



*By Mike Peterson*  
*Illustrated by Christopher Baldwin*

## Chapter One

### The Letter

Jimmy's letter was on the kitchen table again.

The lantern on the table was turned down low, making a golden glow in the dark room.

Betsy went to the cabinet by the sink, reached up and dropped the two quarters from her hand into the shaving mug that sat next to the clock. They fell with a soft clink onto the other coins.

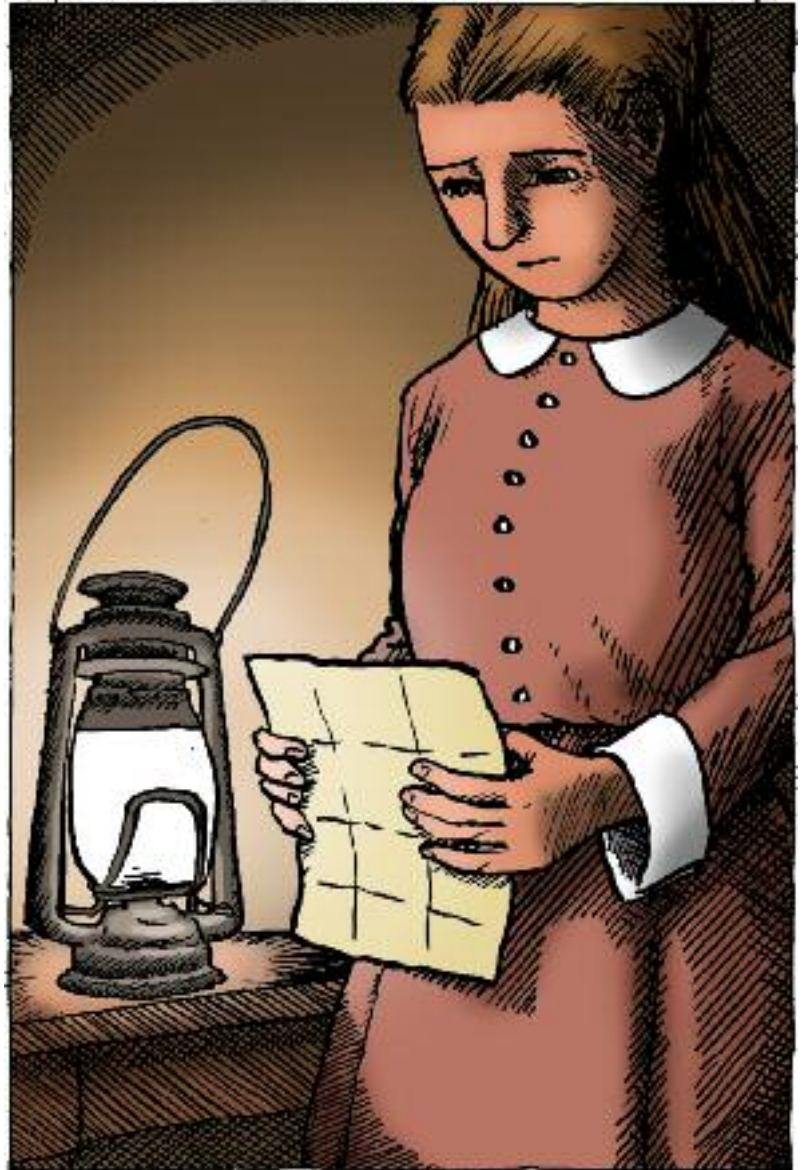
She untied the string of her cloak, gathered it from her shoulders and went out the kitchen door to hang it on its peg in the lean-to. It was early enough in the fall that she didn't need it during the day, but she was happy to have its warmth in the morning, walking to school, and at night, coming home from Mrs. Baxter's.

She went back inside for the lantern and walked across the dark yard into the small barn. The cow turned in her stall to watch as Betsy came in and went to the ladder.

She hung the lantern on a nail, climbed into the hayloft, took the fork from its pegs on the wall and pitched down several generous forkfuls of hay. Then she clambered back down and used the rake to gather it up by the wall for Pa to find in the morning.

Pa could pitch hay or any other work around the house, but his busted-up foot made it hard to climb ladders.

Betsy went back to the kitchen and turned the wick up on the lantern until the flame burned almost white. If Ma had gone to bed first, Pa would have blown out the lantern before he went to bed. It didn't matter; there was a glow from the coals in the front room fireplace and it wasn't that dark anyway.



But it was nice to come home to the lantern's welcoming glow. It was as if Ma had stayed up to give her a hug.

Jimmy's letter was another thing. It made her sad to think of Ma sitting at the kitchen table, alone after Pa had gone to bed, looking at Jimmy's letter and reading it slowly, yet again, again.

Ma had not had much schooling as a girl, and it was hard for her to read. She didn't like to, if she could get Betsy or Pa to read for her.

But she knew Jimmy's letter by heart. It had come in late March, nearly seven months ago. Betsy stood by the table and read it once again herself.

*"Dear Ma and Pa and Betsy:*

*"By now I am sure you know I am not with the Army and I suppose you are worried but I am alive and I am all right. Some of us got cut off in the fight at Knoxville and was captured by Longstreet. I was at Libby but now am at a prison in Georgia that they just opened called Andersonville. I got shot but just in the calf of my leg and it went right through. I could not run away but it is pretty much healed up and I won't even limp anymore when I come home. I hope it is soon. Ma, I remembered how you cared for Pa's foot and so I kept it draining like you did and it is going to just be two round scars one on each side. I do not know that I can send more letters. I would have from Libby but was sick from the wound. I am fine now, but there is not a lot of mail here. If you send some paper and a envelope I might get it but don't worry because I might not. Also money, same thing. Charlie Stout is here tell his folks and he said John Kelley but I have not seen him. Tom Baxter was wounded bad and died. Tell Martha he got her letter and knew about the baby and was glad for it. I will come home. Pray for me. I will come home.*

*"Your loving Jim*

*Andersonville, Georgia, March 10, 1864"*

Betsy read the last part again, the part about him coming home, as she always did. Then she folded the letter carefully, carried it into the front room and tucked it back into the Bible where it belonged.

They had all heard that the boys were missing, and then Charlie Stout wrote his parents a letter from Libby Prison in January. But they knew nothing about the others until Jimmy's letter came.

First Baptist Church took up a collection for Martha Baxter, who had a tiny baby to care for, and Mr. Jones, the sexton, told Betsy that, if she would help Mrs. Baxter with the baby and the house, the church would give her 50 cents a week.

Pa asked Ma if it was charity, but Ma said they didn't need charity before and they didn't need it now but somebody needed to help Mrs. Baxter and why shouldn't it be Betsy? She was 11 years old and already did most of the chores that Jimmy did before he went to the war.

Betsy opened the warming shelf over the oven and took out the plate with her dinner: A piece of last Sunday's ham with fried apples-and-onions.

The first fall apples were ripe but tart, better for cooking, especially with onions and a touch of brown sugar.

Betsy got a fork from the drawer and sat down to eat.

## Chapter Two

### The Widow Woman

Betsy could see the prison camp from Mrs. Baxter's front yard.

You couldn't see the Johnny Rebs; they were behind the tall wooden walls. The only men you could see were the guards with their rifles, up on the high platform that ran around the inside of the walls, looking down at the enemy prisoners.

It used to be you could pay 15 cents and go up a tower next to the camp and look down inside, but they closed that, and tore down all the little places beside it, where you could buy candy and drinks. The tower was still there, but only the Army used it now, to keep an extra eye on the rebel prisoners.

Betsy had never gone up the tower. Ma said decent people wouldn't do such a thing.

Pa had been in town when the first rebel soldiers were marched up to the prison, back when it was new. He said they were

dirty and looked like they hadn't eaten in a long time. Most of them didn't have jackets and some were barefoot, he said, and the scarecrow in Mr. Simmons's truck patch was dressed better than any of them.

The South didn't know when it was licked, Pa said. That's why they sent young boys and old men to war without decent clothes or food.

And that's why Jimmy couldn't come home.

In the beginning, when a soldier was captured, they'd exchange him for a soldier from the other side and he could go home. But Lincoln and Stanton figured that, if they kept sending the Johnny Rebs back to fight again, the war would never end.

So now Jimmy and Charlie Stout and John Kelley were all sitting in Andersonville waiting for the war to be over, and poor Tom Baxter was dead.

Some of the kids from school were down by the prison wall, trying to peek through the cracks to see inside.



Betsy turned her back and went back to picking up dead branches from Mrs. Baxter's lawn. She still had to gather eggs and she'd promised Mrs. Baxter she'd clean the chimney lamps today and trim all the wicks.

Mrs. Baxter was sitting in the rocker on the front porch with Baby Tommy asleep in her arms. She said the only time she ever got to sit down for even a minute was when Betsy came to help.

"If some of those seem like they'd burn all right, could you tuck them under the back porch?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Betsy said, and started around back with an armload of branches.

There was a time when Mrs. Baxter wasn't "ma'am." She was just Martha Vanderleese when she and Tom and Jimmy had been in school. She was a year younger than Jimmy, and eight years older than Betsy.

But now she was a widow woman and a mother, and so, even though she wasn't but nineteen, she was "ma'am" and "Mrs. Baxter" to Betsy.

Betsy went into the chicken yard, closed the gate behind her and shooed the hens out of the henhouse, then ducked inside and began to check their boxes for eggs.

She knew quite a bit about Mrs. Baxter's situation. Mrs. Baxter talked to her like a friend sometimes, at the end of the day. She'd make lemonade or ginger water if it was hot out, or a pot of tea if it wasn't, and they'd sit for a few minutes before Betsy went home.

Mrs. Baxter didn't have many friends to talk to. Her father's farm was a ways out of town. One of her sisters had married a man from Cooperstown and the other two had families of their own to care for, though they came by to visit sometimes.

But Betsy was there every day after school, and they talked. And people talked about her, too, in a kind way, but in a worried way, and everybody had an idea of what she ought to do.

Some thought she and the baby should go live with Tom's parents in their big house downtown. Some thought she should go back to the farm and keep house for her father.

And they all said it was far too early to talk of such things, but a pretty young widow like Martha would surely find another husband, once the war was over and some time had passed.

What Mrs. Baxter wanted to do, she said, was to stay put and raise their son in the house that Tom had bought for them. She could do that if she could get her widow's pension, but first she had to prove that they were married, and that he was a soldier and that he died in the war.

Then she'd have eight dollars a month, and with a truck patch and some chickens, a little thrift and maybe taking in some mending, she and little Tommy could get by. She had filled out all the papers, but the only proof she had that Tom was dead was Jimmy's letter.

She copied it out and sent everything to the Pension Office. Some people said it wasn't enough and others said it just took time, but it had been four months and she hadn't heard back.

Meanwhile, Betsy couldn't understand how she could sit on her porch and look down the block to where they kept the people who had killed poor Tom.

## Chapter Three

### News from the South

Miss Moyer dismissed school early on Saturday. The farm children were still working the harvest and some of them hadn't even started back to school yet, and she said it would be a good chance for the town children to catch up their chores before the Sabbath.

Betsy was helping Ma put up pickles. Their neighbors next door, the Pierces, didn't have a cow, and so Betsy's family sometimes gave them milk when there was extra. But, because they had no barn, the Pierces had space for a bigger truck patch than most people in town, and so Mrs. Pierce had come to the door with a bushel of cucumbers on Friday.



Now the kitchen was filling with steam as Betsy and Ma boiled jars to hold the pickles.

Pa usually worked at the kitchen table where he could stretch his leg out and rest his bad foot. He had been a brakeman on the railroad until eight years ago, when two cars came together and smashed his right ankle.

Fortunately, he had finished grammar school and two years of high school before he went to work on the railroad, and he'd always had a good head for figures. Now he kept books for some of the businesses in town and for several of the farmers.

But the table was full of jars and spices and cucumbers today, so he was at the desk in the front room, bent over the hardware store's ledger, copying numbers from a pile of sales slips into neat columns.

As Betsy was bringing in the coffee pot from the cook stove to set it on the woodstove, she

saw a flash of motion through the window of someone coming up the front walk.

"It's Mr. Jackson!" she said, and Pa turned in his chair as she opened the door.

The bank president came into the room. "Hello, Betsy," he said, but then turned to Pa, who was getting to his feet. "This came for you, Harrington," he said. "I thought I'd better bring it right over."

Betsy looked at the letter as Pa turned it over in his hands. It was addressed to Pa, but she didn't recognize the handwriting.

"What is this?" Pa asked. "There's no postmark, no stamps."

"It came inside another envelope," Mr. Jackson explained. "From my brother in Baltimore. You'll want to call your wife in."

Pa continued to look at him, puzzled, and the banker smiled. "My brother knows a lot of people in a lot of places," he said. Then he went to the door. "I'll give you some privacy, Harrington, but remember, we're all with you. I hope it's good news."

Ma was coming from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel as the front door closed. "Andrew?" she asked.

Pa opened the envelope and then sat down heavily in his chair as he saw the handwriting on the letter inside.

He unfolded it and began to read aloud:

*"Dear Family:*

*"I hope this letter finds you in good health. I traded grandfather's pocket watch to get it out of here and mailed. That was the last thing of value I had, but if he plays me fair, it was worth it.*

*"I don't know what you have heard of Andersonville if anything but if Hell were a place on earth this would surely be it. It is just a high fence and men with guns to keep us in and little more. Whatever shelter we have we make ourselves from sticks and rags. There is little food and everyone sick and men dying wherever you look.*

*"But I am doing as well as anyone and better than most. My leg is all healed. I have lost a bit of weight but I am healthy. There is a group of us that take care of each other and you should not worry about me.*

*"I am sad to report poor Charlie Stout is gone. John Kelley is here and we tried to help Charlie and give him some of our food but he just went. Tell his folks John and me are awful sorry we couldn't help him but we sure tried. Tell them he didn't suffer too much. He just kind of wasted away.*

*"John is in the group with me and we watch out for each other. Elmira boys got to stick together, we say.*

*"Nobody ever gets mail so I don't think you can send me anything. But you tell Father Abraham and everybody up north to send 300,000 more, because we sure do want this war over soon. We heard that Sherman is here in Georgia and we pray he will come throw open these gates.*

*"On that happy day, I will come home. John says tell his folks the same*

*"Your loving son and brother,*

*"Jim."*

Nobody said anything for several minutes.

Finally, Pa folded the letter carefully and put it back in its envelope. "Betsy," he said, in a

quiet voice, "do you know where the Kelleys live?"

"Up by the girls' college," Betsy answered.

"Go tell them the news, that their Johnny is all right. Tell them we'll bring the letter by later for them to read."

Pa began to say something to Ma, but she had already taken off her apron. "Let me just shut the damper on the stove," she said.

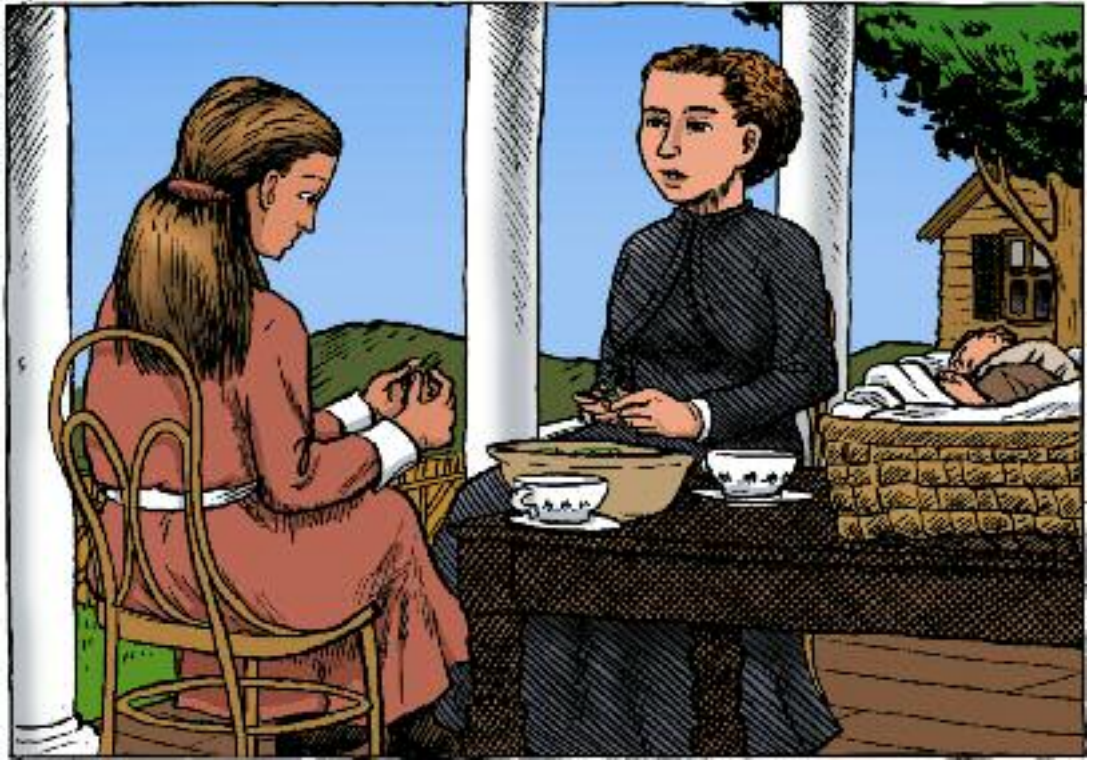
Ma and Pa would have to go visit Mr. and Mrs. Stout.



## Chapter Four Kindness

"It was a kindness for him to say all that about Charlie," Mrs. Baxter said. "Your brother is a kind and thoughtful man."

She had done laundry that day and, when Betsy came from school, they hung the sheets on the line together. Now they were sitting on the porch, shelling peas and drinking cambric tea while the baby napped beside them in a basket of clean diapers and towels.



Betsy kept her eyes down at the bowl in her lap as she spoke. "I don't know that he said anything very comforting," she replied. "Poor Charlie couldn't even eat. It seemed very sad."

"Even bad news is news," Mrs. Baxter insisted. "It helps to have a picture in your mind, to know at least a little about it." She reached up to dump the peas from her bowl into the larger pot on the table, then took another handful of pods and put them in her lap.

"To know that your Jim and that John Kelley were there with Charlie at the end, that has to gladden his parents' hearts amid the sorrow," she went on. "I know it gladdened my heart to hear that my Tom knew we had a son. I was afraid my letter didn't get to him in time, that he never saw it."

They said nothing for several minutes, then Mrs. Baxter spoke again. "I shouldn't say this, but I'm glad John is there." Betsy looked up for a moment, but didn't say anything.

"Goodness knows, I don't mean I'm glad poor John is in prison," Mrs. Baxter went on. "But I'm glad Jim isn't alone. John was never a close friend; Jim and Tom and Charlie were always together while John was always working at his family's store. Still, he is from home. I'm glad Jim has a friend for company."

"I'm not glad of anything," Betsy declared. "And I don't care about anything else. I just want Jimmy to come home! Nothing else. Nothing else will ever make me glad again, ever!"

Mrs. Baxter's eyes began to fill with tears and Betsy suddenly realized the terrible thing she had said. Her brother might yet come home, but Mrs. Baxter's husband never would.

"I'm sorry!" she said, and now she began to cry, too. "I didn't mean it!"

"Of course you did!" Mrs. Baxter said. "Of course you meant it!"

And she put her bowl on the table, and took Betsy's bowl, and then reached over and the young widow and the young sister held each other and wept. It was the first time Betsy had cried since the day Jimmy's first letter arrived and they knew he was a prisoner.

But now little Tommy began to cry, too. Mrs. Baxter wiped her eyes, and laughed, and picked him up from the laundry basket. "Did we wake you up, little fellow?" she asked. "Did those foolish girls wake you up with their caterwauling?"

She played with the baby until he stopped crying, and then put him to her shoulder and patted his back.

"When I first heard about Tom, when your parents brought Jim's letter over, I thought my life was over," she said. "I thought I would never smile again. And then I looked at little Tommy and I knew there was much, much left before me."

She reached out and cupped Betsy's cheek gently with one hand. "Jimmy is coming home. I know he is. Jimmy will come home."

\*\*\*\*

Betsy was thinking about Tom Baxter, and his widow, and his son, and her own brother, as she walked home. She barely heard the wagon slow to a stop until the voice said, "Would you like a ride?"

It was John Jones, the sexton at her church, the man who had given her the job of helping Mrs. Baxter after school. He held a hand down, inviting her to come up on the seat beside him.

Betsy took his hand and stepped up onto the wagon. "Thank you, Mr. Jones," she said, and the black man smiled back.

"Mrs. Baxter says you are a great help to her," he said, as he shook the reins and started his horses up again. Betsy wasn't sure what to say, so she said nothing, and, after a moment, Mr. Jones spoke up again. "I heard you had a letter."

"Yes," Betsy answered.

"He's going to be all right," Mr. Jones said. "He's going to come home. I feel it in my bones!"

Betsy still didn't know what to say. Mr. Jones had been a slave in Virginia, until he and his brothers escaped and came north to freedom, in Elmira.

Then he became a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Nobody in Elmira talked about it, but everybody knew it: John Jones had helped a lot of slaves to freedom, sending them in railroad boxcars up to Canada, where nobody owned people, where people were free.

But now John Jones busied himself with burying the rebel soldiers, those who enlisted to preserve slavery but then died in the Elmira prison.

He didn't just deliver them to the cemetery. He kept track of each grave. Mr. Jones even put a slip of paper with the name of the prisoner and his regiment in a bottle around each dead man's neck, so that that particular reb's body could never be lost and forgotten.

Betsy rode beside Mr. Jones in silence until they came to her house.

## Chapter Five Tunnelers

"I don't want you going to Martha Baxter's today," Ma said. "You come straight home from school."

Betsy said nothing. Sometimes, she knew, that was the best idea and, sure enough, Pa came to her aid. "Well, I imagine they got a great deal farther than that," he said.

Betsy had been coming back from the henhouse with a basket of eggs that morning when the first mounted soldiers had come racing down their street.

Pa went out front to see what the commotion was, and a soldier stopped to ask if he had seen anyone in the area.

"It appears that some prisoners escaped through a tunnel last night," Pa reported when he came back inside. "I'd better walk with you to school."

While Betsy washed up at the pump in the kitchen sink, Pa got his tall lace-up boots from the lean-to and began to put them on. They weren't very comfortable, but they held his bad ankle firmly and made it hurt less when he had to walk any distance.

That was when Ma said she shouldn't go to Mrs. Baxter's after school.

"My goodness, they're not going to stop running a block from the camp," Pa went on. "She'd be in more danger coming back here than going to Martha's."

Ma looked shocked. "Do you think they'd come here?" she asked, but Pa just laughed.

"They'll be halfway to Pennsylvania by noon," he predicted. "If they have any sense at all, they're either floating down the river by now or they've jumped an eastbound freight. Either



way, they're gone from here and good riddance to the rebel scum."

Betsy put on her cloak and picked up her books, then gave her mother a quick hug and went out the back door with Pa. "Do you think they'll catch them?" she asked.

"Hard to say, kitten," Pa replied. "There's plenty of woods and open land hereabouts. If the army had dogs, they might be able to track them down, but they don't. I'm sure if anybody does catch them, it won't be around here. They're long gone."

At school, the escape was all anybody was talking about, and everyone had heard a different story.

Some said there were 30 that got out, others said it was five. Dan Harris said they'd stolen guns from the prison armory, but nobody believed that. Finally, Miss Moyer said it was time for class and they would all have to wait for the next day's newspaper to find out the facts.

\*\*\*

Ten prisoners had escaped, Betsy learned after class, and none had been recaptured.

Mr. Jones had been driving by with an empty wagon as she was walking down the street and offered her a ride to Mrs. Baxter's house.

She knew why he seemed to always be driving his wagon down the street. The wagon could hold eight pine coffins at a time. Some days, he only made one trip from the camp to the cemetery. Other days, he might make two or three trips.

Mr. Jones said the prisoners had escaped sometime in the night, and nobody knew they were missing until morning roll call. There were 10 men missing, and he agreed with her father: By now, they were as far from Elmira as they could possibly get.

"I hope they get caught," Betsy declared.

"They might," he nodded, and clicked his tongue to the off-horse, slapping it lightly with the reins to get it to keep pace with its partner.

Betsy studied his face for a moment, but he was watching the horses and she couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Do you like them?" she asked, and he turned to look at her.

"Well, I don't hate them," he answered. "I don't hate anybody."

"I do!" Betsy said. "If it weren't for them, Charlie Stout and Tom Baxter would still be alive, and my brother Jimmy would be home where he belongs. I hate them all!"

Mr. Jones didn't say anything, and Betsy finally spoke again. "You should know. You were a slave."

"Yes, I was," he agreed.

"You should hate them, too," she argued. "They're fighting for slavery!"

Mr. Jones pulled the horses to a stop. "Betsy, I don't know what those boys were fighting for before, but they're not fighting anybody now. And it doesn't matter. We're going to win this war. By now, everybody knows that. When the war is over, slavery is over and then everyone can go home."

"Everyone who is still alive," she said.

"Your Jim will come home," Mr. Jones said. "Didn't he say so in his letters?"

"How many have said that who never will?" she asked, but Mr. Jones only shook the reins

and made the horses start up again.

He stopped the wagon when they reached Mrs. Baxter's. Betsy stepped down from the buckboard, but Mr. Jones had something else to say.

"I could have stayed in Virginia," he told her. "But my two brothers and I said we weren't going to be slaves anymore, and we walked all the way from Virginia to Elmira and became free. And others said they weren't going to be slaves, and came here and I put them on trains to Canada, and they became free. The first step any of us took was to decide we were going to be free.

"Your brother said he's coming home, and I believe him. You should, too."

## Chapter Six Counting Eggs

“A little higher,” Mrs. Baxter said. “There.”

Betsy held her hands up and apart to stretch the skein of light brown yarn while Mrs. Baxter rolled it into a ball. Mrs. Prestridge had dropped off several skeins of yarn that she had just had spun at the mill from her sheep’s fleeces.

“I had no idea it would come to so much with just those few fleeces!” she declared. “I couldn’t possibly use all this yarn!”

Betsy knew that there was no such thing as “too much yarn,” but she also knew that there was such a thing as “too much charity,” so she kept quiet and



smiled while Mrs. Baxter thanked Mrs. Prestridge and invited her to have some tea.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to interrupt your day,” Mrs. Prestridge said, but Mrs. Baxter insisted.

“It’s no interruption at all,” she said. “Betsy and I were just about to have a cup, and I’ve made tea cakes. Besides, Tommy will be up from his nap soon, and he interrupts everything!”

And so they had tea with Mrs. Prestridge, who remembered Mrs. Baxter back when she was Betsy’s age, and Betsy back when she was Tommy’s age, and who absolutely couldn’t believe how big Tommy was growing.

After Mrs. Prestridge left, Betsy had gone out to the henhouse to collect the day’s eggs while Mrs. Baxter washed up the tea things.

Now Tommy was playing with a wooden spoon and a tin bowl on the floor while his mother rolled the yarn into balls.

“What do you feed your chickens?” Betsy asked, as she held her hands still and kept the

yarn tight but not stretched.

Mrs. Baxter shrugged. "This and that. Turnip tops and potato peels and table scraps. I don't give them as much cracked corn these days, because I'm nearly out. My father will be bringing his corn to the mill soon, though, and I'm sure he'll give me some as soon as he has it ground. Why do you ask?"

"Our hens have slowed down the past few days," Betsy said. "The leaves have mostly turned, but it seems early for them to stop laying. We've barely had any hard frost."

"Well, I'm sure they don't get many grasshoppers and bugs now," Mrs. Baxter said.

"No, but your chickens are still laying the same as all summer," Betsy replied. "I used to get a dozen or 14 eggs a day, but, for the past few days, they've only laid eight or ten. I hope they're not sick, but their eyes seem bright and they run around same as ever."

Mrs. Baxter wound up the ball in her hand and tucked the end of the yarn in to hold it. "Ready to do another?" she asked, reaching for another skein. Betsy shook her arms to loosen them up, then held out her hands while Mrs. Baxter untwisted the skein and slipped it over them.

"Are you sure nothing's getting into them?" she asked. "A skunk or a raccoon?" She reached out and gently raised Betsy's hands to the right height.

"There's no mess, no pieces of shell," Betsy said. "And a 'coon could sneak one or two out, but to take four or five, he'd wake them all up for sure. If something is getting in there, it's being awful clean and quiet."

Mrs. Baxter thought for a moment. "Well, I'm sure I don't know. But my father will come into town for church this Sunday. You should ask him after the service. He'll have some ideas."

\*\*\*

Betsy cut a thick slice of bread from the loaf. "May I take a piece of cheese to school for lunch?" she asked.

Uncle Henry had sent a small wheel of sharp Herkimer cheese to Ma for her birthday and it was under a glass cover on the sideboard.

Ma looked over from the stove, where she was cooking breakfast. "A small one," she said. "Take an apple to eat with it."

Betsy wrapped the bread and cheese in butcher paper and put them in her satchel along with her reader and her arithmetic book, then dropped in an apple from the wooden bowl on the table. She hung the satchel on the back of her chair and sat down.

Ma placed a bowl of hot porridge in front of her and brought the pitcher of buttermilk to pour over it. She went back to the stove and didn't even turn around before she said, "Don't wolf your food."

"I'm late," Betsy said. "Miss Moyer is taking my arithmetic group first today. I can't be late."

"You'll be late if you choke to death," Ma replied, and brought her own bowl to the table as Betsy was scooping up the last bits of oatmeal.



Betsy thought to herself that it would be hard to choke to death on porridge, but just pushed her chair back, put her empty bowl next to the sink, took her satchel and went to the door as Pa was coming in with the milk bucket.

Pa put the bucket of fresh, warm milk on the stand near the door. "Something's wrong with the cow," he said. "Last few days, she hasn't given near as much milk as she had been."

Betsy swept her cloak around her shoulders and tied it around her neck. As she went out the door, she frowned.

She'd never heard of a skunk or a raccoon that could milk a cow.

## Chapter Seven

### The Egg Thief

By Sunday morning, Betsy knew why there had been fewer eggs lately, but she still had to be polite to Mrs. Baxter's father.

He came up to her as church was getting out. "Martha tells me you're having trouble with your hens," he said.

Pa and Ma were talking to someone else, and Betsy hoped they wouldn't notice Mr. Vanderleese and join in the conversation.

"Oh, they're much better now, thank you," she said. "I think they must have just been a little under the weather for a time."

"Well, you need to watch them carefully," Mr. Vanderleese cautioned. "One gets a little sickly and the next thing you know, the whole flock is gone. I've seen it happen too many times. Chickens are funny creatures that way."

"No, they're fine," she said. "I checked their beaks for crustiness around their nostrils, and there wasn't a bit of it, nor around their eyes, either. They walk around with just as much spring as ever. Feathers bright and smooth just like it was Fair Week!"

"Well, that's good, young lady, but you keep a sharp lookout for a time, you hear?" he said. "It can sneak up on you sudden."

"I surely will, sir," she said, and tried to change the subject. "Are you bringing your corn to the mill this week?"

"Not sure," he admitted. "We've had it cut and put up in shocks for some time. I'm thinking maybe the end of this week, if it stays sunny like it has. I know Martha must be pret' near out



of chicken feed by now, though she'd never complain."

"It's getting low, sir, yes," Betsy said.

Mr. Vanderleese nodded and looked across the churchyard to where some women were fussing over his grandson while Mrs. Baxter watched and smiled.

"That girl never does complain, and that's good," he said. "I taught my girls it does no good to complain. But I wish she would ask for help when she needs it. Self-reliance is good, but being stubborn, well, now, that's a fault."

He glanced down at Betsy. "You could always tell me if she needed anything, you know. You'd be doing us both a favor."

"Just some cracked corn," Betsy said, then added. "And her widow's pension, but you can't do much to hurry that, I guess."

"That I can't," he agreed. "And I think it's a disgrace. To lose a fine young man like Tom and have them act like he never existed? It's been near eight months now! A disgrace!"

For a moment, he looked like he was going to spit, but he stopped and put a rough hand on Betsy's shoulder instead, and his voice softened. "I want you to know, Miss Betsy, how much our family appreciates the way you and the other folks from the church help our Martha. We are truly grateful."

\*\*\*

Betsy had learned the truth about the chickens the night before.

When she came home Saturday evening, she took the lantern as she always did and went out to the barn. She hung the lantern on a nail as she always did.

As she climbed the ladder, the lantern below threw her shadow on the roof among all the other shadows it cast, but it lit things up enough that she could see the hay fork in its place on the wall.

The floor was in shadow, though, and, when something crunched under her foot, she had to bend down and feel under her boot to find out what it was.

An eggshell.

Whatever had been stealing eggs from the hens had been bringing them up here to eat. And whatever had been stealing eggs from the hens had also been stealing milk from the cow.

And Betsy wished, oh, how she wished, that it wasn't too dangerous to bring a flame up into the hayloft, because right now she wished like anything that the lantern were in her hand so she could see what was up there in that loft with her.

Instead, she walked calmly over to the wall and took down the stout, wooden-handled fork with its two, long, sharp iron tines, just as if she were about to throw hay down to the barn floor as she always did, and she went over to the pile of hay in the corner of the loft, just as she always did.

And she pulled back the fork just as if she were going to take a big forkful of hay as she always did, and she said, "You come on out of there or I will stick you like a bullfrog!"

Nothing happened.

Betsy took one step closer and held the fork back even farther. "I will! I swear! And I don't

care what I hit!"

And the hay moved, and then a bare foot came out at the bottom and two hands, raised, came out of the top and slowly, a raggedy, long-haired, dirty young man with a scraggly beard rose up out of the hay into the half-light from the lantern below.

"I give up, ma'am, please don't stick me," he said, in an accent that told Betsy exactly who he was and where he had come from.

"You're a reb!" she declared. "You're one of those Johnny Rebs who tunneled out of the prison last week!"

"Yes, I am, ma'am," he confessed, and his left leg buckled and he fell to the floor.

## Chapter Eight

### A Louisiana Tiger

“Stand back up!” Betsy ordered, but the reb stayed on the floor of the dark hayloft where he’d fallen.

“I can’t, ma’am,” he said. “It’s my ankle. I did something to it and I can’t hardly walk at all.”

“You can walk well enough to climb down the ladder and get into our hen house,” Betsy replied, holding the hayfork nearly in his face. “And well enough to milk our cow and climb back up here.”

“That took me near all night, ma’am,” he confessed. He looked at the sharp tines of the hay fork. “Could you just lower that fork a little, please? I ain’t gonna jump you. I can’t hardly even try.”

Betsy ignored the request. “Slide over to the edge and dangle your foot down in the light so I can see it,” she ordered.

His tattered trousers barely reached below his knees, and, as he put his foot over the edge of the loft into the light of the lantern, his dirty, bare leg was a sickly yellow. His ankle was swollen badly, an angry purple-green.

“I was running in the dark and I stepped in a woodchuck hole or something,” he said. “It caught tight and I fell. Might have busted it.”

“You surely did something to it,” Betsy agreed, staring at the joint.

“That’s why I’m still here,” he said. “I come out of the tunnel and seen one of the fellows running ahead, but this happened before I could catch up with him. I reckon they’re halfway home if they ain’t been caught.”



"They haven't been," she said, and realized she shouldn't have told him that. She shouldn't tell him anything. She should turn him in to the sheriff or to the army.

"It's probably not half as bad as it looks," she said. "They'll take care of it back in the prison."

His eyes widened and he scooted back away towards the hay, dragging his bad leg. "You can't!" he said. "For the love of heaven, don't turn me in. I can't go back there. I'll die! They're all dying in there!"

Betsy didn't lower the fork, but she took a half step back. "Well, why wouldn't I turn you in? It's rebels like you that got my brother captured and who killed his friends."

"Your brother's a prisoner?" he asked, and Betsy wished she hadn't told him.

"He's in Andersonville," she said, and saw his face when he heard the name. Even in prison, he'd heard about Andersonville.

"Where did he get took prisoner?" he asked.

"Knoxville, just before Christmas," she said. "He was with Shackleford's troops."

"I didn't have nothing to do with anything in Knoxville, ma'am. I've never even been there," the reb declared. "I was in Virginia, clean on the other side of the country. I'm from Louisiana. My name is Silas Dussault. That's a Louisiana name, sure enough."

"I don't care what your name is and I don't care where you're from," she said. "Rebels are rebels. You're all part of the same army."

"By the time your brother got caught, I was in Fort Delaware prison," he said. "I got caught at Rappahannock, with General Harry Hays and the Louisiana Tigers."

"And if I let you go, Silas Dussault, you'll go right back and join up with your Louisiana Tigers all over again," Betsy said, "and this war will never be over."

"I ain't joining up with nobody no more," the reb promised. "I just want to go home, ma'am. I've had all the war I want, I swear."

"Quit calling me 'ma'am'," Betsy snapped. "I'm only 11 years old."

"It's dark in here," he said. "Alls I can see is that fork in my face. I do wish you'd lower it a bit."

Betsy let the hay fork dip slightly, but kept it ready, just in case. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes.

"My little brother Lucius is just about your age," Silas said at last. "He turned 12 last month, I guess."

"I don't care to hear about your family, either," Betsy said. She started to swing the fork back and Silas covered his head, but she just snapped at him. "Get out of the way so I can throw some hay down for the cow."

He backed up and she took up a forkful and pitched it over the edge.

"I'll bring you something to eat in the morning," she said. "Stay away from our hens and our cow."

Betsy finished pitching down the hay, returned the fork to its pegs and went back to the house without another word, though she heard Silas call a quiet "good night" as she climbed down the ladder.

She was glad Ma and Pa were in bed. She took her dinner from the warming shelf over the oven: a chicken leg, baked beans and a piece of cornbread.

Betsy ate the chicken and beans, then cut a sliver from the wheel of Herkimer cheese, wrapped it in a napkin with the cornbread and hid it in her boots in the lean-to.

She was about to blow out the lantern and go to bed, but she paused for a moment and left it lit while she went to the Bible in the parlor.

A few moments later, Betsy came back into the kitchen with Jimmy's letters and sat at the table to read them by lantern light.

## Chapter Nine

### A Decision

It was no accident that Betsy was part way between the school and Mrs. Baxter's house Monday as Mr. Jones came by with his wagon.

Silas was still in the hayloft. She'd been sneaking him food, morning and night, since she found him Saturday and she still didn't know what to do about him.

So she'd been walking extra slow, hoping that Mr. Jones would come along and offer her a ride.

He could tell she had something on her mind, but he just drove the horses and waited until she spoke up.

"You used to break the law," she said, and he turned to look at her, sitting next to him on the wagon box.

But he didn't say anything, so she spoke up again. "What you did was against the law, putting slaves on the trains to Canada."

"Did you want to ask me a question about that?" he asked.

Betsy thought a moment. "I guess not," she replied, but after they driven along a little further, she got up her nerve again. "How many people do you figure knew what you were doing?"

"Besides the people I was doing it with? I truly don't know," he admitted. "I tried to be quiet about it, so people could pretend they didn't know, if that was what they wanted to do. What they needed to do. But I guess most of the town probably knew at least some of it."

"I guess if they thought it was so wrong, somebody would have told on you."

"That seems likely," he said.

"They probably talked about it, among themselves."





"I suppose they probably did," he agreed.

Betsy looked across to the low mountains on the other side of the Chemung River, all red and yellow with autumn leaves. "How much did you worry about it?"

John Jones shrugged. "About people talking about it, or about somebody getting me arrested for it?"

"Both."

"Not a bit." He raised his hands slightly towards his chest, tightening the knot of reins in his hands and bringing the horses to a halt at Mrs. Baxter's house. Then he turned towards Betsy.

"What I did was right," he said. "I don't know what anybody thought about it, or what they said about it, and I never knew but that maybe I'd go to jail for it. But I know I did what was right."

"Yes," Betsy agreed. "You did what was right."

She climbed down from the wagon as Mrs. Baxter came to the front porch. "Thank you!" Betsy called after Mr. Jones, as he drove away.

\*\*\*

That night, when Betsy came up to the loft, she had a feed sack in one hand, and whatever was in it clunked on the ladder as she climbed.

"You've got to go tonight," she said.

"But I can't hardly walk," Silas started to protest. Betsy cut him off.

"You can ride back to the prison or you can walk home," she said. "But I can't hide you here anymore. Put your foot out."

Silas extended his leg and Betsy took some long strips of cloth from the sack.

"Now, watch carefully. I've seen my ma wrap my pa's bad foot a hundred times." She began to wind the cloth around Silas's ankle.

"There's some potatoes in there that you can bake in the ashes," she said. "I was going to put in apples, but there's still apples left on the trees, and under them, too. You'll find plenty of apples."

Silas watched her bandaging, shifting slightly and wincing a few times as she moved his foot.

"There's a tin cup and a small bag of oatmeal that you can cook in it," Betsy said. "I couldn't sneak you any more bread or cheese, but there's a can of sardines and a piece of paper with some matches folded up in it. Watch they don't strike each other; you might want to put them in your pocket."

"My pockets ain't been proper pockets for months," Silas said. "They'd fall right out."

Betsy looked at him in the shadows and lantern light from below. She should have brought a pair of Jim's breeches, but she didn't want to sneak back into the house now.

"What can't be cured must be endured," she said, and tucked the end of the long bandage in to hold it snugly. "If you get to where you can't feel your toes, loosen up those windings," she said.

She reached into the sack and drew out a pair of tall hunting boots. "These are my brother's," she said. "They'll hold your ankle in place. My pa has a pair just like them that he wears when he has to walk more than a little ways."

"God bless you, Betsy," Silas said, as she loosened the laces on the boot for his bad foot.

"Don't ask Him to bless me," she said. "They're Jimmy's boots and he's the one needs blessing anyway."

"I surely will pray for your Jimmy, Betsy," Silas said. "I surely will."

She helped him with the second boot and they climbed down the ladder.

Betsy and Silas stood in the moonlit barnyard.

"The Chemung's four blocks that way," she pointed. "Downstream is Pennsylvania and the Susquehanna River and that'll take you clear to Maryland."

Silas slung the bag over his shoulder and started to limp away, then turned back as if to say something more.

"Go home," Betsy said. "Your family's waiting."