

One



Late May, 1864

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sassy, that’s enough,” Mr. Heath warned her gently. “Robert has no choice if Caroline needs him.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I reached for the tin. “What is it?”

“Salve. Some kind of salve she concocted. Said it’s for rope burns, that you be needing it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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