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GABRIEL'S JOURNEY



ALISON HART

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*To the brave soldiers of the
Fifth United States Colored Cavalry
—A. H.*

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Gabriel Alexander—thirteen-year-old groom and jockey who becomes a stable boy at Camp Nelson; a former slave of Mister Giles

Lucy Alexander—Gabriel's mother, a washerwoman at Camp Nelson

Jase and Short Bit—young grooms at Woodville Farm

Annabelle—thirteen-year-old former house slave and friend of Gabriel's

Mister Winston Giles—owner of Woodville Farm

Jackson—Gabriel's older friend and a jockey from Saratoga; returns to work for Mister Giles as a trainer

SOLDIERS AND OFFICERS OF COMPANY B OF THE FIFTH UNITED STATES COLORED CAVALRY (IN ORDER OF RANK):

Captain Henry Waite—commander of the Company B cavalry from Camp Nelson

Lieutenant Rhodes—commander of the 2nd Platoon

Sergeant Isaac Alexander—Gabriel's father, a trainer at Woodville Farm who enlisted in the Union army and is now stationed at Camp Nelson as commander of the 1st Squad

Corporal George Vaughn

Private Joseph Black

Private George Lewis

Private Andrew Crutcher

CAVALRY TERMS

squad—a group of soldiers made up of eight to twenty-four men; Sergeant Alexander, Gabriel's father, is commander of the 1st Squad.

platoon—a group of soldiers made up of two squads, with sixteen to fifty men; Lieutenant Rhodes is commander of the 1st Platoon.

company—a group of soldiers formed by two platoons, with sixty to a hundred men; Captain Henry Waite is commander of Company B.

regiment—a group of soldiers made up of companies, with 600 to 2,000 men. The Fifth United States Colored Cavalry was a regiment of about 600 black men hastily organized at Camp Nelson. It was commanded by Colonel James Wade, with assistance from Colonel James Brisbin. Historical records indicate that there were eleven companies in this regiment.

brigade—a group of soldiers made up of regiments, with the number of men dependent on the number of regiments. The 4th Brigade was made up of the Fifth, 11th Michigan, and 12th Ohio regiments; Colonel Ratliff of the 12th Ohio was commander of the 4th Brigade.

division—a group of soldiers made up of brigades. At the battle of Saltville, Major General Stephen Burbridge was commander of the Union division.

CHAPTER ONE

Keep your hands soft, Jase. Hard hands hurt a horse's mouth," I tell the young slave perched in the racing saddle. I'm leading Blind Patterson around Woodville Farm's grassy racing track. Jase is hunched over the Thoroughbred's neck, practicing being a jockey. "Don't use the reins for balance or pain. Use them to talk to your horse."

Jase bobs his head. Sweat beads on his brow.

"Now close your eyes," I go on in a hushed voice. "Feel Patterson's mouth. Listen to what he's telling you."

Jase shuts his eyes as I lead Patterson down the hill past the icehouse. "He sayin' he wants to gallop," Jase whispers. He pumps his arms as if they're flying toward the finish wire. The stallion stumbles, and Jase falls onto the horse's neck. He grabs mane and rights himself. "Not so fast, Gabriel," he scolds, though Patterson is walking as slow as an old nag. "This ain't a real race."

Chuckling erupts behind me. Jase shoots an angry look down at Short Bit, who's dogging my heels. Three weeks

ago, when Mister Giles and me came home to Woodville Farm from Saratoga Springs, we brought Short Bit along as Aristo's groom. Since the first day Jase and Short Bit met, the boys ain't been apart. Except for their skin color—one white, one black—they're as close as the twin calves born here on the farm last spring.

"Why you chucklin' like a fool, Short Bit?" Jase asks. "Think you can ride dis horse better'n me?"

Short Bit nods eagerly.

I've been training the two of them since I came home. Both are small. Both love horses. Both will make fine jockeys. And Woodville Farm will need two fine riders someday soon if I leave.

If I leave. My stomach churns like I've been eating sour apples. I ain't told no one my thoughts on leaving Woodville Farm. Ain't told Mister Giles, Cato, Jase, or Annabelle that I'm thinking of going to Camp Nelson to be with Ma and Pa. Everyone knows I miss my folks with a fierce longing. But they also know how much I love horses and jockeying. Winning the Saratoga Chase on Aristo was like a week of Christmas. And since I've been home, I've won two more races on the colt.

Folks around here won't understand. "How can you leave the glory of winning," they'll ask me, "for a dirt-floor tent in an army camp?"

I'm too muddled to know the answer myself. But there's something else besides Ma and Pa tugging me toward Camp Nelson. The war between Confederate and Yankee has been going on for three long years. This past summer,

Kentucky slaves rushed to Camp Nelson to enlist in the Union army. Ma and Pa say I'm too young to be a soldier. And maybe at thirteen I ain't quite a man. But that don't mean I can't fight for freedom my own way.

Pa's a corporal under Captain Waite, the commander helping to organize a colored cavalry at Camp Nelson. Might be they won't let me wield a rifle against the Rebels, but I know I could help train those cavalry horses.

"Short Bit say it's his turn," Jase gasps from atop Blind Patterson.

I glance over my shoulder at Short Bit. The boy's cheeks have grown a lot plumper from Cook Nancy's biscuits and pies. Now his face is colored red by the sun, not by a bully's fists. And the wary look in his eyes is gone.

"You ready, Short Bit?" I ask.

Jase flops heavily back onto the saddle seat. "Says he is."

"I didn't hear Short Bit say nothin'."

Jase humphs. "*I* hear Short Bit clear as de dinner bell. He says, 'git dat black boy off dat horse so *I* can ride'." Kicking his bare feet from the stirrup irons, Jase slides to the ground.

It's the first of September, and the summer sun still blazes from the sky. Beyond the grassy track, I see a gang of field slaves plowing and planting. September means wheat and rye. Like all slaves, they work year-round, with one day off each week for the Sabbath. I still work six days even though I'm not a slave anymore. But now I don't have to call Mister Giles "master." I get paid for training and jockeying, and I could walk to town without slave catchers coming after me.

Seems a crime so many coloreds are still someone's property.

Jase is struggling to boost Short Bit into the saddle. "Gabriel, give me a hand," he calls.

I blink, realizing I ain't paying attention. Racing and training horses take your whole mind, and right now, mine keeps scattering toward Ma, Pa, and the soldiers at Camp Nelson. That's reason enough to leave the farm.

Together, Jase and me toss Short Bit into the saddle. Slipping his bare feet into the irons, he gathers up the reins. The boy's beaming like a full moon.

I met Short Bit up in New York at the Saratoga Association Race Track, which is a long train ride from Woodville. An orphan, he'd lived most of his life in the barn with the Thoroughbreds, so he almost acts half-horse. But he'd always been a groom, not a rider.

"You ready, Short Bit?" I ask. For such a mite of a boy, he sits tall in the saddle, his fingers light on the reins. Crouching in the jockey position, he nods and squeezes his heels into Patterson's sides. Short Bit don't talk much, but the horses know what he's saying. Patterson strides right out, dragging me with him.

As Pa would say, *The boy's got the gift.*

We hop over the stream at the end of the grassy hill and turn toward the barns. Patterson breaks into a trot. Grinning, Short Bit moves in rhythm with the stallion's gait.

Jase is walking ahead, half hidden by tall grass, when suddenly he flies back toward us, his skinny legs pumping. "Miss Annabelle's comin'!" he shouts.

Short Bit's blue eyes bug from his head. I halt Patterson, and Jase darts behind me. I have no idea why the sight of Annabelle has turned my bold jockeys into field mice.

"There you shirkers are!" Annabelle hollers from the top of the hill. Her fists are planted on her hips. Her bonnet is askew as if she'd slapped it on her head in a big hurry. "I should've known it was you, Gabriel Alexander, making these scholars late for their lessons!"

Annabelle's thirteen, like me, but she grew up spoiled in the Main House. Before Mistress Jane died, she gave Annabelle her freedom, only Annabelle didn't know what to do with it. Since she was always bragging on her reading and writing, I told her she should teach the slaves. I wonder if I should've just kept my mouth shut since she's taking her schooling mighty seriously.

Annabelle, still dressed in mourning for Mistress Jane, strides down the hill, her long skirts flying. The black witch sight of her makes even *my* skin prickle.

With a squeak, Short Bit jumps off Patterson.

Annabelle steps in front of us, her dark eyes snapping. "It's an hour after noon. You two are late for arithmetic." She grabs each boy by an ear and starts dragging them up the hill. Howling, they stumble after her.

"Annabelle," I call after her, "don't you know nothin' about teaching?"

She stops, keeping her fingers firmly pinched on those ears.

"Horses taught with kindness learn much faster than those taught with the whip," I point out.

“Oh! Thank you for your pretty sermon, Gabriel. And when I start teaching horses to read and write, I’ll be sure to heed your words,” she says tartly.

Jase and Short Bit giggle. Annabelle lets go of their ears and herds them toward the Main House with shooing motions. Laughing, they dodge her flapping hands, and I gather their fear of Annabelle is more mock than real.

“Come on, Patterson. Racin’ is over.” I lead him up the hill, through the gate, and down the lane past the horse pastures. Aristo’s in the first paddock. Tossing his head, the colt prances over, his reddish gold coat rippling like sun-kissed water. He pins his ears and nips at Patterson, who ignores his gnashing teeth.

I scratch the colt’s neck. Aristo wheels and gallops across the pasture, stirring up the colts and fillies in the other fields. As I watch them gambol, my stomach roils again. If I leave Woodville Farm, who will look out for the horses? *Who will jockey Aristo?*

Slipping my hand in my pocket, I pull out the tattered article cut from the *Daily Saratogian*. Annabelle’s read it to me twenty times so I know the words by heart:

...gallantly jockey Alexander rode the game and speedy Aristo, who held his own down the stretch. In spite of the determined rush of Faraway, the Kentucky bred dashed under the wire to win one of the fastest-run races ever seen on this track.

Ever since I started riding, I dreamed of seeing my name in a newspaper. Now there it is: *jockey Alexander*. How can I give up the triumph I fought so hard for?

Folding the article, I tuck it in my pocket and cluck to

Patterson. We amble over to the red-brick training barn. Mister Giles is walking toward us from the Main House. He's wearing a top hat like he's off to the city. A surrey awaits him at the roundabout in front of the carriage horse barn. When he spies me and Patterson, he calls out a hearty good day.

"Good day, Mister Giles," I call back.

"You're just the chap I need to talk to," he says in his British accent. Mister Giles came to Kentucky from England, which is even farther from here than New York. Before my folks left for Camp Nelson, Pa worked as his trainer and Ma as his house servant. I was born at Woodville Farm, so it has always been my home.

I halt Patterson in the doorway of the barn. Mister Giles has a good eye for horseflesh and owns some of the fastest Thoroughbreds in Kentucky. Lifting the saddle flap, I unbuckle Patterson's girth.

"I have grand news, Gabriel." Mister Giles waves his cane at me as he approaches. "I'm off to pick up a new trainer at the Midway station. He's arriving from New York."

I stiffen. Newcastle, the last trainer Mister Giles brought from the North, used a whip and a curse to train the horses.

"The man comes highly recommended. *Highly*," Mister Giles repeats, sounding as gleeful as a child in a sweet shop.

"That's fine, sir." I slide the saddle from Patterson's back.

"I had to offer him a handsome wage to leave the North. The man likes his fancy duds and his pretty ladies." Mister Giles gives me a sly wink. "I also had to promise him

a percent of the purse money *and* a home of his own made of brick, not wood, with windows of glass. The man knows what he wants, but he'll be worth every pane."

My brows rise as Mister Giles's words sink in. There's only one fancy-dressing ladies' man I know who could come close to Pa: *Jackson!* But it can't be Jackson. When I left my friend in New York, he was riding for Doctor Crown, and well satisfied with his new life.

Mister Giles raps the tip of his cane on the ground. "This man won't replace your pa, Gabriel, but he'll come mighty close."

"Is it Jackson, sir?" I dare ask.

"It is indeed," says Mr. Giles, holding back a smile. "I told him the war would soon be over and all coloreds would be free. Then every black horseman will head north for the racetracks. By then, Jackson will be well established here and training champions." A grin lifts his mustache. "Think of it, Gabriel. With him training and you riding, we can travel the States, racing and winning at every track."

Goosebumps trot up my arms. He's right. Jackson, me, and Mister Giles's Thoroughbreds would be *unbeatable*.

Instantly my muddled thoughts grow clear. "Sir, it is a tempting offer, but I'll have to say no thank you."

Mister Giles starts in surprise. "You have bigger plans?"

"I'm going to Camp Nelson to be with Ma and Pa," I explain. "I didn't want to leave the horses in the care of a no-account trainer like Newcastle. But now that I know Jackson's taking Pa's place, my mind's made up to go."

Mister Giles studies my face. "I'd hate to lose you,

Gabriel," he says. "You're a natural with horses. You were born to ride."

"I do love the horses," I admit, "but my time for riding will have to wait. Now my place is with Ma and Pa."

Mister Giles places one gloved hand on my shoulder. "I was afraid of this. Your family bond is strong. And I've seen a faraway look in your eyes for a few days now. I was hoping Jackson's return to Woodville might entice you to stay."

"It is good news, sir, but Ma's getting big with child and Pa's training cavalry horses. I need to be with them."

Mister Giles shakes his head in dismay. "You are a gifted jockey, Gabriel, and you'll be hard to replace."

"Short Bit's turning into a right smart rider," I tell him. "Jackson can jockey until he gets too heavy from Cook Nancy's cobblers, and by then Short Bit will be ready to take his place."

"You see potential in Short Bit, eh?" Mister Giles asks.

"Yes sir."

"And the glory of winning races won't make you reconsider your decision to leave?"

"No sir." I throw back my shoulders a bit. "The glory of helping to win this war will have to be enough."

"Patriotic thoughts, Gabriel." Mister Giles places both hands on the top of his cane. "Let's hope the realities of war won't tarnish them. If you're set on this course, I'll telegraph ahead to Captain Waite."

"Thank you, sir." Now that I've told Mister Giles of my decision to join Ma and Pa, excitement flares in my chest.

I picture myself drilling with Pa's squad. Soon I'll learn how to march double-quick, fire a rifle, and salute the officers.

Tomorrow, I'll pack my belongings and say farewell to my friends—and to my beloved horses. Then, with my head held high, I'll stride down the Frankfort Pike on the start of my new journey.