

The
Light Across
the
River

Part 1
1837-1838



Chapter 1

JOHNNY

JOHNNY RANKIN HID FROM his dozen siblings up in a hedge apple tree that stood on the hill behind Ripley. Wrinkling his nose at the spicy scent of October, he shifted his feet on the sturdy branch, leaned against the trunk, and daydreamed. His hat brim shaded his eyes from the late-afternoon glints from the distant Ohio River.

Slam!

Johnny squinted through the yellow leaves toward the back door of his house. So much for solitude—his eldest brother, Lowry, and their neighbor, Miss Amanda Kephart, now stood in the back yard, talking with their heads close together.

My, Mandy's pretty.

Johnny had first seen her in the church choir when he was six. Right then and there, he'd made up his mind to marry her. That was five years ago; he hoped she could wait another seven years until he was old enough. Meanwhile, maybe he'd sneak off and pick another bunch of wildflowers to leave on her doorstep.

Too late! Lowry and Mandy were strolling toward his hiding place. He could barely make out what they were saying.

"Please may I tell, Lowry?" Mandy's sunbonnet hid her face.

"Not until everything's settled." Lowry sounded like Father. Trust a preacher to be rock-solid sure. Johnny rubbed his itchy nose and wondered what her secret could be.

"I wish I could have told my father. Sometimes I can't believe . . . cholera!" Mandy bowed her head. "So quick." Johnny's heart ached for her.

"I know," he heard his brother say. Lowry glanced toward the house before he took Mandy's hand. Then he led her behind the close-grown row of hedge apple trees to a spot just below where Johnny was perched, though he couldn't see them.

Lowry was holding Mandy's hand.

He heard the rustle of fabric.

She must have sat down.

With Lowry.

Johnny dug his fingernails into his upper lip. *Was Lowry still holding her hand?* He peeked, but all he could see was the crown of his brother's hat. He gritted his teeth and kept still.

He cast about for a diversion and saw a gray squirrel on a branch above his head, going after a bumpy hedge apple. Squirrels craved hedge apple seeds. Getting to them was difficult, but this squirrel seemed determined. The fruit would have to ripen before the feast began, but what was time to a squirrel?

A corner of Johnny's mouth lifted. Good thing the squirrel didn't care how foolish it looked. It hooked its hindmost toes around a twig and pushed until the hedge apple turned. Patient paws scrabbled. Now the hedge apple dangled by a sliver of bark. One more tap, and it plummeted—right toward Lowry's hat.

Johnny snagged it in the nick of time. The disgusted squirrel whisked to another tree while Johnny wedged the green globe into a notch between two branches. He wrinkled his nose again and sniffed at the pungent sap on his fingers. Whew! His eyes watered. He shut them. His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. Then he reared back and sneezed. The sound of it ricocheted over the rooftops of Ripley.

When Johnny opened his eyes, Lowry was staring up at him. "Why, you sneaky little spy!" He made a grab for Johnny's leg.

Thorns snagged Johnny's trousers as he scrambled upward, out of reach. He clambered along the hedge apple limb until it bent and whipped him to a flying start ahead of Lowry. Just a few more strides and he would beat his older brother to the steep place and escape down the steps to town.

The next thing he knew, he was pitching forward. The hillside came up at him faster than he could run. His arms and legs windmilled. He grabbed something—a weed—but the dry leaves stripped away under his fingers. An empty feeling shot through his middle, like he'd left his stomach behind. Then a stone bounced down the hill, and so did Johnny.

He already knew two ways to travel the half mile to town, but now he discovered a new one. He somersaulted over weeds, skidded on loose clay, and cartwheeled through dry blackberry canes. His hat flew off, and he thought his teeth would shake loose.

By the time he rolled into Ripley, his head orbited his body, or at least it felt that way. He moaned and clutched his temples to hold the world still.

"Johnny, are you hurt?" Mandy sounded far away.

Boots scrunched on gravel. "Serves him right," Lowry puffed. Shadows loomed. Johnny felt Lowry's rough grip. Mandy supported his elbow, and they helped him to his feet. "Let this be a lesson to you." Lowry whacked the dust out of Johnny's hat and jammed it back on his head. "Stop spying on everybody and mind your own business."

Mandy cleared her throat and Lowry grew less gruff. "Anything broken?"

"No," Johnny croaked. His head ached too much to shake, and his ears were ringing.

"Well, come on, then."

Every step hurt as they climbed the big hill. When they reached the summit, the Rankins' dinner bell stopped midclang.

“Johnny!” The bell rope snaked out of Mother’s hands. “What in this world?” She slapped dust and picked burrs from his clothes. “See that you get this mess cleaned off before you come to supper. Mandy, will you help him, please?” Mother bustled away with Lowry at her heels.

Why doesn’t Mother just say I’m a naughty little boy and be done with it? His shoulders drooped as he followed Mandy to the back porch.

“It’s a miracle you’re not bad hurt,” she said. “Such a tumble! See, your trousers are ripped here . . . and here.” She tilted his chin; her touch burned. “Your cheek’s scratched, too.”

He shrugged and hung his head. Mandy filled the washbasin with fresh water and moistened her handkerchief. With one hand on Johnny’s shoulder, she dabbed his cuts and scratches clean. He hardly noticed how the soap stung; he was too busy brooding about how no one in his family cared much what happened to him. Thirteen children divided by one mother and father left no time for mollycoddling.

Twilight had fallen by the time Johnny took his seat at the long harvest table. Supper smelled heavenly. His mouth watered while Father said grace and passed the plates to the seven girls along the opposite side of the table. At the far end, Mother struggled to keep baby Tappan’s hands away from the hot serving bowls. Finally, supper traveled along the line to the four boys to his right, then to Johnny. He helped himself to a golden heap of sweet corn and all the mashed potatoes his plate could hold before he passed the bowls to William and Andrew. Lowry glowered at the amount on Johnny’s plate, but no one else did. Sometimes it was good to be the shortest, skinniest boy in the family.

Hunger kept anyone from commenting on Johnny’s appearance. Sam bolted his meal like a colicky horse, sighed, stretched, and patted his stomach. “What’s going on in town,

Cal? Somebody been fighting?" He raised an eyebrow at Johnny, who ignored him.

"Not that I've heard," Cal snorted. "Nothing ever happens in Ripley."

"Now, Cal." Mother wagged a finger. "That's the way we want it. Remember, you and Sam are on duty tonight."

"All right, Mother. May I have the biscuits, please?"

Father passed the bowl. "You two will do well if nothing happens," he said. "Laban Biggerman has sought an opportunity to best us since James's slave, Paul, escaped last month." He shook his head. "Reverend Mahan ought not to have kept him around so long."

"Well, it wasn't for lack of warning," Lowry chimed in. "The last thing I told the Reverend was to keep the fugitive ahead of the pursuers, just before Alex and I left for the music convention at Sardinia." He handed the bowl to David, who passed it to Cal.

Oh, yes, Lowry was always right. Johnny wanted to roll his eyes. As he held out his hand for the biscuits, Johnny saw a secret smile flash between Lowry and Mandy. She blushed pink and inspected her plate.

Johnny chomped his sweet corn. The very idea of Lowry looking at Mandy that way rankled him. Lowry had accused him of spying, too—said he did it all the time. As if Johnny were at fault when people stumbled across his best hiding places. Worst by far, Lowry had held Mandy's hand.

The words flashed out quicker than thought. "I know what's happening in Ripley. Mandy knows something that Lowry won't let her tell." He shot a triumphant glance at Lowry.

"How do you know, Johnny?" Father used his Sunday voice, the one that you could hear from any place in the sanctuary.

Johnny knew how to hold his tongue . . . sometimes. He traced a knothole in the chestnut plank that Lowry had hand-finished.

Sure enough, Lowry butted in. "How does he know? Why, everyone in Ripley says if you want to hear the news, go ask Johnny."

"That's not true!"

"Oh, no?" Lowry addressed Father again. "What would you say about a boy who listens to a private conversation and then repeats it? He was in the hedge apple tree spying while Mandy and I watched the sun set."

"I wasn't either spying!" Johnny said. "I just wanted to be by myself. And I was, until you came along holding Mandy's hand."

Mother's knife clattered. "Why, Lowry!"

Lowry withered Johnny with a glance. "That proves it. You can't hold your tongue. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that you've let slip about the Underground."

Johnny clenched his fists, but Father held up a hand.

"Boys, that's enough. But, Lowry"—Father's lips thinned—"do I understand you and Amanda wished to be alone? Holding hands?"

The whole table waited to hear what Lowry would say. Johnny gloated until he saw Mandy blush. Her distress rubbed the gloss right off his big revelation.

"Father, I would never . . . that is, Miss Kephart and I . . ." Lowry spluttered.

"My, how formal, Lowry! It seems we've waited long enough to share this . . ." Mandy's eyes sparkled with tears. "On the way home from Sardinia, Lowry asked me to marry him, and I've accepted." She appealed to Father and Mother. "May we have your blessing?"

Benches and chairs scraped as a throng of Rankins converged on the pair. Father shook Lowry's hand; Mother hugged Mandy. They laughed and cried at the same time. The girls squealed, "Why didn't you tell us?" The boys thumped Lowry's back.

Johnny lost count of how many times he heard, “God bless you!” Joy filled the room, and for once even grouchy old Lowry grinned.

No one saw Johnny slip out the door.

He climbed the hedge apple tree and hunched alone in the chilly darkness. When would things ever change? Brothers and sisters crammed in edgewise, all of them taller, stronger, faster, or smarter than he was. Father and Mother frantically busy with the church, family, and a million other things. They never took any more notice of him than to say, “Johnny, do this,” or “Johnny, do that.”

The only person who’d ever paid him any mind was Mandy, and now she belonged to Lowry. That hurt, but what surprised him more was how much Lowry’s words hurt. He’d as good as called Johnny a traitor by implying that he would spill the family secret.

He could not deny that it was tempting to tell about the Underground. The older boys and Ibby told exciting stories about how the family helped fugitive slaves. What frustrated the life out of him was that he must never breathe a word to anyone else. Why couldn’t Father see how wrong it was to keep quiet? It seemed so simple to Johnny. If only people could know how horrible slavery was! If only they knew the great risks men took to be free!

A flicker caught his eye; somebody had placed the signal light in the upstairs window. The soft glow steadied. Further back than Johnny remembered, lights had burned in the two side windows and in the front. When a slave across the river in Kentucky wanted to know where John Rankin lived, he looked for the light.

The yard brightened and dimmed. Somebody had come out the front door. Sure enough, two dark shapes swished through the wet grass toward the hill; Cal and Sam were headed to town.

They would pass the evening at Thomas McCague's house on Front Street to watch for fugitive slaves. Father still refused to go to Kentucky to help the slaves, but whenever possible, he offered aid the minute they set foot on Ohio soil. So long as slave escapes continued thicker than raisins in a pie, that would remain the rule.

Johnny knew Father's other rules, too: keep the fugitive ahead of the pursuers, use a different station each time, and never talk to anyone—not even his best friends—about the runaways. But had Father ever let him be a conductor? No, and he was older than Lowry had been when he first conducted.

Lowry's remark still burned. Perhaps if Johnny assured Father that he would never reveal the family business, he would make him a conductor.

He vaulted from the tree, bound and determined. Tomorrow night he would keep watch from Thomas McCague's house.

Chapter 1

ELIZA

ELIZA SNAPPED HER DUST rag out the front door and plodded to the sideboard. A multitude of dusty gimcracks cluttered its surface, but that suited her just fine. She picked up the china dog and rubbed it, then dusted under it. She moved mighty slow and quiet because it was Bible reading time. What would she hear today?

“I love you, Mama.”

“I love you, too, darlin’.” Missus James stroked Viola’s hair and kissed Pansy. The three sat on the striped davenport in the parlor, their backs to Eliza. The daughters rested their heads on Missus James’s shoulders as she read aloud to them. “‘Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up . . .’”

“Mama, what’s charity?”

“Charity is love. . . . ‘Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth.’” Missus James closed the Bible. “Now, who can show me charity?” Pansy and Viola hugged their mama hard. “You’re going to squeeze me in two!” she protested with a smile.

Eliza polished the sideboard with resentful strokes. *Now ain’t that fine, for Missus James to love on her children anytime*

she pleases? Hard to see when Eliza could find such time with her own children, Beulah and baby Mose. She pursed her lips and flicked the rag at a slender bud vase. It teetered and crashed to the floor.

“Oh, what a pity, Eliza. No, don’t trouble your head about that old thing. Just see to it that you get all the glass up, so my girls don’t run a sliver in their feet. By the way, Mr. Biggerman will be joining us for supper, so set an extra place.” Missus James turned away. “Now, darlings, I will hear your music.”

The piano skittered from note to note like a kitten was on the keys. Eliza fished the shards of glass from the rug and walked stiffly to the kitchen. She worked up biscuit dough and slapped it out on the floury board while she fumed.

Here she was, making supper for the likes of Laban Biggerman. It was hard to think up a worse chore. The overseer called Eliza “Ol’ Ugly,” but she could stand that. He looked at her grown daughter, Beulah, like a white man had no business to look at a young woman raising five children on her own. That was harder to bear, but Eliza kept a close eye on Biggerman. Beulah’s family lived in Eliza’s cabin because there was more safety in numbers.

The way Biggerman looked at Eliza’s husband, George, now, that was what wore Eliza to a frazzle. She tried to put it out of her mind as she fixed supper, but—lawsy mercy! She knocked over the cut glass saltcellar. The salt flew one way and the square silver salt spoon with the pea pod etched in the handle flew the other. Eliza groaned to her knees and fetched the spoon. She swept the salt up, threw a pinch over her left shoulder, stood the broom in its corner, and refilled the saltcellar.

Goodness gracious, this kitchen is hot! Eliza flapped her apron and glanced idly out the window toward her cabin, like she did a hundred times a day. Grapevines swarmed up the logs on one side. She could smell her herb garden from here, mingled scents

of sage, mint, and yarrow. Dead pea vines and beanstalks rattled when the wind blew.

In the midst of it all stood George. He fooled around the dooryard with a happy smile on his face. There wasn't much Eliza could trust him to do, but she'd scattered some dried bean and pea pods on the ground this morning so he could walk in a circle and trample them. That was how George threshed. Later, the children would gather the shelled peas and beans.

The sight of George's faithful treading warmed Eliza's heart, but the next instant it nearly stopped beating. Laban Biggerman was hiding behind the currant bushes near her cabin. He was watching George, too.

A coldness crawled clean through Eliza's body. The overseer's hands were empty, but she knew he meant business. He clenched and unclenched his fists like he was choking the life out of George. Eliza clutched at her throat.

Then Biggerman turned his dead eyes to Eliza, like he knew she was watching. His mustache gleamed like a new copper kettle in the late afternoon sun. He flicked the brim of his slouch hat in a mock salute and walked away.



The thought of Biggerman's lifeless eyes troubled her all evening, even while George cracked jokes and cut a shine. Here in their cabin it was easy to pretend that nothing was wrong. There were Beulah's children and baby Mose to care for, a second supper to cook, and evening chores to keep her mind occupied, but it was time she faced up to facts. She could not watch out for George the livelong day. His life was in danger here.

She'd kept him safe for so long. Mr. James flew off the handle when he got angry at George and his foolish ways, but Eliza and

Missus James kept him simmered down. The day Biggerman came—that was when the real trouble began.

Strong though George was, Biggerman quickly discovered he was too addled to be of much use. The overseer often raged at George, but George only grinned. Missus James warned Biggerman that George must not be touched because he was a “poor unfortunate.” At first, Eliza had been thankful, but now she wondered if Missus James had made matters worse. The rule kept Biggerman’s temper at a slow boil. He was always on the lookout for an excuse to half-kill George.

No, there was no time to lose. Eliza knew she had to get her husband out of Kentucky and across the Ohio River to freedom this very night.

She pulled Beulah aside. “Your daddy and me has some work to do this evenin’. If you hear Mose, take care of him for me.”

Beulah nodded without a speck of interest. Time was when she’d chatter on worse than a blue jay, but she’d barely spoken a word since her own husband had run off. Beulah did not seem to realize that Paul was better off free.

Eliza felt a tug at her apron. “Mammaw, where you and Pap-paw goin’?” Shadrach’s big eyes were full of questions. He was just four, but Beulah’s oldest son was smart as a whip, much quicker than his older sister, Essie. Quicker than his mama, too.

“Oh, around the daisy.” She pulled him on her lap. “I’ll be back come morning, Shad. Now give your ol’ Mammaw some sugar.” Eliza loved him up until he giggled and squirmed.

When supper was over, Eliza sat on the edge of the bed and rocked Mose. She loved him fiercely and delighted to see his eyelids flutter open, even though she badly needed him to go to sleep. At last, he shivered all over and dozed off. She covered him up and kept a hand on his back for a long time.

She waited until Essie, Shad, Mary, and the twins, Meesh and Abe, fell asleep. Then she handed the heavy skillet to her

daughter. "Beulah, honey, keep this by your bed. Happen you hear a noise, you fetch this skillet and clobber whatever it is, just as hard as you can."

Beulah nodded. Eliza wrapped her arms around her daughter and kissed her cheek. Then she covered George's mouth, took him by the hand, and led him out the door.

They made their way to the creek by starlight, and the cold grew sharper than needles. George seemed to understand the need for quiet. When Eliza took her hand from his mouth, he didn't make a sound. "Lord, just let me get him safe to the other side," she prayed.

For the next two miles, they followed the creek. Once, a deer crashed through the underbrush, and Eliza's heart nearly stopped. She looked behind her more than ahead, and she guided George back and forth across the meandering creek. She hoped to throw the patrollers off their scent.

She could hardly believe it when they reached the river and George found a skiff right away. He stumbled up against it so hard that he fell to his knees. He whimpered, and she patted his shoulder to chirk him up. How she loved him! He was so big and strong and kind.

The skiff was chained and locked to a thick post. Now, how to open the rusty padlock? Before she could fret, shrewdness lit George's face. He seized the post and pushed. He rocked it the other way and pulled the whole stake up out of the mud. He laid it in the bottom of the skiff with a proud smile.

She wiped away tears and settled George in the skiff. It took a struggle to shove it out into the water, but at last the skiff inched backward. George beamed when the boat rocked. Eliza wound strips of cloth through the oarlocks to muffle the screech of the oars. Then she clambered aboard, and they were afloat.

Mist danced along the top of the water. Eliza rowed upstream and tried to remember what she'd heard. Folks said there was

a preacher who lived on a hill near Ripley. Mr. Rankin was his name. He would help slaves to a free country—if they could reach him. Mr. Rankin’s dogs would not bark at a slave, for a wonder. Tales she’d heard through the grapevine said to walk right in the preacher’s house because he never locked his door. Nobody had ever caught a runaway who got to Mr. Rankin’s, neither. He must be a praying man, for sure. All she had to do was find the house once they landed.

Before long, the skiff struck the opposite shore. Eliza stepped out onto the riverbank and turned to help George. Before she could stop him, he jumped up, teetered, and splashed into the river. Thick mist swirled around her, and the darkness was complete.

The water’s only knee deep. He must be nearby. She plunged in both arms up to her shoulders and searched in slow circles. The current tugged at her skirts and she stumbled. The water suddenly rose to her hips; she had stepped off a sandbar. If George did the same, he’d go under, and he could not swim. She had to find him fast, but where was he?

She risked a desperate whisper. “George!”

No answer. Frantic now, she leaned over so far that the front of her dress was soaked. She floundered every which way, but just like that, he was gone.

To come so close to freedom! A sob choked her. She raised a hand to smother her grief, and her fingertips brushed something—cloth. She lunged for it, missed, lunged again, and pulled blindly for all she was worth. Then the mist lifted and she saw that the heavy, wet bundle was George.

She dragged him to shore. He retched and spluttered. Water streamed from his eyes and nose, and she slapped him on the back. She struggled to lift him to his feet; the wind stiffened their wet clothes. George’s teeth chattered, but he was alive, thank the Lord.

“Don’t make another sound. Be still!” Two shadowy forms glided to her side. “Sam, get the skiff.”

“Got it, Cal.”

A voice close to her ear said, “Come with us. We’ll help you.”

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and Eliza saw a young white boy.

She shook her head and pointed at George. “Just him,” she whispered. The other boy took Eliza’s arm, but she whispered, “No.”

“See here, ma’am, we have to move!”

“I can’t go.” She wrung her hands. “He fell in the river. He . . . he’s feeble-minded.” She added, “Biggerman, he gonna kill my George.”

“Biggerman?” The big boys looked at each other. “Better come with us,” the one called Cal urged.

“I got more family over to home.” She would not cry now. “I’ll come back by and by. Please, take him on to Canada for me.”

“If you are going back, go now.” Sam held the skiff steady for her.

She hesitated. It was so quick! She tiptoed to kiss George’s cheek. “Lord keep you, George. I’ll come back. I love you.” With that, she turned blindly to the skiff.

Sam helped her embark and pushed the skiff off the sandbar. She huddled in her wet dress and let the current carry her downstream, with just the tip of an oar to steer.

The boys led George away. He turned back once. Twice. Just before they entered the woods, he shook free and cupped both hands around his mouth. “I love you, too.” His husky whisper carried over the water and broke Eliza’s heart.

By the time she reached home, she was cold to her very bones. Tears coursed down her cheeks with each strangled cough.

No one stirred when she opened the cabin door. Beulah lay

flat on her back in the bed with baby Mose clasped to her chest. She slept dead to the world.

Eliza stirred the fire. While she waited for the pot of water to boil, she picked a mess of sage from the bush outside her door. The leaves were small this late in the year, but fresh-picked sage always worked best for a cough. She tied the leaves in a scrap of stained muslin and placed it in a bowl. After she poured water over the bag, she covered the bowl with a chipped saucer.

The fire crackled. Her shoes would soon dry. She could easily excuse their dampness if need be, but her muddy, wet dress would be harder to explain. She turned it inside out and decided to let it dry on her. To ward off the chill, she filled the washtub with the rest of the hot water and soaked her feet.

When the sage tea had steeped, Eliza added a dribble of honey. She closed her weary eyes and inhaled the fragrant steam. Then she picked up the bowl in both hands and sipped the healing tea.

“Where’s Pappaw at, Mammaw?”

Eliza jumped and tea slopped. Shad stood at her elbow. She did not know how to answer him.

“He with my daddy now?”

She had never seen such big, knowing eyes on a child. A lump came up in her throat but she forced a scowl. “You hush your mouth. Don’t you never say that again, you hear me?”

Shad nodded. He hugged her neck. “I’m glad you come back,” he whispered.

Oh, she loved this grandchild, but he was too smart for his own good. She gave him a sip of tea and sent him back to bed.

Daybreak, and there were still the cows for Beulah to milk. Eliza couldn’t bear to wake her. Tired as she was, she padded barefoot through the wet grass to the cowshed.

The three cows turned their heads to watch her as they chewed

their cud. With a groan, Eliza settled onto the milking stool and burrowed her head in the cow's warm flank. Streams of milk zinged into the pail.

"Milking mighty late, ain't you, Ol' Ugly?"

Eliza never missed a pull. "No, sir."

Laban Biggerman rose from the next pen. "How come that pretty daughter of yours ain't milking this morning? She sick?"

"Yes, sir," Eliza fibbed. Thank the good Lord Beulah wasn't milking today. She coughed and wiped her nose. "We all be sick."

"Well, I'll go tell her I hope she feels better." He brushed soiled straw from his clothes and left the shed.

Before she finished milking the second cow, he strode back to her side. "Where's your man?" he barked.

"Up to the house."

Biggerman grabbed her by the neck and raised her off the stool to face him. "You know he ain't." He shook her. "He's too stupid to run off by himself. You helped him, you—"

"What you mean?" she wailed. "George gone? Oh, my poor George, he musta fell in the branch and drowned! Help me find him!"

"Shut up!" The force of his blow knocked her halfway across the pen. The frightened cow bellowed and kicked the pail. Warm milk showered over Eliza's dress. "I know what you did. You took him to Uncle Johnny Rankin's house."

"I'm sick. You see how sick I am." Her jaw throbbed and she tasted blood. "I don't have the strength to find my poor George, wherever he got to." She crouched in the deep straw to hide her muddy skirts. "Oh, he's drowned, he's drowned! Lord, have mercy on his soul!"

"Good riddance to him!" Biggerman pointed at Eliza. "Get your lazy black hide to work. Since I don't have his brawn no

more, I'll take the work out of you. Yes, and I'll make you pay for what you did."

When he was gone, Eliza unwound her kerchief and dabbed her puffed lip. Her mouth felt full; she spat out a bloody tooth. She packed the new gap with a strip of wadded cloth from her kerchief. Then she finished the milking.

When Eliza had set the cream to rise in the pantry, Missus James approached. Her eyes were swollen with weeping. "Oh, Eliza, why ever did you make Mr. Biggerman so angry?" She dabbed her tears with a wadded handkerchief.

How did her mistress know? Eliza rubbed her jaw. Sure enough, she could feel a welt where he had struck her. "It don't differ," she said.

Missus James's face went crimson. "He says George is gone and you helped him go! We've been so good to you! We never let him raise a hand to your George. Is this the way you repay us?"

A cloud of dust sifted past the window. Hoofbeats rang. Biggerman's red horse screamed as the spurs raked his sides. Eliza's spine stiffened. "Where's he gone?"

"Will you hush your sass and listen to me?" Missus James wrung her hands. Her daughters clung to their mother's skirt and glared at Eliza. "Biggerman's gone after the slave trader!"

"Lord, have mercy," Eliza moaned. She sank into a chair. "Who'll take care of Beulah and her little ones when I'm sold away?"

"Don't you see? He's not going to sell you." Missus James was crying in earnest now. "He's already talked to Mr. James. He's going to sell Beulah and her children to Mr. Adkins, over Germantown way."

The blood drained from Eliza's face. "My Mose, too?"

"He didn't say anything about him. Oh, what shall I . . . ?"

But Eliza was halfway across the yard. She flung open the cabin door. "Beulah!"

Her daughter stood at the stove, surrounded by her children. She jiggled Mose as she stirred the corn meal mush. She didn't respond.

"Beulah! I'm talking to you. Look at me!"

Slowly she turned her head.

"You're sold, you and your babies, to Mr. Adkins. Biggerman's gone there now." Eliza sobbed. "Lord, forgive me!"

For the first time since her husband, Paul, ran off, a spark of defiance flared in Beulah's eyes. That light gave Eliza hope. "Beulah, listen to me. You got to be careful. You take care of my grandbabies. They need you."

She heard a quivery sigh behind her, and there was Shad. Big tears rolled down his cheeks; young as he was, he knew "sold" meant something awful.

Her joints popped as she knelt and folded him in her arms. "Look ahere, Shad. You're Mammaw's big helper. Keep after your mama when she don't talk. Pester her until she says something." She stroked his head as his tears wet her dress front. "You teach your sisters and brothers how to get along. Tell them—" Dear God! There was so little time! "Tell them to say, 'No, ma'am' and 'Yes, sir.' Make sure they always take off their caps before they go in the big house."

It was no use. She could never say all she wanted to Shad. Instead, she bowed her head and prayed to God that He would keep her family safe.