantation Boy of his own free will. Now *that’s* jist plain peculiar any way ya cuts it.”

“Are you saying you like him?”

Amos paused, clearly not taking the question lightly.

“I guess I can’t say that. I like Pricilla and I like James and I guess I like Jessie. You see I ain’t had much experience considerin’ who I liked. I can say pretty definitely that I don’t hate him as much as I did at first.”

“You’re saying you hated him, but you still doctored him back to health?”

He nodded rather slowly as if considering his answer.

“Another peculiar I’d say, wouldn’t you? I seems ta be understandin’ myself less an less the further we gits into this here Rabble thing.”

Benny offered a smile, but no other response. He felt heartbroken for the black boy, but even worse he hurt because, try as he would, he really couldn’t understand. He couldn’t understand the void of *like* in the boy’s life. He couldn’t understand the automatic, apparently required, hate between men. He certainly couldn’t understand the culture that required a black boy to go ahead and care for a white boy

who he hated from head to foot – to care for him when there was nothing present to enforce it other than a mindless requirement of tradition and the likelihood of a bad ending.

Benny understood that Amos had summed it up well for all three of them; ‘I seems ta be understandin’ myself less an less the further we gits inta this here Rabble thing.’”

CHAPTER SEVEN

I'm Scared!

"I'm ready to move on again," Zachary said after half an hour.

The others let him struggle to sit up and make the first moves toward standing by himself. If he couldn't do that much he surely wasn't ready to move on. It also allowed him his pride so they would make no move to assist until he plainly gestured for it. To every one's relief, he was soon on his feet and standing straight.

Amos saw them first – two men on horseback approaching out of the north from the plantation. He pointed and moved to stand behind the other two.

"Probably ain't good," he said. "What we gonna do?"

"Free one rifle and give it to me," Zachary said.

Amos saw it into his hand almost immediately. Ezra had been correct about the efficiency of a bow knot.

"Let's hitch this contraption up to us, Benny. Amos, you walk beside me with your hand on the pole on my right. Do your best to look like a slave."

"That's my best thing, Massa Zachary."

It had been offered in all sincerity. Under other circumstances it would have been humorous.

"Let's move out. As soon as I'm sure they've seen us I'll wave at them over my head with the rifle. I think if we make the first move we'll be in a better position – look less like we might have something to hide."

Benny agreed with a nod and they stepped off. He hoped they weren't merely buying trouble – trouble that could

most likely only come in one size – huge!

“And one more thing, Yankee Boy. Keep your mouth shut. Every syllable you speak shouts Yankee. If you’re forced to speak, try to keep it to single words. Harder to detect an accent word by word.”

It made good sense to Benny even though he had never thought about it before – the word by word aspect. They walked on for ten more yards. Zachary began to wave. One of the riders waved back – well, he raised his hand in recognition, at least. The other loosened his rifle and laid it across his lap.

“This gun loaded?” Zachary asked.

“Yup,” Amos answered. “Loaded an dry.”

“You just keep hold as if you know you don’t dare move until I give you permission.”

“I’m scared.”

“That’s the name we’ll probably give to this whole ill-advised trip just before somebody drops the trapdoor under our feet.”

Although the image he painted was gruesome, Benny was impressed with Plantation Boy’s composed, take charge approach. Things were largely on his shoulders and they would take their cues from him. The boys stopped twenty yards from the horsemen who continued at a walk to within five.

“Morning, Gents,” Zachary said managing some enthusiasm. “I imagine you can tell us if the water in the creek is safe to drink.”

He figured an innocent, offhand approach was best. They lowered the travois to the ground.

“You’re on plantation property. State your business.”

It was the man without the gun.

“Oh. Had no idea. Must have missed your signs. Sorry. Just heading north to Missouri. This is Benny, he’s my cousin from up there. I call my slave boy, here, Amos. I’m Zachary Pendleton of the Pendleton Plantation just across the Mississippi. A thousand acres. How much you have here?”

The question was ignored.

“How we know what you say is the truth?”

“I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t it be the truth?”

“You boys are soldiering age. Why you not in uniform?”

“As you can see, I already took my share of bullets to the shoulder and head and my cousin got his eye burned something awful. It took place down at the Arkansas Post Battle earlier in the week. Afraid we didn’t fair very well in case you haven’t heard. Our captain declared us unfit to serve and sent us on our way before the surrender. We decided to hightail it up north to recuperate until we can get back to the fight.”

“What’s a Missouri boy doing fighting clear down here?”

The question was directed at Benny. Zachary jumped in to answer.

“His father sent him down to join up with me. His face got badly burned like you can see. Hurts him like tarnation to have to move his jaw and talk.”

Benny took his lead from Zachary and pointed to the red area under his eye and down his cheek to his jaw.

The man looked at Amos.

“You belong to young Pendleton?”

“Yessa. Since birth. Got no daddy. Got no Mamma. Jist Master Zachary now since them Yankees done burnt our Plantation down. Why I had ta go to war with him.”

To appear frightened took no acting skill. To have spoken the exact words that had been needed took a good measure of smarts. Neither of the others had even considered they needed a story about why he was with them. He looked at the ground and allowed a few tears.

“Bare your back to me, *hey boy*.”

It was the man without the gun.

Amos looked at Zachary – the way a good ‘hey boy’ would do. Zachary nodded, knowing full well what it was all about. By the time a slave was fifteen, he would bear the telltale signs of the whip across his back.

Amos removed his coat and lifted the back of his shirt and turned it toward the man, bending slightly to give him the best possible view. The men both nodded. The one who had been doing the talking continued.

“It’s lunch time up at the house, boys. Won’t you come and join us. You must be hungry.”

“We had a late breakfast, Sir. Wouldn’t want to be any trouble.”

“Nonsense. We insist.”

Amos hadn’t moved. Zachary spoke to him.

“Get decent, boy. A froze boy is no good to us. Get a move on.”

It was a tone Benny had never heard from Zachary. Its essence was all too familiar to Amos.

Amos made every effort to appear he was, indeed, getting a move on.

“We’re really in a hurry, sir. Have a two-hundred-mile trek ahead of us.”

“Where ya headed up in Missouri?”

Zachary hesitated. He had no idea. The only places he knew about in Missouri were St. Louis on the Mississippi and Kansas City out west. He’d heard they were already employing blacks as if they were free in both places. He wasn’t sure either of them would be the best destination to draw out of a hat.

“Joplin,” Benny offered putting his hand to his jaw as if in pain. It also muffled his voice. He hoped that would lessen the obvious accent.

The man nodded, clearly accepting it.

“Well, at least let the women fix you something to take along. You can draw water from our well. The creek water can be drank, too, by the way.”

Benny picked up the travois. Zachary laid his rifle across it in front of him. Amos repositioned his hand on the sapling. They moved out, following the men toward the big, white, house.

It looked to contain twenty rooms if one, and had wrap around, roofed porches on both floors. They could see four chimneys from that distance and suspected there were more. The grounds on which the mansion stood were green even in January. A dozen or more, huge, ancient looking trees were strategically placed across the lawn to provide shade in the summer.

They moved on around to the rear of the house – it was where the kitchen and servant’s quarters stood, separated from the main building by a covered walkway. It was a fire

prevention measure typical of the day.

The horsemen stopped, dismounted and tied up at a hitching post. Benny led his little band of Rabblies up onto the lawn and lowered the travois, intentionally at a sunny spot.

The talkative man offered his hand for shakes.

"I'm Will, by the way. This is Tom. At least come in while they put something together for you. Warm up. Bet you could handle a glass of milk."

"Sure. Thank you. I suppose we can do that."

"You want Tom to stay out here and watch your hey boy?"

"Not necessary. He knows he's helpless without me."

He turned to Amos and pointed to the area in the Travois that he and Benny occupied while they were on the move.

"Sit in there until I get back."

Amos scrambled onto the spot. His knees were shaking and his mouth was desert dry. It was more convincing than any actor could have portrayed it.

It seemed like a long wait to Amos. Several white men came by and looked him over. One even opened his mouth and looked at his teeth. They were in no way unpleasant. He didn't speak, of course, and averted his eyes to the grass. Like he had said, acting like a slave boy was one of his best things.

Twenty minutes later Benny and Zachary returned. Will stood at the door to look them on their way. Benny carried another sizeable box filled with provisions. Zachary carried a tin cup and offered it to Amos. He stood up. It was milk. He'd be fretting over the fact the others would get some and he wouldn't, but he had already let it go, understanding winning the game was all that was really important. He drank it down in one long series of gulps all the while considering the fact it was cold like it had been at Ezra and Amy's. The concept of cold milk was new to him and not altogether pleasant. He washed the cup out in the horse trough and held it out to Zachary who indicated Will. By the time it had been delivered, the boys were ready to make tracks.

They walked west toward the creek and then northwest along its bank. They walked in silence until they were well out

of sight and ear shot of the house. Teenage boys, regardless of the century in which they lived, have always been moved to exuberance after they have experienced a win, and those three had, without any doubt, just won. Benny dropped the travois and turned toward the others. They jumped and twirled and yahooped and laughed. They shadow boxed the breeze with full out gusto. Thirty minutes of tension and fear seemed eager to escape. At least some of it had.

“Looks to be going on noon,” Benny said. “I say its lunch time. I saw one woman slip half an apple pie into our box. How about we go after the plantation lunch first? It has fresh things in it.”

It really hadn't been a question so it really did not call for an answer. Amos pointed to a rock outcropping on the bank and they were soon sitting, eating, and talking. The warmth absorbed by the rock and the rise of the bank behind them made it a pleasant spot out of the breeze.

“You were absolutely great, Zachary,” Benny said.

“Ya sure was. How'd ya know jist the right things ta say an all?”

Out of habit, Zachary shrugged his shoulders. It had not been a good idea and he winced.

“You two weren't so bad yourselves. I think that one word you spoke, Benny, was probably what saved our story – ‘*Joplin*’.

He tried to mimic Benny's accent, ‘*Joplin*’. They laughed, some from the humor and some still driven by the lingering tension.

“I was thinking it was Amos's back that really clinched it,” Benny said sickened all over again at the lingering image.

“Yeah,” Amos said agreeing. “Never thought I'd be thankin' Wheezie's whip fer nothin'. Seemed ta me that saved our skin.”

“Things just all seemed to fit together right – that time,” Zachary said. “It is not going to be our last performance, you know.”

“Seems I need to learn how to talk southern,” Benny said.

“No time for that. And don't try. Your accent is atrocious.”

It was worth a round of grins even though Amos could only guess at the meaning of atrocious.

“Never figured it backwards like that,” Amos said clearly puzzled about something.

It was met by blank faces.

“What?” Benny asked.

“I always figured it was Yankees what had the accent. Never thought we had one, too.”

Benny loved the boy’s sudden insights. It was like getting a fresh look at the world almost every time he opened his mouth.

Benny lingered over lunch so Zachary could have more time to rest. Amos checked his forehead and pronounced it cooler. He still wet the cloth and secured it in back in place.

He had more praise to direct at Zachary.

“With yer hair all wrapped up like this it does look like you could a been shot in the head. That was good thinking back there.”

“Seems like there’s a lot of good thinking possible among these three Rabble heads,” Zachary said. It had been a clear departure from his more typical ‘take credit himself’ responses.

Amos wasn’t sure he understood that, but it sounded good and it sounded like he had been included in the good, so he smiled. As smiles went, he had the very best of the three of them. Benny probably smiled the most, but it was more just the way his face was built. It was as if Zachary believed smiling was a sign of weakness so it took something quite special for it to show. More and more Amos was allowing spontaneous smiles – not pausing to make sure they would be appropriate or acceptable.

They were on their way again by one. Forty minutes later, Amos began whistling.

“I suppose we should stop for a few minutes,” Benny said. “We’ve been setting a pretty good pace.”

“Let me just say it one more time,” Zachary began as they lowered the travois to the ground. “The whistling thing is not your secret signal. I appreciate your concern, but I’m a big boy. I can tell you when I need to stop.”

“Clearly you can’t if Amos had to do it for you. You’re

proud and pig headed,” Benny said. “We can’t afford to let those things work against *your* recovery and *our* safety. We’re going to need you as complete as possible once we hit those foot hills.”

He pointed off into the distance. It was the first time they had taken notice of them.

Amos took several steps in their direction.

“Wow! I never done seen mountains before. They’re fer real, right?”

It seemed an odd question, but both Zachary and Benny responded.

“Yes.”

“Yup.”

They sat. Benny opened a canteen and passed it around. Amos was only comfortable drinking last. Zachary preferred to have Amos drink last. Benny could not understand any of that, but he let it go, happy to drink in between them. For him there were more all-consuming things to ponder, like boys being required to kill other boys, slavery and freedom, man’s inhumanity to man, establishing equality, how the proponents of such diametrically opposed philosophic bents could both believe they had the blessing of the God of their shared Christian faith. Those were the truly mindboggling things going on inside Benny’s head. He had to wonder if any of those ever tormented Zachary. Again, it didn’t seem to be the proper time. He came to wonder when that time might be – *if* that time would ever come to be.

The forty-five minutes after that short rest saw them into a very narrow valley between gently rounded hills that ascended at an easy slope on ahead of them. The valley floor remained fairly level. Apparently, the creek they had been following had its source somewhere just ahead. It clung to the western edge of the valley along the base of the hill and had narrowed significantly. That whipped its water into a frenzy around and over an unending number of rock outcroppings. Its noise returned from the hillsides over and over again. Rather than being unpleasant, it provided a haven of sorts, keeping the realities of the world outside at bay. The sun lit the area from the eastern bank of the stream right up the slope to the pines that graced its ridge to their right. The hills sheltered

the area against the breeze and allowed the sun-bathed rocks and soil to warm all comers. The Boys unbuttoned their coats.

Amos had wandered east to the hill, as if actually standing on it would confirm its existence. He was like a little boy having a wonder filled new experience. In many ways, he was a little boy having a wonder filled new experience. That, in turn, allowed the others a few moments to relive their own earlier years of awe and astonishment.

Amos was the picture of contradictions and incongruities. At fifteen he had put in more hours of field work under the blazing, southern sun than most white men twice his age. He knew how to exist – thrive even – in the most unimaginably painful and frightening life Benny could imagine. He possessed the medical skills of a trained nurse. When he looked inside a book he had no idea which was up and which was down yet he was quicker than most his age in figuring with numbers. He exhibited what Benny wanted to call compassion and yet it seemed to stem more from a sense of duty than love, or *like*, as he had phrased it. He was prepared to marry a girl he did not love and who was not of his choosing, because of tradition – situation, more accurately. Still, Benny had no doubt Amos would make a fine, considerate and protective husband. He had mastered the ins and outs of his tiny slice of society and culture while remaining fully ignorant of the workings and possibilities of the outside world.

All things considered, much of that was not so different from the other two. They were each steeped in and accepting of the traditions in which their own piece of the world had molded them. Benny wondered, if he and Zachary had been switched at birth, how each would perceive their world – the war, in particular. The very thought made him sick to his stomach. Most likely Zachary would have a similar reaction if the quandary arrived for him. Perhaps it had. In deference to survival they had each apparently decided to soft peddle the topics that would likely lead to confrontations.

“A cave up there,” Amos called, motioning to them and pointing, offering more of his new-found enthusiasm and excitement.

Benny walked toward him. Zachary had already settled

back against a fallen tree trunk to rest. He did watch with interest, however.

Before Benny reached him, Amos dropped to the ground holding his leg. Benny ran to him.

“What’s up?”

“Snake bite. Copperhead. Just above my ankle. Outside.”

“So, how do we handle this?” Benny asked deferring to Amos on the matter.

He helped Amos into a sitting position on the ground and pulled him a few feet so he could sit back against a tree trunk.

“I’m gonna cut slits across the two fang marks,” Amos said struggling to remove his knife from under his belt, behind his back. “Need ta get a rope or belt an cinch it around my leg below my knee. Then, need one a you two ta suck out the poison. I can’t reach it with my own mouth. Get a canteen here so ya can wash out yer mouth real good. I need to stay real still.”

Benny removed his belt and wrapped it around the leg.

“Lower. Tighter.”

Benny made the adjustments.

“What’s going on over there?” Zachary called.

“Copperhead bite,” Benny returned. “Need a canteen.”

Zachary brought the water to them.

“Need to slice across those holes,” he directed as he stopped to look down at the leg.

“Jist done it,” Amos said.

He looked expectantly from one of them to the other. The question was clear. Which one – if either of them – would remove the venom?

“You get that canteen open and ready for me,” Benny said looking at Zachary.

Amos had a final instruction.

“Before you start you need to coat the inside of your mouth with lard, since we got it. It’ll fill in any little scrapes or cuts ya got in there – so the venom can’t git inta yer blood system. Taste awful, but could save yer life.”

That possibility of death had not occurred to Benny. He wished he hadn’t been told and yet was appreciative that he

had. He wondered if slaves were just generally full out honest.

He would soon discover that coating one's mouth with lard ranked right up there with eating mud.

He positioned himself on his knees and without a second thought bent low. He had once watched his grandfather do it so understood the process. He sucked, thinking he would heave right then and there. He didn't. He spit. He washed out his mouth and spit again. He lowered his head and sucked a second time. He had been prepared to feel and taste the venom in his mouth, but not the blood. He would suck three more times before Amos called a halt.

"That should do it," Amos said. "Now, I may pass out and stay that way fer some time. Keep track a the bite. If the skin turns green you need to cut it away. Loose up the belt every half hour fer about two minutes."

"Looks like we'll be here for a day or so," Benny said. "Probably ought to see about making camp in that cave."

"What about more snakes in there?" Zachary asked.

"Snakes don't like being around people. The one that struck Amos was just startled. We'll build up a good fire in there and there won't be a problem with snakes or any other critters."

Zachary had not been prepared for poisonous snakes. Neither was he finding the fresh idea of 'critters' the least bit comforting.

"Let me go look it over," Benny said, meaning the cave.

On the climb, he tried to rid his mouth of the lard. The water hadn't helped. He smiled when he heard himself thinking, "That lard is sticking to the inside of my mouth the way . . . lard sticks to the inside of a mouth". He assumed food, perhaps bread, would eventually remove it.

The cave sat half way up the hill and had an easily accessed opening some eight feet wide, but no more than four high. The darkness inside made it difficult to get a really good feel for it. He could stand up. It appeared to go back for some distance. Its walls and floor were limestone – it was what Benny was used to up in Illinois. They tended to be tight, but wet. Sometimes they were a bit brittle. The floor actually looked dry. He returned down the hill and reported to the others.

“Need to get a fire going at the entrance. We’ll set it out far enough so the smoke won’t get inside and in far enough so the heat and light get captured.”

Benny was something of a story writer and he would remember that phrase, ‘heat and light get captured’. It painted an interesting picture.

He went about collecting wood. It was readily available just outside. Zachary located the flint and steel Ezra had provided. Before long they had a substantial fire blazing.

“Can you bring the blankets?”

It had been Benny’s request of Zachary.

They had soon fashioned a place for Amos to lie down and Benny delivered him to the spot.

“I’ll likely develop a sizeable fever, but I need to be kept warm,” Amos said his eyes already fluttering.

He looked up at Benny, sweat beads were forming on his face and forehead. In contrast to his confident attitude, his face suggested fear.

“Thanks, you know, Babbles.”

Benny answered with a single nod. He left to get a rag for the boy’s head in preparation for things to come – apparently things that had already begun. He drug the travois back with him. Upon return he spread a blanket for Zachary as well.

Amos, who was on his back pointed outside to the sky.

“Looks ta be a afternoon rain storm headin’ our way. Probably want ta gather more wood and bring that travy contraption inside. Maybe fill up any empty canteens with fever water from the crick.”

Fever water was a new term, but the others understood. Zachary had pretty well spent all the energy he had left and the effects of his fever were also becoming obvious. Benny saw to the details.

By the time the rain began he had a sizeable stash of wood and canteens of fever water safe inside.

“Them’s angry clouds,” Amos said. “Better spank ‘em and put ‘em to bed.”

Zachary looked puzzled.

“Already goin’ out of his head, I assume,” Benny said.

He felt the boy’s forehead.

“I’ve never seen a fever come up this fast. How about if we move you close to Amos so you can keep his head wet? That heat’ll dry the cloth out in a hurry.”

Zachary moved.

Benny tried to set things into some sort of priority.

“I’ll handle the fire and take a look on back inside the cave. We’ll need to split up our sleep shifts so one of us can be with Amos all the time. You remember to keep your own head wet.”

The fire, having been built so far forward, provided only minimal light and heat back inside the cave.

Benny moved to begin exploring the rear of the cave then stopped and turned toward Zachary as something fully unrelated came to mind.

“Will, the man at the plantation, referred to Amos as, ‘hey boy’. I didn’t understand, but it was obvious that you did.”

“It’s what all black men are called out in the fields. I suppose it started from calling orders to them, ‘Hey boy, do this or hey boy do that.’”

Benny nodded and proceeded back into the cave. It offered a consistent seven to eight foot ceiling and, as he had first observed, was fairly dry. He estimated it was about sixty degrees, which was actually warmer than outside. He continued on for perhaps thirty yards before it became too dark to see. He returned to the front and shared what he’d learned.

By then the storm was raging; tree branches were whipping and jagged bolts of lightning moved the world outside between day and night. The dark clouds were boiling and the wind came rushing down the valley from the north, fortunately blowing right on past the cave opening. Amos and Zachary were far enough back inside so they were safe and dry.

“There’s a draft coming from the rear of the cave and leaving out the front,” Benny said. “Must be an opening back there somewhere wouldn’t you say?”

“It would seem that way. I noticed the smoke is being sucked right out front. Do you think that means we could bring that fire inside a little further? Its struggling to stay lit out there in the rain.”

“Yes. Good thinking.”

One burning log at a time, Benny managed to kick and roll them back inside some ten feet and soon had the fire reset. The inside immediately lit up and real warmth filled the area. Benny shed his coat. Zachary unbuttoned his, the rest of the way.

Amos was clearly out of his head. It was sad and scary, of course, but the way mild mannered, soft spoken, young Amos strung profane words and phrases together was absolutely humorous. There were words neither one of them knew, but assumed they were intended in the same vein as the ones between which they were sandwiched.

“Sounds to be lots of anger in him,” Zachary said as if it had never occurred to him that a slave might have reason to be angry.

Benny just nodded, thinking it would best if Plantation Boy could come to his own revelation.

Amos began screaming and tossing himself about. His arms flailed and his legs kicked.

“He’s going to break a bone if we don’t get him calmed down,” Benny said.

“Get the coil of rope Ezra gave us,” Zachary said.

Benny didn’t understand, but had it loosened from the travois and back at his side immediately.

“While I hold his arms to his sides you wrap that rope around him – around and around. Then, we’ll do the same to his legs. He’s having a fit of some kind. I’ve heard they can be brought on my high fevers.”

Rather than acting on Zachary’s suggestion, Benny paused and sat back on his legs.

“Does it really make any sense to you that he needs to be kept warm with a red-hot fever?”

“No. But he said. . .”

Without further discussion, they agreed to go with common sense. Together they removed his coat and opened his shirt. They shared a nod and then went back to wrapping him with the rope.

“I’d say pour the water on him – get him soaking wet,” Benny said.

Zachary reached for a canteen and doused him from

head to toe while offering a further suggestion:

“Maybe we should move him outside into the rain.”

“Let’s wait an hour. If what we’re doing doesn’t start working by then I’ll agree to chance it. Just don’t want to risk giving him pneumonia on top of everything else.”

“Look down here,” Zachary said pointing to the ankle. “It’s twice normal size. Looks like it could split open.”

Benny laid his ear against the boy’s chest.

“I never heard such a fast heartbeat.”

They looked at each other, panic and helplessness suddenly growing on both faces.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Things Required a Major Rethink

It was a fit-filled night for all three of them. Neither Zachary nor Benny slept well during the alternating two hour blocks they set aside for that – there were concerns about Amos, concerns about each other and, of course, each one’s private concerns.

By three o’clock, Amos had calmed down and seemed to be sleeping well. They removed the rope. By five the swelling in the ankle had reduced by more than half. The fever, although still there, was also down. The storm subsided at sunup. Exhausted, Benny and Zachary dozed off – all quite unintentionally.

Benny was roused by it first – the smell of bacon. He convinced himself he was dreaming of happier times and hesitated to break the spell by opening his eyes. At home, he slept in the loft right above the kitchen and morning after morning since he’d been five he had awakened to the wonderful aromas of breakfast.

Upon forcing his eyes open, the reality of the situation flooded back on him.

“What the?” he said sitting up.

Amos smiled from beside the fire.

“Figured I must a plum tuckered you two out so I’m fixin’ ya breakfast.”

He had managed to arrange a few stones into position near the fire to hold the skillet.

“Gotta drain the bacon, momentarily. Be eggs direc’ly. Been waitin’ on you sleepyheads.”

“Like I said, what’s going on? How?”

“That ain’t what ya said, but I’ll accept it. You guys must be like magic doctors. I’d been dreamin’ ‘bout flashing lights and havin’ the shivers. A bear done started nibblin’ on my toes and workin’ its way right up ta my neck. I woke up, sittin’ up. Must a been asleep fer a long time. I’m feelin’ pretty good. Fever seems ta be mostly gone. You guys done put a hex on my new, dry clothes, I’ll tell ya that. Look at my ankle. Looks good as new – well, almost. Guess I have what they call resilience.”

“I guess you do. I’m sure glad to see you doing so well. You lay back down now and let me finish fixing breakfast.”

Amos allowed it, willing to acknowledge he wasn’t yet all the way back.

“At least I’m not sleepy,” he said attempting a joke.

“What’s all the jabbering?” Zachary said shading his eyes as he struggled to rejoin the world.

He looked around appearing confused. Benny gave him the short version.

“The patient seems to be doing fine. He started breakfast while we two guardians of his health and wellbeing were both sawing logs.”

“You really doing that well?” Zachary asked sitting up.

“Maybe not as good as I thought I was.”

Zachary reached out and felt his forehead.

“Temperature is way down. I’m no expert, but I’m thinking only a degree, maybe.”

Amos was always still stunned by the turn Zachary had taken – Plantation Boy voluntarily touching a black boy – no malice intended – apparently out of concern, even. Benny was cautiously pleased. It was not discussed further.

“I was parched when I woke up so I nearly emptied the last canteen,” Amos offered.

“I’ll go fill them at the stream if the water isn’t too muddy,” Benny said.

Amos confided that he had sipped some of Zachary’s sippin’ medicine for the pain in his ankle. Zachary nodded. He figured it was really Amos’s anyway. It reminded him to take a sip as well, although over the previous twelve four hours his pain had subsided substantially.

Benny was back in ten minutes.

“Clear water. I imagine it’s okay to drink. I’d think it should be even purer up here near its source than downstream by the plantation.

Amy had included three tin plates and three tin cups. What was unfolding there was a universally approved breakfast among teen boys: Fried eggs, bacon, and flame kissed toast – well, Amos’s darkly scorched, sliced, chewy biscuits came close.

“Somebody done rustled up a lot of wood. Looks like you was thinkin’ I was gonna’ be sick a week. I weren’t, were I?”

“No,” Benny said, trying to sound reassuring. “I just wanted to get in a supply. Had no idea how much we’d go through in a day’s time.”

Zachary continued, looking at Amos.

“You went through fits and a temperature higher than I’ve ever felt, but somehow you handled it all over one night.”

“That was due ta yer good work, Benny. Gittin’ that belt on so fast helped too, kept it from spreadin’. Ya must a got mostly all the venom out. It’s the amount a venom left in the system that accounts fer how bad it gits. ”

“I don’t do that for just anybody, you understand,” Benny began. “In fact, I only ever puckered up for one person outside my family in my whole life. Her name is Maddie.”

They all smiled. Only Benny really understood. The others wished they did.

“You said I went through fits. What ya mean, fits.”

Zachary tried to handle it.

“The fever drove you’re head wild. You shivered and threw yourself around to the point we had to wrap you up in that rope to keep you from breaking your bones.”

Amos’s bearing changed immediately. He looked down at the floor of the cave and picked at it with a finger. He spoke in a low voice.

“I suppose I said some stuff not fit fer others ta hear.”

“What makes you say that?” Benny asked glancing at Zachary. There was a private wink between them.

“I had fevers before. Pricilla said I say terrible things – bad things.”

“Well, yes and no.”

Amos raised his head and gave Benny a puzzled look.

“Yes, you strung together some gosh awful cussing, but Zachary and I really didn’t understand a lot of it so can’t really say if it was all bad or not.”

The older boys shared a grin.

“Look. It’s no problem,” Zachary said. “Forget it. You were out of your head. Not responsible for what came out of your mouth.”

“I call Wheezie’s name in it, did I?”

“Can’t say I heard it. You, Zachary?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Shucks!”

“How come, shucks?”

“Jist seems a awful shame ta waste all those terrible words when I’ve been meanin’ them fer him fer years.”

Benny smiled a fairly broad smile. Zachary suddenly had no smile to offer. It made Benny wonder, but he kept his wonder to himself. Amos was clearly quite serious in his take of it.

“There’s one thing I’ve been wondering,” Benny said after a few moments. “How did you make biscuits without any milk?”

It broke whatever tension had crept in among them and gave Amos reason to manage a grin.

“Flour, salt, lard and water. They come out flatter and harder than the usual kind, but I like ‘em and it looks like you two does, too. I added a egg to these. Softens ‘em up and makes ‘em stick together better.”

“Different, chewy, but not bad,” Benny said.

Amos grinned full out.

It would be the last grin among them for some time.

At that moment rocks began falling outside, tumbling down from above the cave opening. In less time than it took to figure out what was happening, the entrance itself collapsed. Dust filled the air and Benny directed them back into the cave to get away from it.

“That hard rain must have washed some support away,” Benny said, thinking out loud.

When the rumbling stopped and the dust cleared they

moved back toward the front to determine the damage. It wasn't good. The opening had been completely sealed.

"No way to guess how thick that pile of rock and dirt is," Benny said, continuing to think through the seriousness of their situation.

"I guess we need to begin digging," Amos said moving toward the wall of dirt and rock.

He tended to move through his life at a pragmatic level. There were rocks blocking the entrance, therefore they needed to remove the rocks. Plain and simple.

Zachary understood the deeper possibilities of the situation and explained that it could have been a very dangerous move. He spoke directly to Amos, teacher to student.

"Look at it this way. Say you made a pyramid out of little stones – a foot high maybe. What would happen if you removed one from the bottom layer?"

"The whole thing would probably fall down," Amos said.

"I see what you're saying," Benny said, then took the explanation a bit further. "If we begin digging, more stones piled on top could fall in on us."

"And for all we know they may be stacked up ten, twenty or more feet," Zachary said tying up the explanation.

"Sounds like yer sayin' it's lay down an die time," Amos said sitting down right where he had been standing.

"There may be another possibility – just a possibility," Benny said. "Like I told you, when I was back in the cave there was a noticeable draft moving toward the opening up here. That tells us at least two things."

"It don't tell me even one thing, Benny," Amos said rapidly becoming more dejected, cradling his chin in his hands.

"That air had to be coming in from somewhere at the back of the cave. That opening just might be big enough for us to escape through."

"Great! Let's go escape," Amos said jumping to his feet, having quickly regained a sense of hope and purpose.

"Not that simple. Let's think it through first."

He motioned everybody to gather in close to the fire and take a seat.

“Looks like at least one thing is in our favor,” he went on. “See the dust that was kicked up and the smoke from our fire – it’s still being sucked out through the crevices left between the rocks at the entrance. That means we won’t choke on the smoke *and* that fresh air is coming in for us to breath and keep our fire going.”

“Breathing is one of my favorite things. Been doin’ it fer most a my life,” Amos said. He had not really been joking.

“So, I suggest one of us reconnoiters back into the cave to see what the situation is – what our options are,” Benny went on.

“Recon what?”

“It’s a army term. It means go gather information – like what Zachary and his patrol were doing.”

“But it will be dark back there,” Zachary said. “We will need to fashion a torch someway.”

They looked around. Zachary had an idea.

“The rope. We can cut some pieces – say a foot long and bind them to the end of a thick stick.”

“And fray them so there will be lots of small strings that can easily catch fire,” Benny added.

“Rope don’t burn all that good,” Amos said. “Been told it gives off funny fumes that sends folks crazy.”

He hesitated only a moment.

“But, if we worked lard way down deep into every string, I bet jist that lard would burn a long time. I seen it catch fire in a skillet before.”

Zachary looked at Benny and they exchanged a nod.

“Find just the right stick in the kindling pile, Amos. About three feet long and two inches thick at least,” Zachary said indicating the dimensions with his hands.

“Benny had already picked up the rope and begun straightening out one end along the floor. Zachary took out his knife and while Benny held the rope in place, he cut it into twelve inch sections.

“This stick do?”

“Looks perfect,” Zachary said. “Hold it out so Benny and I can tie these strands in place.”

It was more difficult than they figured, but eventually it all came together. Without further discussion, they each went

to work untwisting the strands down to the basic strings that made it up. That took considerable time. When they finished they all saw the problem. The strands were limp and they drooped down against the stick like a witch having a particularly bad hair day. Set them afire and the stick would just burn through six or eight inches below the top.

Amos stood and got the bucket from the Travois. If we can take this wire handle off, we can wrap it around the stick near the very top and make the strings stand straight up above the end of the stick. The wire won't burn.

Amos had the knife with the strongest blade so he went to work freeing the handle. It turned out to be a relatively simple undertaking. Benny held the stick upside down – strings hanging toward the floor – and the others turned the wire around it. It was long enough to make two circles and still leave enough to twist it closed. In the end, it snugged up tightly and did exactly what needed to be done. Amos brought the big tin of lard. They carefully worked it into every string.

“Let's light it up,” Amos said pointing to the fire.

“We need to make a plan first so we don't waste any of the torch's life,” Benny said. “Who uses it? Can we figure out a set of simple signals to communicate back and forth, like, ‘come here’, ‘stay there’, ‘help’, are three that come to mind. Each a different number of whistles maybe.”

Amos, the pragmatist, had the solution.

“Why not just call out, ‘come here’, ‘stay there’, or ‘help’?”

The older boys looked somewhat sheepish.

“Okay, then. Now we just need to decide who, and that will be me,” Benny said. “Face it, I'm the only whole one in the lot of us – from the neck down at least.”

“I'll call back every once in a while, just to make sure we can hear each other. If you don't answer me I'll know you didn't hear.”

Amos handed him the torch.

“We don't even really know if this thing will work,” Zachary said, perhaps suggesting caution, perhaps futility. “It may burn out in five minutes.”

“Then let's hope there isn't far to go,” Benny said determined to keep an upbeat attitude. “I can find my way

back by just feeling along the walls if it goes out.”

In a sudden rush, more rocks collapsed outside. The boys stood there, waiting. It continued for only a few seconds. Benny waited to make sure the smoke was still leaving out the front. It was. He lit the torch from the fire. They watched it for a few seconds as the flame engulfed it. It burned with a low flame, but it produced enough light to guide him through the narrow cave. He turned and left hurrying on his way.

After what he estimated was about ten yards he called back. Amos answered.

Another ten, another call, another answer.

They went on that way for sixty yards, much farther than Benny had figured. It held to a straight course through the hill.

He came to a grade slanting up at a gentle slope. He continued. As the cave narrowed to no wider and taller than six feet, he felt a stronger breeze in his face. It made the fire flicker and cast peculiar shadows on the walls and ceiling. He called back. There was no answer. He called louder. Nothing.

He continued moving forward not wanting to waste any of the uncertain torch life. At the top of the rise his heart sank. It appeared to be a dead end – a solid wall rose just ahead of him. He continued toward it. At that point, the continued presence of the breeze provided his only hope. Suddenly it was coming from off to the left. Up to then hidden from view, was a narrow, right angle bend no more than ten feet deep. It was lit from outside. There was a small opening – the opening he had known had to be there. He knelt beside it and looked outside.

“Land, Ho!” he called out even realizing the others couldn’t hear him.

The hole cut through the four-foot-thick rock wall on the diagonal making it larger than he had first thought – an irregular shape, nearly two feet high and four wide. He stretched himself out through it and poked his head outside. The constant rush of air was powerful enough to blow his long blond hair out behind him. Just beyond was a stone ledge several feet wide. He was overlooking a hillside which descended gently onto a wide flat expanse below. He had his

information and took off on a trot back toward the others. The torch was still providing a steady glow. He allowed himself time to be impressed with that while he trotted on. His heart was racing. He called ahead.

“Hey guys. Good news.”

He listened for a response. It was soon there.

“That’s not one of our code words.”

It had, of course, been Amos.

He arrived panting and dropped to his knees, twisting the end of the torch on the floor to put it out and save what fuel was left.

“So, what?” Zachary asked also dropping to his knees so they were eye to eye.

“There is an opening. Roughly two by four feet. Enters out over a valley. Won’t be able to know the details until we get outside. It looked to be mid-morning. This cave is never narrower than six feet and I could stand up the whole way. We can load up the travois and drag it with us. We may have to disassemble it to get it through the opening and reassemble it outside.”

“Like a back door,” Amos offered, construing it in terms of things he understood and privately feeling ever so smart about understanding the word ‘disassemble’ that time.

Zachary nodded and sat back on his legs. He let his shoulders slump as he allowed himself to relax.

“Nice work, Benny – well Benny *and* Amos. We make quite a three-headed monster, it seems.”

“So that’s what a Rabble looks like,” Amos said smiling. “Still got biscuits. Probably oughta eat ‘em rather than pack ‘em”.

The biscuits didn’t know what hit them – but then few things do in the presence of a three headed Rabble.

“We let the fire burn down low while you were gone to save wood in case you didn’t find a way out,” Zachary explained, sounding much more like Amos than Zachary.

During the next half hour, they secured their possessions to the travois and added additional lard to the torch. Benny made certain the others took sips of the pain brew and they began the trek to the rear of the cave. Amos led the way with the torch while the other two pulled the

contraption, as Amos had dubbed it.

"Light ahead to the left," Amos called out after a few minutes.

He doused the torch and went right to the opening leaving the other two in the dark for their last ten yards.

"It sure feels good ta be a part a the world again," he said closing his eyes and taking a big breath. "Thank ya Lord Jesus. Let me crawl out and do that 'reconory' thing."

He didn't wait for a response. Benny and Zachary went to the opening and knelt down looking out and listened to the ongoing travelogue.

"The ledge widens as soon as it turns the corner going north. Plenty wide for the travy contraption. Rises and follows the ridge north. May not be easy walkin' but at least we won't have ta climb up the hill ta cross it."

"You sure you can walk on that ankle, Amos?" Benny said, a serious turn clear in his tone.

"Done worked ten hours in the field with a bleedin' back. I can walk on this ankle alright."

Benny would never get used to such responses and there seemed to be so many of them – never expected.

"At least let's wrap up good it with some of the cloth Amy sent along – it'll provide some additional support."

Amos returned and allowed it, understanding that might provide some advantage and any advantage should be a good thing.

"See any water out there?" Benny asked.

"I hear running water, but can't see it. Up north quite a piece, I'd say. I imagine we'll run across it if'n we sticks ta the ridge."

"Let's get the contraption out there, then I guess," Benny said.

Zachary had been quiet during the walk through the cave. Benny didn't press it other than to ask how he was feeling.

"Doing much better today. Tired but then we know why. We're both going to need forty winks by noon."

Amos found a spot for the torch on the Travois and stowed it.

With the contraption outside – it had not been a difficult

operation – they surveyed the valley below. It was, in fact, a wide' nearly flat plain stretching east. There were no hills on that horizon.

Amos had been right about it being a difficult walk. Small, jagged stones were strewn everywhere and occasionally fallen trees blocked the way. Benny could see they'd be lucky to make a half mile for every one they had been making down on the flats.

He decided that of the three of them he was the least patient. He had always been that way – when he knew something was going to happen he wanted it to happen immediately. Christmas presented three weeks of unrelenting torture. He had been required to sit between his parents at church until he turned eleven – given to squirming, swinging his legs, humming and turning this way and that as he was.

In his mind he was returning to Illinois and everything between where he was and home seemed like a huge bother. He estimated if they left Arkansas where it met Kansas and went straight north to avoid Missouri, then back east through southern Iowa to the Mississippi River and half way across Illinois, it was going to be nearly 900 miles in all. Under the best of circumstances, it would take forty or forty five days. Up to that point, planning for the best to happen, had not panned out. Add in the several probable snow storms they would encounter up north and he'd settle for two months. That would put it close to spring.

He had no plan further than that. If it were not for Amos they could travel northeast through the Missouri boot heel, cross the Mississippi and cut the trip by probably 80%. The more he thought about that the better he liked it. If he remembered his geography right, there would be almost no mountains in eastern Arkansas. Zachary's ploy of treating Amos like his slave boy had worked very well at the plantation and that performance had been for professional slave owners. Maybe it would get them through southeastern Missouri. He would bring it up to the others at noon. If they were going to change their plan in that way they needed to change direction to the northeast immediately.

Two hours passed mostly in silence. It seemed they each had private thoughts that needed attending to. The

futures of Zachary and Amos were completely up in the air. Benny had somewhat of a better idea about his – his destination at least. Amos brought them back to their real life.

“There’s a little waterfall up here. Runs down the west side to the crick we was followin’ I’m thinkin’. Think it’s the source, maybe?”

“Could be,” Benny answered. “There may be several sources up here in these hills.”

They approached the water and stopped. A low, narrow fall faced them square on. It emptied down a fifteen foot drop into a wide, boiling pool which spilled over and down the west side of the hill to their left. Their hill crest trail north had come to a halt.

“Let’s stop to rest and eat,” Benny suggested. “Zachary and I need to get a little shuteye – neither one of us slept very well last night.”

“Because a me. I know. Take all the time ya needs. I’ll stand guard. Figure my ankle can use a rest, too. I think my temperature is completely gone. How about yours Zachary?”

Somewhat comically, Benny thought, the two of them approached each other and felt foreheads – first with their palms and then with the backs of their hands. It looked like some strange pagan greeting ritual. He smiled, but thought better than to allow the chuckle it truly deserved. Who knew, touching foreheads just might lead to some actual, meaningful dialog.

“You’re right, Amos. No temperature at all.”

“You still got a slight one. Probably need to keep your hair wet at least today.”

Zachary nodded, opened his canteen and doused himself rubbing it in with his fingers. For Benny, it only added to the humor of the ‘rite’.

Amos followed up by pressing around Zachary’s wound through his coat.

“Feelin’ any better?” he asked.

“Was feeling fine until some overly inquisitive imp started poking me.”

Amos smiled, but he wanted an answer.

“No really, what do ya think?”

“A lot less pain. I even have some pretty good

movement, see.”

He moved his arm around and reached it straight out to his side, holding it there for several seconds.

“I can even make and hold a good grip – fist – in that hand.”

Amos nodded.

“Lots better I’d say.”

Zachary continued, perhaps as if to prove himself.

“I can tell my stamina is getting back to normal, too. I have handled the walk this morning a good deal better than I did yesterday.”

“Stamina – like energy?” Amos asked.

“Yes, like energy or endurance.”

They drank their fill at the pool beneath the waterfall and Amos refilled the canteens. Amos and Zachary both opted for another sip of the pain killer.

“I’ll need ta boil up some more tonight,” Amos said shaking that canteen close to his ear. “Need ta be on the lookout fer willows and aspens between now and then.”

Benny rummaged through the food supplies.

“Carrots, apples, jerky, and cold baked potatoes. Sound okay?”

“Let’s save the taters fer tonight when we can heat ‘em in a fire,” Amos suggested.

His suggestions were becoming more spontaneous – as if he thought he had a right to make them – but they were never really free from that follow-up look that asked, ‘Am I gonna git in trouble fer that?’ Amos always tried his best, but Amos always prepared for the worst.

“I have some thoughts to throw out about our trip,” Benny said while they ate.

“What ya thinkin’?”

“It’s about the route we take. Here. Let me draw out a rough map.”

With his hands, he brushed a large spot free from rocks and twigs, and began drawing lines in the soft dirt with a stick.

“This is Arkansas. We’re down about here. Kansas sits up here over to the side and above Arkansas. Missouri sits on top of Arkansas, here, and against Kansas to its west. Above Missouri is Iowa. Part of the Nebraska territory sits in

about here between Kansas and Iowa. Over here to the east is the Mississippi River. It starts way up north and runs south along the east side of Iowa and Missouri and Arkansas. Over here across the River from Iowa and Missouri on the east, is Illinois.”

“That’s where you live, right,” Amos asked.

“Yup. Right about here.”

He added an ‘X’ near the center of the northern third of the state and drew a line representing the Illinois River southwest from there to the Mississippi.

“Where’s Zachary’s Mississippi state?”

“Touches Arkansas down here, along the Mississippi River – pretty much due east of where we are now.”

“Where’s your plantation?”

It was directed at Zachary. He made an ‘X’ right next to the river, considerably south of where they were. It had for the moment become more a lesson in geography for Amos than the set for Benny’s comments that were yet to begin. Benny got them back on track.

“Here are the mountains ahead of us in Arkansas.”

He drew two, rough circles to indicate where they were.

“No mountains over here?” Amos asked pointing to eastern Arkansas.

“Right, and that’s one part of what I’ve been thinking about. The route we’ve been talking about – well that I’ve been talking about, goes like this. From southeast to northwest across the mountains in Arkansas from here to Kansas, then straight north to Iowa, and back east to Illinois. The advantage is that once out of Arkansas we’re in free territory for Amos. The disadvantage is that it looks to be around 900 miles. That’s a long walk especially in the winter snows up north.”

“And especially up and down all those mountains,” Zachary added.

“Here’s another route.”

Benny drew it as he described it.

From here we could head to the opposite corner of Arkansas – the northeast. Part of Missouri sticks down right here. It looks sort of like a boot heel so that’s what it’s called. Then we’d travel east and north across the boot heel to the

Mississippi River, find a way across it about here, and we'd be in Illinois."

"And the advantage is it would be lots shorter," Amos said relating what he'd taken from the presentation up to that point.

Benny nodded.

"Way less than half as far."

"But the *not* advantage is what?"

It had been Amos with the question.

"That we have to cross Missouri where there would very likely be open season on the likes of you. Missouri is one of a couple of states that remained in the Union but that allow slavery."

Amos put his hands to his neck, clearly indicating he understood the 'open season' reference.

Benny turned to Zachary.

"I haven't heard much about the war up in those parts, have you?"

"No. Lots a bad battles over in northwest Arkansas. I haven't heard anything about the northeast. From what I know of the area there aren't many people up there once you get twenty-five or thirty miles west of the river. Probably not much to fight over, I'm guessing."

"Interesting points. I wasn't aware of that."

Amos looked back and forth between the others.

"You two are really smart."

Zachary replied.

"I guess we're smart about things we've learned from books, but you're the one who's smart about things you've learned from out in the world."

Amos frowned not understanding.

"Like your doctoring, and burning lard on a torch and making medicine from tree bark."

"Really? Never thought a them things as smarts. Whacha know."

"There are something like three hundred river boats making regular runs up and down the Mississippi," Zachary said trying to move back to the topic. "Seems like there should be a chance we could find a ride north on one of them."

"Those boats free or slave," Benny asked.

“Someone, some the other, I suppose. I have been told that lots of runaways work on them like they were free – for wages.”

“Negros gittin’ paid fer work?”

Amos couldn’t wrap his mind around any part of such a fully foreign concept.

“I brought it all up because it seems to me now’s the time we have to make a decision,” Benny said – down the west slope here to Kansas or down the east slope to the River.”

“You say it’s pretty flat up here?” Zachary said pointing to northeast Arkansas.

“That’s how I remember about it – from books. There may be one narrow band of hills way up in the corner. I can’t remember for sure, but they wouldn’t be anything like the other ones. I’ve never been there. You think you two could pull off the master-slave boy thing again if we need to?”

They looked at each other for some time.

“What do *you* say, Amos?” Zachary asked.

“I sure does know how ta look like a slave boy and you done pretty good as a master – not really pushin’ hard enough on me ta make it seem real, I’m thinking. I can take a stripe er two if that what it takes ta get ta freedom.”

“I’m *not* going to *whip* you, so forget *that!*”

It had been delivered with more emotion than the other two had ever heard from Zachary. The intensity was frightening. The message was comforting. A few minutes passed.

“So,” Amos said looking back and forth between the others. “Feels like consensus time agin ta me.”

“Northeast, then?” Benny asked.

“I’m in,” Amos said.

They looked at Zachary.

“Like I’ve said before, you two would undoubtedly get lost and starve to death if I didn’t come along.”

It *had* been the same thing he had said before, but was different that time. Before, he had mostly meant it. That time it was offered with a smile – not much of one, but for Zachary it was the equivalent of a full out face full of smile. More and more it appeared to Benny that Plantation Boy’s preparation to

run the show at the plantation, was as much about acting responsibly as it was about managing a farm full of slaves. It required a major rethink about several things.

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CHAPTER NINE

Either Would Be Disastrous

From where they stood atop the hill they could survey the terrain in all directions. It stood at a dividing point between the ever-growing hills on northwest and a seemingly never-ending expanse of low, generally flat features to the north and east.

“So, that’s northeast?” Amos asked pointing.

“That’s right,” Benny said. “I suppose from here we really need to make tracks north, north, east – that means only slightly east – mostly north.”

“How we gonna know we’re goin’ in the right direction?”

“A good question. What we need is a compass”.

Amos’s face drew a blank.

“That’s a small device that looks sort of like a pocket watch, but it has just one hand on it and it always points straight north.”

“You got one?”

“Afraid not,” Benny said.

“But we can make one,” Zachary said. “We need to find that sewing kit Amy put in that crate of supplies.”

Amos, who had become the organizer and keeper of the contraption, went right to it. Just how you’d sew a pocket watch he couldn’t figure, but he’d give Zachary the benefit of the doubt. He handed it over. Benny was content to sit back and let Plantation Boy explain to Slave Boy how to make a compass. He figured it would be a first in the whole history of human existence and he was determined to treasure every moment. There might even be a story in it someday. He

already had a title: Finding Their Directions.

“Find the thickest, straight needle.”

“How about this?”

“Looks perfect.”

Amos beamed over at Benny. He had found something for a white boy and had been told it was perfect. Talk about *firsts!*

“Now we need to strike the needle several times between a flat stone and the metal end of your knife handle.”

That time the look in Benny’s direction seemed to question Zachary’s sanity. Benny nodded urging him to go along with it.

“I’ll hold the needle in place so it doesn’t go flying off into the grass while you give it a few good whacks – not enough to bend it, just enough to show it who’s boss. It will become quite hot.”

Amos grinned – as if participating in some magical ritual – took careful aim, and administered the first blow.

“That’s exactly what we need. Now, a few more times.”

With that finished, Zachary glanced at Benny and winked, but continued talking to Amos.

“Now, I am going to show you some magic.”

The boy’s eyes grew large.

“Hold out your knife blade with the sharp edge down.”

Zachary picked up the needle, placed it against the blade and removed his hand.

“It’s stickin’ right there. Magic *I’d* say!”

Amos reached down and removed the needle. He sniffed it for no obvious reason and then laid it up against the blade, repeating the process several times himself.

“That strikin’ it changed it somehow, right?”

“That’s right. It magnetized it. When something’s magnetized it will stick to steel or iron.”

“Okay, how does that make a compass?”

Amos was willing to forgo the full explanation in the service of function.

“Scoop up a little water in a cup – maybe an inch. Find a tiny piece of soft bark about the size of a nickel.”

“Nickel?”

“A little larger than your thumbnail.”

Amos cut it from a nearby tree with surgical precision.

“Now, I’m going to pierce the bark so the needle goes clear through it . . . long ways . . . Like that. Now, you set it on top of the water and see what happens.”

Amos followed the instructions.

“Look at that! It done swung around and lined itself up straight north and south. The point’s headin’ north. What a great gadget! That’s what I mean when I said you two was really smart – bein’ able to make a thing like this.”

Benny spoke.

“Tell, me, Amos. Do you think you could make a compass from scratch now if neither Zachary or me was here?”

“Sure, I could.”

“And if it takes a smart boy – like you just said – to make a compass, then you would be a what?”

“A smart boy, too?”

It had begun as a question, but soon slipped into some level of recognition that he just might have some smarts of his own. He had known there were lots of things he wanted to learn about, but not until that moment did realize it was really within the realm of possibility.

He didn’t respond further. He didn’t brag about it. He didn’t try to deny it. He did, however install a bit of the smug into his facial expression that he would carry with him for the rest of his life.

“How about if you be our compass man, Amos?” Zachary said.

“Sure. I’ll carry it right here in my left front trousers’ pocket. Safer there. I keep fillin’ up my right pocket with stuff that might break it.”

While Amos spent time trying to fool the compass into pointing in the wrong direction, Benny and Zachary slept away ninety minutes.

“It’s time to be on our way I imagine, Benny said at last. “We’ve lost a good half of our day between the problem at the cave and our time here. You two feel up to it?”

The fact they were both immediately on their feet made further discussion pointless.

“Point the way, Compass Man,” Benny said.

Amos was ready. He had located several points on the horizon that stood north, north, east of them and had tucked the needle away for safe keeping.

The other two hitched themselves into the travois and began the descent down the gentle hill toward their new lives. Without words, each boy noted the significance of those first steps. They were accompanied by an odd mix of feelings – excitement, trepidation, confidence, pride, guilt – undoubtedly others.

Benny, taking the lead position on the travois, had intentionally let Amos move out ten yards in front of them so he could have a word with Zachary.

“You were really great with Amos, back there. I think you’re a natural teacher.”

“It brought up a strange batch of feelings I’m sure you’d never be able to understand, Benny. I will just say nobody was more surprised than I was.”

“Do you really think we – you and me – are so different that we won’t ever be able to understand each other, Zachary?”

It was a question he had been mulling over since the first day they met. He had come to no conclusion, the way Zachary apparently had. He might well have been correct. Zachary made no attempt to provide clarification and Benny decided to continue, withholding final judgment.

“Am I goin’ too fast fer you two?” Amos called back, turning and stopping to wait.

“No,” Benny said. “You’re doing fine. It’s just taking time for us to get in step and such heading down this hill. Now we’re on your tail.”

They walked on in silence for some time. Descending a rocky, wooded, slope presented unfamiliar obstacles that held their full attention.

“That flat land’s only about 100 yards away,” Amos called back at last.

He had apparently taken it upon himself to continue as the tour guide in addition to becoming the navigator and keeper of the compass. It told him he was part of the team. Unbelievable!

At the bottom of the hill, Benny noticed Amos was

limping.

“I don’t know about you two, but I’m ready for a rest,” Benny said.

It had taken the better part of an hour to get down off the hill and nobody objected. The sky was cloudless and the sun large and hot. The fifty-degree air temperature seemed at least ten degrees warmer. Zachary had already opened his coat. The other two followed his lead. They sat and passed around a canteen.

Benny and Zachary saw Amos sneaking a swig from the medicine canteen. It might have been out of pride, or some black manhood thing. Benny had no idea, but wished he would have felt he could be open with them about it. ‘Talk about probably never understanding somebody,’ Benny thought, ‘it would certainly be me never understanding Amos.’

Just to take time to catalog all the hardships and pain he had encountered would have required longer than the break: never knowing his mother, having his father torn away from him, living in abject poverty, expected to work like a man since he’d been ten, knowing he had no rights and that nearly intolerable pain could be visited upon him at any time and at the whim of any of a dozen white men without conscience where his kind were concerned.

After fifteen minutes, they were walking again.

An hour or so after that, they came upon a north to south horse trail and stopped to consider their options.

“Follow it?” Amos asked.

Benny looked at Zachary.

“What do you think? We don’t want to meet up with trouble.”

“I thinking we could scatter into the trees if we meet anybody,” Zachary said.

Benny wondered how much of that reflected good judgment and how much arose from his need to escape some of the pain the overland trek was causing. Regardless, his suggestion seemed to make sense.

“Amos, you’ll have to keep a sharp lookout for travelers up ahead,” Benny said. “It’s into the trees even if you only suspect somebody may be up there. No need to even speak about it.”

Amos nodded, happy about the decision. He figured it had been another consensus.

The trail made the going far easier and they were clearly making better time. They continued north for quite a while.

“Sundown in a half hour or so,” Amos announced at last, still putting one foot in front of the other, fighting through his own pain.

“Probably time to find a campsite, then,” Benny said.

“Way back away from the trail will be best I imagine,” Zachary added, his caution suggesting second thoughts about the wisdom of having been traveling the open road.

“Let me scout out the woods,” Amos said and left off to their right.

They kept walking. Amos appeared back on the trail just ahead of them ten minutes later.

“A good spot fifty or so yards in there. Follow me.”

Before they could maneuver into the trees their attention was given over to the noise of galloping hooves approaching from behind them. They turned to look. There were five men on horseback closing fast. It sent ripples of fright up their backs. Having been spotted, the idea of ‘scattering’ became irrelevant.

“Let me do the talking, remember,” Zachary said.

Amos moved in behind the other two not so much to hide – that time had already been spent – but in an effort to establish some sense of sanctuary from all possible harm. It was a brand-new possibility that would not have entered his thoughts just a week before.

The men stopped a few yards away. They were all holding rifles although not really in a threatening way. Rifles out of their cases were not a good sign, however. The man on the lead horse spoke.

“Evenin’ boys.”

Although it presented an easy going beginning, it seemed to them that he had intentionally emphasized the second word, most likely for the purpose of establishing his own superiority. It hadn’t been necessary – five of them with horses and rifles.

“Good evening,” Zachary said in return.

“What y’all doin’ out here in the middle of nowhere?” the man asked maintaining his composed approach to the meeting.

“Goin’ up to the boot heel to join up. It’s where my cousin, here, Ben, is from. His uncle’s forming a regiment.”

“What about the black boy?”

“What about him? He’s mine,” Zachary said. “Daddy gave him to me on my thirteenth birthday.”

The man studied Amos.

“You got a name, Toby?”

“Not sure why that’s any of your business,” Zachary came back immediately.

“We’re a Retriever Contingent – out searching for runaways. Working out a Sheriff Frank’s office in Jefferson County. Lots a runaways try to slip through here over to the river.”

“I don’t appreciate you putting ideas into my boy,s head, Sir.”

Zachary had managed a good deal of emotion in the statement. If Benny hadn’t known better he’d have suspected more than a little sincerity and genuine objection in it.

“None intended. Where y’all from?”

“You sure have a lot of questions about things that aren’t any of your business.”

“I like your spunk, kid. You’re okay. I guess we’ll be on our way. Word of warning. Keep an eye out for bear in these parts. They’re night foragers you know.”

The other men snickered. They urged their horses around the three of them moving on north along the trail and had soon returning to an easy gallop.

The boys turned and watched them ride out of sight before any of them spoke.

“Nice work, Zachary!” Benny offered first.

“Ya. That was great,” Amos added. “Bears?”

“From the other men’s reaction, I think he was just trying to scare us,” Benny said.

“He done *that* fer sure!” Amos came back.

“Move on to make camp?” Benny asked picking up the travois.

They moved off following Amos’s lead.

He had, indeed, found a good spot. It was a clear area some twenty yards in diameter on a low mound rising to a flat top several feet above the forest floor. Zachary knew the name of the feature.

"It is called a prairie pimple; some are small like this and some are huge, covering acres. Lots of them up this way, I understand. Mostly in the grasslands closer to the river. Learned about them from a man my daddy and I met on a boat trip."

That one was covered in tall grass with a sizeable bald spot in the center, suggesting it may have often been used by others for the same purpose. Amos offered suggestions.

"I figure make a couple a fire pits up there and we'll have a good spot fer the night."

The older boys agreed.

"I'll gather rocks. We'll need wood."

Benny noticed how Amos had provided direction without making it appear to be an order. The boy's growing social sense continued to impress him.

The fire pits were built within the first half hour; Amos decided if there were any chance the bear comment was genuine it would be best if they slept between two fires. Neither of the others objected and, in fact, privately thought it was a good idea. Amos laid the potatoes they had saved from earlier on flat rocks close to the fire and turned them from time to time. By combining the leftovers from the two sets of provisions, they managed a good supper with enough left for two breakfasts and at least one more main meal in a pinch.

They talked while they ate.

"We need to begin thinking about food down the pike," Zachary said. "We've kicked up both rabbit and squirrel today."

"If we come to a stream we should probably do a little fishing, also," Benny added. "I think we've been too interested in making time and not given enough thought to survival."

With that conversation, they understood their objectives had been reordered, if only slightly.

Amos had something on his mind. Bringing it up was not easy, but in light of the earlier discussions that day, it seemed like a good time. He waited until they were finished

eating.

“I’m worried a lot about not bein’ a slave no more. I don’ know how to do that. I been watchin’ you two, but it really ain’t been much help. Where’ll I live? How’ll I buy things? How’ll others know I’m free and not jist up an take me?”

“We’re going to help get you started, so don’t worry about it,” Benny said.

Of course, at that point he had nothing more solid than that to share. He hoped the confidence he tried to project in his statement would reassure Amos until they could come up with something more concrete. It had set another important task for him to think about – one he suddenly realized he should have already been thinking about. Taking a slave boy to freedom entailed a whole lot more than just taking a slave boy to freedom.

“I heard tell that some freed slaves got a *mansion* paper ta carry with ‘em that says they is free.”

“That’s a *manumission* paper – a freedom document. I can fix you up with one of those,” Zachary said.

As one, the other two turned toward him and stared in silence.

“What? That surprises you?”

He sounded offended and continued.

“There is something I have been wanting to say, too – get off my chest, I guess. This seems like a good time. You two still think of me as Plantation Boy – spoiled rotten, rich, black hating, Yankee hating, slave owing, Plantation Boy. Have I been acting spoiled rotten? Am I sitting here on a pile of gold? Does it really appear like I hate you two or have any intention of taking possession of Amos?”

He wasn’t seeking answers so he just moved on. It felt good.

“Like you two, I suppose, I’m seeing and feeling and learning things I’ve never had the chance to before. All of this we have had together has made me question lots of things I thought I knew about right and wrong and proper social order. I am not there yet. I am a long way from having it all sorted out, but I believe I can see the right direction and I need your help – your patience, first, I guess. Just knowing you understand that I really have tried to leave Plantation Boy

back there somewhere will help me. In case you don't get it, I am having quite a struggle."

In an exaggerated, overly dramatic fashion, Benny looked around the camp site, up and down and one direction and the other, finally turning his gaze on Amos.

"You seen any Plantation Boy around here, lately?"

"I ain't seen no Plantation Boy and ya know I'd know a Plantation

Boy if'n there was a Plantation Boy around here ta be seed."

They turned their eyes toward Zachary and shrugged as one.

He nodded. His eyes teared. The others looked away. It was just what guys did. Knowing it was happening and allowing yourself to witness it face to face were two entirely different experiences and they fully intended to keep them that way.

"I suppose we need to turn in. Need to try and make up for lost time tomorrow."

"Why ya in such a hurry, Benny?" Amos asked. "This is our life now – here, together. I ain't got no idea what life'll be after this. I consensus we don't jist hurry on jist ta be hurryin' on."

Benny looked at Zachary.

Zachary shrugged and tilted his head as if to indicate Amos had a point that deserved consideration.

"I suppose you're right. I'm the impatient type. Impatient types don't need good reason to be hurrying on through life – it's just natural to us. I'll try to pull back from it. Suggestions? In the service of consensus."

Amos beamed sitting back with his arms supporting him from behind.

"Fer starters ya can teach me how ta be a free man."

"Seems to me you have already learned a good deal about that," Zachary said.

"What ya mean?"

"Do you feel like a slave here with us?"

"Hmm. I feels like a slave, but not *because* I's with you. That make sense?"

"Probably. Say more about it."

Amos paused as if collecting his thoughts. He raised

his head and looked at Zachary.

“That time I first run across you and the others – bleedin’ yer life away up on the slope by the river – I jist sat beside ya fer a long time. I’d never felt so powerful before. Ya was wearin’ a Confederate Uniform. That told me ya was fightin’ ta keep me a slave. It was the first big decision I’d ever been allowed to make in my whole life, really – sort a like my introduction ta actin’ like a free man, I guess. I could jist leave ya there ta die. Or, I could even speed ya along yer way inta eternity. Contemplatin’ that made me feel powerefuller than I’d ever felt before. Then ya went and called out fer yer mama. It made me think about how worried she must a been – you out fightin’ Yankees and all – riskin’ yer very life. I figured she deserved to see ya agin. I hated ya, but I couldn’t hate yer mama so I decided ta try and fix ya up – not fer you, understand, but fer yer mama.

“I’d never cut a bullet out a anybody before, but I figured it would be a lot like corin’ a apple. It was. Ya was already lying in a pool a yer blood. It jist kep comin’ so when I got the ball out I packed it with that bandana ya was wearin’. It was like poundin’ a wooden peg into the bunghole on a keg a whiskey. I seen Wheezie do it. The bleedin’ stopped. The flies was tryin’ to make it their home inside yer shoulder, so I covered it with my shirt. I thought about using one a the other soldier’s bandanas, but didn’t know what the rules was about that.

“I been raised up not to waste nothin’. After I dug the hole to bury the others in – usin’ yer little shovel – I just had to keep their clothes and boots and things. They was perfectly good and looked nearly brand new. So, the other soldier boys got sent on their way in their long johns – not what Pricilla would call very elegant, but considerin’ all the sides ta it, that made the most sense. I didn’t say a prayer over them – hard ta pray for somebody ya hates so much. I think maybe I wish I’d a done it. Suppose it don’t make no never mind if’n it was jist a prayer from a slave boy anyway.

“I built up a good fire beside ya. My plan was ta leave ya there close to the river. I figured somebody would find ya and take care a ya. Then ya went and done it again – that mama thing. Ya fluttered yer eyelids and screamed out in

pain a couple a times callin' fer her. I figured that was when ya was about to wake up, but the pain was too bad and sent ya back ta sleep. Yer forehead began glowin' red. I didn't know nothin' 'bout how white skin did with a fever. I decided ta go ahead an touch your head. That reminded me how powerful I'd became. I could touch ya and there was nothin' ya could do about it. Ya was burnin' up. I'd never felt skin so hot – white er black. That's when I wet my shirt and begun really doctorin' ya.

"I figured if I stayed you'd drag me back to Azailea, but I also figured I'd be able ta outrun ya fer quite a spell so I stuck around. I caught some lunch – three fish – three fish jist fer me – more than I could eat. It was the first time I can remember ever even condiderin' not eatin' everythin' that was there ta eat. Every time I looked at those three little pieces a left-over fish layin' there on that rock I got that plum powerful feelin agin.

"I think it was likein' that new feelin' so much that made me keep stickin' around. Every time I wetted that shirt and put it back on yer head it was like I was in control a yer life. I could do it or I couldn't do it. I liked that. I'd never ever even been in control of my own life let alone a white man's. I felt like struttin' and dancin'. I figured that was what it meant ta be free – ta be able ta control the life and death of people you hated. I figure I was wrong about that, now that I got to know you two, but I ain't figured what it should feel like. Ya see, it's like I really ain't no slave nomore – the only way I know how ta be – but I ain't got no idea about how ta be a free man."

Benny turned to Zachary.

"Who's teaching who, huh?"

Zachary nodded, if somewhat reluctantly. To say anything would have turned on the tears, and he'd had enough of that. Benny figured as much. He prompted Amos to continue.

"So, how it is different to be with us – two white boys – than it was with the white men you've known before?"

Again, Amos paused. Again, things began spilling out as if he'd been preparing for that moment all his life. Perhaps he had.

"Ya don't hit me. I touch ya and ya don't hit me. I talk

without bein' asked and ya don't hit me. I look at you whenever I want to and ya don't hit me. We all eat together sharin' the same food. I eats what you prepares and you eats what I prepares. Ya protects me, I mean fer *my* benefit not yers."

Benny offered a puzzled look. Amos caught it and tried to explain.

"My owner would keep me safe from being took away – stoled – by traffickers, er bein' hit by lightnin' out in the field, but that was fer his benefit, ya see. If a handler started layin' on stripes out in a field, my owner wouldn't never stop him, and *that* would a been fer me."

Benny nodded and cringed. Amos was not finished.

"If I have a idea I can say it, here. Sometimes after I do I still expect ta be hit – jist fer a second, ya know – like I'd forgot my place. Sometimes you even ask me fer ideas. No white man done never asked *Hey Boy Toby Amos* fer any idea before.

"I's not sayin' I feel like I'm really equal to ya. Everything I's ever knowed about life's told me different than that. Strange, I guess. I don't feel equal to ya, but I don't feel not equal to ya either. It's like my heart says I ain't, but part of my brain says I am. Ya understand what I's tryin' ta say?"

"Enough for now," Benny said. "You know I'm never going to be able to fully understand something like that. Everything I've ever known about life has told me I'm equal to everybody and everybody is equal to me – in terms of my worth and rights. I know we aren't all put together with the same talents – like Zachary here is a whole lot smarter than I am, but that's okay. I could never hold somebody's abilities against him."

"An I'll probably never understand *that*, will I?" Amos said.

Benny had no idea how to answer. He shrugged.

Zachary spoke, directing his remarks at Amos.

"You and I have grown up believing just about the most opposite things about the worth and value of ourselves as can possibly be, and yet we seem to be working it through between us. Don't write yourself off about never understanding your importance, because if it comes out that

you can't understand, it will likely mean that I never will either, and I am just not going to stand for that."

"That sounded like the flowery words James used ta read ta us from the book he had. I wonder if I's ever gonna be able to talk like that."

"Listen and practice," Benny said. "Ask us questions about the words we use."

"That does bring up a big thing I been wonderin' about," Amos said. "James learnt how ta read. Do ya think there's any chance I could learn? James could even write out words. He taught me how ta say the ABC's, but I don't really got no idea what they is or what ta do with 'em."

"Isn't there paper and a pencil in that box from Amy and Ezra?" Zachary asked.

"Sure is," Amos said, scooting toward the travois. He handed them to Zachary and took a seat very close beside him, checking his face to make sure it was alright.

"What's the most important thing you'd like to be able to read and write?"

He didn't pause for even a second.

"My name, Amos. I know white folks have two names, but blacks mostly jist have one."

Zachary printed the four letters at the top of the paper.

"Wow. Them's the letters? What's the letters?"

"A, M, O, S. – Amos."

His face lit up.

"Them's parts a the ABCs. Can I try?"

Zachary handed over the paper and pencil.

Amos spent time lightly tracing over the letters at the top. Then he drew them out below. It was like drawing because he turned the page one way and another, apparently to make it easier. It seemed he preferred making straight lines on the horizontal.

"Pretty good," Zachary said.

Benny clapped, softly, but sincerely. He wondered if it was the boy's first applause, but didn't ask – he really didn't need to ask.

"Now, try it without turning the page all about."

Amos practiced, having a comment from time to time.

"How can I come by another name?"

“Instead of Amos,” Zachary asked confused.

“No. I mean you have Pendleton, too, right – Zachary Pendleton?”

“I see. Zachary is a name my parents chose for me. Pendleton was the last name of my parents and grandparents. Daddy is William and mama is Dorothy – we are all three Pendletons.”

Amos nodded and turned to Benny.

“My full name is Benny Wilson – actually, I have a middle name, too. Thomas – Benny Thomas Wilson.”

“That would take forever to write out.”

Zachary smiled to himself wondering what their student would think about his full name – Bartholomew Zachary Abraham Pendleton, the fourth. He thought better than to bring it up at that moment.

Benny leaned back and glanced up through the tree branches.

“Look, the moon straight above us. Almost full. Must mean we’ve talked clear into the middle of the night.”

“You two go on to sleep,” Amos said. “My head and my heart’s just too excited to sleep. Don’t you worry none. I can put in a full day’s work without no sleep at all if’n it comes to that.”

The boys spread their blankets and were immediately asleep. It had been a strenuous day at several levels.

* * *

The next morning Benny woke first. It was still mostly dark. He could see faint bands of pink and purple light in the sky above him. As he stretched he sat up and kicked the blanket off. He shivered and patted himself, bear hug style. He noticed the fires had died down to embers. He noticed Zachary still asleep, curled up on his side like a little boy taking a nap. He noticed – well, he *didn’t* notice Amos. Amos was gone. His still folded blanket and the paper and pencil were all that were left. A bear? The Retrievers? Either would be disastrous.

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CHAPTER TEN

What's Fair? What's Unfair?

“Zachary! Zachary! Wake up! Amos is gone!

Zachary struggled to awaken from a deep sleep and didn't immediately make sense of what Benny was saying.

“What? Amos?”

“Yes. He's gone!

Zachary sat up. Benny was already on his feet pacing with no sense of direction.

“What do you think?” Zachary asked.

“The bear or those Retrievers, I'm thinking. He wouldn't have just wandered off from us, would he?”

“It doesn't seem likely. His folded blanket makes it look like whatever it was, happened before he turned in.”

“But that could have been any time. He couldn't sleep, remember.”

Benny kicked at the folded blanket and leaned down to pick up the sheets of paper – none of it for any special reason.

“Zachary. Did you show Amos how to make J's and C's?”

“No. Just the letters in his name. Why?”

“Look here.”

He handed over the top sheet of paper.

“I'll be. J and C, big as life. Any ideas about it?”

“Yes, in fact, I do. Those men we met on the trail – the Retrievers. They were from Jefferson County and they each had a star on their hatband with 'J C' on it.”

“You mean you think Amos wrote us some sort of clue?” Zachary asked.

“Don’t know how he managed it, but it sure looks that way. See where it is? It’s nearly attached to the end of his name at the bottom of a page full of his names: A-M-O - - J-C. It’s like he was interrupted after the O and before the S and somehow he, also, knew about the J C.”

“Why wouldn’t he have called out to us?” Zachary asked more just thinking out loud?

“What could we have done – two helpless seventeen year olds rolled up in our blankets like cocoons with no guns at hand? He was trying to save our skins – that’s what he was doing.”

“Where would they take him?”

“Back to the sheriff, I imagine,” Benny said.

“But where’s that? Wait a minute. I don’t know for sure, but I met a soldier from Pine Bluff Arkansas. I think he said he had worked at the Jefferson County Dock there on the Arkansas River. It’s the only sizeable town I have heard about.”

“But we don’t have any idea which direction it is from here – south, west, northwest,” Benny said. “Let’s get back out to that trail and see if we can make out a direction from the horses’ hoof prints. When we met them, they were heading north.”

“Ah!” Zachary said. “See which direction the top prints were traveling. Very clever. Let’s do it.”

“Shall we take firearms?” Benny asked.

“I’d say so. We got these six rifles, all loaded and ready to fire. Bullet pouches filled with balls, powder and caps.”

“Think a Yankee can fire a Confederate Rifle?” Benny asked not really being serious.

“I hope we never have to find out,” Zachary said.”

It refocused things back on the dire place in which they found themselves.

As they made their way toward the trail, Benny spoke.

“The river’s behind us – south of us. That’s where Pine Bluff would be.”

Five minutes later they were squatting beside the trail. Benny clearly had the better skills when it came to tracking.

“No doubt about it. Heading south.”

He pointed. They stood and started back down the trail.

“We’ll never catch them at this pace,” Zachary said. “Why don’t you run on ahead and if you find something do what you have to do – wait for me if you can. I just can’t run or even trot yet.”

They were each carrying three rifles hanging from their shoulders by the gun straps. Zachary handed one of his to Benny. They were carrying all of them because those old southern, Richmond rifles took a considerable amount of time to reload. With all six ready to fire they figured their chances in a skirmish improved significantly.

Zachary offered Benny his hand. Benny paused because it had been fully unexpected. Perhaps it shouldn’t have been; Zachary was clearly a Southern Gentleman. They managed a meaningful, eye to eye handshake, then Benny turned and took off at a good clip. He was a farm boy. He had run from farm to farm and farm to school all his life. He could run for hours and never really tire.

No more than a mile down the trail he came upon a bright glow in the woods off to his right.

“A campfire,” he said under his breath.

He became immediately cautious and kept to the shadows along the side of the trail. He moved in close. There they were. Five were asleep. One was standing watch with a rifle – sitting, actually, on a fallen log at the near edge of the encampment apparently watching the trail for intruders – most likely for the two of them. He saw Amos at the rear of the area. He was standing with a noose around his neck and the other end tied high up around the trunk of a tall, slender tree. The idea was clear: if he couldn’t stay awake he’d collapse and hang himself.

Benny had seen ads for runaway slaves as far north as his home territory in central Illinois. They often offered two rewards – \$150 dollars alive; as much as \$50 dead. Either way those men or the sheriff were soon to see a profit. It didn’t seem likely the owner of the Azalea could have circulated a newspaper ad that soon, however Benny really had no idea how long Amos had been at large. He had assumed a day or so at the most, but there was no real reason it couldn’t have been a month or more. He also realized they were less than a hundred miles from that plantation so it could have certainly

already been circulated just by word of mouth.

Benny had no doubt that he could split that noose rope with his first shot – but that by itself would not solve the problem. It would send six angry, mounted men with rifles after one skinny, barefoot boy. He had an idea, but it needed at least one extra set of hands. He looked back up the trail for Zachary. The trail made a gradual bend in an around the deep shadows of early morning and he really couldn't see very far.

He moved back into the woods some ten yards – opposite the fire, about mid-way between where Amos was tied and the seated lookout. The camp was to his left. He turned and looked over the area. He decided to risk it all. Making sure the others were all really asleep – as much as he could from ten yards away – he walked to the edge of the area lit by the fire. He stopped and waved his arms over his head. It took what seemed far too long for Amos to spot him.

Benny figured there was only one plan that might work. In his mind he quickly fashioned a set of hand signals. He hoped Amos did not misinterpret them. First, he motioned like a boy climbing up a tree. Amos looked up into the branches. Benny nodded. Amos nodded back as much as the noose and tight rope allowed. Then, Benny held up his rifle and moved it to his shoulder pointing it just above Amos's head. Again, Amos nodded as best he could. Benny pantomimed removing the noose and dropping it to the ground. Amos grabbed the noose and then pointed to the ground. Then came the crucial signal. Again, Benny did the climbing maneuver and pointed up making a hand over hand climbing motion. Benny gave no clear reaction other than maybe moving his eyes to look up. It was too dark and too far away to be sure. Benny stepped back into the darkness.

If all went as planned, Benny would sever the rope with a shot that would direct the men's attention in his direction while Amos removed the noose and climbed high up into the tree without being seen. The men would assume he had taken off on foot and would clear the camp looking for him. Amos would climb down and join Benny.

Benny really wanted to scatter the horses – that was going to be the missing part of his plan – but it would cause a

commotion and wake the men before he could retake a position from which he could get a for certain shot at the rope.

One of the men rolled over onto his back and began to stretch himself awake. It was then or never. Benny raised his rifle. In the manner his father had trained him, he took his time figuring the angle. He understood he had only one shot. Anticipating his role at the moment, Amos froze in place to keep the rope steady. Benny squeezed the trigger. The rope snapped clean just like he expected. What he hadn't expected was six horses dashing through the camp, across the trail and into the woods on the other side. It had distracted him as well as the men. He looked back to find Amos. The noose was lying on the ground. At least he had freed himself. Benny could not determine if he had climbed to the top of the tree to hide. His dark skin was finally a lifesaving asset for him.

Two shots rang out from the area where the horses had been tethered. One hit the coffee pot and sent it skipping across the campsite. The other cleanly removed the heel from one of the men's' boot. Benny understood. Zachary must have arrived in time to watch the hand signals. He had circled the camp, untied the horses and waited to slap them on their ways at the crack of the shot.

Instinctively, Benny ran deeper into the woods. He would be too visible out on the trail. He was concerned that Zachary might not manage his way to safety having fired both his rifles.

As he slowed just a bit, Benny heard the cracking of twigs to his left that mirrored those from under his own boots. He stopped, turned, and readied his second gun suddenly wondering if he would really be able to fire it at a man.

"Whoa, there, Yankee," came Zachary's whispered voice out of the shadows. "I got one too many holes in me already."

As Zachary's face emerged into the moonlight, Benny put his finger to his lips and offered a long, low, "Shhhhh. He pointed back to the camp."

They listened. They could make out loud talking punctuated with lots of swearing and general commotion.

"Don't they understand they have to leave to make this

plan work?" Benny said in a quiet voice. "Amos has to get down out of that tree."

He turned to Zachary.

"Good work back there, pal."

They were immediately started by sounds coming out of the darkness from behind them. Benny wondered if he should just whirl around and fire or wait to verify what was going on.

There was a voice.

"Was that A-M-O-S who needed ta climb down from up top that tree?"

"Amos!" they said together as they saw his wonderful white eyes floating out of the woods.

It was a three-way hug. They all understood its significance. They each wondered if it would ever be repeated.

Presently, they separated.

"How did you get here?" Benny asked still holding him close, his arm around his waist.

"Purely by accident, if'n you can believe that."

"More, please," Zachary said placing a firm hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Well, I done like Benny said – I took off the noose and began climbin' that tree. About half way up I was movin' from one branch on up ta another. Somehow, I got onto a branch from the tree jist west of it. It give me the idea ta go from tree ta tree and put tracks 'tween me and them. A dozen er so trees later I heard you guys down here. Ya really gotta learn ta whisper quieter. So I come down. I got one suggestion, okay?"

It appeared to be important.

"Okay."

"You better get them rifles reloaded up quick, jist in case.

In their moment of apparent triumph, the others hadn't thought about that. They set right to the task. With that accomplished they sat on the ground, facing each other, backs to trees.

"Let's think this thing through," Zachary said. "They know where our camp and supplies are. We can't go back there do you think?"

“Probably not,” Benny agreed, but then added, “Do you think they’d really think we’d be dumb enough to go back there?”

“Hmm. Interesting,” Zachary said.

“We can go back close to the camp and *reconner* again,” Amos said.

“I’ll bet they wait to go after the horses til full daylight,” Zachary said.

“They’re obviously horseman,” Benny began. “My bet is they sit tight and wait for the horses to return to them. Horses aren’t dumb. They know who feeds them and takes care of them. They’re really quite helpless and they’ll return after a time.”

“So, how do that help us?” Amos asked.

“If we hightail it back to our camp right now, get our stuff and move out within the next half hour, I’m thinking we won’t have to lose any of our stuff.”

“I think we need to make sure the men are really staying put,” Zachary said.

“I agree, Benny said.

He looked at Amos.

“Don’t take this the wrong way now, but you and your black skin have the best chance of getting in close enough to do a head count. You understand?”

“Of course. Us black boys is the best shadow sneakers in the world. Let’s git goin’.”

The next half hour went mostly according to plan. The men were sitting tight. The boys hurried back to their camp. With all their things quickly secured back onto the travois, Zachary offered one final suggestion.

“What if you two *carry* the travois – one in front and one in back – so it doesn’t leave a trail behind on the ground. Continue that way for a good piece – thirty minutes or so. I assume we’re moving east through the woods. I’ll drag two sticks along the trail north for fifteen or twenty minutes. I’ll ditch the sticks and then turn east and meet up with you somewhere out there. That should take them in the wrong direction if they decide to come looking for us.”

“Oh, I figures they’s commin’ after us, alright. I sort a yelled some a my high fever cuss words at ‘em – well at their

mamas really. They'll be comin' fer me."

Zachary and Benny broke out in laughter. Amos was puzzled. No simple explanation would do so they waved it off and offered none.

The plan set, Zachary turned to Amos.

"Can you make an owl call?"

Hands to his mouth, Amos demonstrated that he could. Zachary gave his version.

"We will identify each other by one short hoot followed by three long ones, okay," Zachary said.

Amos nodded and offered the medicine canteen to him.

"You'll need this more than me, today. I didn't take time to fix more so go easy on it. Make it last. I got some willow bark ta chew on. Almost as good."

Zachary hesitated only a moment. He knew what Amos had said made sense and he'd be no good to anybody if he fell by the wayside.

With that agreed, they stepped off in different directions. The plan was for Benny and Amos to keep to a path straight into the sun so Zachary could make his way to meet them. They would expect to see each other again by late afternoon.

Benny, the stronger of the two, took up the rear since more of the weight was back there. They each grasped the travois at arm's length – Amos down at his sides and Benny down directly in front of him grasping the lowest cross stick. It seemed comfortable although considerably heavier than it was when being drug along behind. Benny began the conversation.

"I won't ask you if you're okay, but I will ask how you're doing."

Amos nodded.

"Probably not as bad as ya'd think. Ya have ta remember I been a black slave all my life. I's been through much worse than that and I's witnessed even worse, still."

"Did you hear what plans the Retrievers had for you?"

"Put me in jail until somebody claimed me an if nobody done that within a reasonable time, I'd go up fer auction. One man said they could get a thousand dollars fer me so he

hoped nobody come ta git me.”

“How’s the ankle?”

“Swellin’s all gone. Holes is healin’ – gots good dry scabs. Pain mostly gone. Feels like maybe those side muscles down there got weakened. Suppose that could a happened?”

“You’re the doc. I really don’t know. I suppose so, though.”

“I think the bindin’s helped.”

They moved on for some time in silence. Then Amos spoke. It clearly had to do with something he had been thinking, but not knowing what that had been, left Benny in the dark.

“That was really somethin’ wasn’t it!”

Clearly the ‘somethin’ was extremely important him.

“That what?” Benny asked.

“The hug we had. It was the greatest, awfulest thing that ever done happened to me.”

“You have lost me – greatest, awfulest? Both, you mean?”

“Okay. It’s like this. I jist got hugged by a white boy – a white, slave owner, white boy. And he really done meant it; I could tell. And I hugged him back, and I really done meant it, too. And we both jist did it – no thinkin’ about it, no waitin’ around, we jist did it ‘cause we really wanted ta do it. A Yankee may not be able ta understand.”

“Not fully, I imagine. But during these past few days I have been learning a lot about the two of you so I think I can *sort of* understand.”

Amos nodded, perhaps not really convinced.

“It was special for me too, remember, I was there.”

“I guess I’d overlooked that – me bein’ selfish about it. I know ya was there. What do ya mean, special fer you, too?”

“I hugged and got hugged back from two southern boys – a Yankee hugging with you two.”

“I never done thought a myself as a southern boy. That’s really somethin’. Thank ya. I’ll start considerin’ that.”

That, Benny *really* didn’t understand, but figured it would come out in time. They continued into the morning sun. Half an hour passed.

“What did ya fully mean by southern boys?” Amos asked.

“Boys who live in the south. Arkansas and Mississippi are in the south.”

Amos offered a nod.

“I figure that’s the only way me and Zachary really both been like southern boys – jist bein here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Zachary’s a southern boy who is rich and owns slaves and is tryin’ to succeed from the United States of America.”

“The word is secede, not succeed.”

Amos nodded and continued.

“I’m a southern boy who is worse than poor, a slave, and jist waitin’ fer you Yankees in yer blue uniforms ta march in an free me up – ta stop the *secedin’*. I figures that only makes me and Zachary southern boys in jist that one way – we both lives in the south.”

“I see. I understand. Very well put, actually. Back to that hug. You said it was great *and* awful?”

“Great ‘cause fer those few seconds we was like equal; it was like we cared about each other. It was awful because slaves don’t like white plantation boys and white plantation boys don’t like black boys. All a a sudden the whole world got turned upside down, don’t ya see. What’s real? What’s right? A week ago Wheezie’d hung me on the spot if I’d a tried to hug one a the owner’s boys. Upside down, backwards, undependable, great, but awful, ya see what I’m sayin’?”

“Yes, mostly I think I do see.”

“Now, I’m not sayin’ me and Zachary’ll ever have another huggin’ – an it ain’t necessary – but we done it once.”

“May I ask if you’ve had much hugging in your life – don’t answer if it’s too private a thing.”

“A slave boy don’t have no private, Benny. Ya jist can’t seem ta git that through yer head. But, about huggin’. When I was little I got lots a hugs – Pricilla and the other women. I remember my daddy would hold me in his big arms. That was sort a like bein’ hugged. The older I got the less hugs I got and the past few years there ain’t been none.”

“I wonder why that is?”

“Fer one thing, Wheezie’d a whipped me uncscious if’n

he'd seen it. Once black boys and girls git old enough to make babies, huggin' is jist fer the married."

"Thank you for that. It helps me understand – to get to know you better."

"Ya really do wants ta git ta know me, don't ya? I guess I should thank ya fer that."

Benny didn't respond to the thanks, but did try to continue.

"Let me try one more question since words seem to be going well between us."

Amos shrugged.

"Okay."

"Were you terribly frightened when the men took you away? I guess I'm not even sure what question I'm trying to ask. Were you afraid for your life?"

"Benny, you *still* jist don't git it. I'm a black boy. Not a day goes by fer a black boy my age that ya can be sure ya'll be alive tomorra. That's not anything that's in our control."

"You are right. I can't understand how a life like that could be. I admire you, you know."

"Admire *me*? Why?"

"The life you have lived would have made most people bitter and angry and vengeful. You don't seem to be any of those things. You have to have been stronger than anybody I've ever known."

Amos became silent. He lowered his head and responded – quietly at first.

"I ain't all that unruffled if that's what yer getting' at."

"Unruffled. I suppose that's an accurate description of what I mean."

"You say you got the heaves from killin' those southern boys down at the Post battle. I'm tellin' ya I could kill 'em all day long and never feel nothin' but good. Sometimes I lay awake at night an plan out how I could kill Wheezie and take a week ta do it – keepin' him screamin' the whole time. When I was little, I couldn't understand why we didn't jist burn the plantation house down an leave. Pricilla explained that without the plantation owner – our owner – we'd have no place to go, no food to eat, no nothin'. It was a terrible lesson ta learn – that a black boy jist had ta put up with it all in order ta

survive. It was soon after that that I come ta terms with fair and unfair. Unfair was how it was always gonna be so I stopped even considerin' fair. Once James put it this way. Takin' the whip is how we pay the master fer all he does fer us."

Benny fought to keep his churning stomach from relieving itself right then and there. It had become quite clear that there were two boys named Amos, both dwelling within that one body. One the cunning, thoughtful, docile survivor. The other, a seething mixture of anger and hate. He only hoped the needs of the survivor continued to control the vicious passion of the other one.

There was another question that had been on Benny's mind, but asking it had made him uncomfortable. Amos volunteered it on his own as if it were something he thought he needed to explain.

"A week ago last night, Wheezie put Jessie under the whip. She'd been havin' some sort a female trouble, Pricilla said, and she slept in past mornin' call – that's when we's all counted ta be sure we's still there. I had ta make a choice. I knew if'n I stayed I'd kill Wheezie fer what he done ta her. Then master would hang me. And none a that would help Jessie or me, in the long time. So, that night I took out. I didn't tell nobody so nobody could git in trouble fer knowin'. I feel bad about the reminders, but I know they was glad ta take 'em if it meant my freedom."

"Reminders? I don't think I understand the term."

"Whenever there's a runaway, Wheezie picks out three men and whips 'em til they drops – sometimes twenty lashes. It's ta make us all think about how we'd be hurtin' the others if'n we took off. Any one a us would take the whip if one a us got away."

It had been an informative morning for Benny – a terribly sorrowful, sickening, troubling, but informative, morning. He would consider carefully what, if any, of it he would share with Zachary. None of the atrocities would be new to him, of course. There had been a time he would have viewed them from the slave owner's point of view as both fair and necessary. Benny couldn't be sure how he would react at that point nor did it think it appropriate to force him to consider

them until he was ready.

“Can I ask you, like ya asked me?” Amos said.

“I suppose so. Sure.”

“Ya left yer home ta go fight, right?”

“Yes. I was too young so I had to lie about my age to join up.”

“What yer folks think about it – you joinin’ up too soon?”

“I didn’t tell them. I was a coward about it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I couldn’t bear looking them in the eyes and telling them I was leaving. My father would have forbid it. I would have gone anyway. I knew it would really hurt them.”

“It didn’t hurt them ta jist have ya up an leave?”

“Oh yes. That hurt, too, but I didn’t have to witness it, you see. The coward part of it. It was probably harder on them the way I did it, really, but I figured it would be easier on me.”

“Is it – easier on you?”

“God no. I’ve been sick about it every hour of every day since.”

“Can’t you let them know? You know’s about writin’ and sendin’ letters don’t ya?”

“I can say the opportunity to do that hasn’t come up. It’s what I tell myself, but it’s probably not really true.”

“Probably?”

“I could have written them from down in Livingston Country where I joined up. I thought about it, but I guess I was too close to it. I couldn’t figure what to say that could make matters better. So, I put it off and I just kept putting it off. Now, I may be blind in one eye, I’m sure I’m listed as a deserter so I probably shouldn’t even try to go home. I assume the army will look for me there. It was made very clear to me when I joined that deserters were shot. So, I’m in limbo.”

“Limbo?”

“Think of it as no place to go.”

“I guess all three a us is in that then ain’t we – limbo – no place ta go.”

“I guess we are.”

“We’re pretty smart – you said so. We can figure

somethin' out.”

Benny didn't respond. His naive young friend had no conception of how things worked out in the real world. It did give him something to smile about – if only for the shortest of moments. Zachary was more than likely going to get shot as a Confederate deserter. He was more than likely going to get shot as a United States Army deserter. If Amos were caught, hanging could have been his future as well. But, if Amos wasn't caught, he would be the only one of the three of them up north who would be free to live out his life into old age. What's fair? He wondered. What's unfair? What's right? What's wrong? Who decides? Who should decide?

All he had were his Rabbls and at that moment he doubted they could be enough. They had to be enough.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Amos and Perfumed Ladies?

Four hoots, met by four hoots at four o'clock, soon allowed a welcome reunion. Benny and Jacob had been making such good time they stopped at about three to make camp, do a little hunting and let Zachary catch up.

"How'd it go?" Benny asked as Zachary came into view through the thick stand of trees.

"Really, very well. I have double, maybe triple the stamina I had just two days ago. Only stopped to rest a handful of times. We have some Doc, here, I have to say."

"You have trouble locating us?" Benny asked.

"Not really. I moved north along the trail for fifteen minutes. Then I moved directly east for fifteen minutes. Then I went back south for fifteen minutes so I've been right behind you by less than hour all day."

"Ingenious," Benny said.

Zachary handed the pain medicine canteen to Amos.

"There is still some of your medicine left if you need it."

"Maybe a sip," Amos said.

He had not complained once the whole day. Benny was learning that neither slave boys nor more recently freed slave boys complained.

"We got two nice sized rabbits, a cookin'. They'll fill all our bellies up good an proper. Got more pain medicine boilin' down. All willow. No Aspens around here. Be ready by sleepin' time."

"I'll be ready to turn in early," Zachary said. "The rabbit

sounds great. I smelled it back quite a piece. A breeze I guess. I just followed my nose the last mile or so.”

“I hope them bad guys didn’t get no whiff. You see any signs a them?”

“Nothing. No sighs of you two either. You did a good job.”

“I was just about ta unwrap Benny’s eye. It’s been nearly the week his army doc said ta wait. We decided the sooner the better.”

“What you’re saying is that *Impatient Boy* here talked you into getting after it a day early.”

“Well, that, too.”

It lit a broad smile.

“Let’s get at it while the rabbit finishes roasting,” Benny said. “I’m not afraid to admit I’m very nervous about this. What if I really can’t see?”

“Not seein’ would be awful, okay,” Amos said, “but ya really been doin’ good with only one eye ever since I knowed ya. Ya walks fine. Ya shoots great. Yer still pretty handsome fer a white boy.”

“Thank you for that. You’re right. At worst it’s still going to be this good. That really did help.”

He figured part of him had just become black.

Amos remained serious and methodically went about untying the bow on top of the bandage and unwinding layer after layer of Amy’s handiwork.

“Don’t look like no new seepage since last time I checked it. That must be good. Ya keep that eye closed now til it’s all off. . . . There. I guess it’s on yer schedule now.”

Benny cupped his hand over the eye thinking it would be better to just let a little light in at a time. It hadn’t detected any in the days since the injury. He turned away from the sun and gradually spread his fingers open. He stood there for a minute eventually dropping his hand away. He sighed and turned around toward the others. He blinked a few times. He kept a serious look and faced Amos.

“Afraid there’s nothing . . . yet. The medic said it might take longer. Tell me how the skin looks.”

“Looks good. Don’t look like there gonna’ be no burn scars. I think I see your eyelashes growin’ in already. They

was burned off plum down to the flesh.”

“Let’s see if we can make a patch or something just to keep out most of the light instead of this big bandage,” Benny said.

He made no real attempt to hide his bitter disappointment. There were tears – but he kept them inside.

“I can do that. I’ll git ta work on a patch right after we put away our supper. Jist let me tie back a couple a layers a this bandage til then.”

Zachary sensed something had changed between the other two while he had been gone. Something about their closeness – perhaps the nature of the respect they shared. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he was pleased – at least he wanted to be pleased. One of his teachers had told him that a group of three had the potential to be the most unstable of any group make-up – it could always turn into two against one. He didn’t see that happening among them, yet something had brought the possibility to mind.

As dusk crept in around them they enjoyed the rabbit; darkness overtook the world more subtly there among the tall trees.

“Think we need to take turns standing watch tonight?” Zachary said.

“I’ve been wondering about that, too,” Benny said. “I’m thinking it’s probably a good idea. Back from the perimeter – in the deep shadow – I’m thinking. Two hour shifts?”

“Sounds right to me,” Zachary said offering a nod. “I have one other idea for us to consider. How about if the one on watch always wears Amos’s coat. That way if they would get close enough to see us sleeping here by the fire, they might think Amos was not with us – they know his coat. They might just move on.”

“That’s a really great idea,” Benny said. “It will at least confuse them long enough that they might show their hand.”

“So, what does the guy on watch do if they shows up?” Amos asked.

Again, it was a question that cut to the crux of the issue. Benny had one suggestion.

“First, we need to alert the others – that owl hoot thing, maybe, but just once.”

“You know how to hoot?” Amos asked.

Benny demonstrated to the other’s complete satisfaction.

“Then what?”

It had been Amos again. Amos demonstrated an overriding need to make sure he understood the rules and expectations. The others understood how that had become such an essential part of his life – follow the rules exactly equated to less potential for pain.

“Fire first or talk first?” Benny asked.

“I guess those are the alternatives. Even with six rifles it would be unlikely one of us out in the shadows could stand off six men each with a rifle.”

“What about this – jist consensusin’ ya understand. We all stay out in them shadows. Two’s a sleepin’ and one’s a watchin’. We make bodies stretched out around the fire, out a leaves, and wrap ‘em in the blankets. If they comes we can shoot ‘em down like pigeons on a rooftop.”

It was more raw hostility than Zachary was prepared to hear from him; not so much for Benny – anymore.

“I like the main idea a lot,” Zachary said. “I would rather not risk a gunfight, though.”

“Okay, then,” Benny began, “how about we find spots well back from the fire, but make sure we each have a clear view of it. Then, first at least, we can just sit tight and see ifn they’ll leave.”

“And a second?” Zachary asked voicing Amos’s blossoming question.

“I know; second means shooting and I’m with you on that, I guess.”

“Okay agin, then, how about this? We sits back all spread out like I said, but we don’t have no fire and no leaf bodies. With no fire, no way outside a dumb luck they’re gonna find us here in this big ol’ forest.”

Benny began clapping. Zachary joined in. The two of them nodded, privately recognizing that in many ways their partner had something more than just a *good* head on his shoulders. They didn’t understand why that idea hadn’t come to them.

There was seldom anything directly logical or

immediately final about a group of teen age boys coming to a joint plan of action. Those four revisions actually weighed in on the more efficient end of the scale.

"It will be cold tonight. Not a cloud in the sky, Zachary said.

"Always warmer in a forest at night in the winter," Benny said. "The trees spend all day absorbing heat and then give it back into their surroundings come dark."

"And," Amos added, "We can cover up with leaves. Leaves keeps a guy good an warm in the cold. All winter long Wheezie 'lowed us ta keep a whole stall full a dry leaves jist fer that. I guess he wasn't all bad."

Any response, more than the fiery flash of a glance that passed between Benny and Zachary, would have ignited the promised fight already brewing between their deep down basic ideas about slavery. So, Benny had to deal with his angry feelings privately; Zachary with his growing confusion and possibly guilt. Benny hated to feel angry – it went against everything he'd been taught at home. Zachary had really never before had to deal with guilt so it was a newly troublesome, fully foreign aspect of life for him. Amos had found some way to stuff his anger and hate into a tight compartment deep inside him so he seldom had to think about it. It had become clear to Benny, however, that if it ever roared to the surface there would be hell to pay.

"So, is the plan to turn in with the dark and get an early start in the morning?" Zachary asked.

"Sounds like it," Benny said. He looked from one to the other. "Consensus?" he asked. They nodded.

Amos had been working on an eye patch from rags Amy sent along – probably for bandages. She just assumed teenage boys would need bandages. He put it up to Benny to see how it was coming, then went back to making necessary adjustments.

"I have something else to bring up for us to consider," Benny said. "Remember how Ezra said the Mississippi River was one option for us to use going north. I figure if we keep traveling due east like we have been today it can only be fifty or sixty miles to the river. Zachary, you know a lot more about river travel than I do. But I'm wondering if that might really be

our best bet. It would avoid traveling the Missouri boot heel and might avoid fighting off who knows what there in the hostile middle of nowhere.”

“But we have no money for passage,” Zachary said.

“Maybe we could work our passage. We’re strong and smart. We could catch on in a hurry.”

Zachary nodded, signifying he was thinking about it – not that he yet agreed.

“Two main problems with that,” he said at last. “We would hit the river east of here where it runs between Arkansas, a confederate state, and Tennessee, a confederate state. They won’t cotton to your Yankee talk and I’m not really sure how safe we can keep Amos. It would seem unlikely that a slave owner would be taking a slave north.”

“I heard there were lots of black men working as free men on the boats,” Benny said, more just wondering out loud if that might contribute anything to the decision.

“There are, but few of them sail south past Kentucky and that’s another fifty or sixty miles on up the river from here. I am not saying no, understand, just laying out some of the problems that come to mind.”

“What about the fact we’re boys?” Benny asked.

“That shouldn’t be a problem. Lots of young men our age work the boats.”

“Wouldn’t folks expect us to be in the army, is what I meant?”

“I see. I’m not sure. A dilemma. If we try to look younger, we’ll avoid that army thing, but won’t likely get a job. If we try to look older, we will be subject to questions about the military, *but* if we can find a way around that we can probably find work.”

“I’ve heard back in the north, at least, sometimes a boy’s parents, all quite legally, will pay some other boy or man to go serve in his place. Could we incorporate that into our story – do you think it might help?”

“Very interesting. It is done down here in the Confederacy as well. Unflattering to my kind, it’s called the Brat Law – giving rich boys a way out of the dangers of uniform.”

“You could sure pull off being a rich kid who’d bought

his way out,” Benny said, “and I meant no offence by that.”

Zachary shrugged. Like he had said, they were all what they were.

“In fact, it’s what my father preferred. I was so hot headed patriotic I wouldn’t hear of it. I thought with right on my side, nothing could happen to me.”

He raised his eyebrows as if to say, ‘so much for that dumb take on life, duty and religion’.

“It might actually help with the Amos problem, too,” Zachary went on, studying Amos. “Rich southern boys often travel with a slave – usually a domestic rather than a field slave, of course, but you seem to know the role. Still, it takes us back to the fact that we have no money to book passage and a boy with a slave would be expected to have money.”

“How about something like this,” Benny said sitting back and beginning to think out loud much like he did when spinning one of his stories. “You, Zachary, can be the rich southern boy whose father bought him out of serving. Amos can be your attending slave boy. I can be your cousin from Illinois who traveled down to find you after I heard your plantation got burned to the ground. Since I’m blind in one eye I was exempted from service. We’d be heading north so our story could be that you were coming to live with me and my parents – your aunt and uncle. It would explain my accent. I only had enough money to get down to you, expecting you’d have money to get us back north. The invading troops that burned your plantation also looted it leaving you with no money and a slug in your shoulder. During the attack on your plantation, you and Amos hid out somewhere together. That way, it would seem legitimate for you to still have Amos and for us to need to work our way north.”

Zachary began clapping. Amos joined in enthusiastically.

“You is a fine story teller, Benny. Maybe that what ya should do – write stories.”

“I believe we might be able to pull that off,” Zachary said sitting up straighter.

“First, we need to . . . what?” Benny said stopped in his tracks without a starting point in mind.

“Well, first we needs ta survive this night,” Amos

suggested.

He held the new patch in place. It fit fine. He seemed pleased. The others were intent on talking about the plan and let it pass.

“Then, we need to get on over to the river,” Benny said. “If it’s all trees between here and there it may take three or four days. If it becomes grass, the way I expect it will, then maybe only two.”

“On our way, we can rehearse our stories,” Zachary said. “They need to be airtight. We can take turns asking each other all the questions we think we might get asked so we can have ready – believable – answers in place.”

It brought on a period of silence as they let the plan work inside them, seeing if it fit. Ten minutes passed. The fire burned down to embers.

Amos broke the quiet.

“The sippin’ medicine is ready. I’m gonna add it to the canteen. I’ll take a swig and then you can carry it fer us. Remember it’s hot if’n yer takin’ any now.”

He was addressing Zachary who accepted the arrangement without comment.

“Shall we stir the fire out?” Amos asked.

“I suppose we’re ready to turn in. Sure.”

The folly of the move was immediately clear. It kicked embers into the air and they spiraled up above the tree line surely being visible for miles in all directions. So much for being protected in the depths of the forest by the bad guy’s need for dumb luck.

“What’s done is done,” Benny said. “I still think our plan for the night is a good one.”

They each collected his gear – two rifles apiece, a packet of ammunition, a canteen, and a blanket.

“I’ll stand first watch,” Benny said. “Just don’t blow my head off when I come to wake you up. Amos, you second, okay?”

Amos nodded.

Zachary understood they were giving him a good start on a night’s sleep there at the beginning. The rotation would only require one watch for him. He accepted it because he understood he needed the rest. They each found a spot within

fifteen yards of each other and settled in.

Amos was immediately asleep – that ability seemed to have come as original equipment for the boy. Benny sat back against a tree and considered what Amos had said about a possible career path for him. Zachary had a difficult time finding a comfortable position, but once he found it, he was, also, soon asleep.

The only interloper during the night had been a beautiful gray fox. It appeared on Zachary's watch. Of the three, he was the least acquainted with nature – not unappreciative, mind you, just inexperienced and uninformed. In fact, when he first spotted it, he thought it was a dog and made some overtures for it to come closer. The fox had been wise enough to take note of him and then move on. It was a fortunate Plantation Boy that had encountered such a wise animal.

Dawn was breaking as Benny finished his second watch. It seemed odd – fascinating perhaps – to see the earliest signs of morning light straight above him in the sky rather than to the east.

He poked around in the ashes hoping to find some last vestige of fire so he wouldn't have to disturb the others with the raking of the flint and steel. There it was a tiny dot of sparkling orange glow. He smiled and laid leaves onto it. Amos had kindling stacked nearby. Five minutes later there was a fire just large enough for egg scrambling and fried rabbit warming. He arranged things in the skillet and sat back to wait on the others.

Amos made his way back into camp next and took a seat at the fire.

"I think you arranged me out a my second watch," Benny.

"Really? How despicable of me."

He had used the word to get a response. By that point in their relationship Amos no longer had to ask. His furrowed brow indicated his need for a definition or clarification. He was comfortable asking and the others were pleased to accommodate him, often setting him up the way Benny had just done.

"Despicable – wicked, shameful," Benny said.

Amos nodded. He had figured as much, but felt no need to mention it.

“How’s the ankle seem this morning?” Benny asked. “You put a lot of difficult miles on it yesterday.”

“Feels good. Like I said, a little weak side ta side, but hardly any pain this mornin’.”

“This is a great eye patch. Thanks. My face feels free. Maybe that doesn’t make sense.”

Amos’s face lit up.

“A *black* patch makin’ a *white* boy feel free. I think that’s funny.”

Benny matched Amos smile for smile, but only had the vaguest sense of why he had seen humor in it.

“Think I better go check on Zachary?” Amos asked.

“You don’t need my permission, Amos.”

“Oh. Yeah. I keep forgettin’. It makes me feel dumb when I do that.”

“I’m thinking that will change.”

“What da ya mean?”

“You’ll understand when it happens.”

“One a them ‘wait an see’ things. James used to do that to me. James is a good man. When I was young he told me someday I’d start lookin’ at girls like they was girls instead a just other people. I didn’t understand for a long time and then it was like one mornin’ I woke up an there she was, a girl.”

Benny chuckled and reached out to ruffle his hair the way he had often done to his little sister. It had been a spontaneous thing between friends. They understood. Amos smiled and leaned his head into Benny’s hand. Being touched in friendship had been a rare offering those past few years – never from a white man.

It was the first-time Benny had felt the hair of a black person. Something about it seemed very special. There was really something there to feel, some substance, unlike his own that just laid there, lifeless.

In a million years, Amos would have never dreamed there would come a time in his life when he could just reach out and touch a white boy’s hair, but there he was *reachin’* out.

“You calls it blond, right?”

“Blond, yes. Medium blond to be specific.”

“How do ya git it grow so long? Mine jist sits up there clingin’ ta my scalp like it’s afraid if it lets go it’ll fall off.”

Benny chuckled.

“I can take no credit for its length. It just grows by itself. Mama cuts it four times a year. I go from this to that – he pointed back and forth between his hair and Amos’s – in fifteen minutes under her shears.”

“It’s really soft. If I had long hair like that I’d never let nobody cut it.”

Their conversation had roused Zachary and he made his way back to the fire his blanket still draped around his shoulders. He stood in close and warmed his hands. Amos took it upon himself to move the skillet further onto the fire to hurry the process along.

Zachary worked his shoulder and arm.

“Look at that, gentlemen. Practically full motion. There remains a good deal of discomfort, but it moves with a great deal of efficiency. That has been my greatest concern – mobility. I assume the pain will eventually subside.”

Amos put his hands to his mouth and chuckled. Benny joined him with a broad grin.

“What?” Zachary asked looking back and forth between them.

“We jist gets a kick outta it when ya talk like Zachary.”

Zachary tilted his head and broke a few shallow furrows in his brow suggesting he didn’t understand.

“Perfect English and two dollar words,” Benny said offering the brief explanation.

Zachary allowed a smile.

“I guess I am what I am. We are all what we are, right? That should be fine, shouldn’t it?”

“Well put,” Benny offered. “We meant no offense you understand. If anything, we were more admiring it than mocking it.”

Amos nodded. He had been stirring the eggs in the skillet with some vigor and they were ready – almost recognizable as scrambled eggs, in fact.

“Plates or skillet?” he asked.

“Skillet makes more sense,” Benny said.

Amos passed around spoons and held out the skillet so they could all access it.

Becoming comfortable eating from a communal skillet had not come easily for Zachary. Benny knew it. Amos knew it. And, Zachary most certainly knew it, but he was dealing with it, and kicked himself for having been so well-bred that it made any difference in the first place. It was dawning on him that having been a rich, slave owning, white boy had sheltered him from important and intriguing sides of life – the normal sides of life he suspected. Picking up chunks of meat – other than fried chicken – and eating them with his fingers still had its off-putting side, but it was fascinating how hunger could moderate one’s sense of propriety.

Amos cleaned out the skillet with leaves while Zachary and Benny made the travois ready for travel.

“That’s a great patch you made for Benny,” Zachary said.

“Thanks. That’s what he said, too. Maybe that’ll be *my* thing.”

“I don’t understand,” Zachary said.

“Well, Benny here’s gonna be a famous writer and I’ll be the best patch maker that’s ever been. Now I jist have to come up with somethin’ fer you. Don’t worry about it. I’ll come up with somethin’. Maybe governor with all yer fancy words and talkin’.”

Zachary understood it was the truth – Amos *would* have a thoughtfully fashioned suggestion. He was being well taken care of – a situation that was at once demeaning, distressful and agreeable.

Benny had a final point to make before they left.

“Just because they didn’t find us during the night doesn’t mean those Retrievers have given up looking. We still have their thousand-dollar prize with us, so we need to remain vigilant at least til noon I’d say.”

The others nodded.

They stepped off. Amos and Benny alternated, rest stop by rest stop, pulling the travois. Zachary led the way up front. His assessment of his stamina had been correct and they were pleased – relieved and pleased.

An hour into the day's journey the trees became sparse and soon a vast, treeless plain of tall grass stretched out before them. They stopped and surveyed the scene all the way to the horizon.

"Ain't that beautiful!" Amos said.

It was, but for some reason those were not words they expected to hear from him. Benny felt somewhat ashamed of himself. Zachary was merely dumbfounded at the phrase.

"That'll be the Mississippi River on the other side, right?" Amos asked walking ahead into the shoulder-high blades of greens and yellows. He stretched out his arms and twirled in it like a propeller.

"It's somewhere out there. A couple of days away I imagine," Benny said.

"Look how the breeze makes the top of the grass look like broad waves moving across a lake," Zachary said pointing into the distance.

"I never seen a lake before. Think we'll git ta see one."

"I can guarantee it," Benny said.

From that point on, Amos would live in a continual state of awe as he came upon one new thing after another. His companions found it infectious and would revisit and grow to appreciate things they had long relegated to the realm of the ordinary.

They rested mostly in silence. In some way leaving the trees behind and venturing into the grass ahead became another significant watershed in their journey, adventure, trek toward survival – whatever it really was.

They allowed twenty minutes down time and were on their way again. Away from the forest, the constant cool breeze and the direct rays of the sun provided a trade off in terms of temperature. At Zachary's suggestion, it became Benny and Zachary together on the travois. The long, thick grass had multiplied the amount of friction and drag and two strong bodies were required. Amos led the way – not as easy a task as it had at first appeared. The blades were sharp and tended to cut flesh that contacted them. Long winter trousers and thick coats kept any real damage to a minimum. Benny worried about Amos's bare feet.

"Don't you want to try the boots?" Benny suggested.

Amos turned and smiled.

“These feet’s a whole lot tougher than any ol’ grass this prairie can offer up.”

It was the last that would be said of it. His words seemed to be true. Just as amazing, his feet never seemed to get cold. More of his original equipment, Benny figured.

The prairie teemed with small game and occasional streams offered a variety of small fish. There was no wanting for things to eat. That night they made camp along a narrow stream and enjoyed fish and wild carrots.

It was Zachary who mentioned it.

“We really stink, you know. I for one am ready for a bath. Amy put in soap, correct?”

“Right,” Amos said. “Prob’ly great smellin’ soap.”

He went to the stream and ran his hand through the water.

“Not as cold as the air fer sure, but cold – Zachary would call it *relatively cool*.” He had lowered his voice to mimic Zachary’s.

“You skittish about cold water,” Zachary asked, kidding.

“Oh, no, not me. I jist figured you was used to havin’ heated bath water in the winter and would suffer somethin’ awful if’n ya had ta git into cold.”

The truth of the perceptive comment would not be confirmed or denied.

Amos broke out their second sets of clothes, and found the soap and the one bath towel Amy had included.

Bathed and smelling of Amy’s magical soap they were soon decked out in their new clothes – Amos’s trousers had to be rolled up, but other than that they were a pretty good fit – they set to washing the first set at the creek. Amos was the uncontested expert, but soon the others were mastering the dipping, the soaping, the beating on a rock and finally the rinsing.

Amos looked around.

“No trees to hang ‘em up ta dry.”

“I imagine they’ll lay out on top of the grass,” Benny suggested.

They did, more or less.

The boys felt better. It was humorous to the others how

Amos kept sniffing his hands and shirt. There was clearly an affinity between Amos and perfume. Maybe his calling in life would in some way involve perfumed ladies. It was a pleasant – if way too stimulating – thought on which to drift off to sleep.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

The Mighty Mississippi

It was fish for breakfast. Amos was up early and, thinking ahead to lunch, had brought in seven young bass. He fried up half while his companions groaned themselves back to life – they *were* teen age boys – and let the rest fry while they ate. He had eaten both raw fish and cold fried fish and would consensus for the latter every time.

“So, today the day we find the Mississippi River?” he asked with his characteristic enthusiasm.

“It could be,” Benny said. “We made really good time yesterday. How you two feeling – aches and pain wise?”

“I’m really good,” Amos reported.

Being asked how he felt was an exciting new part of life for him. Before, it would have been a meaningless question because he would have had to go to the fields regardless.

“Like I said yesterday,” Zachary added, “I am doing a lot better. Pretty much have my strength back. I’m resigned to the fact that my shoulder won’t be back to normal for some time.”

They took a few moments to watch the sun pop up above the horizon. Amos was clearly fascinated by sunrises and sunsets. Benny asked him about it.

“You seem to really enjoy watching the sun come up in the morning. I was wondering why?”

“Most a my life I been out in the fields before sun up and then I spent most a the day bent over, plantin’ or pickin’ or hoein’. Never really had no chance ta look up an see the sun. Wasn’t worth no stripe. It’s somethin’ ta treasure, I’s tellin’ ya

that.”

“Why don’t you take the lead first this morning, Amos,” Zachary said.

“You’re makin’ my life really difficult, ya know,” Amos returned with more than a hint of disgust, and as usual, believing it had been a full and sufficient explanation.

The others were stunned.

“I just thought since . . .”

“I knows what ya jist thought. Ya thought since I liked to see the sunrise you’d put me out ahead where I can see the sunrise without having ta peek around Benny.”

“Well, yes. I certainly didn’t mean anything bad by that, though.”

“I know. See, that’s the trouble. Yer a white plantation boy. All my life I’ve expected white boys ta enjoy makin’ my life miserable. Since I come ta know ya, I can’t count on that no more – or lots a other thins.”

“I have no idea how to respond to that, but thanks for your honesty. You know, *I* keep bothering *me*, also.”

“What? *You* keeps botherin’ *you*? Now I’m the one that don’t know how ta respond.”

Zachary offered a simple explanation.

“When I hear myself making a suggestion like that to a black boy – ‘walk out front and enjoy the sunrise’ – it reminds me how *my* whole world has been sent topsy turvy, also. Since I met you two, I’ve had to begin re-thinking lots of things I’ve always just accepted as being true. So, if you will stop being a descent, likeable, helpful black human being, I’ll stop being considerate of you.”

Amos understood that last part was a joke and he grinned.

It was becoming less easy for either of them to misplace the truth that, in fact, they were being forced to change – to rethink things and adjust. The only alternative seemed to be going their separate ways and truth be told, it was even too late for that – they could never return to their former lives of comfortable certainties.

Benny was pleased that the two of them were having what seemed like a useful conversation, but sensed they may have overlooked or at least set aside that it wasn’t being all

that easy for him, either.

A month earlier, Benny's overriding aim in life had been to get boys like Zachary in his sight and kill them. He supposed he never really hated them like Zachary and Amos had hated each other's kinds, but he had been convinced the only way to take down the social order he *did* hate was to win the war, and winning the war – disgusting as it was – seemed to require killing gray clad boys. The reality of it had made him sick beforehand and it made him sick to that moment. He needed to walk it off.

They collected their freshly laundered clothes, bundled them onto the travois, and, before the sun really had a chance to move from sunrise to morning, they were on their way. Regardless of his earlier protestations, Amos was clearly happy to be in the lead, Zachary was okay with playing second fiddle to Benny on the travois – an uneducated Yankee peon as he would have characterized him earlier – and Benny tried to set aside his inner turmoil and focus on friendship and cooperation in the moment.

The further they traveled the thicker and taller the grass became. It entangled their ankles and worked to slow them down, requiring a good deal more energy. Benny figured the lush growth had something to do with a more plentiful water table nearer the river, but had no real bases for the assumption. There were no significant objects on the unremarkable horizon to focus on and there in the tall grass it became difficult to keep to a true course. They discussed it over lunch and decided the lead person would carry a cup containing the compass needle they had fashioned days before.

With a half inch of water in the bottom and the bark and needle floating freely, they set out due east. It had taken but a moment for Amos to understand that for them to move directly east the needle needed to be kept parallel with the front of his body – left to right.

They kept to a steady pace that day, which required a few more stops due to the increased difficulty posed by the grass.

It was four o'clock or so when Amos noticed it first. He pointed.

“Is that black smoke up ahead?”

“Looks like it.”

“That a fire comin’ toward us?” Amos asked stopping in his tracks. “It’ll eat up this grass like goats on a fresh mowed lawn.”

Neither of the others was familiar with the saying, if in fact it was a saying. It made the point either way.

They set down the travois and Zachary stood off to the side shading his eyes from sun’s glare dancing back at them off the ever rippling, light colored grass.

“No. I think what we’re seeing is the smoke from the stack of a river boat. Lots of them use coal to fire their boilers. The back color indicates just that, a coal burner. They’re usually the big ones.”

Amos jumped up and down without offering anything by way of explanation. It might have been relief about the grass fire – or, more specifically, the unlikelihood of a grass fire. It might have been related to the fact they were actually nearing the river, no doubt another symbol of freedom. It might have been as simple as him suddenly realizing he needed to relieve himself. In any event, the gyrations gradually came to a stop.

Benny and Zachary suddenly had to confront the fact they harbored mixed feelings about the decision. The river had been their goal and having achieved that allowed them a sense of success and even happiness, perhaps. Still, they understood it presented a whole new array of unknowns. It would be the ultimate test of their talents. They would have to be sharp, alert and at the top of their game. They would have to improvise on a moment’s notice and anticipate and support each other’s moves. They would have to protect Amos in a foreign culture of unknown possibilities and potential problems.

“Have you ridden the boats often?” Benny asked.

“Four times a year since I was nine, with my daddy, selling cotton and buying . . . other things.”

As if by instinct, Amos flashed a quick, livid look at him. It faded almost as soon as it formed. Everybody understood and nobody pursued it.

“Looks like the river is maybe two miles away,” Benny said. “Judging distance with one eye is difficult.”

The others accepted his estimate since neither of them had much experience with such things.

“I suggest that we camp here for the night,” Zachary said. “I think there are some things we need to take care of before we try our hands as river bums.”

Neither Benny nor Amos understood what he had on his mind, but they would go along with it. Up to that point it was what they had done – give a hearing to anybody who wanted one. It had served their purposes well.

Amos pointed northeast.

“A small stand of trees. How about we camp over there?”

It was another of those, ‘no response needed’ things. Zachary and Benny picked up the travois and followed Amos as he dumped the water and stowed the compass needle back in his pocket.

It was further than they had thought. The trees were larger than they had thought. There were more of them than they had thought; seven surrounding a sizeable pond, which they had not seen. From wash marks around the outside, the pond appeared to grow and retreat periodically – possibly depending upon the flow of a spring that fed it.

There were two ducks huddling together on the pond – a male and a female according to Benny. Either one would have made a fine meal, but the boys made no move toward disturbing them – two other beings alone in the world. Benny collected wood fallen from the trees. It lay there in abundance suggesting it was clearly not a place frequented by other campers. Amos arranged the wood on a wide bare area at the near edge of the water. It would not do to set that grass on fire. The wood was soon ablaze, larger than was necessary. Its warmth did feel good as the sun lowered in the western sky behind them.

It was the first time they had really looked back.

“Can’t hardly even see the forest no more from here,” Amos said. “Maybe jist the tree tops.”

It had been nothing more than an observation.

A half hour later, a good-sized rabbit was roasting on a skewer. The ducks kept their distance on the other side basking in the last warm rays of the day. Whether their

reticence to move about was also encouraged by the fire or the presence of humans would remain their private matter.

They soon understood that Zachary's suggestion had been a good thing. They needed time to unwind, to put the uncertainties and fears of the past behind them – such as they could. It was like a welcome oasis in an uncertain and threatening land. There were unprovoked chuckles as there will be when one allows relaxation to unseat tension and anxiety. They understood they were different from the week before. They had evolved – into something better, they hoped. Some of it they liked outright. The verdict was still out on other parts.

Zachary waited until they had finished eating to broach the subject that was really on his mind. He added a log and took a seat on the grass facing the others.

“I have some things to say. It's not that I have any intention of changing your minds about anything. I just know your perspectives are very one-sided and I ask that you just hear me out. I don't expect agreement or questions or comments. We never need to speak of these things again.”

He certainly had their attention.

“Benny, you have been raised to think my southern way is bad and that your northern way is good. I have been raised to believe that you northerners are very short sighted and that as southerners go, you only care about the slaves and not about the vast majority of us who are white people. Those things that we have been taught prove nothing good or bad about either one of us. Amos, yours is a special case and I'll get to it.

“In the south, we have slaves. We say we own them. We all three understand how that works so I won't say more about it at this point. In the north, however, you have apprentices. Parents are paid a sum of money – like \$500 or \$1,000– and they allow a child to go work for a tradesman, supposedly so they can learn that trade although few actually ever do. Most apprenticeships last twelve years. During that time the adult is only required to provide food, clothing and reasonable shelter. An apprentice is little more than an owned piece of property during those years. His master has control of life and death over him. Did you know more apprentices run

away because of mistreatment in the north than slaves run away for the same reason in the south? I can point you to books published in the north that contain my facts.

“In the northeast, you still have what you call indentured servants. They are generally people who have had their passage paid to the United States from some European country and in return for that they agree to work for their benefactor for a number of years – often ten or fifteen. Again, they work for room, board, and clothes.

“Sometimes one person will have four or six or ten apprentices or indentured servants and force them to live together in one tiny room. They can be whipped or otherwise disciplined if they disobey or fall behind in their work. Apprenticeships are less about learning a trade than they are about increasing the production – and therefore the wealth – of the Tradesman. Did you know that since the United States became a country there have been just about as many of these ‘white slaves’ in your north as there are ‘black slaves’ here in the south?

“I will no longer defend the inhumanity that is regularly inflicted on the black slaves in the south. I hope you will take a fresh look at the same sort of thing going on in the north. What is really in a *name*: servant, apprentice, slave? How is paying another slave owner \$500 for a fifteen-year-old black man different than paying parents that amount for one of their ten year old children? With just a few exceptions on both sides, I find it difficult to call either more moral or Christian or more humane than the other.”

He turned directly to Amos and scooted so close that he could reach out and take both of his hands in his own.

“I owe you and Benny more than I could repay in my lifetime. To apologize to you for the life your owners have forced on you would be too shallow and meaningless to even offer. All I can do is tell you from the depths of my heart that I am really trying to accept you as a fine, decent, valuable, human being. I hope you can understand how difficult that is for somebody raised in my tradition. I do value you as one of my two best friends. If I ever truly can put color and station aside, it will be largely thanks to the two of you.”

Zachary had dropped a set of troubling, new

perspectives that could do nothing but effectively challenge the other's lifelong beliefs. Zachary had been correct; it was not the time for questions or attempts to mount defensive justifications. It left little to be said on any of their parts. Sleep did not come easily.

* * *

The following morning, they topped a gentle rise and there it was – the Mighty Mississippi as it was often described. Zachary had been to New Orleans and had seen the Gulf, but the river stretching out before them was by far the widest expanse of water either Benny or Amos had ever seen. Although Benny had ridden the troop boat south, he had loaded on and loaded off in the dark and had been relegated to the lower, windowless deck so had experienced none of it.

Upon giving the river only a moment's attention that morning, *that width* seemed to be its only 'mighty' feature as far as they could determine. The water, which appeared to be standing glassy-surface still, was brown, offering thick, green sludge near the shore. Refuse floated near the bank and lodged in fallen trees and rock outcroppings. It smelled many times worse than three boys after six days on the road. All things considered, their first impression was more than a little disappointing.

Regardless of that, they had to believe in its potential to serve them well. Benny and Amos looked to Zachary for direction.

"I've been thinking and I believe a mid-sized, operator-owned boat will offer our best chance to obtain a ride for work. Let's begin by just walking the docks and seeing what's available. It would be good to find out where we are, I suppose."

They turned north and walked a wagon road several hours to a tiny, riverside settlement. They stopped at the edge of town. From there they could count five boats in dock. All but one were cargo boats and none would be considered large. There were several stores and shops and a small hotel. It being, The Livingston Hotel, just south of, The Livingston Restaurant, suggested they had come upon Livingston. It was primarily a dock settlement with something less than two dozen houses set back behind the half dozen businesses.

“Why is all the buildin’s up on sticks?” Amos asked looking at Zachary for his answer.

“To hold them above the spring flood waters. When the snow melts up north it all comes this way and it’s often too much water to pass within the banks we see here.”

For Amos, the new experiences continued to be mindboggling. Coal, the river, huge boats, buildings on sticks, restaurant, hotel, melting snow, and floods: the education of Amos had moved to a new level. The boys were intrigued as they watched him taking it all in and tucking away questions that would most certainly be delivered at a later time.

With Zachary leading the way they began the walk into town. Amos, alone, pulled the travois. He kept his eyes down on the road. Benny followed intrigued with how that arrangement spoke to everything the three of them were not – no longer were, at least. Zachary assessed the boats and the potential they appeared to present for them.

Only two of the boats fit their needs. Zachary decided that prolonging their inquiry would only prolong their uncertainty. Stashing the travois beside a wooden railing on the dock, they walked up the plank of the ‘Suzzy Belle’ – Zachary, Benny, Amos. It had two floors – decks, they would be told – above the water line and probably nothing below. The once white paint was cracked, flaked and dirty – up top from the soot and below from the lapping, filthy water. They would soon learn it was a ‘doubler’ – it carried passengers on the top deck and cargo on the bottom. In all cases where the wellbeing of one or the other became a concern, the cargo won out. It was understood.

The owner’s name was Flax. No explanation about it was provided, but to preface it with Mr. seemed awkward and inappropriate. He was just plain Flax – short, aging, skinny as a pencil, Flax.

“I suppose you boys are lookin’ for passage.”

“Yes, sir, we are heading north to Illinois.”

“Suzzie Belle’s goin’ north as far as Grafton – that’s in Illinois. It’s a four to six-day journey, dependin’. Need two stokers and a ‘go boy’.”

Benny figured he understood that a stoker shoveled coal and kept the fire blazing. He wasn’t sure about the ‘go

boy' so, without thinking, he asked.

"I'm unfamiliar with the term, 'go boy', sir."

Flax paused, stepped back and looked him over – floor to the top of his head.

"You sound like a Yankee, yet you're hooked up with a Reb and a black. Don't make no sense."

Benny immediately understood why the plan had been for him to keep quiet. Zachary came to the rescue with the cousin story.

Flax seemed to buy it – if with some hint of reluctance. Truth or fiction it really didn't matter to him as long as they were hard and steady workers. They certainly looked strong enough.

"Here's my deal. Stokers work eight hour shifts. 'Go Boy' is always on call – sleep when you can. We sail most of sixteen hours a day."

Benny's question about the Go Boy had been overlooked.

"Typical *Go Boy* duties, I assume," Zachary said fishing for the details.

"Yup. Take care a the needs a the passengers. Have six cabins. Five of them in use. I provide two meals a day to my help – lots a grub – nothin' fancy. Bunk together in the Go Boy's room. Three bunks. Fine accommodations as they go."

"So, you have three hands?" Zachary asked.

"Will, if you three sign on."

He chuckled his high-pitched chuckle as if it had been particularly humorous.

The boys smiled and nodded.

"So, your hands don't stay long?" Zachary asked.

"Hands mostly work for passage. Once they git to where they're goin they're gone. It's the deal. My last three worked clear up from Natchez to Livingston."

"And you are leaving north, when?"

"About ten minutes after you three sign on. The black boy really free or slave?"

The question took them by surprise, suggesting Flax had maybe not bought the cousin story. It was not a question for which they had a practiced answer. Zachary gave it his best try.

“I’ll answer your question, but I’m wondering why it matters.”

“Don’t matter none to me. Jist like to know if he’s up for grabs.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If he’s known to be your slave, the likelihood is small that anybody’s gonna try to take him. If he’s free, he’ll likely be hogtied and headed back south before we hit St Louis.”

“Fortunately, then, I guess, he’s mine – like I said.”

Both Benny and Amos noted how he had cleverly avoided actually claiming him as a slave although he would have done it if he had been pressed. The statement as it stood could have just as well referred to friendship. Amos took it upon himself to move a step closer to Zachary. It seemed to seal the illusion for Flax.

“I guess we’re in, then,” Zachary said looking at the others and receiving the requisite nods of consensus. “I’m Zachary, this is Benny – my cousin like I said – and I call my boy, Amos.”

Flax nodded. He made no offer of handshakes.

“We have some things we’ve brought along. Is there room to stow them?”

Zachary pointed to the travois they had stood up against the railing at the dock.

“Tie it upright there outside your quarters. I usually charge for that.”

Zachary made no offer to pay. Flax let it drop. Benny figured they had just won round one.

They stowed their things and got acquainted with their quarters, which sat at the front of the main deck just behind and to one side of the Captain’s wheel. It was a seven by seven-foot windowless room with a seven-foot-high ceiling. The three bunks were stacked on top of each other on the inside wall. There was a small table and two wooden chairs.

The lower deck consisted of four main rooms – divisions, more appropriately – each of which ran the width of the boat and held the cargo. Access was gained from open, wide, connecting doorways along the center of the ship. As it turned out the boiler room was set low to the rear and also spanned the width. It was, as would be expected, filthy from

the coal and produced a deafening din of rhythmic clanks, and whines and screeches. Steam spewed in tiny plumes from uncertain pipe connections and the large, rear wheel that propelled the vessel sat at the back with groans, splashes and squeaks all its own.

The upper deck had three rooms on each side of a narrow hall that ran front to rear. Each room had one window that opened and was furnished quite comfortably with a bed, closet, chest of drawers, small table and an upholstered chair. The floors were strewn with a variety of mismatched throw rugs.

There was no reason to dislike either their accommodations or the work – they were in essence the ticket north and the boys immediately appreciated the package. Amos and Benny took to the shovels and Zachary began attending to the whims – reasonable and otherwise – of the odd assortment of passengers. It was the only possible and most reasonable allotment of physical skills and talents among them.

As for the passengers:

Miss Molly was a substantial woman who had seen sixty longer ago than she cared to have others contemplate. Her mostly graying red hair was rolled across her forehead and pulled back to cover her ears and the back of her neck. Her face was wonderfully wrinkled, but encased in powder and rouge as if attempting to plaster over the valleys time inevitably offered. She smelled of the perfume of the day as well as those that trailed along from her recent past. Humorously, the boys thought, she seemed to have undisguised amorous intentions toward Benny and Zach – most accurately in the opposite order.

Sam was a writer, riding the river boats to catch a plot and uncover wonderful characters to make a story come alive. After their first conversation, up on the sitting area atop the second deck, he clearly found himself fascinated with Benny and his creative mind. As time allowed, they talked for hours about all things related to story building and writing. Benny felt encouraged and figured he just might risk giving it a try.

Jake was a very well dressed, wheeler-dealer and none of them really trusted him. He and his fancy hat and narrow

moustache would have seemed more at home moving among the gambling accouterments and other well-dressed folks on a luxury boat. Early on he unsuccessfully tried to engage Zachary in a two-handed poker game using Amos as his stake. He was generous with his tips however and, in light of that, Zachary found himself willing to accommodate the man's less desirable attributes.

The other passengers pretty much stayed to themselves. Since Flax provided no meals for the passengers they made port every day so perishable items could be acquired from the markets along the way.

The boys agreed that Flax fed them well even though there was clear similarity in the fare from day to day – bread, ham, raw carrots, apples, jerky and milk when it was available. The stokers had a relatively mindless, though strenuous job. There was a pressure gage, which was to be maintained at a reading of 50 while they were moving. As they approached ports, Flax, who manned the wheel up front, would call through the voice tube to the boiler room telling them to let the pressure reduce and eventually to pull the huge lever that disengaged the steam engine from the wheel. There was a reverse lever, which at times, also needed to be engaged. If there were a tricky aspect to the job it was entering and leaving docks. Amos liked pulling the rope that sounded the steam whistle and had been cautioned to be less enthusiastic in its use.

Benny found himself exhausted after every shift. He was used to daylong farm work, but it seldom demanded such continuous effort. Amos was clearly the better prepared for the job and although he found it tiring, he also found ways to make it enjoyable. He sang and danced himself through every shift. He was discovering an inner joy he had no idea dwelled inside him. The Suzie Belle sailed the daylight hours so Benny's shift began at five in the morning and lasted until one in the afternoon. Amos took over and worked until nine or whenever they came upon a port for the night. They each slept while the other worked so it gave them time to be together between their shifts at night. They each spent time with Zachary as his work allowed.

One of Zachary's jobs – Flax had failed to mention it up

front – was topping off the water tank every time they made port. It involved turning a large, metal wheel to open a 'gate' on the top of the boat, swinging the delivery arm from the water tower into place over it and running it full. There was nothing difficult about the task, but on windy days or in the choppy waters of the more open docks, it offered its measure of danger – a condition, which was, for some reason, universally relished by teenage boys.

The boiler room job was hot and they stripped to their waists to work, meaning they accumulated layers of filth at a rapid pace. After the boiler room shift they showered from the water tank, attempting to remove at least the majority of the sticky, black, soot laden sweat from their hair and bodies. Flax set a five-minute limit on water use, so an efficient routine became imperative. They kept one set of clothes just for work. From the second takes of others on board, the boys assumed that, unlike the run of the mill stokers, Benny and Amos carried an appreciated and pleasant aroma between shifts. Amos was still baffled and enamored by Amy's magical, *sweet smillin'* soap.

* * *

As had become the routine, Flax woke the boys at four thirty for breakfast. The world was still dark. That morning Amos wasn't in his bunk.

"See Amos on deck?" Benny asked.

"Haven't really been out there," Flax said. "Think he run away. We are getting pretty far north."

The boys knew Amos was not going to run away. If he were missing, it meant he had been taken.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Steak Dinners Really Aren't Devastating Events, Amos!

Flax sniffed the air and then the pillow on the empty bunk.

"Chloroform," he said. "Nobody does use chloroform on himself. Causes sniffer's death. I'm thinkin' somebody's been up to no good."

"And I'm thinking that somebody is Jake," Zachary said. Benny took it one step further.

"We need to pay Jake's cabin a visit right now, with or without you, Flax."

"Sure. I'll come. I got the key. Never liked him. Never trusted him. Oh, my! Do you suppose he'd really . . . ?"

The door to Jake's cabin was not locked. His things were gone. Jake had cleared out, apparently taking more than just his bags.

"You know if he carried a hand gun?" Benny asked.

Before Flax could answer Zachary provided the information.

"He carries a pearl handled, double barreled derringer in a chest holster, left side, under his coat. I've seen it often. In fact, I've never seen him without it."

"There's a sayin' on the river," Flax offered. "Derringer up top, Derringer down below."

"I don't understand," Benny said apparently speaking for both of the boys from the looks on their faces.

"If a man carries one under his coat, you can bet he has another one strapped to his ankle. Just offerin' it as a

warnin' when you go after him."

The boys noted the word, 'when'.

Zachary turned to Benny.

"Yes, I guess we are going after him. Any suggestion, Flax?"

"Two. He'll be headed south to make a sale. And, most likely on the old Nachez, a small side-wheeler known to work the slave trade up and down the river. Owned by a man named Braveheart – half breed from the Oklahoma Territory. Been workin' the river for years. Heard told about a secret compartment under the water line. Don't really know no more – except he's a really bad man – kill ya sooner than shake your hand."

"Not sure what to do with our belongings, Flax."

"Ain't botherin' nobody where they are. You can always find the Suzzie Belle. I'll be in port here for at least three days now."

"Three days?" Benny asked. "I'd think there would be lots of men wanting to work their way north."

"Twon't be if I don't advertise no need."

"You're a good man, Flax." Benny said. "Leave when you need to, you understand. Like you said, we'll find you, like a hunter after a squirrel."

Flax understood. Zachary didn't, but wouldn't waste time asking just then. Benny took a moment to make sure the travois was still securely tied in place.

"Would you believe it!" he said motioning for Zachary's attention.

"What?"

"Look here. The bark and needle compass and the letter 'J' traced with a sooty finger – all here by the travois. Amos left us a clue. It confirms what you suspected, Flax. He is some kid? I guess the 'J' is also self-explanatory at this point – *Jake!*

They turned to take the ramp down to the dock.

"One question?" Flax called after them.

They stopped and looked back.

"Amos ain't no slave, right?"

"How did you know?"

"You two treat him like a kid brother who you'd protect

with your lives. That ain't how you'd treat a slave boy."

"We bow to your powers of observation," Zachary said with a dramatic bow from the waist. By the way, thanks for everything."

Flax raised a friendly hand. His weathered old face took on the look of deep concern.

They left on the trot. They entered the bait and tackle store that sat right on the river's edge and inquired about the Natchez.

"Started south no more than half hour ago," the shop owner said as he went about readying the shop for the early morning fishermen.

"We need to be on it. Any way to catch it?"

"You the two working the Belle and traveling with the black?"

"Yes sir," Zachary said without really thinking about how his answer might impact the man's response.

It certainly had not made things worse.

"There's a local livery wagon runnin' south along the river trail mornin's. It just went by as you come in. The Natchez is as old as I am. Moves slow even going down stream. I'm sure the livery will pass it up. Tell the driver that Mack sent you."

There was no hesitation. The boys were back outside and headed south at a full trot.

"You be okay, trotting?" Benny asked clearly surprised.

"I will. Feels good in fact."

"Okay. You set the pace."

"Be glad I'm injured, Yankee. Otherwise I'd clean your plow in a foot race."

They shared a broad grin.

"The time will come, Plantation Boy. The time will come."

They each noted to themselves how the terms Yankee and Plantation Boy had taken on gently friendly connotations – all quite different from their original ugly implications.

"What did you mean by the squirrel hunting comment with Flax," Zachary asked.

"When you hunt squirrel, you sit in one place and wait for them to come to you."

Zachary nodded.

The first bands of light began stretching across the sky. It was enough for them to make out the dust cloud the livery wagon was leaving in its wake. The sight apparently gave Zachary a second wind and he picked up the tempo. A few minutes later they were beside it waving it down. The driver pulled his team to a stop. It was a large wooden wagon – long, wide, and high. The driver looked to be fit and middle aged.

“Mack said you’d give us a ride south. We need to catch the Natchez – it’s a matter of life and death.”

“Involve a black?”

It was another of those questions for which they had not prepared. Zachary didn’t know how to answer. The wagon seemed to be their only chance and he knew they didn’t dare lose the ride.

Benny spoke.

“Yes, a black. We’re taking him north to freedom. Fifteen year old boy.”

“Get on. Hurry, now!”

The boys climbed the side and knelt behind the seat. The driver flipped the reigns against the backs of the team and fumbled for the whip. They were soon at a full out gallop. Zachary furrowed his brow clearly asking why Benny had felt so free to offer the full, true, explanation. Benny pointed to the lantern hanging atop a post off the front left corner of the wagon. It was metal, square, with a large star cut out of each of the four sides.

Zachary nodded.

Ten minutes later the driver pointed ahead on the river.

“The Natchez. A bad lot. Got weapons?”

“A knife apiece.”

The driver continued.

“Secret compartment. Only entrance is from the outside just above the water line on the other side – about ten feet forward from the back. Probably locked with a padlock. There’s a iron rod in the box behind my seat. The best tool I have along for turnin’ off a padlock. You understand how to do that?”

“Sure do,” Benny said suggesting complete confidence.

Zachary frowned not understanding how straight as an arrow Benny would have knowledge of such a thing. It was another question for later.

“Let me get you a good mile up ahead of it. It don’t make four miles a hour – mostly just floating down stream. You’ll need to swim back at an angle to the rear and then cross to the other side. You’re lucky. This time of morning when the dawn’s just breaking what sun there is puts a terrible glare on the water. See how glassy quiet it is. You’ll be nearly invisible.”

“Can you swim, Zachary?”

“Have to be on my right side. Couldn’t use my left arm.”

“Then I think I better do this by myself. How far you going south, sir?”

“It’s Willie, not sir. I’m going as far south as you need me to go.”

They made a few general plans about meeting at a church at the crossroads on south if they got separated. It wasn’t much of a plan, but they’d functioned pretty well on less.

They passed the Natchez. It was, as described multiple times a decrepit looking vessel in every sense of the word. They pulled ahead and eventually Willie reined in the team to a halt. The horses seemed appreciative. It had been a long hard gallop. Benny shed his coat and boots and secured the rod under his belt. He waded out into the water. It was freezing – probably not, but it felt that way. He figured it had to be some of that melted snow water from up north that had already made it down stream.

With no hesitation, he leaned forward into the water and began the swim. He soon had the angle he figured would intersect the old boat’s path. Benny was a strong swimmer, but the current just below the surface was a whole lot stronger than it looked. He needed to keep his kick shallow or he’d be sucked under. He adjusted his course several times. As the bright light of morning began filling in above the horizon he found himself swimming almost directly into it. He had to squint.

He realized again that with vision in only one eye his

depth perception was fully undependable. He was perhaps thirty yards away. Twenty. Ten. His angle might come up short. He plowed through the water with every reserve of strength he could muster. His hand touched the near side of the hull. There was a rail across the rear just above the water line. He managed to grab it just as it passed and let himself rest there for a time, breathing hard as he allowed the boat to pull him along.

It was then he sensed he was shivering – really shivering. Although it crossed his mind, there was not time to contemplate the physiological advantages of a good shiver when the body grew cold. He took a moment to scan the shore for the livery wagon. It had set an easy pace to just keep up with the boat. Even though it was a good thirty yards away its presence was reassuring.

He pulled his way along the railing to the far side – the side where the opening to the compartment was reported to be. It better be there or else his sort-of-a-plan would evaporate leaving him with nothing but most likely pneumonia. With some caution, he looked around the side. There was indeed a small door, no more than two feet square. It sat ten inches above the water line. That put the padlock nearly two feet above the water. It would be a strain to reach it.

He carefully removed the rod from under his belt, pleased it was still there since he had been paying no attention to it as he fought his way through the water. He turned onto his left side and swam to the door. Using the tips of his fingers on his left hand he managed to hook and maintain a solid grip on the door frame. He was holding one end of the slender, eighteen-inch rod with his right hand and reached high, kicking hard to achieve whatever extra elevation that might provide. Whether it had been skill or luck didn't matter, it threaded through the opening in the padlock on the first try. His job then became turning the rod until the padlock broke or the hasp into which it fit came loose. On that old boat, he bet on the hasp giving up first. It did. The lock was off. He returned the rod to his belt and worked to open the door. With the hasp and lock long sunk to the bottom of the river there was no easy handle to grasp.

He had an idea.

“Hoot. H o o t, H o o t, H o o t.”

He heard movement against the door from inside. It eased open.

“Hey, Doc. Can you come out and play?”

“I can, but I got four women in here with me and one is gonna birth a child any time now. Can’t jist leave ‘em behind.”

“Got any ideas?” Benny asked.

“Let me pull you in and we can talk.”

He was inside with less effort than either had expected. The women shaded their eyes from the light entering through the opening. Amos pulled the door mostly closed for obvious reasons. The compartment was no more than ten feet square and four feet high. It was cold.

“Is Jake on board?” Benny asked.

“Oh, yes, In fact, I think he has some stake in the boat.”

“Like a part owner you mean?”

“Yeah. Somethin’ like that.”

“How many hands on board?”

“Jist a couple – we think jist three, other than Jake an the captain – I’ll say he’s a mean lookin’ man – the captain.”

“Is there any way into this hold from inside the boat?”

“No. To avoid bein’ found during police searches, I expect. I feeled all over the walls and ceilin’ from in here – nothin’.”

The topic of how Benny had found him had not come up. Neither saw it as important at the moment.

“Okay then,” Benny began. “How can we disable the boat so it will either have to pull into port or just stop dead in the water?”

Amos thought for just a moment. His days as a stoker were about to pay off.

“Ya knows that shut down valve at the top of the emergency steam release pipe.”

“The one outside, you mean. I understand. Good thinking. We turn it off. On an old tub like this I’ll bet that emergency release pipe is in almost constant use. Turn it off, steam builds up and the boiler will blow. Do you know where it is?”

“I’ve determined the boiler room is at the center of the

boat – it makes sense because side wheelers need the power there. Probably just behind the paddle wheels, I'm guessin' and it's only guessin'. Probably cargo rooms right ahead an o'er top a us, here."

"I'm pretty sure I can ride the wheel to the top of the boat," Benny said. "I noticed that on my way out here. The rear of the wheels turn upward. It'll take some time for enough pressure to build up to do any damage."

He looked at the women and then continued.

"What about this for a plan. I'll climb up and turn off the valve. Then I'll swim back to shore where I have friends waiting with a team and wagon. We'll shadow the boat and by the time the damage is done we'll have worked out some plan to rescue you?"

"Okay. Be careful. Not fully light yet, but a white boy can't really can't count on the shadows fer hidin'. Like I said, these are really bad men."

As much as Benny disliked the idea of reentering the water, he backed out the little door, stomach down and immediately began pulling himself toward the wheel. It took several attempts, but presently he grabbed onto a paddle board and rode it the twelve feet to the top. There he managed to take hold of the railing to his right. He straddled and ducked himself through it onto the roof. He crouched low while he got his bearings. The pipe he was looking for was right where Amos assumed it would be. He approached the valve, which sat at the top of a thick, six foot tall two inch metal pipe. It was a good news/bad news sight. Excess steam was wafting from it at an excessive rate – an essential part of the plan. But, the valve was frozen – rusted open. What to do? Again, he reached for the metal rod and worked it through an opening in the handle. With that added leverage the handle began to move and he soon had the valve closed.

Benny returned the rod to his belt and let himself back down the side of the boat into the water. The breeze up top had only added to his distress. He had never felt that cold. He managed a quick smile thinking his shivers were certainly shivering. He welcomed the fact that the water seemed considerably warmer that time around. He let the boat pass and then began the arduous swim back to shore. He stopped

about half way there to rest and reset his course straight for shore. The boat continued moving downstream. He saw Zachary waving, indicating they had spotted him.

Five minutes later they pulled him out of the water. There were two blankets waiting. With one he dried his feet and slipped into his stockings and boots. With the other he bundled up. Zachary draped his coat around him, over the top of the blanket hoping to keep the coat dry. He rubbed his back and shoulders. Soon on the move again, Benny described the situation in the lower compartment and what he had already done.

“We can get a large row boat at the next landing – a ten hand fishing boat,” Willie explained. Any idea how soon it’ll blow?”

“None, really. Within fifteen minutes, I’d guess. I suppose it depends some on how much steam pressure they run with and how much of that was really escaping. Seemed like a lot.”

It took a good fifteen minutes to reach the landing. The Natchez seemed to still be under power, though it lagged far behind the wagon. Willie finger whistled and received a high sign from a pier hand. He called out.

“Need a tenner – now. One hand. Four oars.”

They pulled to a stop at the head of the pier. The long, wide boat was in the water facing out into the river. The Natchez was still a half mile north. Benny pointed to the rear of the row boat – its name was, *The Four Star*. They assumed it would not be the first time it had carried black passengers.

A strong looking man in his early twenties was waiting in the boat. He assisted the three off the pier.

“You sure you want to try this?” Benny asked Zachary.

“One Plantation Boy’s arm is equal to two Yankee Boy’s arms any day. Slide over.”

Willie and the new man sat on the front of the two center seats. Benny and Zachary took up the one just behind. They each manned one oar and soon got a good rhythm going moving straight across the river.

“I figure to get across in front of her and then come back to the door you spoke of,” Willie said. “If something don’t happen soon I can tell you we can expect to begin taking fire.”

Our best cover will be in the water if it comes to that.”

It appeared it was not his first participation in a life threatening melee.

Suddenly and with tremendous force the front half of the boat blew apart – the top went up, the sides went out, the bow skidded on out ahead. Flames burst upward from the center. The water was littered with sections of wood.

“She’s bound to sink,” Willie shouted. “Pull!”

The door flipped open and Amos appeared. He reached out and helped hold the row boat steady.

“We needs ya in here, Benny.”

Inside he saw the problem. In the earlier excitement it had escaped Amos’s attention. Each of the six of them had a shackle locked around one ankle and a rope leading from it to a large ring on the front wall. He called out to Zachary.

“Need that knife of yours.”

They passed in up and into Benny’s hand. He gave it to Amos and they began the task of cutting through the ropes – tightly wound ropes that were a full inch in diameter.

“The boat’s sinking,” came word from Willie outside.

“I have one free,’ Amos said. “Hurry out into the row boat, now!”

She left.

“Another one here,” Benny said.

Water began lapping in through the open door and running across the floor.

“Three ta go,” Amos called out.

Clearly he was not counting himself.

“Make that only two, now,” Benny said.

The boat sank some lower and more water began pouring inside the compartment.

“Here’s another,” Amos called out.

“I got the last woman,” Benny said. “You free yourself, now.”

As the final woman slid out through the incoming water, the compartment became fully inundated. The boys were underwater, still inside the boat as it plummeted toward the bottom.

Amos motioned for Benny to leave. Ignoring that, Benny added his blade beside Amos’s. The rope fell away.

Their lungs were bursting. Every natural instinct demanded they inhale. Benny pushed Amos out ahead of him, then pulled against the outside of the door frame propelling himself outside and upward.

By then the boat had sunk some fifteen feet below the surface and was continuing its descent.

Those in the rowboat scanned the surface of the water. Presently Amos popped up, gasping and groaning. They continued to watch. Benny should have surfaced. Amos dived back below in search of him.

"Hey, over here, other side," came Benny's voice at last.

Amos resurfaced next to him.

"This water is *really* cold, Benny. How dumb must ya have been ta swim in it?"

"Just dumb enough to save your hide, little brother."

Benny reached out and dunked Amos who came up sputtering and laughing. It meant much more than the words and the dunk. They climbed aboard, needing to be on their way.

As it turned out four of the five women were only fourteen. One was nineteen and she was pregnant although she would not be for long.

"I thinks my baby's comin', Mr. Amos."

Benny and Zachary took note of the title, undoubtedly well deserved, but went on.

"We need to get her to the dock house," Willie said.

"And fast," Amos added.

They moved the boat across the water with all the power the four of them had in them.

"Anybody here know about birthin' babies?" Willie asked.

"I helped Pricilla lots a times" Amos said calmly and clearly in a take charge frame of mind. "Easy as fallin' off a log. This here's Betsy, folks. She got separated from her husband a week ago. First, we's gonna get her baby birthed and then we're gonna find her man."

It seemed like a big order to Benny and Zachary. As much as they might want to, they couldn't be stopping to help every black person in distress. Getting a new baby into the

world was one thing, but tracking down a maverick husband was something quite different. Still . . .

Back at the dock, Willie arranged for the girls to be taken directly to a safe house. Betsy and the baby would join them when they could. Amos did what he knew to do to make her comfortable on a table and before one could say *precious new life*, there she was, crying, wrinkled, and absolutely beautiful. After only a few minutes of recovery time, mother and child were on their way.

Willie spoke.

“You three are amazing. It’s an honor to have made your acquaintance. I’m pretty sure I know how to find Betsy’s husband. Did she tell you his name?”

“Richard.”

“I got him up at the church. His story matched hers. A band of Retrievers from two counties north. Let’s just say they’ll be divin’ for their pants and boots well after their dark prey is on its way out of here.”

In and around the feelings of relief, there were genuine expressions of happiness and handshakes.

“I need to get back bein’ a livery driver now, boys,” Willie said.

He turned to his friend who operated the landing.

“I assume you can outfit these lads in dry clothes.”

“My pleasure. I’ll send for the tailor.”

It drew a round of chuckles. Willie left.

Dry, re-outfitted the three of them set out north along the river trail hoping to find the Suzzie Belle before it shoved off.

“So, you going to tell us how it happened?” Benny asked.

“Not a whole lot ta tell,” Amos said reflecting his genuine puzzlement. “I waked up with a start an felt a hand over my mouth an another one on the back a my head. I smelled something I’d never done smelled before. I tried ta struggle agin it. I remember things going black in my eyes. Then I think I come to, fer jist a minute maybe – outside on the deck, maybe. Seems like two men were talkin – still on the Suzzie Belle. Next thing I remember was that smell again. When I waked up I was tied up an in the back of a enclosed

wagon with the five women. They said they'd been taken at various places a couple a counties north. From what they overheard they were headed fer the big block at New Orleans."

"I don't understand the 'big block'," Benny said.

Zachary stepped in.

"It's the major site for the buying and selling of the best class of slaves."

"Thank you."

He turned back to Amos.

"Do you think Jake was the ringleader of it all?"

"No doubt. The women described him right down to his two, double barreled Derringers."

"You knew about them?"

"Dead on I knowed about them! I may a lived my life as a slave, but not as a dumb slave. I can smell a whip or a knife or a gun from forty paces."

They walked on in silence. Eventually it was broken by Amos. The others saw some humor in it. Amos was almost always the one who broke the silence. He wanted answers to every question he'd ever asked himself and was determined to squeeze as many as possible out of his new companions.

"What was it he used ta put me ta sleep so fast?"

"It's called chloroform," Zachary said. "A liquid that becomes fumes when exposed to the air. Usually drizzled on a cloth. When a person breathes it in, it seems to turn off his brain for a little while."

"I could a sure used a bottle a that while I was cuttin' that bullet out a you, Zachary. I did what I had ta do, but you'd get close to wakin' up and then ya'd scream and go limp – unconscious agin. I sat there prayin' you'd stay unconscious."

"You keep saying things I don't have any response for," Zachary said.

"No question was asked. No response called fer. Jist relatin' how good it would a been to have them fumes. The regular doctors use it that way?"

"Lots of them are beginning to use something similar called ether. It's less dangerous and easier to regulate I think from what I've read."

"Do you remember leaving the clues for us?" Zachary

asked.

“Clues? No.”

He gave Amos the short version. The boy’s response was not what they expected.

“Sounds like somethin’ I’ do alright.”

Clearly it had been – discussion over.

New topic.

“You guys gotta git back to learnin’ me how ta read. My heart jist burns wantin’ to be able ta do that.”

“We’ll get right back to it,” Zachary said. “If we forget, you pester us about it.”

“Pricilla always said I was about the best pest she ever done knowed.”

There were smiles and chuckles. Nobody questioned it.

* * *

As they approached the gang plank, they saw Flax across the deck leaning on the rail, looking out over the river. Zachary tried to disguise his voice by lowering it.

“Permission to come aboard, Captain? Three tired and soggy deck hands returning for service.”

Flax turned. He face brightened. He was clearly overjoyed to see them. He hurried across the deck and extended his hand, first, to Amos.

“I’m so glad to see you are alright, son. I’d not have given one chance in hell for your return when your two hard-headed friends here lit out after you.”

“It seems hard-headed friends is jist what I needed, then. Thank ya fer waitin’. They done explained about yer kindness.”

Amos looked to the sky.

“Goin’ on one. I spose that means it’s time I start shovelin’ that coal.”

“I’ve decided to give Ol’ Belle one more day off,” Flax said. “Instead, I’m gonna treat the four of us to steak dinners at *Annabelle’s Restaurant* over yonder. Best steaks on the Mississippi.”

“We have seven dollars among us – at least we did when we started out. May have lost it,” Zachary said searching his pockets. “I have some tip money in our room.”

“You keep your money. I seldom have reason to

celebrate. You wouldn't go and spoil that for me, now, would you?"

"You three go ahead, Amos said. "I'm thinkin' I'm a little off my feed."

Flax and Benny looked puzzled. Zachary understood immediately.

"Amos! There comes a time in every young man's life when he needs to just face up to things and learn how to eat in a restaurant."

The others suddenly understood.

"I don't have the faintest idea how ta do that and anyway I don't know about eatin' stakes – are they boiled – bark an all – what?"

"Steakes – s-t-e-a-k-s – like the best meat on a cow."

His face lit up – only to indicate that it did make more sense, not that he was yet convinced the restaurant outing even faintly resembled a good idea.

It hit Zachary and he motioned to Flax. Zachary was standing behind Amos. He put on a frown, indicating a question, and pointed to Amos's head and cheeks and then to his own.

"Blacks is welcome at Annabelle's. No problem. She'll put us in the back room, but that's a whole lot a progress from just five year ago."

Zachary and Benny picked Amos up from under his armpits and carried him, legs kicking air, down the plank to the dock. Amos was petrified and the others understood, but as petrifying things went, a s-t-e-a-k dinner held very little potential for becoming all that devastating.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

This is Amos We're Talking About!

Benny and Amos slept the clock around. Zachary did what he could to pacify upset passengers about the delay and spent a good deal of time hiding from the aging, if intriguing, Miss Molly. It was not that having an amorous tryst with a clearly experienced woman would not be completely in line with the all-consuming, hormone driven, interests of a seventeen-year-old male, but his upbringing at home and church screamed cautions and prohibitions at him. It was one of those rare mark-it-on-the-calendar moments when teen boy's hormones lost.

Benny had the boiler stoked and a ready head of steam at five the following morning. Unexpectedly, during the unplanned stopover, Flax had acquired a substantial amount of cargo heading upstream to Grafton, Illinois. Sometimes kindness pays in the least expected ways. It was the spot where the Illinois River joined the Mississippi. All the passengers would disembark at St. Louis just south of there. Flax didn't know the narrower and shallower Illinois well enough to chance navigating it so that would be his turnaround point.

In that, just-for-as-long-as-it-lasts, sort of way, Flax and the boys had grown close; they had grown to care about each other. That was quite possibly more obvious to Amos than to the others. He wondered to what extent it was also the true nature of the relationship among the three boys – would they look back on it as just a fleeting moment, relatively detached

from the main streams of their lives? He chose not to contemplate it, not wanting to allow any disagreeable possibility. During those past two weeks they had become each other's full and seemingly sufficient world – the best he had ever known.

The following two days boasted a sun full of sky and a peaceful calm in the air. Together they set a relaxing tone, something the boys really had not experienced since meeting. The temperatures dropped as they traveled north. Zachary and Amos clearly found it uncomfortable. To Benny it felt like home.

Between the days lost while the boys were on their unplanned and unwelcome side trip, and the frequent stops following that to unload and take on cargo, the Suzie Belle had fallen behind. Flax had guaranteed a delivery date at Grafton and they needed to push the old boat to its limits. That came to involve several twenty-four-hour days moving north on the river.

Flax gave Benny and Amos the choice between alternating eight hour shifts around the clock or each taking on a twelve-hour shift once a day. They opted for the half days so they would have time together and a few hours of uncommitted awake time during the light every day. Word was confirmed that unseasonably warm temperatures far north in the headwaters had caused an early and extensive snow melt. The river swelled rapidly over the following twenty-four hours and the current quickly increased from calm to raging. The old Suzie Belle struggled against the sudden oncoming force of the water. Flax gave the order to begin maintaining the steam pressure at 60 – seventy, marked the low side of the red colored danger zone on the dial. Benny was amazed at how much more coal it took to maintain the new pressure setting and he began questioning the wisdom in the exhausting, longer work periods.

They needed to put in for coal well before they reached Grafton. They had done that once during the boy's first days of service and it had been tiring work. Large wheelbarrows, overflowing with coal had to be pushed up a ramp from the coal barge onto the lower deck and then back through the cargo holds to the coal bin at the rear of the boat. Since Flax

paid by the wheelbarrow, he wanted them completely filled. The boys did their best to oblige. It took four hours; then they were immediately on their way again. Zachary was still a long way from pushing a load himself, but he did what he could to help load. The other boys saw that as a mixed blessing; the job went considerably faster, but the rest time between pushing those loads became shorter.

They had set twelve o'clock to twelve o'clock shifts so each boy would have some daylight during his half day away from *the pit* – as they had dubbed the boiler room.

It was midnight. Benny was finishing up and Amos had just arrived. Amos put his arm up beside Benny's.

"So, *brother*, how's thins a goin'?"

Though not a perfect match, Benny was black as the night sky. It was worth chuckles and smiles and just a bit of the expected pushing and shoving – boy's universal signal of positive regard.

A message came through the voice tube.

"May have trouble brewing up here, boys."

Benny, who had begun stripping down for a shower, gathered himself together and ran up the steps to the main deck.

"What?" he said, buttoning his coat with his still black fingers.

Flax pointed.

"Don't like the looks a that boat. I'm thinking its a small, low profile gunship fitted out to look like a fishermen's boat. Afraid it may be a Reb Mayhem boat."

"Not familiar."

"My name for 'em. They come north to disrupt shipping. Usually light craft with a low profile. They attack at night. Usually have at least one cannon on board and a half dozen armed men – often too old to serve in the regular military. They seek out smaller ships like the *Suzie Belle*, here. There've been reports of one boat takin' out half a dozen freighters in just one night."

Zachary arrived from the top deck. Benny filled him in.

"You can stay out of it if you want to, Zach," Flax said. "I understand about loyalties."

Zachary ignored the comment and offered several of

his own.

Looks too small to have a big boiler," he said. "Can't be very fast. Look how low it's riding in the water. Must be carrying a lot of weight. What, twenty feet long."

"May have a land cannon – makeshift, ya see. Them suns-a-guns weighs a ton."

"So, can we out run it?" Benny asked, getting down to the most basic question.

"Probably the boat, but not their cannon balls."

"It's keeping its distance way out there paralleling us," Benny said again providing an essential observation.

"I don't see any cannon," Zachary said.

"Most likely sittin' behind that wooden crate that's covered in fishnet, midship. They try ta look like harmless fishing boats during the day."

"So, what's your plan, Flax?" Benny said addressing the immediate situation.

"Got none. You?"

Zachary took that as permission if not a requirement to act. He had been trained for take charge leadership his entire life.

"Tell Amos to push the head of steam to the limit and you make for the shore. The Suzie Bell draws very little water so we shouldn't run aground. Use your best judgment, of course. The water flows much slower over there – at least that's what Benny tells me he learned during a recent, early morning swim. The Belle can make better time against a slower current."

Benny nodded.

"That's true," Flax confirmed with a series of short, deliberate nods.

"Let me untie our rifles," Zachary said. "We also need something a foot or so long and cylindrical."

While Zachary moved to untie the rifles, the others looked around even though they had no idea where his head was going.

"How about that keg?" Benny asked, already on his way to bring it back to where they had been standing."

"It should work. Can you secure it on its side on top of that barrel – one end pointing toward that boat?"

A little rope. A little wire. It was soon in place.

"Here's my idea. We'll attach the rifles flat up around the outside of the keg, all of them pointing in the same direction so when fired they will send a circle of bullets ten or so inches in diameter. We'll aim it right at the water line beneath where you think the cannon sits. With any luck, if we fire all six at once, the bullets will cut a circular hole in the hull, flood the boat from below and the weight of the cannon will cause it to tip in our direction once it begins taking on water."

"Genius!" Benny said.

He meant it.

The boys set to work securing the guns with rope.

"How close will they come before they fire?" Benny asked, glancing up at Flax.

"Close. There'll probably be rifle fire first. They'll go for a partial load shot. The cannon shot will have to wait to maybe twenty or twenty five yards. That rig can't possibly be carrying anything heavier than a low load cannon. I've heard tell of some of them boats blowin' themselves up when they overloaded one with too much powder. They'll need to get close, alright. See how the rush of this current is makin' it fight to maintain a straight course."

Flax had already spoken to the boiler room and had altered course toward shore. Amos clearly had a blazing fire going down below.

"What's the danger of blowing our boiler?" Benny asked.

"It's run at 85 before. Not for long, maybe a half hour."

"What's your steam pressure?" Zachary called through the tube.

"Be up to 80 any second now."

"Flax says 85 is probably safe for a few minutes."

Flax had other things on his mind.

"Them four big wooden barrels over there is filled with sorghum," Flax said. "They'll stop rifle balls for sure and certain."

With the rifles in place the around the keg, the boys worked the sorghum barrels to the railing sitting them tight against each other. They would not only protect those waiting at the rifles, but also Flax on his knees at the wheel.

"The Belle seems to be moving really fast," Benny said.

"She still has plenty of get up and go if you feed her," Flax said with some pride.

"You concentrate on guiding this thing," Zachary said. "Check with Amos."

"Pressure, Amos?"

"Sittin' right on 85. What should I do if it goes higher?"

"Use the relief valve, but hardly open it. A little relief goes a long way in a hurry. Don't want to lose the good head a steam you've got going or we'll be as good as sittin' dead in the water."

"I been hearing some a yer talkin' through the tube. Don't sound good."

"You take care of the steam. We'll take care of the Rebs."

It had been Zachary. Everybody was surprised by his language, but no one mentioned it. He continued.

"What about our passengers?"

"Best I know is fer them is to lay on the floor in their rooms," Flax said.

Sam appeared at the top of the steps. Benny rushed up to meet him. He gave the brief explanation.

"Will you pass the word on to the others? On the floor away from the outer wall, Flax says."

Without a word, Sam turned to tend to his task. Benny noted that the man seemed invigorated rather than frightened. He was a fascinating character."

Benny slid down the stair rail to the others. By then the Belle was in as close to shore as Flax felt comfortable. They were moving along at a clip that clearly surprised him.

"The other ship's losin' ground," Flax said. Expect it to begin firing."

"We're ready," Zachary said. "Got a good bead on it with this . . . contraption."

"Flax, we need you over here now to pull two of these triggers with us."

Flax tied off the wheel. He had been correct. Their boat began to take rifle fire – lots of rifle fire. They crouched low behind the sorghum barrels. Zachary raised up to readjust the aim of the keg one final time.

A few seconds later, with the rifles cocked and a finger on every trigger Zachary began the count down.

“One, two, three, squeeze!”

The rifle fire from the other boat continued – but only for a moment. The three rose slowly during the period of relative calm that followed. They peeked out above the large wooden barrels. Although they would not see the actual result of their handiwork, they witnessed the meaningful outcome. The boat tilted in their direction – just a bit at first. Then, as a rush of huge air bubbles gushed up from the water just below where the cannon sat, the boat flipped onto its side and slipped beneath the water. From the pulling of the triggers, to out of sight, couldn't have taken two minutes.

Zachary became the momentary hero. There were cheers and pats to his back. The other two missed the momentary expression of sadness he allowed on his face as he looked back at the suddenly empty spot on the river. Neither could they see it tearing at his heart.

He had to wonder: was he a traitor to the South or a hero to the North. Quite clearly, both, neither of which felt acceptable. He had helped save his friends, by that point all innocents in the war, and he would try to live with that.

“Some information, please,” came Amos's voice from the tube.

“All under control, Amos,” Flax called. “These other two triplets of yours done sank the enemy and saved the day.”

“A great line to use in a book,” came Sam's voice from up above as he offered a series of slow, evenly spaced, claps. “May I have permission to use it?”

“You're supposed to be spread eagle on the floor in your cabin, Sam,” Benny called out, more than a little upset with the man.

“How could I write about it if I didn't witness it? I can turn the past twenty minutes into three solid, spellbinding chapters.”

“What you mean is that since, due to pure luck, you survived your very reckless behavior, you will be able to do that.”

It had been a clumsy statement for a blossoming writer, but he knew the man got his message.

That said, Benny understood – appreciated, even – the impatient side of the man. He was less sure about his fearless – no – his reckless side. Impatient; fearless; reckless; that would take some sorting out.

“You can cut back the pressure now Amos,” Flax called down the tube.

“Done that as soon as I heard the celebration begin up there. By the way this boiler stood steady at 95 for ten minutes.”

“You could have been killed, steamed alive down there,” Flax scolded.

“Coulda been killed most every day a my life, but I twerent.”

“I’m going down and spell Amos for a few minutes,” Benny said. “He must be spent. Then I’ll shower and get some shut eye.”

“I’ll go up and inform the passengers,” Zachary said. “Let’s see, how do I do this? ‘I single handedly stood off a gunboat load of two dozen, well-armed, determined young Confederate sharp shooters, sank their ship, protected our precious cargo and saved countless lives.’ Can you guys imagine the tips I’ll have filling my pockets before sunrise?”

He was being facetious, of course. Benny suspected it had been his way of diverting himself from the confusing feelings contending somewhere down in his gut – betrayal, guilt, pride, guilt, relief, guilt, luck, guilt, and more he was sure.

Benny was confused by *his* own reactions. He was pleased, of course, at the outcome, but wondered why he had made no suggestion they should try and rescue the confederate crew even as he watched them being swallowed by the angry river. Had they received what they deserved – drowning in the icy cold, swirling water of the Mississippi? Were they victims of the powerful men in the south the way he was coming to feel he had been a victim of those in the North? Were they bad men? Some, perhaps. Were they good men? Many, probably. Had their deaths done anything to aid the cause of the South or wreak any significant sort of havoc on the cause of the North? No. They were dead. He and his compatriots were alive. Had the causes of good and right been well served? He not only had no idea, but he could

conceive of no way to go about determining the answer to such a question.

Life had been simple as a little boy. Some things he knew were right and some things he knew were wrong. When he did what was right he felt good about himself. When he did what was wrong he felt bad about himself. Some parts of growing up just plain stunk!

* * *

They continued north between the boot heel of Missouri on the west and Tennessee on the east and finally arrived at the southern tip of Illinois. Amos figured *that* should be just about the end of their journey.

Zachary and Amos were talking.

"Illinois is four hundred miles from south to north, Amos," Zachary said. "That's longer than we've traveled since the day we started out together down on the Arkansas River."

"Wow! We have ta go all the way ta the top?"

"I'm sure we don't. Benny said maybe three quarters of the way up the state to LaSalle County. His farm is right on the Illinois River. He says it is a little less than two hundred miles above Grafton he thinks."

"Still a mighty long way. We walkin' or ridin'?"

"We have no way of knowing at this point. I guess we will just play it by ear, like we have the entire trip."

"Play it by ear," Amos said, again skillfully offering a question in the form of a statement.

Zachary gave it a try.

"There are two ways to play music on an instrument. One is to read the music printed out on paper. The other is to just hear it and play it – by ear, it's called."

"Ya mean there's readin' and writin' fer music, too?"

"Yes, although I had never characterized it that way."

Beyond all that, Amos seemed to understand – play by ear, shoot from the hip, take pot luck and any of probably dozens of sayings in that same vein.

"Flax says the next big city on the river will be Cape Girardeau."

"What kind of name is Girardeau and why a cape – isn't that like a coat without sleeves fancy men wear?"

Zachary smiled and nodded.

“Cape also means a peninsula or an area of land that juts out into a body of water. Girardeau is a French word – a name, I believe.”

“How many languages are they?”

“I really don’t know. I’d guess hundreds.”

“Holy God in Heaven! No wonder we gots so many problems in the world. Seems like that would make it impossible fer folks ta talk ta each other. And if’n ya can’t talk ta each other ya can’t git ta know each other. And if’n ya can’t git ta know each other ya can’t solve the problems between ya.

“Hmm.

“Yankees and Southerners speaks the same language though don’t they? There must be somethin’ else, too.”

Zachary decided to return to the original question.

“There are a few languages that most people do speak: English, French, German, and Spanish. If you know one of those you can get along about anywhere.”

“So, I gotta learn French and German and Spanish if’n I wants to be able ta talk ta folks.”

“Like I said, English will get you a long way. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

What he didn’t say, of course, was that Amos still had a long way to go before he truly spoke English.

“Then what city after Cape Girardeau?”

“St. Louis is the next really big city. It is where the passengers will get off.”

“It in Missouri or Illinois or some other state?”

“Missouri. It’s just a little ways on north of St. Louis where Flax and the Suzie Belle are headed, a small town called Grafton – on the Illinois side of the river. It’s right about where Benny’s Illinois River hooks up with the Mississippi.”

“My you knows a lot a thing’s. Gonna take me a *long* time ta catch up.”

“You probably don’t have to catch up.”

“Oh, yes. I’m determined ta be as smart as you and Benny put together – maybe even add in Ezra an Flax an James.”

Zachary would not bet against that. It had been among the many eye-opening revelations Amos had provided for him.

Zachary had been taught that Negroes were innately unintelligent. It was often used as justification for slavery – whites, benevolently taking care of a race that couldn't possibly take care of itself. He imagined his parents really believed that was true. He had to wonder how they could have been around Negroes all their lives and not have come to see how misguided that was. Well, he *did* know – they never came to know anything about their slaves beyond strength, stamina and the ability to bear lots of healthy babies. Neither had he, of course. The cultural rules enforced the separation – the absurd, mandatory, self-fulfilling ignorance as he would later characterize it.

He wondered how life on the plantation would change if teachers would be employed there, if the black workers became partners in the business, if they were treated humanely with respect. He smiled. Seventeen or not, his daddy would take him out behind the barn and give him the thrashing of his life if he were to voice such ideas. That didn't mean he wouldn't. It meant he had lots of things to learn before he tried it – and another thirty pounds and a fully healed shoulder might be well taken additions as well.

Later, when Benny got off his shift he could tell Zachary wanted to talk, but he was dead tired.

"I'm beat. Twelve hours in the pit is exhausting. Let me get seven hours and then let's talk awhile. We haven't done that – just the two of us – for a while."

"Sounds good. I can catch some sleep, too. Flax has had me steering this old bucket while he catnaps during the daytime. Come six or so he'll be ready for a rest. We can talk while I man the wheel. He says we'll make Grafton tomorrow."

They slept. Benny was a farm boy. He could set his head to wake up at a specified time and dependably manage it within fifteen minutes.

So it was. Seven fifteen and his eyes flipped open. Flax had let the food supply get low in anticipation of losing the boys. They managed their ways through ham sandwiches, green apples, and milk from the ice box.

"Let me spell you, Flax," Zachary said as the boys approached him on deck.

Flax nodded.

“Just until ten o’clock or until the river gets crowded with boats. St. Louis is the busiest port in the north. Stick just to the right of center and everything should be fine. I know how to wake up if you need anything.”

He chuckled at what he clearly had seen as his little joke.

Benny perched on one of the barrels just to the right of the wheel. He was finishing his apple.

“Been quite a journey, hasn’t it,” he began, thinking Zachary could take that in any direction he pleased.

“Has been. Not long until it will be over – at least for you, I guess.”

It was the first-time Benny had really given any consideration about what would happen to the others once they reached his farm.

“I suppose we need to talk about that,” he said. “You got any ideas what you want to do? You’ll be welcome to stay with us at the farm for as long as you want. Likely be jobs in the area – so many young men away fighting. Lots of pretty girls, as well.”

Zachary smiled.

“Thanks for that. I really have no idea. Flax mailed a letter for me to my parents – put it on a boat with a captain he said he could trust to head it in the right direction way down river. I used the address of your farm for a response.”

“How do you know that? I don’t remember ever giving it to you.”

“Sometimes when you’re sleeping you say things. Once you were talking like you were trying to convince somebody to take you home. I remembered the address.”

Benny nodded.

“Like bad dreams?” Benny asked.

“Like the worst bad dreams I’ve ever known of, Benny. Sometimes Amos and I have had to hold you down so you didn’t hurt yourself or get up and run away.”

“Amos told me. I guess I didn’t realize I was still having them. I don’t ever seem to wake up.”

“You *won’t* wake up no matter what. Amos said you told him we should wake you. We’ve even poured water on your face and you just lay there sputtering, sound asleep and

raving. We stopped trying. I'm sorry for you. The war – the battle – I assume.”

Benny nodded.

“Yeah. The battle. From what I remember. Thanks for your help. Any recently?”

“Last time was that final night in the tall grass before we hit the river the next morning. Scared the stuffing out of those two ducks I can tell you.”

Benny managed a faint smile and nodded again. He only really knew they were terrifying. The images and content never followed him into wakefulness – just the emotion, the horrific emotion. He hoped they would leave him for good by the time he got home. He didn't want to visit such experiences on his family.

“Can I know what was in your letter home?”

“It was mostly to let them know I was wounded, but that I was healing and had decided to leave the army until I got back on my feet. I asked them about the plantation and told them I had heard it might have been burned. I said I'd met up with a traveling companion, but didn't give any details. I knew that would make them feel better – that I wasn't alone. It was short. That's about it. I told them I loved them – that just seemed natural. It's one of those things you never have to say, but always want to.”

“I hope it makes it to your parents. If an answer arrives at my place you can be sure they will keep it safe and guard your privacy, even if it may seem odd to have received it.”

“I tried to handle that for them. I put: In care of Benny Wilson, at the beginning of the address.”

“Good thinking – like usual. You're thinking about going back to Mississippi?”

“I'm not letting myself think anything yet. You and Amos are all the world I have that I can count on day in and day out – well, there is Flax, but that won't be for much longer. Like you said, it might be a good idea for me to stay with you for a while. I can pull my weight on a farm.”

“You will find my parents are very wise people if you ever want to run things by them.”

“I can tell they are wise. I know their son.”

Benny had no idea how to respond so he looked at the

deck and picked at his fingernail.

Zachary continued.

“I’m more concerned about Amos, you know. Are there many black people where you live?”

“No. If you can believe it, Amos is the first black person I’ve ever touched. I’m sure mama and daddy will help us all work it out. In the end it all has to be his decision you know.”

“I know – he’d have made it his, whether we were of a mind to allow it or not.”

It was worth face into face smiles.

“I haven’t heard Amos talk about it, have you – afterwards, I mean?” Benny said.

“Only once. The other evening he said something like, ‘I guess we’ll soon be at our destination up in Illinois, but I don’t think it’s the end of my journey.’”

“Profound,” Benny said.

“He’s got more potential per square inch than two like us,” Zachary said. “Do you suppose he’ll ever be able to realize it?”

“Think about it, Zachary. We are talking about *Amos!*”

Nods and smiles brought the discussion to a close.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Leather Seats and Brass Buttons

The Suzie Belle made port in St. Louis at eleven o'clock the following morning. The passengers disembarked. Zachary hid from Miss Molly. Benny received a long, firm, sincere handshake from Sam along with encouragement to begin getting serious about his writing.

“Only way to learn how to write, son, is to write. Write something on Sunday and then rewrite it every day for the rest of the week. It’s a grand adventure to see a piece grow up that way and become something you can be proud of.”

Benny nodded and they shared a smile as he studied the man’s face for the final time. He admired the man’s long graying hair and broad, undisciplined, moustache. Who knew, maybe someday it could be his look. That would probably have to wait at least until he began sprouting something more serious than a sparse layer of blond fuzz.

The dockhands offloaded over half the cargo. What remained was due just north in Grafton later that day. They would easily make the deadline. It meant twenty dollars difference to Flax. He would be charged ten dollars for every day he was late. He’d earn a bonus of ten dollars for being on time.

Upon the delivery at Grafton, Flax was paid in Yankee dollars. The boys had untied the travois and laid it flat down on the deck. While they were cinching up loose ropes two young men approached up the gangplank looking for work. They were hired on the spot. Amos had one piece of advice for them:

“The pressure valve gets nervous sometimes and starts stutterin’ – usually if ya let it drop below 40. Just tap it a few times – let it know who’s boss – and it’ll work itself back ta normal.”

There were handshakes and hugs back and forth among the three ‘old hands’ and Flax. They left no doubt that they had become fond of each other. Flax and Benny traded mailing addresses. They each understood they would likely never be used, but having them at least provided a tie they would not have had otherwise.

At the base of the gang plank they turned and waved. It was more than just saying goodbye to Flax and the Suzie Belle; it was clearly still another watershed, symbolic of putting their pasts behind them and stepping forward to willingly be consumed by the unknown.

The docks dominated the waterfront so they walked east into the town. It seemed surprisingly small considering the large dock area.

Benny turned his head toward Amos.

“Why didn’t you share that information with me about the pressure gauge? That would have made life in the pit a good deal less worrisome.”

“I figured *you* was smart enough ta figure it out. Them two new hands didn’t look smart enough ta figure out which end a the shovel ta hold onta.”

Amos had been serious. The other two chuckled. Amos continued.

“Now I got somethin’ fer you two.”

They looked puzzled.

Amos reached into his pocket and removed two ten dollar bills.

“The bonus money. Flax said it was us who really deserved it and he figured you two wouldn’t take it if’n he tried ta give it ta ya.”

He handed one bill to each of them.

“Hey. He gave it to you,” Benny said. “Seems like you should be the one to keep it.”

“This here’s the first money I ever held. I don’t know nothin’ useful about it. You two need ta hold onta it.”

Benny looked at Zachary. Zachary spoke.

“Okay. We will hold onto it *for you*. In the end it will be yours to do with as you see fit. Flax seemed to want you to have it.”

“Not really. He just said you two were both such proud dunderheads that ya wouldn’t a took it. Mostly what I took from that is that I ain’t no dunderhead.”

The others laughed out loud and slipped the bills into their pockets.

“About money, since Amos brought it up,” Zachary began. “I earned some tips from the passengers. Since I couldn’t have done that if you two hadn’t kept the boat moving along, I figure it belongs to all of us.”

Neither of the others shared an immediate reaction.

Zachary motioned them into the shadows between two buildings as if needing a private place. From his coat pocket, he removed a small fabric sack closed with a drawstring and opened it. He held it out so they could look inside.”

“That mean we’s rich?” Amos asked his eyes growing large.

“Not hardly, but it does mean we have nineteen dollars and seventeen cents. Add to that the seven we had before and . . .”

“An we gots twenty-six an seventeen plus the ten and ten from flax – thirty six and seventeen.”

“That *is* a considerable amount of money from my way of thinking,” Benny said.

“Well, we now know what we have to work with,” Zachary said choosing not to add his take on just how wealthy that amount of money really *didn’t* make them. He pulled the string tight on the top of the bag and returned it to his pocket.”

Back in the street, Benny stopped a man and his son as they passed.

“Pardon me, sir. My name is Benny. New here. Wondering if there is stage or train service going north from Grafton.”

“Both and a livery line.”

He turned and pointed back up the street.

“Two blocks, other side of the road is the office. Provide a northbound stage every day but Sunday. Also, has train schedules. A livery wagon heads north about every

hour.”

“Thanks. Have a good day.”

The man tipped his hat and they went their separate directions.

“Seemed friendly,” Zachary said.

“And polite,” Amos offered. “See how he tipped his hat? I needs ta start tryin’ that.”

On the wall beside the front door at the stage office was a four-foot-high map of Illinois. Amos approached it and pointed to the caption at the top. His next act amazed Benny.

“It says: ‘ill – in – oys’.”

Benny flashed a puzzled look at Zachary and addressed Amos.

“How did you learn to do that?”

“Pesterin! On my rest time back on the Suzie Belle, Zachary’s been helpin’ me with my readin’. How’d I do?”

“You pronounced it just like it’s spelled. That was great. It is a French spelling of an Indian word and today we pronounce it ‘Ill-in-oy’.”

“I’m finding readin’ has lots a them mixed up words, like did you know Belle – a part of Suzie Belle – is French, too, an it means beautiful woman. Zachary says boats and ships – ships is big boats that sails mostly on oceans – is usually called *her* – like a female companion fer the lonely sailors on board. Female means girl or woman or not male, like boys and men. I suppose ya can figure out the actual differences.”

“How do we turn him off?” Benny joked.

“Not something I’d ever want to do,” Zachary said.

“Or me, really, of course.”

Benny addressed Amos.

“Your brain is like a sponge. Whatever it comes upon it soaks right up.”

“I hope it’s a real big sponge cause I’ve still got lots ta learn. Jist look at all the words on this sign that I don’t know yet.”

“Most of them are the names of towns and cities. Like here, *Grafton*, that’s where we are now. This says *Illinois River*. It goes from where we are to way up north. This town way up here, *Ottawa*, is close to where my farm is. It’s right about here, just to the west and it’s right on the river.”

“Is there a map a the whole world?”

“Yup. Maybe we can find a library and show you one.”

Amos took note and would ask about ‘library’ later.

“So how do ya figure how far it is from here ta yer farm?”

“Look down here – it’s called a legend. A legend always tells us important things about the way the map was made. Here it says ‘scale’. It’s about distance. . .”

“So, like this long is five somethings – miles I’m guessin’. I’m bettin’ that’s a inch and I’m guessin’ that’s a yard from here up ta Ottawa. Zachary says a yard has three feet and a foot has twelve inches so that would be thirty six inches, five times, and that would be one hundred an eighty things – miles.”

Zachary clapped and turned to Benny.

“A sponge, indeed.”

“Indeed means right er correct, huh Zachary?”

“*Indeed*, it does.”

That was worth a chuckle all around. Benny and Zachary studied the map in more detail while Amos set about pronouncing the words he found there.

Benny related the more immediately useful information.

“Rail service north to Chicago’ – he pointed for Amos’s benefit – “every morning at five o’clock. A ticket for the entire ride is \$6.50, but we don’t want to get on that train down here.”

“Why not?” Zachary asked.

With his finger, Benny traced the track north on the map.

“It goes through Springfield. That’s about the biggest army training post in the north. It’s where I caught a troop train down to the Mississippi after I signed up. We’d have too many questions to answer.”

He studied the map a bit longer.

“Look. Here. A stage route from here in Grafton up to Jacksonville and at Jacksonville there’s a railroad that runs up to LaSalle – not more than ten miles from my farm. Runs way west of Springfield so that should solve the problem for us.”

“Hows about me?” Amos asked. “Anybody out ta git me up here in i-l-l-i-n-o-i-s?”

“Abraham Lincoln, the president of these United States

of America, and citizen of Illinois, declared you are a free man” Benny said. “There’ll be no legal move against you.”

“How about *not* legal moves?”

“There seem to be bad people everywhere. So I suppose there aren’t any guarantees. But, in general, Negroes are treated as free citizens up here. Your main obstacle to finding work won’t be that you are black; it’ll be convincing an employer that a black man is smart enough to do the job.”

Amos filed that information away figuring that he was slowly assembling a set of the new ground rules for his new life in his new land. To that point it all seemed fine except for one thing – it was sooooo cold!

“Let’s go inside and find out what the stage fares are,” Zachary suggested.

“Grafton to Jacksonville by stage is \$1.80 a ticket,” the old man behind the window announced. “If you’re carrying a weapon I can reduce that to \$1.60.”

“We have weapons – rifles – six among the three of us,” Zachary said, puzzled. “Why the reduction?”

“Some highwaymen – gangs we called them in the old days – have hit stages several times the past couple of months. Every gun’s a plus. Driver and shotgun are both armed of course.”

He seemed to feel that was the sufficient explanation. He moved on.

“Stage holds six passengers comfortable inside. Ladies first choice, of course. If you need more room you can sit up top. Six horse teams. Good strong flesh, but no team can be counted on to outrun a band of bad guys on horseback.”

Zachary nodded as if to thank him for the information.

“We’ll need to discuss it outside. Give us a few minutes.”

“So, the price seems right,” Benny said once they were on the porch out front.

“Sounds ta me we is payin’ \$1.60 each to be their armed guards,” Amos said.

Although it had been an astute observation, they needed a way north.

“We all heard the Station Master,” Zachary said.

“There is a risk of bandits. Are we willing to take that risk?”

(Of course they were; they were teen age boys!)

Back inside Zachary paid for the tickets with the coins he had received in tips. It lightened the weight of the money sack considerably.

“Leaves at six in the a.m. and probably arrives in Jacksonville at two or three in the p.m. depending on *things*,” the old gentleman explained.

“We hope to make train connections at Jacksonville for LaSalle. Do you know anything about fares or timetables?” Benny asked.

“Got it all right here. . . somewhere.”

He adjusted his glasses.

“Stage and the railroad all part of the same company. Imagine they’ll have track laid all the way down here once we’re done lickin’ them Rebs.”

He had been fumbling through papers, looking for his route chart as he spoke.

“Okay. Let’s see. Looks like it’s a five hour trip – railroad’s more dependable than stages. Leaves Jacksonville at five o’clock in the p.m. Three dollars apiece – nine for the lot of you. Nothin’ off for guns.”

Somewhat humorously the other two looked at Amos at the same moment.

“Thirteen dollars and eighty cents for both rides.”

“That sound alright?” Zachary asked looking back and forth between them.

There were nods all around. With the stage tickets in hand they left the office and began walking east on the wide, unpainted, wooden walk that ran in front of the stores. It was raised a good eighteen inches above the graveled street. The boards squeaked and rolled a bit under their feet. Presently, they heard the old man calling to them from out front of the stage office. They returned on the trot hoping there hadn’t been some problem with the arrangements.

“I was just thinking that you boys might need a place to bunk for the night. You are free to sleep in the loft over the stable out back. The air don’t smell too pretty, but the straw is fresh and soft and makes a good warm bed.”

“That’s very kind. Thank you,” Benny said. “Right

behind your office?”

The old gentleman nodded, turned and pointed. Living an adventure through the lives of three young men was about the only way he'd ever experience such a thing again.

They spent less than a dollar on food at a nearby grocery store; a big can of beans, three thick slices of roast beef, a loaf of bread for sandwiches, and a half gallon of milk.

Outside:

“He charged ya seventy six cents when the food only come ta seventy five,” Amos pointed out.

“I added a surprise for our mathematician – for after lunch.”

“Mathematician?”

“Our numbers guy.”

“Me?”

Zachary shrugged, teasing, and exchanged a smile with Benny.

Amos didn't pursue it but certainly wouldn't forget it.

They found a grassy spot in the sun and sat with their backs against the side of a store to enjoy their meal.

“I can tell, you, I'm getting excited to be this close to home,” Benny said.

The moment it left his lips he wished he hadn't said it. The others looked at the ground and munched. Benny tried to redeem himself.

“What I mean is once we are there, all safe and sound, as my grandma used to say, we can start making solid plans about our futures. Don't look so glum. That farm isn't going to be my home for the rest of my life either. We're all moving on to new things.”

Zachary looked up and nodded, appreciating the new perspective – the shift in focus from survival in the here and now to their futures. Even so they found little to say the rest of the afternoon. They left the travois at the stage office and followed Amos as he explored the first real town he'd ever experienced. He pumped water into a public horse trough along the street. He stood and admired the colorful flag flying in front of the Post Office. He watched boys rolling large wooden hoops down the street. He watched in amazement as a black smith fashioned a new shoe for a horse that had

apparently thrown one. Experiencing his wide-eyed delight was fascinating for all of them.

“Oh, Amos, I almost forgot. I have something for you.”

Benny removed a large, round piece of hard candy from his pocket.

“You ever had anything like this?”

“Since I have no idea what it is I guess I can’t say whether I have er not.”

“It’s candy. Put it in your mouth and it dissolves slowly over time. Sweet like sorghum. Much better. I think you’ll like it.”

The boy’s face lit up as though magic itself was unfolding right there atop his tongue. He tried to speak, but it was unintelligible.

“Save the comments for later. Just enjoy it. Don’t try to bite it – might break a tooth.”

That seemed to raise spirits all around. Having unfilled time on their hands was a rare commodity and they were clearly having difficulty enduring it – well, not Amos.

At Benny’s suggestion, they cut the extensions – front and rear – off the travois so what they had remaining was a three by three foot frame with all their things secured to it. It should lie on top of a stage with no problem. Amos dubbed it the *Rack*.

They were bedded down by nine.

“One question,” Amos said before sleep came. “Just what is a dunderhead?”

For some reason, and teen boys often don’t need much of one, Benny and Zachary thought it was belly-holding hilarious and laughed on for some time. Eventually, wiping the tears from his cheek, Zachary offered an explanation.

“A stupid or slow witted person. Somebody without good common sense.”

“I’m *not* one, you know. Flax said as much!”

Flax and anybody else who had ever taken time to get to know him.

They were soon asleep

* * *

Benny awoke early and managed to have the others awake and functioning in time to be waiting for the stage in

front of the office when it came rumbling down the street and stopped.

There had been a dozen hardboiled eggs and six pieces of buttered toast waiting for them at the top of the ladder earlier – thanks to the ticket man they were certain. Amos and Zachary were beginning to think Yankees just might not be all that bad after all. Amos had been amazed the eggs didn't leak when he cracked them. Benny rolled the shells carefully between his hands and soon had his shelled to be munched like apples. Zachary, sliced one of his eggs onto a piece of toast, covered it with another, and had a sandwich.

A business man got off, leaving the coach empty. The boys would apparently be the only passengers leaving from Grafton. They managed their rack up to the top and tied it near the rear to the low rail that encircled it. They helped the station attendant – different from the day before – unload the cargo and stowed it on the porch. Once the team was exchanged for a fresh one the boys, their rack on top and six rifles inside, found themselves on their way north.

The man riding shotgun had eyed the guns. Clearly he knew they were Confederate. Benny had a story ready about taking them off bodies after a battle if the need for an explanation ever arose. Sadly, it would be the terrible truth.

Amos looked around. He ran his hands across the shiny brown leather upholstery of the seat with its over-all diamond pattern, and picked at the brass buttons that held it in place. He traced the indentations in the fancy woodwork. He smelled everything. He rolled the curtain on the window to his right up and down several times. He leaned down and ran his fingers through the carpet on the floor. He polished the brass handles on the doors with the sleeve of his coat and smiled at his distorted reflection in them.

Eventually he sat back feeling like a king. He was very sure he was going to like living in the North. Now, he just had to learn how to behave like a free man. He understood that was not going to be a simple process. He had been watching his companions and had 'absorbed' many pieces of that puzzle. He had been giving serious thought to what some of the first steps should be. He'd begin trying them out as opportunities arose.

The other boys had been wondering about a part of that, but had not mentioned it. Amos had brought into the coach the boots they had provided for him— the boots he had so continually and vehemently refused to wear. Presently he made the move, prefaced by a question.

“Ya wear stockings inside yer boots. Can ya explain why?”

Benny fielded it.

“Without them, boots tend to rub big blisters on a person’s feet. Not a good thing. Also, warmer in the winter.”

Amos nodded and reached into one of the boots removing a pair of the white stockings Amy had provided. He laid one out across his lap. He turned it one way and then another eventually coming to a conclusion.

“This is the underneath and this is the on top.”

Benny nodded.

“Right. That baggy-like part snugs around your heel.”

“Don’t seem like which is right and which is left matters none.”

“Not for the socks. Yes for the boots.”

Amos nodded. That, he had figured out ahead of time.

He went to work and soon had a new white ‘stocking’ on each foot. He wiggled his toes and reached down to tug one way and another on the fabric, apparently for the purpose of arriving at a better fit or improved comfort. He either eventually achieved that or gave up. He seemed to be content just sitting there in his ‘stockings’ for many miles.

He looked. He wiggled. He smiled.

Benny described the landscape as they moved along. It was not really necessary, but it was familiar and he felt like it was his to share with the others – like his introduction to his world for his companions. Early on, the trail ran alongside the river. Later it left it behind to the south. There were occasional rock outcroppings and gentle rises and shallow hollows. Mostly the land soon became flat.

“We have lots of rock outcroppings like those up near our farm. More hills up there in the northern part of the state. I guess Illinois is mostly pretty level. I really haven’t traveled very far from home other than that one trip after I joined up.”

Amos slipped one foot into a boot and again waited for

some time apparently satisfied to experience the effects one at a time. He managed a few chuckles off and on.

“What’s funny?” Zachary asked.

“The stockings an the boot feels funny. I think I keeps hearin’ my toes sayin’, ‘Git me outta here! Git me outta here!’”

“You have really never had your feet in shoes before?” Benny asked clearly dumbfounded.

“Nope. This’ns the first. Guess I’ll go fer two.”

“They look good on you,” Zachary said.

“Lookin’ good an feelin’ good’s two really different things, then, I’m a thinkin’.”

The older boys exchanged smiles.

Zachary and Amos had sensed that something had been on Benny’s mind all morning, but since early on in their relationship they seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement to leave each other’s private thoughts alone.

Benny began to speak.

“You understand that you’re traveling with a wanted man who will probably end up in front of a firing squad if some captain somewhere has his way about it. I’m saying that to let you know that I may have to make my visit at home really short. I would never put my family or you two in danger over me. We’re not too far from the Wisconsin line up home and if I have to pull out that’s where I’ll probably head. I figure a state’s militia takes care of its own firing squads. I’d probably be safe up there.”

“If you gos, I gos,” Amos said.

It was a matter of fact statement that carried no emotion. There was to be no contesting it.

“That goes for me as well. Look at all we have survived together. Avoiding one old Yankee firing squad will be as easy as finding eggs in a hen house.”

The others turned and looked at him, surprised.

“What? Plantation boys have sayings, too.”

It was good for smiles.

Benny’s lower lip quivered, but he was determined not to shed tears. He looked out his window. The others looked out theirs. Apparently, the issue had been settled – the issue really being the unwavering loyalty of his new friends.

Amos resumed his excursion into the realm of boots.

He stood, having to bend a bit because coaches were, at best, five feet high inside. He took steps in place. He screwed his face into a dozen expressions of displeasure and distress. It was extraordinarily comical, but the others would contain their inclination to explode into laughter.

He sat back down. He folded his arms. So far as he could determine there was nothing even remotely *free feeling* about wearing boots. Perhaps he had misunderstood the proper definition. His investigation would continue.

The head of the man riding shotgun appeared in the window beside Amos – upside down.

“Greenfield Station up ahead. Fresh team. Gert has sandwiches. I see one meal is contained in each of your fares. Hurry in and out. Can’t afford no more than a fifteen-minute stop.”

His face disappeared as he pulled himself back up top. The boys looked at each other.

“That nice old man,” I suppose,” Amos said.

“I suppose,” Benny agreed.

To Amos it was a rare act of kindness in his life. To Benny it was proud proof of how wonderful Northerners really were. To Zachary it challenged everything he had ever been taught about the greedy, four-eyed, green haired, monsters that lived up north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Amos sat back and smiled, relaxing. Benny sat up, strutting his smug. Zachary became uncomfortable and fidgeted. He was angry, but couldn’t place whether its target was his parents and teachers for lying to him or at himself for being so gullible.

At the stop, they each had good reason to need to stretch their legs. The lunch was soon wrapped in butcher paper. Ham sandwiches, carrot strips and apples – there seemed to a remarkable consistency in their recent diet. Benny spent some time chatting up Gert, a weathered looking woman who wore leather and gave the impression that all bets would be on her should an occasion arise in which she needed to put a bear in its place. He learned the station master’s name back in Grafton was Gus – no last name, just Gus. She said that as a young man he had spent some time as a buffalo hunter way out west.

As they got under way again they broke out the lunch.

Benny and Zachary saved the apple for last. Amos was intrigued by it from the moment he saw it. He looked it over carefully and shined it against his wool coat. He smelled it and licked at it.

“Ya know, I hates ta bite inta this. It’s the most perfect apple I ever done seen. The ones I got back at Azalea was crawlin’ with worms.”

His quandary was short lived. He soon allowed himself to enjoy it in a most leisurely and appreciative manner. That noon, sandwiches could be dessert! The other boys saved their apples figuring Amos was the one who really deserved them.

Silently, Amos worked on some unshared quandaries.

‘Hmm. A Reb and a Yankee both bein’ considerate and nice? Something just had to be wrong. On the face of it, that blew the real basis for the war. Rebs and Yankees could not both be good people, especially not to each other. Just ask any Reb or any Yankee – present company excepted, apparently. It seemed the more he learned the more muddled things became.’ (Welcome to the real world, Amos!)

Amos soon curled up on the fancy leather seat, held in place by the brass buttons and surrounded by the fancy wooden filigree, and was fast asleep.

Benny *wondered* if it represented a lifetime of being exhausted.

Zachary *knew* it represented a lifetime of being exhausted.

Zachary had his share of gnawing, unresolved questions as well. How was he to come to grips with the fact that this scrawny, black boy, who – initially, at least – hated him in the most thoroughgoing ways imaginable, had risked his own freedom and saved his life just because it was the right thing to do?

Like Amos had said, they might soon be approaching their destination, but their journeys were most certainly not over.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Journey Begins

The stage was nearly an hour into its trip north from Greenfield Station when a familiar face appeared in the window. That time it did not include news about a free lunch.

“Four riders up ahead. Look to be highwaymen. Get them rifles ready. Wait til ya hear me fire off first. I got a better view from up here. I’ll be bellied down on top so don’t go off halfcocked and fire them Rebel, Yankee killers, through the roof.”

They each reached for a rifle and an ammunition pack, which had been stowed on the shelf above Amos.

“You sure you know how to fire a rifle, Amos,” Zachary asked.

Benny thought it an odd question considering their recent past. Apparently, Amos did, also. As it turned out, their reasons were different.

“I never said I knowed how ta fire one. These is the first guns I ever done even touched.”

“So, all those times you stood watch you didn’t know how to shoot the gun you were holding?” Zachary asked.

“I figured if push come ta shove I’d point, close my eyes, an pull the trigger. At first, not knowin’ if I could trust either one a you, I sort a needed to give off a certain impression, don’t ya see.”

They did, of course and after the fact like that it seemed both clever and humorous. Still, they needed to deal with their present situation.

“Do you know how to load them?” Benny asked.

“I think so. I’ve watched you two.”

That was good enough. Zachary continued.

“Okay. Benny and I will handle the shooting. Once we have fired we’ll hand the rifle over to you. You hand us a loaded one and reload the empties. One of us will help when you fall behind.”

“I can do that. Looks like all told we got a hundred balls er more, with packs a powder an caps enough ta fire em.”

The three managed one final look among them. They understood – Good luck.

Benny peaked out his window to reconnoiter. He spoke while he surveyed the area ahead.

“Four on horseback, alright. Bandanas over their faces. Looks like six shooters – hand guns at any rate. We have the advantage from this distance. The man upstairs needs to begin firing.”

“*God?*” Amos asked, clearly puzzled.

“No. I was referring to the man riding shotgun up above us.”

Amos was still nodding when the first shot rang out. They also heard Shotgun calling down to them.

“Another four coming up behind us. I’ll work on those up ahead. See what you can do with the others.”

The boys traded seats so Benny and Zachary were facing the rear. They leaned out the windows on each side and took their shots. Amos kept up very well. As it turned out he had little to do. They had fired four shots and four horses were running free.

They turned their attention toward the front.

“Looks like one is down, three to go,” Benny said. “Wonder how Shotgun up there ever got hired on.”

“I heard that,” came word from up top. “See the five coming out of the woods behind them? We got a new game on. They are spreading out on both sides of the road. Going to try and board us.”

With fresh guns at the ready two more shots – two fewer riders. A third fell from Shotgun’s work. It left five. A minute later it left three. A minute later than that those three

turned and fled into the woods.

From up above Shotgun let out with a rodeo whoop. The boys did their best to mimic it. What teen boy would miss a chance to celebrate! Shotgun had more to say.

“It’s likely they will shadow us in the woods of the right. When we get up to where they were, the driver’ll give the team their head and we’ll pass them like water over sorghum. Be ready to take fire from the sides, is what I’m gittin’ at.”

“Got it,” Benny said.

With all six rifles loaded and ready, they waited. There was no doubt when the driver let the team take control. It jerked Amos off the seat and onto the floor. He saw it as quite humorous and remained down there prepared to use his seat like a table. He had become proficient with a minimal amount of practice. During training camp, Zachary had been required to load and fire his Richmond Rife three times per minute. With hardly any practice at all, Amos had surpassed that. It was a Confederate knock off of the Springfield Rife widely used by the U.S. Army – shorter than most rifles of the day at only 40 inches. It fired .58 caliber balls and was rated at 90% accuracy at 200 yards. The boys had been somewhat closer than that, which may have helped increase their accuracy rate to 100%.

They waited.

“Nice shooting, by the way, Zachary. You’ve been holding back on us. Where’d you learn to shoot like that?”

“Not a whole lot for the only white kid to do on an isolated plantation. Daddy said a man needed to know his way around guns. I guess I just expected *you* to be good – from things you’ve said. You certainly proved the voracity of your contention.”

Amos beamed up at him.

“*Voracity of your contention* – this is so great!”

Leave it to Amos to find the, ‘so great’, part of a running gun battle with a band of cutthroat bandits.

It was Shotgun again.

“Off to the right. Thirty yards. Edge of the trees.”

Zachary took the front window and Benny the rear on that side of the coach. They waited to receive incoming. At that first shot they pulled their triggers. They launched three

volleys and then silence from the woods. The coach rushed on past the spot. There was no response.

The driver reined back the team to a walk. Zachary kept watch up front. Benny looked to the rear. They maintained those positions for several miles before relaxing back into the seats.

“You boys alright down there?”

“Doin’ jist fine, sir,” Amos called back. “All ready for another vicious onslaught.”

The boys beamed down at Amos and together said:

“Vicious onslaught?”

“Must a read it somewhere. I do that, now, you know.”

He beamed.

Some of the laughter was at the comment. Some was to drain away the tension from the previous half hour. Mostly it was the recognition of friendship.

Zachary eventually broke several minutes of silence.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be able to pull the trigger, Benny.”

“Neither was I. I’ve just been thinking about it and I believe I see the difference. War battle is all artificial – like a deadly game. Each team is trying to win and in order to win you have kill all the members of the other team. That sickened me. When I was a soldier I held no hatred or bitterness toward them as individuals. My parents taught me to treasure human life. There was something disconnected between the idea of winning a battle and having to actually kill individual people in order to do it.

This time, though, those men were not only trying to rob us, but they were trying to kill us. We weren’t their enemy, also setting out to kill them. We were defending ourselves and whatever there is of value on the stage. I felt like I was in an entirely different situation – world, maybe. Don’t get me wrong, I still hate the idea of men killing each other. It turns my stomach, but I can live with what I – we – just did.

“I’m not sure if that even fully sorts it out. I’m sure it doesn’t, but it seemed to straighten things out in my mind enough for today.”

Zachary nodded. Amos just listened having offered no comment.

“I wonder what this coach is carrying that would be

worth a gang risking a dozen or so lives?" Benny asked.

"Me, too. Must be something really valuable."

"Gold, maybe."

"Or jewels."

"If it's money, I'd think it would have to a huge amount."

Amos sighed, shook his head, stood up, stuck his head out the window and addressed the men up top.

"What was those bad men after, anyway?"

Nothing like just sitting there speculating about the facts when you could actually get them.

Again, it was Shotgun.

"We got a strongbox filled with the last month's fares from the stage line. A considerable sum. On the way to the company's headquarters up in Jacksonville."

Amos pulled himself back inside.

"Git that?"

"Yup," Benny said. "Thanks."

Sometimes Amos wondered how such smart boys could act so dumb. Perhaps it was that all the things they knew somehow buried their common sense. He'd make more observations and check back with himself.

Amos continued.

"Jist because we done beat off one band a outlaws, don't mean there won't be another band 'round the next bend, does it?"

Benny and Zachary, who had allowed themselves to relax and put it all behind them, sat up and took note. During the remainder of the trip they demonstrated a more appropriate level of vigilance – while Amos finished his nap.

Of interest to Zachary, they pulled to a stop in front of the stage station fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. Apparently engaging highwaymen improved their running time. He hoped the owners of the line didn't misinterpret that and start sending out gangs of their own to harass the drivers.

He grinned at the absurdity of the thought.

"What?" Benny asked.

"Just a private junket through the hollows of my mind."

Benny nodded and allowed it, of course. He would remember the phrase. It had been too good not to find a place in a story someday.

While they removed their rack from the top of the stage, the driver and Shotgun went inside to deliver the strongbox and make their report. The boys followed a few minutes later, seeing it was also the source of train tickets. Benny approached the window and placed the order.

“Three for LaSalle.”

He and Zachary counted out the fare from what they had left in the sack and placed it on the counter.

A large, older man in a suit entered the room from an interior door to their right. He was followed by Shotgun. They walked directly to the boys.

“The sharpshooters, I assume,” he said offering his hand all around for shakes.

The boys obliged and offered shrugs, having been caught off guard. The man continued.

“From what Bart here says, if it hadn’t been for you three I’d be out nearly a thousand dollars and probably a driver, a shotgun and a coach. He says you’re headed on north by train – my train, by the way. Your journey will be on me with my thanks.”

He turned to the man behind the window.

“George. These boys’ money is no good here, understand?”

“Yes, sir. No good.”

George slid the tickets along with their money across the counter toward them.

“We don’t know what to say,” Benny said. “Thank you so very much. We have money to cover it.”

He pointed.

“And now you have money for a good steak dinner at the Jacksonville Restaurant across the street. Tell them I sent you.”

He winked, the purpose of which was fully unclear. He returned to his office. Shotgun – that is Bart – shook hands around and offered his thanks as well.

The boys stopped on the walk out front. Zachary pointed to the restaurant and spoke.

“I don’t know. Think we can possibly manage another meal so soon after that big lunch on the stage?”

The commotion that ensued on that street during next

thirty seconds defined the young male syndrome of push and shove to gain the spot at the head of the line for no reason beyond pushing and shoving to gain the spot at the head of the line. They entered more or less in one piece – certainly less disheveled than could have been the case. They brushed the dust from their clothing and finger combed their hair.

They had two hours before the train left so, that time, they really did allow themselves to relax. The conversation became a ‘remember when’ reenactment of their journey to that point. It was cause for lots of laughter – some at truly humorous incidents and some suggesting relief and, perhaps amazement upon reflection that they had survived.

As they were folding their napkins making ready to leave – an exercise Amos found humorously absurd, fold the napkin so it could be washed – a waitress approached with a tray bearing three large glass dishes of ice cream.”

“Must be a mistake, ma’am,” Zachary said. “We didn’t order dessert.”

“Complements of Mr. Wentworth.”

“Mr. Wentworth? We don’t . . .”

“He owns the stage and railroad. Rumor has it you three are real life heroes.”

“Rumors seem to spread rapidly in this vicinity.”

The idea of being a hero to a beautiful young lady definitely had its merits.

“You three enjoy the ice cream now. Home churned. Just let me know if you want refills.”

She turned and started away then came back.

“Oh, by the way, the meal’s on Mr. W, also.”

And with that the wink had been explained.

Amos was amazed that such a thing as ice cream existed – that it even *could* exist in fact. As per the unwritten law of first time ice cream eating, he got an excruciating headache, but managed to recover soon enough to enjoy a second dish, which he approached with considerably more restraint.

When at last finished, they again folded their napkins to leave. Zachary took a dime from his pocket and left it on the table.

“Why you leavin’ money. Mr. Wentworth’s done paid,

didn't you hear her?"

"It's called a tip," Zachary explained. "It's like a reward for the waitress's good service."

Amos offered a broad, impish grin.

"Good service or good chest?"

They broke into laughter and hurried on outside.

On the walk, Benny and Zachary began pushing Amos back and forth between them – a way of acknowledging their camaraderie. A deputy approached them.

"What's going on?"

The pushing stopped and Amos stepped forward offering his hand, which was accepted.

"We's the teen boy heroes you's been hearin' about and we is jist out here celebratin' life. Didn't mean to cause you no bother or concern."

"Good to meet you boys. Hope your trip north goes well. May be dull. Haven't had a good train robbery in six months."

They exchanged chuckles. Apparently, the rumor exchange allowed no privacy at all in Jacksonville, Illinois. They headed for the depot and were allowed to board ahead of the others. They could get used to being heroes.

Five hours later they jumped to the ground at the LaSalle station. There were small piles of snow, the leavings of the storm just past. That time both Amos and Zachary were amazed. Snow! Benny formed a snow ball and threw it at Zachary. A short-lived exchange of flying, white, missiles followed. They learned two important lessons: snow was very cold to bare hands and having it shoved down one's neck was most uncomfortable. Welcome to northern Illinois.

They had slept most of the way north from Jacksonville. It was going on ten o'clock. The sky was clear and moon full. They re-buttoned their coats against the considerably colder world of the north. Benny spoke.

"My farm's about eight miles almost straight east."

He pointed.

"Hilly during the first half then flat as the cover of a book. We'll follow the river all the way. Be less snow to contend with along the bank."

They stepped off, with the rack out flat between Benny

in front carrying his end behind his back, and Amos in back holding his end in front. It worked well. Zachary stayed to the left, away from the river.

“My daddy’s name is Benjamin, Mama’s Claire, the biggest of my little sisters is Shirley and the smaller one is Ruth – we call her Bitsy. They’ll be in bed. By the time we get there it’ll be midnight, or near to it. They’ll be in their night clothes – don’t let it bother you, it won’t bother them.”

“Night clothes?” Amos asked.

“Some people wear long, loose gowns to sleep in – extra warmth.”

Amos nodded. He figured it explained the disgusting scene with Miss Molly back on the ship one night when he had come across her out on deck. At first he thought he’d seen a ghost – a very large ghost that jiggled all quite generously underneath its sheet.

Those things said, they proceeded in relative quiet for the duration of the trek.

“There it is – my house and my barn. Sure looks pretty there in the moonlight. I’ll go in first and wake up my parents. Then I’ll come for you two, alright?”

“Sounds fine. Take your time,” Zachary said.

“Yeah! I think it would be good if ya’d git yer cryin’ out a yer system before ya come back fer us.”

Amos really didn’t like crying. The others assumed they understood.

They all also understood that Benny was returning to the familiar while Amos and Zachary were still engaging the unknown.

As Benny mounted the porch and opened the door, Zachary pulled Amos close to his side. They stood there waiting, in the dark, surrounded by patches of snow, in the new land, in silence.

Light from a lantern soon lit the kitchen. Shadows played across the window.

It took ten minutes, but the boys were happy to just let whatever wonderful moment it was play out inside according to its own necessary schedule.

The door opened and Benny came out onto the porch motioning them toward him. He had already shed his coat

and built up the fire in the cook stove.

Inside, with the door quickly closed against the cold night air, Benny made the introductions. There were pegs for their coats. Benny's mother had hot chocolate brewing on the stove. They all managed chairs close enough around the kitchen table to listen and talk and question and answer themselves right on to daybreak.

At one point Amos had a question.

"I'm keepin' track a my firsts, an I jist wondered if'n I'm the first black person inside yer house."

Benny's mother answered.

"Well, sorry to spoil your list of firsts, Amos, but no. In fact, we had three new friends here this very week."

Benny looked surprised. His mother explained.

Our church has just started working with a sister church in Canada. Between us we have helped more than a dozen black people find safety and work up there this month. We had a going away party for three of them this very evening."

* * *

Nearly a month passed. The two extra hands managed to be helpful around the farm – their major contribution having been new coats of paint to the barn, house and each other. Their evenings were consumed by important conversations – sometimes with the parents, sometimes just among the three of them. They shared Benny's loft.

Their in-between time there at the farm fulfilled its purpose well. The boys gradually came to sense that the time had come. It was a tearful goodbye that early March morning. They had each come to momentous decisions and were unshakably committed to them.

Amos – Amos Freeman as he had named himself – headed for Canada with a group of black people already well-established there in a multi-racial commune. He would eventually marry and have one son – Benjamin Zachary Freeman. Twenty years later he became the first Negro professor at St. Williams University – his fields: communication and modern languages.

Upon learning in a letter from his parents that his plantation had not been destroyed, Zachary returned home. His father had bought him out of military service. He

completed four years of college, married, and went on to become the first senator elected to his state legislature from the newly formed progressive party. He established the first profit sharing cooperative between a plantation owner and his free, black, partners.

Benny, having arrived home to an unanticipated, honorable discharge due to his loss of sight – most likely aided by one of those infamous military snafus – remained on at the farm for several years. He continued his studies and in later years became a well-known author of stories for teens, each one built on positive values and extolling the virtues of openness, acceptance, and unconditional love. He and Maddie married and had seven children – the evidence would suggest that he had spent a good deal of time learning how to become a really good kisser.

Although the three would think of each other daily, they would never see each other again. In later years, they would look back on their journey – the treasure of their lives – not as a trek to freedom, with safety and comfort as their destination, but as their initiation into what would become their lifelong, grand flight from ignorance.

All things considered, not bad for a rag-tag bunch of aimless, hurting, feuding Rabblers.

If you enjoyed Rabblers, look for the novel by the same authors, Nathan and Alexander: vagabond brothers, set in 1870 United States just after the Civil War. The brothers, 12 and 17, work their way west from Maryland, where they were just orphaned, to Kansas, where they hope to find their uncle.