

RACING TO FREEDOM TRILOGY

BOOK



TWO



GABRIEL'S TRIUMPH



ALISON HART

CHAPTER ONE

July 1864

Huff...huff...huff... The colt gallops toward the grandstand, puffing like a steam engine arriving at the Lexington depot. It's the final mile of the second heat, and Captain Conrad's running so fine, I can't quit grinning.

I peer over my left shoulder. Jane's Delight is a nose behind, but the mare's tight against the rail and coming on. Chirping, I urge Captain ahead. Don't want Jane's jockey hooking my stirrup and flipping me off. A rider who falls in the middle of a race might likely be trampled bloody.

Shouts pummel us as the horses race past the grandstand:

"Ram the spurs into Lord Fairfax! Rowel him up!"

"Come on, Grey Eagle!"

"Pull Jane steady!"

"Use the whip, boy!"

I don't hear Mister Giles hollering. Before the race he told me to ride Captain smart, and that's what I'm doing.

Crouched low, I canter Captain around the turn and down the backstretch of the Kentucky Association track. As we head into the dip, I note the rest of the horses falling behind. My fingers are bloody from holding the reins so tight, my throat's dry, and my legs tremble from the strain of galloping three and a half miles. But pride's swelling in my chest. Ain't no horse going to eat up that distance. Ain't no horse about to beat me and Captain now!

Mister Giles says he'll pay me fifty dollars if I win.

Fifty dollars!

That's a dream come true to a colored boy like me.

My mind's on the purse money when I see a blur of motion to my right. Lord Fairfax is charging from out of nowhere!

Foolish thoughts of money may cost me the race.

Adam, Lord Fairfax's jockey, flails the whip brutally against his horse's flank. Adam's got a wild spark in his eye, and I figure that whip will soon find me. I hunch lower to drive Captain on. Then I feel a rough bump, and Captain lurches left. Grabbing mane, I barely keep from pitching off.

I glance to my right. Lord Fairfax is neck and neck with Captain. Our stirrup irons touch, and Adam yanks his left rein, forcing Lord Fairfax to bump Captain again.

We hit hard, throwing Captain off his stride.

I frown. Adam *ain't* going to bump me again.

I ain't going to lose fifty dollars because of no cheating jockey, neither.

Gritting my teeth, I perch my hands high on Captain's

mane. "Run on, fine colt," I croon hoarsely. "Run on like we're chasing those Rebels."

I purse my lips and squeeze my boot heels into his sides. Captain springs forward, righting his gait. His front legs stretch high and long, grabbing the track as he thunders around the homestretch bend, pelting that no-account Adam with clumps of dirt. Roars erupt from the grandstand as we fly past the finish-line pole.

I raise my fist in the air. It's my second race—and my second win!

How I wish Pa and my friend Jackson could see me. But both are far away. Jackson's racing Thoroughbreds in a place called Saratoga. Pa's in the Union army at Camp Nelson.

Captain slows to a trot, and I'm deafened with cheers. The men who placed bets must be pleased with the results of the race. When I turn Captain, I spot Mister Giles hurrying down the grandstand steps. One hand secures his top hat against the wind, the other holds his cane.

Then a *yahoo* rends the air, and Jase shoots from between the men hanging over the track's railing. He lands in the dirt, beats his bare black feet on the ground like a victory drum, and runs to my side.

"You did it, Gabriel!" he cries as he loops a rope through Captain's snaffle ring.

"*We* did it." I lay my palm against Captain's slick neck. The colt's nostrils are flared, but his breathing's clear, so I know he ain't too winded to enjoy his victory. "Captain and me. And you helped, too, Jase."

Jase is little and skinny. He's Captain's groom, but when

he's thirteen—as old as me—he's going to be a jockey, too.

“I did help, didn't I?” Jase throws back his bony shoulders and struts over to the judges' stand, leading Captain. “Ain't *no* horse can beat *my* colt.”

I chuckle. I don't want to stomp on Jase's bragging, but I know one horse that can beat Captain: *Aristo*. That colt's so fast he can outrun the wind. And soon I aim to race him—and win, too.

Mister Giles strides to the judges' stand. “Well done, Gabriel Alexander!” He reaches up to shake my hand.

Like I'm a man, I think.

I shake back, my fingers leaving bloody smudges on his doeskin gloves. Mister Giles joins the track president and the mayor of Lexington, who present him with an engraved plate and the purse money. All around us, there's so much cheering that it's hard to believe there's a war raging between the North and the South.

Licking my swollen lips, I crack a smile for the crowd. A reporter from the *Lexington Observer* asks Mister Giles questions about Captain Conrad. Beside him, a second man draws on a pad. “Hey, boy!” he calls up to me. “Jump off that horse. I need a sketch of him for the paper.”

My smile fades. After a race, there's plenty of glory for the winning horse. And glory for the owner. But no glory for the jockey.

Jackson warned me after my first race. “Gabriel,” he said, a stalk of straw waggling between his teeth, “Kentucky's a slave state. Reporters don't write my name in the paper, and I been racing for two years. They write ‘Mister Giles's

colored jockey' or 'the darky rider.' I don't let it get to me, and you shouldn't, either."

That's one reason why Jackson left Kentucky for Saratoga, New York. He's hoping to find fame in the North.

One day, I vow, I'll find fame, too.

Jase leads us outside the track railing. I slip off Captain's back. My legs buckle, and when the colt rubs his sweaty head on my shoulder, he tumbles me clean off my feet.

I land hard on the ground and my racing cap falls into my lap. Jase twitches with laughter, but I'm too tuckered to yell at him. If Pa were here, he'd have caught me before I fell.

Jase loosens Captain's girth and walks him toward the barn. After slapping the dirt off my breeches with my cap, I hobble after them. Pa's old boots have rubbed my feet raw. Captain's got a hitch in his front leg, and I wonder if that last bump hurt him.

When we reach the barn, Renny, Mister Giles's coachman, hurries over. "Won me some coins betting on you and Captain," he says gleefully. "They're burnin' a hole in my pocket, so I'm headin' into town." He lowers his head and his voice. "Don't be tellin' Master where I gone, Gabriel. If he asks, tell him I'm gettin' the wagon wheel looked at."

He slips off into the milling crowd, and I shake my head in disgust. "Ain't going to lie for you, Renny," I say to his departing shadow. Ever since Pa left to join the army, Renny's taken to playing poker all night and staggering back to the barn with empty pockets.

Bending over, I run my hand down Captain's pasterns.

There's heat and a slight swelling above the right front fetlock.

"Horse needs time in the stream," I tell Jase as I sink down on a wooden box and pull off Pa's boots. There are blisters on my toes and heels. Maybe I'll use this win money to buy me some boots.

Wearily, I lean against the barn wall. But it's a short rest, 'cause I hear Pa's voice in my head: *Colt just ran four hard miles for you, Gabriel. Least you can do is see to his care.*

Pa has magic ways with horses. Folks say I've got the magic, too. Only I tell them it ain't magic. Horses tell you what they need. Pa and me, why, we just listen.

"Captain could beat any horse in Kentucky!" Jase's boasting cuts into my thoughts.

I look up. Several gentlemen in frock coats are strolling by, admiring Captain's glossy brown coat and white star. One of them comes over to where I'm resting, and I jump to my feet.

"Fine riding," he tells me. He's got a black goatee and a fat paunch that strains his vest buttons. I remember him from the first time I raced at the track. *That's Doctor Rammer, Pa had said. A man who whips his horses as hard as his slaves.*

Hooking his thumbs in his pockets, Doctor Rammer leans back and studies me. "A boy like you could make some money riding *my* Thoroughbreds."

"No thank you, sir."

"Why not, may I ask? You're free now, I believe." He

wags one finger at me. "And your pa's left Woodville Farm for the army."

"Yes sir. But I'm riding Mister Winston Giles's Thoroughbreds." I don't tell him the real reason I said no. I'd never work for a man who wields a whip.

Doctor Rammer harrumphs. "My Thoroughbreds are the finest in Kentucky. And I just hired a new trainer from the North. So when you get tired of riding Winston's broken-down nags, Gabriel, come see me."

"When crows turn white," I mutter when he walks off. But secretly, I'm feeling proud. Three weeks ago, I was a slave with no name. Two wins later, I'm a jockey named Gabriel and men are asking me to race their Thoroughbreds. How many more wins before I'm famous?

A crowd of ladies strolls past, parasols twirling over their shoulders. Jase is staring at them, but my gaze is drawn to the man walking behind the ladies. He's wearing a slouch hat, a dusty gray jacket, and spurs on the heels of his grimy boots.

A Rebel guerrilla!

Instinctively, I touch my upper arm. Under my jockey silks, I feel the crusted scar from that Rebel bullet. I tense, my eyes frozen on the man, fear scattering thoughts of glory from my head.