

CHAPTER ONE

FUGITIVE



ONE DAY IN MARCH OF 1854 ON A REMOTE ROAD SOME miles north of where the river flows between Ohio and Kentucky, two horsemen lean against the stinging grit in the wind. Just behind them, a third man yanks on reins to steer a wagon along ruts of hardened mud.

Meanwhile, on a bluff a distance back from the road, Adam Porter perches high on a ladder propped against a wall of his house. He pounds an iron nail into the clapboard siding till a gust threatens his balance and he clings to a rung for steadiness. He waits for the wind to subside and looks past the barn and across a field of corn stubble to a few surviving patches of dirty snow. He squints to see the distant road with its tiny figures of men on horseback and the horse-drawn wagon following.

He turns back to his hammer and nails. Soon his wife, Hannah, rushes to the base of the ladder. She pulls her blue wool shawl tighter and calls up to him. The wind blows away her words so she shouts again.

“Some men are here, Adam, some men.”

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He climbs down the ladder and hands her his hammer. “Stay here. I’ll find out.” He rounds the corner of the house and sees the two men standing beside their horses and the third man seated on the bench of the long-bed wagon. One of the men waves his hat in the wind and calls, “Hello there.” The wind tugs at the man’s coat and blows strands of black hair across his face.

Adam eyes the Colt hanging from the man’s hip. “You need something?”

“Troubling you for water,” the man calls out as he jams his hat back onto his head. “We been blown to hell and back and got more ground to cover before nightfall. Like to get these filled.” He holds up two metal canteens.

“Here, let me,” Adam says. “You can water the horses at the trough over there.”

The man walks toward Adam and hands over the canteens. “Name’s Summerfield. I’m federal marshal for this area. Haven’t been out this way much. Still getting acquainted.” The lawman points toward the other dismounted man, large in a wool coat and wearing a battered hat low over his eyes. “That’s Klemmer.” Summerfield then gestures toward the gnarly man seated on the wagon. “Abe Williams.” The driver touches his brim and nods.

Adam walks to the water pump with Summerfield following. “Seems winter just might be behind us at last,” the marshal says. “Some say this one’s going down as Ohio’s coldest far back as memory serves. I never before witnessed so many folks digging through so much snow just to get wood to keep warm. Odds are, we’ll soon be finding what’s left of some of those folks who got froze in their beds.”

Adam hands him the full canteens.

“You been here long?” The lawman rambles between gusts. “Myself, I come up from Nashville last October and can’t attest to being warm since.”

“Three years next month,” Adam answers. “Farm belonged to my wife’s uncle. We were living up by Akron—my wife and two boys—when the old man died. We came down here for a new start and found the place a fearsome mess. Still working on making it our home.”

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Summerfield glances toward the farmhouse. “That her? Your wife?”

Hannah approaches slowly, shawl flapping in the wind.

“That’s my wife.”

“Ma’am,” the marshal nods. “Marshal Summerfield at your—”

A nearby tree branch cracks in the wind loud as a gunshot and the mare hitched to the wagon shies. The wagon rolls directly in front of Hannah. She clasps her hands over her mouth. “Oh, my goodness.”

“Stand back from there, ma’am,” the lawman orders. “Runaway colored we’re taking back to Kentucky.”

Hannah peers into the wagon’s bed to see the beaten boy, no older than fourteen. His canvas pants are ripped and muslin shirt is smeared with blood. His wrists are wrapped with twine soaked red where it sliced through the boy’s tender skin. A rusted length of chain crudely encircles his thin waist and is padlocked to the wagon’s seat.

“Found him holed up in Elmer Mitchell’s barn,” Summerfield says.

“To his misfortune,” the man named Klemmer mutters.

The boy flinches at the sound of Klemmer’s voice.

“Have you done this to him?” Hannah asks Klemmer as she slips the shawl from her shoulders and spreads it over the boy’s chest. “Help me cover him. He’s freezing.”

Klemmer picks up a corner of the shawl and tosses it back toward her, exposing the boy. For a moment no one moves. Then Adam gathers up the shawl and hands it back to Hannah. He edges away from the wagon and gently pulls her with him.

Summerfield breaks the silence. “He’ll be warm soon, ma’am, I assure you. We’ll leave now.” The marshal hoists himself onto his horse. “I thank you for the water.” He nods to Hannah. “And I do apologize for this, ma’am.”

Klemmer mounts his horse and slaps the rump of the harnessed mare so the wagon lurches forward. The boy cries out. Klemmer shifts his weight on the saddle and turns his horse to follow the wagon.

CHAPTER TWO

ACCUSED



TWO DAYS SOUTH, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE OHIO River, twilight settles over a small Kentucky settlement of one large house, a few barns, and four small cabins. In one of the cabins, a woman named Nettie opens the shutters and peers through the square hole cut into the plank siding.

“Don’t be letting in more cold,” the man known as William complains. “How many times you got to look out there? That boy be home soon.”

Nettie squints at the darkening landscape and then closes the shutters. She shuffles across the dirt floor to the table. “Sky’s getting dark and he’s supposed to be in by now. You know that.”

“Must be Bobby Hill got him doing something. Don’t be worrying.” William lights a third candle for more light. He walks to the window himself and opens the shutters, but all he sees are the squat silhouettes of the other slave cabins and bare tree limbs. Up the hill, the Leyden house is framed by the sunset’s final flare. He closes the shutters and turns to watch his boy Alfred snatch a piece of cornbread

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from a dented tin. The youngest boy, Dan, splashes water in a basin while the baby Lucy coos in her crib.

“I know he’s in some trouble.” Nettie says. “You eat. I can’t.”

“I say there’s no trouble and that’s what I’m going to do—eat.” William looks at the boys. “Alfred? Dan?” He picks up the pan and puts pieces of fried pork onto the boys’ plates and one onto his own. He takes the tin of cornbread from Alfred. “Give us some of that afore you eat it all.”

Nettie glances toward the door. “Somebody’s coming.” She pulls open the door and her boy Richard stomps into the cabin. At twelve, he’s tall for his age and lighter skinned than the other three children. He keeps his eyes to the floor. “You hurt?” his mother asks.

A ruddy man named Bobby Hill steps into the cabin behind the boy and shuts the door as Nettie looks over her son. The overseer’s black frock coat is flecked with mud. His face is pale and fleshy, making him look younger than his thirty years. Reddish curls poke from beneath his felt hat.

“Everything all right, sir?” William asks nervously.

“We have ourselves a situation.” Bobby Hill looks around the cabin. “The boy’s been up to no good.”

Nettie puts her arm around Richard’s shoulders but the boy pulls away.

William gives the boy a stern look. “What he do?”

“He and his friends seem to delight in inflicting damage around here.” Bobby Hill looks directly at Richard. “I caught them pushing down a fence.”

William reaches out quickly and grabs Richard’s chin. “Why you do such a thing, boy? Why you wreck a fence?”

Bobby Hill keeps his eyes on the boy. “I suppose they were hoping the hogs would stray over and trample the tobacco in the north field. That right?”

Richard twists his chin free of William’s grasp.

“I didn’t do it. I was there. But I didn’t do it.”

“Come now,” the overseer chides the boy. “Lying makes everything worse.”

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Nettie picks up the baby Lucy, who squirms in her arms. "What's going to happen, Mister Hill?"

"As I said, we have a situation. First it was little things like mud thrown against the buildings. Tools been coming up missing and equipment getting busted. Couple of times I've found cured leaf thrown in the dirt and ruined." He turns to William. "You know what I'm saying, William. You've had to fix a number of these things."

"Yessir. You let me fix this, too. I promise the boy won't be no more trouble."

"I'm afraid it's beyond that now. I'm taking the whole situation to Mister Leyden. It's not just your boy. It's the bunch of them doing things that's costing the farm money. That's when Mister Leyden gets involved, when there's money at stake."

"What you think the master going to do?" Nettie whispers with worry.

"That'd be solely up to him," Bobby Hill says. Without another word, the overseer opens the cabin door and is gone into the night.

William digs his fingers into Richard's shoulder. "What's got in your head, boy? You going to get beat. If Bobby Hill don't beat you, I will."

Nettie pulls on William's hand to loosen his grip. "What's the boy got to say?"

Without raising his eyes, Richard tells how he and two other boys, Frankie and Louie, were stacking wood at the Leyden house. They'd finished the chore and wanted to tell Bobby Hill so. Then the brothers Ben and Reuben showed up and all five headed toward the north pasture to look for the overseer. They'd romped through the field in the fading daylight. Richard said Reuben had run into a fence post. "That post busted and fell over so we tried to put it back in the ground. That's when Mister Hill showed up."

"And what'd he do?" William asks.

"Made us put those posts back."

"What you mean 'posts'? You said Reuben knocked just the one over."

"Could be two or three. Can't say."

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William groans. “Oh, you done it now, boy. You telling tales and you going to be punished for sure.”

Nettie leans close. “You tell me the truth, Richard. You and those other boys been causing all that harm Mister Hill says? Stealing tools and stuff?”

“We ain’t.”

“What about the other boys?”

“Maybe Reuben. Can’t say.”

“Can’t say?” William grabs Richard’s shoulder again. “Let me tell you something. Any of those boys—Reuben, Ben, any of them—could be making trouble and you could get beat or whipped for just being around. You could get sold away.”

“Leydens don’t whip us and they don’t sell us.” Richard takes a step back from William.

“You a fool, boy!” William says, voice rising. “They ain’t beat or sold us because there ain’t been no trouble all these years. I ought to know. I been here for more than twenty. And what about Bobby Hill? We never had no overseer before. Now we got the missus’ own brother looking over us and telling us what to do and how to do it. Who knows what he’s liable to do? No, this don’t look good.”

William looks down at his plate of food. “Now I ain’t hungry. Not at all.”