



**The Boys of
Freedom
Island**

**David Drake
&
Tom Gnagey**

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NOTE:

In this story, people with black skin are referred to as Negroes; and Native Americans are referred to as Indians, because those were the respectful terms used at the time just after the Civil War, when this story takes place. Although Negroes had been freed from slavery, some people in the south still rejected that. They were sometimes kidnapped and sold to men called 'slavers' who herded them aboard ships along the southeastern coast of the United States and sailed south to the Caribbean islands where slavery continued to be legal and they were sold.

Also, sometimes the author uses the *best* word instead of the '*easiest*' word. In those cases he puts a synonym (a word with a similar meaning) in parentheses () after that word so the less advanced readers won't need to consult a dictionary (and, may just learn a few new words along the way).

Happy reading!

CHAPTER ONE

The Chase

The two frightened and exhausted boys had been running through the night for nearly an hour. Their pounding hearts and aching lungs told them they could not go on; their survival instinct told them they must. The armed, angry men giving chase were determined to catch them, but were slower and less agile (athletic). The thick forest offered some advantage for the youngsters; they were young and fast and strong and could vault the fallen trees as they ran. They were able to pick their way with care, producing very little noise. The men called out to one another pretending no secret about their position.

Jack reached forward and tapped his younger brother on his shoulder.

“What say we climb a tree? We’re coming to the edge of the woods. It’s a hundred yards across the open beach to our boat. The men have guns. We won’t stand a chance.”

Davy nodded. They stopped and looked up. The forest thinned as it approached the bay so the tops of the trees were clearly silhouetted against the night sky. At the same moment they pointed to a huge old oak.

“Problem. First branch is up twelve feet,” Davy said. “Trunk’s way too thick to climb.”

“There,” Jack said pointing. “That fallen limb. We’ll stand it up against the tree and climb it to the first branch.”

As if it were a well-practiced activity between them, they soon had it leaning against the huge trunk. As he held it steady, Jack motioned his younger brother up first. The sounds of the men grew louder – they were closing in. He waited until Davy was up into the tree before he began the climb, figuring the skinny branch might not hold the weight of both of them. Once he was secure in the tree, Jack kicked the branch away and they climbed high into the upper branches where they sat motionless in the shadows.

As the men approached with their lanterns and rifles, the boys got a count for the first time. Davy whispered.

“Looks to be six – you think?”

“That’s my count. Stay quiet, now.”

As the men passed the base of the tree, what had before been a murmur of unintelligible, angry sounds in the distance, emerged more clearly as individual voices – all furious, all cursing, and all suggesting dreadful things they had planned once the boys were captured.

Half an hour passed. The boys listened unable to see what was going on once the men moved onto the sandy shore. Gradually their voices dimmed and eventually disappeared.

“It sounds like they have spread out to the north and are going back through the woods to make another sweep,” Jack said.

Davy nodded, suggesting that was his take as well.

“So, another ten minutes up here and then we head off to the boat?” Jack said, really asking.

“Makes sense.”

It was a long, quiet few minutes – their ears remaining alert for the slightest sound. Presently, Jack sighed and stood, signaling the waiting was over. He began moving down the tree. Davy followed. Beside each other, they hung from the lowest limb and dropped to the ground, remaining motionless as they squatted there to determine if it had caused any reaction.

“I suggest we be very cautious,” Davy said, grabbing onto the back of his brother’s belt.

Jack nodded and smiled to himself thinking it hardly needed to have been said. They moved slowly forward toward the beach – only about twenty-five yards of cover left they figured. At the edge of the woods they crouched behind a stand of bushes and looked both ways. The sand reflected what little moonlight there was. Even so, it was enough to brighten their world.

“Nobody in sight,” Jack said. “What do you think?”

“I think the sun will be coming up within the hour from out over the water. We need to be 300 yards away from here before then.”

Three hundred yards was about the distance at which a rifle of the day was accurate.

"I agree. Let's stay low and move fast. Watch the sand for rocks and debris (pronounced dee-bree). Can't afford for either of us to trip and fall. The boat's on the other side of that huge rock. You untie it and I'll position it out into the water. Middle seat for both of us. One oar apiece. Doing it all quietly is essential. Dip easy and don't drip."

Davy understood the challenge. Nothing about him had ever been *quiet*, however.

Once the boat was freed, they walked it out into the water, bellied over the side, took their seats and headed out into the bay, quickly establishing a well-coordinated, long and powerful stroke.

"Even without a full moon it feels like we're in a spotlight out here," Davy said. "Not as good a thing as I always thought it would be."

Five minutes later Jack spoke, pointing back at the shore.

"See the rock we were tied to back on the beach. See how small it looks. Well, we look even smaller than that to anybody looking out from the shore."

"I understand and thanks. I hadn't considered that."

"I think it's safe to veer off to the north toward our island. We must be due south of it by now."

"Half an hour to safety! That sounds good."

"We've had some adventures since we left home, haven't we," Davy said.

"Yeah, but very few that involved angry men willing to shoot us on sight."

"So, are you saying that's a good thing or a bad thing, big brother?"

"Hmm. Good I suppose. We're still kickin' aren't we?"

It was worth no more than a tired smile. They moved on in silence, each lost in the memories prompted by Jack's observation.

* * *

It had been four months since things had gone sour for them up north in Delaware where they had been born and raised. Three sad occurrences converged (came together) to

change their lives forever.

Late in June, of 1865 when Davy had just turned five and Jack was barely six, a union soldier rode up and dismounted near their front porch. Their mother invited him inside and shoed the boys to stay out. They peered in through the front window, hands beside their heads to reduce the glare. The soldier handed her an envelope and spoke with her for several minutes. The boys could not hear the quiet conversation. She broke into tears. That, the boys didn't need to hear. The soldier turned and left onto the porch.

"Your ma needs you, now," he said, then mounted up and rode off.

The boys rushed inside. She opened her arms and gathered them to her. It was some hours later before she was able to tell them their father had been killed in Virginia, at the Battle of Appomattox, ironically the final major battle of the Civil War. The only death with which they were familiar was that of squirrels and rabbits and fish their father had brought home for supper. Sometimes they and their friends played Soldier and Indian – those unfortunate enough to be assigned the shirtless roles of Indians were soon lying dead on the ground – but moments later they popped up to fight another day. The reality of death was fully unfamiliar. They had questions and asked them. Their mother did her best to provide satisfactory answers. It was a sad bedtime. That night, the boys were glad they shared the same bed.

Five years later, when Jack turned thirteen, it was arranged for him to receive training as a leather worker, learning how to make saddles, bags, belts and shoes. The arrangement had been between his mother and a leather worker in a nearby city. It was called an *apprenticeship*. His mother received a sum of money and Jack was required to work for the man, learning the trade, for five years, or longer if his skills were not adequate to ply the trade unsupervised. The Masters typically found ways to keep their virtually free labor several years longer than the original term.

In many ways it was little different than slavery had been in the south. The Civil War in which the boy's father had died had been fought to change that. The 'owner' of apprentices in

the north was variously referred to as artesian, master tutor or master craftsman. Some welcomed the young men into their families and treated them well. Others did not. Abraham Gunderson, did not, and it had been with him that Jack's mother had made the arrangement. Jack would follow his mother's wishes although with great sadness. Young Davy was heartbroken. His eyes remained red for weeks. He lost interest in everything and regularly pushed away his plate at meal times. He slept in late and napped a lot – neither of those things was at all like him.

The third component of the boys' great unhappiness occurred just four months later when their mother became ill with what they then called 'the fever'. After a week, she died. Davy was placed in the home of an elderly couple since there were no relatives to take him. They were kind and sympathetic, but for Davy, life without his family was unbearable. He packed a canvas duffle bag, and one relatively warm summer night he ran away. His mission was to find Jack, free him from his apprenticeship, and escape with him to the south. That was the full and total extent of his plan. Not much, but like his brother, he was smart and creative and had no doubt that together they would pull it off.

Davy figured the first place the authorities would look for him would be Jack's new place of residence. He had no idea where that was, but nobody seemed to know that. He hatched an ingenious plan to find him. Rather than leaving town, he waited on the flat roof of the store across from where he had been living. Things worked just about like he figured they would.

The minister arrived in his carriage and spoke briefly with the old couple. Davy was sure he knew what they were up to – find him and bring him home. The buggy then turned around and moved east along the hard packed, dirt street. It led to the road that ran north and south along the west side of the bay. Davy followed on the trot. The Pastor's horse was old and slow. Initially, keeping up posed no problem. They were headed toward a large town twelve miles north. It was a four-hour journey. For a youngster who for months had picked at his food, it eventually became a struggle between his determination and

his stamina (energy).

The Minister stopped at the top of a rise a mile or so before reaching the town. He got off the buggy and walked on ahead a few yards, looking down into a shallow valley. Davy positioned himself so he could also see. At the base of the slope were a house, a barn and a long narrow building with many windows.

Presently, back in his carriage, the Minister moved on down the road and stopped at the house. Davy crept close enough to the porch to hear the conversation between the minister and the woman who answered the door. The man removed his hat, introduced himself and continued.

“I am here looking for the younger brother of Jack Jansen, one of your husband’s apprentices – the last one to arrive, I imagine. His younger brother has run away and I suspect he will find his way here to find his brother. Have you seen anything of the lad – eleven, nice looking, well built, shoulder length blond hair, with blue eyes I believe?”

“No, but I will keep my eye out. How can I contact you?”

The minister wrote on a scrap of paper and handed it to her. Davy slid backwards under the porch and waited. His plan seemed to be working. The horse and carriage retraced the path taken earlier. At the top of the slope, however, it pulled off the road and stopped. The minister got out and took a seat on the grass, his back against a tree as if he were keeping watch on the valley, expecting the runaway to turn up at any moment.

It was still several hours until dark. Davy had not been sleeping well so he allowed himself to drift in and out of wakefulness hoping the rest would help rejuvenate (refresh) him. He didn’t make the connection between not eating and his physical weakness. His drifting had soon lapsed into a long, deep sleep. It was nearly nine when he awoke. For the first time in months, he felt hungry so he removed a large, hard crust roll from his bag. For a moment, he debated whether or not he should leave the bag behind at the porch or keep it with him as he explored the grounds looking for Jack. He decided to keep it with him. Eventually, that proved to have been a good decision.

He kept low and moved along the high, rock foundation of the house until he was at a spot that allowed a good view of

the long narrow building and the barn. A man was walking to the house – the Abraham guy, he figured. Only one of the windows in that long building was still lit. He waited for the man to enter the house and then, keeping to the shadows, made his way to that light. He was disturbed when he discovered the window had bars across it. Still, he continued. He set his bag against the building and carefully raised up so he could get a look inside. The room was small with a single bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling. It soon became a moment filled with joy – there he was, his brother lying on a cot. There were two other boys each on his own cot. They were reading. Jack had his hands behind his head and was looking toward the wall – the wall with the window – the window with the peeping Davy.

Davy put a finger to his lips suggesting quiet and began waving back and forth across the glass with the other arm. It was apparent that Jack didn't see him.

"Light inside. Dark outside. He can't see things out here," he said to himself.

He knelt and opened his bag while stuffing the last of the roll into his mouth. He had kept his mother's hand mirror as one of the few things he had to remember her by. He began moving it so it would reflect escaping light from inside, back onto Jack's face. It took some doing, but he soon had it figured out. Jack hadn't seen it.

"Just as well," Davy said to himself. "I was jumping the gun. Let's see. A sheet of paper in my bag."

He found and removed one sheet. He, also, located the stub of a pencil. Placing the paper against the smooth siding he carefully printed a message in large letters.

'Davy here. You MUST leave, now. HOW?'

He held it flat against the lower corner of the window, and then began manipulating the mirror again. He found his brother's face. Somewhat humorously, he thought, Jack first tried to brush it out of his eyes, not immediately understanding its source. When he began looking around, Davy leaned in close hoping he would be seen.

Jack's forehead wrinkled as he inspected the window from across the room. His face brightened when he saw Davy. Davy repeated what he had done earlier – making the 'be quiet'

sound with his finger to his lips. Jack put on a casual stretch and yawn, stood up, and walked to the window. The others paid no attention. Davy pointed at the message. Jack looked and nodded. It was not necessary for him to understand the why' behind it. If his brother said it was time to leave, it was time to leave.

Jack bit as his bottom lip as he looked around the room and thought. He nodded, having figured out how to communicate. First, he pointed down at the window sill. Davy examined it and found the lock-release there on the outside. It was clearly intended to keep people in and not keep them out. He nodded.

Then, Jack pointed to the others and lay his flattened hands up against his cheek – the universal symbol for sleep. Davy understood – wait until the others were asleep. Jack held one finger and pointed to his wrist.

“Ah, wait one full hour. Got it,” Davy said to himself, nodding that he had received the message.

Jack placed his palm against the glass. Davy met it palm for palm and mouthed, ‘I love you.’ Jack returned it then walked back to his cot and pretended to make ready to sleep. Davy took down the paper and made sure he could work the lock. He could. He slid his back down the outside wall to a sitting position on the ground. He suddenly recognized his mixed feelings: happiness and fear. He took note of moon’s position in the sky and calculated its position in one more hour – above the tallest of the pine trees to the east.

It seemed like a good idea to know if the minister had remained after dark. He tied his bag closed and laid it back against the foundation before making his way to the far end of the building. Crouching low he ran across the large open yard to the base of the hill where he flattened himself against the ground. He noted how little energy he seemed to have. That could not deter (stop) him. He crawled up the hill and then south to a point from which he could see the spot where the minister had been waiting. He was still there, although he might have been asleep. He couldn’t get close enough to determine that. At least he knew he was still there and figured that was important. He returned to the base of the hill, picking up a

sturdy, four foot stick on the way. He believed he was less likely to be discovered there than if he went right back to the building. Davy thought ahead – way ahead. He laid back against the slope to wait out the clock, or moon as it happened to be.

He was back below the window with time to spare. The room was dark. He released the spring lock and sat back close against the building, waiting. The window unit – bars, glass and all - was built to swing up once the lock was released. Things seemed to be in their favor. He heard the window squeak up above and he stood to one side. Jack's face appeared. Davy showed the stick and placed it at the inside corner of the window, then carefully raised it out of Jack's way. Jack placed his chest against the sill then pulled himself out as far as his belly, and was soon doing a handstand on the ground. He flipped over backwards and there he was. Davy lowered the window and relocked it – quietly. He tossed the stick aside and picked up his bag.

“We need to go south through the shadows. Reverend Shipley's after me – us, now, I suppose – and he's sitting up on the north hill. Keep still and I'll explain everything once we are safely away.”

As was their habit, big brother led the way and Davy followed, one hand grasping the back of Jack's belt. Trotting, they put a good mile between them and the farm.

Jack felt his brother lagging behind. That was unlike the always energetic boy. He stopped and turned around.

“What's the matter, Davy?”

He looked at him, really for the first time.

“Why, you're skin and bones. What's up? You sick?”

“Not sick. I think we need to get at least five miles away for safety sake. I'm sure when the Abraham guy finds you're missing he'll be after you.”

“You're right about that and my life would be hell if he got me back. Okay, but now you lead the way – you set the pace. I think we should keep to the woods and not chance it out here on the road.”

“Okay. That makes sense.”

They moved on for over an hour before Davy stopped.

“I guess I need to rest a while. You doing okay big

brother?”

“I’m doing fine.”

He pointed to their right.

“There. A rock overhang, bushes, out near the road. We can slip back underneath. It should be a good, safe spot for a rest and to hide.”

They settled back into the shelter. They could look down on the road but felt sure they could not be seen. Davy opened the duffel bag and took out a canteen. He handed it to Jack who, knowing better than to refuse it, took a swig and handed it back. Davy drank for some time, wiped his mouth and began asking his brother questions so he would know how to proceed with what he had to say.

“You get much news from back home since you’ve been here?”

“Nothing, actually. What is this all about? You. Here. Sick?”

“I got the worst sort of news, Jack. The only way I know is to come out and say it. Our ma died of the fever a few days ago. The town fathers put me with Oliver and Maude, but I knew that just wasn’t going to work. I decided it was time for us to get back together and see what kind of a life we can work out together.”

By then, tears were running down Jack’s face. Davy thought he was cried-out, but found that was not the case. Jack drew him close and they sat there holding each other and sobbing for a long time.

As dawn broke over the hill to the east they drew apart and just sat a while longer – arms folded across their raised knees, chins on their arms. Jack was the first to speak.

“It’s a terrible place – the leather shop. He works us twelve hours a day with fifteen minutes for lunch. If our work isn’t perfect he beats us – you’ll see fresh bruises. The other two are older. They’ve been there two years and he’s already sucked the souls right out of them. They never talk. They do whatever he tells them to do. They just stand there and take their beatings. They offer no help to each other – no sympathy. It’s like they are dead on the inside. I’ve considered running away, but the boy who just graduated – the one whose place

I'm taking – told me it would result in pain like I couldn't imagine when the old man caught me – and apparently, runaways always get caught.”

“We can't let that happen, Jack. I've been thinking we should go south – the weather is better – warmer – year-round down there. We can camp out if we need to. It's mostly rural so there aren't as many people to stick their noses into another guy's business. We'd be away from all the reminders of things that went bad for us.”

“You *have* been thinking. That's it then. We go south. We can follow the coastline down through Virginia into the Carolinas for starters. Make final decisions along the way. I've already picked up all the basic leather working skills and I've watched enough others that I'm sure I can teach myself. I have been working on my first saddle – cutting, tooling, stitching. With those skills, we can support ourselves. We're both good trappers and, thanks to ma, we know just about everything there is to know about gardening. We'll do fine – we're brothers.”

At that moment they heard horsemen – four, five, maybe six – following the road from the direction they had come.

“Belly down time, I'm thinking,” Jack said. “Get flatter than you've ever got flat before. Here, let's pull this dry grass up in front of us.”

“The horses were moving at a full gallop. They came into sight.”

“See the white stallion? That's Abraham. Two of the others are his hands. At least the sheriff isn't with them. This could end badly.”

CHAPTER TWO

Life on the Run

The horsemen passed, picking up their pace and raising a cloud of breath stifling (choking) cloud. Once they moved on around the corner and out of sight the boys could begin breathing again. From there, they headed east toward the coast and began their long trek south into the unknown.

Davy had rescued the money his mother had saved from what Abraham had paid her for Jack – it came to nearly five hundred dollars. She had spent almost none of it. A family of four could live well on that amount for an entire year – two if they were very careful.

Weeks later, after having walked every single step of the way, they reached the central coast of North Carolina. They found there were many, long, narrow lines of rock a few miles off the coast that acted as barriers against the high waves of the Atlantic Ocean. They were referred to as *reefs* or *banks* and the areas of calm water between them and the actual coast were called *sounds*.

* * *

After their escape from the rifle toting, angry men in the forest, the boys continued rowing their small, wooden boat north through the sound.

“There she is – our island,” Davy said, great relief in his voice.

The mere sight gave the boys a sense of safety and comfort.

Their island sat some five miles off the coast in an area of the sound where many small, jagged rocks showed above the surface. That kept larger ships well away. Being shielded from the ocean by the reefs, the water in the sound was typically calm and, being held there like it was, the sun tended to keep it moderately warm year-round. That in turn, moderated the temperature of the air above it.

It was a small, unappealing looking island – a big, sharp, chunk of barren, brown rock, less than a block long and only half that wide. It was so insignificant that as far as they had

been able to learn it had no name – other than ‘the island’ as some of the locals called it. It was far enough off shore and low enough that folks seldom even remembered it was out there. The rocky surface rose almost straight up from the water to a height of no more than forty feet with virtually no beach surrounding it.

As they came near, they slacked up, pulled in the oars, and drifted into a small, sheltered cove. The opening to the inlet sat at an odd angle and went completely unnoticed by passing boats.

They stepped out onto the rock ledge that formed the west edge of the cove and tied up the boat. They climbed a steep and uneven path that continued about halfway up the side of the island. At that point it led through an opening – a short tunnel. On the inside, they looked down on a valley that formed a lush green bowl, that rose, somewhat irregularly, half way up the high rock hills that enclosed it. At the center was a deep pond kept filled by rain water which made it ideal for drinking and cooking. The cave that had become their home was about halfway down the east side of the hill to the right of the tunnel.

That morning, Dave soon had a fire going in the rock fireplace they had laid up, and Jack had mixed pancake batter. In no time, they had a fine breakfast of flapjacks and fried eggs underway, thanks to their large, iron skillet (and the six chickens that roamed the valley). The smoke was sucked up into a crevice (crack) in the roof of the cave. Where it went, they didn’t know, but it was never visible above the island.

They talked as they fixed things and ate. They always talked. It was usually Davy who started. Jack kidded him about having been giving instructions to the doctor while he was being born. Being so close in age, they shared many interests. Jack’s voice had pretty well deepened into that of a man. Davy’s not so much – his still crackled between soprano and tenor.

Davy was speaking.

“So, what are we going to do about the kidnapped Negros we ran across back in the forest? The men who are holding them seem like terrible people. They sure didn’t take kindly to us when they found we had run across them.”

“Can’t let them get to the slavers’ ship. They’ll end up

who knows where.”

“The captives were all men and teenage boys – did you notice?” Davy said.

“Yeah, I did. We need to learn more about all that. Who’ll know?”

“I imagine the men at the trading post will know.”

Jack nodded.

“We’ll need to make a trip in later. We can pick up some supplies. I see we’re getting low on flour and grease and jerky.”

“And a couple of pork chops, maybe,” Davy added.

Jack nodded again.

“I imagine we can work a trade for some of the belts I’ve finished. A couple still need to be shellacked. I can do that this morning and they’ll be dry by noon.”

“It would help if we knew how to spot the slavers’ ship,” Davy said. “That would set the other end of things. We now know where at least one of the little stockades is in the forest where they hold the Negros. If we knew the ship we’d sort of have like bookends – where they are and where they’re going.”

Jack nodded, always appreciating the unique way in which his brother thought about and explained things.

“Our lives would be easier if I wasn’t wanted by the authorities,” Jack said. “I knew it would tick off Abraham if I escaped, but I really didn’t consider how it was against the law for an Apprentice to just walk away like that.”

Davy took it up.

“So, because of that – an act in which I was complicit (associated) so am I also wanted – we *can’t* go to the authorities with what we know about the slavers for fear of being found out, but once we gather all the information we can see they get it anonymously.”

“I know. It’s just I never thought I’d live out my life being a wanted man.”

“I imagine there is some limit to how long Abraham can stay after you. We’ll just have to find out. A lawyer will know. You know, I had this humorous image of you getting caught when you’re 70 and having to go back and work as an apprentice boy.”

“Humorous to who?”

“I think that would be, ‘to whom’.

Show off! Anyway a lawyer might turn us in – two kids living alone, unsupervised and all.”

“We’ll keep thinking on it, then. There’s bound to be a library around someplace. We’re doing pretty great, you know. We got this island and our secret valley. We got your leather goods to sell and still have most of ma’s money from the tin.”

“I wish we had friends, Davy. I mean, having each other is the best thing, but it would be nice to have other kids in our lives, too.”

“Just kids or *girl* kids?”

Davy laughed thinking his little joke had been hilarious. Jack turned red in the face.

“Okay. Boys *and* girls. There. You satisfied?”

“Probably not, but we’ll see.”

“How long we been here on the island – four months, maybe?”

“Just about,” Davy said. “A lot has happened since that day we found this place.”

“More like the day this place found *us*, the way I remember it.”

* * *

After arriving in North Carolina, they spent the first week camping out on the beach along one of the smaller sounds. They were eating lunch around a small fire in the sand.

“I’m getting sick of the rabbit and squirrel we get in our traps,” Jack. “Let’s catch some fish for a change.”

“You know we tried. There doesn’t seem to be anything but minnows in the shallow water here.”

“You know that row boat we saw just south of here, the one half buried in sand? Maybe we could fix it up so we could go out further into the sound. Bound to be fish out there, don’t you think?”

Jack nodded and went on.

“Maybe. Wouldn’t hurt to look the boat over, I suppose. It would be good to have some transportation, anyway. We could explore further up and down the coast.”

Davy put out the fire and, as had become their routine,

they covered the duffel bag in grass to hide it. They were soon walking south, barefoot. Jack figured they should save their shoes in case a time came when they really needed them. The soles of their feet were becoming tough as leather.

Twenty minutes later they spotted the little boat, one side just barely showing and the rest buried.

“The part we can see doesn’t look so bad,” Jack said walking all the way around it, poking at it here and there as if to determine its condition. Looks to be ten feet long. A center seat and a back seat. Ideal for the two of us. Let’s see if we can dig it free. Might be rotted down in the wet sand. Won’t have to dig far to determine that, I suspect.”

They worked for the better part of an hour pulling back the sand with their hands.

“I think now we can rock it back and forth and maybe that will work it free,” Jack said.

They pushed and pulled and pushed and pulled. Gradually, it began coming free of the sand. With one final, mighty shove it fell over, top side down against the shore.

Again, they walked around it.

“No holes or rot,” Jack observed, clearly thinking better about it.

“Wonder why it was left here?” Davy asked. “Think we can make it sea worthy?”

“Won’t know ‘til we try, I guess. Some of the seams between the boards need to be re-packed with putty and tar. We can start by going over the outside with sandstone to remove the flakes of paint and giving her back her smooth surface.”

“Shall we take it back to camp or move our camp down here?”

“Boat’s heavy. Duffel bag’s light. Let’s pull it back close to the trees away from the water. We can hide it in the woods when we’re not working on it.”

And work on it they did – several days sanding it smooth and removing all the loose putty from the cracks. Jack had finished a very nice set of saddle bags and exchanged it for seven dollars in credit at the trading post. They got a dollars’ worth of putty, thick tar and a brush, and within one more day

had sealed the boat and made it ready for its trial run.

“We did a good job, Jack. We’re not usually that patient. Good for us!”

“Yeah. Good for us.”

Using two staves (wooden sections) of an old wooden barrel for paddles they shoved off, staying close to shore in case anything went wrong. It didn’t and they were pleased with their week’s work. Sometime in the future they would paint it.

That afternoon they found a set of discarded oars while they were rummaging under a wharf just up the beach looking for – well, looking for a set of discarded oars.

“Tomorrow, let’s pack a lunch and row out to the reef,” Jack said. “We’ve never seen one up close. Can’t be over what, ten miles.”

“About that. It’s harder to judge distance over water than fields like we’ve been used to doing. We can ask to be sure.”

The next morning they set off at dawn keeping to an easy pace. They had learned it was nine miles and were pleased with their estimate. They were also pleased with their progress – in two hours they were close enough to see most of the features. They stopped and feathered the oars taking time to get a good look – top to bottom and up and down its length.

“Seems we came a long way to look at a long narrow hunk of brown rock,” Davy said sounding disappointed.

“You enjoyed the trip and you know it. You’re stronger than I remembered. Since we’re this close we probably oughta go ashore and see what’s what.”

“In my experience *what* is almost always *what*,” big brother.

It was worth grins. They dipped the oars and headed on toward the rock.

Davy was pretty much right – nothing really, but a long, narrow barrier of rock. They climbed to the top – no more than fifteen feet at its highest rise – and descended part way down the eastern side toward the huge expanse of ocean.

“What do you suppose is out there if we sailed far enough?” Jack asked.

“The northern coast of Africa – don’t you remember from geography?”

“Apparently not or I wouldn’t have asked.”

It had been a friendly exchange between brothers.

“Notice how the rocks are smoother over here than on the other side?” Davy said.

“Yeah. I suppose the wave action over here has worn them down over time.”

They were not able to get down close to the edge of the water because the waves were constantly splashing and rolling well up onto the rock.

Davy had thoughts. Davy *always* had thoughts.

“Ben, at the trading post, says that down through the centuries, lots and lots of big ships have crashed up against the banks during storms. Can you just imagine all the great stuff that’s buried down there under the water?”

“You mean treasure?”

“Well, maybe. I was really thinking about things we could use like compasses and other navigating equipment, and guns and whatever they were transporting – pots and pans and dishes maybe. Just whatever’s on ships.”

“That *would* be interesting, but what’s sunk is sunk.”

“Well, it’s only sunk until somebody comes along and unsinks it.”

“*Unsinks* it?”

“Yeah. Dives down and rescues it, brings the stuff up – unsinks it.”

“Could be fun. I think we need to get set up in some more permanent location first – a place we can call home, to take the stuff, not just anywhere along the beach.”

Davy nodded. They made their way back over the ridge and down to the spot where they had tied the boat.

“Let’s eat,” Jack said taking the sack from the boat and pointing to a spot that looked comfortable on a wide, flat, sunny rock shelf that jutted out over the water.

They sat for some time enjoying jerky and fruit as they watched the relatively calm water that stretched between them and the coast.

“How about a nap, Jack? I did get tired rowing earlier. Still not quite up my old self – BDAR.”

“BDAR?”

“Yeah – Before Davy’s Amazing Rescue.”

It got the smile and not he had hoped for.

“Sure. It’s not like our calendar is full of things we have to do.”

“That makes me think that I should get back to school work of some kind,” Davy said. “Ma wanted me to graduate eighth year – next year. The money was in an envelope inside a tin (can). She had written, Davy’s High School Money on the outside of it. I’ve been thinking about that. It was like she believed she had arranged for you to get a trade that would support you and your family and from the money she got out of that arrangement she was going to get me an education so I could do the same.”

“Our ma was a very smart person. She understood you were smarter where book learning was concerned. I’ve always been real good with my hands. She was a teacher when pa married her, did you know that?”

“Maybe,” Davy said. “I mean I’m not sure. I always knew she loved books and seemed to like helping us with our schoolwork. I really miss her, you know.”

“I know. When I was at Abraham’s sometimes I missed you folks so much I didn’t think I could stand it. I’d lay on my back on my bed after work and just scream into the air. The other two were convinced I was crazy.”

“For all the bad stuff, we still got each other, Jack. We’re smart and we’re going to be fine, you know.”

“I believe that, too. Life has just changed so much and so often for me during the past six months. I’m ready for some – what – steadiness I guess. Knowing where I am and who I have and being able to begin thinking about the future.”

“And by the future, of course, you mean girls.”

“You’re just aching to be tossed into the water, aren’t you?”

“Maybe after a nap. I float poorly when I’m tired.”

“Okay. I must admit that I haven’t been sleeping very well on the beach. I can use a nap, too.”

They were soon both asleep. From where they were, low on the west side of the bank they had not seen the clouds rolling in from out at sea. Squalls, they were called locally, and

they came up fast. The sky darkened and became angry looking. The wind picked up forcing stronger and higher waves against the other side of the reef. The clouds, which had earlier been small, widely separated puffs of white, darkened and mushroomed, boiling high and wide. Lightning brightened them from inside. Thunder clapped.

Whether it was the thunder or the sounds of the waves crashing against the seaward side of the bank, they couldn't be sure, but something awakened them with a start at the same instant. They sat up, startled, momentarily confused about what was happening.

"Where'd our great day go?" Davy asked getting to his feet and pointing back over the bank toward the sky.

"What do you think? Stay here or make for shore?" Jack asked really thinking out loud as he looked around to get a feel for what was taking place.

"No protection here," Davy said. "The next huge wave could wash us away. Look. There's already water in the boat."

"Okay. I'm with you. We'll pull the boat up on the rock, dump it out and head back to shore. The storm doesn't appear to be having much effect on the water in the sound."

Without more words, they attended to the boat. Water continued to splash over the ridge behind them and run down the west side. They were already soaked.

"Once off this rock we shouldn't have the water problem – the water running into the boat, I mean," Jack said.

They slipped the boat back into the water. Davy entered with the oars and set them in place while Jack worked to shove off, then leaped aboard. They shared the center seat and each worked one of the oars just as they had done earlier. Rested and frightened, they had an abundance (a lot) of energy and initially could maintain a fast pace. The storm was behind them as they rowed.

The sky darkened even more, entirely blocking the sun that should have been directly above them. The wind, which earlier had mostly been on the seaward side of the bank rose higher and blew with great force across the sound. Waves quickly picked up and were soon slapping at the rowboat from the rear and both sides. Following the waves, their boat rose

high above the usual level of the water and then sank well below it as it rode the swells and plunged into the troughs. If there were any good aspect of it all, the wind and waves were at the rear of the boat, which tended to propel them forward toward the coast at significant speed.

They began tipping dangerously from side to side. Jack positioned his oar almost straight out using it like an outrigger to hold the boat stable in the water. Watching that, Davy followed suit. It made some immediate improvement keeping them from being so badly buffeted (rocked, slammed) around.

Just as things seemed to be stabilizing, the rain began coming down in sheets so thick they couldn't see three yards in any direction. Davy elbowed his brother and leaned close to his ear, screaming to overcome the din (volume) of the storm.

"The boat will soon be filled with water. Wood floats. How about we sit on the floor with our legs underneath this seat? We can hold onto the seat and stay with the boat until the storm passes."

"Okay. First stow the oars on the floor. We'll sit on them so we don't lose them."

They managed the first leg of the plan, removing the oars from the oarlocks without losing them to the storm and placing them on the bottom of the boat. It was close quarters, but they managed to make the necessary adjustments. Jack hitched his head at Davy indicating he should go first. It required more care and effort than he had figured, but he was soon in position. Jack copied his brother's moves and was soon squeezed in beside him. With the oars withdrawn the boat was soon out of control, turning – swirling – around and around, up and down, fully out of their control. The boys held on, arms hugging the seat.

They each tended to their task – mainly, doing what he could to save his own life. Their hearts pounded. They fought the rain to breathe, each finding short, rapid breathing allowed less water into their mouths. Breathe, spit, breathe, spit. Neither boy had ever considered they could be that frightened. Neither would give up, however. It was a lesson well learned from their parents.

Interestingly, they both had private visions of home and

parents. Memories flashed through their heads as if in a parade – a collage – a history of their lives in short, simple images. The tears that flowed could not be seen, of course, and might or might not ever be discussed.

Soon they were shoulder deep in water. The thin, top edge of the boat's sides remained floating right at the surface just like Davy had predicted. With the addition of the natural buoyancy of their bodies, they had constructed a rather effective lifesaving structure. At that moment, however, neither boy felt heartened (encouraged) by the fact, as they continued to fight off wave after wave of water slapping against their faces, seemingly determined to force its way their mouths and lungs.

Eventually the most dreaded of all possibilities befell them. A huge wave, aided by the ever-increasing force of the wind, flipped the boat, turning it upside down. They found themselves heads pointing down, underwater, with their legs pinned between the seat and the bottom of the boat.

CHAPTER THREE

The Island Found the Boys?

The sun was low in the western sky and the storm had passed when Jack's eyes fluttered open. His mind was confused and at his first attempt to move he found his body was one throbbing mass of hurt. He had flashes of frightening memories – looming, black, swirling clouds, waves ten feet tall crashing down on him, lightning hitting the water close by the boat. As he struggled to sit up he discovered he was laid out on his back on a ledge of dark brown rock.

“The reef?” he asked out loud, still puzzled.

A rush of panic overtook him as he struggled to his feet. His knees were weak and he was dizzy. He reached out to support himself against the rock wall to his right.

“Davy?” he said quietly.

It had been more a question than a name.

His panic grew. He looked around and repeated the only word that held any meaning for him at that moment – Davy! He called out again and again, louder and louder until he was screaming. He walked along the ledge continuing to call his brother's name. He found himself between a tall rock barrier of some kind – perhaps the side of the reef – and a small cove or pond. He rounded the southern corner and turned west on what had become a very narrow rock shelf a few feet above the water. There was a noise – different from the water lapping against the rocks, different from the breeze chasing clouds up above – a sound, perhaps a human sound. It was a groan. He looked up along the rock wall searching for the source.

“There it is again,” he said, still out loud.

He called his brother's name again.

“There! A path, steps, maybe.”

He began climbing. Every move hurt. It was narrow and steep, part path and part natural rock steps.

At the top was a generally round opening in the rock wall – no more than five feet high and about that wide. It led into a short tunnel of sorts – perhaps three yards long. The sun lit it from the other side. Just inside lay Davy, bruised and bleeding;

his eyes were closed. All that really mattered was that he was breathing – slowly but regularly. Jack knelt and quickly examined him. His arms weren't broken. His legs weren't broken.

"Watch it, Buster. I don't let just anybody feel my legs that way."

It had been Davy. He opened his eyes in starts and stops and continued in a slow and measured manner.

"I'd smile, brother . . . but I think I may have . . . lost it during the storm."

"You'll just have to paint one on then, because I'm sure not going back to look for it. I thought I had lost you, Davy. That was so terrible. This is so great!"

"Great? Soaking wet, bleeding, nearly unable to move and you say it's great?"

"Of course, it's great. We survived."

Davy nodded and raised his arm for a hand up. The pain showed on his face. Jack helped him sit back against the wall of the tunnel. With some care, he managed to take a seat beside him.

"That was some April shower, wasn't it?" Davy said.

"Enough to last the rest of the Aprils in my life – and just to keep history correct, it was an August shower. Are you as sore as I am?"

"No way for me to know that, of course, big brother, but I suppose we need to enjoy it. Like you said, because we can feel it, we know we're alive."

"You remember how we got here," Jack asked shaking his head a bit as if trying to clear his head.

"I remember the storm and the row boat flipping over – I was sure we were just seconds from dying."

"That was a good boat. Too bad we lost it."

"Yeah. We put a lot of work into restoring it. That was a good time – the two of us working on something without arguing. Remember how we used to argue?"

Jack nodded. They were rambling.

"Seems like a long time ago – the arguing."

"I do remember something else," Davy said. "I remember climbing – like a stairway or something opened up in

front of me. I remember wondering if it was the stairway to Heaven.”

“That was probably the rock steps that lead up to this tunnel.”

He pointed.

Davy strained to look.

“Hey. In the cove down there – upside down – isn’t that our boat?”

Jack turned to look.

“What about that, brother? I missed it before. We didn’t lose it after all.

“No. *It* seems to have lost *us*.”

“Apparently not until it delivered us safely to this hunk of rock. I’ve been thinking this was that barrier reef we explored, but look there, east. That’s the reef way out there, isn’t it?”

“I’d say so. This must be an island in the sound. Let’s look around.”

“Dave, you can’t even stand let alone look around.”

“I suppose. Give me a few minutes to recuperate (feel better). It feels like my body got mangled pretty bad during the mishap.”

“That’s badly, but who’s keeping score?” Jack said, teasing him the way their mother had done as gentle reminders. “And you call it a *Mishap*? A mishap is when you step in a puddle and get your stockings wet. This was a *cataclysm* by comparison.”

“Pretty big word for a leather jockey.”

“You putting down my trade?”

“No, I was putting *you* down.”

They managed smiles. They discovered smiling really hurt.

It often seemed like they were putting each other down when really, they were saying, ‘I love you’. Guys often do it that way.

“It will soon be dark,” Jack said. “I think I should go back down to what you called the cove and tie up the boat. We surely lost the oars, but we can think about how to handle that later. Then I’m going to take a peek out the other end of this tunnel and see if I can see the coast line.”

Davy nodded. He was beginning to accept that he had been seriously hurt. He'd let Jack run things for a while.

With the boat righted and secured so it wouldn't float away, Jack returned and went directly to the other end of the tunnel.

"You've got to see this little brother. Here, let me help you."

Jack bent down and Davy draped his arms around his neck. Jack lifted him. He carried him to the opening and just stood there holding him.

"It's a huge valley like the Garden of Eden, Jack. I suddenly believe I am still unconscious and suffering some mental aberration."

"*Aberration?*" Jack asked.

"It means abnormality I think. At least that's what I meant."

"I'm betting it's all real, little brother. Trees, grass, a pond, flowers on the hill sides. I'm surprised we haven't encountered any people."

"Yeah. It's like some resort or something. You can put me down and look around if you want to."

"I think what I need to do first, is to find a sheltered place for us to spend the night. We both need a good long sleep for starters."

"I agree. Put me down out there in the grass so I can keep you in sight. Don't want to lose you again."

The very idea sent waves of panic through him.

* * *

"Remember how we slept the clock around that night, Jack?"

"I do and I think it was *twice* around."

Jack would never mention that he had awakened every few hours to check on his brother, bathing the blood from his face and chest, and fueling the fire to keep him warm. That was just what big brothers did.

"Back to those slavers," Davy said. "We can't just let them continue doing what they're doing. Our pa got killed in a war to make sure they remained free. It's against the law, now,

so why doesn't the law stop them?"

"Can't know that based on the little we've learned about the operation. I remember pa saying once that even if the North won it would be enforcing the ban on slavery that would be the hardest part of it all."

Davy nodded and spoke.

"Speaking of things we don't know enough about, where do you think we stand with your Abraham and anybody he might have looking for you?"

"Like you have been known to say, 'no way to know'. I guess we just stay cautious and keep our eyes out for him. You said you got a look at him when he went to the house for the night."

"Yeah. I suppose I'd recognize him and his red beard if I saw it again. Doesn't he need to stay at the leather shop, training and supervising the other boys?"

"I'd think so, but you haven't seen how angry he can get. The fact I escaped and he can have no idea how, will keep him furious for a good long time. Plus, there's the money he paid ma for me. He won't be happy about losing that. I pity the other boys. I didn't like them, but you can bet he'll think they know something and try to beat it out of them. He has helpers that can oversee their work. I don't know how he'd know which direction I'd go. That's on our side, I think. We must be, how far, away from up there now – 450 or 500 miles south?"

"Something like that. Still, we shouldn't let our guard down."

"How about going into town today. I have those three pair of leather work gloves finished. They should be worth three dollars. We can treat ourselves to a real supper at Maude's Restaurant."

"That sounds good. We might overhear things about the slavers."

"I'd like to learn more about the sheriff and why he's not dealing with them."

"Okay then. Shirts and shoes I'm thinking," Jack said.

"I've really come to hate wearing shoes, you know."

"I know. Most people will think we're classier with shoes on."

“And by most people you mean girls. You seem to think about girls an awful lot since we got here.”

“The age I suppose. You know it happens. If it didn’t, the human race would have died out long ago – that’s what dad told me when he was telling me other stuff.”

Davy let the phrase, ‘other stuff’, pass for the time being.

“Never thought about it like that. Okay, then. Go find a girl. Never let it be said that because of my foot dragging on the matter I killed off the human race.”

“Your day will come. Mark my word, little brother. Your day will come.”

They trotted down to the pond in the center of the valley. It was little more than a natural rock basin thirty feet across. Except for right after rains the water was clear and pure enough to drink. They washed up, put on their go to town clothes and were in their boat by late morning.

With each of them handling one oar and setting a leisurely pace, it took about an hour from their island moving directly west to the town on the coast – Carterville. On the way back, they usually took turns rowing. The other one would fish with a line behind the boat. It was seldom they didn’t catch a mess for whatever meal was next. That extended the trip to just over an hour and a half.

They were growing strong from the rowing and swimming and walking and the other activities that kept them busy. Davy was picking up the basic leather working skills and routinely handled things like preparing the hides, drawing the patterns and cutting pieces to size. They purchased the leather from Ben at the trading post and had picked up the tools from various places – some on the way south from Delaware. On trips into town, Jack always carried five dollars emergency money in his front pocket – or in a stocking if they were wearing shoes. The rest was hidden in the tin in their cave. The amount was growing.

They tied up at the dock near the trading post just south of town. Inside, Davy began working a deal for the gloves. He was the talker and undisputed best deal maker between the two of them. He began by examining the one pair of leather gloves Ben had for sale.

“You know, Ben, these are stitched up with regular number ten cotton thread. They’ll come apart in less than a year. My brother’s gloves, in addition to being better quality leather, are stitched with number fourteen, oiled silk. You just can’t get stronger than that. They’ll last a woodsman two years, easy. And he uses a flat whip stitch on the fingers and thumbs. They look good, they feel great and they last a long time. I’d say you can get a buck and a quarter a pair. With only a dollar to us for each one, you’ll be making a killing.”

“Boy, you could sell winter coats in Cuba.”

He examined a pair and tried them on. He made a fist and pounded it into the palm of the other one.

“These *are* very well made just like you said. Okay, a deal at three dollars for the three pairs.”

Jack accepted the money as Davy handed over the gloves and brought up another topic.

“I see very few of your hats have bands. How about we make up a few and bring them for you to look at? We can custom fit them for you right here. Probably add thirty cents to the price you can charge for a hat – twenty for us. Those dimes add up fast, you know.”

“Sure. I’ll be glad to look at them.”

The man opened the lid on the glass bowl containing the balls of hard candy.

“One apiece. I know boys your age have a sweet tooth.”

“Thank you. Very kind. Here’s a penny. Like to take one back home for grandpa. No teeth, but I declare he has as big a sweet tooth as we do.”

“I forgot about grandpa. Hope he’s well. Here take one for him, on the store. Tell him hello from me.”

“And him to you, sir. He often speaks of your kindness when he first came to town.”

Jack picked up the conversation.

“Did we hear right that the Sheriff took a posse out looking for the slavers?”

“I hadn’t heard that. He doesn’t seem much interested in them. I haven’t even heard of any slavin’ traffic anywhere close to here. Why do you ask?”

Jack hadn’t thought far enough ahead to have an

answer. Davy came to his rescue.

“We’ve been talking about how exciting it would be to go after the bad guys.”

“You just remember, what’s bad guys to some, ain’t bad guys to others. You stay clear of them, you hear. They eat boys your size for supper.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll stay clear for sure. We figure that’s up to the law, you know.”

Ben raised his eyebrows as if offering some degree of skepticism (doubt) about the law.

The boys left.

“Walk to town or take the boat?” Jack asked.

“I’m up for a walk. I feel uneasy every time we have to bring up ‘grampa’ – since there isn’t one.”

“I know, but we have to make it seem like some grown-up is in charge of us – taking care of us – or some do-gooder like Reverend Shipley will be hot on our trail.”

“I understand. Still, I’m uncomfortable.”

“Good. It wouldn’t be right to be comfortable about being dishonest.”

“What do you think Ben was really saying about the Sheriff and the slavers? You see the way he raised his eyebrows. I don’t buy what he said about not knowing if there is any slaving going on around here. First, we know there is, but second, he went on to warn us to stay away from them – stay away from them if they aren’t here? Makes no sense. We need more information. By the way that thing about the posse was a great lead in.”

“Thanks for saving my hide.”

“That’s what brothers are for.”

Jack smiled and changed the subject.

“How about if we stop in the general store and look around,” he urged more than asked.

“Look around for Mary Beth is what you mean. Sure. I’ll even make myself scarce so you two can have another awkward conversation.”

“I figure if I don’t get through the awkward conversations I’ll never learn how to have the easier kind.”

“Sound thinking, big brother. May I suggest you slick

back your hair and dust off your shoes before we go inside?”

With his hair dampened from their canteen and slicked back, and his shoes more or less shined by wiping them on his pants legs, they entered. Mary Beth’s mother and father owned the store. Her mother greeted them. Davy engaged her in conversation while Jack made his way to the rear of the room where the young lady was unloading a crate of towels and washcloths.

From Davy’s vantage point up front, the two of them seemed to be having a good time – looking at each other, talking back and forth, smiles, even a few chuckles. Davy figured his brother was probably borrowing some of his jokes. That was okay.

In the short space of ten minutes, Davy had fabricated (built) an entire, fictitious life story in response to Mary Beth’s mother’s pointed questions. He’d have to go over all that with Jack so they were on the same page. He hoped his brother hadn’t been concocting some *other* story for Mary Beth.

She walked Jack back to the front. They nodded at each other and the boys left.

“So?”

“So, what?” Jack answered, putting on a tease.

“You can’t be that dumb, brother. Mary Beth. Things go alright?”

“Yes. Fine. She’s a smart person.”

Davy rolled his eyes.

“Yes? *Fine? A smart person?* What kind of dumb comments are those from a young man in love?”

“I’m not in love. We had a good conversation. She is thirteen and will have a birthday next month – then she’ll be fourteen.”

“Funny how that happens – going from thirteen to fourteen?”

Jack tried to ignore him.

“She is in eighth year at the local school and plans to be a teacher.”

Davy laid out the story he had told the girl’s mother.

“She must have really pumped you.”

“Like four men manning the fire carriage. How do you

think I did?”

“Good. Not too much detail. Nothing that can be easily traced. Yeah. Very good, I’d say. Nothing less than I would have expected from you.”

Davy offered a broad grin. His whole body always smiled inside when he received a compliment from his brother.

They moved on to the hardware store. Jack had ordered some supplies the week before and they went to check if they had come in. There were several men sitting at the rear drinking coffee and talking. Davy moved in close enough to listen while Jack was talking with the owner. He heard several very interesting things, which he began revealing the moment they were back outside.

“Heard stuff, Jack. One of them said he figured the slaver – a man he called Archibald – had the sheriff in his back pocket. I assume that means he somehow got him to be on his side and look the other way. Maybe paying him off. That wasn’t mentioned. Anyway, another man agreed and said he’d noticed the sheriff was away on business every time there was no moon – what’s that called, the dark of the moon? Anyway, it seems the men think the slaves are moved out of this area only on nights when there’s no moon. Didn’t hear why they thought that or if they thought the sheriff was helping move them or just didn’t want to be around at the time.”

“Less likely to be seen on nights with no moon, I imagine. Your ears have been busy, haven’t they? Anything about the boat they use?”

“Nope. I was thinking, it could be they use different boats each time to make it harder to keep track of them.”

“That would make sense. It’s how I’ll do it when I become a slaver.”

Davy stopped in his tracks.

“What? You a slaver?”

“I’m kidding. I do that sometimes.”

“Oh. I guess I was just so caught up in what I was thinking that I missed it. Actually, that was pretty good.”

“Maude’s?” Jack said, pointing across the street.

“Sure. I’ve reached that stage where I can eat any amount, at any moment during any hour of the day. Grampa

says I have a hollow leg.”

“Grampa?” Jack said clearly confused.

“Gottcha – slaver boy.”

“Oh. I see. Now it’s a competition.”

Carterville was a community of four hundred or so people – on the high side for a coastal town. The graveled Main Street wandered a quarter of a mile back from the dock up a gentle slope. The businesses occupied both sides of the street just inland from the dock. The homes spread out north, south, and west. There were many farm families in the outlying areas that counted on the little town for supplies, church, school, and Friday night entertainment.

As was the case in many of the small towns up and down the coast, Negroes were there and yet they weren’t. They were neither accepted nor really rejected. The men worked as laborers and the women as cooks and maids. Most towns had a Sundown Law which stated Negroes were not allowed to remain in town overnight. That forced them to live outside the town limits. An ugly law, the boys thought.

As they crossed the street they heard a commotion in front of the yard goods (cloth) store. Two men were dragging a Negro boy toward the Sheriff’s office. He looked to be about their age. The boys exchanged glances and moved quickly up the street to see what it was all about. Getting close, they caught the boy’s terrified look.

CHAPTER FOUR

What's a Deuteronomy?

Davy, who was a better talker than a cautious, 'thinker ahead', walked right up to them.

"Whoa, whoa, guys. What you doing to our boy, Deuteronomy, here?"

"You know this kid?"

"Know him. He works for our grampa."

Jack understood and joined in.

"We been worried about you, Dute. You were gone all night."

Davy turned to his brother and slapped his own forehead.

"He told us he was going to visit his granny up at Winston, remember?"

"You're right. How dumb of us."

They turned back to a very confused eleven-year-old.

"She doing better – your granny?"

"Yessa. Doin' much better – all of a sudden like. Got her ta take some chicken soup while I was wit her."

"Glad to hear that," Davy said.

"Pushing any advantage he thought he might have created, Davy hitched his head at the boy and took hold of his upper arm separating him from the men. We need to get home. Grampa's all by himself."

The dumbfounded (confused) men released him and the three boys turned and walked back down the street toward the dock as if it were something they did every day.

"They following us, Jack?" Davy said out of the corner of his mouth, keeping them to a medium pace, not wanting to dawdle so the men might catch up, or go fast and appear to be too interested in getting away from them.

Jack turned his body just enough to get a quick take of what was going on.

"No. Watching us, though. Just standing there with their hands on their hips. Clearly puzzled. It looks like we may have pulled it off – whatever *it*, might turn out to be."

"I doesn't know what ya's doin' but thanks, I'm a thinkin'."

"Just you keep acting normal here with us, Dute," Jack said. "We'll do what we can to help. It seems to be working."

Five minutes later they had turned off the street and had a good start back down the trail south toward the Trading Post. They were well out of view of the men.

"So, what's up, Dute?" Davy asked.

"Dute?" the boy asked.

"Yeah, Davy. Where'd you pull that name from - Deuteronomy?" Jack asked.

"It was the name of a Negro boy in a story I read once. It's the only name for a Negro boy I've ever heard."

He turned to Deuteronomy."

"You'll have to excuse us. We've never known a Negro boy before so we'll probably be pretty dumb about it."

Deuteronomy shook his head.

"I must be a dreamin'. That's it. I'm a dreamin'."

"Not a dream," Jack said. "We're as real as you are. By the way, what *is* your name?"

The boy grinned.

"I think I'll stick wit Deuteronomy, if'n I gets ta choose. Feels important, ya know?"

"Okay then," Jack said with a nod. "Deuteronomy, it will be."

So, suddenly there would be *three* boys using aliases there in Carterville. As a cover from any inquires Abraham or his men might make, they had assumed the names Billy and Frank. Up to then, grampa had remained just grampa.

"Okay if we shorten it to Dute?" Davy asked.

"You *askin'* me?"

"Yes."

Davy was puzzled at the boy's question.

"Why did you ask that?"

"I seldom done been *asked*. I jist mostly been *told*."

"Consider those days over. So, what about *Dute*? That be okay?"

"Very okay."

"Good. I'm Davy, by the way and this is my big brother, Jack. We're glad to know you."

Deuteronomy shook his head.

“Never done had nothin’ like this happened ta me before.”

“Like this?” Jack asked, puzzled.

“Yessa. Can’t figure why you two took up fer me. In case ya didn’t notice, I’s black as a moonless night. That’s a important difference ta most whities – I mean, white folks.”

“We had the good fortune to grow up in a home that taught us ‘different’ means ‘fascinating’ and ‘possibly helpful’.”

Deuteronomy nodded slowly, clearly thinking about it.

“Thas real good. Most a the white kids I’s met up with must a been learned that ‘different’ means “scary’ or ‘bad’. Sure am glad it was you who come along ta git me outta that scrape I was in.”

“We’ll have time to get acquainted later, if you decide to come with us,” Jack said. “That’s up to you, of course.”

“I’m tryin’ ta git ta my daddy, ‘cause some men took him away an I don’t know where he is. Them two men was probably a part a it all.”

“Slavers?” Davy asked.

“I heard ‘em called that. I’m sceered outta my skin fer him.”

“Your Mother?” Jack asked.

“Always been wit my daddy. Mama died birthin’ me he says.”

“Sorry. How long ago did they take your pa – daddy.”

Deuteronomy’s face lit up.

“I know ‘pa’. Been around white folks all my life. I can even talk the way they talk when the situation requires it.”

The boys smiled at the short example he offered as if to prove his contention.

“I didn’t mean to put you down by that ‘pa’ and ‘daddy’ thing,” Jack said.

“You two is the *strangest* white folks I ever done knowed.”

“We’ll assume by strangest you don’t mean anything really bad.”

“Oh, no, Sir. Strange *good* all the way. Jist different, I s’pose would be a better word, huh?”

“Probably,” Davy said. “One thing. Please don’t call us, ‘sir’. That really makes us uncomfortable.”

“Never knowed nothin’ else ta call white men – well *massa* (master).”

“Goodness no! Not *sir*. Not *massa*. Try using our names. That has always worked for us.”

“I’s a gonna try, but I kin tell ya right now, I’s gonna git the willies every time I say ‘em.”

Davy responded.

“My brother and I haven’t ever seen a real life ‘willie’ before so this should be great.”

Deuteronomy furrowed his forehead. Jack came to his rescue.

“My brother has an odd sense of humor. You will get used to it. When you’re not sure, just look at me and I’ll explain.”

“I gets the idea I will be lookin at you a lot . . . Jack.”

He offered a broad grin as if those willies might not feel so bad after all.

“There’s our boat, Dute,” Davy said, pointing. “How about coming home with us until we can sort out the thing about your pa?”

“Ta *your* home? Me? Won’t nobody care?”

“Jack and I are the only *body*s at our place. Lots of room for you. We can guarantee you’re welcome.”

“Yeah. Our philosophy is that everybody has to help out everybody else in this world. That’s the only way to make sure things keep going really good for everybody.”

“You two is so strange! I says agin, can’t you see the color a my skin?”

He pointed.

“Yeah,” Davy said shrugging and looking at Jack. “It’s great – beautiful even. Lighter than I expected black skin to be close up.”

Jack nodded and held his arm close to Deuteronomy’s.

“See here. I got nothing. See there. You got real color.”

“You’re what ya call *tan*, ain’t ya? I seen white ladies a whole lot whiter than that.”

“That’s right. White girls think being pale makes them attractive and then they spoon on powder and rouge to cover it

up. Who can figure? The tanner white boys get in the summer the better we like it. But, you, you're well-tanned the year 'round. I'm sort of jealous seeing it up close like this for the first time."

"First time?"

"Yeah. There weren't many Negros where we came from. We are counting on you to provide a good education for us."

"I guess I'll come along, then. I'm used ta sleepin with the horses or chickens so won't be no trouble that way. An I kin cook an clean."

"I'm sure we'll work something out. You fish?"

"All the time."

"Good. Davy and I'll row and you can fish off the back and catch supper for us."

"You travels by boat?"

"We live on an island out in the sound. We like to keep that private and ask that you don't reveal it to anybody, okay."

"Oh, yes, sir . . . er, DavyJack. I'll takes it to my grave if need be."

"We'd never ask that of you. Let's get going."

By the time they reached the island, it was Davy and Dute on the oars with Jack handling the line. Between them they caught six medium sized fish – three Snapper and three Butter Fish.

As Jack watched the other boys, he was soon convinced it would be the two of them who would become the best friends. That made him happy. That meant both he and Davy had a friend.

"Wow! This really your island? You must be rich."

"Not rich. Fortunate, I guess. A bad storm dropped us here, and here we have stayed."

"It got a name?"

"We've been calling it *Freedom Island* because we feel . . . well. . . free out here. Nobody after us. Nobody telling us what to do. We can pretty much do as we please here. See? *Freedom*."

"I'd call a place like that Heaven. I jist know I must be a dreamin'."

“Just wait till we get you elbow deep into fish guts and I’ll bet you’ll change your mind,” Davy said offering a grin.

Jack tied up the boat and the others took charge of the fish.

“From a distance I wouldn’t a give a pig in a quickmud’s chance that this was nothin’ but a big hunk a rock. It must be sompin’ else, I guess.”

“We’ll let you decide. Home’s just up that path and through a short tunnel to the east.”

Davy led, Deuteronomy followed and Jack brought up the rear. They stopped at the opening to the valley.

For some time Deuteronomy just stood, mouth open, taking in the scene below.

“This may be *yous Freedom Island*, but I’s a tellin’ ya true, this here is *my Heaven Island*.”

Davy led them down to the cave, which sat twenty-five feet off the path to their right – north. Deuteronomy handed him his fish and began walking the cave touching all the things he found there. There were straight back chairs at a wooden table, several sea chests, a cupboard, two good sized, straw-filled mattresses, which sat up on foundations of slats over logs. There was a grandfather clock standing beside the fireplace and a dozen oars standing along one wall each pair painted and decorated alike. A wooden barrel with a tap (faucet) filled with water set on a low wooden stand. Lanterns hung here and there to provide light at night and there was a roll-down canvas at the opening, up front, that could be lowered during cold snaps or during storms.

The cave had a relatively flat floor, part of which had been covered with wooden planks. The boys had only recently begun that project. Dozens more lengths of planking were stacked just outside.

Deuteronomy was drawn to two bows with quivers of arrows hanging above the rock fireplace.

“You know how to use a bow?” Davy asked seeing his interest.

“Ya. I am very good wit bows. Daddy, he a expert. Trained by the Indians when he was a boy. They raised him after they killed his mamma and daddy in a raid. I know lots a

Indian stuff. My mamma was Powhatan – that’s a tribe from these parts.”

“That’s why your skin is lighter than I expected,” Davy said. “Please don’t take that the wrong way. I’d never try to hurt your feelings. Like I said, I love your color.”

Deuteronomy shrugged, not really understanding why Davy might think his feelings mattered. They never had before where white men were concerned.

Jack brought out bowls and pails for them to use while cleaning the fish. They sat on the floor of the cave near the opening and went to work.

“How’d ya git all this stuff?”

Davy began thinking about how things had come together for them at the cave.

* * *

Davy and Jack were sitting near the fire in their cave sharing apples and flame cooked fish along with some sort of baked potato-like vegetable they dug down close to the pond. The apples were from trees right there in the valley.

“It’s a great place here, you know, Jack, but it’s bare. If we’re going to get back to living a civilized life, we need some stuff – bed, table, clothes, books, pots and pans and a skillet – stuff. Lanterns would be good for night time.”

It was the end of their first full week on the island. Davy had recovered remarkably well. They had begun going for a long trot around the valley every morning. In general, they had let themselves begin relaxing and believing they were safe from Abraham and the authorities. Some of the money from the tin had gone for basic supplies – flour, salt, sugar, a good kitchen knife, two pans, tin plates and cups, and a big iron skillet. It had come to just over four dollars which seemed very expensive, but what it was, it was, they figured. It made them realize they couldn’t afford any of the bigger things they had talked about wanting.

“How about using five dollars to buy a good cow hide so I can make a few things to sell?” Jack asked. “I can use the knives we found along the way on the trip south. I’ll need an awl to make holes, and several small blade chisels to use in the tooling (making designs). Also, linseed oil and shellac. That’ll

add another dollar, maybe two, but they should more than pay for themselves after just a few sales.”

“I think it’s a great idea. You can teach me things – the easy stuff – so I can help – make it go faster.”

That day they rowed into town and found what they needed. Ben, the owner of the trading post gave them half a dozen of his old tools that he said he was replacing. There was a hammer, a brace and bit (drill set), a screwdriver and an assortment of chisels. They were all quite worn, but Davy redefined that as just being ‘well broken in’. Ben said he’d like to look over any leather products they produced thinking he might be able to sell them – he mentioned belts, gloves, saddle bags and holsters.

At the General Store, they added a half gallon of milk. Milk had to be used within the same day because they had no way to keep it cool.

On the return trip, they talked about how well their shopping had gone and a variety of other things.

“I know we had to mention the leather work,” Jack said. “I just hope that doesn’t make it easier for Abraham to find me.”

“Ben clearly likes us so I imagine nobody will get anything out of him,” Davy said. “I believe he’s an honorable man – a good one for us to know at this juncture in our lives.”

“Juncture?”

“Place, crossroad.”

Jack nodded as they each handled an ore setting their course south east from the trading post. Their island was north east, but they always started in the opposite direction in another attempt to keep their whereabouts secret. It added less than a half hour and they believed it was essential. Jack saw it as a bit more work. Davy saw it as giving them more time to talk. Jack would have noted that’s all they had anyway – time to talk.

After they turned to the north, Davy pointed to the reef where their lives had been changed in so many ways.

“We really oughta go back out there and see if we can dive down and find any of those sunken ships. They’d be loaded with stuff we can use I’ll bet.”

“You’re probably right. We don’t know how deep they are. Might not be able to dive that deep or stay down long

enough.”

“Never find out just talking about it like this.”

Jack smiled – it had been Davy being Davy.

The next morning, they set out in the row boat heading for the reef.

“We have no idea where to look, you know,” Jack said.

“Down in the water, I believe,” Davy joked.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, and I got an idea about that. We swim along the top with our face in the water looking down below the surface. Once we get started we will get a feel for how to go from there. From what I hear the reefs come pretty much straight up from broad ledges, so it may not be as deep as we think. We’ll learn a lot during the first few minutes, I’m thinking.”

As they neared the reef they passed a narrow opening.

“Let’s see if we can get through there to the other side,” Jack said. “That’s where we need to be and the boat would be over there with us.”

The slit between the sections of rock turned out to be plenty wide. The water on the other side was much choppy – the waves that were mere ripples inside the sound were nearly a foot high.

“Does the surface look calmer out twenty yards or so?” Davy asked shading his eyes.

“Sure does. Let’s row out and get a better take on it.”

Their observation had been correct. The water splashing against the rocks was causing the higher waves as it rolled back, meeting the incoming water.

Jack spoke.

“I think one of us should stay in the boat since we have no place to tie it up out here and sure don’t want to lose it. That person can sort of row along with the one who’s in the water.”

“That’s a good plan.”

“I’ll get in first,” Jack said. “We’ll trade off.”

Jack stripped and was immediately over the side. He set out north pausing occasionally to take a breath. They moved on for nearly a hundred yards. He stopped and treaded water.

“Got stuff and it’s no more than ten feet down there. Let me dive and take a better look.”

“Okay. Be careful.”

Jack’s head ducked beneath the surface and soon he was out of sight. Davy began counting. He had no idea why, but it seemed like a good idea. At the count of ninety-two Jack surfaced, sputtering and smiling.

“A small, wooden sailing vessel. Maybe forty or forty-five feet long. One mast. On its side. Big gash across the bow from what I could see. Probably hit the reef during a storm or heavy fog and sank immediately.”

“What shape’s the hull wood in – rotted?”

“Didn’t pay attention. Doesn’t salt water sort of preserve wood?”

“Not sure. Maybe.”

“What else should I look for? Then I’ll dive again.”

“See if there’s any easy way to get inside, for one thing. Second, keep away from any man-eating octopuses that may be living inside. Don’t want to be writing in ink some day and wonder if it’s really you I’m using.” [The octopus secretes a dark liquid that was once collected and used as ink.]

“Okay. Here I go.”

That time Davy reached one hundred and twelve before his brother surfaced, shooting out up to his waist, sputtering for a breath.

“The hull is split on the top side, leaving a huge open gash. That allows enough light inside to see almost everywhere. The area beneath the deck is basically all open – a few support beams. Here, take this.”

He slapped the end of a length rope over the side of the row boat.

“What’s this about?”

“There’s a big coil of rope down there. This is one end. I figure we can use it to haul stuff up.”

“You found real *stuff*.”

“Everything on your list and more. I don’t know how some of it will have survived, having been in the water all these years, but we can pick and choose what we think will be best. Not sure how to get it all back to the island.”

“How long’s the rope?”

“Not *that* long, doofus!”

“I didn’t mean all the way to the island. I mean maybe we can pull stuff directly over to the reef and lay it out there to dry. Then we can make as many trips in our boat as we need to in order to get it all home.”

“I see. The rope – probably a hundred feet, or if it’s from Europe maybe thirty meters – both about the same.”

“You get in the boat and I’ll take a few turns diving,” Davy suggested. “You can start pulling the rope up and coiling it here in the bottom of the boat.”

“Sounds good. Diving takes it out of you – especially the pressure on your ears and holding your breath. Here’s an idea. You tie the other end of the coil to something down there and I’ll pull it up tight. Then, by pulling ourselves along it, we can speed our way up and down while we bring up little stuff that we can carry.”

The plan seemed good. Davy made his first dive. He returned with several pots and pans. Take my belt out of my pants and hand it to me. I can string it through holes in things and carry more on a trip.”

With the belt in hand he dove a second time. A short time later, he surfaced empty handed.

“There are chests down there. Can’t open them, but probably filled with lots of useful stuff. I’ll tie the rope around one of them and then come up and help you pull.”

That went just fine until they tried to lift it into the boat. In the water its buoyancy made it seem light. Out in the air it was another matter. Jack had an idea.

“Let’s lash it to the boat then row with it back to the reef. I imagine we can slide it up onto the rocks so we can get a look inside.”

It took a while, but worked just the way he thought it would. Jack broke the lock with a large rock. They opened it. Jack had visions of gold and silver. Davy was hoping for dishes, pots, silver ware and practical things like that. Neither of them had been even close to right.

They gasped and pulled back!

CHAPTER FIVE

The Plan

“Ugh!”

“Awful!!”

“Disgusting!!!”

“Creepy!!!!”

“A dead skeleton! All crunched over inside the chest.”

Davy managed a smile.

“Most skeletons that we might come across *will* be dead big brother.”

Jack ignored it.

“So, what now?” he asked.

“I suppose he deserves being buried,” Davy said leaving it open for discussion.

“Can’t do it here on this rock.”

“Back in the woods, maybe?”

“That makes sense. When?”

“I doubt if haste is a priority. Clearly he’s been dead for decades – maybe a century even.”

“Then why don’t we close the chest and continue diving for a while. Later we can come back and attend to him.”

Davy nodded, agreeing. They closed the lid.

“Never seen a skeleton before,” Davy said putting on a shiver.

“Me either. It’s sort of like getting a peek at your own insides.”

“I for one have had enough of a peek. I’m happy just seeing skin. Let’s get back to the boat. We need to spend some time just looking over what’s down there – like taking an inventory – see what looks like it’s still any good. Then we can discuss which of it all that we want to try and raise.”

“Good idea, little brother. Whose turn is it to dive?”

“I hardly got started and I’m pretty well rested now,” Davy said.

“Okay. Let’s get back out there.”

Davy made four long dives and located a table with chairs, a stash of oars, a large roll of canvas that had been packaged inside a canvas bag coated in tar. Many of the crates

were similarly coated either in tar or wax to keep the contents from being damaged by the rain, humidity and ocean water during the voyage. They didn't open those sealed containers hoping to raise them undamaged.

It became Jack's turn and he dove pulling himself along the rope, a system they found cut the time in half both ways. He had been down a long time. Davy became concerned. He got into the water and submerged his face to take a look. Something was wrong with his brother.

He took a huge breath and pulled himself down along the rope at a fast clip. Jack's foot was caught between two boards along the opening in the side. Davy swam to the stash of oars and was back with one in seconds. He managed it into the crack and, using it like a lever, pried the crack open releasing Jack's foot. Jack floated limp back in the water, bubbles left his nose and mouth.

Davy, always fast thinking and level headed, put his mouth against Jack's and blew what air he had in his lungs into his brother's. He grasped him under his arms with one arm, pulled on the rope with the other, and kicked his feet furiously. At the surface, he held Jack's head above the water and took lots of rapid breaths himself as he swam backwards to the reef pulling his precious package. He pulled Jack up onto the rock and lay him, belly down, over the chest, keeping his head lower toward the water. He pressed on Jack's back and raised his arms out to his sides. He repeated it over and over again. A doctor had once come to his school and demonstrated the process.

"Don't you dare drown! You hear me? You hear me! Breath."

Davy was screaming. He continued working on Jack for a minute, then two or perhaps three, determined to pump life back into the most important person he had.

"Cough! Sputter! Groan! Sniff!"

Jack turned his head continuing to cough and expel water from his mouth. Davy continued to pat his back. He experienced an incredible feeling of relief. Eventually he moved him carefully and sat him back on the rock.

Jack looked around, very groggy and confused.

“If this is Heaven it sure looks a lot like a pile of rocks.”

“Not Heaven, big brother. I’m here. We had a scare.”

“Surly you can find a more descriptive word than *scare*, little brother.”

“Alarm? Fright? Panic? Terrifying? Petrifying? I can probably find more if they’re required.”

“I think those cover it. I remember getting my foot stuck, looking up, and seeing you coming down the rope.”

Davy filled in the blanks.

“You gave me your last air? You risked drowning, too? What a lame brained, totally stupid, idiotic thing to have done.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jack managed the first smile. He nodded.

“Thanks, you know. Love ya.”

“Me too, you.”

“We need to call it a day,” Davy said. “Neither of us is any good right now. We have a good idea of what’s down there and with the rope we know we can bring up whatever we want.”

Jack nodded and pointed out into the ocean.

“I sure hope you have the strength left to go after the boat that seems to be well into making its way to Africa out there.”

“I’ll get it. What about the rope? It’s still tied to the sunken ship.”

“Bring the coil back with the boat. We can hide the coil here with the chest. Then pile rocks on the chest to hide everything. Doubt if anybody would see the rope in the water. I don’t want you diving down again to free it.”

“*That* gets a unanimous vote, then. Give me a few minutes to rescue the boat.”

They were both very weak. Davy used a lazy back stroke and after a few minutes was at the boat. It took half an hour before they finally had the chest and rope well disguised.

“I’ll row,” Davy said.

“We’ll each take an oar. We can take it easy – take as long as we need to get home.”

They rowed in long, slow, smooth, strokes, resting frequently. They remained silent for quite a while. Davy broke it.

“Never been so scared in all my life as I was back there today, Jack.”

“Me either, for as long I knew what was facing me. Must have been worse for you. We make a good team.”

“You mean you drowning and me saving you?”

“Yes, that.”

They shared a smile.

Over the next ten days they salvaged dozens of things from the boat. Many of the items were in surprisingly good shape. The largest canvas bag held a perfectly dry, Grandfather’s Clock, which soon stood proudly toward the rear of the cave. With air being constantly drawn out of the cave through the crevice in the ceiling, the floors, sides and ceiling remained dry.

Eventually their place sported a table and chairs, two large cabinets, blankets, beds, cooking and eating equipment, and other necessities of life. There was a sealed, metal, chest, which contained bows and arrows and a variety of flint lock pistols. They figured they might be able to sell them later as relics. They fashioned two mattresses from the canvas using Jack’s leather working needles and twine purchased in town. They bought bales of straw to stuff the casings and after just a little adjustment had two fine beds.

* * *

They skillet-fried the fish that Deuteronomy and Jack had caught. Davy placed six good sized ‘island potatoes’ in the fire to bake. They had a bowl filled with apples and peaches fresh off their own trees.

“First time in ages I ate off a plate,” Deuteronomy said. “Never was much good wit forks. Mind if I jist pick it up and go at it like corn on the cob?”

“You mean like this?” Davy said doing what Dute had described, hoping to make him feel more comfortable.

Jack smiled and enjoyed the goings on, but went ahead and used his fork.

After the meal was finished they took their new friend on an extended tour of the little island.

“No li’l critters – rabbits, squirrels?” Deuteronomy asked

at last

“We suppose they aren’t much at swimming out this far from shore,” Davy said.

Deuteronomy looked at Jack. Jack nodded.

“That was a joke, Dute, although it’s probably true. We set traps in the forest just inland from the beach. Been thinking of bringing some rabbits out to live with us.”

“Wouldn’t do that,” Deuteronomy said. “They likely take over the place and ruin all this.”

“We hadn’t considered that. A good point,” Jack said.

“All sea birds out here, too, I sees.”

“Yeah. They come and go.”

They took seats in the grass close to the pond.

“You two wore shoes in town.”

“We do that when we need to be dressed up. Here on the island, never.”

Deuteronomy nodded.

“Never had shoes, myself. Looks awful uncomfortable.”

“I’m growing to agree with you,” Davy said. “My brother mostly really wears them to impress a girl he’s in love with in town.”

Jack shot him a look but kept quite. Davy giggled. Deuteronomy looked puzzled but didn’t ask.

Jack was ready to get down to business.

“What do you know about the men who abducted your pa?”

“Ab-whated?”

“Abducted. It means took or captured.”

Deuteronomy nodded and smiled. He clearly appreciated the boys’ help that way.

“We left the plantation and was walkin’ our way up ta New York State. Pa heard there was work for Negros up there – good pay even. The work in Georgia was not much better than bein’ a slave. A roof, food, blanket and fifty cents a week – that was if I worked wit him.

“We got this far, eatin’ off the land and doin’ pretty good. We had time to really git to know each other – more man ta man, ya know. One night whiles we was gittin’ ready ta turn in at our campfire, we was put upon by a half dozen or so white

men. They tied daddy's hands behind him. They made a rope – maybe ten foot long – with a noose in each end. They slipped one over each a our necks so I'd follow along. They wasn't all that smart 'cause they didn't tie my hands. When we stopped ta drink at a creek, daddy whispered ta me ta free myself and take ta the woods. He said ta go east ta the ocean and he'd come find me. That was the last I heard from him. I done like he said. The men shot at me, but I was soon into the trees and they had no chance a gittin' me in there. I hope they didn't hurt pa over it."

"Wow! Scary! Awful!"

It had been Davy acting like a dictionary, again.

"How far away from here was that do you think?" Jack asked.

"Two days. I was two hours north a here when those men you saw caught me and dragged me down ta town."

"Why did they go after you?"

"From what I made out, it seems like the Sheriff buys Negros. They spoke about a better price down here than on up north. That don't make no sense, a course. Mr. Lincoln stopped slavin'. They was hopin' ta git seventy five or a hundred dollars fer me. They fed me good – so I'd be healthy lookin' fer a sale I's a thinkin'."

"That's the second connection we have between the Sheriff and the slavers," Jack said. "I don't suppose you know where they were taking you and your pa when they had you, do you?" Jack asked.

He shook his head, then his face brightened.

"The head massa said somethin' like cartersnet or cartonset. I really never got it straight in my head."

"We've hear the forest here called the Carteret Forest," Davy said.

"That could mean they were headed up to the little stockade we found loaded with Negro men and boys," Jack said.

"Where is it? Let's go," Deuteronomy said making a move to get to his feet.

"Not so fast," Jack said. "We need a plan. On foot, I'd say their camp is about two hours into the forest from the shore.

We had been in there camping and hunting for two days when we stumbled onto them so can't really be exact about how far it was, but it took an hour running full-out to reach the shore."

Davy took it up.

"That's roughly six miles or maybe something less – running around trees and jumping logs probably slowed us down."

"What's your pa's name?"

"Daddy, oh, you mean, Amos."

Davy turned to Jack.

"The moon is on the short side of quarter. It'll go dark within this week."

"What's that got ta do with anythin'?"

"We believe they move the men they've kidnapped during the dark of the moon. That gives them two or three nights of good dark cover."

"So, that sets our time line, then," Jack said. "We need to get back in there and examine their setup so we can make plans."

"We have several possibilities," Davy said continuing his brother's thought. "We could maybe set them free at the stockade although that's probably not the best idea considering the guards and guns. We could silently steal some of them when they are brought through the forest to the boat at the shore or we could sabotage the slaver boat before it's loaded – sink it or disable the engine. That would only slow things down until they got new transportation, I suppose."

"One problem – no matter where we make our move – is the Sheriff," Jack said. "We need to have some authority on our side."

"Authority?" Deuteronomy asked.

"The law, in this case," Jack explained.

He nodded.

"Who's over sheriffs?" do you suppose?" Davy asked.

"Their boss you mean? A Federal Marshal, I suppose."

"We need to find out how to contact him – telegraph, I suppose. I wonder where the marshal's office is."

"Probably Raleigh or Durham," Jack said just speculating (guessing).

“A hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty miles away I’d guess.”

Jack did some figuring.

“Three or four days by horse – a day or less by railroad depending on the schedule. We’ll keep that in mind.”

Davy picked up a small stick and began drawing in the clay.

“This is how I remember the stockade,” he said. “You jump in and correct things you remember differently, Jack.”

Jack nodded. He and Deuteronomy moved in closer.

“A square enclosure made of logs sunk into the ground and standing upright beside each other. Nearly twelve feet tall. I’d say, what, maybe twenty-five feet square, Jack.”

“Maybe thirty. And like a bunkhouse behind it for the guards back here.”

He pointed and Davy added it to the drawing, then continued.

“It all sets near the bank of a creek. It looked to be fairly deep because there were five, good sized rowboats tied up close by.”

“Why so many?” Deuteronomy asked.

“Great question,” Jack said. “Each one can hold five when full. We counted six men following us. I assume they left one or two behind to guard their prisoners.”

“Maybe some were brought in by boat,” Davy suggested.

“Or, maybe they are all going to be taken away in boats – delivered to the slave ship. Maybe the ship waits for them way off shore. That would mean they’ll be moving east down the creek.”

“We need to find where that creek empties into the sound, Davy said. “It’s probably the first one south of Carterville, don’t you imagine?”

“We haven’t explored much down that way, but what you say makes sense. That’s probably the place to begin – finding the outlet. It should point us pretty close to the spot the slaver’s ship will pick them up if it comes ashore. Maybe some natural cove down there.”

“So, should this be a day time or a night time sortie for us?”

“You boy’s use lots a strange words.”

“*Sortie* means like a raid or in our case a short trip to investigate along the creek.”

“A good word. I didn’t mean your words wasn’t *good* words.”

“You just keeping asking whatever you want to. That’s the best way to learn new things,” Davy said.

“Back to day or night,” Davy went on. “They’ll probably be more alert at night when it’s hard to see than during the day. What do you think?”

“You thinkin’ they’s expectin’ a *sortie* raid?”

“I doubt it, if they really have the sheriff on their side,” Jack said. “Who else would be likely to raid them?”

“Good points, brother. Tomorrow morning then. We should decide what we need to take with us.”

“Just how good are you with a bow, Dute?”

“Don’t know how ta say. I kin show ya.”

They walked back up the slope to the cave and the boy carefully selected a bow from the several they had available.

“I like longer ones. They packs more power – arrows fly further an faster.”

The chest contained dozens of arrows. He selected four. They went outside. He looked around for possible targets and pointed.

“The knot on the side a that tree.”

It was thirty yards away. He set the arrow in place, raised the bow, and with no hesitation, let it fly.

Zonk!

They ran to the tree. The arrow was still quivering, sunk dead center into the knot.

“Amazing! You’re a great shot, Dute,” Davy said.

“Best I’ve ever seen,” Jack agreed. “We will definitely take the bow and arrows along, just in case.”

“Shall we walk along the creek or take the boat? It seemed like quiet water so we should have no problem rowing up stream, Davy said.”

“Let’s think on that,” Jack said.

Deuteronomy raised his hand as if for permission, but went ahead and spoke, maybe trying out the promise of

equality.

“I think in a pinch I’d rather be free ta run than have ta manage a boat. It could become like a trap. Only one path open fer a boat. All paths is open ta a runner.”

“That makes sense. Okay then, we’ll stash the boat in the woods near the beach and walk in.”

“That’s it? Again?” Deuteronomy said clearly confused about something.

“What do you mean?”

“I done made two suggestions and you jist takes ‘em both?”

“Sure. They were great suggestion – smart,” Jack said. “About the rabbits and now the boat.”

Deuteronomy shook his head.

“Beats all. That done *never* happened before. Beats all I’s a tellin’ ya.”

“Better get used to it. We’re sure you know lots of stuff we don’t,” Davy said. “We’ll be counting on you that way.”

Jack continued.

“Walking means we’ll need to divide our supplies among the three of us.”

“What supplies?” Deuteronomy asked.

“Food for one – jerky, hard rolls, cheese, apples, hard boiled eggs,” Davy said. “We don’t want to have to spend time trapping.”

“Good idea,” Jack said. “And, hunting knives and our hatchet – your bow and arrows. We’re just going in so we can look things over so we can devise a plan. We don’t want to make contact with anybody.”

“Okay, then. I’m excited,” Davy said.

“How did ya find the stockade the first time?” Deuteronomy asked, “the time they done chased ya through the forest.

Jack began:

“Like I said, we were hunting and mostly just having a good time – climbing trees, throwing stones at targets, things like that. About dusk, we saw a plume of smoke ahead so we went to investigate. It was coming from the chimney in the bunk house we mentioned. The stockade interested us – why would

it be there? Cattle in the middle of the forest made no sense. It was way too small for a military post. More likely some group needing protection from some other group or from the big cats that we're told roam the backlands around here. None of that even seemed to make good sense so, of course, my little brother moved forward to investigate."

Davy took over the telling.

"We got within twenty yards of the clearing and climbed a tree. From up there we could look down on the area and see inside the stockade. That was when we first saw the men and boys in there. We counted about a dozen – mostly just sitting on the ground. Just about that time somebody called out from the edge of the clearing on the other side. Two men came out of the bunkhouse with rifles to investigate. Three men set foot out of the forest. Two of them had another man in ropes – a Negro. It looked like some money was exchanged. Then, the newcomers turned and left the way they'd come. The man was led into the stockade and the gate shut and secured."

"Bad men," Deuteronomy said.

"That's about the time I sneezed," Davy went on. "The men with the rifles looked up trying to locate us. We slipped down the back of the tree and high-tailed it off through the woods toward the coast. They gave chase."

"At that time, we didn't really know much about the slave trade other than some rumors we had heard," Jack said. "Since then we've made it a point to learn all we can. When we get enough information about this operation, we will pass it on to the marshal."

"What does ya know so far?"

Davy answered.

"That it must have been going on for some time. That stockade isn't new – has high grass grown up around it and the raw cut edges of the logs are no longer the bright color of recent fells (logging). And the rumors about it make us think it probably started way back during the war. Several times we've heard the words, 'slaver boat' used by the men at the hardware store. From other things they've said, we have the idea it's an old steamer."

"Can't say I understands lots a that, but I's glad you does."

I still don't see how any a this is gonna git my daddy back fer me."

"First, we can't be sure your pa is one of them at the stockade. But our goal is to think up a plan so they all go free and the slavers are arrested."

Deuteronomy nodded that he understood. He took on a somber (sad) look; not until that moment had he considered that his daddy might not be among the group the boys had been talking about.

They spent the rest of the day discussing possible plans and selecting what they would take with them. The brothers sharpened their knives and the short handled ax. Deuteronomy carefully selected the straightest and best-feathered of the arrows. Jack fitted him with a new belt so he could hang things from it. Davy divided the food into three small canvas bags to spread out the weight and bulk. There were very few other things since they decided they needed to travel light – get in and out with ease.

They turned in early planning to get an early start.

The next morning Jack and Davy woke up at about the same moment. Davy noticed it first. He jumped to his feet.

"Where's Dute?"

They went to the opening of the cave and looked across the valley. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Why would he run out on us? You think he took the boat and stranded us here?"

CHAPTER SIX

The Red Arrow

Davy headed for the cove to see about the boat. Jack followed.

“The boat’s still here, Jack. You don’t suppose he tried to swim to shore.”

Jack cupped his hands to his mouth and called out.

“Dute! . . . Dute! . . . Dute!”

They went back into the valley. Davy pointed down toward the pond.

“Either Dute or something way bigger than oughta be here is behind that bush down there. If it’s Dute, I hope he’s okay. Can’t tell from up here.”

He called out – “Dute!” and began working his way down the slope.

Whatever it was moved – stood up. It was the misplaced boy. He smiled and waved and started back up the slope to meet them.

“We thought we lost you,” Davy said as they met.

Deuteronomy apparently missed the concern in Davy’s voice.

“Lost me? Hard to git lost on this little rock.”

The boys let it go. He held up an arrow he had stained using the red juice of a berry that grew along the pond.

“What’s that about?” Davy asked.

“A red arrow means something special to the people who lived in the Powhatan village where my mamma and daddy grew up. Like good luck. I figured it couldn’t hurt if we took one along with us.”

“I suppose we can use all the luck we can get,” Davy said.

Jack nodded.

Back up the slope, it was a fried egg and salt pork breakfast. They were eager to get on their way and found themselves leaving the cave with their gear as the clock struck seven.

“Let’s begin by setting our course south west,” Jack

suggested. "Then, after half an hour, we can turn directly west toward the shore. That should put us somewhere close to the mouth of that stream without ever being seen from shore."

"That's good," Davy said. "As we close in on the shore we'll have a long look up and down the coast and we should be able to see the creek."

They rotated on the oars – two on the middle seat, one up front keeping watch. They changed positions every fifteen minutes. They were filled with energy and set a rapid pace. Davy and Jack kept up a constant chatter.

Deuteronomy grinned, shook his head and commented.

"You two sure does talk a lot. Not complainin'. Jist never knowed folk who done talked so much."

Davy giggled. Jack responded.

"I've tried to ignore Davy's jabbering, but when I do that he keeps it up anyway, and louder, so I just play along."

Davy grinned.

"I know I talk a lot. I think better out loud. Jack, here, thinks better inside his head."

"Daddy and me's like Jack. We could walk half a day witout passin' a word between us. I guess fer us, jist bein' close is like talkin' is fer you two."

An hour into the trip, Deuteronomy, who was in the front at the time, pointed.

"There's the stream I'm thinkin'."

The boys feathered the oars and squinted trying to find it.

"Good eyes, Dute," Jack said. "I see it too, now."

"Me, too," Davy said. "Looks really wide. Maybe the steamboat can actually sail up into it."

"I suggest we make shore a couple hundred yards north just in case the ship is in there or they have lookouts of some kind," Jack said.

"Good idea," Davy agreed. "What do you think, Dute?"

Deuteronomy beamed, his reaction to having somebody ask his opinion. Still, all he could manage was a nod. It was enough.

As they neared the coast they spotted a very small natural cove, and headed for it. They pulled the boat onto the

tree cover just beyond the shore and hid it in the high grass.

“We need to make sure we can find it again,” Davy said. “I suppose we can always find the cove.”

The others nodded.

Jack led the trek (walk) south, sticking close to the tree line to remain as inconspicuous (hidden) as possible.

Davy had a thought, so of course it was out loud.

“I’m thinking that if we come upon anybody, Dute, you ought to head into the forest just in case they turn out to be the slavers. “

“That’s a good idea,” Jack agreed.

Deuteronomy nodded.

Presently, they came upon the mouth of the stream.

“It’s a lot wider here than up at the stockade,” Davy said pointing out the obvious. It flows south east from up there. I wonder how deep?”

Ever-practical Dute picked up a long stick – ten feet long – and went to the water’s edge. He lowered it into the stream at several different places.

“Looks to vary between say four and six feet,” Jack said, watching. “That’s deep enough for a small, low draft, flat bottom steamer don’t you think?”

The other’s nodded.

“Well, shall we follow it inland?” Davy asked.

“That’s why we came,” Jack said and he began moving west.”

Deuteronomy pointed at the edge of the water.

“A high bank. That means its low water season. With a channel cut that deep it means during the rainy season it moves lots more water and’s a lot deeper then.”

“That’s interesting,” Davy said. “We told you you’d know stuff we don’t.”

They continued west along the stream for half an hour. Gradually, it narrowed, which meant it also got deeper to handle the same volume of water.

They came upon a wooden dock of sorts – six feet wide and twelve feet long, running along the bank rather than sticking out from it.

“What’s that thick pole sunk into the ground?” Davy

asked, "And up there's another one – what, forty feet apart?"

"Where a big boat ties up, I imagine – front and back," Jack said.

"The slave ship!" Davy said.

"Could be," Jack came back.

"And look just up there," Deuteronomy said as he pointed to the right of the stream.

To the other boys, it looked like a heavy-duty hitching rail made from six inch logs.

"You know something about that?" Davy asked.

"A holdin' station."

It was offered as if that were a complete explanation.

"What's a holding station?" Davy asked.

"It's where the men is tied to, like when restin' or at night or when waitin' fer somethin'. Me an daddy been tied to 'em lots a times."

"Maybe where they bring the men and boys downstream in the rowboats to wait for the steam boat," Davy said more as a question.

"That prob'ly right," Deuteronomy said, again pointing, that time to the bank. "See in the mud, deep grooves where boats is pulled up on the bank?"

"Yeah. I see. Good going, Dute. Their depth suggests it has been used many times. I wonder how far to the stockade?"

"Probably quite a way or they'd just march them through the woods, don't you think?" Jack said.

Deuteronomy tried to explain things he thought the others needed to know.

"If the man on the boat's payin' fer each man separate, then they'd want the men ta be in real good shape when they was examined durin' the hagglin'."

"Hagglin'?" Davy asked.

"Yeah. The back and forth ta decide on a price. Another thing, the seller wouldn't risk snake bites walkin' the barefoot men – a man dying a the bite wouldn't bring no price at all."

"You think there are poisonous snakes in there?" Davy asked."

"Oh, yeah! The forest's surrounded by swamps. There's

all kind a snake in there. You kin be sure a that.”

Davy and Jack exchanged glances. Davy put his hands to his throat indicating death.

“I guess we were lucky we didn’t run into any then all that time we were in there,” Jack said.

Deuteronomy grinned.

“I’s thinkin’ Davy’s chatter done scared ‘em off.”

It had been only partly offered as a joke. Jack and Davy laughed, then chuckled on about it for some time. The kid was coming along nicely.

They walked for most of another hour when Jack put up his hand and squatted down. The others did as he had done. They didn’t have to ask why. There were men’s voices just ahead. Jack motioned them to their right, in among the trees. They remained quiet for several minutes.

“They aren’t coming closer,” Davy noted in a whisper.

“We may be at the stockade, then,” Jack said. “Let’s ease forward a bit so we can get a look. Use the cover of the trees. Quiet.”

They moved silently through the trees. Not twenty yards away they could see the clearing and the stockade at its center. There were several guards grouped together on the near side, talking. The boys could hear them clearly.

“Got word from Archibald. Midnight of the 21st. Leave here at ten. Make sure they’re all cleaned up and lookin’ good. Have ‘em wash their clothes.”

Jack motioned to the others to follow him to their right further into the woods. Eventually he pointed up into a tall tree. They gathered at the trunk.

Jack huddled them and spoke in a whisper close in to their faces.

“I think it’s back far enough into the trees that we won’t be seen if we climb very slowly and keep to the east side of the trunk. It should give us a good view.”

“I think it’s the tree we climbed before,” Davy said.

Jack nodded.

“We need to remember the sun is still behind us so it’ll make a good silhouette of our bodies if we move away from the trunk.”

Dute clearly didn't understand 'silhouette', but he got the idea and nodded. Davy led the way, being careful not to dislodge bark as he climbed. When he had moved ten feet up into the tree, Jack motioned Deuteronomy to go next. It was clear that Dute was the most skillful climber. Jack followed. Davy stopped at a spot where he felt he should go no higher – the size of the branches and the amount of cover from the leaves.

The others climbed to within sniffing distance of the heels just above them. They each found a solid branch to straddle and surveyed the area below. It all appeared pretty much like Davy and Jack remembered it. They counted eight men and three boys being held inside. One thing they had missed before was the small, split rail corral on the far side of the bunk house. It was built in among the trees and held eight horses.

Deuteronomy became excited, pointing. He whispered, louder than most whispers.

"That's my daddy! He's here!"

"Which one," Davy asked.

"In the far corner by himself. Black trousers. Tossin' the stone up and down in his right hand."

Amos was a large man – tall and muscular with broad chest and shoulders. He sat there, legs straight out in front of him.

"I need ta let him know I'm here," Deuteronomy said.

"Not sure how," Jack said, "and, not sure it's a good idea. Getting us caught is not going to help him."

Deuteronomy nodded. Because of what he did next, however, it wasn't immediately clear what that nod may have meant. He slipped his bow free from around his neck. He selected one arrow from his quiver – the red one. Oddly, they thought, he aimed high into the air, but in the general direction of the stockade. He let fly.

The other boys scrunched down as if trying to make themselves invisible. They watched the arrow as it flew, executing a high, wide, lazy arc. It began falling. Because of its high path, it was heading straight down into the stockade. It entered the ground not five feet to the right of Deuteronomy's

father.

The man tensed slightly, startled as his head turned to see the arrow standing straight up and down beside him. The boys realized what their new friend had done. By directing the arrow so it would enter the clay standing straight up and down there was no way to tell the direction from which it had come – no telltale angle – no giveaway of their position if it had been seen by a guard.

His father leaned out extending his long arm. He plucked it from the ground and placed it beneath his legs. Apparently, it had arrived unnoticed by anyone else. The man looked up, slowly moving his head from one side to the other. He was smiling and nodding indicating, they were sure, that he understood his son was there working for his freedom.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jack said beginning to move back down the tree.”

On the ground, Davy patted Deuteronomy on his back.

“Great idea and a fantastic shot.”

Jack added a nod and signaled for them to follow him as he picked his way quietly back toward the narrow, grassy creek bank. He stopped just short of the open area.

“Time to get down to some serious planning. Looks like we have three days. How about we leave here and find a safer place?”

The others nodded.

A hundred yards past the log, ‘holding station’, the grassy area between the creek and the trees widened. They stopped. Deuteronomy sat immediately.

“I’ve noticed whenever we stop you sit, Dute,” Davy said.

“Stoppin’s fer restin’. Standin’s not restin’.”

“Can’t argue with that logic,” Jack said and he and Davy joined him on the ground.

“We need to list all our options – everything we can think of that might possibly be helpful in freeing the men and boys,” Jack said. “Then we can choose what we think has the best chance of succeeding.

Davy began (of course!).

“For one thing, we need to contact the Marshal’s office. For that we need to get back to the telegraph office in

Carterville.”

“We need to learn the name of this creek so we can give him directions,” Jack added.

“Two other *options* – that the right word?” Deuteronomy asked.

The boys nodded. He smiled and continued.

“Two other options is ta lead off the horses and sink their row boats.”

“Very good,” Davy said. “And we could set fire to the stockade.”

“That might spread to the forest,” Jack said. “Kill lots of trees and animals.”

Davy nodded and crossed that one off his mental list.

“I suggest we head back to town,” Jack said. “We can plan as we walk.”

In less than an hour, they were at the cove just north of where the creek entered the sound. They decided to leave the boat hidden just inside the woods and walk to town, figuring it was less than a half hour away.

They were soon at the south edge of Carterville.

“I ain’t cottonin’ ta goin’ back in there,” Deuteronomy said.

“You’re right. Probably not a good idea,” Davy said.

“Okay, then. Let’s get you fixed up in a good safe place,” Jack said.

He suddenly realized that ‘keeping safe and free’ had to always be at the forefront of their new friend’s mind, while it seldom even entered their heads anymore. Having been in that same place a few months before as they fled Abraham, Jack did have some idea of how that was, of course. He was also ashamed he hadn’t considered Deuteronomy’s situation before the boy had to bring it up.

They found a small clearing in the woods twenty some yards from the beach. It was surrounded by good climbing trees in case it became necessary for him to hide. Davy and Jack left.

In town, they headed for the telegraph office which was in the lobby of the small hotel. It was their first time inside that building. The telegraph operator was a talkative old gentleman

named Al. Davy engaged him in conversation.

“What’s the name of the creek just south of town?”

“That’s the Denton – Denton Creek. Fed by dozens of springs up stream. Cold water. Not really very long, but stays pretty deep even in dry times.”

“I’ll bet you can settle a bet my big brother and I have going.”

“I guess I can try,” the man said, smiling.

“Who’s the Federal Marshal for this area of the state?”

“That would be Marshal Thomas Woods.”

“See, I told you, Frank.”

“Okay, you win, Billy,” Jack answered.

He had no idea where his brother was going with it, but played along. Davy turned back to Al.

“Tommy – the marshal’s – our ma’s uncle. I said he was the marshal up at Durham.”

“No, Raleigh,” the old man said.

Davy hit himself on his forehead.

“That’s right, Raleigh. Well, it still counts as my win, brother.”

“Okay. Okay,” Jack said quickly revising the telegram to incorporate (include) things from his brother’s conversation.

Jack hesitated before handing the sheet over to the old man.

“I assume what is sent from here remains confidential.”

“Oh, of course. Completely confidential. Yes. Yes.”

He didn’t convince either boy, but they had no alternative. Jack/Frank passed it across the counter. Al adjusted his glasses and read it out loud.

“Uncle Tommy. 21st this month. Midnight. Denton Creek. Caribbean party in darkie of the night. Jack and David. That *really* the way you want it worded?”

“Yes, exactly,” Jack said. “Uncle Tommy will understand. His pet names for us.”

“Sort of like a family reunion,” Davy added. “Can we watch you send it? I like to check my skill at reading the code whenever I get the chance.”

The man set to sending it.

The boys paid the fee, thanked him and left.

"I didn't know you knew telegraph code, Davy."

"Neither did I. Just wanted to make him think I did to keep his fingers honest."

They laughed out loud. It required just a bit of pushing and shoving.

"That was superb code you devised on the fly, big bro."

"Why, thank you, little bro. See, you're rubbing off on me."

They chuckled.

"Three days until the 21st," Jack said getting back to the serious business. "Shall we just camp on the beach or go home?"

"Staying here has some advantages. Once we decide what our plan is going to be we will have preparations to make."

"Makes sense. Think we can trust Al, the telegraph guy?"

"I sure hope so. Did you think he got nervous when he saw the message?"

"Really, nervous!"

"Could have been for our safety if he figured it out," Davy said.

"Or, he could have just been itching to get to the sheriff with the news."

"So, we need to proceed in a very careful manner," Davy added.

"When in your entire life have you ever proceeded in a *careful* manner, little brother?"

"I was remarkably careful while I was rescuing you from the evil clutches of Abraham."

"Yes, you were. Sorry. I'll certainly give you that. Sometimes I forget you're growing up. I suppose to me you'll always be my little brother."

"Wouldn't have it any other way. So, what's our next move?"

"We'll be out of food by morning. I suppose put in some supplies while we're here in town."

"I can do that," Davy said. "You haven't checked out the general store in a week or more. It's probably getting lonely. You should probably take care of that."

They shared smiles.

Jack removed several bills from his pocket and handed them to Davy.

“Get some hard candy, too. I doubt if Dute has ever had any.”

They parted ways each with his own thoughts.

‘My brother is a really fine person,’ Jack thought. “Lucky to have him.”

‘My brother is a really fine person,’ Davy thought. “Lucky to have him.”

Later, as Davy walked south with the supplies, Jack, who had been watching for him out the store window, came through the door. Mary Beth, walked him across the porch and waved. Davy nodded, having no idea what a little brother was supposed to do when his brother’s favorite girl waved at him.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they reached to the clearing. Deuteronomy was not there.

“Dute?” Davy called out, quietly.

“Up here,” came the boy’s voice.

They looked up as he came down the tree to meet them.

“Were there problems?” Jack asked, looking around.

“No problems. Been buildin’ us a nest.”

“A what?” Davy asked.

Deuteronomy pointed up into the tree.

“I got ta thinkin’ and figured we’d be stayin’ here ‘til we deals wit the bad guys. Not really safe to sleep on the ground in here – big cats at night, snakes, an bad guys – so I started a *platform*, I think you’d call it, up there. Providin’ nobody rolls off in their sleep, we oughta do jist fine.”

He offered a grin.

“Good thinking, Dute. Jack and I figured we needed to stick around here, too. Can we see what you got going up there?”

“Sure. Jist stick to the trunk an you can’t miss it.”

He smiled believing he had made a joke. He had and the other boys responded with smiles and chuckles. Davy refrained (held back) from mentioning that the big cats were fine tree climbers.

“I think he needs to be rewarded for displaying such

outstanding initiative, don't you, Jack?"

"Definitely, Davy. Do you have something you would suggest?"

Deuteronomy enjoyed the byplay even though he wasn't sure what was going on.

"I Got these funny hard little balls in my pocket."

He opened his palm exposing three pieces of candy. Deuteronomy frowned, not understanding.

"We figured you'd like these," Jack said. "Candy. Put it in your mouth and just leave it there – don't chew on it. It'll bust your teeth. Tell us what you think of it."

Deuteronomy picked one up and smelled it. He squeezed it. He rubbed it against his cheek.

"The idea is to put it in your mouth," Davy said, demonstrating with one of the two left in his hand.

Jack followed his brother's lead. With some hesitancy, Deuteronomy put his to his mouth and licked it. He smiled and licked it again. He smiled again and took it into his mouth. He nodded.

"Heard about candy. Never had candy. Thank you. Chewed on sugar cane. Sorta like sugar cane. Sorta like fruit. Sorta like a rock."

The others giggled.

"It is sometimes *called* lemon rock candy, so you described it perfectly. Glad you like it."

With an abrupt change in expression, Deuteronomy held up his hand.

"Somebody's comin'," he said in a quiet voice.

Davy and Jack listened.

"More than *one* somebody," Jack said. "Up the tree, Dute, and hurry. Whoever or whatever it is, is coming through the woods pretty fast."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Iron Bars and Floating Glass

Davy and Deuteronomy made it up to the platform of saplings and sticks. They lay flat. Jack stopped just short of it and froze quietly in place on a branch just below as someone passed within yards of the tree trunk. It was a horse and rider. Jack waited until they were well away, then continued his climb.

"I couldn't see anything from where I was on the tree," Jack said arriving beside the others.

"We could see just fine," Davy said. "Wore a badge – the sheriff or one of his deputies I'm thinking."

"Do you suppose the telegraph man really did go to the sheriff?" Jack asked.

"I suppose we have no way of knowing," Davy said.

"It's lucky he didn't get close enough to see the supplies sitting at the base of the tree," Davy said. "We probably need to get them up here right away in case he comes back."

Jack agreed.

"How about you staying up here, Dute, while Davy and I go down and bring things up? We can hand them to you through the opening."

They waited for Deuteronomy's response.

"Oh. Sorry. I keep forgettin' when you ask my opinion you really means it. Sure. Fine."

The boys made their ways to the ground. As they bent down to pick up the several sacks there was a man's, firm voice from behind them. Nothing about it could be characterized as friendly.

"Just hold it there. Hands up."

The rider had circled and returned apparently having seen the bags.

"Jack Jansen and his brother David, I assume. The poster with our pictures says you ran away from your apprentice master clear up in Delaware and that your brother is suspected of assisting you. Seems you have a few nights on the floor of my jail until the Delaware authorities can come to fetch you. Hands up high against the tree, spread your legs."

The man dismounted and took a coil of rope from his saddle. He tied their hands behind their backs, each with opposite ends of the same rope. He remounted, twisted the middle of that rope around his saddle horn and directed them to move out ahead of him to the beach and then north to Carterville.

“You the sheriff or one of his flunkies?” Davy asked.

“I am nobody’s flunky, son. I assure you of that. Now stop talking or you’ll feel my whip.”

Deuteronomy was watching quietly from up in the tree as the three of them disappeared north along the coast. He knew several things: his friends had been captured by the sheriff and were being taken to the jail. The reason given by the man made no sense. There were several other things: he had to free them both because they were his friends and because his father’s fate depended on it.

It was nearly dark by the time they reached the jail. As they passed the hotel they saw the old telegraph man duck back inside. That presented no clear message.

At the jail, he said: “Move!” pushing them ahead of him across the sidewalk. Inside he lit a lantern, then opened the door to one of the two cells and motioned them inside. There were no bunks, just an eight by eight expanse of wooden floor – very old, very well worn, very uncomfortable, floor.

“Sit and stay seated. Feel free to untie each other – if you can.”

He laughed as if that presented an impossible challenge.

“I’ll bring you water later – if you behave yourselves.”

He locked the cell door, placed the big key in his top desk drawer and then left through the front door.

“We need to scoot together and start working on these knots,” Davy said.

“Okay. Let me get a good look at your wrists first, so I can see how we’re tied. That oughta help me get started on you.”

“Good thinking. That’s why I keep you around, big brother.”

Davy scooted into position.

“Need more light,” Jack said. “Scoot up close to the bars

where there's light from the lantern."

That done, Jack looked the rope over with care.

"Got it. Okay, now, let's get back out of the light."

They scooted back along the south wall.

Jack went to work. After ten minutes, he spoke.

"The sheriff may have won this round. I don't seem to be able to loosen up anything. Why don't you try me for a while?"

They changed positions without more words and Davy went to work.

"The man knows how to tie wrists, I'll give him that. Let's rest and think for a while."

"I was sure surprised there was a flyer out on me – and that it got way down here."

"I was, too. Your old Abraham is a persistent cuss, I'll say that for him."

"*Persistent* will be the least of my concerns if he ever gets his hands on me again."

"Ouch, you mean?"

"Yeah – whatever's worse than ouch. Abraham is one mean man."

"Never fear, big brother. We have our secret weapon."

"Secret weapon? What do you mean?"

"Dute, of course."

"If Dute knows what's good for him, he'll start running and not stop 'til he gets to Pennsylvania or Canada."

"You do know Canada isn't a state, don't you?"

"Ha. Ha. You know I know."

"I got faith in him – Dute. How long will it take Abraham to get down here once he receives the telegram?"

"It took us over a month. If he comes by horses maybe half that. If he comes by train probably only two days – maybe even less."

"Sooner than I figured."

"I suggest we get some sleep so we can be ready for any opportunity we see to escape," Jack said. "If we get a chance to run, remember to hold up the rope that's in between us so it won't snag on anything."

"Not much of a plan," Jack.

“I’ll listen if you have better.”

Davy shrugged in the darkness. He felt his brother lie down on the floor. He continued to sit up, back against the wall. From there he could see the night sky through the barred window in the rear wall. With very little moon it was mostly just dark out there. He hoped Dute was safe.

Within a few minutes, they were both asleep.

They remained in the jail cell until the following evening. They received water but no food. It was close to nine. The boys were sitting in the shadows with their backs against the rear wall. They heard a commotion in outside the front door. Presently the door burst open. The sheriff and a deputy dragged a man inside and shoved him into a chair in front of the desk. The sheriff turned up the lanterns flooding the front room with light.

Jack whispered.

“Stay in the shadows. Act like we’re asleep. That’s Abraham.”

“The sheriff doesn’t seem to be treating him very well,” Davy said.

“Let’s just listen and see what’s going on.”

The sheriff took a seat behind his desk and spoke to the man with the long, red beard.

“One more time. This is the deal. You get the boys when you get me \$5,000. If you don’t come up with it – well, lots of accidents happen to folks in the swamps around here. Cougars, Bobcats, poisonous snakes. Even been heard tell of careless tenderfeet being washed out to sea and never heard of again. Five thousand dollars. Kurt here will take you to the telegraph office. I’ll pay for a couple of wires. Just get the money.”

“But there is no way I can raise that kind of money. That is ten years’ earnings.”

“I’ve done some checking. It seems you have bank accounts in three towns. Once you have sent the wires, you will be escorted back here to your accommodations while we wait for the money.”

Abraham stood and pounded his fist on the desk.

“This is outrageous. You are an officer of law.”

Kurt, the deputy, knocked him to the floor with a fist to his jaw. His mouth bled.

The boys continued to sit motionless. Kurt pulled Abraham to his feet, wiped the blood from his face and left with him out to the street. The sheriff walked to the front of the boys' cell.

"I assume you witnessed my conversation with the man who says you belong to him. I can see why you wanted to get away from him – a fully disagreeable human being. Sorry that I'll have to turn you over to him, but, you understand the law is the law."

He smiled and returned to his chair.

Half an hour later Kurt and Abraham returned. It was obvious that the old man had been roughed up again. Since being in the jail, it became clear to the boys that Kurt enjoyed hurting people. Up to that point they had not felt it.

As the boys sat quietly, they were having similar thoughts: 'they were just bait to get Abraham there so the sheriff could force him to pay a large sum for his safety – maybe his life. They wondered if the man was foolish enough to think that once the sheriff received the money he would just let him go – that would never happen. It probably meant the same for them. Things suddenly looked far worse for them than before.

They also knew there was only a day and a half left to prevent the slaver from sailing south with the men and boys.

Abraham was locked in the other cell, wrists and ankles bound. They could hear him groaning in pain through the darkness.

As seemed to be their routine, at ten thirty Duke left a bucket of water and a dipper on the floor in front of the boys' cell. He turned the lantern to low and then he and the sheriff left for the night, locking the front door. Jack chose not to speak to Abraham. They believed that through it all he had not seen them there in the back corner.

Perhaps fifteen minutes later, the boys heard a gentle thud in their cell. It seemed to come from the ceiling. They stood and scanned it with their eyes. The light was dim.

"There!" Davy whispered.

Jack nodded.

An arrow had been shot between the bars through the open rear window. Jack squatted low. Davy sat on his shoulders, straddling his neck. Jack struggled to stand. Davy reached up with his mouth to pull the arrow free. He was an inch or so shy.

“Can you tip toes?” he whispered.

Jack strained with all his might and was eventually able to move up onto his toes for just a few seconds. Davy sunk his teeth into the feathers and pulled it loose, dropping it in the process. Jack set him down quietly. Davy found the arrow and spoke in whispers.

“Good old Dute. He got us the sharp edge we need to get out of these ropes. Your hands are stronger than mine. Take the arrow and go to work on me first. Remember, it’s my skin under the rope and the head of that arrow is razor sharp.”

Five minutes later Davy was free. In another two he had the ropes off Jack.

“So, our hands are free, I’m not sure how that really helps us,” Jack said as they both rubbed their sore, red, wrinkled wrists.

“I’m thinking that was only Act One,” Davy said.

“Act One?”

“Dute’s a smart kid. He’ll know that free hands aren’t the entire solution. Just wait. He’ll give us time to free ourselves before his next act begins.”

The boys sat to wait.

Presently, there were quiet noises coming from the front door. The street outside was dark. The boys stood and moved to the front of the cell to listen and watch.

“What’s that? Like a popping sound and a clink,” Davy said.

“Look there on the floor – a small square of glass,” Jack said. “I don’t get it. Where could it have come from?”

“I doubt if that’s the entire second act. Just wait.”

No more than a minute later a fully amazing thing took place. The glass in the window in the front door, began to float in their direction, out a few inches away from the door. Then it turned at an angle and floated diagonally right out the opening, leaving the window open.

They remained amazed for only a moment when a long, slender, black arm slipped in through the opening, reached down and clicked the lock open. The arm disappeared and the door knob turned. It opened and closed quickly.

“Back here, Dute,” Davy said.

“How you know it was me?”

“Who else in the entire universe *could* it be? Anyway, the key to the cell is over there in the top desk drawer, *and* later you will owe us one huge explanation – floating glass? Really? You some sort of voodoo hoodoo?”

Jack looked at Davy.

“Voodoo hoodoo? Really?”

Davy shrugged his shoulders as his full response.

Once the cell was open it was time for hugs all around. Davy and Dute headed for the front door.

“Wait guys,” Jack said. “We’re not going to just leave Abraham here to be killed. Open his cell and help me get him untied.”

The old man roused. Jack clapped his hand over his mouth.

“You keep quiet. We are here to save your hide. Do as I tell you. It wouldn’t take a whole lot for me to leave you behind. There will be no second chance at this, understand.”

It was the first-time Abraham recognized Jack. He nodded. With Jack’s shoulder under one arm and Dute’s under the other they moved him toward the door. Davy made sure the coast was clear.

“I suggest we move behind the building right away,” Dute said. “I have a route in mind.”

Without hesitation, they rounded the corner into the shadows behind the jail. Abraham started to speak.

“Shut up, old man,” Jack said, “or I declare I’ll leave you right here.”

It worked. Following Dute’s directions, they kept to the shadows behind the buildings all the way to the trail that led south along the coast.

“Head for the trees to the right so we can make a plan,” Jack said, “unless you have that all laid out, too, Magician Boy.”

He had been looking into Dute’s face, which seemed

puzzled by the comments.

They continued into the stand of trees some ten feet where they sat Abraham back against the base of a tree. The others took spots on the ground.

“Several things to handle immediately,” Jack began. “Do you have anything new to tell us about the kidnapped men, Dute?”

“Just like they was when we seen ‘em last.”

“You doing okay?” Davy asked.

“Me? Nervous as a hen on a hot sidewalk, but I’s makin’ it.”

“Good. Thanks, you understand, but we’ll deal with that later. By the way, this is Abraham. I knew him . . . back up in Delaware. The sheriff has all but signed his death warrant. As much as I hate the man I can’t just leave him behind to such a fate. If it’s illegal and can make him a buck, the sheriff seems to be into it. Horrible person. We will deal with him later, also. About six tomorrow morning, when he finds we are gone, he’ll come looking, you can bet on that. I’m thinking he’ll believe we are too smart to return to the creek where he found us, so I suggest we return to the creek. I’m sure he didn’t see the nest you made up in the tree, Dute. It’s still there, right?”

“Oh, yes’em it is. Now, even a bigger and better version. Jack flashed him a smile and nod, and continued.

“It looks like our chances of hearing from the Marshal are slim. We don’t know if we can trust the telegraph operator. More and more it seems we can’t depend on that. I was hoping the Marshal would respond to our telegram, but now I don’t think we dare chance trying to find out. That puts us all alone in this, I guess. At least the sheriff should have no reason to think we are planning to disrupt the sale of the captive men.”

“Sell men?” Abraham managed.

“Yeah. Of course you wouldn’t know anything about how that works, would you?” Jack said. “There’s about a dozen Negro men and boys not far from here that are going to be put on a boat and sailed down to the Caribbean islands and get sold as slaves. One of the men is the father of our friend, Deuteronomy, here.”

“I hesitate to mention it, but Jack and I haven’t eaten in

two days,” Davy said, looking at Deuteronomy. “You still have some of our supplies left?”

“Oh, yes. In the kitchen.”

“Kitchen? I can hardly wait to see what you’ve done to the place. Got curtains? By the way is our boat still okay?”

“Sure is. Right where we left it.”

They continued walking south with Abraham still being partly supported by Jack and Deuteronomy. As the circulation returned to his limbs he was able to help himself more.

“We’ll stop at the Trading Post and get supplies to clean up Abraham’s cuts and bruises,” Jack said. “If he’s seen we’ll need a cover story.”

“How about this?” Davy said. “He’s the grampa we’ve spoken about and he took a terrible fall off a roof onto a pile of sharp rocks.”

“By the way, Abraham,” Jack said, “do you think you have any broken bones – ribs, nose, maybe.”

Davy wanted to inform his brother that the nose was cartilage and not a bone, but he didn’t.

“Could be ribs,” Abraham answered. “Hurts to breathe. Maybe my tailbone. Once when I fell that Kurt fella kicked me mercilessly. I can’t understand why you would do all this for me, Jack.”

“I have no doubt that you can’t understand. Another ten minutes and we’ll be at the trading post. Ben lives in the back. If we pound on the door he’ll answer.”

“Sure wish we had a way to get rid of that red beard,” Davy said. “It’s a dead giveaway if the sheriff comes asking questions.”

Deuteronomy removed an arrow from his quiver, displaying the sharp, metal head.

“Sharp as a razor, I’d say.”

“Let’s stop here, guys,” Jack said. “Sit him down.”

Without asking Abraham’s permission Jack began the job. It took fifteen minutes – first slicing off the long hair close to the skin and then shaving what was left to produce a relatively smooth face.

“My goodness, Abraham, you look like a real human being,” Davy said.

The man remained quiet and felt his face.

“My wife always hated it, anyway.”

They helped him up and moved on south along the coast. He was walking much better.

Once at the Trading Post they sat the man on the front porch, back against the wall close to the door. Jack took a dollar from his pocket and handed it to Davy.

“You go in and handle things. You’ll make it work.”

Davy pounded on the door. A light came on. He spoke to Ben in low tones and was invited inside.

Five minutes later he returned with soap and warm water, and a small length of white cloth to tear into rags. Ben followed him with a lantern, which he hung above them.

“Ben, meet our grampa – John.”

“My you did take quite a fall didn’t you? If you boys need anything more just come in and help yourselves. No charge. He started to leave then turned back. “You have two really fine grandsons, sir. Really fine.”

He reentered the building.

“Remove his shirt while I get to work on his face and neck,” Davy said. “See if we need to tend to anything on his chest and back.”

“Mostly deep bruises down here,” Jack said. “Only one’s open – at the base of his spine, probably from the toe of a boot like he said.”

The man’s face was a mess. Both eyes had been blackened and were swelling closed. There were cuts and bruises from his forehead to his chin. Davy went right to work as if it were his craft.

He had taken on the job of medic for one main reason: to free his brother from the temptation of really hurting the man. He understood it would have only been a temptation, because Jack was a good person.

“That should do it,” Davy said at last. “I think I got all the cuts cleaned out. As for the bruises, they’ll just have to mend themselves.”

He put things into a sack Ben had provided inside.

As they walked south they took frequent breaks for Abraham. He never complained, but the others could judge

when he needed to rest.

When they passed the little cove, Davy took time to go into the trees and check on their boat. It was just how Deuteronomy had said it was.

Soon after that, they reached their tree with the nest. Jack pointed and asked: "You think you can make that climb, Abraham?"

"I have to assume you think it is necessary for our safety or you wouldn't request it of me. I think I can, given enough time."

He was correct. Ten minutes later they were all up in the nest. Deuteronomy broke out the food. He handed jerky and an apple to Abraham.'

"No. You young folks need your strength. I'll be fine."

Jack responded.

"Not how we do things. We share what we have. Eat. You – we – may need your strength as well. We have no idea how things are going to turn out."

They ate – all of them. Davy spoke.

"Back to our plan."

"What plan? Jack asked.

"Oh, that's right we don't have a plan do we."

"I sorta got a plan," Deuteronomy said.

"Let's hear it," Davy said.

"I sees three things we kin do. Might do nothin' more than delayin' things, but in the confusion, we might be able ta free up some a the men and boys.

"One thing is we make holes in the bottoms a the boats near the back end then plug them so they don't leak. Then, when we're ready, we go back into the water and pull the plugs so the boats sink. I figured we don't wanna show our hand too soon.

"The next thing is that we walk the horses away from the corral and hide them so the guards won't have use a them. I figure doin' that at about nine o'clock, before they start movin' the men.

"The last thing is ta disable the steamboat once she arrives at the mouth a the creek. Not sure how to do that. Maybe set her on fire or make more holes, but I'm thinkin' there

won't be time for nothing that's gonna take very long once it gits here."

"Good ideas, Dute. Wish we knew more about steamships."

Abraham cleared his voice.

"Yeah?" Davy said.

"I spent summers as a youth working for my uncle on a steamboat over on the Mississippi. I just imagine I can totally disable her in less than fifteen minutes if I can borrow one of you strong lads to help."

The boys looked at each other, stunned. What could the horrible old man have up his sleeve?

CHAPTER EIGHT

“We Need a Better Plan.”

They decided Davy and Abraham would disable the steamboat when the time came. The old man began going over the possibilities with Davy. At the same time Jack and Deuteronomy discussed ways of accomplishing the other aspects of the plan.

“Oh, by the way guys,” Davy said opening the sack with supplies from the Trading Post. “Ben loaned me a brace and bit (drill set). Just in case that might make your planning easier. I guess Dute and I were thinking along the same line.”

There were smiles all around though none were seen there in the darkness.

Jack took charge of the new tools.

They talked on until first light.

“Our next work comes tonight,” Jack said. “I think we better sleep the day away. Okay?”

They handed around the canteen and each drank their fill.

“It’s creek water,” Deuteronomy said. “Been drinking it since you left and ain’t bin sick so it’s good.”

“Before we go to sleep, Dute, how *did* you manage that thing with the glass window back at the sheriff’s office,” Davy asked.

Deuteronomy chuckled.

“I’s thinkin’ it musta looked oddly to ya inside. First, daddy an me once worked cleanup for a man who made windows. I got ta watch him often – holding glass flat and such. I learned how ta use a glass cutter. Earlier tonight I paid a visit ta the hardware store and borrowed one. Intend ta give it back.

“Well, first, I scored lines that outlined a small square and then tapped it from the outside to break away the glass – that’s what ya seen fall onta the floor. Then, I scored all around the outer edge a the window. I took hold a the glass wit my finger through the little square hole, then tapped the big glass an it come free, toward the inside, of course. I just turned it corner ta corner so I could pull it outside. I guess that looked like it was a floatin’.”

"I liked it better when I thought you were a magician," Davy said. "We must return that cutter, like you said."

They slept through until mid-afternoon.

"I think we need to make one final check that things are still the way they should be," Jack said. "Let's eat and then two of us will go check things out."

"Who goes and who stays?" Davy asked.

"Well, for sure, Abraham stays and Dute goes. I guess the only choice is between you and me."

"I'll go if you want it that way," Davy said, "but I think you'd be the better choice – faster, stronger, lovesick."

Davy giggled.

"What do you mean, lovesick?" Jack said.

"Well, it means you have more to live for, I'm thinking – more motivation to survive."

"We'll settle *that* later. Okay, it'll be Dute and me. Just don't let this old fox I'm leaving you with trick you into something you'll regret."

Davy nodded and left it at that. It had not been a possibility he'd given any thought.

Jack and Deuteronomy left. Their first stop was the top of the tall tree that overlooked the stockade.

"Things seem like they have been – no – wait – count – they've add one new man."

"So they have," Jack said. "Can't see how that changes anything for us though can you?"

"Prob'ly not. I sure wish we had a way to let them know our plan."

"Any ideas?"

"Just one, but you won't allow it."

"I won't allow it?" Jack said. "I'm not your boss. I thought we had that straight."

"I'm not sure myself, yet," Deuteronomy began. "I was jist thinkin' if I could git in there wit 'em, I could prepare 'em."

"Any ideas how to get in there?"

"One that's sure ta work. Jist walk up ta the guards an give myself up."

"Oh, yes, I'd bet that would not only work it might get you a Caribbean vacation for about the rest of your life. Like you

said, I'm not in favor of that."

"I could try a note on an arrow, but they is two problems wit that. Wit more guards they might find the note an that would tip 'em off somebody's plannin' a escape. Then, also, we doesn't know if any a the men kin read. Chances are real poor on that one."

Jack didn't have to ask. It seemed clear his pa didn't read. He really hadn't ever seen Deuteronomy read either, as he thought about it.

"Don't you think your pa will be expecting something because of the red arrow?"

"Oh, yeah he will – jist not when or how."

"I was planning on you in the water when we pulled the plugs. Face it, my white skin won't do much to keep me hidden out there – even without much of a moon."

Deuteronomy nodded.

"I kin see that. We needs more plan then, I guess."

* * *

It reminded Jack of the time on the way south from Delaware that Davy had said just about that same thing: "It looks like we need a better plan, then."

They were a week into their escape from Abraham's place and found themselves entering Virginia. They had been pushing hard to get distance between them and the Leather shop so were both tired and hungry. The food Davy had brought along was long gone and they had mostly been surviving on fruit from trees and bushes, and milk from the occasionally friendly cow.

They came upon a sizeable stream with docks and boats. It was early morning.

"Fish sure would be a nice change from fruit," Davy said as they walked the river bank. "I just imagine some of these boats have hooks and line in them. We could take a couple hooks and twenty feet of line and leave a dime to pay for it. That wouldn't be stealing."

"I suppose we could do that if there were still plenty of hooks and line left behind."

They began examining the contents of the boats that

were tied up at docks.

“There’s a good-sized boat. Looks like a tackle box under the middle seat. You keep watch and let me go down and investigate.”

“Okay, here’s a dime from mom’s tin,” Jack said handing it over.”

Davy slipped down the bank and into the boat. He found what they were looking for and was soon back at his brother’s side.

“People will be getting up and around soon so we better get out of here,” Jack said.

They moved on for perhaps two more miles, when they came upon a curve in the stream. There were no houses or barns in sight.

“A good spot to fish, don’t you think?” Davy said.

“Looks good to me. The water should be fairly deep here on the outside of that curve. Let’s get things ready.”

“I’ll cut the line in half and tie on the hooks,” Davy said, “while you find sticks for poles.”

Within a short time they had two nice sized trout. A few minutes later Jack had them cleaned and Davy had a small fire started down on the bank near the water. They skewered the fish on green sticks and flame cooked them.

“Now this is eating good,” Davy said.

“I agree. A nice change from apples. You had a good idea.”

Davy had another idea.

“We could make a rabbit trap, but we might have to stick around too long to catch anything. I think we need to keep pushing on south.”

“I agree, little brother, but we haven’t really cleaned up since we left. Let’s take fifteen minutes for a quick dip. It’s a good deep spot here.”

They wanted to stay longer, but their plan was to keep moving so they dressed and began walking again along the river. They traded off carrying Davy’s canvas bag every half hour or so. It had been their habit to stay away from roads that looked well-traveled. Answering people’s questions about where they were from and why they were alone was

uncomfortable and, perhaps, even dangerous.

“Think this road it safe for us?” Davy asked as they came to a bridge that crossed the river. “Looks like it heads pretty much south for a while at least.”

“I guess so. It’s flat in through here so we will be able to see folks coming from quite a distance. If we see anybody we can hide in the grass or behind bushes. Have to keep a keen eye out, though.”

It had been more detail than was necessary, but Jack was determined to remain free.

Davy nodded and they stepped onto the road turning south.

It proved to have been a good plan. They had only met one lone rider and had plenty of time to take cover.

As it neared noon, they saw something on the road ahead. They moved off the road some thirty yards and kept to the tall grass and brush as they continued moving toward it.

“A carriage,” Jack said.

“Looks to be broken down. See the rear wheel?”

A woman carrying a fancy, yellow parasol (woman’s small umbrella) rounded it from the far side.

“Should we offer help?” Davy asked.

“It seems to be a woman all alone. I suppose we’d be in no danger.”

They walked to the carriage. The woman saw them and waved, taking steps toward them. She called out.

“Oh, I am in a terrible pickle, boys. Can you help me with the wheel? I think it just came loose.”

“Yes, ma’am, I think we can help. Do you have a tool kit?”

“Yes. Under the seat. Thank you.”

They set to work. She had been correct – the pin that went through the wooden axel to hold the wheel in place had come loose and been lost somewhere along the way. Jack lifted the carriage just enough so Davy could slip the wheel back in place. Jack then carved a pin from a good-sized stick and pounded it into the hole in the axel.

“That should get you on down the road to a town where you can get it fixed proper,” Jack said.

She offered to pay them, but they refused.

“Well, thank you very much, boys. I’ll always remember your kindness.”

They helped her up onto the seat and she prepared to snap the reins and be on her way.

While they had been talking, two men riding on one horse had come toward them at full gallop. They were upon them before the boys could make it to cover. The riders pulled up but stayed on their horse. The front man had a rifle pointed in their direction.

“We’ll take the horse. Got a saddle with you?”

“No, I don’t have a saddle and you most certainly will not take my horse,” she said. “He’s old and would die if you tried to run him even a mile.”

The one with the gun who was doing the talking pointed to Jack.

“Unhitch the horse.”

“The lady said she would not allow that.”

Davy moved his hand to his shoulder and hitched his head in the riders’ direction. Jack saw it then, too. The man on the rear had blood on the shoulder of his shirt. Jack continued to speak.

“I see your friend is bleeding. Let us look at him and see if we can’t tend to it.”

“Just tend to your own business. Get the horse.”

“I’d think you’d be better off if you’d let us help your wounded friend into the carriage and let us take him to a doctor.”

The front man turned to the one behind.

“This horse is about spent. Maybe we should take the horse and carriage and continue on for the shack.”

“I’m sure Miss Loosenpinsky would gladly allow you to use her buggy in order to get your friend medical attention.”

Davy understood the code words and moved to the back wheel.

“Okay then. Miss Lucy-whatever, get down.”

Jack moved to the side that was away from the horsemen to keep their attention on him and off Davy. He offered his hand to assist her. He winked at her. She frowned

but moved away from the carriage according to Jack's instruction. He then walked to where Davy stood beside the wheel. Davy whispered.

"Got it. Shield me here and it'll have that pin out in just a minute."

The men boarded the carriage with two sets of bulging saddle bags, which they put on the floor. The talkative one turned the buggy around and started off down the road in the direction from which the boys had come. The woman began to cry. The boys had no idea what to do with a crying woman. Davy, tried.

"It'll be okay, ma'am. We'll get you on this horse and walk with you to the nearest town – you know where that is, I assume."

"Two miles ahead. It's where I live."

With less effort than they expected she was quickly mounted and they headed on along the road.

"What was that *Miss Loosenpinsky* all about? My name is Winston and I don't recall telling you that."

Davy explained.

"It was like a code for me to *loosen* the *pin* we'd just put in for you, so after a mile or so they'll be stranded the way you were. We figured they were up to no good – the blood, holding the gun on us, ready to steal your horse, and their generally disagreeable attitude."

Before he could go on, they spotted a billowing cloud of dust headed directly toward them. It looked to be a dozen or so riders. At the front rode a man with a star.

"That's sheriff Petty," she said.

She raised her hand. They stopped. The sheriff tipped his hat and spoke to her.

"Seen two men riding hard, one with a slug in his shoulder? They just robbed the bank in Springdale."

She nodded.

Davy continued the explanation. At the end, he said: "You will find them a mile or so on up ahead sitting in a disabled carriage – the one they took from Miss Winston and the one from which my brother and I removed the rear axle pin on its left side. One of them has a rifle. There are two bulging saddle

bags on the floor.”

The sheriff thanked them and ordered one of the men to accompany them to town. He and the rest of his men rode on at a full gallop.

Jack spoke to the man.

“Since you will be with Miss Winston, I think we will leave you. We’re on our way to meet our grampa at his place out on the coast. We need to turn east right about here.”

“Alright. Have a safe journey. Appreciate your quick thinking and help.”

“Yes,” Miss Winston said. “And thank you again.”

The boys waved them on their way.

“I just hope we have very forgettable faces,” Jack said. “That was a whole lot more contact and attention than we should have allowed – two bad guys, a damsel in distress, and of all people, a sheriff and his deputies.”

“It looks like we need a better plan, then, big brother.”

* * *

“We do need a better plan – I’ve been thinking on that,” Jack said. “We really have no idea what to do with the men once we sink their boats and stir up trouble at the stockade. The guards still have guns.”

“They’ll still walk ‘em ta the steamboat, right?” Deuteronomy suggested.

Jack nodded, not sure where his friend’s thinking was off to.

“I’m sure they’ll do whatever it takes to get their money.”

“Well, that give us ‘bot a hour ta rescue them – the prisoners – from the time they leaves the stockade ‘til they gets ta the steamboat if’n it ties up at the dock we seen.”

“It does, but that gets us back to what, then? Still a half dozen guards with rifles.”

“Try this on, Jack. Along the way, I mix in with ‘em as they’s marchin’ toward the boat. I passes the word that when somethin’ happens – me whistlin’ or somethin’ – they’s to run into the woods and get naked as the day they was born. His black skin’s often the best weapon a Negro has at night. We all done it lots a times.”

“Interesting, I’ll say that much, but at best it’ll only hide them for a while. Eventually it will get light.”

“Men that was slaves is strong and fast. They kin make thirty, maybe forty miles in six hour. Jist wish we had a big boat ta take ‘em away in. There’s a river not far west a here – maybe half hour, runnin’. Me and daddy was campin’ near there when we got took. It’s wide an goes almost straight south. Water runs fast down a long, gradual slope. We must a followed it north some fifty miles.”

“We’ll have to think on the possibilities that has. Davy can always take an idea like that and find a dozen ways to Sunday to make it into something useful.”

“We still got’s, let’s see, from about seven, now, ‘til tomorrow at midnight. I say that give us 17 hours ta get our plan together. That what you figure?”

“Yes. Good figuring – I didn’t mean to put you down by that.”

“Don’t think twice about it. When you’re my shade you learns not ta let anybody know all the stuff ya know or they’ll be makin’ ya do it.”

“May I ask if you can read?”

“Some – maybe a lot. I got no way a knowin. My daddy, he insist I learn ta read. He says fer me ta be a success up north in White Man Country I’ll need ta know how ta read and do figures. A couple a nice ladies helped git me started – soundin’ out, ya know. From there I pretty well jist made it on my own. Read a lot a fliers posted on trees, some newspapers – them’s the best – even a book once.

“Once I figured out that things is writ – er, wrote – in white man talk, I finally got on with it pretty good. It is why I have the ability to converse in whiteman’s English in such an accomplished fashion.”

“You rascal, you. You can speak every bit as well and Davy and me. Why do you . . . ?”

“My life is going to be mostly among Negroes. I know the war’s not gonna change that. I need to keep fittin’ in, you see.”

“I can understand that. You are an extraordinary person, Dute.”

He grinned.

“I jist does like I feels I gotta do, ya unnerstand.”

Jack smiled and nodded.

“Our secret, Dute.”

“Thank ya fer that. My daddy like to have me read ta him. I tell him I’ll show him how, but he say he’s too old. You think he’s too old?”

“How old is he?”

“Best he kin figure he’s jist past thirty.”

“I’ll bet he can learn. He may not want to risk failing at it – in front of his son, you understand.”

“Hadn’t thought a that. Then, I’ll git after him and stay after him ‘til he either learns himself ta read or runs me off.”

He offered a wonderful grin. Clearly, he took Jack’s word as the truth on the matter.

“Let’s get back to the others,” Jack suggested. “We really need to get my brother’s brain going on these new possibilities.”

They put on a trot enjoying the run through the trees. From time to time one or the other would pull ahead, just to see how fast the other one was. They both understood. Neither spoke of it. They found they were about as well matched as two boys could be.

Back in their nest, they shared their ideas. Davy opened his mouth to speak. Jack winked at Deuteronomy and he smiled back, understanding. Apparently that special brain of Davy had just shifted into high gear.

CHAPTER NINE

Putting it All Together

“Hmm. Six guards, trying to run through the forest at night, carrying rifles, and wearing high-heeled riding boots,” Davy began. “Nothing about that spells anything but disaster for them I’d say. What sort of trees are you taking about over at that river?”

“Mostly White Pine. Daddy pointed out that near the water, at least, it looked like second growth. They only grow up to 25 feet tall – daddy says that means it was logged some dozen or so years ago. I’d say they average eight to ten inches thick.”

“Hmm. Wonder how long it takes to chop down a pine tree – with an ax like ours.”

“Probably fifteen minutes and another half hour to trim off the branches,” Abraham offered.

Davy nodded at him.

“Problem is we only have one ax.”

“I believe we can have three,” Deuteronomy said.

The others looked at him.

“While I was snoopin’ round the stockade the other day I come across they’re wood pile – cookin’ and heat at night, I’m thinkin’. Up next to the bunkhouse. Anyway, there was two long handled axes leanin’ up agin the pile.”

“So, with one cutting down and two trimming we could do about four an hour. We could build one good sized raft in the time we have.”

“But we don’t have rope to hold it all together,” Jack said.

“How about this?”

Jack removed a sheet of paper from his bag and began to sketch.

“We lay two logs north and south on the ground about twenty feet apart. Then we lay one on top of them at each end heading east and west making an open square. We drill a hole down through each log near the very end – so they meet up – top log and bottom log. We cut eighteen inch pins and pound them through the top and well down into the bottom to hold them together. That makes a strong frame and leaves room

underneath between the outside logs – for logs to be lined up side by side making the bottom of the raft. Those in the center don't need to be pinned because the outer logs will hold them in place.

“If we go for a twenty-foot square raft, we'll need about 35 logs total. So, at fifteen minutes a tree – about eight or nine hours, right?”

“Looks like we have plenty of time if we get well organized,” Jack said. “We need a precise timeline that includes everything we have to do, how long we can allow for it, and who is responsible for every step.”

“Every step will be crucial (important),” Davy said. “A mess-up anywhere along the way and we'll be in one big cow pie (a cow's bathroom leavings).”

Davy turned the paper over and began the outline. Each of them pointed and added things. They soon had their master plan.

“Now, who'll take charge of each thing?” Jack asked.

“I been helpin' fell trees since before I had a mouth full a teeth. I'll see ta that. Looks like I'll need two helpers and it looks like the only ones fit ta help is Davy an Jack.”

They all agreed. Jack spoke.

“That means we need to do that right away because by dark there will be other things to take care of. That will also give Abraham time he needs to rest and mend.”

“You say you will need plugs for the boats,” Abraham said. “Bring me some branches the right thickness and I'll cut them while you are gone. You say one inch, then get them an inch and a half thick. I'll sharpen them slightly so they'll be easy to insert and turn into the holes.”

“Great idea,” Davy said.

They cut branches right from their 'nest tree'. Jack provided his knife for the old man to use. The boys began thinking about the next phase of the plan.

“Who borrows the axes from the guards?” Jack asked.

Abraham had a comment.

“If Deuteronomy got caught that would be last help he'd be to us so I suggest one of you white boys.”

“Good thought,” Davy came back. “I nominate Jack

because he's stronger and faster than I am."

"That makes sense," Jack said.

The other three nodded.

"I'll bring the hooks and line we sort of purchased early in our adventure," Davy said. "While we work on the raft we can set some poles and catch a meal. There's food here for you, Abraham."

He pointed to the sack on Deuteronomy's 'kitchen' shelf.

"Okay, I guess, we have a plan then, Jack said just reviewing one last time. We build the raft, now. As soon as it gets dark, Dute and I will make the holes in the boats and plug them. Just before the men are moved from the stockade at ten tonight we take care of two things: Dute pulls the plugs and I lead the horses away to hide them. By then Davy and Abraham are at the steamboat making it inoperable. Then, once the march is underway, Dute works himself in among the men and gives them three instructions: at Dute's whistle they break and run into the woods, remove all light-colored clothing and flee west to the river where they use the raft to move south. From there they are on their own I suppose."

"I'll be going with them, you understand," Deuteronomy said.

"I hadn't thought ahead that far, but of course you will," Jack said. "We'll deal with that later. Are we all set then?"

Davy slipped the ax handle through his belt.

The others nodded and the boys descended the tree to the forest floor.

"You think Abraham will really come through for us?" Davy asked Jack.

"If not you'll be on your own at the boat."

"I got some ideas from him while you were gone. I'm pretty sure I can handle it if I have to."

They stopped in the woods just opposite the pile of firewood. The axes were still there. The pile looked big enough to last days if needed indicating the men had no intention of leaving the bunkhouse soon. Jack moved forward, his eyes flitting back and forth to make sure the guards were not in the vicinity (area). He took a big breath and crouched down, moving fast as he covered the open area between the trees and

the bunk house. It was a clean trip with no problems.

He immediately handed one axe to Deuteronomy.

“They are really heavy.”

Deuteronomy nodded and automatically led the way. He was the one who knew about the river. Once out of ear shot of the guards he set a quick pace. Davy was at his heels and matched his speed without problem. He and Jack had always been an even match.

When they arrived at the river Davy and Jack saw that things were just the way Deuteronomy had described them. The water flowed rapidly but not choppy.

“We’ll change off between felling and trimming if that seems useful,” Jack said.

Deuteronomy took first shift at cutting them down. The other boys watched. He had a steady and powerful motion. The first fell in less than ten minutes. Jack and Davy went to work trimming the branches off the trunk. At one point Jack stepped off twenty feet from the bottom and scored the trunk. He began cutting through it to get rid of the excess at the top. He returned to helping trim it.

By the time Deuteronomy had the next one on the ground, the boys had the first one trimmed. They let lay it where it was and moved right on to the next one.

“You doing okay, Dute?” Davy called out.

“This pine is real soft. Easier than I figured. Oak would a taken four times longer.”

They took that to mean he was okay and went to work. By the time they had cleaned up the first trunk, they had a good system going. Davy started with the thicker branches toward the bottom while Jack chopped through the trunk at the twenty-foot mark. Then, he began working his way down the trunk handling the thinner, upper branches. They discovered that they needed to remove each branch as close to the trunk as possible so the logs wood snug together well.”

They stopped to rest on several occasions, once to eat the five, nice sized fish the river had given up for them. They had the trees ready ahead of schedule and by five had the raft assembled. Once hidden – covered with the pine branches – they made their way back to the nest. That time it was three

very tired young men who made the trek walking.

“Those were good additions you suggested, Dute,” Jack said, “the poles to help guide the raft and the rudder at the back.”

“The rudder is quite primitive and may be too fragile to function properly for the entire duration of the voyage,” Deuteronomy said.

Davy stopped and looked their new friend in his face.

“Quite primitive? Too fragile? Function properly? Duration? Who are you and what have you done with our friend the Big Dute?”

“Stick around him long enough little brother and you’ll find he’s full of surprises.”

“I can see I’ve missed something.”

Deuteronomy tried to give the short answer, which just raised further questions.

“I read a lot.”

“I *guess* surprises,” Davy said. “I’m happy for you. Those are skills that will be really useful for you.”

“That’s like what my daddy says: ‘Stuff’ll do ya good later’.”

He grinned. They all grinned.

They walked on.

“Hope Abraham’s okay,” Davy said.

“Hope he’s still there,” Jack said, still no real compassion or trust showing for the man.

As they neared the stockade they became quiet and moved cautiously. It was growing dark, which made it relatively easy for Jack to return the axes. They moved on to the ‘nest’.

The old man was still there.

“You move without making a sound, boys. I was startled to see the young imp’s face pop up through the hole there.”

“Imp? Me? You must be mistaken.”

Davy and the old man had a chuckle. It was clear they had formed a positive relationship during their time together. Not so much between Jack and the old man. Jack decided he could live with having saved him from the sheriff – no man deserved what the sheriff had in mind for him – but he could muster no compassion for him or forgiveness for the way he

had been treated. Deuteronomy sided with Jack on general principles – anybody who owned another person, even if only for a few years, was evil in his eyes. Davy agreed, of course, but he was basically a very forgiving sort of person.

“Okay. Everybody understand what they are going to do?” Jack asked.

They each nodded.

“Dute. Time for you and me to go make some holes. Ready?”

“Ready.”

Abraham held out the sack of the plugs he had made.

“Enough for four holes in each of the boats.”

Jack looked him in the face as he took the sack. He managed a nod. It was as much of a ‘thank you’ that he could manage.

He added the brace and bit and closed it.

Jack had traded his white shirt for Deuteronomy’s black one – long sleeves and a collar that could be turned up.

On the ground, bare chested Deuteronomy had one more suggestion.

“You’s still gots a problem; that yellar hair. Let me rub some mud over it, okay?”

The mere thought of having mud in his hair sent shivers up Jack’s back, but hair could be washed and it was a good idea.

“I think you’re enjoying this way too much, Dute,” Jack said as the process got underway.”

“First white person’s hair I ever done touched. Soft like a horse’s mane.”

Jack relaxed and just let him take his time. It did remind him, however, that he had never touched a Negro’s hair. Perhaps later.

“You’s nearly as invisible as me,” Deuteronomy said. “One more thing, let me mud up your face jist a bit. . . . now that’s good.”

“Glad I can blend in. Let’s go. I’ll drill from inside the boats and you plug them immediately from underwater. It’ll be dark. You’ll have to feel for them. Be careful so I don’t cut you when the bit breaks through.”

“I’ll take care a keepin’ from gettin’ cut. You jist hurry. What’s your plan if somebody sees you?”

“Got none. Ideas?”

“If ya got room ta run, run I guess. If not, inta and under the water. I’d say swim west up stream. I’m bettin’ they’d think you’d go east with the current. Stay low on the other side. Remember, you’s hair is gonna be yella agin.”

“All good stuff. Thanks.”

“Of course, it’s good stuff. That’s the only kind a stuff I gots. *Good stuff!*”

They missed seeing each other’s broad smiles in the dark.

Deuteronomy slipped silently into the water and moved to the rear of the first boat. Jack entered it and began the first hole. They went fast and remarkably quietly – less than thirty seconds – a great deal faster than he had figured.

Their system worked fine. The bit finished the hole. The plug got turned into place. They repeated the routine on the next and next and next, then moved onto the boat just upstream. Jack could step from one into the other. There was no sign of a guard throughout the operation. They returned to the nest.

“Why’s your face is dirty and you got mud in your hair?” Davy asked reaching out to feel it. “You dive too deep or something?”

Jack explained and continued.

“Now we wait until nine thirty.” “You have a watch?” he asked pointing at Abraham.

“Yes.”

He removed it from his vest pocket and handed it toward Jack.

“No, you keep it. Just keep us informed.”

“I’m beginning to feel it in my arms and shoulders,” Davy said.

“The chopping those tree limbs, you mean?” Deuteronomy asked.

“Yeah. Hope we can move *our* limbs in the morning.”

“Hope we’s alive in the mornin’ so’s we kin be appreciative of bein’ able ta feel the pain what’s there ta feel.”

Deuteronomy had put things in perspective in a hurry. Suddenly it hit them: it was going to be a dangerous night ahead – the men who they were about to make angry, were armed with rifles, needing to protect thousands of dollars' worth of slaves. Not a tea party by any means.

“If we get separated tonight and can't use our tree, we'll meet up back at our boat. You remember where that is, Abraham?”

The old man nodded.

“If for some reason we can't go there, then behind the Trading Post in the morning. Okay?”

They each responded.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Yes, I understand.”

They remained silent for some time, then Jack spoke.

“Sure wish we had some way of knowing about the Marshal. At this point I guess he'd just get in the way anyhow – not knowing our plan.”

He turned to Davy.

“You two know how you're going to enter the steamboat?”

“Apparently, it's standard for there to be a short ladder extending down on the left side at the rear – used for repairing the paddle wheel that sits across the back.”

“What if it's a side wheeler?”

“Abraham said a side wheeler would be too wide to make it clear up the creek. Has to be a rear wheeler if it's planning to tie up at little dock we found.”

“So, you'll both have to enter from in the water?”

“Right. Abraham says that won't be a problem for him.”

Jack nodded feeling somewhat better. He couldn't decide if being such a careful person was being an advantage to the mission or just the cause of his anxiety and a burning stomach. He would put off thinking about that until later.

They sat in silence again for a long time. Finally, Abraham spoke.

“Nine thirty, gentlemen. If you can manage me out of this nest of yours and onto solid ground I think it is time to get this

party underway.”

A few minutes later they were on their ways: Davy and Abraham heading east keeping just inside the tree line in case there might be a lookout along the way waiting for the steamboat. Jack headed west past the stockade and bunkhouse to tend to the horses. By the time he reached the corral, Deuteronomy was already in the water. On his own, he had decided it would be better if he went from boat to boat removing only one plug at a time, then repeat it for the second plugs and so on. That way they would all be sinking at about the same rate and maybe it wouldn't be noticed as quickly as if one sank then the next and on down the line.

He worked quickly and silently. There was a slight bubbling sound as the water entered the boats. He hadn't counted on that and hoped it wouldn't be heard up at the stockade. With that part of his job finished, Deuteronomy floated down stream to where he was out of sight. He climbed the bank, went into the woods close to the path along the stream and waited for the men to walk by so he could mix in with them.

Jack just stood among the horses for some time, speaking low and making friends. They nuzzled him as happy to get acquainted. None seemed to be bothered by his presence. Moving slowly so not to spook them, he began removing a section of the rails along the back of the corral. He was counting on what he had heard about horses being true – that they liked to stay together and when one moved on the others followed.

There was a sack of oats just outside the corral and he lifted it onto the back of the one that seemed most friendly to him. He urged it outside and across the small clearing to the north, away from the stream. Beyond that was the forest.

He looked back.

“Well, what do you know. Here they all come. Not sure what I would have done if that hadn't worked.”

He soon had them in among the trees. He continued for what he judged was at least a hundred yards. When he stopped, they stopped. He smiled.

“I'm just one of the stallions, it seems. That can't be all

bad.”

He lifted the sack to the ground and with his knife cut an X from corner to corner dumping about a third of it out in an arc. The horses were soon busying themselves with an early breakfast. Jack left. The horses didn't.

Jack smiled.

“I probably should have stayed – oatmeal.”

Meanwhile, Davy and Abraham had made their ways to the dock near the mouth of the creek just east of what Deuteronomy had called the holding station. The steamboat was nowhere to be seen. That didn't surprise them. It was two hours early – only ten p.m. They sat back against trees just inside the wooded area. From there they had a good view downstream.

“I hope it gets here plenty early,” Davy said.

“My guess is that it will not. What the slaver is running is a very dangerous business. If the authorities catch him he'll be shot or hanged – after a trial, of course. He'll keep to a very tight schedule.”

There were a few minutes of silence, then Davy spoke – a question.

“Do you believe in slavery, Abraham?”

“Certainly not.”

“I have a hard time seeing how what the slaver is doing is a whole lot different from what you do. You pay parents for a kid who is expected to stay with you for six or eight years and do whatever you ask him to do. If a kid gets out of line, according to how you see it – it seems there are no general rules about it – you can cause him pain – terrible pain the way I hear.

“A slave owner pays somebody for a slave and works him and treats him anyway he wants to – no rules seem to apply there either. A slave owner trains a man to cultivate and pick and process cotton – a valuable skill in the south. I guess there's some difference since slaves weren't done serving their time after so many years. You see any difference other than that?”

“Apprenticeships are fully legal in Delaware and most northern states.”

“Slavery was legal in all the southern states – legal is legal the way I see it.”

Abraham had no more to say on the subject. Davy didn’t press him. He felt he had made what points he had to make. As it turned out, there wouldn’t have been time, anyway.

“Are those lights down there on the creek?” Davy asked.

Abraham sat up and leaned forward for a better look.

“That’s the steamboat. Anytime now we’ll start hearing the rhythmic chug, chug, of the steam engine. They run quiet. You’ll hear more sounds from the water running off the paddle wheel than the engine. Quiet, now. Listen.”

Davy thought it funny that the one who had been talking talking had said to be quiet. He kept his chuckle to himself.

As it came closer they began making out details: a rear wheeler, fifteen-foot smoke stack, and wooden drive shafts from the engine to each side of the paddlewheel – just the way the old man had said it would be. The cabin rose eight feet above the deck. There was a five-foot walkway around the deck with a railing made of pipe. The Wheel Room sat on top of the cabin with windows on all sides providing a 360-degree view for the captain. It was lit inside and they could see the man standing at the large, wooden, steering wheel.

One other thing they could suddenly make out. On the top of the cabin, front and back, were Gatling Guns – rapid fire guns capable of firing 700 bullets a minute. Guns like that had helped the Union bring the war to an end.

CHAPTER TEN

Will All the Parts Come Together?

“There will probably be a man on each gun. We’ll have to disable the boat before the guards arrive with the prisoners.”

Of course the plan was that they would *not* approach, but Davy did not point that out. The old man was planning for the worst.

“See the chains dangling from the railing?” Abraham said. “They have ankle cuffs that get locked in place on the men. They sit facing the cabin.”

“Do we wait for it to stop and tie up?”

“First, let’s see if we can estimate the number of crew members. The man at the wheel is the only one I see. There’s bound to be at least one shoveling coal and tending to the engine inside at the rear. Usually a minimum of one more as a lookout when backing or sailing close to the shore.”

“I see him coming around the front of the cabin, now; see!”

“He’ll probably tie it up to the dock.”

“There isn’t room for the boat to turn around,” Davy said. “The creek’s too narrow.”

“She’ll back out. How far is it from the mouth of the creek do you think?”

“At least a half mile. Why stop here way east of the stockade?”

“I imagine there are obstacles of some sort on the bottom of the creek – shifting sand bars or rock outcrops. I’m surprised it could get this far.”

“It seems to be their regular stopping point, the dock, the tie posts and all.”

“So it does.”

“Time to leave?” Davy asked,

“I’d say so. Remember we will enter the water a good thirty yards downstream from the dock, well behind the boat. They will be on high alert.”

“You follow me through the forest, okay?” Davy suggested.

He started east with Abraham at his heels. For having taken such beatings the old man seemed to have recovered remarkably. He was undoubtedly in good shape. If his boys worked twelve hour days, Davy suspected that he had, also.

“I think this is far enough.”

“Okay. Into the water. Help me off with my boots and coat.”

In just moments they were wading chest deep out into the stream.

“Keep your hands under water as we swim upstream. No splashing to give us away.”

Davy already had that figured out, but he didn't mention it. With virtually no moon, it was pitch black except for the light from several lanterns on the boat. Presently, they heard the splash of the water up against the boat. The motor continued running. The wheel had stopped turning. They headed for the rear left corner of the boat.

“You know what to do, Davy. One thing. From time to time they will release steam from the pressure tank – a loud hissing. Don't be startled. That must be done so the pressure doesn't build too high. Good luck.”

“Yeah. Same to you. Thanks for all your help and guidance.”

It sounded like good-bye – that wasn't what the boy had intended.

Abraham waited for Davy to climb the ladder. Then, he submerged. His job was to damage the rudder assembly so the ship could not be steered. There were several kinds of rudder assemblies so his first dive was to learn which it was. That mostly amounted to locating it and feeling around to determine size and shape.

Davy's job was to remove the twelve-inch bolts that connected each of the wooden crankshafts to the paddle wheel. There was one on each side of the boat. The bolt, rather than being secured by a washer and nut in the usual way, used a washer and a cotter key (a split metal pin that slipped through a hole in the end of the bolt and spread out to hold it in place – Google for a picture).

Davy side-stepped his way out across the narrow top

edge of the 2 X 12 inch crankshaft, holding onto the many parts of the wheel for support. Near the end, he straddled it, leaned forward, and went to work unfastening the cotter key. That required bending down its two bent ends so it became straight and could be slipped up through the hole in the bolt. It seemed quite simple and he accomplished it quickly – removing the bolt from the hole took a bit longer. The weight of the shaft with him sitting on it pressed down with a good deal of force. He turned it back and forth as he pulled. With that accomplished, he made his way around to the opposite crankshaft where he repeated the operation on that cotter key and bolt. It also went without a hitch. He put the bolts and keys in his rear pocket and crossed back to the other side preparing to climb down the ladder.

In the water, Abraham, was having some success, also. With the use of a knife blade, he had to unscrew the six large screws that held the rudder board to the metal rod that was attached to the steering wheel two stories above. Without that board, no matter how the captain turned the wheel, the steering mechanism was useless. It took more than one dive to remove each of the screws, but the old man kept at it. Finally, there was just one to go.

Up above, with the large rear paddle wheel disabled, Davy set his eyes on the Gatling guns – not part of the original plan, of course, since they had no idea they would be there. Between the wheel and the rear wall of the cabin was a narrow walkway, the way he had crossed between the shafts. At the center of the back wall was a ladder that led up to the roof of the cabin – the top deck. That was where one of the two big guns sat. He began climbing, slowly and carefully. His plan, if he were spotted, was to dive into the water and hide behind and under the paddlewheel. He hoped that would not be necessary, of course.

In the dim lantern light above him he saw the barrel of the gun – six barrels, as it turned out, fastened to a round central column. As it rotated, the barrels fired one at a time. He could see a crank handle at the rear and quickly understood how, as that handle was turned, the column rotated and some mechanism – a series of firing pins – fired the bullets as the barrels clicked into place. The ammunition was mounted on

strips held in a large, circular, metal container on top. It was his first close-up experience with one.

His problem was how to disable it. He examined it for some time then focused on that handle at the rear. It was built like a crank. It appeared to be screwed into the mechanism that turned the column. If he could unscrew it and remove it, the gun would be useless.

He heard voices on the outer walkway below – the area where the slaves would be chained. He couldn't make out what they were saying. What it did tell him was that he had to hurry. If he could only remember which way he needed to turn something to *unscrew* it. Turning it the wrong way might fire it. He wasn't into shooting people – even bad people – and certainly did not want to get caught.

In his head, he rehearsed how to unscrew a screw. He was finally sure he had it figured out. He pushed on the handle of the crank very gently to the left. Nothing. He pushed harder. Still nothing. Perhaps it was locked. He felt beneath the mechanism. Yes. There it was, a metal plate that fit into a gear that kept it from moving. He pulled the plate forward and felt the handle come free. He took a big breath to steady himself and began turning – 'to the left', he told himself, 'always to the left'. He felt it loosen. He continued. It took some time – many turns – but soon it was there in his hands. He found a pocket for it.

As was typical for the boy he whispered to himself as he thought.

"Now. I really should do the other gun, too. That one is down on the main deck up front. I'll be much more likely to be caught down there. Hmm."

He made his way down the same ladder he had climbed, then inched his way, back against the wall, along the left side of the boat moving toward the front. There, he stopped, crouched and slowly positioned his head so he could see around the corner.

"There she sets," he whispered to himself.

The gun was pointing away from him toward the shore. That put the crank nearest him. He figured that was a good thing. He could tell in the lantern light that it was a slightly

different model – larger, with a much bigger ammunition container on top.

The voices started again. They came from the right side nearest the dock. He could tell they weren't moving and figured that was the time to make his move.

The locking mechanism was different. He squatted down to examine it and soon had that figured out – a latch to slide, rather than a plate to pull. He felt the crank release and tried to turn it. It wouldn't budge. He stood so he could put all his weight on the handle. It still wouldn't budge. It had been screwed in tightly – frozen in place. He jiggled himself up and down. That did it. It came free. He returned to a squat behind it to keep himself as hidden as possible.

One of the voices began moving in his direction. He turned faster, but saw the man's shadow nearing the corner of the cabin. Davy stretched out on the deck up against the front wall. It was in a shadow and he hoped the man would stop before he got near him. The man continued around the corner where he stopped under the lantern and removed a pocket watch. It was the captain – Archibald, he figured – who they had seen earlier up in the wheel house.

"Another ten minutes," he said, apparently to the second man they had also seen from up on the bank. "They are usually here, waiting, early. Begin watching for the row boats."

That confirmed for the first time, that the men were to be transported by the boats. Up to then it had just been supposition (a guess). Davy found himself feeling better about the plan. He hoped the others were all having the success he was having.

The man put his watch away and returned back around the corner to the other side. Davy began breathing again. He moved back to the gun and finished the job, taking the crank with him. Moving back along the side, he reached the ladder that led down to the water. He stopped hoping to see Abraham waiting. He wasn't. The plan called for him to return to shore – Abraham or no Abraham.

He entered the water and paused a few moments longer. It could be that the old man had already made it back to shore. Davy figured if he weren't there, he could return and search the

water for him.

As he crawled up the bank he heard a familiar voice – whispering.

“Davy! Over here! Thank goodness you made it. I was worried. It took you so long.”

“Good to see you, too. I sort of took a little extra time to disable the Gatling Guns.”

“Really? And you succeeded?”

“I think so.”

Davy pulled the crank handles from his pockets.

“I’d say you succeeded, boy.”

“Anything new out here?” Davy asked.

“Not really. It’s just a few minutes until midnight. I hope things are going well for the boys upstream.”

Upstream, as the old man had called it, Deuteronomy had already pulled all the plugs and got out of the water. He made his way into the woods moving east, alongside the trail. He stopped and waited for the men. A few minutes later things began happening in a big way.

“The boats is sunk!” one of the guards called out.

“The horses is gone!” another announced in an angry voice.”

The men inside the stockade stood to listen. Amos, Deuteronomy’s father, passed on the news that he figured the time had come for the rescue to begin. The guards huddled and the decision was made to march the men, downstream, along the trail to the steamboat landing. They would need to keep to a fast pace to make it on time.

The men were gathered and the march began – three men, rifles at the ready, led the way, in case they met up with some unforeseen problem. Three more brought up the rear. The men and boys walked three wide down the trail. From the trees, Deuteronomy got an accurate count for the first time – seven men and five, early teenage boys – an even dozen.

At the curve in the creek, the path narrowed so the prisoners were forced in close together. That was when Deuteronomy made his move. He entered the group near the front where there was the least chance of being seen by a guard. He spread the word as he dropped back through the

group, row by row. At his shrill, finger whistle they were to run into the forest to their left, remove light colored clothes and run directly west to the raft at the river. Deuteronomy moved to a spot beside his father who was walking at the rear. He had one more suggestion – at his whistle, the three of them at the back would turn and rush the rear guards, pushing them into the water.

While that was going on, Jack had returned to the area of the stockade. He noted that the captives were gone and that the boats were filled with water. His private plan was to catch up with the men and find some way to distract the guards at the moment Deuteronomy gave the signal. He was soon beside them only a few yards away in among the trees. He found a long branch which he cleared of twigs as he walked. It made a fine, heavy club. His plan was to swing it the rear guard's heads from behind and at least startle them.

Although none of the team could know for sure, all parts of the plan *were* ready to come together.

The captain of the slave ship noticed it first.

"Hear that? Something's gone wrong," he called to the other man. "The men are coming on foot. Keep a eye out for trouble. Man the front gun."

The second man hurried to the front of the deck.

"Something's wrong with the gun. The crank's gone."

"Get to the other one then."

The captain walked to an open window near the rear – the engine room. He called inside.

"Get us out a here, Jackson!"

A few minutes passed. The second man shouted to the Captain.

"This gun's been sabotaged, too. What shall I do?"

"Watch the rear. I'll get up to the wheel house and we'll back outta here."

He climbed a ladder and assumed his place at the large wheel. He soon determined that the wheel was turning freely, apparently not connected to the rudder below.

The man in the engine room stuck his head out the window.

"I'm giving her full power, but the wheel ain't turnin'."

“Time to get out of here on foot. Bring the rifles and take the path back to the coast.”

Moments later they were on shore and running east.

Davy turned to Abraham.

“I guess we hadn’t taken time to think about what they’d do when they discovered all our handiwork. How can we keep them from escaping?”

“I’m thinking we can’t. At least we made the boat useless. They’ll never use it to take their captives away, tonight. Maybe that’s all we should have expected.”

“I suppose that should be enough, but it burns my butt that the slaver is going to get away.”

“I understand.”

They watched the three of them disappear into the darkness.

Just upstream, the other boys were ready to put the final phase of the plan into action. Deuteronomy nudged his father, put his fingers to the sides of his mouth and let go with a whistle so shrill it even sent the owls to flight.

Jack got in one solid lick with the club and turned to run into the woods himself. He figured he had managed to land a blow on at least the one nearest him. He didn’t wait to see. Deuteronomy and his father had managed their job on the other two. Then, they joined the men in the forest.

The captives had responded on cue and made a dash into the forest. They were out of sight before the rest of the guards could even raise their rifles. They managed a few blind shots, but those soon sunk harmlessly into tree trunks. It took the guards some time to regroup. Presently, the leader ordered them into the forest after the men and boys. The guards continued straight north across the vast wooded area. The captives had long before started making their way west toward the river.

Jack was surprised by the tear that trickled down his cheek at the thought he would never see Deuteronomy again. He had become a good friend. He brushed it away. A boy and his pa should be together. He turned east and carefully picked his way among the trees.

The plan was for the three of them – Davy, Jack and

Abraham – to meet back at the ‘nest’ and, if not that, the cove. Jack was there first. He took a seat on the ground with his back against the trunk. He tensed as he heard movement coming his way from the direction of the creek. He prepared to stand and run if necessary.

“My you look comfortable, Big Brother,” came a voice out of the darkness.”

Jack sprang to his feet and met Davy with a full bear hug. He still couldn’t bring himself to even touch the old man.

“Well?” Davy asked considering that should be the complete question.

“Well, I hid the horses, Dute sank the boats and got the men into the forest headed west. I managed a good solid blow with a club to the head of one of the rear guards. You two?”

“Missions accomplished,” Davy said. “Abraham removed the rudder. You should see how long he can stay under water. I detached the paddle wheel from the engine – all just like we planned.”

“The boy left out one little detail,” Abraham said. “He also managed to render the two Gatling Guns on the boat useless. They had one front and one rear. A darn fool thing to have attempted for sure.”

Jack smiled. He turned to the old man.

“You have to understand that my brother has always been full of darn fool things. If he kept them all inside, his head would explode.”

He became serious, still addressing Abraham.

“I need to thank you for your loyalty and help. I still can’t bring myself to shake your hand. I know I should, but I can’t.”

The old man nodded – a tear ran down one of his cheeks.

“What now?” Davy asked.

Before an answer could be launched their attention was drawn to a commotion with shots fired in the direction of the coast. Davy took off on a trot with Jack at his side. The old man followed as he could at a distance. Eventually they stopped just inside the tree line.

“What the?” Jack said, confused.

“My guess is that man wearing the star is our long-lost

Uncle Tommy from Raleigh, the Federal Marshal,” Davy said.

“You think? I mean you’re probably right. I wonder how . . .?”

They left the woods and approached the gathering – a dozen deputy marshals led by ‘Uncle Tommy’. The three men from the boat were in hand cuffs. Davy approached the Marshal offering his hand for a shake.

“Long time no see, Uncle Tommy.”

“So, you two are the imps that sent the cryptic telegram.”

“Imps? Whatever do you mean?”

The Marshal continued with an explanation.

“I tried to wire (telegram) you right back. In return, I received one from the telegrapher in Carterville – Al somebody. He laid out what he knew about the slaver. A few hours later he sent a second one calling the local sheriff’s integrity into question. I had heard rumors about the sheriff before – enough to have no doubt what I read was true. I wired Al at the Carterville office telling him to corral you two before you got yourselves into serious trouble. Within a few hours I received a reply saying he had seen the sheriff taking you to his jail. Law men all up and down the east coast have been on the lookout for Captain Archibald Collins, here. If he’d have got his hands on you two no telling what he’d have done – made you into fish food, most likely. There is a large reward for his capture. That will go to you boys.”

“And Abraham,” Jack said pointing to the man just emerging from the woods.

“It will up to you to decide how you want to divvy it up. We’ll tend to that later. It will come to the bank in your names. What are they, by the name?”

“David and Jack Jansen, formerly of Delaware,” Jack said.

The Marshal looked at Jack.

“Your name sounds familiar. There wouldn’t be a warrant out for your arrest would there – at your young age.”

Abraham stepped up.

“There was one. I initiated it and then recently discovered I had made a mistake. I am withdrawing it. My name is Abraham Gunderson, so you can check it out. I’ll sign

whatever documents are necessary to get it cleared up. Whatever reward there is regarding the capture of the slaver goes to these two boys – and a third one named Deuteronomy if he should ever return.”

Jack looked the old man in his face and nodded; it was the best thank you he could manage to the man who had beaten him unconscious on so many occasions.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Oddly Strange and Peculiarly Different

As the first streaks of morning rose in the sky above the reef, the Marshal and his men left with their prisoners. They would stop in town and take the sheriff and his deputies into custody as well.

"I need to get started back to Delaware," Abraham said, "but I'm way too tired right now."

"We're all tired," Jack said. "Let's get a fire started here on the beach to take the chill off and sleep until we feel human again."

Jack and Abraham gathered wood to put on top of the dry grass and twigs Davy assembled on the beach. Although they all watched it come alive with flames they remembered very little more. For the first time in days they slept deeply without fear. Once their eyes closed, not one of them so much as budged.

* * *

It was well after noon the following day.

Davy was the first to hear it.

"You lazy good fer nothin' son's a polecats. Don't ya knows it's already tomorra?"

Even before he opened his eyes, Davy knew *who* it was. *Why* he was, puzzled him. He should have been thirty miles south on the river by then.

He sat up propped back on his elbows, squinting into the sun.

"Need one major explanation, Dute."

"Dute?" the man standing there with him asked.

"It's like their nickname fer me. It's short fer Deuteronomy. A long story."

"Seems so, Moses. I'll be happy ta hear all about it later on."

Dute offered hands up for each of the three of them.

Amos, Deuteronomy's father spoke.

"I wants ta thank ya fer all the help – protectin' my boy here and arrangin' the escape. The others send their thanks

through us.”

“Life was getting boring around here,” Davy said. “We were pleased for some little thing to come along and break the monotony.”

Amos shook his head.

“Daddy, I told ya they was oddly strange and peculiarly different.”

“Ya hit that’n on the head, son.”

For just a moment, Davy felt a pang of jealousy – Dute had a father, right there beside him ready to take care of him for as long as necessary. He tried not to show it, but couldn’t help wishing the man could stick around.

“So, what’s your plan?” Jack asked, looking back and forth between them.

“Follow our plan to get up north and find work that offers Negro’s a good day’s pay I guess,” Deuteronomy/Moses said.

Abraham spoke.

“First, may I suggest we all get back to Carterville and I will buy each of you the biggest steak dinner you’ve ever seen.”

That was the best suggestion any of them had heard in months. There were nods and smiles all around.

“You think they’ll serve daddy an me?”

“They will if the three of us blue-eyed, pale, white men have anything to say about it,” Abraham said determination showing in his voice.

They arrived in town and walked Main Street to the restaurant. They hesitated just outside on the wooden sidewalk – all except for Abraham who barged right in motioning the others to follow.

Inside were a dozen patrons sitting here and there, eating. When the five of them entered, the others all stopped and looked up as one. One man at the rear stood.

“Sure hopes he don’t shoot black men,” Moses whispered to nobody in particular.

Unbelievably, that man began clapping. Other’s stood and joined him. Within moments the room was filled with applause. A man with a marshal’s badge approached Abraham, assuming he was the spokesman. They had a few quiet words. While the others were seated, Abraham made his

way to a table that had been pointed out to him by the marshal.

By the time the food arrived, Abraham had rejoined them at the table. The marshal leaned in close for one last remark.

“I sort of spread the word about what you brave folks did. I’m thinking you’ll have your way with this town for a good long piece.”

As they enjoyed steak, backed potatoes, and fresh bread with home-churned butter, they each rehashed how their parts of the plan and come together. Amos could hardly contain his pride every time his son’s contributions were mentioned.

As they were being served thick crust, cinnamon-apple pie enveloped (covered) in sweet whipped cream, a man approached them from the table Abraham had earlier visited. Abraham made the introductions.

“This is William Green, the local attorney. I asked him several questions and based on his answers, asked him to draw up a legal document. He motioned for the man to sit and offer the explanation.

“Good afternoon, gentleman.”

Deuteronomy, well, Moses officially, and his father beamed – it was hard for them to believe they had been referred to as gentleman for the first time in their lives. The attorney continued.

“Abraham had several good questions about the current legal status of the steamboat. In this state the booty – plunder, unclaimed goods – from criminals are the rightful property of those who were wronged or threatened by the criminal act. From what I can see the five of you at this table are the rightful recipients of the boat that was used with the intention of bringing harm to the larger lot of you. I just need to add names and have the deputy sign, verifying the facts in the document.”

Abraham spoke.

“I will not be a part of the reward. My unchristian intentions when I arrived here exclude me from any gains the events may offer.”

“The other four, then?”

It had clearly been a question from the attorney.

“Give us a few minutes to huddle on this,” Jack said.

They talked on for nearly ten minutes. The boys each

managed a second piece of pie as the conversation continued. Presently, Jack raised his hand to call the attorney and the marshal back.

“Two things: First, we have decided to accept the boat in all four of our names – equal partners, so to speak. Second, can you draw up a paper that turns us into a shipping company? Abraham knows steamboats and he has agreed to teach Amos and Du . . . I mean, Moses how to operate the boat. He has connections on up north to begin arranging cargo for them to carry. When they need extra help, Davy and I will pitch in.”

“Come to their rescue – again – is more like it,” Davy offered, the imp in his grin never more apparent.

Moses spoke.

“This will be so fantastic it exceeds anything I have ever let myself envisage.”

They all turned toward Moses, the attorney and the marshal being the most surprised, of course. Amos grinned and spoke.

“That’s *my* boy. Every so often sompin’ comes over him an he starts a talkin’ all highfalutin like that. Think I needs ta git him ta the doc?”

There were smiles, nods and chuckles. What a wonderful way to end an adventure – and, what a wonderful way for four *gentlemen* to begin a new life together.

The End

Abraham gunderson