

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD DIDN'T TAKE TICKETS, JUST COURAGE

BLACK MEN IN BRIGHT BLUE



FROM THE COMPLETELY ABRIDGED SERIES – VOLUME 1

DAVID-MICHAEL

HARDING

AUTHOR OF *HOW ANGELS DIE*

Black Men in Bright Blue

by

David-Michael Harding

from

The Cats of Savone

The Completely Abridged Series –

8 Short Novels for Busy People

Copyright © 2013 by David Harding

All rights Reserved

A

Q&CY

BOOK

ISBN 10: 0985728515

ISBN 13: 978-0-9857285-1-9

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2013916043

The Cats of Savone, from which “**Black Men in Bright Blue**” is gleaned, is the 1st installment in the *Completely Abridged Series – Short Novels for Busy People*. The collection grew from the author’s teachings and letters on the Art & Science of Writing. This work contains examples of what David-Michael Harding refers to as newborn novels. “Most novels begin their lives as short stories. Consider Ernest Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea*, or John Steinbeck’s *The Red Pony*. Though in their entirety these classics are short in comparison to other works of the masters, each began life as a true short story. Writing, much like any gift, skill, habit, or hope, is strengthened through practice, training, and exercise. The short story is the stretching and dedication to a running regime long before the marathon. It is the repetition of scales on the piano, years before the recital.”

Read “**My Boo Radley**” and meet the peculiar ex-big league pitcher. “**The Cats of Savone**” will take you into the world behind the walls of a maximum security prison while in “**Forever Beneath the Celtic Sea**” you’ll feel your hands against the damp hull of a German U-boat in World War I. You’ll be taken back to a hidden side of the Civil War in “**Black Men in Bright Blue**” and somewhere unknown through “**St. Alden’s**.” Then saddle up to laugh and learn with “**The History of West Texas According to Henry Brass**.”

For fans of David-Michael Harding, these shorts and novellas are glimpses into the talent and passion his creations are layered in. Readers care about the people in a Harding story. You’ll cheer, jeer, laugh, cry, and inexplicably learn as characters dance, stumble, and recover at the tip of the author’s pen through the amazing reading delight Harding calls “edu-tainment.”

Read free excerpts and view upcoming novels at
www.DavidMichaelHarding.com



David-Michael Harding is a life-long writer whose novel, *How Angels Die*, continues to receive critical acclaim. A former semi-professional football player, his writing is hard hitting and passionate. He holds a master’s degree in education and is an adjunct professor of writing.

Novels by David-Michael Harding

How Angels Die

Cherokee Talisman

The Cats of Savone

Available at Amazon, Smashwords, and Barnes & Noble

Find free reading excerpts, preview upcoming novels, and check out the author’s blog at -

www.DavidMichaelHarding.com

The underground railroad didn't take tickets.

Just courage.



Black Men in Bright Blue

Rachel Justice saw the black men in bright blue in her dreams. Being ten years old lent itself to dreams, but being a young white girl in 1863, especially in South Carolina, the first state to secede from the Union, the presence of the black men bid her keep her dreams within herself. Yet to Rachel the dreams were much more vivid than just playful specters dancing across the nightscape of her mind. And still, the thoughts – real, dream, or otherwise – may have given cause for punishment or even The Treatment and rightly so she considered for the black men in bright blue had no place in her world. It was best they stay in the cloudy land of dreamy short lived visions that crowd a young girl's head.

Setting aside her concerns and the dreams themselves, the men had been real or nearly so, she thought. Rachel was quite certain she had seen them, but always after night had come. She was so certain of it that night's arrival at Providence, her father's plantation, did not necessarily bring with it friend Sleep. Rather than sleep, darkness brought an urge to pursue the dream. So Rachel would often leave the sanctuary of her bedroom within the main house and creep around the sprawling farm usually pretending to be a spy for General Stonewall Jackson. It was during episodes like this, when she would steal her way to the cabins of the field hands, magically transformed into a Union camp, that she would see the black men in bright blue passing beneath shadowed gables as silently as ghosts.

The row of small houses was on a makeshift dirt road. It was hardly a road at all as there wasn't a wagon or even a horse in the thirty-some-odd house shanty town. The cabins were below simple – one room laid-up rough log squares with clapboard roofs. Behind the swinging burlap that doubled as window pane and curtain, dim light bounced about and reached out to paint slow moving shadows on the dusty ground. As a rule, Rachel wasn't allowed down there during the day and after dark even her father seldom visited. Only the night, the dream, and General Jackson thought her being there permissible.

She made her first daylight visit to the town only recently when she accompanied her mother as they delivered a large bundle to one of the shacks. That day Rachel waited on the wagon seat as Colonel, their old cart horse, stood on three feet, resting the fourth and lazily swished his tail out of worn habit. While the old horse dozed behind drooping eyelids Rachel's eyes darted all around her. There were so many things they hadn't seen before. As it was with most new sights, each picture generated an abundance of questions which she was certain to press on someone. Far too quickly for Rachel's eyes and inquisitive mind, her mother returned to the wagon followed by an elderly black

woman who walked beneath the stoop of a slightly bent back and lagged badly. Ahead of her, Rachel's mother, Mrs. Martha Justice, covered the ground as if her steps were water gliding over a smooth rock. Even her footprints in the dust seemed elegantly placed.

"And to be sure, Carol Anne," Mrs. Justice said sternly as she climbed aboard the wagon and sat next to Rachel. "Three."

The movement behind him stirred Colonel and he placed all his feet beneath him in anticipation of moving on.

"Yes, 'am, Miss Justice," the black woman answered. "Three it is."

"Very good then. Best be busying yourself. The day is short already." With that, Mrs. Justice chirped to Colonel. He leaned against his harness and the wagon moved up and away from Carol Anne, whose words trailed off behind.

"Yes, 'am. Three. Gots to get three ready. Praise be Lord Jesus. Three! Amen. Three."

As Carol Anne neared her small house, she began to sing triumphantly. Rachel, who had been staring at her, looked from the black woman to her mother.

"Mother, why does Carol Anne live in such a tiny house?"

"That is all she requires. Her needs are few."

Rachel considered this for a moment. "Well, why does she live down here and not someplace else?"

Her mother paused before answering. "Because she works for your father."

"Then why doesn't she save her money and make a nicer house?"

This time the pause was longer and more awkward. "Carol Anne works at Providence and is given food, clothes, and a place to live in return for her labors."

Rachel came back with the quickness of a child's mind that sees the world in a simple light. "Does Carol Anne work hard, mother?"

"Yes she does."

"Then father should give her a nicer house. I shall ask father to give Carol Anne a nicer house."

Mrs. Justice didn't respond, but snapped the reins down on Colonel's rump. He snorted and the wagon lurched forward past two black men carrying garden tools toward the main house. Rachel turned in her seat as the wagon passed and watched the men until they vanished below the crest of a small hill which stood above the slave quarters.

Turning again to her mother she asked, "Do those men work for food and a tiny house too?"

"Yes," Mrs. Justice said without looking at her only child.

Rachel pointed to the bent backs of laborers some distance away in the fields. "And those folks there. They all work for free too?"

"Well, yes, but it's not exactly for free. They each get meals and—"

"Do they get paid money? Like when I do something for PaPa he sometimes gives me a penny. Do they get pennies?"

"No. They do not get pennies."

"Then why would they all stay here? I don't think I would stay without getting pennies. Why do they stay? I don't think I would stay."

"They must stay."

"But why? I don't think—"

Mrs. Justice pulled in Colonel's steps and the wagon stopped. She turned in her seat and looked closely at her daughter. "Rachel, do you know what a slave is?"

"A slave?"

"Yes. A slave."

"No."

"Rachel," Mrs. Justice said mechanically, "a slave is a colored man or woman, maybe an Indian, who belongs to another person."

Rachel looked back, but her eyes gave away her lack of understanding.

“Listen to me closely,” her mother continued. “The people who live here and work for your father are his slaves. They belong to him, like the fields and the cotton, tobacco plants, the peach orchard, and this wagon. And Colonel here. Your father owns Colonel so he takes care of him. Colonel cannot just wander up the road to the Jenson’s place because he belongs to your father. If your father let him go off wherever he wanted, we wouldn’t have a horse to pull our wagon, would we? And if we allowed the slaves to leave, we wouldn’t have anyone to tend the crops. See? These people you see around the plantation are like Colonel in many respects. They are taken care of in exchange for their work, just like Colonel is fed for pulling this wagon. Understand?”

Rachel nodded yes, though she didn’t completely. Her mother, wanting to put some distance between herself and the conversation, spoke to Colonel and the wagon moved again.

They were nearing the main house before Rachel spoke. “Mother, is Carol Anne a slave?”

“Yes she is.”

“Does she like being a slave?”

“I don’t...,” Mrs. Justice hesitated before continuing. “Rachel, there are a great many things you do not understand as yet.” She looked away and frowned to herself. “There are a great many things I don’t understand.”

Another moment and she turned her attention back to her daughter. “Slaves – slavery – is such a thing, darling. I can’t say I’m completely comfortable with it myself, but I am a woman of means and as such accept my station in God’s world.”

“Slavery. Mother, should I like slavery?”

“You should do as you are told and do what is expected of you throughout the majority of your life,” Mrs. Justice replied.

Rachel bowed her head as though she’d been scolded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Her mother suddenly reined in the confused horse once again. She slipped an arm around Rachel’s shoulders and spoke in a soft voice. “But there are times, my precious, when you must listen to another voice, one that comes from inside. From your heart. Often it speaks loudest of all, but we pretend not to hear. That is the voice we should listen to.” Mrs. Justice accented her words with a vigorous hug. “We should listen to our hearts.”

Rachel’s face became a smile as she moved tightly into the comforting fold of a mother’s arms. She loved it when her mother was like this – open, smiling, warm, and full of hugs. Often in the house she became someone else, someone cool and distant.

After another moment, the hug relaxed. Mrs. Justice spoke again and the baffled Colonel drew himself up to the main house. A stable boy approached with head down and silently took hold of the old horse’s bridle. Mother and daughter disembarked and headed into their expansive home. Rachel hesitated in the doorway and looked with a combination of wonder and sadness back at the boy, no bigger than her, as he led the big horse and empty wagon to the nearby carriage house. This notion of slavery was churning in her mind and raising a quiet tone in the young girl’s ears, but her mother’s voice called from inside the house and broke the spell.

“Rachel, come inside. The Daughters of the Confederacy will meet this evening. Be assured of having yourself prepared for our trip in proper fashion.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rachel answered as she closed the door on her picture of the boy and the horse.

As the Carolina sun methodically relinquished its hold on the day, the field hands made their way to their shantytown. Night sounds began to echo across the fields as the smells of simple meals drifted out from the ramshackle houses. In the main house, Rachel was finishing her own dinner alone in the kitchen. Her parents ate separately in the formal dining room. A slave maid had prepared the meal, but was nowhere to be seen. Miraculously she would reappear each night and clear Rachel’s table just as she finished. Normally Rachel left the table with the dishes, but tonight she lingered and watched as black hands cleaned up after her. She was full of questions, but could not force them out onto her silent and unknowing teacher. Still, she watched and thought of work

and food, pennies, and Carol Anne's rickety home.

Night had a firm grip on the plantation as Mrs. Justice primped Rachel's dress in the large foyer of the house. "There. You are the absolute picture of a fine southern lady. Remember to hold your head erect as you greet the ladies in attendance this evening. You are a Justice and of proper breeding. I expect you to demonstrate as much."

Rachel resisted the urge to struggle against her mother's preening. Mrs. Justice could be very firm and even harsh in her role as matron of the plantation. Many times Rachel had witnessed her mother chide one of the maids to tears for an act or omission. But as Rachel stood in the hallway watching her mother's hands caress the bow on the front of her dress, it occurred to her that she had seen those same hands dole out huge bundles of food and clothes to many more slaves than had ever been lectured. It was peculiar, Rachel thought, that her mother was often like two people. One was aristocratic and cool and the other warm and giving, like the lady in the wagon who had explained voices of the heart to her that afternoon. That was the mother Rachel loved the most, as hard as it could be to find her.

Straight away the pair was walking across the front lawn to the carriage house with Rachel carrying a basket with her mother's contributions to the buffet for the meeting and two corn muffins for the short trip. Colonel had been hitched to the wagon some time before, probably by that same young boy, Rachel mused. She looked for him, but he wasn't to be found. A shadowy figure began to stir near the stable and approached the wagon just as Mrs. Justice and Rachel dropped onto the wooden seat. It was Mr. Calloway, the plantation foreman.

Rachel didn't like Mr. Calloway. He was always grouchy. Whenever he looked at her he snorted like a bull. Worst of all, he was never without a black leather whip which he carried neatly coiled and tucked under his belt. The whip had a name around Providence. It was called The Treatment. Though she had never seen him use it, she had once heard it cracking above the cries of a grown man. She had run from the sound of the whip and had fought to keep as much distance as possible between herself and Calloway ever since.

"Mrs. Justice, ma'am, you ought'n to be trapsin' around here in the dark."

Rachel's mother was startled by his sudden appearance, but recovered so quickly that neither Rachel nor Calloway took notice.

"My dear Mr. Calloway," she quipped with as much sarcasm as she could fit in next to her own drawl. "I am hardly trapsin'."

"No, ma'am. What I means is, you ought to be sportin' a light."

"I shouldn't think a light necessary. And since you brought it up, what is it that has you out here wandering about at all hours? Tell me that, my Mr. Calloway?"

"I thought you should be carryin' a lantern, especially on the road."

"Colonel knows the way quite well, thank you. And you haven't answered my question. Why are you out here meandering about in the shadows mimicking a highwayman or some wayward ghoul?"

"Just doin' my job, Mrs. Justice."

"Your job is to tend to the needs of this plantation and I don't believe skulking about in the dark is one of your primary duties."

"No, ma'am, but we been havin' a lot a runaways and Mr. Justice, he said--"

"Mr. Calloway, are you suggesting that my husband instructed you to hide in the shadows, sneaking about like a prowler, with designs to leap out to frighten his only child here?"

Rachel took her cue perfectly and quickly painted on a pouting face and widened her eyes in the moon's dim light.

"Well, no ma'am, but--"

"I should certainly hope not. Now, move along to your own quarters for the duration of the evening."

Providence's matriarch waved her hand condescendingly toward Calloway as though he smelled badly. "Go on. Get along with yourself."

“Yes’am, Mrs. Justice.”

Calloway’s figure was quickly swallowed by the darkness. Rachel was glad to see him go, but happier yet that she had witnessed her mother dress him down so.

Mrs. Justice shifted repeatedly on the seat and brushed at her dress as if to remove something Rachel was certain wasn’t there. As the elder justice fingered Colonel’s reins, she spoke in a voice that quivered with a nervousness that hadn’t been there just moments before.

“Well, there now. We’re shed of him. Aren’t we, Rachel? Now I suppose we can get on to our meeting in peace.”

There was a pause that should have been followed by the sound of the reins colliding with Colonel’s rump, but the sound didn’t come. The gap was so pronounced that Rachel actually leaned forward in anticipation of the lurch of the wagon, but nothing happened. Rather, Mrs. Justice resumed her uneasy banter and brushing until a rustling noise behind them drew both Rachel’s and her mother’s attention to the rear of the wagon. Though it was so dark she couldn’t see much further than just behind her own seat Rachel began to pivot quickly toward the noise. For her part, Mrs. Justice was unnerved. In fact, she became the picture of resolve that had a moment before summarily dismissed Calloway. With a firm and steady grip, Mrs. Justice grasped Rachel’s thin arm and squelched her effort to peer into the darkness of the wagon bed.

“Let’s be on our way.” With that the reins clapped and Colonel began his walk to the meeting.

“But mother, I heard something behind the wagon.”

“I’m sure it was nothing, dear.”

“No, mother. I heard something.” Then in a whisper, “I think there was someone behind the wagon.”

Her mother laughed at her quiet fear. “Oh, my darling Rachel. It’s just the dark. Just the dark playing tricks on you. Let’s have no more talk about it. Now tell me, what have you in your basket to nibble on during our journey?”

Soon the calming rhythm of the road and the taste of fresh corn muffins began to eradicate the recent memory of strange sounds in the dark. By the time Colonel stood at the hitching rail outside of the Jenson home, Rachel had all but forgotten it entirely.

The meetings of the Daughters of the Confederacy were loosely conducted over tea and around the pleasant conversation of southern ladies. Grace flooded the room with each wave of the guests’ flowing dresses. The women wore simple gowns designed for traveling, but each attendee had given their dress a little something extra – an additional row of pleats, a touch of lace, a contrasting color – to set its wearer apart and to proclaim, “Here is distinction!” It was expected and recognized by everyone.

As was generally the case there were about fifteen pictures of fashion present. Rachel knew most as being local women, with an occasional daughter as a traveling companion like herself. A few were unknown to her which made Rachel think they must be from far away as she knew everyone who lived within a day’s ride of Providence.

To Rachel these meetings were little more than organized gossip sessions, a theory both supported and promulgated by her father’s comments concerning the D.O.C. In fact, Rachel seldom recognized a meeting taking place at all. Her mother made the customary rounds between all the guests, alternating between listening and telling stories, trading compliments on the dress selected, the weather, and of course, the war. These conversations were often punctuated by subtle whispers in perfumed ears.

Talk of the war was something Rachel listened intently for. She couldn’t remember a time when there hadn’t been talk of war. The greatest extent of what knowledge she had on the conflict had been gained by eavesdropping on her father. Whenever he entertained a guest in his study, Rachel crept to the closed door and put her ear to the floor and listened at the threshold. It was here on the floor that she first conceived her game of spy. She would listen though she understood little and scamper away when the sound of creaking leather boots signaled an approach.

Between whiffs of pungent cigar smoke, Rachel learned the names of the players in the war. The war itself was referred to as many things. Her father chiefly called it, “the fight for independence.” As with so many things, “independence” lacked a clear definition for her, but the names of the warriors did not. Talk often centered around the exploits of a general named Lee, “a truly great man,” and a “scoundrel” named Grant, or “that sonofabitch Sherman.” Having no experience with the word, it was almost a year before Rachel realized that “sonofabitch” was not General Sherman’s first name. Even after she learned otherwise, William Tecumseh Sherman was always called “Sonofabitch Sherman” in her late night campaigns around the plantation.

The greatest general though, was a man on a gray horse. Rachel knew the horse to be gray from a painting on the business side of her father’s study door. And she knew the rider to be Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. Mr. Justice explained that the painting was dated. “Now,” her father had told her, “General Jackson has more stars on his shoulders and a sorrel horse under his rump.” But when Rachel closed her eyes she saw the general as painted with no mind to number of stars and colors of horses.

She had heard the story of how Jackson came to be called “Stonewall” several times and though the story often changed dramatically her admiration did not. He was the leader who spearheaded tremendous charges against overwhelming odds, battled tirelessly to make the Confederate States of America free, and above all else was a courageous and loyal soldier. Stonewall Jackson became her gallant general on a gray horse and came often to ride with her on Rachel’s evening forays over the battlegrounds of Providence for their beloved Confederacy.

Rachel’s excursions to enemy lines were set aside for the moment however, as she shuffled among the Daughters of the Confederacy with a tray bearing a miraculous selection of tiny cookies and finger cakes. In her travels between parlor and kitchen she paused only long enough to dispense her load unless the conversation turned to “the fight for independence.”

“Oh, dear no,” Mrs. Jenson was saying. “You never want to mix nutmeg with cinnamon, even in a dusting. Why one taste just cancels the...”

A dropped off treat or two and Rachel moved away.

“...and well, she claims there was nothing between them, but mind you, if you had seen the look in his eyes! Well, I never...”

Boring.

“So I told her, I never did say such a thing, but if I wanted to, by heaven I would! But to tell the truth...”

Slim pickings tonight. Just ladies talking ladies’ things. Nothing of interest to a burgeoning spy.

“...and your three makes seven. That’s the largest ever.”

“Yes. A group that size will be difficult, but there were many concerns.”

“Certainly, but the concern should be with continuing our work, not increasing the risk of exposure.”

“You needn’t remind me of our intentions. As I said—”

“But, Martha. You had an allotment of one. And yet you bring three. Then there’s all this talk of concerns!”

“Keep your voice down.”

“We haven’t room for Martha’s concerns. We haven’t room—”

“For a family? Is that what you’re saying? One would have destroyed a family. I apologize, but there was no other way.”

Rachel’s expression did little to cloak her interest and confusion at this strange conversation. Stranger still was the fact that one of its primary contributors was her own mother.

“Obviously it’s too late now,” another woman moaned. “We’ll have to manage, but Martha, in the future, please consider the longer range terms of our mission.”

“That is exactly what I was considering,” Rachel heard her mother say. Then Mrs. Justice politely excused herself and stepped away from the small cluster of women. Rachel followed closely,

but said nothing about the unusual conversation then or throughout the ride home.

Several days passed without incident. Rachel ventured out a few nights to reconnoiter with General Jackson and to check the whereabouts of the Army of the Potomac, but sunlight would find things quiet and unaffected by the scouting. On the morning following one such excursion, Rachel's mother summoned her to the kitchen. She arrived to a beehive of activity. Mrs. Justice was flitting from pillar to post doling out instructions on the fly. Her servants responded quickly and departed on fleet bare soles, intonations of "Yes, 'am," echoing after them.

"Rachel, come here, dear," her mother called as she whirled. In her arms was a brown paper wrapped package of considerable heft. "Hold your arms out and see if you can carry this. Easy now, it's rather stout."

Rachel obeyed and felt the weight of the plain brown paper bundle fill her arms. She gave only slightly then deftly adjusted the package with a tiny heave. "I've got it, mother."

"Excellent, dear. Now, you know Carol Anne, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you recall where she lives – toward the fields?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Fine. Do you think you could manage this parcel all the way down to her?"

"I think so," Rachel said as her arms and eyes again tested the weight. "Yes, ma'am, I can do it."

"That's a good girl! I am just simply overrun here. We have a meeting of the D.O.C. tonight and your father has stepped out and invited the corresponding husbands to Providence for the evening. Some sort of meeting he claims. No doubt we will find all the brandy gone, replaced by a house full of the smell of cigars on our return."

Rachel nodded in agreement above the bundle, but secretly longed to stay at home and listen at doorways. Certainly there would be talk of the war. There'd be discussions of letters coming in from the front, of battles and strategy, troop movements, and generals.

"Now off with you to Carol Anne's. And don't return until you've done as I've directed."

Rachel's thoughts turned from battle to the back door of the kitchen. Just as she hastily left the bustle of the kitchen behind her, her mother's voice caught up with her again.

"Tell Carol Anne, two! There's a shiny penny for you when you've finished."

Thoughts of the penny put new strength in her arms as she headed for the shantytown. Unfortunately, the strength was short lived. Before she had cleared the out buildings that buttressed the main house, Rachel had to set the bundle down and rest. In a minute she was up and going, but soon the scene repeated itself as her skinny arms began to fumble the clumsy package. Several times she stopped and started. After a time her arms gave out entirely and the bundle dropped to the ground, tearing as it hit. Bright blue denim peeked out from the slight tear.

Rachel sat on the ground beside her resting burden and gently tweaked the coarse blue material between her fingers. She was so consumed by the cloth that she didn't notice the young stable boy approach.

"Miss Rachel. Is you sick or sumptin'?"

Rachel turned with a start and shading her eyes, squinted up from the dirt at her interviewer. "No. Not exactly. See," she said as she stood awkwardly and wiped the dust off her hands. "I was resting. Me and this dumb old package was headed for Miss Carol Anne's and it's kind of heavy. My arms are tired out."

The boy leaned down to pick up the bundle. "Maybe I's can tote it fo' you."

"Oh, that would be splendid!" Rachel replied as she bent to help her new assistant. As the unlikely pair hoisted the parcel together, the boy noticed the tear and the bright blue denim inside.

"The blue!" he exclaimed then just as quickly threw a blanket over his excitement and lowered his wide eyes.

"What's so special about blue?" Rachel asked.

“I dunno,” the boy answered as he watched his bare toes squish through the dust beneath his feet.

“Haven’t you seen blue cloth before?”

“I seen it afore.”

“Then what’d you get all fluffed up about? Only denim, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You don’t have to call me ma’am. Call me Rachel, like you did before.”

“Okay, Miss Rachel.”

“And what’s your name?”

“Nathaniel Job. But ‘erybody call me Joby.”

“Job. That’s a fine Christian name,” Rachel said in an excellent impression of her mother.

“Yes, ’am. Thank you, Miss Rachel.”

With formalities accomplished the duo set out with purposeful steps, but as they approached the crest of the knoll they were both sweating and breathing heavy. They exchanged anxious glances before Rachel suggested they rest for a minute. Both sat in the dirt road measuring off the remaining distance between the package and Carol Anne’s, now about fifty yards away.

“You know what, Joby? My mother said she’d give me a shiny penny for delivering this parcel.” Rachel accented her declaration by kicking at the package with a dirty toe.

“A whole penny? Jus’ fo’ fetchin’ this here bundle?” Joby said in disbelief.

“That’s right, a whole penny. And a shiny one at that.”

“Land o’ Goshen. I could fetch a hundredt bundles a day fo’ a penny a piece.”

“That would be a hundred pennies. Then how much would you have?”

Joby stared at her blankly.

“A hundred pennies, silly,” Rachel said again. “How much is that?”

Joby concentrated hard. “I s’pose it be’s a hundredt.

“No, no. It’d be a dollar. A hundred pennies is a dollar. Everybody knows that, Joby. A hundred pennies is a dollar.”

Joby lowered his head. Rachel twisted down and around until she could see his face. “Aww, don’t be ashamed of forgetting. Everybody forgets things. You did just forget, didn’t you, Joby?”

The boy kept up his admiration of the dirt around him and said nothing.

“Why, Joby, don’t you know how to ‘cipher?”

Joby’s head waved the answer.

“Do you know any arithmetic?”

Joby’s head was still swaying and didn’t stop at this new question.

“Golly, Joby, how come? Don’t you go to school?”

The boy looked up at Rachel and though his eyes were dry they were full of despair.

Rachel continued, though with greater tenderness. “Can you at least read and write?”

Joby spoke for the first time in several minutes. “No, Miss Rachel. I dunno how to do no learnin’ things.”

Rachel sat quietly for a moment then fairly leaped to her knees and began smoothing the dirt in front of her. Joby sat up on his knees by her side and watched as Rachel’s hand mimicked an eraser on a blackboard.

“Now watch, Joby. This is a J,” Rachel said as she traced the letter in the fine dust. “Now, O. Then B. And Y. There. J-O-B-Y. That spells Joby.”

She pointed excitedly as Joby stared at his name in the dirt, seeing it for the first time. Rachel carefully retraced each letter and said them slowly as Joby followed the tip of her finger with his eyes. “J-O-B-and-Y. Joby. Now you try.”

The young boy’s hand was trembling slightly as he pushed his work scarred dirty finger into the dirt. He drew it slowly through the dust as his eyes darted back and forth repeatedly from Rachel’s ‘JOB Y’ to his own scrawling. Rachel noticed the poor attempt and covered his hand with her own

and provided gentle guidance. She sounded out the letters and Joby mouthed them after. When they finished Rachel encouraged him to try again and again. After several tries Joby was printing his name and saying the letters plainly.

“That’s terrific, Joby. You never have to be embarrassed again. You can now write your own name.”

Joby was smiling broadly as he etched his name, erased it, and then quickly repeated the lesson. “J-O-B-Y. Joby. Joby.”

Rachel got to her feet and her student followed. “We’d better get this parcel delivered or we’ll both get The Treatment,” she laughed.

They continued on to Carol Anne’s, with Joby looking often over his shoulder to the spot where his name was carved in dirt. As expected, the remainder of the short trip was filled with echoes of J’s and O’s and the others.

When they reached Carol Anne’s door, the tired house was very quiet. Rachel bravely knocked on the battered wood, causing the entire door to shake beneath her light raps. Carol Anne answered directly. Her surprise was clearly evident by the look of wonder and amazement on her face.

“It’s me, Miss Carol Anne. Rachel.”

“Why yes. Yes it is.” Then the aging seamstress noticed the splash of blue spilling out of the bundle. “Oh my. And you’ve brought me a little sumptin’, I see.”

Carol reverently touched the blue material then looked beyond it and took notice of Joby. “And you’ve picked up a helper ‘long the way.”

“Yes, ’am. My name’s Joby. J-O-B-Y. Joby.”

There was an instant look of concern on Carol Anne’s face at the sounding of the letters, but she smiled, albeit cautiously. “I know who you are Joby,” she said as she took the package from their arms. “You two wait here. I’ve got a honey biscuit for your trouble.”

The children looked at each other and nodded their appreciation. Rachel covered her mouth to stifle a giggle as Carol Anne retrieved two hot biscuits from a pan atop a wood stove and brought them to the youngsters. “Here you go. Now mind you they are fresh as the morning and hot as the noon-day sun.”

The pair tossed their treats from hand to hand to avoid the burn as they thanked her and headed back toward the main house and the stables. As they began to scurry away Carol Anne called after them.

“Missy Rachel! Did Miss Justice give ya’ll a number for me?”

“Oh, gracious. Yes. She said, two!”

“Alright, childrens. Run on now.”

Carol Anne was singing again before the door closed. Hearing her, Rachel stopped in the dusty road and looked back at the tiny cabin. Joby stopped with her.

“Joby, why is Miss Carol Anne singing now? I wonder why she likes sewing so much when she doesn’t get paid for it?”

“It the blue. She always take to singin’ when she sew the blue.”

“But why?” Rachel questioned as her eyes moved from Carol Anne’s cabin to the fields beyond. “Look. Nobody wears what she makes. Why would she commence to singing when no one wears what she makes?”

Joby turned away and started to walk back to where his letters waited in the dirt. “Them’s travelin’ clothes.”

Rachel ran to catch up with her new friend. “Traveling clothes? What are traveling clothes? Who’s traveling? Where they going?”

Joby had reached his dusty chalkboard and sat down beside it. “I dunno.”

Rachel stood above him and scowled. “Whatdaya mean, you don’t know? You knew they were traveling clothes all right. Now, who’s leaving and where they going?”

“I dunno, Missy Rachel,” Joby answered as he lazily drew in the dirt.

“Awful funny how folks know some things, but not others,” Rachel demanded as her voice rose. “You listen here, Nathaniel Job. I showed you how to write your stupid name, now you tell me about traveling clothes, this instant!”

Joby looked up with a face held gently in the hands of sadness. “But I cain’t, Missy Rachel. I jus’ cain’t.”

Rachel stomped her feet through his dirt letters and ran off toward the house.

“You’re just a dumb old slave. That’s all you are. Can’t even read and write his own name.” Then she began singing her taunts as she skipped, looking over her shoulder. “Joby can’t read! Joby can’t write! Joby can’t read! Joby can’t write!”

For his part Joby sat in the dirt and watched through teary eyes as his short lived friendship faded. The tears trickled down his cheeks and fell on the dusty ‘J’ beside him. “Can so write my name,” he cried softly as he again traced ‘JOBY’ between his feet.

Rachel had stopped near the house and was spying on the crying writer. Behind Joby, coming up the hill from the shanty town, Rachel saw a dirty hat appear, then a head beneath it. In a moment shoulders followed as the walker ascended the slope behind the unsuspecting boy. As Rachel continued watching from behind the safety of a peach tree she saw that the man was Calloway and he was pulling the Treatment from his belt.

She edged through the orchard toward the dirt road and Joby. As she came to the edge of the orchard Rachel saw Calloway lay the whip out behind him, uncoiling the black snake for a strike. She wanted to scream a warning, but was frozen. The whip snapped toward Joby and cracked sharply just inches above his head. Both children jumped. Joby spun in the dirt as his heels and palms tried to back pedal away from the advancing task master.

“Get back here, boy!” Calloway screamed.

Joby froze while his friend melted enough to move out from the safety of the trees. Calloway was now towering above Joby as he recoiled the whip in his filthy hands.

“What are you doing, boy?”

Joby looked down. “Nothin’, Mas’er Calloway, sir.”

Calloway’s eyes caught the letters in the dusty road. “What the hell? This here yourn, boy?”

Joby didn’t answer until Calloway’s dirt caked boot prompted him. “Yes, sir. Mas’er Calloway, sir.”

Rachel felt the kick herself and was now walking toward Calloway and her friend.

“Where you been learning this shit, boy?”

“I dunno, Mas’er Calloway, sir,” Joby called up from the ground as he began to immeasurably inch away.

Calloway noticed Rachel creeping slowly toward them, though she was still a considerable distance away. “Bullshit you don’t!” Calloway screamed. “You’s a lying niggra, boy. And now I’m gonna give you some more learnin’. Learnin’ what happens to niggra boys what lie!”

The Treatment spit out with practiced authority. The first lash ripped over Joby’s up stretched arms and Rachel began to run. By the second strike, Joby had curled into a dusty ball on his dirt chalkboard. The third lash lay over his skinny back, ripping easily thru his thin worn simple cotton shirt and biting deep into his flesh. And while the leather tore at his skin, the tip of The Treatment struck the ground and snapped up Joby’s name from him.

Meanwhile, Rachel was headed pell-mell down the road. Her momentum outran her legs and she fell in the dirt. She was screaming as she scrambled to get her feet beneath her. “Stop it! Stop it!”

Below the whipping a monstrous black man lumbered out from the shadows of the cabin row and stepped tentatively toward Joby and Calloway, but Rachel would reach them first. Her lanky body was dirty and tired, but her voice still carried her mother’s jurisdiction. “Stop that! Stop that this instant!”

Carol Anne appeared behind the huge slave and took hold of his arm. As she did she motioned toward Rachel who was descending on Calloway with the Furies behind her.

“What are doing?” Rachel yelled. “He didn’t do nothing!”

“That’s just it!” Calloway hollered back. “He ain’t doing nothing and he’s supposed to be workin’.”

The exchange gave Joby a chance to unwind his bleeding body and take to his feet. Calloway started to move after him, but Rachel reached out and grabbed the end of his whip.

“RUN, JOBY!”

Carol Anne and the black man discreetly moved back into the shadows of her house as Calloway started in on Rachel who, like Joby, had started to run.

“Okay for you, Missy! But it’ll mean the Treatment for the both of ya. I’ll be bringing this to your father. Then you’ll run! And you’ll stop playin’ with niggra boys. And you! Run, boy! But you can’t outrun the whip! I’ll find you and then you’ll reckon the devil hisself has got holt of you!”

Rachel dashed around the back of the house, but Joby was nowhere to be found. She looked for a minute then fearful of Calloway, crashed through the screen door into the kitchen. She was panting hard with streaks of tears in the dust on her flushed cheeks. Her mother saw the sight and crouched down in front of her.

“What in the name of heaven have you been doing? You had best have seen to your task before you began this silliness. You are a fright.”

Rachel was trying to get her story out between gasps. “Mr... Calloway... the Treatment... Just spelling... and—”

“Oh, Rachel. I’ve told you a hundred times to steer clear of Mr. Calloway. That whip has given you nightmares as long as I can remember.”

“No... There was a boy...”

“That’s quite enough,” her mother directed as she stood to her full height and buried her hands in the pockets of her apron. “Go upstairs and get yourself presentable. I have a great deal to do to prepare Providence for your father’s meeting. Hmmp! Meeting, my left foot. Just an excuse for drinking, smoking, and loose talk. That’s what it is.”

Mrs. Justice was already back to her duties as mistress over many.

Rachel crept close to her, looking for a shoulder, an ear, or at least a hug. Instead a shiny penny was pushed into her hand as Mrs. Jenson strode unannounced into the kitchen.

“Martha. I’m so sorry to pop in so, but we simply must talk.”

Out of habit, the slave maids and housekeepers silently disappeared into the farthest reaches of the house. Rachel greeted Mrs. Jenson politely, but her disheveled look garnered only a disapproving nod. With the curt greeting tucked away, Rachel followed on the heels of the servants, but held up just outside the kitchen door. From within, her mother and the unexpected guest spoke in whispers.

“Martha, there’s been a problem to the south,” Mrs. Jenson began. “Several travelers were intercepted last night. I don’t have all the particulars, but I do know there’s been a lynching.”

Rachel heard her mother sigh deeply. “Oh, no.”

“It’s a poor consequence,” Mrs. Jenson continued. “But there’s now ample room available.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Times here are very strained. And there are so few hours left in the day. I don’t believe arrangements could be made.”

“Regardless, I wanted you to know. You agonize so over these decisions. I thought the extra room might ease your burden.”

“Thank you, Maudie, but I believe tonight is already set. There’s no time for changes at this late hour.”

“Ah, no time for your famous blue coveralls?”

Rachel jumped – her eyes as wide as saucers!

“You know,” Mrs. Jensen stated with an air of pride. “I understand they’re quite popular to the north. They seem to give the travelers confidence and also invites confidence in employers. With

your blue on their backs, your travelers fit in well in the coal mines of Pennsylvania, the factories of Detroit, along the docks in New York City, wherever. It's a wonderful thing you do by that, Martha. The others may soon follow suit."

Mrs. Jenson paused and looked about the kitchen. "I see you're preparing for the men folk to descend. The old fools. Just an excuse to drink up your husband's bourbon."

"My thoughts exactly," Mrs. Justice said absentmindedly.

"Well, dear, I'm off. See you this evening, Martha." Mrs. Jenson pivoted and bolted out the swinging kitchen door. Rachel just managed to duck away from the door's assault. Mrs. Jenson strutted by within inches, but never noticed Rachel crouching on the floor as the door swung back to place.

Inside the kitchen, Mrs. Justice was still talking. "Yes. And thank you. Lord, another lynching."

Rachel staggered away from the kitchen surrounded by a thousand thoughts, one of which occupied her mind so completely she dropped her shiny penny. It bounced off the polished hardwood floor until it found its edge and began to roll. She chased it down and dove on it with both hands, like a cat capturing a mouse, until the sounds of voices perked her ears. The penny had brought her to her father's study doorway.

Inside, Mr. Justice was having a very deliberate conversation with Calloway.

"Certainly I agree, Mr. Calloway. I can hardly afford any more losses, but I'm pressed as to what to do. I try to treat them well and yet they still run."

"You treat 'em too well. They understand the whip better'n kindness."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"Well sir, it's your place, but if'n you keep a goin' like you are by next spring there won't be a hand left to till the fields. Then what, Mr. Justice? Then what'll you do?"

Rachel listened to the silence as her father thought.

After a few minutes, he spoke slowly. "You've made a valid argument, Mr. Calloway. All right then. I agree. Post your guards at the river, along the edge of the shacks and the stable."

"Now you're talkin', sir. It's a hard way, well I know," Calloway offered with counterfeit sympathy. "But if'n you gotta kill one or two to keep the rest to home, well then that's what you do. It was them what forced you into it."

Rachel silently picked up her penny.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Mr. Justice said carefully. "It's a damn shame to have to do any killing."

"It's for the best, sir. You drop one of 'em and the rest'll stay put."

"Yes, I trust you are correct."

Rachel ran away from the study like a shot. She dashed up the stairs to her room and flopped down hard on the bed. She put her hands, one of which still clutched the shiny penny, to her ears and shook her head. "What's going on here?" she said out loud to no one but herself. In her mind she replayed the conversation of her mother and Mrs. Jenson. And then the one between her father and Calloway. And the eavesdropping at the D.O.C. meeting. And the noise in the wagon. And the bright blue denim. Always the bright blue.

An hour later still found Rachel on her bed. Her thoughts had turned to General Jackson. He was fighting for her father's right to independence. That much she had learned from closed study doors. And he was fighting for her, right? Oh, how she loved the general on the gray horse. She had spied for him. But something was wrong and the wrong was welling up inside her. She could feel it. And the something was soon summed up by a newly spelled word. JOBY.

Rachel jumped off her bed and flew out of the room and down the stairs. In seconds she cleared the mansion and the wide green lawn. As she ran she thought as best she could of what to do and what to say. She sprinted through the dusty school where Joby had felt the whip, down the hill, and beyond to Miss Carol Anne's door.

Rachel didn't knock. She burst through the door and bolted straight to a plain wooden table where Carol Anne stood wringing out a threadbare towel in a large pan of water. On the corner of the table sat two freshly stitched pair of bright blue overalls.

Scraps of the magic material lay scattered around the basin. Rachel snatched up a small piece and held it up to Carol Anne as she fought to catch her breath.

"This... This, Miss Carol Anne! I know... I know! You... You have to make one more. A small one about my size."

Then Rachel's eyes caught sight of the water in the large bowl. It was pink.

Carol Anne's face held none of the pleasantness of earlier in the day. She didn't even acknowledge what Rachel had said. Rather, she turned to the side and looked toward the back of the one room cabin where a small group of slaves were standing around an old handmade, quilt covered bed.

Rachel left the table and walked slowly toward the bed. At its head was the huge black man who had earlier stepped from the shadows. Rachel locked eyes with him and he helped her draw near. When she had, the man shifted his gaze to the bed and Rachel's own eyes obeyed. Stretched out before her was Joby, but he was scarcely the same boy who had helped her with the package only hours before. His face was swollen everywhere. Both of his eyes were pressed tightly closed. There were lumps on his bleeding scalp and his jaw wasn't aligned properly. His breathing was slow and laborious. Rachel started to cry and most of the attendants moved away from the bed. Carol Anne replaced them and dabbed the blood from Joby's battered face.

"Joby? Missy Rachel here to see you," Carol Anne whispered.

Rachel's lower lip trembled and pumped tears down her cheeks. "Hey, Joby," she called, sensing he couldn't see her.

Joby raised a dirty hand and Rachel took it into her own along with the piece of blue denim she still held. The shaking in Rachel's lip spread throughout her entire body. Her shoulders began to heave as she fought to maintain her composure. With each of Joby's dwindling breaths, Rachel lost another battle with her emotions. Joby tried to talk, but couldn't. Instead, he weakly pried open Rachel's hand and faintly pressed a dirty finger into her pale white palm. On it he began to spell his name. He struggled to say the letters, but couldn't speak so Rachel said the letters as he wrote them in her hand.

"J... O... B... Y..."

When he finished, Joby's hand quivered slightly and collapsed in Rachel's still open palm. Carol Anne slipped beside the crying girl and eased Joby's lifeless arm from her trembling grip and returned it to the quilt. Everyone turned from the bed except the man at the head who reverently pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket and spread it over Joby's puffy face. Rachel looked up at Carol Anne who was wiping the tears from the only white face in the shack.

"Wh-what h-happened?" she stuttered as she gulped for air between crying heaves.

Carol Anne didn't speak, but someone else muttered, "Calloway."

Rachel began to cry all the harder and buried her face in Carol Anne's waist.

"It's my fault. It's all my fault..."

"Nonsense, Missy Rachel," Carol Anne soothed as she gently maneuvered Rachel back to the table. A chair was pulled out for her and as she sat, she pulled the distraught girl up on her lap and began to rock her. "Ain't your fault, child. Ain't no one's fault but one man alone."

Someone behind them spoke in a murderous tone. "Damn white folk!" And a murmur of agreement rippled over the tiny throng.

Then a young man pushed through to the table where Carol Anne was seated with Rachel. "Get that white girl outa here!" he shouted.

"Hush, Teo!" Carol Anne scolded.

"No, damn it! She right. She the one what done it. Get her 'way from this poor boy."

"Teo! I said that's enough!"

Teo snatched Rachel's arm and tried to wrench her off Carol Anne's lap.

"TEO, NO!"

From out of nowhere, two mammoth black hands grabbed Teo from behind and effortlessly pinned his arms to his sides. Teo's legs buckled under the immense pressure as the huge man spoke in a calm, but powerful voice. "Leave go o' that child whilst you got arms that still can."

Rachel's arm instantly floated free and Carol Anne shuffled her to the door.

"You best run along to home, Missy Rachel. I'll tend to Joby."

Rachel looked back into the room behind Carol Anne. The big man was still holding a subdued Teo. The faces around them were taut with sadness. Some were angry, but none were dry. Further into the room lay Joby. Rachel looked at the white square on his face then turned and ran into the dusk of early evening. She ran for her mother. She wanted, needed, to be held and hear the mother's voice who had spoken so gently to her on the wagon not so long ago. That's the woman she craved as Rachel stumbled and fell again and again as she scrambled up the hill through the orchard to the back door of the kitchen.

Surprisingly, the kitchen was empty. Rachel streamed through the lower rooms of the house and found no one. The slaves had returned to their homes, collecting there to begin the simple funeral preparations for Joby. Even the women that were supposed to remain at the house to put the finishing touches on Mr. Justice's meeting were absent. Eventually Rachel's search led her to the bottom of the stairs where her mother spotted her from an upper landing.

"Good Lord, child! What have you done with yourself?" Mrs. Justice swooped down the stairs to Rachel who tried to collapse into her mother's arms, but was grabbed and held out for a harsh inspection instead. "Rachel. Now you listen to me and listen well. Get yourself up those stairs and made presentable. Immediately! We should be leaving within the hour."

"But mother, it's terrible! Just awful."

"I won't hear another word."

"Mother, please. Joby. Joby's—"

Her mother shook her sternly. "That is quite enough! This is a very important trip tonight and I sh'ant be late on your account. Now go!"

Rachel was crying again, adding new tears to Joby's, which still skated beneath her chin. "Oh, mommy! I—"

The next words were jerked inaudibly from Rachel's mouth as her mother spun her sideways and swatted her hard on her bottom. "Now git!"

Rachel was jolted by the spanking, but clamored up the stairs until she reached the mid-point landing. She turned and through blurry eyes saw her mother standing with hands on hips at the base of the stairs.

Mrs. Justice critically prodded her daughter on. "Go! I've got too much to do to be bothered with your foolishness! Nonexistent battles and such. Nonsense. You cannot possibly understand how important it is that we depart in a timely manner. There are many other people to be considered in this world beyond yourself and your imaginary playmates. Now, get yourself in order or there'll be more of the same. Move!"

Rachel's fists were clenched at her side. Though she still felt the sting of her mother's hand she had stopped crying. Her face was red from anger now rather than tears. For the first time in her young life she confronted the woman at the bottom of the stairs. "I want my *MOTHER!*" she screamed uncontrollably before turning and running to her room.

The scene was a near repeat of earlier in the day. Rachel flung herself on the bed, literally wrenching from anguish. So much had happened today and she was alone to deal with it. She cried for want of her mother, not the lady at the stairs who had now dropped her hands and was staring at the empty landing, but the soft mother who explained things so well, the only one who could make sense of this terrible day. But Rachel couldn't find her, couldn't reach her.

It took several minutes before her breath was her own and the tears to subside. Rachel rubbed her red eyes. They itched. Only then did she realize her hand still clutched the patch of blue denim from Carol Anne's table. Its magic brushed her cheek and brought a look of resolve to the young face. Joby was gone and she ached deeply, knowing she had a hand in his death. But no one else had to die. Or at least she could try to save a life to make up for the one that was lost.

The gray horse pranced to the front of Rachel's battle, vainly trying to rally. Rachel eyed Jackson hard in her mind then dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "No, General. Not today. This is wrong." And the gray rider vanished.

Hurriedly and with eyes brimming with determination instead of tears, Rachel quickly washed and dressed for the Jenson's. In minutes she was ready. As she checked her look in a full length mirror, the tiny swatch of blue called to her from the bed. She gently picked it up. On it was the dust and blood from Joby's hand as well as her own tears. Without hesitating she turned up the collar of her blouse and pinned the snip of bright blue to it. Carefully she massaged the collar flat again and with the blue hidden, headed quickly to the door.

She cracked it open and discreetly peered up and down the hall. There was no one within sight or sound. Out she went. The site of the recent screaming bout was empty as well, so she descended the stairs in a flurry and darted out the front door.

The manicured lawn was dark. It was getting late and she knew her mother would soon collect her for their trip. Rachel's spying games were paying dividends as she expertly snuck around the house. From the hedges she could see men with lanterns collecting near the stable. They milled around kicking at nothing in the dirt then began to move away in a variety of directions. All were carrying guns.

Rachel moved on. She traveled quickly around the edge of the orchard and was nearing the other side when she faintly heard her mother's voice call in the house.

"Rachel. We will be leaving in a scant ten minutes. Bring yourself down."

Rachel allowed herself a slight smile at the notion that her mother thought her upstairs. As quickly as it came however, the smile faded and she moved on toward the shanty town.

In a few moments Rachel was perched at the corner of the nearest building in the slaves' quarters. Carol Anne's lay twenty-five yards beyond. She watched intently for what she thought would come. In another moment, it did. Two shadows, one looking monstrously big, moved surreptitiously along the side of Carol Anne's shack. The moonlight was not exceptionally brilliant, but still Rachel could see the color that surrounded the travelers and set them softly aglow. It was the magical halo of bright blue.

The travelers moved like ghosts, ever silent. In the gathered darkness their feet seemed never to touch the ground. Rather, their garments carried them like wings of sapphire. Rachel watched with knowing amazement at the sight she had witnessed before, but never believed. Now she believed because she understood. The black men in bright blue were real. And they were headed straight for the stable and the waiting guns.

Her hand absently reached beneath her collar and tugged at the blue talisman pinned there. Its relationship to the bright blue that now moved toward the guns sent courage to her heart and energy to her feet. She scurried away. Thirty seconds later she had run a course that would intercept the travelers on the back side of the small hill. She waited in the shadows of a small grove for the ghosts to arrive.

Soon they came – floating breathlessly up the hill. The pair of specters moved from one stand of trees to the next. In seconds they had drifted to within range of Rachel's whispered voice.

"Travelers, please don't move."

She stepped out from behind a skinny tree that had completely hidden her slight frame. The men were afraid and began to back away, not certain if Rachel herself was a ghost or perhaps worse yet, a player in some devilish trap. She moved in on them and was quickly recognized.

"Missy Rachel!" the big man whispered. "What you doin' out here?"

“There isn’t time to explain, but there’s guns waiting for you just over that knoll not a hundred feet from here.”

“Oh, Lordy,” the smaller man moaned. “We’s dead fo’ sure now. C’mon. We’s gots to get back to the river.”

Both men started to move, but Rachel clutched the bright blue of the big man’s pant leg. “No, wait. There’s guns there too. I heard them talking. There’s only one safe way. You have to come with me.”

The men eyed each other in the darkness as well as the little white girl pleading before them. The big man remembered her grabbing the dangerous whip to defend Joby and knew this child had courage.

“Alright, Missy Rachel. Where do we go?”

“Through the orchard. I know a path there. It isn’t far, but we’ve got to hurry.”

“The orchard?” the big man said. “Ain’t they no other way?”

“No. Please, we must go now!” Rachel’s tiny hand reached for the huge black mitt that hung near her face. The man’s thumb was as big as her wrist, but she wormed her way inside. Gently the hand closed and swallowed Rachel’s hand, wrist, and most of her forearm. Secured to her charge, Rachel glanced around and started back in the direction she had come.

The men’s gait was crippled, hampered by the tiny steps of their leader. With a gentle boost Rachel was suddenly airborne, gliding over the ground at tremendous speed toward the orchard. Now she was certain that these ghosts or men or whatever, could fly. Never had she moved so fast.

Just inside the orchard Rachel was softly returned to earth. On another day she might have asked for another ride as part of some game, but this wasn’t play. The guns around this encampment were real. They had to hurry. Rachel took a step deeper into the orchard, pulling again at the big hand. This time the hand resisted and brought her springing back.

“We must hurry!” she ordered.

The big man crouched down on his knees. Still he was much taller than his little general.

“Missy Rachel, you ever seen a dead man?”

The question was lost on her, but she answered as fast as possible. “Yes. Yes. Plenty. There’s a war about you know.” In truth, Joby was the only dead person she’d ever seen, apart from some old man in a funeral procession lost someplace in her memory.

The big man shifted his bulk and spoke again. “Missy Rachel, they a dead man yonder in that orchard. It don’t look like they’s much way ‘round it. You ‘fraid, Missy Rachel?”

“No...”

“Then we best be movin’ on.”

Rachel led the way, but found herself clinging closer to her monstrous friend with each step. Halfway through the grove she was by his side, clinging to his muscled arm with both hands. The man caught sight of the body first and cradled Rachel closer, covering her head and eyes with his free hand. The dead man had been hung, or at least eventually hung. His hands weren’t tied and dangled freely as his body twisted in the night air. A strange and ancient drive made Rachel peek through the huge fingers that covered her face and she looked at the corpse. She watched it spin slowly toward her in the moonlight as she walked by. When it had turned completely, she saw the distorted face above the stretched neck. It was Calloway. And he was hanging by his own whip.

Rachel shuddered. Her protector felt the quiver and scooped her up to his chest again and began running among the peach trees. In no time they emerged on the other side near a shallow ravine and Rachel’s feet found the ground by the rocky edge.

“There,” she said as she pointed down into the darkness. “Get down there. You can’t see the bottom now, but it isn’t maybe fifteen feet deep. I’ve crawled down this bank. You can easy. There’s a little creek down there. Follow it upstream about a mile. You’ll come up under a small bridge. Wait ‘till you hear a wagon stop on that bridge. Then get in.”

The smaller man was already over the edge, but the big man knelt again in front of the little girl. "Looky here, Missy Rachel. You go 'round the outside of the orchard goin' on back. T'ain't nothin' to be 'fraid of and I's know you a brave girl, but if'n you would, jus' skirt the orchard, alright?"

"Yes. Yes. Just git a going and mind you watch for that sonofabitch Sherman," Rachel offered with a tiny smile. "Of course, in those blues you'll probably be taken for Union anyway."

"Yes, ma'am. I reckon so," her big friend smiled back.

"Look," Rachel said excitedly as she turned up her collar and stretched her neck to expose the secret patch of blue. "I suppose I'm Union now too. Do you imagine General Jackson will understand?"

"Yes'am, Missy Rachel. I's sure he will." With that, the hulk slid into the gully and out of sight.

Rachel turned back and faced the orchard. Her fingers again sought out the charm pinned to her collar. "I sure do hope the general forgives me," she said as she stepped into the trees. Her plan to slink the long way around the edge of the grove was suddenly changed by a voice in the distance.

"Rachel. Rachel? Let's go."

Her mother's voice was faint, but sought her out among the peach blossoms. She was out of time. She'd have to go straight through the orchard or run the risk of another whipping. Her spindly chest heaved in a preparation breath and she dove hard into the dark peach trees.

She knew the way well even at night, but now it seemed much different. It was darker than it had been just a few minutes before. She changed direction to avoid the body, ran on some and changed direction again. The orchard was pitch black now and Rachel's eyes were widening and she was beginning to shake and sweat, but she ran on feeling more lost and alone with each stride.

The trees around her were coming to life. They reached out for her, trying to snatch her up into the branches and hang her like Calloway. "They hang traitors!" her mind taunted, and she was a traitor to the Confederacy. She would hang for it! Now she cried and ran all the harder, clawing to escape her fate. On and on through the snatching black forest that seemed to have no end. Spinning. Lashing at the limbs that tried to grab her. The whole orchard was moving and tipping now. Every branch held the whip and every bough was Calloway's swinging corpse lunging for her.

Rachel was faint and dizzy. She leaned forward on her knees, gasping for breath as she cried out, "I'm sorry, General! I had to. It just isn't right. Forgive me. Please!"

As she sobbed, the fingertip of a soft glow of light touched her chin and brought her face up. In the distance, on the far side of the orchard, a soft gray light summoned her from her delirium. She stepped toward it. Soon she could make out the silhouette of a rider on horseback through the trees. Each successive step brought an increased brilliance to the gray light and as it intensified, Rachel began to see the horse and rider clearly. It was a gray rider, but more, it was General Stonewall Jackson, just as he appeared in her father's painting.

"He's come to execute the traitor," Rachel heard her voice say.

She watched helplessly as the General drew his sword. The swish of the steel resounded as the heavy blade came to life and flashed in the strange glow. The gray horse abruptly snorted and plumes of steam shot from its nostrils. The powerful animal pawed the ground unmercifully, tearing up clumps of sod and causing the earth to quake beneath Rachel's feet. The arms of the trees fell back. She thought surely she would die, but walked on stoically through the grove to her betrayed idol.

After a testing prance, the gray horse reared magnificently. Rachel stopped dead in her tracks, legs shaking as she stared up at the ghostly horse and rider. From high atop his mount, Jackson pointed his gleaming blade at the mesmerized girl.

Unexpectedly he motioned her to him with the brilliant sword and shouted his command. "This way, my young soldier! The battle has just begun!"

Rachel bolted toward her General. The branches withdrew further as she careened through the last of the trees and into the gray beam. She felt as if she was floating as her tired little body passed deep into the light and through to the other side. When she paused to look up she discovered she

was standing beyond the grove at the top of the hill. The light that now covered her came from a lantern swinging in her mother's hand.

"Rachel!" her mother beckoned. "Lord, child, you have become a bother. Here, let me have a look at you."

Fortunately, the lantern did little to illuminate Rachel's haggard face. Mrs. Justice brushed away a few twigs from her daughter's clothes and spoke again, this time in a mother's voice. "Come along, darling. It's important we get started." She paused to straighten Rachel's collar and saw the bright blue swatch, but pretended otherwise.

"Sweetheart, I apologize for spanking you," she said very gently. "These are troublesome times, but not of your doing. I am sorry, Rachel. Truly I am."

Rachel heard the words and was warmed by them, but spun quickly to look back at the orchard. Then as quickly turned back to her mother. "Mommy, I saw General Jackson!"

Mrs. Justice leaned into her daughter and hugged her tight. "Yes. Yes. I believe you did. Come," she said as she stood and took Rachel by the hand. "You can tell me all about it on our trip."

As mother and daughter walked toward Colonel and their wagon, Mrs. Justice doused the lantern. Rachel didn't question, but the move brought a gun out of the shadows of the stable.

"Ms. Justice, ma'am? You ought to keep that torch a burnin'," said a burly man as he struck a match to his own lantern. "There might be trouble afoot tonight. You best not be doin' much movin' lessin' you got yourself a candle."

Mrs. Justice and Rachel stood in the hired gun's light.

"What's all this about?" Mrs. Justice queried resolutely as she pointed to the gun.

"Orders of your husband, ma'am. Too many darkies been runnin' off. He's fixin' to stop 'em. One way," the man said as he tapped his gun, "or t'other."

Mrs. Justice helped Rachel into the wagon then joined her. She tried to turn the man away as she had done Calloway. "Well, I'll not have any firearms around my daughter. You just get yourself over there by the house."

"No, ma'am. This here's my post. If'n I moves off'n her, Calloway said he'd tear up his whip on me. I's a stayin'."

Rachel looked toward the orchard and thought of Calloway's whip as the man extinguished his lantern and receded into the shadows.

Mrs. Justice was nervous. She couldn't wait. If the slaves approached the stable, as they were certain to do any second, there'd be shooting and Rachel could get hit. If she tried to warn the travelers, the entire organization could be exposed. There was no good way out. She called to Colonel and brought the reins down sharply on his rump. The old horse lunged ahead and jerked the unusually light wagon to a start. Behind the cart the man stepped again from the shadows to watch Colonel, Rachel, her mother, and the empty wagon move out onto the road to the Jenson's.

The reins were trembling in Mrs. Justice's hands. Any second she expected to hear the report of a gun. The tension grew as Colonel inched his way up the road and left Providence behind. Any moment now. Certainly any second and men would be killed. Mrs. Justice braced herself for the blast that would now be echoing some distance behind her. "At least Rachel is out of harm's way," she reasoned silently. "But those poor men."

Rachel tapped her mother's arm and the woman jumped, causing Rachel to jump as well. Mrs. Justice smiled weakly and slid over in the seat to be nearer her daughter. "Oh, my! I guess I'm a tad out of sorts tonight, dear."

Rachel knew the cause of her mother's anxiousness, but was unsure how to approach her. Would the tender, loving woman who met her with the lantern be there to listen or would the calloused head mistress of the plantation answer? Rachel cautiously tested the water. "Mother? I saw General Jackson tonight. Down by the orchard."

"You did?" her mother responded with her nervousness unhidden. "How was he? Next time be certain to ask him to the house for tea."

“Awww, you don’t believe me.”

“Oh, yes I do. I do believe you saw him. It’s just difficult to understand how he can be in two places at once. I heard the other day that he was leading his troops into Chancellorsville, but I suppose he is an amazing man.”

“He is, mother! He really is!” Rachel exclaimed. “He was on his gray horse, just like in PaPa’s painting. And he had a shiny sword and everything! See, I was lost in the orchard and the General, he showed me the way out. He is amazing. And he must have forgiven me too. You know, to help me like that. If he didn’t forgive me he wouldn’t have helped me would he, mother?”

“I suppose not,” Mrs. Justice answered, still listening with one ear for the guns to erupt. She thought to ask Rachel what she sought forgiveness from General Jackson for, but waited instead for the blast.

Rachel sat quietly alongside her mother for a time until she recognized the bend in the road that signaled the approach of the bridge. Her mother was there all right, but still Rachel was uncertain how to talk so openly about such things as Joby, and Calloway, and the men that waited beneath the bridge. Perhaps her mother would not stay. There was no more time to consider a strategy. Colonel’s hooves were kissing the worn planks of the bridge.

“Mother, let’s stop a minute.”

Mrs. Justice was once again drawn from her concentration on the guns.

“What, dear?”

“Let’s stop. Let’s stop the wagon.”

“Why, Rachel? What’s wrong?”

“Just stop. We must stop!” Rachel reached over and jerked the reins that rested in her mother’s hands.

Mrs. Justice sat in shocked silence. Colonel took advantage of the unscheduled break and rested. Rachel was sitting stiffly, looking forward over Colonel into the dark.

“Mother, do you remember telling me that sometimes you have to do what your heart tells you is right? Even if maybe it means not being a... a proper lady of distinction?”

“Why yes, I believe I may have said that. I don’t know if it meant stopping us in the middle of the road, but—”

“Did you tell me that or not, mother?”

“As I said. I imagine—”

“Mother, please. Yes or no.”

“Yes. Yes I did.”

“And is it true? I mean, is it important to do that?”

“Yes, Rachel, it is very important to follow your heart.” Mrs. Justice thought back to the travelers she had helped and the problems it had caused her husband. “Often it is the most difficult thing we do in our whole life, but there are times when we must, even if it’s...” There was a slight rustling noise behind the wagon. Mrs. Justice slowed her words and began to turn in her seat. “an... unpopular... decision...”

Without looking, Rachel reached over and gripped her mother’s arm tightly.

“It’s all right, mother. It’s just the dark.” Mrs. Justice turned back to the front as Rachel continued. “The dark can play tricks on you, you know. Let’s just be on our way.”

Mrs. Justice looked with wonder at her daughter, who was still staring straight ahead, uncertain of what her mother was about to say or do. But there were to be no questions that night. Perhaps later, but not now. Instead, Mrs. Justice clapped the reins up and down on Colonel’s back and spoke in a hushed voice. “Step up, Colonel.”

The quiet horse did as ordered, leaned into his harness and pulled the heavier load off the bridge. A big voice whispered from the rear of the wagon. “Bless you, Missy Rachel.” At that, the youngest engineer on the underground railroad ducked her head under her mother’s arm and began to cry tears of exhaustion at the day behind her. Mrs. Justice dropped the reins to her lap, leaving Colonel to his

own navigations. As the horse walked on steadily, she flung both arms fully around her daughter and hugged her deeply.

“I’m here now. Your mother’s here,” she said as Rachel nestled deeper into her cradling arms. “Yes, your mother’s here. And I’ll never go away again.”

It was well over a week before word reached Providence that the great General, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, had died at Chancellorsville early on the night of Rachel’s jump to the Union. Rachel and other soldiers north and south, grieved him at length. Many times thereafter as she traveled to late night meetings with special cargo, Rachel would tell the story of her encounter with the General. On those trips and elsewhere, her mother was always present as she had promised. And often, just into the impenetrable darkness behind their wagon, Rachel would hear the hoof beats of a gray horse.

If you enjoyed “**Black Men in Bright Blue**,” please help promote this story and others from *The Cats of Savone* collection by sharing with family and friends and posting a review @ Barnes & Noble.com, Amazon.com &/or Goodreads.com.

Thanks so much,

David-Michael

Novels by David-Michael Harding

How Angels Die

Cherokee Talisman

The Cats of Savone

Available at Amazon, Smashwords, and Barnes & Noble

Find free reading excerpts, preview upcoming novels, and check out the author's blog at -

www.DavidMichaelHarding.com