

Young slave Gabriel Alexander, who is learning to be a horse handler like his father, dreams of becoming a famous jockey one day. But when the violence of war threatens his Kentucky homeland, it is up to Gabriel to put his dreams aside and protect the horses he loves.

"At the core of this stirring historical novel is the question of what freedom means... The boy's first-person, present-tense narrative brings close the thrilling horse racing—on the plantation, at the race course, and in the war—and the African American history in all its complexity." —Booklist

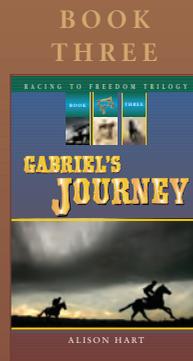
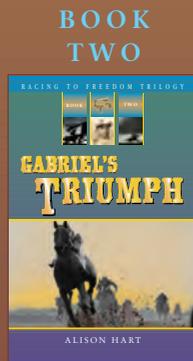
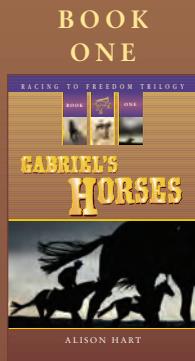
"Readers will find this wonderful blend of history and horses appealing." —School Library Journal



GABRIEL'S HORSES

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RACING TO FREEDOM TRILOGY



ALISON HART

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To John L. Heatwole
Dedicated Historian, Writer, and Friend
—A. H.

CHAPTER ONE

The wrap goes like this, Gabriel,” Pa tells me as he tugs the strip of rag around the horse’s front leg. Stooped in the straw, I watch with hawk eyes. When Pa shows me something, I take note. Pa’s the best horseman in Kentucky, and I aim to follow in his path. Besides, any fool knows that wrapping a racehorse’s legs right is almost as important as riding him right.

“Keep the cotton wadding smooth,” Pa adds, his forehead as furrowed and brown as a plowed field. “That’s what protects the legs.”

“Yes sir.” I feel a warm tickle on my neck. Tenpenny’s lipping my hair. “Get away, horse.” I swat his muzzle playfully. Tenpenny is one of my favorites. Tomorrow, Master Giles is racing him in Lexington, and since I’m the lightest boy at Woodville Farm, I get to ride him the eight miles to the track.

At the thought of the journey, my belly churns. Sure, it ain’t as exciting as jockeying Tenpenny in a race. That’s Jackson’s job. But this trip has got me plenty stirred up. I’ve

never been to the big city of Lexington, or a racetrack either. Pa and Jackson have told me lots about both places, but that ain't the same as seeing with my own eyes.

Pa does the last wrap, then rises. "Finish grooming Penny. Make him shine the way Mister Giles likes. Then get ready to go. We head out after sunrise."

Using the softest bristles, I polish Tenpenny's gray flanks. Pa was born free, so he calls my master, Winston Giles, *mister*.

When I ask Ma why I have to call him master, she tells me it's 'cause I'm a slave chile. "I ain't no chile," I tell her. "I'm almost thirteen. A man."

Ma chuckles like I said something humorous. Then I smile, too, 'cause I like making Ma laugh. Since Mistress Jane, Master Giles's wife, caught the fever, there ain't been much joy in Ma's heart.

Standing back, I eye Tenpenny. He gleams as bright as Mistress Jane's silver tea tray. "You gonna win this race, Penny," I tell him as I stroke his silky neck.

Outside the stall, I hear Jackson whistling. Jackson is Woodville Farm's jockey. I swear he could ride a hog and win. All spring he's been teaching me how to ride like him. He says I've got the talent, too, so I practice every morning, hunching low on the horse's neck when we gallop the grassy track that winds through Master's fields.

"You got my horse ready, boy?" Jackson asks as he throws open the stall door. He's short and bandy-legged with a chest like a rain barrel. He's chewing on a stalk of hay. A checked cap slants low on his head like he's some Louisville dandy.

"Who wants to know?" I sass back.

Jackson cuffs me on the head. "You best show respect to the world's greatest jockey." Sticking his thumbs in his vest, he puffs out his chest.

"You ain't the world's greatest jockey," I say. "That's Abe Hawkins."

Many nights I've heard the story of how Abe Hawkins, an ex-slave from the South, beat the famous white jockey Gilpatrick in St. Louis. Last May Pa and Jackson traveled to St. Louis with Master Giles to see the races. Jackson said Hawkins even had his name "Abe" mentioned in an article in the *New York Herald*.

"When you beat Gilpatrick, then I'll show you some respect," I say, getting in one last jab.

Jackson chuckles at my joshing. Then his dark face grows serious. Like Pa, Jackson knows horses better than he knows himself. Thumbs still hooked in his vest, he walks around Tenpenny.

I follow behind like his shadow, trying to see with his smart eyes.

"Pa's got him wrapped for the walk to Lexington." I pat the colt's flank.

Jackson nods, his checked cap bobbing. "Colt looks fine, Gabriel," he says before leaving. "Should win tomorrow, I reckon."

I grin proud. When Jackson calls me Gabriel, I know he's mighty pleased.

"Be back in a jump," I tell Tenpenny, rubbing his nose. "I gotta say goodbye to the other horses."

I stop first at Captain Conrad's stall. He's another colt in training. I give his flank a quick pat and head to blind Patterson's stall. When I open the door, he pricks his ears. I hum "Camptown Races" to let him know it's me.

When Patterson was a colt, he won so many races that Pa lost count. Then one day he broke into the corn bin. Ate until he about bust. The horse doctor bled him, but the corn did something bad and Patterson started going blind. Now he bides his time in the pasture with the mares.

"I'll be gone for two days, but Jase or Tandy will turn you out," I tell the bay stallion. Jase and Tandy are the other grooms. Both are younger than me, but they care for the horses right fine.

Patterson whiffles my cheek. I shut the stall door and run out of the barn to say goodbye to the younguns. The morning sun's rising over Woodville Farm. Pastures surround the three red-brick horse barns, the supply shed, the carriage shed, and the hay barn. One brick barn is for Master Giles's Thoroughbreds. Pa's in charge of that barn, which is where I spend my time. A second barn is for the riding and carriage horses. Cato runs that one. Oliver, Cato's brother, is in charge of the last barn, the one that houses the mares and foals.

In the main pasture, Romance, Savannah, and Sympathy graze peacefully. When I whistle, the three fillies trot over, and I stroke their velvet muzzles. In the paddock next to them, Arrow and Daphne spar with their front hooves. I halloo, and they charge away, bucking.

My favorite colt, Aristo, is kept by himself 'cause he's so

wild. I climb the split-rail fence. Beyond the pastures, Master's cropland stretches from hill to hill. It's early summer and new plants shoot from the earth. In between the rows of corn and hemp, the field hands hunch low, hoeing weeds. Sometimes their sad songs reach my ears, and I thank Jesus I ain't in the fields.

When Aristo spies me straddling the rail, he prances over. His flaxen mane and tail billow like bloomers on the line, and his coat shines as red and glorious as this morning's sun. Tossing his head, he nips at my pants leg.

I laugh. "Risto, you think you some fierce critter. But I know you ain't."

When the colt swings close, I spring onto his back. Twining my fingers through his mane, I squeeze my calves against his sides. He leaps in the air and takes off across the pasture. His stride lengthens into a gallop. I dig my bare heels into his ribs, urging him on. The dewy air slaps my face, and gnats catch in my teeth.

Mimicking Jackson, I burrow my fingers in the colt's mane and lean low on his neck. He wheels at the far corner, races back, and skids to a halt near the willow on the other side of the fence.

I raise one fist and whoop, "We won!" We're both breathing hard but happy, and dreams of being a famous jockey like Abe Hawkins swim in my head.

Slipping off Aristo's back, I bow real low to the willow tree. "I, Gabriel Alexander, winning jockey, want to thank all you fine ladies—"

"Gabriel Alexander, that horse must have kicked you in

your head,” a sassy voice interrupts me. “You’re no winning jockey. You’re nothing but a puny stable boy in raggedy britches!”

Startled, I jerk my head up. Annabelle’s peering at me through the veil of willow branches. She’s wearing a fancy straw hat and a yellow dress with a puffy skirt. A basket of meadow flowers hangs from one arm, and daisies poke from her hat ribbon.

“And you ain’t no fine lady!” I shoot back, mad that she caught me bowing to a tree. Annabelle’s a slave like me, but she grew up in the Main House. Since Master and Mistress have no children, they spoil her like a daughter.

Annabelle’s eyes grow squinty. “If Mistress Jane didn’t need these flowers to cheer her, I’d dump them over your bragety head.” Spreading the branches like curtains, she sashays toward the kitchen garden.

“Least then I’d smell sweeter than you!” I holler.

“Least *I* can read and write!” she tosses over her shoulder. Annabelle always wants the last word.

I clench my fists. Since she gets schooling from Mistress Jane, Annabelle loves to throw her learning in my face. But today it don’t bother me for long, ’cause I’ve got a bigger boast. “Least *I’m* riding to the big city of Lexington where you ain’t *never* been! You don’t do nothing but stay home tending the sick.”

“Humph.” Annabelle slams shut the gate into the garden. “You only going ’cause you the skinniest stable boy. Not ’cause you some fine rider like *Mister* Jackson.”

Her mocking burns me up. Old Uncle, the yard slave, is

in the kitchen garden picking peas. I see his body twitch with laughter. I loosen my tongue, determined not to let Annabelle get the last taunt.

“Sass me all you want, Miss Annabelle. But one day you’ll use your fine learning to read about *me* in the *Lexington Observer!* And the words will say, ‘Gabriel Alexander, Winning Jockey!’”

Sticking her nose in the air, Annabelle struts up the brick path to the summer kitchen, pretending she don’t care. Only I know she cares ’cause she’s switching her hind end back and forth like an angry horse. Too bad I ain’t got time to gloat. Renny, the coachman, is driving the wagon and team into the stable yard, and I see Master Giles striding down the front walk from the Main House. I best hurry and get Tenpenny ready before Pa starts bellowing for me.

I race to the barn, bare feet pounding the dry grass. Tenpenny’s head is hanging over the stall door. His eyes are keen. Grabbing the bridle off the hook, I open the door. He ducks into the corner, not wanting the metal bit in his mouth. I talk sweet until he comes around. Then I stand on a wooden bucket and slip the bit into his mouth and the headstall over his ears.

Clucking, I run the colt outside. Master Giles sits in the wagon on the seat next to Renny. Jackson’s slouched on a pile of sacks in the wagon bed. Pa’s helping two stable hands load the last of the feed, tack, and supplies. Cook Nancy passes Jackson a basket of vittles. I lick my lips, hoping she’s packed some of her homemade bread.

Master nods approvingly when Tenpenny prances toward

the wagon. "Horse looks fine," he tells Pa, who hoists me up onto the colt's bare back.

Three mounted men are heading down the lane. I recognize Mister Ham and his two grown sons, Beale and Henry, farmers from down the pike. Master hires them when he needs an armed escort. All three men tote double holsters on their saddle pommels. A shotgun lies across Master Giles's lap and a pistol peeks from under his topcoat.

"Morning, Winston." Mister Ham halts his gelding, a big-boned Kentucky Saddler.

"Morning, Ham." Master Giles nods. "Glad you brought your sons. Reports from Georgetown aren't good. Yesterday, One Arm and his Rebel raiders robbed the citizens and burned the telegraph office. Union soldiers chased them out of town but lost them in the hollows. I've left armed guards here at the farm in case they ride this far."

I catch my breath. Georgetown is north of Lexington. That means One Arm Dan Parmer and his band of Confederate raiders might run into us on the road. God willing, they won't venture to Lexington since Union troops are camped there.

Pa told me that most of Kentucky is Union, which means a lot of folks here are rooting for the Yankees from the North. But the Confederates have plenty of friends in Kentucky, too. Seems every valley holds farmers and shopkeepers who are Rebels at heart. They aid One Arm and his men every chance they get. Some say the raiders are out to win the war for the South. I say they're robbers bent on stealing what they want from either side. And what they

want most is *horses*, especially swift Thoroughbreds like Tenpenny.

I glance at Pa. His expression is grave as he climbs into the wagon bed beside Jackson. Everyone at Woodville Farm has heard stories about One Arm and his band of raiders: How they'll ride into a farm and steal it blind. How they'll kick a colored man bloody. How they'll swipe a horse right out from under its rider then gallop it to death.

At the thought of meeting One Arm and his men, a shiver sweeps through my bones. Tenpenny dances beneath me, eager to go. Only now I ain't so sure about this journey. I lay my hand against the colt's warm neck, and my excitement turns to fear.