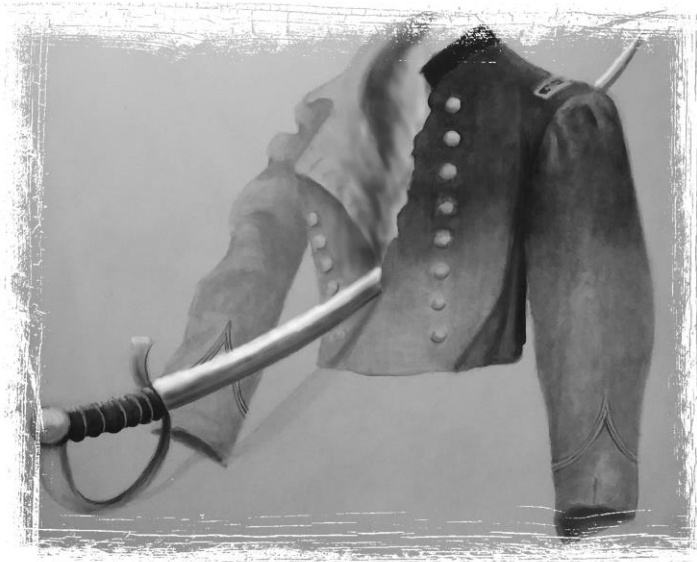
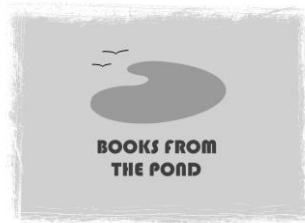


TENNESSEE YANKEE



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Herb Hughes



Books From The Pond
2016

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, organizations, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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First Printing: 2016

ISBN-13: 978-1539635062

ISBN-10: 1539635066

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For Charlotte. Thank you, Babywoman.

Author's note: *There is a difficulty in writing fiction about the civil war era in that racially offensive terms were in common use at the time. I have avoided using these terms except in a few instances where use of the term itself was the salient point. No offense was intended, and I sincerely hope none was taken.*

Prologue

Frost flows from my breath and flakes mingle with my fur as I follow summer paths that are, now, little more than ripples in the new white sheet. My feet take the steps without thought. The paths are known to me. I can feel my body making the changes that, along with my thoughtless habits, will keep me alive in the coming winter. I stop. Cocking my head slightly, I look out over the valley floor, out over a scene in which the vastness of nothing is spotted by a human standing alone, unmoving. There is no feeling of danger as I stare at the solitary figure far below. I am only aware of his presence, as I have been in seasons past. I hold my gaze a moment longer then I am gone, vanishing into my winter life.

Chapter 1

The fragile white flakes of the first snow, soft and slow and wet, danced lazily through the motionless air, down to the frozen dirt that filled the spaces between the tumbleweeds and the few twisted blades of grass that formed the southern Montana landscape. Autumn was dead. Aaron had watched the snow line crawl slowly, week by week, down from the peaks of the mountains, riding the cold breath of early winter in its slow assault on the valley. Now the prairie's time had come. He knew the land would soon lay covered, the dust of summer settled back to the earth and hidden under winter's blanket. He knew, too, that the white velvet slopes above him, beautiful and rolling, rounded and soft, were treacherous.

The first snow would cover slowly, only gradually building to a delicate smoothness as the colors of summer faded to the monochrome of winter. It was a moment for enjoying the beauty. Aaron stood and watched. From the corner of his eye, he saw movement, a coyote walking along the edge of a precipice on the side of the mountain. It stopped, looking down into the valley. For a few brief moments, the coyote stood and cocked its head and looked at Aaron. The moments ended suddenly as it moved on, quickly out of sight.

Aaron continued to watch as flakes waltzed slowly back and forth as though afraid of the touch of the earth, only grudgingly coming to rest after all resistance had failed. Flakes slid down his long brown hair to the collar of his handmade sheepskin coat. A huge right arm, heavily muscled from carrying a double burden, rested on the butt of an ax handle, the blade end hard against the earth. The left sleeve of the coat hung limp at his side. Though the maker and wearer were one in the same, the left sleeve had never been needed. It had been many, many years since he had needed a left sleeve.

Watching the hypnotic movement of the flakes, Aaron's thoughts began to drift back. Years melted away in his mind as he saw another first snow from so long ago, snowflakes falling on the sidewalks in front of the houses that ringed the stores of downtown Nashville...

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~ Memory: Nashville ~

White dust, the stirring of snow, escaped from beneath the back of her full-length purple dress as her quick, short steps carried her along the sidewalk. Aaron was walking toward her but stopped when he saw her. He stood and stared without realizing what he was doing. Snow collected on the padded shoulders of her matching purple jacket and veiled hat. It looked as though the snow and the cold had caught her by surprise. She wore no overcoat. She hugged herself against the weather as she ran, her face lowered away from the bite of the wind.

She was unusual, beautiful but different. The snow contrasted with her coal black hair, which hung in large curls across her shoulders and bounced with each step she took. He wanted to stop her, to talk to her, to reach out and touch her, but he only stood there, frozen and staring. He was not frozen from the cold in the air. The radiance of this woman had turned him into a statue. There was something about her.

She was almost upon him when she looked up and noticed Aaron for the first time. Startled out of some deep thought, she caught the toe of her shoe and lunged forward, her hat spilling across the walk as she fell. The surprise in her face, skin light bronze as though tanned even in winter, and her long black hair with its huge, buoyant curls flying wildly through the air, was instantly carved into Aaron's memory, a picture that would remain his forever. She was so beautiful. He reached his arms out to catch her, to keep her from falling to the ground, but she was just out of reach, barely beyond his fingertips. She fell hard, her purse skittering away on the snow as little puffs of white powder filled the air with each bounce.

Aaron stepped to where she lay and knelt at her side and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Y-yes. I-I think so." Her voice was deep and raspy, but still feminine. With Aaron's help, she lifted to a sitting position. "My hat! Where is my hat?" she asked excitedly. "It was a present from my mother. I cannot lose it."

The hat had come to rest on the snow-draped grass some distance away. Her small handbag was on the other side of the walk. "I'll get

them," Aaron said. When he came back, the woman was standing. She extended her hand for her things and started to step toward him, but stopped. "Oh, dear!"

"What's wrong?"

"I seem to have hurt my ankle. I cannot walk on it."

"You must have twisted it."

The snow began to fall more heavily as they stood there, momentarily silent. The silence stretched for a few more seconds before Aaron finally spoke. "You need to get out of the cold and soak your ankle in hot salt water. Where were you going?"

"Home. In the next block. But I am having trouble putting weight on my foot. If you could find me a walking cane of some sort.... "

Aaron's gaze covered the ground under the young oaks that lined the city street, but there was nothing in sight substantial enough to use as a cane. He walked over to the woman, wrapped his strong arms around her, and picked her up.

"Oh, dear," she said, surprise painted on her face once again.

"I don't mean to be forward, Miss, but the snow's starting to come down pretty hard, and it's getting cold with the sun setting. We need to get you out of this." She held onto his neck without protest as he began to walk.

Aaron moved as briskly as the load would allow. She was medium height and, though not plump, was a full-bodied woman even though she was still quite young. She weighed more than he had expected. He tried his best not to show that he was struggling. His huge arms were used to carrying heavy loads around the plantation. He often, against his father's spoken wishes, joined the slaves in their labor. But he was not used to carrying heavy loads for long distances. Midway in the next block, he began to wonder if he would make it. He was already hours late leaving for the plantation, and this diversion would have him riding home in the dark and the snow, but this woman had captured something inside him. He had to help her.

"It's over there," the woman pointed, "the last house on the block."

Just my luck, Aaron thought as he tensed his body for the remainder of the walk. He had to keep his mind off the load, so he

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decided to talk. "At least your hat was not damaged. Your mother will be happy it's okay."

"My mother passed away when I was a child," she answered.

"Ah... Oh. I'm sorry... I..."

"She gave it to me to play dress up not long before she died. It was hers. That's why I cannot lose it. It means so much to me."

"I'm glad it's safe," Aaron said. "My mother died when I was young, too. She got sick and never recovered. I was so young I don't remember much about her."

He was beginning to struggle to get his words out. Detecting the strain in his voice, she said, "My ankle feels much better. Perhaps I could walk the rest of the way. With a little help, of course."

"I'm fine," Aaron groaned. He wasn't, but somehow he made it. He even managed to go up the steps to the front porch, relieved that there were only a few of them.

The house was a wood frame, white two-story, deeper than it was wide, with a roofed porch across the full length of the front and much of the side. It was ornate and large and well kept. He lowered the woman to her feet at the front door. The ache in his arms immediately gave way to a burning numbness.

"Thank you so much, Mr.... "

"Richardson. Aaron Richardson. I'm sorry. I should have introduced myself before."

"And I, too. I am Deborah Harris. Well, thank you, Aaron. May I call you Aaron?"

Her smile was genuine and melting and, combined with her beauty, almost too much for a young man to have to bear. "Of course," he answered.

"Please come in," she said, holding the door open. "Perhaps a cup of coffee or hot tea would help repay your kindness. It would help warm you as well."

She continued to smile. He could not nod and walk away from this woman, even if it was so late his father would be mad. He wanted to know her. He wanted to be with her. He wanted to stay close to her.

"Coffee'd be fine, ma'am," he answered. He followed Deborah as she limped through the door. It was late afternoon with the sun not too far above the western horizon and, even though you could still see outside, the inside of the house was dark, only tiny slivers of faded day sneaking through the edges and seams of the shutters. Aaron's eyes had not yet adjusted so he stood motionless in the darkness. The woman felt her way along a path of furniture and soon had a small oil lamp burning.

"Please have a seat," she said, almost in a whisper. "Did you say coffee or tea?"

"Ah, either. Whichever is easiest."

"That you, Deb?" came a man's voice from upstairs.

"Yes, father. I've brought a guest."

The well-dressed older man who came down the stairs looked vaguely familiar to Aaron. He was quite tall and had a round face, with a round body as well. There were a few strands of gray hair lying limp across the top of his otherwise bald head. On the sides, his hair was thick and seamless with a full, neatly trimmed gray beard. In spite of his large size, he appeared to be in good shape for an older gentleman, descending the stairs easily.

"Father, this is Aaron Richardson. I am afraid I took a fall out on the sidewalk, but Mr. Richardson helped me up and, ah, helped me get home."

"Are you all right?" the man asked his daughter.

"Yes, I will be fine. It is only a slight twist of my ankle."

The man turned to Aaron and said "Weaver Harris" as he held out his hand. "Aaron Richardson, eh? You one of Big Jim Richardson's boys?"

"Yes, sir," Aaron answered as he gripped Mr. Harris' hand and shook. "You know my father?"

"Of course. Everybody knows Big Jim and his plantation, what's it called? Calla! Yes, that's it. One of the best plantations in Tennessee. Jim's a fine man. I remember you as well, but you were a small boy the last time I was out to Calla. Jim and I used to be good friends... Well, we still are, but I don't get out that way these days. Perhaps I should."

"You'd certainly be welcome, sir," Aaron said.

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"I offered Aaron coffee or tea, father, to repay his kindness. Would you care to join us?"

The older man wrinkled his brow and stared at his daughter a moment before responding, "Yes, of course. I'll have coffee. Aaron, please sit down." He indicated an ornate chair with a dark red and green brocade cloth and intricately carved wooden arms. It was much nicer than anything Aaron was used to at Calla. Furniture at the plantation tended to be more functional than decorative.

"Thank you, sir." Aaron sat in the chair, and Mr. Harris sat on the near side of a matching sofa. There was an equally ornate coffee table between them and a large upright piano against the wall behind the sofa.

"So," Weaver Harris began, "what do you think is going to happen? Are we going to war with those damned Yankees?"

"I hope not, sir. I'm afraid a war would be devastating for the South."

"Devastating? How so?" Weaver's brow wrinkled in concern.

"They've got the industry and resources that we don't have," Aaron explained. He had thought a lot about all the war talk. "And they outnumber us greatly. The war would likely be fought on southern soil. We might hold our own, but if we don't, we could lose everything."

"Nonsense!" Weaver blurted out as he threw his hands in the air. "The Yankees don't stand a chance against our Southern boys. Our young men know how to shoot and fight. The Yankees are nothing more than a bunch of conscripts. Our Southern boys are born and bred with a rifle in their hands. Hell, each one is worth ten of those damned immigrant Yankees."

Weaver's voice had continued to rise as he spoke, and Deborah had heard the last few words from the kitchen. "Please, father," she called out. "Watch your language. We have company."

Weaver turned around and shouted through the door to his daughter, "Sorry, my dear, but the damned Yankees are 'damned Yankees' whether we've got company or not!"

"Oh, father!"

Weaver turned back to Aaron and continued. "And England is on our side. I'm sure of it. Maybe France, too. They'll help us with the

material we cannot manufacture.” He pointed a finger at Aaron and shook it. “This thing is going to come to blows before too much longer, and I guarantee we’ll whip their tails in no time. Once it starts, I give the war six months at the most. We’ll be in Washington and Lincoln will be hanging from the Capitol flagpole by Christmas.”

“Yes, sir.” With his quickly growing interest in Weaver Harris’ beautiful daughter, it was not the time for a disagreement, let alone an argument, so Aaron decided the best course of action was to smile and go along with whatever the older man said. Besides, if his private thoughts were to leak out of his head and become public knowledge, he would probably be run out of Nashville on a rail. Better to keep his opinions unspoken. “Our boys are definitely braver,” he offered. “And we can probably fight circles around them.”

“Of course we can. Mark my words...”

At that moment, Deborah came in, limping slightly while carrying a tray with a pot of coffee and three cups. “Are you still talking about war, father?” she asked as she set the tray on the coffee table between the two men.

“What else is there?” Weaver responded to his daughter, but he kept his eyes directly on Aaron, making long and painful eye contact. “That’s all the news there is these days. States’ rights and war. Each independent state in these United States has a right to make its own laws without that useless Federal government interfering. States’ rights is the true issue here. Not slavery. You do understand that, don’t you?”

Though Weaver was looking directly into Aaron’s eyes, Deborah responded before Aaron could speak.

“We’re not in a war, at least not yet, and Mr. Richardson was very kind to me this afternoon. I would like to have a more pleasant conversation. Please, father?”

“Sorry, dear,” Weaver sighed. “What would you like to talk about?”

“Why, the early snow, of course. Haven’t you noticed? An early snow means winter is coming sooner rather than later.” She poured their coffee then sat on the sofa. The only available seat was on the other side of Weaver, well away from Aaron.

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With war and state's rights momentarily taboo, the conversation drifted from the weather to the local newspapers and eventually onto the big plantations, of which Calla, the Richardson plantation, was one of the more noteworthy. It was large but far from the largest. Still, Calla was well known, if for no other reason than the fact that Aaron's father was so well respected. They talked about Big Jim and Aaron's brother, Jim Junior. They talked about slaves and a number of other more mundane topics with Weaver Harris only occasionally mentioning states' rights or cursing the 'damned Yankees.'

Time passed quickly. After what seemed like only a brief few minutes, Mr. Harris stood and said, "Well, young man, I appreciate the kindness you have shown to my daughter. It is time for Deborah's piano lesson so I must tell you goodbye. Please give my regards to your father and brother."

From where he was sitting, Aaron couldn't help seeing Deborah glance at her father with an annoyed look, but he stood and shook Mr. Harris' hand and thanked him and Deborah for their hospitality. Then he worked up his nerve and, with a sudden dryness in his mouth and throat, struggled to say, "Sir, if you don't mind, I would greatly appreciate being able to call on your daughter sometime."

"No, that can't be," the elder man responded immediately, his head shaking side-to-side and his brow suddenly heavily furrowed as a frown wrinkled his face. "I'm afraid it's out of the question. You're much too old for Deborah." Weaver Harris put his arm on Aaron's shoulder and began to gently push him toward the front door. "I'm afraid Deborah is, well, you need to find a young lady closer to your own age. But I do appreciate your kindness."

With that, Aaron found himself standing in the cold on the front porch as he heard the front door lock behind him. He was so surprised at the hasty exit that was forced upon him; he could not move momentarily. Deborah's muffled voice, raised in anger, seeped through the door as she told her father how rude he had been. Then she pleaded that she was almost seventeen years old and had a right to pick who she wanted to court her.

Aaron was uncomfortable with the thought of eavesdropping and did not linger to hear Weaver's response to his daughter. He did not believe he was too old for this young lady, but for whatever reasons Mr. Harris had a problem with him. So be it.

He stepped across the porch, down the few steps, and onto the sidewalk, turning toward the wagon, several blocks away. As he walked hurriedly along, he couldn't help thinking about Deborah Harris' beautiful face. She wouldn't leave his mind. Once again he saw her falling, her big curls bouncing wildly and surprise in her deep, dark brown eyes. As he watched her in his thoughts, his arms reached out in real life to catch her. She was, once again, barely beyond his fingertips. He watched in his memory as she fell onto the ground and into the snow. The memory faded, and he saw his outstretched hands in front of him. Aaron stopped and stared at his empty hands and arms a moment. Finally, he put his hands in his pockets to warm them and started walking quickly again, hurrying toward the wagon.

Aaron kicked the snow about as he half walked and half ran. The sun was below the horizon now, and there was little light left. He should already be home or, at least, almost home. It was way too late to be starting on the road back to the plantation. He picked up his pace then turned a trot into a full run. It would be long after supper when he got home. Big Jim would be worried, if not out looking for him. Aaron could already hear Big Jim's lecture about how dangerous it was to bring the wagon home in the dark, especially with the cold and the snow. He had heard it before.

~ Memory: Calla ~

Only a week had passed. It seemed as though it had been months since he had last seen Deborah. *How could one week be so very, very long?* Aaron wondered as he drove the old, dead cotton stalks under the ground with his hoe. He had spent much of the week working with the slaves, keeping busy in an effort to make time pass more quickly. It wasn't working. Time trudged along like an old man walking with a crooked cane.

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A slender slave called Skinny Joe stopped chopping his stalks and leaned against his hoe and looked at Aaron sideways and said, "Mastuh Aaron, you's choppin' those stawks like you's mad at 'em."

"You want me to kiss them first?" Aaron retorted.

Mild laughter broke out from the other slaves around them.

"No, suh. But we jus' works them into the groun'. We's not chopping cotton where we's tryin' to pull the weeds out of the ground. We's puttin' the cotton stawks undah the dirt. Mastuh Big Jim says it makes the groun' bettah, so we works 'em in instead of pullin' 'em out like t'others do. Do it like this." Joe's hoe came down in small, accurate blows that took little effort but perfectly worked the stalk into the ground. "Theh's no need to kill the stawk. It's already dead."

Laughter rang out across the field again, louder than before. The slaves were still chopping, but fewer blows were being struck as ears were perking up to listen.

"I'm not weak enough to make baby blows like that," Aaron shot back, but he was smiling as he did so. "My muscles are too strong from working the fields so much."

"Now, Mastuh Aaron, you's strong, shore 'nuf, but I works the fields more'n you and I believes I'm a might stronger than you and you don' see me trying to mutilate the stawks."

"Stronger than me? Joe, what are you talking about? Look at your skinny arm. It's smaller than mine because you're out here making baby blows, hardly raising a sweat."

Both men were still smiling, but the smiles were not as broad as they had been.

"You mus' be lookin' through them crooked white eyes," Joe said, something he could say to Aaron but would never say to another white man. "My arm is jus' as big as yore's. Lest ways, the muscle part. That extra part on yore arm ain't muscle. I shore 'nuf knows my arm is strongah."

"Why, Joe, are you saying my arm is fat? It may not be as lumpy as yours, but I assure you, it's all muscle. You wouldn't stand a chance in a test of arm strength."

“Now, Mas’suh Aaron, you knows that ain’t no truth. These heah arms may be skinny and lumpy, but they’s got more muscle than them big ol’ smooth, fat arms you got.”

Their smiles had all but disappeared.

“That’s some mighty big braggin’, Joe,” someone in the back said. “Brave man makin’ big noise. You big enough to back it up?”

“Why, I shore is,” Joe snapped back. He turned to Aaron and said, “I’d shore ‘nuf bet on it. If you’s a bettin’ man, that is.”

“You got a bet. What do you want to wager?”

The smiles disappeared altogether as the two men stared at each other. The rest of the slaves stopped working and gathered around to watch the proceedings and place their own bets.

Joe looked at the sky a moment as though in deep thought, then he turned back to Aaron and said, “You clears it with yore daddy that I don’ hafta work next week. I can fish all week long.”

“Fair enough. And if you lose you have to polish my boots every night for a month. After you’ve finished working in the fields all day. I want them so clean and shiny I can see my reflection in them.”

Joe nodded his head while the rest of the slaves continued to arrange their wagers. There weren’t many bets placed as most people wanted to bet on Aaron, and few of them had much to wager, but enough people managed to work up an acceptable arrangement so that Joe had a small but vocal crowd backing him.

Aaron and Joe left the late autumn cotton field and walked over to where an old oak stump rose out of the ground, next to the twin ruts that made up one of the wagon trails through Calla. The other slaves, with eager eyes and the constant sound of chatter, followed.

Joe and Aaron sat on opposite sides of the stump while the rest of the slaves formed a ragged circle around them. The two combatants placed their right hands on top, elbows down. They grasped each other’s hand firmly. Both men wiggled their arms and hands trying to get a more advantageous grip. Palm-to-palm, they could feel each other’s sweat. Tode, a well-respected, older slave, the default leader of the slaves at Calla, stood over them and held his hand high. Tode was a large man with imposing size but was as gentle a person as Aaron had ever known.

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Both Aaron and Joe nodded that they were ready. Tode jerked his arm down, and the struggle began.

They teetered back and forth for a few seconds, and the cheers and jeers and calls of the crowd rose and fell. Joe was strong, but Aaron quickly realized that, as expected, Joe was no match for him. Still, he didn't want to embarrass the slave with all the other slaves standing around watching, so he didn't take him down right away. Instead, Aaron drug the battle on for quite a while before he began to bend Joe's arm over. Finally, after what he considered was a reasonable time, he thumped the back of Joe's hand against the stump.

Aaron stood, and Tode held the victor's arm in the air. There were some cheers and some cat calls. Aaron looked down at Joe and saw only hurt and embarrassment in the black man's face. He had honestly expected to win.

A slave in the back of the crowd said, "You ain't nuthin' but talk, Joe." Aaron hadn't seen who it was, but it didn't matter. Likely someone who had lost his bet. Aaron saw the sting of the comment in Joe's eyes.

"It ain't fair," Joe said. "Mastuh Aaron is right-handed. I's left-handed. It ain't fair."

The cat call chorus rang out even louder but Aaron held up his arms and the noise subsided quickly. "Okay, I can appreciate that," Aaron said. "All bets go on hold. We'll fight left-handed. When I whip you with my left hand, you'll have to polish my boots for a month. And everybody who bets on you is going to be crying."

Cheers roared again, as did groans and complaints from people who thought they had already won their bet. Aaron sat back down, and he and Joe took their grip with their left hands. They nodded. Once more Tode's arm flashed down, and the struggle began again. It was a much closer battle. Aaron could not have taken Joe down as easily as he could with his right hand, but he could have taken him down nonetheless. He didn't. He allowed the struggle to go on for a full minute and a half before finally letting Joe pin him. The slender slave hopped up and jumped for joy, whooping as loud as he could whoop.

Aaron stood more slowly, and Tode held both men's arms in the air and said, "I declah this heah match a tie 'tween Mas'suh Aaron and

Skinny Joe. Joe don' hafta polish no boots, but he won' be doin' no fishin', neithah."

Joe smiled, and Aaron smiled back at him. Time was suspended. It would stay suspended until he could see Deborah again. While Weaver Harris had said 'no', his rules were mean and unreasonable. They didn't deserve to be obeyed. Aaron decided to take action.

~ Memory: Nashville ~

After a few discretely asked questions, Aaron knew when and where the Harris family typically did their shopping. He had tried hard to forget Deborah Harris in the first few days but had failed. Aaron kept seeing her surprised face as she fell in the snow, slightly beyond his reach. Each time he replayed the scene in his mind, his arms went out in front of him as though he were going to catch her and save her from the fall this time.

He had to see her in person again, not just in his mind, so he manufactured an excuse for a trip back to Nashville a week later, much sooner than was necessary. After checking the general stores near where the Weaver's lived, a clerk in Preston's said, yes, Deborah and her father shopped there almost every Saturday, usually late morning.

It was Saturday, so he began wandering the store, trying to look nonchalant as he walked around and stared at the merchandise in Preston's, not actually seeing what he was looking at. He kept glancing at the front window.

After what seemed like hours, the Harris' carriage pulled up next to the rail. Finally! Deborah was driving and hopped down as soon as they came to a halt. She called something back to her father, who was on the other side of the carriage, then ran into the store.

"Aaron Richardson! What a surprise. It is so good to see you again," Deborah said as she took off her coat then removed her gloves. The first snow had long since melted, but it was still cool for middle Tennessee.

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“Why, hello, Deborah. This is, indeed, a pleasant surprise.” Aaron built up his nerve and tried not to stumble on his words. “You are every bit as lovely as I remembered. More so.”

She smiled broadly, and he reached out and took her offered hand then bent over, brushing his lips softly against the back of it. They stood there a moment, neither knowing exactly what to say. Still holding her hand in his, Aaron finally thought of Deborah’s ankle. “How is your ankle? You seem to be getting around well.”

“Oh, it is fine. It was only a small sprain. I got over it in a couple of days. And thank goodness the snow is gone.”

“You don’t like snow?”

“Too cold. You?”

“I used to love it. When I was a kid. There’s a hill at Calla that we used to sled down every time it snowed. When the big snows would come, we would stay out all day and come home at night with red runny noses and aching fingers and toes.”

“How dreadful.”

“Better than the light snows. When there wasn’t enough snow, we would hit big clumps of grass and fall off our sleds and hurt something.”

“Oh, how terrible! Why would you try it if there was not enough snow?”

“It’s Tennessee. You take what snow you get and do the best you can with it.”

She laughed lightly. They stood in the middle of the store aisle looking at each other while the silence and the smiles stretched into time. Aaron was still holding her hand, and he was keenly aware that she had not tried to pull it back. She was letting him touch her.

Finally, Deborah said, “I have never ridden a sled.”

“It’s a lot of fun when you get a good ride down the hill. The next time it snows, I can bring one to your house so you can try. If your father doesn’t mind, of course.”

“Perhaps he would not. Just a sled ride.”

Aaron could see Weaver outside, looking through the lumber, carefully examining each piece he picked up. Aaron was thankful for the

few extra seconds alone with Deborah. "I don't know. After the way he acted last week, he might shoot me."

"My father is more bark than bite. You would more likely have a problem with me falling again than my father shooting you. Maybe you could catch me this time?" she teased.

Aaron thought about all the times he had tried to catch her in his daydreams, this beautiful woman always beyond his fingertips, and said, "Maybe you could fall a little closer to me this time."

Deborah laughed again, but the laughter died quickly. Her face turned serious as she said, "Regardless of how my father acted, you were my hero that day."

Aaron blushed briefly again but recovered quickly and said, "I believe it was Socrates who said, 'Fame is the perfume of heroic deeds.' Well, the fame of being the hero of such a beautiful lady is quite intoxicating."

Deborah's smile *was* intoxicating. She looked deeply into his eyes again. He could feel her searching them, pulling something from his soul. He was willing to give it.

They looked out the front window, at the bustling streets of Nashville. The early December sky was cold, but not as cold as the evening a week earlier, in the first snow of winter when they had met. And the late morning sun was shining brightly, warming in the windless air. There were people everywhere, the sunshine having brought them out in droves.

"Nashville has become quite a busy place in recent years," Aaron said.

"Yes. Father says it has grown quickly because of the river and the railway. It is a transportation hub for the whole region. Of course, he is part owner of a company that distributes goods all over so he should know."

"Did he ever tell you that Nashville was originally called Nashborough?"

"No. What a funny sounding name."

"It started as Fort Nashborough back in the seventeen hundreds, named after a revolutionary war general, I believe."

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“Well, I am glad they changed the name. Nashville sounds so much better than Nashborough.”

“Before that,” Aaron said, “they used to call this area French Lick.”

Deborah laughed and brought her hand up to her mouth. Her deep, cheerful sounds were music to Aaron’s ears. It made him feel good inside to hear her laughter.

“French Lick! What a silly name. I did not realize I lived in a place called French Lick.”

Aaron felt her gloved hand brush against his hand ever so slightly. On purpose? It seemed so. He hesitated a moment but, emboldened by this young lady’s beautiful smile, he reached out and took her hand. She didn’t resist. Besides, where they were standing up near the front of the store, no one could see they were holding hands.

Weaver loaded his selected pieces of lumber in the wagon then walked to the store, hitting both sides of the door as he came through. Even though he was not a small man, he was not that wide, but his bulk was exaggerated by his heavy coat. He took off the coat and shook himself as though throwing off the cold air. Deborah and Aaron walked over.

“Father, look who I found shopping in the store.”

“Mr. Harris,” Aaron said as he nodded his head and stuck out his hand.

“Aaron.” Weaver Harris took the younger man’s hand and shook it, but he did not smile. “Buying supplies for the plantation?”

“Yes, sir. We ran short on a couple of things. It’s amazing how much it takes to keep Calla running smoothly.”

“Yes, I would imagine so. Well, please give my regards to Big Jim. Now if you’ll excuse us...”

“Father, Aaron has offered to bring his sled to town the next time it snows. I have never ridden a sled before.”

Weaver Harris turned and stared at his daughter. He didn’t say anything for a several seconds. Finally, with a puzzled look on his face, he said “Sled?”

“Yes, father. He has a sled they ride down hills in the snow. He has been kind enough to offer to let me ride it the next time it snows. I would love to try.”

At that moment the store clerk, a gaunt, middle-aged man, came walking up. “Well, they finally arrived. You were very patient waiting for them this long, young man.”

Deborah’s eyes got large. Aaron could see Weaver’s face quickly turning red.

“What? Did I say something wrong?” the clerk asked.

Finally, Weaver spoke, his voice calm but firm. “Deborah, please go get in the carriage.”

“But, father...”

Weaver’s voice grew louder. “Now, please!”

Deborah glanced at Aaron with an expression of shock and worry mixed together, then turned and walked toward the door. Weaver turned to Aaron and said, his voice rising as he spoke, “I thought I made myself perfectly clear when you were in my house, Mr. Richardson. You listen to me, and you listen carefully. You are not to see my daughter. Under any circumstances. EVER! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” By the time he got to the last words, Weaver was shouting so loudly that everyone in the store was staring.

“But, sir, our age difference isn’t that great. I’m only twenty-four.”

“NO!” Weaver Harris screamed. Everyone in the store jumped from the volume of the scream. Aaron thought he felt the floor bounce beneath his boots. Weaver lowered his voice and said through gritted teeth, “You, sir, have gone from being a former friend’s son to being an arrogant, disrespectful young fool. You are far too old for my daughter, and you are NOT the type of man I would want her to be around. I am going to tell you one more time. You are not to see my daughter! Not now. Not next week. NOT EVER! You are forbidden! The next time you see us coming, you had better turn and go the other way.” He turned to leave but whirled around momentarily and said, “Big Jim will hear about this!” Then he put his coat on and walked out the door.

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Aaron was stunned into silence. Through the glass of the large front window, he could see Deborah with tears in her eyes. Weaver took over the driving. He snapped the reins hard, and the carriage left with a start.

The clerk said, "Well, don't that beat all. I sure didn't mean to say anything to cause any trouble. You must have done something terribly bad to upset him so. Weaver is always such a pleasant man. Why, I've never seen him like this."

"I asked if I could call on his daughter."

"Humph. Well, some men are funny about their little girl. Most men, actually. Although, being a Richardson, I would have thought he would consider you a good catch even if you are a little old for her. Whatever it is, maybe he'll change his mind over time. She's a looker all right. Might be worth waiting for." With that, the clerk smiled and patted Aaron on the shoulder then walked back toward the cash register.

~ Memory: Calla, Plantation House ~

"Morning, Lucy," Aaron said as he came in from the field. "I understand Big Jim wants to see me." Lucy had sent a runner, a small slave boy, to find Aaron.

"Yes, sir, Master Aaron. He shore does. He doesn't seem none too happy, either." She opened the door wide to let Aaron enter.

Lucy was the housemaid, in charge of the slaves who worked in the plantation house. She had come from another plantation well to the south many years ago, when she was barely a teenager. She was half white, the daughter of a slave and the plantation owner's son. On many plantations, the better-looking slaves were often used by the owner's sons to 'practice' their lovemaking skills. Any mixed children that resulted were typically still considered slaves, but were often favored slaves and served in the plantation house rather than in the fields.

In Lucy's case, however, her father, the white plantation owner's son, had experienced an emotional religious rebirth shortly after his father died. When he became the plantation's new owner, he realized that Lucy stood out. She inherited her black mother's beauty, but she still

looked very much like her father's white family. With his renewed religious beliefs, she was an embarrassment to him, so he decided to get rid of her. Big Jim had picked her up at a fair price.

Lucy led Aaron into the study then turned and left, closing the door behind her but not before a quick, apprehensive glance at Aaron. There was something in that look, but once the door closed, Aaron shrugged it off then stepped over to Big Jim's old oak desk. The top of the desk was almost a mirror from Lucy polishing it so regularly.

Big Jim had not turned around when the door opened. Instead, his chair was turned sideways, and he was sitting and staring out the window. Aaron stood in front of the desk a moment, waiting. Finally, he said, "You wanted to see me, father?"

"Hell, yeah," Big Jim said as he suddenly whirled the chair around. Lost in thought, he had not heard the door open, or his son come in. His face instantly went from absent to irritation. "I got a letter from Weaver Harris. He says you're trying to court his daughter, and you disobeyed his wishes by arranging a meeting after he told you not to see her again. What the hell do you have to say for yourself?"

Big Jim was a small man; his two sons towered over him. He stood no higher than five-foot-six but was reasonably muscled and had no fat. Even though he was on the short side, the man's spirit and attitude were big, thus the name 'Big Jim.' It was a taunting nickname from youth, a slander on his lack of physical stature, but it had stuck, though it meant something altogether different in his adulthood. As short as he was he was still imposing as he stood there with a frown on his face waiting for a response from Aaron.

"I... Yes, I suppose that's true. But I don't understand. I..."

"What's not to understand?" Big Jim shouted as he waved a sheet of paper in the air toward Aaron's face, reaching up to do so. "Weaver said he made it clear that he did not want you courting his daughter, yet you just happened to meet her in a store and proceeded to try to court her anyway. It sure sounds to me like you disobeyed his wishes."

"But why is he so upset? I'm not a bad person. I wouldn't treat her badly. I'm..."

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“Hell, I know you’re not a bad person.” Big Jim walked around from behind the desk and stood directly in front of his son, looking up at him with fiercely intense eyes. Aaron had seen those eyes get that intense only a few times in his life. Big Jim raised his arm and put his hand on Aaron’s shoulder. “That’s not the point, son. You’re a Richardson, damn it. You are one of the finest young men in this state. And one of the traits of a fine young man is to respect his elder’s wishes. Weaver Harris doesn’t want you seeing his daughter so you will not see his daughter. It’s as simple as that.

“And, damn it, I agree with Weaver. She’s too young for you. Hell, she’s still a kid. She’ll go through a half dozen beaus before she grows up enough to find someone to settle down with. You’ve got to face facts, son. She’s not the kind of woman we need. I’m not going to be here forever. We need a young lady who can step in and run Calla, at least the household. We need someone who was raised on a plantation and understands how a plantation works, someone who is older and more mature. There are plenty of eligible girls in this county, and if they’re not good enough, there are plenty more in the surrounding counties.

“Hell, I want you and Jim Junior both to find a nice girl and court her and settle down and raise a family. You both should be married by now, and I ought to be bouncing my grandkids on my knees, but you want to be Plato for Jesus’ sake, and Jim Junior is bound and determined to court every damned girl in Tennessee before he makes up his blessed mind!”

Big Jim had taken his arm off Aaron’s shoulder and was waving both arms wildly about as he talked, showing his irritation. Aaron, standing as stolid as he could, tried not to let his exasperation show as Big Jim worked himself almost into a frenzy. But the older man took a few moments to calm down then put his hand back on Aaron’s shoulder.

“Now,” he continued, “when both of you finally come to your senses and find the right young lady and get married and settle down, I’m going to build a new plantation house for Jim Junior. I want you to have Calla, you and your bride. There’s plenty enough land for the two of you to make a fine living, but, like I said, you’ll need a strong, mature woman. And a practical woman, one who doesn’t have her head up in

some philosophical cloud like you do. One of you in the pair is enough. You don't need some inexperienced little girl."

"But, father..."

"This discussion is over. Weaver is an old friend, probably the best friend I've got outside of family, and I do not want to upset him and risk losing our friendship. You are not to see Deborah Harris again. Ever. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Big Jim pulled his arm down to his side and walked back around the desk and sat in the old, worn leather chair. There were spots where strips of tattered leather were sticking up, but he refused to buy a new chair because the old one was 'broken in and comfortable.'

"From now on, damn it, if you want to go to Nashville, you let me know first. I might need something from town."

"Yes, sir."

Big Jim turned his head and stared out the window as he sat in his worn leather chair. Aaron stood there waiting to be dismissed. Nothing happened. After a couple of moments, Aaron cleared his throat to make sure his father realized he was still there.

A distant look in his old, watery eyes, Big Jim turned from the window and looked up at his youngest son. "Oh, hell," he said. "Aaron, I don't need this. It's just... You just... Aw, get the hell out of here. And leave that girl alone." Big Jim turned back to the window.

Chapter 2

The memory faded as Aaron pulled himself back to awareness. It was unusually cold for a first snow, even in Montana. While he had been standing there lost in thought, daydreaming about the past, the wind, a harsh, biting wind, had begun to blow. His face was burning from the sting of the cold. How long had he been standing there? He wasn't sure, but the prairie floor was now fully white. He had wasted far too much time.

Herding the strays couldn't wait. He cursed himself for daydreaming, for revisiting a life he had tried to leave behind, and started toward the cabin at a trot. The wet snow, mingled with the dirt of the prairie, lumped in layers on the sides of his boots as he ran. The flakes, driven by the cutting wind, were large and heavy, quickly going about the job of turning the sharp contours of the land into a soft roundness. Tossing the ax toward the tool shed – he would carry it inside and place it on the wall pegs later, next spring if need be – Aaron turned to his horse, Chrissy, a tall beauty with a shiny brown coat, now mottled white with sprinkled snow, and patted her on the rump. “Okay, girl. Time to round ‘em up.”

Chrissy reared her head and snorted her understanding, frost billowing from her large nostrils. Before mounting, Aaron dusted the snow from the saddle with quick, impatient flips of his wrist. Even though he only had one arm, years of practice allowed him to hop up to the saddle as quickly as a man with two. He signaled with two quick clicks between his tongue and the roof of his mouth, and the horse moved ahead at a medium trot. Aaron dropped the reins around the saddle horn long enough to pull his fur collar up around his neck then grabbed the reins again and held them while, at the same time, steadying himself on the horn. At that moment a large dog with long red hair came running up, yelping his demand that he not be left out.

“Hey, Old Bear. Where you been fella? Chasing prairie dogs again? Come on. I need your help getting the strays in.”

There were more hours of work to do than there were hours of sunlight left. He knew he probably wouldn't be able to round up all the

sheep, and he had only himself to blame. How could he have wasted so much time daydreaming? He had to hurry, to round up as many as possible and minimize the loss he would suffer overnight. Perhaps the ones he couldn't get to would find a secluded spot somewhere, between outcroppings of rock or a grouping of trees, to protect them from the cold winds. Maybe, with a little luck, the entire herd had stuck together. And maybe it wouldn't get that cold anyway. Still, he had to hurry. He urged Chrissy on to greater speed.

Bear ran alongside, sometimes getting so close he would brush against Chrissy's legs. It was a bad habit Bear had developed when he was a puppy. He had felt the heavy thud of a hoof against his flanks or his head more than once, but Bear always got right back up and continued to run beside and between the tall horse's moving legs. Even though he had grown from Bear to Old Bear and his legs had lost much of their youthful speed, the habit remained.

As he expected, not far from the cabin Aaron found a group of sheep on a small outcropping of flat ground not too far up the slope. It was low enough and flat enough so that grass grew well, making it a favorite grazing spot for the sheep, but they weren't grazing. They were huddled together, standing motionless, the first snow an unpleasant wonder to them. He was in luck. It looked like most of the herd was there, which meant there wouldn't be many strays, if any. A quick round-up by Chrissy and Bear and he would be sitting in the cabin next to a roaring fire in no time, patting Bear on the head and sipping homemade whiskey.

He urged Chrissy to move faster as she climbed the slope toward the plateau, Old Bear darting in and out of Chrissy's legs as she went. Suddenly he felt Chrissy jerk and lunge. Had the great horse slipped? He realized he had been rushing too fast, forcing Chrissy to take the slope at a greater speed than she was used to even without snow, but the thought was gone in an instant as he found himself launched into the air, the sky and the snow-covered slope whirling over and over at maddening speed in front of him. The turning stopped as suddenly as it had started when his right leg slammed against a large rock.

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He heard the crack of bone a fraction of a second before the searing pain scorched through his body. He cried out as he recoiled and continued the cry as he came to a stop. It felt as though fire was burning inside his leg. He tried to move, but pain and nausea came in a huge wave, slamming his head back to the ground. He felt consciousness being stolen from him. Reacting to the lightning pain, he jerked pointlessly to the right and then to the left with his upper body. Nausea pushed hard against him again. As he settled back, he felt darkness coming. He tried hard to think about something, anything; any thought he could think that would keep him conscious. The thoughts wouldn't come. There was only the pain that was his leg and the sick, swimming feeling that swept over him in heavy waves. The darkness spread, and he lost the battle to stay conscious...

~ Memory: Calla ~

Aaron tossed a piece of bread into the creek and watched the bream attack it. They were too small to get the thumb-sized piece into their mouths, but they tore away small chunks over and over as the bread bounced from spot to spot and slowly disappeared. Aaron looked down at the fishing pole that lay idle on the leaf-covered ground. A long winter had passed. It was early spring, months later, and he was still miserable.

He didn't want to fish. He had walked into the forest and gone to his favorite spot on the creek with the intentions of fishing, a way to pass another miserable day if nothing else, but now that he was here there was no desire to throw the line into the water. Jim Junior was in another county seeing a young lady at another plantation, so he sat on the bank of the creek alone, his legs dangling over the edge of the dirt bank but still well above the water. He threw another piece of bread and watched it slowly disappear.

"Damn it," he said to himself, mocking his father.

"You look like you are as miserable as I feel," a voice behind him said.

Aaron jumped as he turned and almost fell into the cool waters of the lazy creek below. "Deborah!" He had started shouting her name but

realized he shouldn't in the middle of his shout and almost whispered the last syllable. "What are you doing here?" he whispered. He climbed to his feet but stood still, staring at this beautiful young girl.

"I had to see you, Aaron," she said as she stepped toward him. "I have been so unhappy these last few months. I had to see you again."

As she stepped up to him, he put his arms around her and pulled her close. He had wanted to do that so many times. The early spring weather was cool, yet, and the warmth of her body felt good against his.

"What about your father?" he asked.

"At first, I tried to talk to him. I tried and tried, but he would not listen."

"Mine, too."

"So I bided my time and let him think it was all over and done."

"But what if they find us?"

"When my father is being this stupid about something, he deserves to have me disobey him. After all, the human soul is life's mirror. What it shows to others, in turn, it is shown. If you are deceitful and distrustful, others will be deceitful and distrustful of you. If you are happy and friendly, others will be happy and friendly to you. My father is showing stubbornness so I will be stubborn, too. I will do whatever I need to do to see you. I am not a child anymore. I can think for myself!"

Aaron looked into her eyes, searching for answers. All he saw was her beautiful brown eyes searching his own eyes. "I don't want to break up our father's friendship," he said. "But I want to be with you. These last few months have been hell."

"For me, too," she said. Then she leaned forward and tilted her head back and closed her eyes. Aaron eagerly took the hint and their lips touched, lightly at first then more firmly as their bodies rubbed together.

They gently swayed as they embraced. Aaron hugged her, and they kissed again then a third time. Each kiss lasted forever and not nearly long enough all at the same time. In the middle of a fourth kiss, Aaron felt the ground beneath his foot give way. He suddenly realized they had gotten too close to the creek bank, but he couldn't react in time. The kiss ended abruptly as the ground beneath them crumbled and fell. They slid several feet down the bank and splashed into the water.

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It was not deep at the edge of the creek, but they tumbled sideways and were both fully immersed. It was cold! They sat up on the creek bottom with water above their waists, staring at each other and gasping from the cold.

“A-Are you all right?” Aaron asked.

“I, yes, I am fine, I think. A little wet. And muddy.”

They stared at each other a second longer then both started laughing.

When he got control of his laughter, Aaron stood and helped Deborah up. They waded along the creek until they found a place where the bank was not so steep then they climbed out.

“My dress. It is ruined,” Deborah said as she stood, once again on solid ground, this time well away from the creek bank. The dress was not only dripping wet, but it also had huge, ground-in mud streaks where she had slid down the bank.

“I’ll buy you a new one.”

“On, no! We cannot have that. My father would be livid if he knew what happened.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“Why, I fell in a creek, of course. I will tell him I went for a ride in the country and stopped by a creek to look at the fish. Then the edge gave way, and I slipped in. That is the truth, is it not? I will not mention that you and I happened to be kissing at the time. No need to get into too much detail.” She was smiling through her shiver as she hugged herself.

“There’s a clearing over here,” Aaron said. “Not too far. Let’s get in the sun and dry out. It’ll be warmer.”

They walked to a small clearing in the middle of the forest. After several centuries of standing high above its neighbors, a gigantic oak had finally reached the end of its story and fallen to the ground. The younger trees around it had not yet grown enough to close the opening that was created. It was early in the spring, so the weeds were only ankle high. They sat on one of the massive limbs that stuck out from the fat old trunk of the fallen tree, the warming sun shining down on them. The months apart had felt like forever, and they couldn’t stop looking at each other.

“How did you find me,” Aaron asked.

"A few weeks ago I decided I was going to see you again no matter what it took. I cannot spend my entire life being miserable. So I told father I was going to town and took the carriage by myself and rode out here. I often go shopping. He hates to shop so he did not think anything of it. Once here, I waited on the hill above the plantation and watched for you, hoping to see you alone."

"And you saw me going into the woods?"

"This time. The first time I came out was two weeks ago. I saw you and your brother riding together, so I had to leave. I did not know if it would be a good idea to involve your brother. Last week I did not see you at all. But this week, I got lucky. I saw you walking into the woods with your fishing pole, so I came down here."

"You've been out to Calla three times? You're braver than me. I had resigned myself to being miserable forever. I didn't have the nerve to try anything else after that scene in Preston's."

"You were so brave to find out where we would shop and to be waiting on us. That is why I had to see you. It was my turn to arrange for us to meet. Oh, Aaron, I have missed you so much."

They embraced, wet, mud-stained clothes notwithstanding, and kissed again. Even though wet hair was caught between their lips, they continued to kiss.

"My body feels miserable from these wet clothes, but it feels so good when I touch you," Deborah said.

"Me, too. You probably need to get home so you can change. Before you get sick."

"I don't want to go home. I want to stay here with you."

They wiped the wet hair from their faces and embraced and kissed again. After a lengthy kiss they separated and Aaron said, "What are we going to do? We can't let our fathers know that we're seeing each other, but I can't bear not to see you, not anymore."

"I do not know, but I have to see you, too. Your kiss makes me feel so warm, so... so... like a woman. I want to be your woman, Aaron."

"And I want to be your man. We'll have to keep on meeting in private until our fathers finally realize how stupid they're acting. We

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need a place and time to meet, one that is much closer for you. If you keep coming all the way out to Calla, your father is going to get suspicious. I know a place close to Nashville. Here's what we'll do..."

~ Memory: Nashville ~

Aaron tossed the last of the bags into the wagon. He had checked his father's list twice and was sure he had everything except the newspaper. His timing was good. The hawkers would be coming out any moment to sell their freshly printed dailies. He preferred the Nashville Patriot as they were against war as a means to settle the troubles between North and South, but it wasn't critical. He would take the first paper he could find then go home. If war were inevitable, in the final analysis, all of Nashville's newspapers would support the South, including the Patriot. They would, but he knew he couldn't.

He stood still and listened carefully. There. He could hear the shouts off to his left, a couple of blocks away. He walked toward the sounds and saw the paperboy walking along the street but going slowly because of the many customers he had. The paperboy's business was much brisker than usual.

"The Union surrenders at Sumter!" the boy shouted cheerfully, as soon as he was free from his latest customer. He raised a paper in the air and shouted again and another customer immediately walked up and handed the boy a coin. There were three customers in line by the time Aaron got there, but the wait was short as customers eagerly grabbed their newspaper and wandered away reading. Aaron did the same.

Good. It was the Patriot. He had heard about the battle going on at Fort Sumter when he was in the general store gathering supplies. It was all anyone could talk about, and they were eager to fill him in since no one at Calla knew about it. Big Jim hadn't sent anyone to town in at least a week, and they had missed the recent news.

The people in the general store told him how South Carolina's Governor Pickens received word direct from Abraham Lincoln that the Federal government intended to resupply Fort Sumter. Instead, the Confederacy, through Brigadier General Beauregard, commander of the

local Confederate forces, demanded that the Union surrender and evacuate the fort immediately. Major Robert Anderson, the Union officer in charge of Sumter, refused and two days later, on April Twelfth, the shooting began. The South fired first, but that didn't matter. Both sides were firing at each other, men on each side trying to kill their fellow countrymen.

Some of the people in the store, when they were telling Aaron about the fighting, seemed thrilled that hostilities had begun. Aaron had listened with great dread. He tried not to show what he felt, but this was the worst news he could imagine. At least, he wasn't alone. Two other people in the store were brave enough to speak out against the fighting, but their fathers weren't the owners of an important plantation and dozens of slaves. Aaron had to be careful what he said in public because word could easily get back to Big Jim. And probably would. He knew better than to try to make a statement as anything he said would be construed as an official stance by Calla. Big Jim would be furious.

Aaron stood in one spot and read the article, as did most of the others with newly purchased newspapers and several lookers-on who either did not have the coin or did not want to spend the coin they had. The fight at Sumter ended after a day and a half, with Major Anderson finally surrendering. Thirty-six hours of artillery fire and no-one had been killed. Thank God for that, but one Federal soldier was killed, and three wounded when a cannon exploded prematurely during the surrender ceremony.

"We got one of them!" a stocky man in a brown suit and brown hat said to no one in particular.

"Sounds more like they got themselves," another man said as he laughed around puffs on a fat cigar. "All the better. If these Yankee fools keep killing themselves, that'll make the war a lot easier for us."

More people joined the laughter.

"What are you laughing at?" an old woman in a black dress and black veil asked, her voice rough with disrespect. Aaron wondered why she was in mourning. Perhaps her husband had passed. She was at that age. "That was one of God's children who died," she continued. "And they are afraid one of the wounded will yet die. The death of a fellow

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human being is not funny nor is it glorious. You are standing in the eyes of God! You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

The man who had started the laughter took the cigar out of his mouth and pointed it at the old woman and began to say something but stopped while his mouth remained open. Apparently, he thought better of it as he put the cigar back in his mouth then folded the newspaper and placed it under his arm and turned and walked away. The other men who had gathered around the paperboy to read the article did the same. The unfinished lookers-on, no longer having a paper to read, were the most disappointed. The paperboy moved on to fresher markets as well, leaving only the old woman and Aaron standing there.

“These fools are so eager to see people get mangled and killed,” she said. “I wonder if they would be as brave if they were sending themselves instead of their sons. Probably so. That’s how stupid they are.”

Aaron wasn’t sure if she was talking to him or to herself. She didn’t look at him; she looked after the men who were walking away. He said, “Yes, ma’am,” out of courtesy.

She turned and looked at him as if noticing him for the first time. “Do you think war is glorious? Do you want to rush out there and risk your life to fight for some politician’s belief?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Smart boy. That’s rare. Most of our kids will rush to the battlefield drunk with bravery.” She turned her head and looked back toward the paperboy, who had not gone far before being surrounded by more customers.

There was a short silence, and Aaron could think of nothing to say. The old lady dressed as if in mourning continued, “Their visions of glory will be met with the reality of human slaughter and the free flowing of blood. Some will join in the slaughter and revel in the butchering of their fellow man. Yes, there are people of that ilk. Others will turn and run the moment they see the blood of others flowing onto the ground.” She looked back up at Aaron and asked him, “Are you going to enlist and rush into battle?”

“No, ma’am.” It seemed okay to talk to this old woman. “I don’t think war is the right way to solve differences.”

“And you are correct, young man. Much more so than the blood-thirsty politicians who rule us. But will you be able to follow your good sense? It will be hard to do. As time passes and the hostilities grow to unthinkable proportions, you will be pressured to take sides and join this incestual blood-letting. You will be pressured from both sides, from every angle as this great stupidity gets worse. And it will get worse.” She turned her head and looked back toward the paperboy, who had traveled only a few feet further and was, yet again, besieged by customers. Barely loud enough for Aaron to hear, she whispered, “Much worse.” Then she looked back up at Aaron briefly and said, “Good luck, my son.” She turned and walked away.

Aaron watched her a moment as she moved, slowly, on legs no longer young. He wanted to talk to her longer but didn’t know what to say, so he stood and said nothing. He was not completely sure he understood everything she had said, but the gist of it was obvious enough.

It was time to get home. Everyone would be eager to hear the news about Fort Sumter. He walked back to the wagon and wedged the newspaper between the boards of the seat as he thought about the implications of what had happened. War appeared to be almost unavoidable now. What could he do? He couldn’t fight for the South, not for slavery. It wouldn’t be right. But he couldn’t fight for the Union, either. He would be fighting against his home, against the land where he grew up and the only people he had ever known.

And what would Tennessee do? Perhaps the state would not secede. Many of the people in the eastern part of Tennessee wanted to stay in the Union. But, no, a large majority of the people in the West wanted to join the Confederacy. There were a lot more slaves in the West, in the fertile lands of the Mississippi valley. And more money. Money had a way of getting its way. Tennessee would probably join the other renegade states. If it didn’t split apart itself. Somber and thoughtful, Aaron climbed onto the wagon and snapped the reins.

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As he rode home, he realized there was only one thing that made any sense. The old lady had been telling him to stay out of the war. He was sure of that, and he was sure she was giving sound advice. He would listen. He would take the woman he loved and leave, run away to the west where they could escape the war, and their fathers. But would Deborah go with him? It was one thing to dream about running away, but the reality of it, running off and leaving everything and everyone behind, friends and family and everything he and Deborah knew and had grown up with, well, that was not a step to be taken lightly. She might not agree with it.

Aaron decided to talk with Deborah at next week's secret meeting; see how she reacted to the idea. He hoped the war would hold off a little longer. Even though shots had been fired at Sumter, things were moving slowly enough. They should have time to plan before they left, if she agreed to leave.

~ Memory: A Forest Between Calla and Nashville ~

"Oh, Aaron!" Deborah said as she threw herself into his arms. They kissed, eagerly at first, then more softly after they had felt the warmth of each other's bodies. They continued to kiss as they lowered themselves to a sitting position in their regular meeting place, not far outside Nashville under an unusually large and knurled old pine tree that was in the middle of a forest, about two hundred feet from the road. Sitting on the thick, soft pine straw, they stared into each other's eyes a moment then kissed again.

"I've missed you, Deborah."

"And I have missed you, too. So much."

Aaron played with the big curls of hair that draped her shoulders. Her hair was so soft and yet still strong. He liked the feel of it. He liked to bounce the large, tight curls and watch them respond.

"I hate having to meet in secret like this," he said. "I can't wait for the day I can take your hand and walk right through downtown Nashville in broad daylight, and nobody can stop us."

"If my father was not such an idiot!"

“Big Jim is not any better. I’ve long since been old enough to make my own decisions, but he still wants to run my life. He tells me what to do and where to go and how to act. Sometimes, I think I’d like to leave the plantation and go away for good, let Jim Junior have it all.”

“I do not understand why my father is so against us. You would think he would be thrilled for me, happy that I was being courted by a son from one of the finest plantations in Tennessee. He is such a stupid old man. But one day I will be old enough so that I do not care what he says, and we will not have to meet in secret anymore.”

They kissed again then stood and began walking through the forest. The woods were alive with birdsong and the rustling of squirrels and other small animals. Deborah rested her head against Aaron’s muscular shoulder as they walked.

“Father is getting suspicious,” she said. “When we meet, I always tell him I am going shopping. I am gone for hours and come home with nothing or some small thing I grab quickly on my way back. He has not said anything, but I can tell he is getting curious why I spend so much longer shopping than I used to.”

Aaron kicked at a pine cone, sending it bouncing some distance away. He watched it bounce until it stopped then said, “Perhaps we should meet less?”

“Oh, Aaron, I want to meet more, not less. Once a week is not enough. Once a day would not be enough. I want to be with you all the time. Forever.”

“Me, too. But if your father finds out, we won’t be meeting at all. We’ve got to be careful.”

They were silent a moment as Deborah looked into the distance while they walked along. After a short time, she said, “That would make our painting ugly.”

Aaron’s face wrinkled. “Our painting?”

Deborah looked up at the odd pieces of blue sky she could see through the branches and leaves and needles above. “I remember before she died my mother used to say life is our canvas. Our thoughts are the brushes we use and our actions are the paints. Each one of us must paint

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our lives the best we can. Some of us are artists and make beautiful pictures. Others don't."

"Well, I guess I've only slopped paint around... until I met you."

"You and I are painting a picture, Aaron, and I want it to be beautiful."

"I didn't paint you, but you're already the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Thank you, but that is not what I meant. I want our picture to be beautiful. I love you, and I want to marry you and have your children and build memories as a happy family together. When I have to sneak around to see you, it makes it so much harder to paint a beautiful picture."

"I understand, Deborah, but I don't know what to do about it. I love you, too. If you think it would help, I could try to talk to your father again. God knows he might shoot me this time."

"No, it would not help. Definitely not. He has always been so stubborn. Once he says 'no', that is it. He will not change his mind even if you prove him wrong. I do not know what to do."

"Well, I do. At least, I know what to do right now." Aaron took her into his arms and kissed her, starting slowly and passionately, but their kiss was interrupted by the sound of a wagon bouncing along the road. They quickly slipped back to their horses and held them and patted them to keep them quiet as the wagon passed by along the road.

"This is what I was talking about," Deborah said. "Having to sneak like this, having to hide from the slightest little sound every time we meet. It is so ugly. It is making our beautiful painting ugly. I do not know what to do, either. All I know is I love you, and I want to be with you. And I want our painting to be beautiful."

"I love you, too. One day we will be able to walk anywhere we want, side-by-side, as husband and wife, our heads held high. I promise you, Deborah, we will make our painting beautiful. Someday." He was silent a moment, but only a moment. It was time to talk and talk seriously. "But war is coming," he continued. "If we get involved with the war, it could be a long time before you and I are together."

"My father says we will win in a matter of months, perhaps even weeks. He is so absolutely sure of it. I am not. I am so afraid of this war."

“We don’t have an industrial base in the south. We grow cotton. What are you going to do with cotton? You can’t shoot people with it. I guess we won’t have to go to war naked, but that’s little enough use when someone’s trying to shoot you. We won’t be able to trade cotton for guns with Europe because we don’t have a commercial fleet. Most of the ships belong to the Yankees. Your father is right about one thing, though. Most Southern boys are spoiling for a fight. They don’t realize what they’re getting into.”

Deborah hugged him and placed her head against his chest. He reached down and put his finger under her chin, raising her lips to his. They kissed as though it would be their last. When they finished, Deborah asked, “You said you will not fight for the South, but what are you going to do?”

“I cannot fight for a cause that I know is so terribly wrong. They say this war is about states’ rights and not about slavery, but that’s not true. Unrestrained states’ rights means the people in those states can legally enslave other people. Every man who puts on a Confederate uniform prolongs slavery. I cannot do so. No matter how you twist and turn it, there is no way it is right for one man to own another man, no matter what color his skin or what shape his nose or how curly his hair. Our whole Southern system of life is a great sin in God’s eyes, and here I am right in the middle of it. Perhaps I could fight for the North, but I don’t want to fight against the people I’ve grown up with and against the land I grew up on. I pray that cooler heads will prevail, and war will be avoided, but after Sumter, the chance for us to avoid war may already have slipped through our fingers.”

“Yes, I am so afraid it has. The devil is about on the land, now. If war is inevitable, I do not want you to fight for the South. Or the North. People get hurt in war. They get killed. I do not want anything to happen to you.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to anybody. If war does break out, though, I can’t stay here. I could not live on the same land as Big Jim and not fight for the South.” He looked at Deborah out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge her reaction, then continued, “Maybe I could go out west and start over.”

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“You must take me with you. Aaron,” Deborah said as she put her arms around him. “I cannot bear the thought of you going away without me.”

Aaron hesitated. He had daydreamed so many times of taking Deborah and running away, going out west where they could get away from their fathers, where they could be married, and nobody could stop them. But this was reality, not a daydream. Could they leave their families, their friends, their lives? Could they?

“I... I... Would you leave with me?” Aaron asked. “Walk away from everything?”

Deborah stood there a moment looking into Aaron’s eyes. “Yes, of course. My mother is dead, and my father is being so stupid I would not miss him. I will miss my friends, but you are truly all that matters to me, Aaron.”

“I would miss Jim Junior. Terribly. He’s the best friend I’ve got. And I would miss Tode. And the house maid, Lucy. And I would actually miss Big Jim even though I’m so tired of him telling me what to do. Are you sure you want to leave? I could go up north for a while until the war was over then I could come back, and we could be married.”

“No! I do not want to stay here with my stubborn father. I want to be with you. I do not care where it is. Friends are only friends. What we have is love. We can make new friends, but love is rare. If you leave, wherever you go, north or west, you must take me with you. I do not care if I do not have a friend in the world besides you. Please, Aaron. Do you understand?”

“Of course I do.” They embraced again, and he squeezed her warm body against his. “How long should we wait?”

“We cannot keep meeting in secret like this. My father will surely catch on. We need to go as soon as possible.”

Aaron took his arms from around her and grabbed her shoulders and looked into her eyes and said, “Do you mean that?”

“Yes. With all my heart.” Her eyes spoke only truth.

“Okay. Next week we’ll meet back here at the same day and time. Have everything you want to take with you, but please pack as light as

possible so your father won't realize you are leaving. Here's what we'll do...

~ *Memory: A Forest Between Calla and Nashville* ~

Aaron looked up and down the road. It was clear. A horribly long week had finally ended. Each week seemed like forever as he waited for their meeting day to come around, counting one miserably slow day after another, hour by hour, even minute by minute. Then their time together passed so quickly, the precious few hours seeming like a mere handful of minutes. But that would change today. Starting today, they would be together forever. He couldn't wait to put his arms around Deborah again as he dismounted and led his horse into the woods, back toward their pine tree, eager to feel Deborah's body against his, to taste her full lips. He hurried. As he pushed a limb out of the way and rushed around to the open space under the pine tree, there stood Weaver Harris, his face red and sweaty through the gray beard, a shotgun in his hands.

"I ought to shoot you down right now," the older man said. "If you weren't Big Jim's boy, I would."

"Don't let that stop you," Aaron answered as he stood up straight to make himself an easy target. The bravery clogged in his throat as Weaver pulled the shotgun to his shoulder. *Weaver wouldn't actually shoot, would he?*

"I told you to stay away from my daughter, and you defied me, sneaking around behind my back like some low-life coward. You aren't fit to be called Big Jim's son. Maybe I won't let that stop me. Maybe I'll shoot you anyway. You deserve it you piece of trash!"

Weaver sighted along the barrel. The old man's face was flushed red and sweating profusely. A few beads of sweat dripped from his beard. This wasn't right. Had Weaver Harris gone mad? Was this crazy man going to shoot? Anger was deeply etched into Weaver's features, and he had apparently bolstered himself with drink. Perhaps he was capable of anything. Aaron looked deep into the older man's eyes and realized that Weaver was not fooling around, that he was struggling deep inside himself as Aaron's life hung in the balance.

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Aaron's legs began to wobble slightly, but he tried not to let Weaver see he was losing control of his body, of his nerves. He tried to stand straight. It was becoming difficult to do. He could feel the clamminess of his own sweat breaking out of his skin, all over his body. Weaver's finger wrapped around the trigger.

"You're going to get what you deserve," Weaver shouted.

Aaron had to think quickly. Should he jump? Run? Would it be in time? Then a steely resolve took him. No! He couldn't give Weaver the satisfaction, even if it meant his life. He stood firm. If Weaver killed him, Jim Junior would make sure Weaver paid for what he did and paid dearly. Aaron stood even straighter and said defiantly, "If you won't let me see Deborah, I don't care if I live or die. Go ahead and shoot, you old fool."

Weaver stared a second longer then lowered the shotgun, maybe an inch but no more. "Spoken like the immature little jerk you truly are. I told you to stay away from my daughter, and you wouldn't listen. Well, I've fixed that. I'm not going to have to worry about the two of you disobeying me again."

"Why? Are you going to shoot me? Go ahead. I'll have the satisfaction of knowing you'll rot in hell after Jim Junior blows your head off."

Weaver jerked the shotgun down and held it at his side. "You think I give a damn about your lame threats? Hell, NO, you damned fool! I don't care what your brother would do. I ought to shoot your pathetic ass anyway, but I don't need to. I've already taken care of the problem, and I'll be happy knowing how miserable you are."

Oh, God! He is crazy! Did he shoot Deborah? Is he so deranged he could kill his own daughter? "What? What are you talking about?"

"I sent Deborah away. She's going to a boarding school a long, long way from here. Even if you find out where it is, there's nothing you can do about it. They don't allow men anywhere near this school, and it is strictly enforced. Now you get your sorry ass back to Calla and stay there. You're damned lucky you've got a father like Big Jim and a great plantation to inherit. God knows you don't deserve it. Get out of here! I don't ever want to see you again."

Deborah gone? How could this be? He stood a moment, frozen, staring at this awful man who was his love's father. How could he not see her and hold her and kiss her again? This was lunacy, crazy and cruel and wrong. This old man was not in full control of his faculties. In fact, he was a raving lunatic. He had to be to act this way.

"GO!" Weaver Harris shouted as he lifted the shotgun and pointed it at Aaron again. "Before I change my mind and send you to God's justice."

He stared at Weaver Harris a few seconds longer, but he couldn't fight it. Not here. Not now. There was nothing left to do but turn and leave. He turned slowly, staying eye-to-eye with the old man as long as he could before he turned his back to him. Aaron walked methodically back to the packed wagon that was tied to a tree along the road. He climbed into the wagon and started for Calla, but went slowly at first. A few yards down the dirt road, Aaron gently snapped the reins to get the horses to pick up speed. Then he snapped them harder. The animals jumped to a trot. A few minutes later he worked them into a full run. He needed to feel the wind on his face.

~ Memory: Calla, Plantation House ~

Lucy gave Aaron a deep frown as she led him toward Big Jim's office. She did not say a word.

"So you're against me, too?" Aaron asked.

She stopped and stared at him a moment. There was something in her face, in her eyes. Disapproval? Somehow it almost looked like... What? Fear? Why would she be afraid? That couldn't be it. What was it? She still didn't speak. Perhaps because she was a slave, she felt it out of place for her to comment, but Aaron thought they had a better relationship than that.

She looked away from him and opened the door to the study and stood aside, her eyes looking down toward her feet and focused on nothing as she waited for Aaron to enter. He stared at her a moment longer before stepping through the door. Big Jim was sitting and staring

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out the window as he always seemed to be doing, but this time, he quickly turned when Aaron entered.

“You see what you caused?” he shouted at his son as Aaron walked in. He hopped out of his worn leather chair and stepped around the desk to confront Aaron face-to-face as Lucy quickly closed the door. “No respect for your elders!” He waved his finger at Aaron as though scolding a child. “The Bible teaches you better. I taught you better. Hell, you’re a Richardson, damn it! You ought to know better without having to be taught. Look what you’ve caused.” Big Jim picked up a letter from his desk, waved it around once, and tossed it back down, almost in the same spot from where he had picked it up.

“I assume that’s from Mr. Harris. He’s... he’s not right. He was so unreasonable.”

“Unreasonable, HELL!” Big Jim shouted at the top of his lungs. “What the hell is wrong with you, son? You’re the one being unreasonable. Deborah is *his* daughter. If he doesn’t want you to see her, that’s *his* decision, not yours. You should have respected that. Instead, you two had to break every rule that decent people live by. You got that girl sent away, and now she’s split off from the only life she’s ever known. And it’s your damned fault! I damned near lost the closest friend I’ve ever had. Maybe I have lost him. I’m going to have to try some bridge mending there if it’s not too damned late already. Do you understand how much trouble you’ve caused?”

“I understand that I love Deborah, and now I won’t be able to see her anymore.”

“Love? What do you mean love?” Big Jim was screaming so loud Aaron was sure even the slaves out in the fields could hear him. “You were infatuated with a pretty young girl. That’s all! That’s not love, and she’s not the kind of woman you need to marry. Hell, she’s not a woman at all. She’s a kid! Probably still sleeps with rag dolls. Why can’t I make you understand? You marry for the sake of the land you live on. You need somebody knowledgeable and strong, somebody...”

“Who can run the plantation. Yes, father. I hear you.”

“But, bloody hell, do you understand me? I keep repeating myself about this, and I’m tired of saying the same old things over and over. I

know damn well you're tired of hearing them." Big Jim looked down at the floor a moment then turned around and walked back to his chair. He plopped down with the air of a defeated man. "Aw, shit. It's over anyway. It's done, and she's gone. Hell, let's put this behind us and move ahead."

"I can leave now?"

"Yeah, yeah, get the hell out of here. Go help the slaves in the fields. You like to do that anyway. Hell, you act like a slave sometimes. Serves you right to work alongside them."

"What's wrong with helping the slaves?" Aaron said. "They work for us. They sure don't get anything out of it."

"Bloody hell they don't! They get a good living out of it. I treat my darkies well."

"What?" Aaron was not used to talking back to his father, but he decided he was too old to take this anymore. He had lost his woman, and he was damn sure going to voice his opinion, whether his father liked that opinion or not. "They live in tiny, poorly built shacks with little protection from the cold. When was the last time they got new blankets? Huh? And what about the food they eat? Animal guts! Junk we would throw away. And their clothes are ragged and torn and not fit to be wrapped around a dog, much less a human."

Big Jim frowned up at his son, stunned out of a response. Aaron's words hung heavily in the air for a long time before Big Jim finally said, "Well what the hell am I supposed to do? Feed them on gold plates? Hell, most of the whites in Tennessee don't live any better. A lot of them worse. That's life, son. That's the world we live in. You're lucky you were born above that. You're a Richardson, by God."

"You say that like it's supposed to mean something, like we're some sort of privileged class who deserves to live better for some unseen and unknown reason. What does being a Richardson mean? That I get to eat better than other people? That my clothes are nicer than everybody else's? That I don't have to work myself to death in the heat of the cotton fields?"

"Hell, yes! That's exactly what it means. What don't you understand about it?"

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“Damned if I know,” Aaron shouted, as much to himself as to his father. He couldn’t seem to find the words to explain.

Big Jim waved a dismissal and said, “We’re not getting anywhere with this. Go on. Go work in the fields. We’ll talk later.”

Aaron stood a moment as his father turned and stared out the window, the older man’s glazed-over eyes fixed on nothing. Aaron wanted to say more, but he couldn’t think of anything to say, at least, not anything that would somehow make his father understand. There was nothing. He didn’t believe Big Jim would ever understand. He wasn’t sure he understood himself. He gave up and turned and left.

~ Memory: Calla ~

The rest of the day and all of the next day Aaron labored in the fields, working alongside the slaves but working harder than any of them, never showing that he was tired and rarely talking. Skinny Joe and Tode and others tried to strike up a conversation with him, more than once, but, invariably, they ended up talking to themselves most of the time.

Finally, late in the afternoon of the next day when everyone was getting ready to go home for the evening, Skinny Joe tapped Aaron on the shoulder and, with a look of concern on his face, said, “Mastuh Aaron, you’s been awful quiet these last couple a’ days. All of us’s worried ‘bout you. Is theah somethin’ wrong’? I’s be proud to hep if’n I could.”

Aaron wiped the sweat from his forehead with his shirt sleeve and looked at the sky for the briefest of moments before replying to the concerned slave. “Joe, I... Well, Plato once said ‘At the touch of love everyone becomes a poet.’ I guess when that love is taken away they become a laborer, so I have become a laborer. I just need to work hard.”

“Cuse me, suh. I don’t rightly know if I unnerstan’,” Joe replied. There was no mistaking the confusion on the man’s thin brown face.

“Sorry, Joe. You’d need a little classical background for that to make sense. I’m having lady problems.”

A flash of understanding raced across that same brown face. “Yes, suh! I see. Them ladies can get you down in the dumps foah shuah.”

“Well, I wish it was that simple, Joe. I...” Aaron didn’t want to talk about it. Everything was bad enough without spreading it around. He stumbled for something to say but was saved when Lucy walked over from the plantation house.

“Master Aaron,” she said cautiously. “I came to walk you home.”

“How thoughtful of you, Lucy. Excuse me, Joe.”

“Of coase, Mastuh Aaron.

Lucy turned back toward the house, and Aaron walked alongside her. When they were out of earshot of the slaves, who were walking in the opposite direction toward their cabins, Lucy said, “Can I speak with you? Just you and me?”

“Of course, Lucy.”

“Big Jim, he’s a good man. I... I don’t know for sure how to say this, but I don’t think y’all talk to each other so’s you can understand what each other is saying. The two of you are not all that different.”

“My father and I? You’ve got to be kidding. We’re like night and day.”

“No, no you’re not. I know I’m only a slave, but I promise you that you two are much more like each other than you realize. Sometimes a man, he can’t say everything that’s in his head. He just can’t. And both of you two are like that. You don’t... men don’t know how to open up and talk to each other.”

“We sure do talk a lot for two people who don’t know how to talk.”

“Yes, and neither one of you listens to what the other one is saying. And neither one of you ever really talks anyways, least ways when you’re trying to talk to each other.”

Aaron was silent for a moment as they continued to amble slowly toward the house. “Maybe you’re right, Lucy. I believe it was Cato who said, ‘An angry man opens his mouth and shuts his eyes.’ Maybe you’re right. But I don’t understand. What is so wrong with Deborah and me loving each other? I know I’m older than her, but it’s not like I’m a gray-headed old man. I’m not all that much older. Why, you see marriages all the time with people who are many more years apart than Deborah and I.”

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"I can't speak to that. It's not my place. But the two daddies, don't you think they've got good reason if they feel so strongly about it? They're older men, older and they've lived longer and seen more life. They both want what's best for their children. And I hate to see you and Big Jim against each other so. He loves you. He is not trying to ruin your life. He's trying to make it better. Can't you accept that? I mean, it's not my place to tell you what to do Master Aaron. You're my master and all."

"I am not your master, Lucy. God is your master. I'm a man who happens to be the son of a slave owner."

They were close to the house now. Lucy stopped and put her arm up to stop Aaron. "Master Aaron, it don't matter whether you're my master or not, but we've got to live in this world where I call you my master. That's the way it is here in this part of Tennessee. When it changes, and I believes it will someday, then we'll do differently if either or both of us is still around. But it ain't changed right now, so we have to live in this world the way it is. And in this world we've got to live in, these two fathers are strongly against you and Miss Deborah being together. They wouldn't be so strong against it if they didn't have no good reasons. We've got to accept their reasons. Do you understand?"

"No, Lucy, I don't understand. Not that you didn't explain it well, and not that what you say isn't right. I just don't understand the whole damned thing. I don't understand why two people who love each other can't be together. This is not medieval Europe where children are wed at twelve and thirteen to somebody they don't even know to solidify kingdoms. This is America. People who love each other should be allowed to... to... To love each other!"

Lucy glanced around nervously then said, "Master Aaron, you ain't heard me say this, and I shouldn't be talking to no white man this way, but I'm going to tell you straight out. Your idea of America is a dreamland. Maybe we'll be in a dreamland someday, but it ain't here and it ain't now. This is the America where one man can own another man. OWN him! That man belongs to another man because he paid for him. Do you understand that? This is the America where a man can have another man whipped on a whim or hung for damn near nothing. This is

the America where some men have everything they could hope to have, and they still want more, while some men starve to death because they ain't got enough to eat.

"You think I don't want things to be fair? I grew up being a nigger to the whites and an outcast from the blacks. Hell, when I was a child I dreamed about living in a world where everything was right, and everything was fair, and everybody was free. But this is the real world, and those dreams are long gone. If you're looking for rightness and fairness, you're in the wrong place. I know that. I gave up on it many, many years ago. It may not be my place to say, Master Aaron, but these two men have said 'no'. It don't matter what their reasons are or whether it's fair or not. It's the way it is. I can't say no more than that."

Aaron had become a statue, standing there listening intently to this almost middle-aged woman, a person he considered knowledgeable, someone he had come to respect greatly over the years. Deep inside he knew she was right. But it didn't make it hurt any less.

"You're right, of course," he finally said as he started walking again. She started walking, too, still side-by-side with him. "I know you're right, but I still want to kick the damn world hard in the ass and make it be a better place whether it wants to be or not."

Lucy looked up at him with a smile and they both started laughing. When the laughing stopped, Lucy said, "You're going to need some bigger boots for that kind of kicking, Master Aaron. A lot bigger."

Chapter 3

As consciousness began to creep back, he was aware of smoke in the air and fire in his leg. Even though he was still dazed and everything around him seemed to wiggle and wobble, he realized the smoke was only his breath, frost in the frozen cold. Temperatures were falling. The fire burning deep in his right leg told him it was probably broken, so he turned to look. His pants were ripped and open below the knee. Both his pants and his exposed skin were soaked in blood. He could see ragged, splintered bone sticking out of the flesh of his lower leg; raw meat lumped around the edges of the opening. The sight brought on another wave of nausea, but he fought against it as hard as he could and managed to remain conscious.

He heard a scraping noise not far away. Chrissy. He looked around. They had fallen some distance down the slope, but Aaron had been stopped by the rock that made such a mess of his leg. Chrissy had gone all the way to the flat of the valley floor, some fifty or more feet below where Aaron lay. She was trying to get up but couldn't, her rear legs limp, useless. All she could do was pull with her front legs and drag herself through the snow. There was a huge knot along her spine. Broken. She didn't make a sound, at least not with her mouth. She kept trying to stand up. There was a wildness, a determined desperation in her eyes as she refused to give up. Aaron knew there was nothing he could do to save her.

Old Bear was only a few feet from Chrissy. His head was misshapen and lay in a small pool of blood. There were red streaks in the snow leading down the slope to where the dog had stopped, the streaks getting wider as they got closer to Old Bear's now motionless head. The dog's body was twisted awkwardly and lay limp on the ground. Aaron momentarily forgot his pain as tears welled up in his eyes. How could this be happening? Was it real or a bad dream? The answer came with the fire that screamed from his leg.

Old Bear was beyond help, but Aaron realized he had to do something for Chrissy, regardless of the great pain he felt. Somehow, he had to get down to where his rifle had been thrown. Laying his head back

down, he thought a moment. His right leg would have to be on top of his left before moving down the slope. That way the protruding bone would not snag on a rock or lump of dirt hidden under the snow. Aaron gathered all his strength then lifted the broken leg and moved it over. Fire would have been a relief compared to what he felt. A scream escaped from his lips, a reflex, but he succeeded.

He took a long breath to build his resolve then, lying on his back, tried to push himself downslope with his uninjured leg. He couldn't. With his bad leg resting on top of the good one, it was too painful. He tried pulling himself forward with his one arm. It worked, but not well. And there was no way to see where he was going.

Aaron knew he had to do something different, so he rolled over on his left side to lessen the area of his body that was in contact with the ground. This also allowed him to see downslope toward the rifle and put his arm in a position where he could get more leverage when pulling. Every move brought new waves of pain and nausea. It took a great effort to remain conscious, but there was no choice. Chrissy needed him. With his teeth gritted as hard as teeth could bite, Aaron managed to crawl through the pain.

The rifle had been flung from its holster on the side of the saddle as Chrissy tumbled down the hill. It lay in the snow near the bottom. Every small drag of his body convulsed him with pain, but he had to reach it. Over and over, torture after torture, he inched down the slope. With the building snow, it was more like a controlled slide than a crawl. The trick was to keep from going too fast and making his injury worse.

Finally, he reached the bottom of the slope and picked up his custom made target rifle. Lifting it to his shoulder, he tried to take aim. The loss of his left arm and the memory of war had taken his marksmanship away from him. The barrel wobbled back and forth. He could not hold it steady with only one hand, so the sight ball did not stay on target. Sadly, Chrissy was only a few feet away. Even with a wavering barrel, he couldn't miss.

She had stopped struggling as though she knew what was coming and had accepted her fate, holding still to make Aaron's task easier. He knew he couldn't wait. Delay would wither his resolve. He pulled the

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trigger and the boom of the gunshot echoed across the slope. The sound was quickly swallowed by the howling wind. Chrissy rested in the snow. She felt no more pain.

Tears streamed from Aaron's eyes as he slid on his side to cover the short distance between them. He laid the rifle on the ground in front of him and patted the great horse's neck. She was still as warm as though she were alive. His tears fell and mixed with the hair on her back. Aaron looked out into the distance and tried to think of something, anything. He needed to think of something besides pulling the trigger with the barrel pointed at Chrissy. He wanted to think about something good. Nothing came to mind. Perhaps someone good, someone he loved, someone who personified what it was to be a good person. Tode! Of course. He thought about old Tode, one of the best men in the world, white or black.

~ Memory: Calla ~

"Mas'suh Aaron, that theah gittar makes some mighty sweet sounds. Old Tode wishes he could play a gittar like that. Jus' to touch it'd be a dream for this old niggah."

Aaron smiled and pulled the guitar strap over his head. "You can try, Tode. And don't call yourself bad things like that. You are a man, same as me." Aaron held the guitar out with both hands, the tips of the fingers on his left hand red and raw from pushing the strings against the frets, and offered it to Tode. "But there's one catch. You've got to tell me a story."

The yellowed whites of the older black man's eyes became enormous in his dark face as he looked at the offered guitar. His hands reached out tentatively, eager but afraid, wanting to touch but not sure he was allowed or that he deserved to touch such a beautiful musical instrument. He pulled his hands back without touching the guitar. "Oh, Mas'suh Aaron. Old Tode's not shuah. I... I'm jus' afraid to touch it. It's so nice and purdy. And it belongs to my mas'suh."

"I take that back, Tode. There are two catches. The second is you've got to quit calling me master. You aren't all that old, but you are a few years older than me. You'd more likely be my master than the

other way around.” Aaron held the guitar out further, closer to the reluctant Tode.

“Lawd, child. Whatchu speakin’? Don’ be sayin’ no wuds like that roun’ mas’suh Big Jim. He’d be havin’ me beat ‘til old Tode couldn’ walk no moah.” The thick black fingers touched the edge of the guitar then slid slowly across the smooth surface, rubbing the satin finish of the wood for mere moments before pulling back.

“Don’t you worry, Tode,” Aaron said, still holding the guitar out in front of him. “Nobody is going to beat you or anybody else. I’m not going to let that ever happen again. But you’re right. I have to be careful what I say around Dad. He doesn’t understand. And Jim Junior, too. They’re both, well, I love them, but they don’t think about things like I do. They accept what is and what always has been without a thought to it being right or wrong.”

“You’s dreadful right ‘bout that, mas’suh Aaron. They’s don’ see things likes you do. But, now... I don’s mean no bad, mas’suh Aaron, suh, but they ain’t many folks ‘round heah sees things likes you do. Yore diffunt for these parts.”

“Yeah, I reckon I am, Tode. I have a dream that one day we’ll all wake up to reason, and they’ll all see I was right. One day. Now take this dad-gumed guitar before my arms fall off.”

The apprehensive yellow-white eyes glanced at Aaron, then back to the guitar that the white man was holding with outstretched arms. Tode couldn’t resist any longer. He placed his large hands on the instrument and slowly, carefully took it out of Aaron’s hands.

Tode strummed the guitar with the strings open, at least the ones his thick fingers on his chord hand weren’t accidentally muting. Aaron leaned over and took the old man’s chord hand and placed the fingers, one by one, on a C chord then told him to strum the guitar. The C came out rough, strings half muted and fingers slightly misplaced.

“It is painfully hard to do, but on your chord hand you must keep your fingers only on the strings I showed you. Don’t let them touch any of the other strings, or it will mute them.”

Tode adjusted his fingers and strummed again.

“Better.”

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Then he adjusted and strummed again and again until finally, a crystal clear C rang through the air.

“Well, it was painfully hard for me. You don’t seem to be having a problem at all.”

In astonishingly few tries, the old man had made the sound as pure as it could be. Old Tode’s eyes held a smile too big for lips alone as he continued to strum the perfect C chord.

“Very good! That’s amazing, Tode. Okay, that’s a C chord. Now here’s a G.” Aaron once again adjusted Tode’s fingers to the chord. “Tell you what. I’ll show you how to play the guitar while you tell me a story.”

“What story you wants to heah, mas’suh Aaron?”

“Tell me how your family got here, Tode, how y’all got to America.”

The black man strummed the G chord several times. Although his fingers were large, they were astonishingly adept. He once again adjusted to a pure sound in short order. Tode practiced going back and forth between C and G as he had seen Aaron do. He stumbled at first, unable to make the quick chord changes, but he didn’t give up, and before too long he was going back and forth with relative ease. He continued to strum the guitar, switching between the two chords and hitting the strings with different rhythms as he started talking.

“T’aint much of a story, mas’suh Aaron. My great-grandpappy was the one who come ovah. He told us kids about it when we was jus’ puppy sized. He was a young man at the time he came ovah on dat boat, a few yeahs younger than’s you are now. Why, that mus’ve been ovah a hundred yeahs ago. Great-grandpappy was a hundert and foah when he passed away.”

Tode started strumming the top 2 or 3 strings to get a more bass sound. Then he changed to the lower strings for the high sounds. Aaron marveled at how the old man had so quickly changed the way he strummed to vary the sounds and wondered why he had not thought of it himself during the year and a half he had been trying to learn to play.

“Great-grandpappy lived a lot longan than most folks. Anyway, they was sittin’ theah eatin’ breakfas’ in theah home way ‘crosst the ocean when’s all of a sudden theah was these white guys with these

swords. And them white mens had guns, too. It all happent so quick. Next thing he knows his aunt's dead at his feets and they's tiein' him up. They thowed him down into the bottom of a big old boat, biggah than anything he'd evah seen. They got chained down to the bottom of that boat. Great-grandpappy said it was bad, real bad. When they had to go, they had to go right thah. And they laid in it for weeks. The food, well, it wasn' no count. Lots o' folks died. They'd unchain the dead ones and thows 'em ovah the side of the boat. On a calm day, you could heah the splash from inside wheah they was. But then afta a while they tooks off them chains. He said his sistuh was on that boat... ”

Tode stopped talking and mused a second, but never stopped strumming the guitar. Aaron could see the big man's eyes water and knew old memories were coming up from deep inside, reaching out and showing themselves on the insides of the old man's eyelids. He could have told Tode not to say anymore, but could not bear not to hear. He had to know.

Shortly, Tode said: “Mas'suh Aaron, please show old Tode anothuh one of these heah chouds.”

Aaron showed him a D, then when Tode picked that up in short order, Aaron showed him an F, one of the harder chords for an amateur to conquer, particularly a man with thick fingers. Tode struggled for a few minutes, but before too terribly long the huge, thick fingers were making the F sound as sweet as birdsong.

“Tode, you're amazing. I've never seen anybody take to a musical instrument so quickly. And play it so well. This is unbelievable.”

“Well, thanks you, suh, mas'suh Aaron. This gittar feels so good in my hands. And it soun's so sweet. Let's see, wheah was I. Oh, yeah. On that thah boat, afta days and days and days they alls of a sudden started feedin' 'em bettah food, and they knew somethin' was up. Then afta a few moah days, great-grandpappy thought he could smell the shore. If'n the winds a'blowin' right, you can smell the land long 'fore you sees it. But with the stink down in that ship, it was hard to be shuah. But then the white genelmens hauled them up on top, and they sees the land.

“Mas'suh Aaron, my great-grandpappy said that city on the edge of the ocean was a sight that they jus' couldn' believe. Now, you got to

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unnerstan', he ain't nevah befoah seen nuthin' more'n a grass hut. That's whut he lived in. Well, suh, the white genelmens chains them togethuh at the docks and they brungs them inta this place with all these big, solid buildin's that had fancy rails and glass winduh's and solid doah's. It was jus' unbelievable to 'em. Nobody's livin' in no grass hut. It was some kind of speshul place, like heaven or somethin'. And then theah's all these white folks speakin' and talkin' and shoutin' things at them, and they don's unnerstan' a thing them whites is a'sayin'. It was powaful scary for all the black folks cause they could tell by the looks on those white folks faces that they's not gonna be frien'ly towards 'em. No, suh. They knew this warn't no heaven no mattah how nice it looked. They knew this was bad.

"My great-grandpappy said he tried to say somethin' to his cousin who was in front of him but one o' them white mens heard him, and he lays that whip acrosst his back, and that shuts him up in a hurry. Great-grandpappy showed us the scar from that one lick, and I'm heah to tell you it was a good 'un. Stretched from his backbone to his uppah arm."

Tode stopped talking but continued to play the guitar, changing back and forth between the four chords he had now mastered. As he strummed, he sometimes picked a solitary note, then two or three at a time, then right back to the chords. Aaron was stunned. It sounded as though Tode had been playing the guitar all his long life. He couldn't have, of course. There wasn't a guitar in the slave's quarters. In fact, there were few guitars anywhere. Stringed instruments had been around for many centuries, but the modern guitar had only been around for a few decades. Aaron could not believe the black man was only now learning, not the way he was playing. He suspected that Tode had learned on a similar instrument somewhere in the past. Perhaps he had learned on a lute or something like it. Maybe Tode was afraid to admit it for some strange reason, although Aaron couldn't imagine why. There was nothing wrong with a black man playing a musical instrument. Sometimes black folks got some funny notions in their heads, though. The threat of the whip made a man cautious.

"So what happened when they brought your folks into town?" Aaron asked.

"It was the strangest thing, mas'suh Aaron. Well, it seemed strange to my great-grandpappy at the time, but they didn' know nuthin' back then. The white genelmens brung them all into the center of town, all of them all chained togethuh. And then they'd unlocks them one at a time and walks them up onto this platfo'm made outta wood. And this fat white man without no hair stood on the platfo'm wid them, and he was a'jabbering real fas'. It didn' make no sense at all. But ev'ry onest in a while one of the white folks standin' thah in front of the platfo'm would raise his hand or his arm and say somethin'. Then when none of the white folks wanted to say anything else, it was ovah. They'd take the black person down off'n the platfo'm and give him ovah to some white man in the crowd and that white man would give this othah man ovah to the side of the platfo'm some paper with drawings on it. My peoples, they didn' know this was money at that time. They didn' know they'd been sold at no aucshun. They didn' know nuthin'. They was jus' happy to be outta the boat and still alive. But they was scared, too."

Tode strummed a second and looked thoughtful. A moment later he continued, "My great-grandpappy, he was sold to a white genelman down ta Nauth Carolina. He said it was hard in them firs' yeahs not knowing no English. He didn' know when he was doin' somethin' wrong. Haf the time he nevah even knew why he was gettin' a'whippin' when he got one. But he learnt quick enuf. He had to so's he wouldn' keep a' gittin' those whippin's.

"Anyways, that plantation down ta Nauth Carolina, that's wheah my grandpappy and my daddy and myself was born. But once I's old enuf to do hard work, the son of the man who bought my great-grandpappy died, and he didn' have no kids that lived to grow up, so we's all got sold. I hadn't seen none of my famlee since."

"That's terrible. If we're going to allow slavery, we should keep families together. So my father bought you?"

"No, suh. It was anothuh man. Man by the name o' Wiser. A meeeeeeaaan, mean old white man. He brung me to Tennessee and beat many a lesson into my bare back. That's why I got all them stripes back theah now. A few yeahs latuh Mas'suh Wiser had a run o' bad luck, and he had to sell a bunch of his niggahs, ah... Excuse me, Mas'suh Aaron.

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His slaves. He had to sell a bunch of his slaves. Anyway, Mas'suh Jim, uh, that's Big Jim yore daddy, come a'lookin' for some slaves to buy. They was callin' us... I's sorry about this, but it's the truth. They was callin' us 'bargin niggahs'. We was goin' cheap cause ev'rybody said we didn' work hard enuf to make Mas'suh Wiser no good living. But Mas'suh Wiser, he done things even a fiel' hand could see was not no good way to do it, so that's why he went broke. It wasn' on account o' his slaves.

"But, anyways, bargin... ah, slave or not, I wanted to be sold. I had me a good mas'suh in Nauth Carolina, fore he up and died, so I knew theah was a whole lot betta out theah. I'd had enuf o' them beatin's and I figgered no new mas'suh could be any wors'n the one I had, so I cleaned up bes' I could, and I put on a shirt that didn' have no sleeves. It was nippy that mawnin seein' as how it was wintah, but I wanted the new mas'suhs to see my big, strong arms, wanted 'em to see I was strong enuf to work all day long.

"Anyhow, they lines us up out in front of the shacks and all them white mas'suh's come a'walkin' down through theah, and they was a'lookin' us ovah. I smiled at 'em and flexed my muscles while all the time I was tryin' to look like I was normal relaxed. Made my arms look even bigguh. Shore 'nuf, Mas'suh Big Jim made a bid for me and old Mas'suh Wiser said that was good enuf. He takes the money, and he tells me to git my black ass on ovah to my new ownuh. I tries hard not to grin, but I was bustin' clean through with that good old happy feelin'."

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," Aaron said.

"Lawd, child, what chu talkin' 'bout? That was the bes' thing what evah happent to me."

"But dad's whipped you, too. What makes him any better?"

"Now, I jokes 'bout that, Mas'suh Aaron, but it's jus' wuds. All these yeaHS I been a'workin' for Mas'suh Jim, I can count the numbuH of times he had me whipped on my finguhS on one hand and have finguhS left oveH. Land sakes, old Mas'suh Wiser used to do that in a week. And wid yo daddy, I knew why I was gittin' whipped. I'd done wrong, and I knew I'd done wrong when I was a'doin' it."

“That doesn’t make it right to give a man a whipping. No man should have the right to treat another grown man that way. No man. Not even my daddy.”

“Yas, suh, well, you bes’ be cahfull saying things like that, too. Not ‘round no white man. And, Lawd sakes, don’ say it on my ‘count, or I’ll get the dickens whupped out of me. Well, not by Big Jim. He don’ whip this old slave no moah. The last time was yeahs and yeahs ago. Foah you was boan. He said ten lashes and then he stops aftuh two and theahs a teah in his eye, and he looks at my old messed up back and he jus’ tells me to get on home and he walks off. He nevah whipped me again. He nevah whipped no one again.”

“He doesn’t have to. He has that overseer to do his dirty work for him.”

“Only when a slave has done somethin’ real, real bad. And nevah me. Big Jim told that ovahseah that he’d fire him good if he evah laid a whip to Old Tode.”

Tode had never stopped strumming and picking the guitar through the whole story. He played beautifully. Much better, Aaron realized, than Aaron could play after well over a year of practice. “Tode,” Aaron said, “you’ve played the guitar before. Or a similar instrument. You must have. You play so well.”

“No, suh, Mas’suh Aaron. As the Lawd is my witness, I done nevah played one o’ these heah gittars befoah. Nor no nuthin’ like it. I’ve made me some cane flutes befo, and I can play them right well, but they ain’t nuthin’ like this gittar. It jes’ feels so good in my hands. And it sounds so good in my ears.” Tode closed his eyes and shook his head and strummed some more. “Soooo good.”

“Well, if it feels that good and you can make sounds that good,” Aaron laughed, “it’s yours. You keep it.”

Tode’s lids flew open, and he stopped strumming momentarily, his yellow-white eyes bulging large again. “Lawd no, Mas’suh Aaron. I can’t take this heah gittar. No, ah, slave’s lowd to have nuthin’ this nice. Mas’suh Big Jim’d break his promise and beat me shore ’nuf.” Then he started strumming again.

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“Big Jim isn’t going to do a thing to you. He got it up north, on a trip to Pennsylvania, from some man named Martin. I’ll tell him I gave it to you. He’ll be happy to have somebody around who can play for him. Lord knows I can’t do anything with it.”

“Oh, Mas’suh Aaron, please don’t tease me, now. I know Mas’suh Big Jim’s not goin’ to whip me, but would he really let an old slave have somethin’ this fine? Thout whuppin’ you fus?”

Aaron laughed. “Hell, yes, Tode. Big Jim’s not going to whip me, either. Besides, I’m tired of trying to learn the damned thing. I’ll tell dad as soon as I get home so he’ll know. You don’t need to worry about anybody getting whipped, me or you or anybody else. Well, not for the guitar. Hell, he might whip me on general principle.” They both laughed.

Tode’s watered eyes could no longer hold back the gathering tears, and they rolled down the old man’s dark brown cheeks. He quit strumming the guitar and held it out to look it over. The sound of pounding hooves made him look up. “Why, it’s mas’suh Jim Junyore,” he said.

Tode jumped up as quick as his old body could, all the time wiping his eyes with his sleeve to get rid of the tears, trying to do it quickly so Jim Junior wouldn’t notice. Aaron also stood as Jim Richardson, Junior, brought his horse to a halt in front of them.

“Where you been, Bullseye?” Jim Junior asked Aaron. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Daddy wants to see us.”

“I was letting Tode play my guitar. I tell you, Jim, Tode never picked up a guitar before in his life, and he plays it like he was born with one in his hands. I couldn’t play it like that if I practiced for a hundred years.”

“Is that right, Tode? Can you play... What are you crying about?” Jim Junior asked, looking down at the black man skeptically.

“I jes’ strums the chouds Mas’suh Aaron showed me. That’s all. And I ain’t cryin’. It’s jus’ sweat.”

“Plays like an angel,” Aaron added.

Jim Junior laughed. “Lord, Lord. Can’t you see old Tode in white robes and wings sticking out of his back?”

Aaron smiled and said: "He must have wings under his shirt somewhere 'cause he sure sounds like an angel. Hell, I decided to give him the guitar. I'm tired of fooling with the damned thing."

Jim Junior eyed Tode a few seconds, then said: "Up to you. It's yours to give away. But you better be careful, Tode. Some people might not cotton to a slave owning such a fine instrument as that. Daddy paid twenty dollars for that thing. Better keep it hidden."

"Yas, suh. If'n anybody says somethin', I'll tell 'em I's jes' a'holdin' it for Mas'suh Aaron. Takin' care of it real good."

"You do that, Tode. I'd like to hear this angelic miracle, but right now we've got to get back home. Come on, Bullseye. Daddy wants to see us both right now."

Aaron walked over to his horse and untied it from a small tree then mounted. Jim Junior nodded toward the mansion with his head and trotted off. Aaron turned to say good-bye to Tode. The tears were still flowing down the old man's face, and he was still trying to wipe them away.

"Thank you, Mas'suh Aaron. Yore the most wonnerful person in the world. Lawd knows I'll nevah be able to pay you back. Thank you."

"The only thanks I need, Tode, is to sit and listen to you play." With a quick smile, Aaron was off to catch his brother.

Tode wiped the tears again then went back to strumming and picking as he walked along the trail toward the shacks that made up the slave quarters.

Jim Junior reached up and began rubbing the top of his right ear as Aaron came riding up from behind. It was an unconscious habit, developed as a toddler, and Jim Junior was not even aware that he did it. He scoffed at anyone who said anything about it, but the ear stayed red and raw from constant rubbing. While Aaron was amused by his brother's strange habit, Aaron had learned long ago not to tease the elder Richardson sibling about it.

"Why does Big Jim want to talk to us?" Aaron asked as he came alongside.

"Looks like it's going to start soon," Jim Junior said with a quick glance over at Aaron.

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There was a confident smile on Jim Junior's classically handsome face. He had always been sure of himself and for good reason. He was not only every young lady's dream beau, but he was also better than anyone else at almost everything. There was only one thing that Aaron could do better than his brother. Jim Junior was an excellent marksman, but Aaron was perfection with a rifle in his hands. He had been born with the eye and could take out a squirrel at two hundred yards.

And, in Aaron's mind, perhaps he was better at one other thing. He was better at thinking. Aaron could sit down and reason things out. He understood that slavery was as wrong a thing as there was on the face of the earth. Jim Junior, like most Southerners, simply accepted without thought everything his parents and his peers had taught him by their words and actions. To Jim Junior, slaves were only slaves, half human, unworthy of a white man's esteem. But even though the two brothers often seemed more different than strangers, Aaron and Jim Junior still loved each other and had always been best friends. Blood was thicker than water in the Richardson household.

"I bet we'll both be officers, Bullseye," Jim Junior continued. "Big Jim will make sure of that. Maybe we'll be in the same division. That would be great, wouldn't it?"

"What are you talking about," Aaron asked.

Jim Junior reached up and rubbed the top of his right ear. "Why, the war, of course. The Yankees are spoiling for a fight and, by God, we're going to give them one."

~ Memory: Calla, Plantation House ~

Lucy smiled at Jim Junior then frowned at Aaron when she let them in. As they followed her through the hall, Jim Junior leaned toward Aaron and whispered, "What was that all about? I can usually tell Big Jim's mood by Lucy's mood, but I don't know what to think now."

"She's not happy about my seeing Deborah Harris," Aaron whispered back as the brothers lagged behind Lucy in the hall. "She thinks it's my fault that Weaver Harris sent Deborah away to a boarding school. And she's probably right."

Lucy dutifully let the brothers into the room, smiling at Jim Junior and avoiding Aaron's eyes as she was closing the door behind them. They could hear her walking away down the hall as Big Jim came out from behind his desk to greet his sons. It was the first time in a while Aaron had seen his father smile when he entered the study.

"I want you both to be in Nashville and be ready," Big Jim said. "When the word goes out you will be the first men to step forward and volunteer. Of course, you will both be officers. That's already arranged. I expect you two to acquit yourselves with courage and dignity. Remember, you carry the 'Richardson' name with you."

"Tennessee hasn't seceded yet," Aaron protested. "We might not join the renegade states."

"Renegade? What do you mean, renegade? Don't be ridiculous! Shots were fired at Sumter almost a month ago. Those are Southern boys down there defending their land against the damned Yankees. And they killed twelve of our boys in that mess in Maryland a week later. Lincoln's already called for a troop buildup, and there's no doubt it's going to wind up in a fight.

"I got the news this morning," Big Jim continued. "The Tennessee legislature has voted to secede. Now all we need is for the people of Tennessee to vote on it. It doesn't take a great genius to figure out how that vote will go. Tennessee *will* join with the other Southern states. You can bet your horse on that. The people of Tennessee will not abandon our neighbors and friends, and we will not abandon our way of life because somebody up north is jealous of us. Tennessee will fight with the Confederacy!"

"Father, I..." Aaron mumbled. He had dreaded this moment and had hoped against hope that it would never come. He would have been married and gone by now if Weaver had not found out about their secret meetings and sent Deborah away. But he was still here, still living at Calla. Even so, he could not fight for a cause he knew was so insidiously wrong. He had to gather his courage. This was the time to make a stand, not stumble over his words.

"Father," he said with conviction, "the way of life you're talking about is only for a privileged few like us. Most of the people in this state,

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regardless of color, can only dream of changing their lives. They live in squalor and have little hope of anything better. I will not fight for a state where the enslavement of human beings is acceptable.”

“What the hell are you saying, boy?” Big Jim, the smile gone, looked up at his son with rage in his eyes, his fists at his sides clenched so tight the knuckles, bone white, stood well above his hands. “Don’t you tell me you won’t fight for your own land! I worked my ass off building this place for you two boys, and I’m not about to let some damned Yankee foreigners come down here and take it away. You know what will happen if you don’t enlist? Everybody around here will call you a coward. They’ll say you haven’t got any guts. You’ll be a disgrace to the name Richardson. Do you want that? Do you want people calling you a coward, saying you’re afraid? You’ve got to stand up for yourself, son. It’s time to be a man. It’s time to protect what is rightfully yours.”

“I... I can’t. This is wrong. Just plain wrong...”

“Bullseye needs a little time, dad” Jim Junior said, trying to protect his brother. “He’s got a lot going on right now. If you could give him some time to think it through...”

“Aaron,” Big Jim interrupted, ignoring Jim Junior’s plea. “I don’t want to hear any more nonsense from you.” He unclenched his fists and waved his hands in the air. It was time to reason, not to fight. There would be plenty of fighting later. “Your conscience is lying to you. Listen to me. This isn’t a question of what’s right and wrong about slavery. You know as well as I do that it’s going to end eventually, regardless of what the states do. What this war is about is being loyal to your land, to the earth that has provided for you and given you a comfortable life. We’re from Tennessee, by God. Why should we let the Yankees come down here and tell us how to live? The good people of Tennessee have a right to determine their future without any interference from a Federal government that’s little more than a puppet of the Yankee businessman. If the young men of the South do not stand up and whip the damned Yankees, then our world will be over. We will lose everything. Do you realize that? You’ll be out digging ditches alongside the darkies, trying to eek out a meager wage just to buy your daily bread. I won’t have my sons living like that. I won’t have a Richardson lying his head

down on a filthy, bug-infested mattress in a squalid shack. You two are the finest the South has to offer. Your state needs you. This is your land. It's time to stand tall. You must protect your home. You *WILL* be an officer in the Confederate army. Is that clear?"

"I... Yes, sir," Aaron mumbled. He knew he would never be able to put on a Confederate uniform, but he also knew he could not stand before his father and continue an argument that was impossible to win. It would be pointless. It would accomplish nothing.

"Very good," Big Jim nodded. He took a deep breath and tried to smile, but it wouldn't come. With a somber look on his face, he continued, "Now the two of you will report to Nashville in a few weeks, as soon as Tennessee declares itself a part of the Confederacy. If the damned Yankees don't leave us alone, then we'll go up there and whip their asses and get this war over quickly. It's too early to start packing right now, but you need to start making arrangements for being gone. There are things to take care of. I've gone over it all with Lucy, and she can help you get prepared." He hesitated a moment, then said, "Make me proud of you."

Aaron and Jim Junior nodded and said they would and walked out the door. Aaron's head was hanging low as they walked along the hard-packed dirt trail in front of the plantation house.

"I heard you say 'yes, sir'," Jim Junior said, "but I've got the feeling you were only humoring him. You're not going to enlist, are you, Bullseye?"

"You know me too well."

"That's what brothers are for. So what are you going to do?"

"Leave. Everybody will think I'm a coward, but I can't do something that I believe is so wrong. I just can't."

"I know. I don't understand, but I know. Are you sure you can live with yourself in the years to come if you don't fight for the South, for your home?"

"Yes. I couldn't live with myself if I fought for a government that supported slavery. Socrates said, 'It is not living that matters, but living rightly.' I couldn't do something I believe against so deeply."

HERB HUGHES

"You always were a thinker, Bullseye. Maybe if I had half your brain, I'd go with you."

Aaron looked up at his older brother, suddenly realizing that, once he left Calla, he might never see Jim Junior again.

"You take care, Jim. Don't put yourself in harm's way any more than you have to. Regardless of what they say, this war won't be easy or short."

"Don't worry about me," Jim Junior said as he rubbed the top of his right ear. "I'll be fine. There ain't a Yankee bullet big enough to bring me down. What about you? Where are you going to go? What are you going to do?"

"Deborah and I were going to get married and go out west before Weaver sent her away. I could go by myself, but this may not be the time to go that far. One day Deborah will come back, and I want to be here when she does. I suppose I'll ride north. For now. The only thing that's for sure is that I don't fit in the south anymore. I guess I never did."

"You be careful. They might be locking the border down soon. You could get shot as a spy or something. Kentucky's a mess. They can't figure out what they're going to do."

"It's a long border, and most of it is friendly. I'll be okay. Probably not a good idea to be seen going through Nashville and not enlisting, so I'll take the roads west of here and work my way around Nashville then head north toward Louisville. It'll be a meandering path, but it'll get me there eventually. Big Jim's got friends in government everywhere. If anybody asks, I'll tell them I'm delivering a message from Big Jim to Senator Crittenden in Kentucky. If Kentucky secedes, it won't happen soon so I'll probably be all right. I'll cross the Ohio in Louisville. There'll still be ferries working if I don't wait too long. And if Kentucky doesn't secede, the ferries won't be shut down at all. I'll find a job and stay up north until this is over. Then I'll come home and find Deborah. Weaver can't hide her from me forever."

"How much money do you have? It'll take a while before you can get a decent job. Don't you be taking any work that comes along. I don't want my brother having to sweat alongside Yankee rabble. You are a

Richardson, and that does stand for something, whether you understand it or not.”

Aaron smiled. “Well, I’m proud to share that name with you, Jim. I’ve got my life’s savings. Eighty-five dollars.”

“Here.” Jim Junior pulled a hundred dollars from under the flap in a corner of his wallet. “Take this.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Hell, yes, you can. I won’t be needing Yankee money any longer anyway. Now take it. When are you leaving?”

“There’s no need to hang around and pretend. I don’t want to deceive Big Jim, but I can’t go along with him. I might as well pack and go.”

“Now? It’s the middle of the afternoon. Give it a few days. It will be a while before they get the army organized.”

Aaron thought a second, then said, “Well, not now. But I need to leave soon.”

“Yeah, okay. I guess you do but give it a few days. I’ll be gone soon enough. Hang around a little longer. We’ll go fishing and hunting before you leave. It may be a long time before we see each other again.”

“Sure. That would be good. I’m going to miss you, Jim.”

Jim Junior rubbed his right ear. “Yeah, I’ll miss you, too, little brother. You take care, Bullseye.”

“You, too.”

“Fishing in the morning?”

“The one with the smallest fish has to jump in the creek.”

“Right after I push you in,” Jim Junior replied with a grin.

They shook hands then embraced momentarily. Aaron wanted to say something else, but he didn’t know what else to say. He turned and walked back toward the house. Life without his brother around, something he had never experienced. It was a sobering thought.