

A young boy wearing a dark cap and a dark jacket is crouching in a dense forest. He is leaning against a large, thick tree trunk on the left side of the frame. The forest is filled with lush green foliage, including various plants and trees. The lighting is natural, suggesting daylight. The overall scene is quiet and somewhat mysterious.

Sid Johnson and the Phantom Slave Stealer

Chapters 1-4

Frances Schoonmaker

Award-Winning Author

Praise for the Book

Exhilarating and enjoyable, Frances Schoonmaker's *Sid Johnson and the Phantom Slave Stealer* is a middle-grade historical fiction that should be used both for children's education and entertainment. I think it is deserving of a place on the shelf of a children's section of every library. — *M. Gordoni, Pacific Book Review*

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and the Phantom
Slave Stealer
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Frances Schoonmaker

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To Warren and Bruce

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1. Eavesdropping

Was that a gunshot? Sid Johnson sat upright in bed. Maybe he'd been dreaming. Jimmy lay on the other side of the bed tangled up in the covers. It was no use asking if he heard the shot. His little brother would sleep with the house falling around them. *Maybe it was men huntin' down by the creek.* He slipped out of bed, going to the window.

Dogs bayed off in the distance. He felt sorry for the poor animal they were after. Leaning out of the open window, he breathed in the soft night air. The sound of the dogs faded. Maybe they weren't going to have their kill after all.

A shadow moved on the far side of the orchard. *Too big for a fox.* He'd almost have said a person, except there wasn't any reason for someone to be in the orchard at night. After a while, he gave up watching.

Yawning, Sid shoved Jimmy back onto his half of the bed. Smoothing out the covers, he crawled in, pulling the quilt up to his chin. He could hear Ma and Pa downstairs, talking in muffled voices. Ma had been to see someone who was sick. *She's just now getting home,* he thought, snuggling into the warm spot where Jimmy had been. He let himself drift back to sleep—but not for long.

Downstairs a woman moaned. *Ma? Was she hurt?* Goosebumps prickling the back of his neck, Sid threw off the covers, jumped out of bed, and flew down the stairs.

A candle burned on the kitchen table. Ma was on her hands and knees scrubbing up something that looked like blood. She looked

up as calmly as if she were merely wiping up crumbs after supper. “Why, Sid, whatever are you doin’ out of bed this time of night?” “I heard a gunshot.”

“Oh, that. Never mind. Your Pa is determined to catch the fox that’s been botherin’ the hens.”

“Did he get hurt?” Sid looked at the blood. “I heard someone moanin’—”

“Must be the house talkin’.” Ma didn’t give him time to finish. “Old houses make night sounds. Nothin’ for you to worry about. You’d best get back to bed. Just wanted to wipe this up so it doesn’t dry on the floor.”

Sid went back to bed. He was not convinced. If this had been the first time, he might not have worried so much. But he had been awakened in the night before by strange sounds coming from downstairs. Ma always said old houses make sounds. Pa said he was probably having nightmares. Sid wasn’t so sure, not now, not with blood on the floor. Ma and Pa were hiding something from him. If they wouldn’t talk about it, he’d have to find out another way.

The following night, Sid slipped out of bed and stood at the top of the stairs listening. Ma and Pa usually sat at the kitchen table talking after everyone else was in bed. If they saw him, he’d say he was on his way to get a drink of water.

All Sid wanted to know was what the two of them were up to. Unfortunately, Pa was in the middle of a rant. “Abe Lincoln is right. Steven Douglas got his Kansas-Nebraska bill through Congress by caving in to slaveholders. Dumbest thing Illinois ever did was let Abe retire from Congress back in ’49.”

Sid knew what was coming next. Pa couldn’t get over it when the popular Stephen Douglas was elected to the U.S. Senate instead of Abraham Lincoln. “Folks keep saying Doug- las should run for

President. Hen's teeth! Far as I'm concerned, Honest Abe would make a far better President. Lord knows we need somebody who amounts to something in that office. Mark my word. We are getting closer and closer to a war over the slave question."

"You don't think it will come to that?" said Ma, undisguised worry in her voice.

"What did you expect from the Compromise of 1850?" said Pa. "Whoever named it the 'Bloodhound Bill' had it right. Being in a free state stands for nothing, not when any slaveholder in the country can come in and arrest people."

There wasn't anything more to learn. Sid knew about the Fugitive Slave Act. Pa was likely to go on about it for another hour. Sighing, he started for bed.

"I keep thinkin' of that poor woman," said Ma. "God bless her. I hope she made it to safety—" Sid stopped in his tracks, listening — "Leastwise you got her as far as Alton this mornin'. Travelin' alone and hunted down like an animal! Thank God that gunshot just grazed her. I didn't think I'd ever get the bleedin' stopped." *The gunshot.* Sid strained to hear every word.

"They wouldn't want to harm her now, would they?" Pa said. Sarcasm rang in his voice. "It would reduce her value." Sid took in a sharp breath. The dogs he heard baying in the night were after a woman and that woman had been in their house. The realization hit him like a punch in the stomach. He knew that people searching for slaves on the run often used dogs, but he'd never actually let himself think about what it would be like to be the one who was hunted.

"President Pierce would say we're break- ing the law," said Pa. "Folk like him try to hide behind the Good Book. Reckon they did have slaves back in Bible days. Doesn't make it right. They

thought the earth was flat then, too. This is 1855. We ought to know better.”

“I’m afraid, Ben,” said Ma. “Sid is gettin’ older. He’s bound to find out. He might let somethin’ slip at school. He saw me moppin’ up the blood last night.”

Sid held his breath, hardly able to believe what he was hearing. “I’m not worried about Sid,” said Pa.

“We’re going to have to tell the boy sooner or later. He can keep his own counsel. It’s the young ones. Little Cora would blurt out everything she knows to the first person who asks. Jimmy never met a stranger he couldn’t talk to.”

So, they’ve been sheltering runaways. The idea slowly sank in. Any guilt Sid might have felt at eavesdropping vanished. He hoped Ma and Pa would take him into their confidence. Until they did, he had to be prepared. If Ma and Pa got into trouble for helping freedom seekers, he’d have to take care of Jimmy and Cora. It wasn’t that he approved of slavery but breaking the law was another matter.

Pa carried on about politics for nearly a week. There weren’t any gunshots or muffled voices in the night. Worried about what might happen, Sid listened anyway. He couldn’t afford to miss anything. “They call it states’ rights,” Pa was going on again one night. “It’s nothing but varnish- ing over the fact that these slave states don’t want to give up their cheap labor. That’s the plain truth of it.” Sid sat on the steps at the top of the stairs, head in his hands. He was getting weary of politics.

“But, Ben, it isn’t as if Illinois has clean hands,” said Ma. “We have neighbors around Alton who still have indentured servants.” “No, we don’t have clean hands,” said Pa. “That’s another burr under my saddle. When people move into Illinois with slaves, the law says they can keep them for a year as indentured servants.”

Some of these people just refuse to obey the law. Now they're pushing to make it legal to keep your slaves if you move into a free state."

"Mrs. Harold's anniversary is comin' up," said Ma. "It's almost 20 years since Mr. Harold was killed."

"They knew the risks, Sadie," said Pa. "When Harold started working on that abolitionist newspaper with Reverend Lovejoy it was only a matter of time. Anti-abolitionists kept destroying his press; I don't think anybody expected them to murder Lovejoy and Harold—not in a *free state*. I don't know, Sadie. Makes you wonder about a lot of things."

Sid sighed inwardly. It wasn't that he didn't care about their neighbor, Mrs. Harold. He wasn't learning anything new. Besides, it was hard to stay awake at school when he didn't get to bed on time. *Guess I'll give it up for the night*, he thought. He turned toward his bedroom as Ma said, "What we're doin' isn't risk-free, Ben. Sometimes I worry about the chil'ren. What will happen if they come for us?"

Sid whipped back around. *Come for us*— he supposed she meant if slaveholders came after them or maybe anti-abolitionists like the ones who killed Mr. Harold. *It's about time they thought about that*.

"I'm not sayin' I'm sorry to be part of the Railroad," said Ma. *Railroad? Does that mean the Underground Railroad?* Sid was stunned. Was there really such a thing? *Are we a part of it?* There were vague rumors about how people managed to escape from slavery. He didn't think anybody really believed there was a train running underground, though.

Ma sighed. "I don't know as I'd have had enough courage to get involved if it wasn't for Mrs. Harold. But I worry. I worry about

you, Ben. You could get a big SS branded on your hand, like that sea captain back East, or worse.”

Branded? with SS? Sid caught his breath. Who would do such a thing?

“Walker was caught,” said Pa. “The thing is not to be caught.”

“Ben Johnson! I don’t reckon Jonathan Walker planned on bein’ caught. Bein’ branded as a slave stealer may be a mark of pride for him now; he’s a famous abolitionist. But think what the man went through. And think of people who are caught, and nobody comes to their rescue.”

Sid felt a chill go up his spine. The more he learned, the more frightened he was.

“Don’t think I don’t worry, Sadie,” said Pa. “I worry about the children, too. And you, going out all hours of the night. Then about the time I start to question, there’s somebody who needs a safe place and I know we’re doing the right thing.”

“I know, Ben.” Ma sighed. “Risk or no risk, we can’t sit by and do nothin’. And yet, what we do is such a small drop in the bucket. For every person who gets away from slavery, how many hundred are left with no hope of ever bein’ free?” She heaved another big sigh. “The risks we take are nothin’ compared to the risks they take.”

There was a long pause downstairs before Ma spoke again. “On another matter, what did Luke have to say in his letter?”

A letter from Uncle Luke in California? All thought of the Underground Railroad and slave stealing flew out of his head. His uncle in far-away California was a larger- than-life figure to Sid, a real hero.

Pa had been to town, making a stop at the post office. “I thought my little brother had lost his good sense when he took off for California back in ’49. Seemed like every third man was talking about striking it rich unless they found Coronado’s gold on the way.”

“Well, Luke didn’t strike it rich,” said Ma matter of factly. “No. He didn’t find the lost Seven Cities of Gold, either.” Pa chuckled.

Seven Cities of Gold? Sid’s imagination ran away with him. They studied about Coronado in school, Coronado and the conquistadors who traveled all the way to Kansas looking for the fabled cities. The Spaniards found turquoise, silver, and people who already lived there. *They took them, too, like they were gold for the havin’*, he thought.

“Luke ended up with a nice piece of land, though,” said Pa. “Thinks we should go out. California’s a free state.”

Go to California? Sid listened intently.

“If there’s a war, we’d be in a good place,” said Pa. “It’s not likely to spill over into California. I’ve been thinking on it for some time. Luke says there’s a piece of land right next to his that’s come up for sale. Says it would make a fine orchard.”

“Oh, Ben,” Ma said. “I just don’t think I could do it. I know this isn’t the best piece of land in Illinois but think of how hard we’ve worked on it. It would be that hard to leave, too.”

Going to California sounded exciting, especially with Uncle Luke there. But Sid agreed with Ma. He wasn’t so sure he’d really want to go west, not if it meant leaving home.

“And what would happen to our stop on the Railroad and the people who need us here?” Ma asked.

Stop on the Railroad? There it is again. Sid's thoughts bounced between Uncle Luke and his growing understanding of what it meant to have Ma and Pa breaking the law to help people trying to get away from slavery.

"I don't know, Sadie," Pa sighed. "Our folk are all gone now. Luke's our only family. I'd like the children to grow up knowing family. It's getting crowded here, too. Next thing you know, they'll be gobbling up all this good farmland to build factories. It's already happening. Anyway, it'd be a whale of a lot better going to California than sitting here in the middle of a battleground. If we end up in a war, there won't be any more slave stealer or Underground Railroad."

"It's getting more and more dangerous," said Ma, "I'll grant you that."

"Safe stops have to shift anyway, Sadie. We've seen that before. It's just these new laws make it so much harder. Our place is getting to be a crossroad for slave trackers and bounty hunters. The word trespassing means nothing to some of them. That bounty hunter I caught today was out there searching the barn. Took a pitchfork to the hay. God help anybody who tried to hide in the hayloft."

"Thank God Sid and Jimmy were at school," said Ma.

Bounty hunters, here? Sid was jolted into action. He needed to know some things. He walked downstairs like he was going for a drink of water. He hoped Ma and Pa would take the opportunity to bring him into their confidence. If there had been any chance of it, loud knocking at the door ended the possibility.

2. A Foot in the Hay

A man with a coat thrown over his pajamas stood at the door. “Doc Short sent me for Miz Johnson. Baby’s on the way. He’s over to the Miller place tending old man Miller. Can she come?”

Ma had already gone for her valise. It wasn’t unusual for the doctor to send for her—sometimes in the middle of the night. She didn’t have any formal medical training, but Ma had brought many a baby into the world. When Dr. Short was busy, she’d done everything from setting broken arms to treating colic. The only thing she refused to do was surgery, but Dr. Short allowed he’d rather have her cut him open than a lot of men he knew who’d studied medicine.

Ma was out of the house in a flash. “Best get on to bed, Son,” said Pa. “No use us waiting up for your Ma. May take her the rest of the night.”

Sid wanted to ask Pa about what he’d heard. He wanted to tell Pa that he didn’t think it was right to break the law, that he didn’t want him branded with SS or put in jail. He didn’t like the idea of going to California, either, not really. *Why can’t Uncle Luke move back home? Then we’d have family here.* But he didn’t know how to say what he wanted to say. It was a long time before he was able to go to sleep.

At breakfast the next morning Pa announced, “This is the day you’ve been waiting for, Cora. The kittens have their eyes open. Sid, you can take Cora and Jimmy up in the loft to see them, if everyone promises to be real careful. Mind, you three have to finish your chores first.”

Serena, a feral grey tabby, found the barn one day, liked it, and stayed. Ma named her “Serena” because of the gentle, serene look on her face. Sid agreed. It suited her. Cora had been wild with excitement ever since he discovered that Serena had given birth to a litter of four kittens in the hayloft.

“Cora, you must promise to be careful with those kittens,” Ma advised as they helped her clear the table. “They aren’t like your rag doll. You love on ’em too hard, you can hurt ’em.”

The tea kettle was singing. Ma took it from the stove and poured hot water into two large, gray-speckled enamel pans.

Jimmy, who usually put up a fuss about helping with the dishes, didn’t complain. Once the table was clear, he took up his post next to the worktable. Ma washed in one pan, Jimmy rinsed in the second pan; Cora and Sid dried. Sid did most of the drying, but Cora was learning. Once the dishes were put away and beds made, they headed for the barn.

The barn was a long, gray, weather-bleached wooden building. It stood at the end of a winding driveway that led past the house. Sid loved the fresh smell of hay greeting them as they opened its big doors. He could have found his way inside with his eyes closed. A wide space in the middle was where their wagon, buggy, and the plow were stored. All along the right side of the barn, the roof sloped downward where it ended over an open, fenced-in area adjacent to the pasture. This is where the cows were held before milking, and where they sheltered during the winter. A door at the far end let the cows inside. Wooden stanchions stood all along one wall. The stanchions could be locked in place so the cows couldn’t escape during milking. Their cows were so gentle that it wasn’t necessary.

“Where’s Buttercup?” Cora asked, looking around. Gentle Buttercup was a special friend. Sid had watched her grow from a calf. Now he milked her twice a day. In fact, all their animals were special. They were like members of a large family. Each one had a name. *If we went to California, we’d have to sell all the animals;* the thought came unbidden and unwelcome. It was one more reason not to go.

“Where’s the horses?” She sounded disappointed. They kept three gentle horses—two workhorses and one for pulling the buggy and riding. Their stable extended along the left side of the barn.

“They’re out to pasture,” said Jimmy. “Don’t you know nothin’?” Sid gave Jimmy a look the way Pa would have. “They wouldn’t want to stay in the barn all day, not if the weather’s nice.” He tried not to lose patience with Jimmy. But sometimes he felt like giving his little brother a good, hard punch.

Jimmy looked up at the hayloft that ran the entire length of the barn above the stable. “How come we got so much hay?”

“The cows and horses will eat some this winter, and we’ll put some of it on the floor for their beddin’,” said Sid. “They’ll eat corn, too.” He nodded toward the corn crib at the far end. “We’ll take some of the corn to the mill in Alton, so it can be ground up for the chickens—”

He didn’t have a chance to finish. Jimmy sped toward the ladder that led to the hayloft, Cora right behind him. “Wait,” he called, hurrying to catch up.

“Jimmy, climb up first; wait for Cora. I’ll come up last. Then I’ll show you where to find Serena and the kittens. Mind you, nobody picks up a kitten unless Serena says so.”

“She ain’t gonna tell us nothin’,” said Jimmy scrambling up the ladder. “She’s just a cat.”

“Not ’posed to say ain’t,” Cora scolded.

“Serena has her ways,” said Sid, before a fuss started. “You just have to know what to look for. Up you go, Cora. Use both hands.” Once they were all in the loft, Sid cautioned, “Remember where the edge of the loft is, so nobody falls off. Serena is just back here. We’ll move slowly so as not to alarm her.”

Crawling over the hay, Sid motioned the other two to follow. Serena lay stretched out in the hay to one side, near a large, shuttered vent that let air into the back of the hayloft. Four little kittens eagerly suckled. “How come they’re pushin’ Serena?” Cora asked.

“They push with their paws to get her milk flowin’,” Sid explained. “Kittens do that.”

“Look at their stubby little tails!” laughed Jimmy. “Can I pick one up?”

“Best let them finish breakfast,” said Sid. He held out his hand to Serena. She let him rub around her ears. “See, she’s purrin’. She’s proud of her little family.”

They watched quietly. Cora and Jimmy lay on their stomachs, elbows propping them up. After a while, Cora got up to explore along the wall where there was less hay. When the last of the hay was gathered, all along the back wall would be filled in. There wouldn’t be room to walk. “Just stay back there where it’s safe,” Sid cautioned. He had to keep a careful watch over her, but he wanted her to have the fun of exploring. She’d be back in a flash as soon as the kittens quit suckling. She threw herself on the hay, laughing.

Jimmy was transfixed by the kittens. “Their tummies are gettin’ fatter, ’n fatter,” he said. “Reckon one of ’em will explode?”

“No, they’ll quit when they’re full. Serena will get up directly when she thinks they’ve had enough.” Sid kept an eye on Cora all the while. She pulled herself up and stood looking wide-eyed at the hay, her mouth hanging open.

“What is it, Cora?”

“A foot.”

He got to her just as she reached down and tickled a brown foot that was sticking out of the hay. A boy about his age sat up, wide-eyed with terror. "It's okay," said Sid. "We won't hurt you. We don't hold with slavery. You a runaway?"

The boy stood, looking from one to another. His coarse cloth shirt was in tatters. He wore trousers held up by a rope that was tied at the waist. The trouser legs ended about halfway up his shins. Sid looked at Cora and Jimmy. "This has to be a secret. You must solemnly promise not to tell." They gravely shook their heads in agreement.

"You got folks with you?" Sid asked.

The boy swallowed, looking down at his feet. "Posed to meet up with my mamma. Can't find her."

"I don't know what to tell you about your mamma," said Sid. "My ma and pa might know. We help folk who are runnin' away from slavery. You're safe here. I can get you some food and water. You travelin' at night?"

The boy nodded.

The sound of horses and voices outside ended the conversation. Looking through the vent, Sid saw Pa talking with two men on horseback. "You Johnson?" One of them waved a paper, shouting at Pa. "Name's Mean, August Mean. I got a warrant for the arrest of Lula and her son Elijah, property of Salias Pugworth of Banner, Kentucky. Been missin' for near a week. You seen 'em?"

"Nah," Pa let his speech slide into the way the men were talking, as if he were one of them. "From what I hear runaways comin' up this way follow the Illinois or they's headin' over to the Wabash River. Don't see 'em 'round here. Reckon we're a little off the

path. Besides, if I seen one of 'em, I'd be claimin' the reward for myself, now wouldn' I?"

"That ain't what we hear," said the second man. "The way we hear it, you been harborin' runaways—"

Mean interrupted, "There's a federal law agin it. If you know somethin' about Lula and Elijah, you'd best own up. Turn 'em over, and we'll look the other way. We haveta look for 'em, we'll have the law on you. You can count on it."

"Well, Mr. Mean," said Pa. "Can't think who woulda told you that. Maybe somebody as was tryin' to steer y'all in the wrong direction. Aimin' to waste yer time here, whilst the runaways hightail it up the Wabash River."

The men dismounted. "This here paper gives us the right to search your property," said Mean. "That's what we're goina do. You got a storm cellar, Miz Johnson?" He tipped his hat to Ma, who stepped out into the yard with Pa.

"Yessir," said Ma. "Did I hear y'all say Banner, Kentucky? I'm Kentucky-born myself. Grew up there. Y'all are sure welcome to look. We don't hold with breakin' the law."

"This here is Roscoe Bones," said August Mean, nodding toward the other bounty hunter. "He's gonna need to inspect the house and cellar, Miz Johnson."

Roscoe Bones tipped his hat to Ma.

"Looks like there's a smokehouse out back of the house, Roscoe," said Mean, "and don't forget to look in the privy. I'll check the barn and henhouse."

Sid flew into action. “Everybody quiet. Here’s what we’re goina do. We have to move slowly, so as not to frighten Serena. We need her help.”

He didn’t stop to think about breaking the law.

3. Bounty Hunters

Sid watched nervously when August Mean got to the barn. Mean searched the feeding troughs behind the stanchions, the horse stable, the manger that held their hay, inspected the buggy, and looked under the wagon.

Pa was right behind, offering advice in the same slow drawl. It was funny. Pa prided himself on his crisp “Yankee” speech. Now he sounded like somebody from the South, like Ma. He was so helpful and friendly that if Sid hadn’t known better, he’d have thought Pa wanted nothing more than to cooperate.

“Course there’s the hayloft. Kids is up there playin’ with some kittens,” Pa said.

Sid cringed inwardly with every step the bounty hunter took up the ladder. Cora and Jimmy sat on a small pile of hay holding a kitten each. Cora was sucking her thumb—Ma was trying to break her of the habit, but now wasn’t the time to say anything. Sid played with another, while beside him Serena groomed the fourth. The boy was nowhere to be seen. Sid silently prayed his plan would work. He was terrified that it wouldn’t.

Taking her thumb from her mouth, Cora looked up at the bounty hunter. Sid nearly stopped breathing. *We’re done for—there’s no tellin’ what she’ll say.* He didn’t dare try to stop her for fear of making it worse.

“You better be careful Mister, or Serena will get scared and move her kittens,” Cora said. Sid silently let out a breath of relief.

“Well, little missy, we wouldn’t want that now, would we,” Mean said kindly. When he smiled, he looked as nice as anybody you would ever meet. “You youngens seen anybody crawl up here?”

They shook their heads. “No sir, we can’t help you,” said Sid. “Been up here near an hour, too.”

Grabbing a pitchfork, Mean said, “I’m just goina fork this hay to make sure there ain’t any runaways holed up for the day. Haylofts is one of their favorite hidin’ places. They sleep in the day and travel by night. Reckon there could be somebody here as you don’t know about. They can be plenty dangerous.

You youngens stay right where you are. I won’t let you get hurt.” Sid watched tensely. August Mean gripped the pitchfork and stabbed the hay vigorously where Elijah had been only moments before.

“Nobody here,” he said after a while, disappointment ringing in his voice. “Well, you youngens enjoy the kittens. And you, Son,” he bent down, putting his hand on Sid’s shoulder, “if your pa is tryin’ to put somethin’ over on the law, you’d best warn him agin it. I’d hate to see a fine boy like you haveta be head of the family ’cause his pa’s in jail or been shot by some angry slaveholder tryin’ to claim his rightful property. There’s real nice folk like your pa that think slaves is better off free. Truth of it is, slaves don’t know the first thing about carin’ for themselves. Slaves is better off with somebody to look after ’em. And it’s *the law*. Remember that, you hear?”

“Yessir,” said Sid, trying to stay calm as the man climbed down. He put his finger to his mouth, signaling Jimmy and Cora to be quiet and stay put.

“Whatcha’ hidin’ in here, Johnson?” Mean grabbed the latch to the corn crib door.

“Best not open that,” Pa was right behind him. “Corn’s dried on the cob. It’ll fly out on ya. Once it’s full, I take what I need from this here small door at the bottom. Ain’t room in there for nothin’ or nobody.”

“Reckon that’s why I’d better have a look,” said Mean, grimly. “I caught more ’n one of ’em hidin’ in a corn crib.” He yanked the door open. Pa stepped aside as corncobs came raining down. Jumping to get out of the way, Mean let out a string of oaths, slipped, and landed on the floor. Corncobs pelted him.

Pa forced the door shut and gave the bounty hunter a hand to help him up. August Mean didn’t even say thank you. Nor did he volunteer to help clean up. Limping from the barn, he yelled angrily, “Find anything, Roscoe?”

Roscoe Bones called from the smokehouse. “Nobody here. I already searched the house top to bottom.”

“Stay put, everybody,” Sid said. “They might come back.” He watched through the vent. Mean stormed into the chicken house. Chickens flew out of his way, flapping their wings and squawking. The two men were grim-faced as they mounted their horses. warnin’, Johnson,” yelled Mean. “Man with a fine family like yours oughta be more careful. You ain’t heard the last of us. I mean to find those runaways. You been reported. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, if you get my meanin’. Fire could do a lot of damage to a nice place like this.”

As soon as the bounty hunters rode off, Sid told Cora and Jimmy to stand up. “Are you Elijah?” he asked, helping the boy out from under the hay where they had been sitting.

The boy nodded, ducking down again as Pa returned to the barn.

“You youngsters better come in the house,” Pa called, pausing at the foot of the ladder. “Here, I’ll help Cora down. Come here, Sugar Plum.”

“Come up here a minute, Pa, please?” Sid asked.

Elijah cowered in the corner behind Cora and Jimmy as Pa’s head reached the top of the ladder. “We found Elijah,” said Sid.

“Thank God!” said Pa. “Elijah, your mamma’s with us, got here last night. She’s worried sick about you. You’d best stay here till it gets dark, though. Those bounty hunters will be watching the place. They know you’re here; they just don’t know where. We’ll get you some food and water. Soon as your mamma says so, we’ll help you on your way. You may have to lie low tonight.”

“Yessir,” said Elijah, still wide-eyed.

“Jimmy, take Cora back to the house,” said Pa, lifting her from the ladder. “Sid and I will get this corn picked up. Have to say it was worth it to see that bounty hunter dance. Happens every time. They insist on opening that door. That man’s language would fry bacon. I’m sorry you had to hear him.”

“I can hep, Sir,” said Elijah. He looked down from the loft, as if he were waiting for permission.

“Come on down,” said Pa, “I appreciate your offer, but I don’t want to risk you being in sight. You try to get some rest. I’m going to make a place for you down here. It will be safer. Those two scoundrels won’t give up so easily. Somebody’s reported us. They’ll watch every move we make.”

As Elijah came down the ladder, Pa took in a sharp breath. Sid gasped. For the first time, he noticed that Elijah’s torn shirt was in strips across the back, sticking to him in places. They had piled hay over him, and Cora and Jimmy sat on it to hide him from the

bounty hunters. He hadn't let out a sound. It must have hurt terribly.

“Let me have a look, Son.” Pa inspected Elijah's back, shaking his head. “There's no fire in hell too hot for the person who'd do a thing like this. We need to get those wounds cleaned up. I'll get the Missus out here to take care of you. Sid, fetch a bucket of water from the pump. Bring it through the front. Leave the barn doors open. Won't look so much like we're trying to hide something.” Elijah was nowhere in sight when Sid returned with a bucket of water. Pa was busy shoveling corn into a bushel basket.

As soon as he saw Sid, Pa let himself into the stable and lifted the top of the manger where they kept fresh hay for the horses. He set it on the floor of the pen. Sid was flabbergasted. There was Elijah on his stomach resting on a bed of clean hay in a space Sid didn't even know existed. Pa lifted his hand to silence him before he could say anything.

He had a box of clean rags, too. “Give him a drink first,” Pa said softly. “I'm going back to work where I can be seen.” He gently placed his hand on Elijah's shoulder. “Sid will put some wet rags on your back, son. We have to soften up those places where your shirt is stuck.

“Sid, when Elijah's had a good drink, wet a few rags in the bucket, enough to cover his back. Lay them on gently over the shirt. It's bound to hurt, but it will hurt a whole lot less if that shirt can come off nice and easy when Ma cleans the wounds. Then come help me get this corn cleared up.”

Elijah had a good long drink from the bucket. Following Pa's directions, he lay back down on his stomach.

“I'm sorry, Elijah,” Sid apologized as he placed the first wet rag. Elijah didn't flinch. When he had a layer of wet rags covering Elijah's back, Sid picked up a shovel and went to work with Pa.

His eyes burned with tears. Whatever had been used on him had left Elijah's back marked with long gashes. Sid had never seen anything like it.

"I know, Sid," said Pa. "A person can see a wagon load of terrible things, and still, something like this brings tears to his eyes."

"But Pa," said Sid, sniffing, "that man spoke so kindly to Cora. He looked like a real nice man. How could he think Elijah would be better off with somebody who'd do that to 'em?"

"Money. They collect a lot of reward money. It's not just bounty hunters. The whole slave system is based on money. That's why it's so hard to get rid of it." Pa paused, leaning on his shovel for a moment. "But you know, Sid, there's usually good in the worst of us. I reckon most of the mischief and a lot of the evil in this world is done by people who think they're doing good. You can't reason with them. They figure out a way to turn things around so they can feel like they're doing the right thing."

"Like sayin' that slaves are better off with their masters," said Sid.

As they cleared away the last of the corn, Pa said in a low voice, "Sid, your ma and I have been meaning to tell you. I don't hold with breaking the law. But the law that says one man can own another is wrong. Doesn't matter if a slaveholder treats slaves with kindness; if they were really kind, they'd free them and pay them wages for their work."

"I'm glad you're helpin' people," said Sid, and he meant it. "It's the right thing to do." "There are so many slaves in this country. So few ever escape from it," said Pa, shaking his head. Sid had never heard him sound so discouraged.

"The law doesn't protect people like Elijah. A slaveholder can do what he likes, and the law is on his side."

"Why can't we change the law?"

“We keep trying,” said Pa. “You’re a good boy, Sid. You have a kind heart. That was a smart thing you did to save Elijah.”

Pa went over to the manger, “We’ll keep a watch over you, Elijah. I’m putting the top to this manger back in place. You’ll be safe. Hasn’t been a bounty hunter find it yet. Try to rest. The Missus will be out directly to bring you some food and take care of your back. She’ll be singing ‘Amazing Grace’. You know it?”

“Yessir,” said Elijah.

“If she’s singing, you’re safe. If she stops, don’t make a sound. She’ll be back when she can. If anybody knocks on the manger or calls to say you’re safe, don’t believe it. If I come for you, I’ll sing ‘Amazing Grace,’ too, though it won’t be as pretty.”

“I never guessed, Pa,” Sid said as they left for the house, “all the times I put hay in that manger, I never suspected. And, Pa . . .” Sid confessed that he had been eavesdropping.

“Should have told you sooner,” said Pa. “Just as well you knew. Otherwise, that young man would have been caught. I just hope Jimmy and Cora can keep this to themselves.”

Gathering his courage, Sid said, “So we’re part of the Underground Railroad. Is it really underground?”

“It’s not really a railroad, Son. It’s places people can hide and rest on their way to freedom. So yes, we are one of those places.”

They washed up on the back porch. “Who’s the slave stealer?” asked Sid, drying his face on a rough, cotton hand towel—it was one Ma had made from a flour sack.

Pa furrowed his brow, “Where did you hear about a slave stealer?”

“I dunno, maybe at school?” Sid hedged. He wasn’t sure he should say how much he’d heard when he listened to Ma and Pa. “Like

Captain Walker, but somebody else, somebody who steals slaves and brings 'em across the Illinois border. It's just a name I heard."

"Hmm," said Pa. "First of all, it isn't steal- ing to give somebody back what was theirs in the first place. Second, it might be a person, might be more than one person. We don't ask questions, Son. And we don't pass on names." He closed the door to the porch behind them.

The welcoming smell of a pot of ham and beans simmering on the stove greeted them. "Sadie, we've found Elijah."

"Thank God!" said Ma. She looked at Sid, then at Pa, her eyes asking a silent question.

"I've told him, Sadie. Best he knows as little as possible, though."

"I've already told Lula," said Ma. "Cora and Jimmy couldn't wait to tell. They're playin' inside. I don't want 'em out where a bounty hunter could find 'em. I wish they didn't know."

"Can't be helped," said Pa. "That young man's back looks bad. He's taken a beating. May be why he and his mamma left."

"Reckon I'd better kill a chicken for dinner," said Ma, like she wasn't paying any attention.

It didn't make any sense. Why would Ma kill a chicken with a pot of ham and beans already cooking? *Maybe she's changed her mind.*

"Sid, fetch me a cabbage from the root cel- lar, please?" Ma began putting some things in a gray-speckled enamel pail: milk, bread, a slice of ham. "While you're out there, I need you to get a pan of rainwater and set it on the stove to boil, *if* you can get to the rain barrel. I don't know when you plan to get those weeds cleared out like I asked. That whole patch is dryin' up and goin' to seed. You'll have twice as much work to do next summer."

Sid cringed. He hated chopping weeds. They brushed against him as he made his way to the rain barrel, some almost too tall to see over. Had it been that long since he promised to clear them out?

“What worries me is somebody has reported us,” Pa was saying as Sid returned to the kitchen. “Those bounty hunters had the legal papers to search our place. That means they had to be able to show good cause. When I was in town, Sherriff McDown told me we’d best be minding our P’s and Q’s. Course he wouldn’t say more than that, but I knew something was up.” Turning to Sid, he added, “He couldn’t deny their warrant. That means he had the sworn testimony of somebody who has seen something—”

“Or says they’ve seen somethin’,” said Ma, pulling several large leaves from the cabbage. She washed them off.

Sid’s jaw dropped, “Who would do that?” “I don’t care to speculate, Son,” said Pa. “Wouldn’t want to start feeling ill toward any of our neighbors. Best to be tight-lipped anyway.”

Ma laid the cabbage leaves out on a clean rag and began rolling them with her rolling pin.

“Make a fire under the iron kettle, Sid. Your Ma will need hot water if she’s going to pluck a chicken.”

“What about Elijah?” Sid asked.

Ma didn’t answer his question. She rolled up the sappy cloth that held the crushed cabbage leaves and put it along with the things she was collecting in the speckled pail. She poured the boiling rainwater into a jar.

“Whatcha put a knife in the jar for?” Jimmy asked, on his way through the kitchen.

“Keeps the jar from breaking as I pour in hot water,” said Ma. “I need you to make sure Cora stays in the house while I’m out

dressin' a chicken, Jimmy. Reckon you can do that without gettin' into a fuss? It's very, very important or I wouldn't ask."

"Sure, Ma," said Jimmy, swelling with pride. "How come it's dressin' a chicken? Looks like you're undressin' it to me." He didn't wait for an answer. Grinning, he was off to the next thing. Sid gathered and piled wood under the cast iron cauldron kept near the barn. They used the cauldron to heat water for laundry and jobs requiring more than a teakettle could hold. By the time he had filled it from the pump by the stock tank and had the fire going, Pa had killed a hen. Ma would plunge the chicken into a bucket of boiling water and pluck off the feathers. Sometimes Sid plucked the chicken for her.

"Not today, Sid," Ma said. "I need you to keep an eye on Jimmy and Cora. We can't have 'em out talkin' to the world. I'll take care of things here."

"But I thought—"

Ma interrupted before he could finish. "When you're busy doin' somethin' regular, people who are watchin' lose interest. They don't watch so close. It's the best way to do what needs to be done without bein' noticed. Now run along." She began humming "Amazing Grace."

Sid reluctantly obeyed. He wanted to be where Elijah was, but he knew he had to follow orders. If he didn't, something might go wrong. Elijah could be captured.

Somehow, in the middle of plucking and dressing a chicken, Ma was going to make her way into the barn. She would clean Elijah's back with the warm rainwater. Then she would lay the juicy cabbage leaves over his wounds, leaving them there to draw out any infection. How many times had she done this very thing right under his nose?

That afternoon at dinner, Pa told Jimmy and Cora that they must never tell anybody about finding Elijah. “Not even the preacher?” asked Jimmy.

“Nobody, not even the preacher, or your teacher, or your friends,” said Pa. “Anybody we tell is in danger.”

4. Buying Some Time

Cora and Jimmy were in bed, fast asleep, when Sid finally met Elijah's mother. She was a tall, graceful woman with hair cropped close to her head. Dressed in a man's shirt and trousers, she sat at the kitchen table with Ma.

Pa said he thought they ought to stay out of sight a couple of nights. "Elijah's back needs some time to heal. I can take you to a safe place up in Alton on Monday; they'll get you on upriver. My wagon has gone past many a bounty hunter."

Lula was determined to leave. "I sure appreciate what you've done. I know the boy is in bad shape. I did the best I could, but there wasn't time. Our guide came and we had to run. We can't stop running now. We were told we'd be safe here, that you could give the boy the care he needs. We're supposed to meet up again, where the Mississippi joins the Illinois River, by dawn tomorrow. If we aren't there, we'll be left behind. I'm afraid we have to take the risk."

"That's a fair piece up the road. If you miss your connection, we can get you to the next safe place on the way up to British North America," said Pa.

Lula shook her head. "No, Sir. My family will meet us there with the guide. We could lose track of them. We can't afford to take that risk."

Sid couldn't help noticing the way Lula spoke, more like Pa than Ma. He wondered if she'd been to school. It was illegal to educate slaves in some states. Some kids at school said the way slaves talked was ignorant. Ma said kids at school didn't know what they were talking about. "How you talk depends on lots of things, like where you come from. Your Pa and I don't talk the same. You chil'ren talk in-between both of us."

“Lula, I’m puttin’ up some food for you to take,” said Ma. “No tellin’ when you’ll get a real meal again. I got Elijah’s back cleaned up. There’s some infection, but I think the poultice I put on will take care of that. It is goina need some more attention, though. I’ll give you somethin’ you can use when you have a chance.

“Ben, I reckon you should take some butter and eggs over to the widow.”

“Mrs. Harold?” Sid asked, regretting it immediately. Ma and Pa both frowned at him.

“Here’s what we do,” Pa explained. “When it gets dark, I’ll take the buggy and draw the bounty hunters off by heading out to our neighbor’s house in the opposite direction. They’ll think I’m taking you over to the Wabash. That will buy you some time.”

Lula nodded.

Pa continued, “When I hitch up the buggy, I’ll tell Elijah to wait till Sadie throws a pan of dishwater on the nasturtiums at the back door. That will be his signal to meet you in the garden. Make your way back through the orchard, then follow the creek going north. It will take you up to Alton. If you run into trouble, take shelter in the smokehouse behind that big brick house that overlooks the creek a ways up. It backs up against the churchyard on the edge of Alton. It’s about four miles up the road.”

“Folk there will help you,” said Ma. There’s no dogs to worry about.”

“When you see the church steeple,” said Pa, “you’ll know you’re in the right place. There’s a mill along the creek where you can shelter. There’s also a Friends Meeting House near the Mississippi. That’s a safe place, too.”

“We know of these places,” said Lula.

“Good,” said Pa. “Sid, bring me the butter and eggs when I pull the buggy up to the house.”

Sid didn’t get to see Elijah or where Lula had hidden. “Better that you don’t know, Sid,” said Ma. “If you don’t know, then you can answer honestly if you’re ever asked.”

“I shouldn’t have said Mrs. Harold’s name,” said Sid.

“No, you shouldn’t. We use names, but only given names or code names. Lula and Elijah wouldn’t mean to tell. We wouldn’t either, but, Sid, people do some awful things to get information.”

The autumn nights were getting cooler. Elijah’s thin cotton shirt was in tatters, and he was barefoot. “Elijah needs some new clothes,” said Sid. “Reckon he’s about my size.” He got a pair of his trousers, a heavier shirt, and a pair of shoes and socks for Elijah.

As he gathered up the clothes, Sid acted on an impulse. He wrote on a piece of paper, “Good luck.” Then he added, “We’re praying for you.” He didn’t write his name or Elijah’s on it. He figured Elijah would know. If Elijah couldn’t read it, Sid felt sure his mamma could. He put the paper and the stub of a pencil in one of the pockets. Pa said he’d take the clothes when he went to hitch up the buggy.

Ma gave Lula a work shirt to put over her shirt. “It’s darker, and heavier. It’ll protect you from the underbrush and the cold.”

Their plan worked like a well-oiled machine. It was nearly dark when Pa went to the barn. The clothes for Elijah made a big lump under his coat. They watched from the kitchen window. “He’s tryin’ to look suspicious, but not too suspicious. Those two bounty hunters will be watchin’,” said Ma.

They could barely see Pa in the fading light. He looked to right and left, then quietly opened the barn door. He was gone for what seemed an age before he reappeared leading their horse, Sandy,

hitched to the buggy. He left the barn door open. When the buggy stopped by the back porch, Sid carried out a bowl of butter and small basket of eggs. Pa put them in the buggy and hopped in.

When Sid stepped back into the house, Lula was not there. He never saw her or Elijah again. He had a sunken feeling, wishing he could have said goodbye.

It was pitch dark outside when Ma threw a pan of water out the back door. Sid watched, but there was no sign of Elijah leaving the barn, or of Lula leaving the house. Ma said if they were lucky, they'd get a riverboat all the way to Chicago, or even into British North America. Now that it was illegal to give sanctuary to freedom seekers, they had to go all the way to British North America to be safe.

When Pa returned, Ma let Sid run out to help him unharness Sandy. Pa didn't have anything to say until they were back in the house. Ma had hot cocoa waiting. "Why, Sid, where are your shoes?" she asked. "It's too cold to run around barefoot. And at night, too." Pa looked at him, then at Ma. He didn't say anything.

Sid swallowed hard. "He didn't have any shoes."

Ma set the steaming cocoa on the table, kissing him on the top of the head. "How did Widow Harold like her butter and eggs?" she asked, turning to Pa.

Pa grinned. "Sandy gave those two bounty hunters a good run for it before they forced us off the road. They gave the buggy a work-over. I figured the longer they took, the more distance between them and Lula and Elijah. They were plenty angry. Like I told them, all I had with me was butter and eggs for my poor widow neighbor. They headed back toward the creek, lickety-split. God help them, Lula and Elijah will need every inch of distance we could give them.

“Mrs. Harold sent you some pound cake.”

Sid wasn't sure how things worked, but it sounded like Mrs. Harold must be in on it. He hadn't given much thought to it when Pa took butter and eggs to their neighbor, but now, as he thought about it, there wasn't any predictable schedule. Sometimes they went weeks without taking her anything, then two or three times in a row. *Why would she need butter and eggs anyway? She has her own farm. And she sure isn't helpless.* Mrs. Harold had two grown sons.

Pa looked at him as if he knew what Sid was thinking. “Don't ask questions, Son. Nobody knows any more than they have to.” Reaching for a piece of pound cake, he added, “You can't tell what you don't know.” That wasn't all, either. Once he was on the alert, Sid made another discovery. Nobody said any more about a slave stealer, but sometimes Pa left the house at night carrying his gun. When that happened, he didn't get home until nearly dawn. Sid wondered what else was going on right under his nose. He couldn't fault them any longer for breaking the law, not after seeing Elijah. *But what will I do if they're caught?*

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