

## CHAPTER ONE

Fayetteville, Georgia 1862

John Henry Holliday believed in heroes -- he came from a long line of them, after all. From his distant Irish ancestors who had fought English invaders down to his father and uncles who fought Yankee oppressors, the Hollidays were famous for being fighting men. And so it was with some disappointment that John Henry listened to the eulogy being read over his Grandfather Robert Alexander Holliday's grave, that gray November day when Grandpa Bob was buried in the family plot in the Fayetteville Cemetery. For though Bob Holliday had been a loyal Southerner all his life and had passed a fighting spirit on down to his descendants, he had never himself raised arms in any kind of fight, and to young John Henry's way of thinking that was a real shame.

Not that Grandpa Bob had lived a shameful life, as a whole. He was well-loved by his family and well-respected by the little Georgia town he had helped to settle, and as the owner of the most popular tavern on the Jonesboro Road he was a man of many friends, as well. In fact, it was "Uncle Bob's Tavern" that had helped to put Fayetteville on the map in the first place, giving thirsty travelers a pleasant place to stop on the long ride from Newnan to Decatur. In those early pioneer days, when most of Georgia was still fresh out of the Indian Nation, hotels were few and far between, and a country tavern seemed like the very center of civilization. With his genial personality, and the help of his wife and six living children, Bob Holliday had prospered in the inn-keeping business and in the farming business, as well, with an eight-hundred acre place south of town and even a few hard-earned slaves to help till the soil.

No, there was nothing all that shameful about Grandpa Bob's life except for the peace of it, and that wasn't really his fault. He couldn't help having been born too late to fight against the British and too early to fight against the Yanks. Still, John Henry felt disappointed as the preacher pronounced the eulogy. Not a single battle to his grandfather's credit! Not even a sword, like the one Great-Grandfather Henry Burroughs had used in the Revolutionary War, to pass down to a hero-worshipping grandson. Just a lot of talk about hard work and responsibility, and Bob Holliday's word being as good as his bond, and where was the heroism in that?

John Henry sighed as he shivered in the damp November chill, wishing that the funeral would hurry and get over. The sermon had been going on for what seemed like hours already, and there were still the benediction and the burial to go, the clumps of red clay falling with a hard finality on the pinewood box in which his grandfather was laid out. Grandpa Bob's remains had been in that box for two days now, resting for viewing in the best parlor of Uncle John's big white-columned house just off the Fayetteville town square, and John Henry had been obliged to stand as honor guard while the whole village came through to pay their respects, a grandson's duty to his grandfather's memory. For a restless eleven-year-old boy, standing still for any time at all was difficult; standing with his head bowed and a properly mournful countenance on his face was torture.

But no one could have guessed by looking at him how hard John Henry had to work at being reverent. With his blue eyes downcast under sandy lashes, and his lips moving silently in response to the prayers, he was the very model of good behavior. He was a handsome boy, dressed for the funeral in his Sunday-go-to-meetin' suit, his fair hair pomaded neatly into place. He had his father's high cheekbones, his mother's fine narrow nose and expressive mouth, an easy grace about him that matched the rhythm of his slow southern drawl. And if it hadn't been for the way he kept fiddling with his hands and fussing with the wool cap he held in front of him, one would have thought him a properly placid child. But there was nothing placid about John Henry. He only stood so politely still because he had been trained by his mother to be polite. Left to his own whims, he would have bolted from the cemetery long ago, grabbed the first horse he found tied to a rail, and headed off into the open countryside for a fast ride.

It wasn't that he didn't truly mourn his grandfather's passing, of course. John Henry had loved Grandpa Bob as much as the rest of the grandchildren, though since he lived away off in Griffin, thirty miles to the east, he didn't get to visit as often as the rest of the Fayette County clan. But his father had brought him to Fayetteville with enough regularity that he knew his grandparents and aunts and uncles well, and considered his first cousins to be his closest friends, and he had actually cried himself to sleep the night he heard that Grandpa Bob had died -- though his father would have called that an unmanly show of emotion, had he known.

His mother knew, though she never said a word about it. Alice Jane McKey Holliday was a well-bred woman and a dutiful wife, and she would never dream of discussing something of which her husband disapproved. If Henry Holliday had ordered their son to keep his emotions

in check, then she would never reveal that she had heard the boy's weeping as he buried his face in his feather bed pillow in the room next to her own. But the next morning, she had laid her hand on John Henry's shoulder, and said in her sweet and sensitive voice: "It breaks all our hearts to lose your Grandfather. Why, heaven itself must have been cryin' some last night." And John Henry knew that she had heard him, and would keep his confidence.

He stole a glance at his mother, noting how she stood near the grave with her eyes prayerfully closed, her face in pale repose under the dark veil of her silk mourning bonnet. On the bodice of her black mourning dress she wore the symbol of another death, an ebony broach set with a lock of hair taken from her dead baby daughter. The somberness of Alice Jane's attire contrasted sharply with the alabaster whiteness of her skin, and emphasized the dark shadows that showed beneath her eyes. The shadows were caused, she said, by too many sleepless nights worrying over the health of her husband, who had recently returned from the War on a medical discharge. But it wasn't just worry over her husband's illness that caused her tired and drawn appearance. Alice Jane had been sick for some time herself, suffering from an undulant fever and a nagging cough, and the added strain of caring for her husband in his recuperation was wearing her to the point of exhaustion.

Her husband's early return from Virginia, occasioned by a long bout of camp sickness, had been the sad ending to a proud military career. As Captain Quartermaster of the 27th Georgia Infantry, Henry Burroughs Holliday had seen action at Williamsburg and Seven Pines, Cold Harbor and Malvern Hill, before being promoted to Major on Christmas Day of 1861. But then his unit moved on to the defense of Richmond, where the spring rains turned the green countryside of Virginia into a muddy bog that trapped the men and spread disease through the camps of tents and shacks, and Major Holliday had taken sick along with his men, suffering from a bout of watery dysentery that threatened to waste him away. The camp doctor tried every remedy he had, but Henry finally had to surrender to the sickness and resign his commission with the Army, returning home to Georgia in the early fall of 1862. For the proud Major, it was a galling defeat. But though his Confederate gray uniform hung loosely on his illness-ravaged figure, Henry Holliday still looked like a hero to his son, with his black Irish hair streaked with silver and his eyes a cool uncompromising blue -- eyes that could chastise with only a glance, as John Henry knew only too well. But John Henry didn't mind his father's militarily disciplined

demeanor. A hero was supposed to be strong, after all, and John Henry was proud to be a hero's son.

Henry Holliday was the bravest man his son had ever known, beholden to no one, afraid of nothing -- a legend and a legacy impossible to follow. Henry had been a fighter since he was old enough to load a gun, and had already fought in two wars before the struggle for Southern independence began. Henry had won his first commission at only nineteen-years-old as a Second Lieutenant in the Creek Indian War. When the War with Mexico broke out, Lieutenant Holliday had signed up again and served with valor from Vera Cruz to Monterrey, coming home in glory and full of stories to tell of the great adventure, of rough and wild Texas where longhorn cattle grazed on endless acres of grassland, of strange Spanish Mexico and the fierce Indian warriors of the western deserts. John Henry had been raised on his father's war stories and thought them even more exciting than the penny-novel tales of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett that were so popular with other boys. When John Henry's father talked of Texas, there was a gleam in his eyes that made the adventure seem so real that John Henry could almost picture himself there, too.

But for now, Henry Holliday's eyes were staring dispassionately ahead of him, as he stood beside the open grave, a shovel in his leather-gloved hands. As the oldest of Grandpa Bob Holliday's four living sons, it was Henry's right to place the first spadeful of dirt on his father's coffin as they lowered the box into the ground -- a privilege he would have missed, if he hadn't returned from the War just a few weeks before. Now, instead of commanding men, he was at the forefront of a cemetery full of mourners, spreading out around the graveside in a dark and somber circle of family and friends. Grandpa Bob's sons and daughters stood closest to the coffin, the men wearing black armbands in honor of their deceased, the women with their grieving faces hidden behind the heavy veils of black mourning bonnets. Behind them stood the daughters-in-law, sniffing daintily into their black-trimmed handkerchiefs and trying to keep all the cousins quiet while the preacher rambled on. Past the family were the neighbors and business associates, hats in hands and heads bowed. And past them, at a properly respectful distance, stood the Negro slaves, swaying and murmuring in musical lamentation.

If only the preacher would say a final "Amen" and get on with it! John Henry's already thin patience was wearing even thinner, and he let out a loud sigh and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to keep himself warm in the wintry chill of the air.

“Stop fiddlin’, Cousin John Henry!” The whispered words came as both a scold and a tease, and he turned to look into the watchful eyes of his cousin Mattie, who was standing just behind him in the circle of grandchildren. As the oldest of the girl cousins, Mattie Holliday had always made it her business to keep an eye on the others, and especially on John Henry who had no sister of his own to look after him, and he usually didn’t mind too much.

Mattie was all right, for a girl, with a bright sense of humor and an adventurous streak to match his own, though she was getting too grown up and ladylike to show it very often. Young ladies of almost thirteen-years-old couldn’t keep throwing their skirts up to ride horses the way Mattie used to like to do, when she and John Henry had been children together. For all her growing up, though, Mattie still looked childlike. She was just a little thing, barely as tall as John Henry though she was eighteen-months his elder, with eyes too large for her little heart-shaped face, too wise for a girl her age. And though she wasn’t really what one could call a beauty, those eyes of hers were beautiful: dark brown flecked with streaks of gray, changing in the changing light, calm and deep as evening shadows in the woods along the river.

“I’m not fiddlin’, Mattie,” he whispered back. “I’m just bored, that’s all.”

“How could you be bored at Grandpa’s funeral? I should think you’d be cryin’ harder than the rest of us, seein’ as how you were his favorite.”

“Says who?”

“Says everybody. You’re the only son of his oldest son, aren’t you? That’s bound to make you the favorite.”

John Henry shrugged, feeling the uncomfortable weight of his special place in the Holliday family: only son of the oldest son, primary heir of the Holliday clan, and future guardian of the family’s good name as well. For as long as he could remember, he had been taught that it would one day be his responsibility to represent the Holliday family to the world. The family, he knew, would always be watching.

But for now, the only one watching was Cousin Mattie, and sparring with her was more entertaining than listening to the preacher, anyhow.

“And I guess you don’t call that fiddlin’,” he said, “playin’ with those rosary beads of yours.”

“I’m not playin’,” she retorted. “I’m prayin’ to the Blessed Mother for Grandpa’s soul.”

Mattie always took offense whenever anyone derided her Catholic traditions. Though the rest of the Holliday family was Irish Protestant, John Henry's uncle Rob had converted to Catholicism when he married Aunt Mary Anne Fitzgerald, and their five daughters all worshipped the Virgin Mary and the Roman Pope. *Popish*, John Henry's mother called them, though the Hollidays generally tolerated the Fitzgerald's religion.

"...and it wouldn't hurt you to do some prayin', too, you know," Mattie added.

"Oh, I'm prayin', all right," John Henry replied with a grin, "I'm prayin' this preacher gets done with his preachin' so I can get to supper soon! I'm starvin', aren't you?"

"No," Mattie answered piously, her brown eyes averted from his mischievous gaze.

"We're havin' smoked ham and sweet potatoes," John Henry tempted, "hot buttered biscuits, pecan pie...can't you just taste it, Mattie? Bet you can! Bet you're as hungry as me, under all that proper religion of yours..."

And just as he had expected her to, Mattie rose to the challenge.

"John Henry!" she said loudly, forgetting herself for a moment too long, "you are just shameful! I don't know why I even bother to help you behave!"

And as she spoke, her voice rising above the solemn sound of the sermon, the crowd of mourners turned to stare at the auburn-headed girl whose cheeks were blushing crimson with embarrassment. Only the preacher seemed unaware of the disturbance, and kept right on with his sermonizing, quoting endlessly from the Holy Book: "...that it is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law..."

John Henry quickly bowed his head to hide a laugh, though Mattie heard the sound of it.

"Very funny, John Henry! I hope you're satisfied now that you've made a mockery of me in front of the whole family. Have you no decency at all?"

"Aw, Mattie," he drawled, "I was just foolin' around, you know that! I wasn't tryin' to get you in trouble. Besides, everybody knows you're too good to make a fuss in public. I'll own up, if anybody asks."

"I still say you're shameful, not carin' anything about Grandpa being dead."

"I never said I didn't care. But my Pa says a man's got to quarter his feelings and not cry over somebody dyin'. So I'm not cryin', that's all."

Henry Holliday's word was law to his son, and he was careful to obey -- though it wasn't really his father's strict discipline that kept John Henry on the straight and narrow path, but his mother's gentle persuasions. Like cousin Mattie, his mother was always watching him, making sure that he was behaving himself as a gentleman, and John Henry didn't like to disappoint her. He loved his mother as much as he idolized his father, and her good opinion of him mattered more than any tempting misbehavior -- most of the time. There were days when his adventurous streak got the better of him and made him throw caution to the wind, and commit some ungentlemanly act or other. Then Alice Jane would reprimand him and call him to repentance, her sweet voice tinged with the suffering of a loving parent: "John Henry dearest, I am so very disappointed..." and John Henry would be truly ashamed of his sin and beg for her forgiveness -- which of course she always gave.

But cousin Mattie wasn't nearly as forgiving as his mother, and she was still fuming over the embarrassment of having all the family turn those chastising eyes upon her.

"I don't know why I even talk to you," she whispered, "you're such a child, John Henry, and a spoiled one, too! It's a shame you don't have any brothers or sisters. I bet that would teach you to be a little less selfish."

"I am not selfish!" he protested -- though in truth he'd been accused of it before, mostly by the cousins who all came from large families and had to share everything, including their beds. As an only child, John Henry seldom had to share his room or his things with anyone else, though he didn't see as how that made him selfish. It wasn't his fault that his mother had never had another baby after he came along, or that his only sister, Martha Eleanora, had died as an infant before he was even born.

Mattie, on the other hand, was the oldest of five children, and proud to be from a large and growing household. It seemed like her mother, Aunt Mary Anne, was always either caring for a new baby or expecting another. In fact, it was only since Uncle Rob had gone off to the war that Aunt Mary Anne had not been in the family way -- though John Henry wasn't supposed to notice such things. Still, as a curious youth, he couldn't help but wonder where all those babies came from, and why Uncle Rob and Aunt Mary Anne should have so many and his own parents had only him. There was some mystery to it, he knew, and he intended to unravel it one day...

“Curiosity killed the cat, John Henry,” Mattie whispered, as if reading his thoughts. “What are you ponderin’ on, anyhow? You’ve got that wonderin’ look on your face again.”

“I’m wonderin’ how much longer this service is goin’ to last,” he snipped, uncomfortable at the way Mattie always seemed to see right through him. There were some thoughts a boy didn’t want to share with a girl. And to his relief, before Mattie could question him anymore, the preacher gave a final and dramatic, “Amen!” and the men began their burden of covering over Grandpa Bob’s grave.

It was the sound of the dirt going down, heavy spadefuls of damp red clay, that caught John Henry’s attention. His father’s was the first shovel to swing and drop, committing Grandpa Bob to the ground, then Uncle John and the rest of the pallbearers followed after, and the ladies began to sing a hymn to cover the morbid sound.

*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see...*

Above the sound of the rest, John Henry could hear his mother’s voice, so sweet and musical that it seemed to float out over the cemetery, and he felt the poignant beauty of the moment rise up inside him.

“John Henry!” Mattie exclaimed, “Take that hat back off your head! You know you can’t cover yourself ‘til after the service is through. It isn’t proper!”

But John Henry didn’t answer, as he pulled his wool cap onto his sandy hair and down low.

“John Henry!” she started again, but stopped when he turned and gave her one quick look from under the brim of the cap.

“Well, it’s a funeral, isn’t it?” he said, sniffing back unmanly tears. “I reckon I’ve got a right to mourn a little.”

“Oh, honey,” Mattie said, her scolding voice going soft, “so you really do care about Grandpa’s dyin’, after all!”

“I told you I did,” John Henry said, defending himself as he struggled with the sudden emotion. Then he added, “Hey, Mattie? You won’t tell anybody, will you? I mean -- you won’t tell my father that I was cryin’?”



“I won’t tell a soul,” she replied. Then she leaned over and kissed him once on the cheek, a sisterly sign of affection. “It’ll be just our secret always, I promise. No one but me will ever know what a soft heart you really have. Now let’s go on and get to supper. You’re right, I am just starvin’!”

“No, you go on ahead and get started without me. I think I’ll stay around here a little longer.”

“Whatever for? I thought you couldn’t wait for this funeral to get over.”

“I’m just not ready to go yet, that’s all. Save me a plate, all right?”

And as Mattie picked up her skirts and went off with the rest of the mourners, their mood lightened now that the last benediction was spoken, John Henry stepped closer to the graveside. The fresh red earth was mounded over Grandpa Bob, a spray of red fall leaves taking the place of flowers on the grave. Then, with no one but the angels in heaven looking on, John Henry let the tears come. His grandfather may not have been a hero, but John Henry was going to miss him all the same.

~~~~~

Dr. John Stiles Holliday, John Henry’s namesake uncle, was the only doctor in Fayetteville and as such had one of the nicest homes in town: two-stories tall with a row of white columns across the front and eight fireplaces inside, one in every room. To John Henry the house seemed like a mansion, with its glistening floors of Georgia heart pine and lofty ten-foot ceilings, its two front parlors and string of servants quarters out back. And though Uncle John’s home was really just a townhouse that doubled as a medical office, compared to John Henry’s family’s neat little cottage in Griffin, it was elegant.

Now, with the eight fireplaces blazing and the funeral supper laid out on tables in the dining room, the parlor, and the front hall, the house looked fit for a party. Only the black draping that covered the mirrors over the fireplaces and the pictures on the walls showed that the family that lived there was in mourning. While neither Uncle John nor Aunt Permelia were superstitious folk, they still held with the old traditions, and had ordered that all the reflective glass in the house be covered to keep the dearly departed’s soul from looking back into the mortal world -- though John Henry wouldn’t have minded seeing his Grandfather’s ghost smiling back at him from the other side.

While the adults took their funeral supper in the dining room and the parlor, the children were served from the tables in the entry hall and had to seat themselves on the stairs, two cousins to every step. But though the stairway was crowded with Holliday children, they all knew that somebody was missing, and the talk soon turned to Cousin George, Uncle John's oldest son, away at military school in Marietta.

"...best school in the whole state!" George's younger brother Robert said proudly. "My father says it's a real honor to the whole family for George to be goin' there. 'Course George always was a smart one -- like me!" he added with a laugh and a wink. "In fact, I bet ol' George makes Captain of the Cadets real soon. He's sixteen-years old now, you know, plenty old enough to see some service."

"Oh Robert!" cousin Mattie exclaimed, "you don't think the cadets will have to go off to the War, do you? They're just students still..."

"That's true, but I wouldn't be surprised if General Lee called them all up to fight one of these days. You heard about the Battle of Sharpsburg, back in September? They say Bobby Lee lost ten-thousand men on Antietam Creek up in Maryland, almost a quarter of his whole army. He may need all of us boys to go fight the Yanks, soon enough."

"Well I'd go, if they'd let me!" John Henry said fiercely, the War talk bringing out the Irish in him. "I'd whip those Yanks good!"

"Don't be silly, John Henry!" Mattie's younger sister Lucy said with a laugh and a toss of her long dark braids. "You're only eleven-years old, and mighty scrawny. You couldn't even whip Cousin Robert, let alone a Yankee!"

Twelve-year-old Robert Holliday grinned at that. "Don't taunt him, Cousin Lucy. You know John Henry's always ready to make a fight, even if he is little!"

As the two boy cousins closest in age, John Henry and Robert always had a sort of sibling rivalry going on, though they were good friends most of the time. They even favored each other in looks, with the same Irish blue eyes and high Holliday cheekbones, and strangers sometimes mistook them for brothers. Still it irked John Henry that Robert was older by a year and always would be, giving him a superior edge in the circle of cousins.

"I'm ready to take you on, anyhow," John Henry boasted. "I may be younger'n you, Robert, but I bet I could take you in a pistol fight. My Pa says a pistol makes all men look about the same size."

“Now stop it, both of you!” Mattie scolded. “Such talk! I thought you two were best of friends, not enemies.”

“We’re friends, all right,” Robert replied. “It’s just a little friendly competition between cousins, that’s all. So what do you say, John Henry? Shall we make it a real competition?”

“I’m game,” John Henry answered. “What do you have in mind?”

“Just a little tree jumpin’, that’s all.”

“Tree jumpin’?” ten-year old Theresa asked. “What’s that?”

Robert lowered his voice conspiratorially before answering, evidence that tree jumping was not approved of by the adults. “Tree jumpin’ is a game George and I invented before he went off to school. There’s this oak tree outside my bedroom window, and if you stand in the windowsill and jump out far enough, you can land right in the tops of the branches. Like landin’ on a feather bed, if you do it right.”

“And if you do it wrong?” Lucy asked.

“Then you break your neck, no doubt,” Mattie observed, “and land in a heap on the ground. Sounds like a stupid game to me, and I forbid John Henry to participate in it.”

“And who made you my Mammy?” John Henry snapped back. “I swear Mattie Holliday, sometimes you act like an old maid! But I don’t guess I have to be scared of tree jumpin’, just ‘cause you are...” he let his words hang in the air, like a challenge, knowing that the one thing Mattie hated was to be called a coward. For all she was a girl, she had the same unthinking courage of the Holliday men, afraid of nothing.

“I am not scared!”

“Then prove it,” John Henry replied. “I dare you!”

Mattie sat still for a moment, the color rising prettily in her pale cheeks. Then she gave a quick nod of her auburn head. “All right, I will! I’ll beat you both at your stupid tree jumpin’, and I’ll go first, as well!”

“Oh no, Mattie!” Lucy gasped, “you’ll kill yourself for sure!”

But Mattie had already pushed her plate off her lap and was climbing over the other cousins to the top of the stairs, where Robert’s room was the first on the second-floor hall.

Robert’s jumping tree was a good six feet away from the window, though the spreading branches did reach close to the white painted clapboard siding of the house -- almost close

enough to make a jump from the open window possible. But if the jumper didn't leap quite far enough...

"It's a long way down, isn't it?" five-year old Roberta asked as Mattie pulled her skirts up past the hem of her pantalettes and climbed up into the window sill. It was a twenty-foot fall at least onto the hard-packed earth of the side yard where Uncle John kept his wagon and carriage. Mattie hesitated just a moment, then took a deep breath and bravely jumped out into the cold night air.

Lucy and Theresa both screamed at once, then Roberta and baby Catherine started crying, and all John Henry could think was that he was going to Hell for sure with his own cousin's blood on his hands. He'd killed Mattie by daring her to jump out the window, just as much as if he'd pushed her.

"Did she fall?" he asked, his heart racing. "Did she hurt herself?"

"I can't tell," Robert said, "but I didn't hear her hit the ground."

Then, as if sharing the same thought, they both bolted from the room at the same time and went racing down the stairs and out of the house, heading for the side yard.

"Mattie!" John Henry cried, and Robert echoed him, "Mattie, are you all right?"

And to their relief and amazement, they heard an answering sound of laughter coming from under the jumping tree where Mattie was lying in a heap of leaves and broken branches, her skirts up over her head and her drawers shining white in the moonlight.

"I did it!" she said, laughing and crying all at once. "Did you see me do it? I jumped out the window, just like you dared me to!"

But before they could join in her excitement, there were scolding words behind them, as Aunt Permelia's little mulatto housemaid, Sophie, came running out onto the porch.

"Mercy, Miss Mattie! I see you all right, and I'm ashamed to say your cousins seein' you too, with your underpinnin's all open to the night air like that. Where'd your decency go, Missy? And what's all this screamin' and hollerin' going on, anyhow? Shame on y'all! makin' a circus out here and your grampa jest buried this day and not even cold in his grave..."

Sophie had uppity ways for a serving girl, John Henry thought, even if she was descended from the Governor of South Carolina, being the illegitimate daughter of the Governor by one of his favorite slave women. But good blood lines or not, Sophie should have kept her

nosey self out of the cousins' business and he was about to tell her so when another voice spoke from out of the darkness -- one that made John Henry stop cold in his tracks.

"Leave them be, Sophie," Henry Holliday said, as he stepped down into the side yard. "I'll handle this," and Sophie replied with a hasty "Yessir, Mr. Henry, Sir."

Henry Holliday was a commanding presence, standing militarily straight in the moonlight. Even in undress, without his officer's frock coat and with his uniform vest unbuttoned and hanging loose on his illness-gaunt figure, Henry looked every inch the officer he was trained to be, accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed.

"Well, Mattie, are you hurt?"

"No Sir, Uncle Henry," Mattie answered, quickly pulling her skirts down to cover her underthings. "I'm just tousled a little. My petticoats flew up and broke my fall, I guess. We were just playin'. Robert told me about his jumpin' tree, and then John Henry dared me..."

"Did he?" Henry asked. "Well, boys, it seems like we have some talkin' to do. Sophie, you go on and take Miss Mattie back inside and let Dr. Holliday have a look at her, make sure there's nothin' broken. John Henry, you and Robert make yourselves comfortable."

Comfort, however, had little to do with a lecture by Major Holliday. Henry had never been much for conversation, and when it came to chastising his wayward son he tended to be brief, to the point, and painfully blunt.

"What the hell did you boys think you were doin', anyhow?" he asked, as soon as Mattie and the maid were safely out of earshot. "You could have got your cousin killed."

"We didn't make her do it, Uncle Henry," Robert said with an apologetic smile. "It was her idea. We were only bein' gentlemanly, lettin' her go first..."

Henry's sudden anger cut into Robert's excuses. "Damndest pair of gentlemen I ever saw! Lettin' a lady put her life on the line like that! John Henry, tell me a man's duty toward his womenfolk."

John Henry's answer came easily, having been memorized as part of his family training from toddlerhood. "A man's duty is to protect his womenfolk, Sir."

"Yet you dared Mattie to jump from a window?"

"Yessir."

"You're pretty brash and bold with your dares, aren't you, son? Have you ever jumped from that window yourself?"

“No, Sir.”

“Then how did you know it could even be done?”

“Cause Robert said so, Sir,” John Henry explained in his own defense.

“We never really did it, though,” Robert mumbled. “George and I just talked about how fun it would be to try it...”

“Damn if I haven’t raised a fool for a son!” Henry exclaimed. “John Henry, next time you want to make a dare, you better make sure you can beat it yourself first!”

“Yessir,” John Henry nodded.

“Yessir, what?”

“Yessir, I’ll make sure I can beat it myself.”

“All right, then,” his father said, “let’s see you do it.”

“Do what?” John Henry asked, bewildered.

“Let’s see you beat the dare,” Henry said coolly. “I want to see you jump from that window yourself and make it down as good as little Mattie did. ‘Course without all those skirts and petticoats of hers, you’re likely as not to break your neck. Now get up those stairs and get to it. Robert, you can go on inside and start making your apologies to your cousin.”

Robert nodded obediently, then darted into the house as though afraid his uncle would decide to include him in the punishment as well, for punishment it certainly was. Without the thrill of the game, without the excitement of all the cousins watching, jumping from the window seemed like a stupid and dangerous thing to do, indeed.

But Henry had given his command, and John Henry resolutely climbed the stairs and made his way to Robert’s bedroom window. The room was empty now, the rest of the children all gathered around Mattie downstairs, and the only sound John Henry could hear was the loud thumping of his own heart as he climbed up into the open window, balancing his smooth-soled leather boots on the wide window sill, and looked out into the night.

The limbs of the jumping tree were silhouetted in black against the bright mantle of the moonlit sky, and down below in the darkness, his father was waiting for him to prove himself against a dare. But he couldn’t show himself a coward in front of his father. With heart racing, he put one foot out, then took a quick breath the way he had seen Mattie do, and steeled himself to step out into thin air. But just before he jumped, a strong hand grabbed hold of him and pulled him back into the room.

“That’ll do, son,” said Henry Holliday.

“Pa, I thought you were still down there...”

“I followed you up. I don’t want you to get hurt, son. I just want you to learn to think before you speak, and not let the Irish in you get the better of your judgment. You’ve got a tendency to be impetuous, I fear. But God knows, your mother would never forgive me if I ever let anything happen to her boy.” And for a moment, John Henry thought he saw something soft go across his father’s stern face, something warm like the flicker of the oil lamp lighting Robert’s room.

“But I would have jumped, Pa,” he said eagerly, basking in the unexpected warmth in his father’s cool blue eyes, and in his heart he added: *I’d do anything for you, Pa...*

“I know, son. But I hope this particular lesson’s already been learned. Now get on down there and say you’re sorry to your cousin Mattie. And let’s not hear any more about this jumpin’ business, all right?”

“All right,” he said, but hesitated a moment before obeying. “Pa?”

“Yes, son.”

“I just wanted to say...I...” he stammered, unsure of how to put the feeling into words.

“I’m listenin’, John Henry.”

“I’m glad you’re home, Pa.”

And Henry nodded, accepting the welcome.

~~~~~

The easiest part of his punishment was asking for Mattie’s forgiveness, since he didn’t really care whether she forgave him or not. As long as she wasn’t hurt, he didn’t see that any harm had been done. She could rant and rave at him all night if she wanted.

But Mattie wasn’t angry a bit, only flushed with the excitement of her brave feat.

“My mother says I should be ashamed, jumpin’ out a window like a boy! But I think she’s most upset about my skirts comin’ up. Sophie told her you boys saw my underthings -- did you?”

“I don’t know,” John Henry lied, “maybe. I wasn’t thinkin’ about underthings just then.”

The truth was that he had indeed noticed Mattie’s drawers, as she lay in the pile of leaves with her skirts all around her neck. Robert had noticed, too. How could they not? Neither of

them had sisters, so girl's underclothes were something novel to them both. He'd seen the hem of Mattie's pantaloons before, of course, as she pulled her skirts up to ride horseback and as she stood in the window before jumping. But never before this night had he seen all the way up.

"Well, I don't care if you did see," she said with a toss of her auburn hair. "You're just a child, anyhow."

"I don't guess you're so grown up yourself," he shot back, "or you wouldn't have been jumpin' from the window at all."

Mattie clenched her fists and pursed her lips, and John Henry wasn't sure whether she was going to hit him or cry. Then she squared her small shoulders and put her chin up in the air.

"I am still waitin' for your apology, Cousin John Henry. And I'll tell your father if you don't make it good."

She had him there. So he launched into the prettiest words he could find to beg her forgiveness. Better to humiliate himself in front of a girl than to earn his father's displeasure again, and he got down on one knee and bent his head like a true penitent.

"Mattie Holliday, I am sorry for darin' you to jump out of Robert's window -- even if you did take me up on it of your own free will -- and I hope you will forgive me for bein' so ungentlemanly." Then he looked up at her from under his sandy lashes, his blue eyes as full of repentance as he could make them appear to be.

"Get up off the floor, John Henry! You're making a fool of yourself! Of course I'll forgive you, don't I always?" and when he grinned up at her, she smiled reluctantly. "I never saw a boy who could get into so much trouble, or get out of it so easily!"

"That's 'cause I'm so charmin'," he said without a trace of sarcasm. "My mother taught me to be a gentleman. Besides," he added with another grin, "you always did like me special."

And Mattie had to smile herself at that. "I always did," she said fondly, "ever since you were a baby. I guess if I'd had a brother, I'd want him to be just like you. Even if you are trouble most of the time."

"Aw, Mattie! I thought I was your best sweetheart! That's what you always used to call me when we were little, remember?"

"*You* still are little," she teased, reaching up to pat him on the head and tousling his sandy hair. "But I guess you'll always be my best sweetheart, trouble or not."



~~~~~

They all stayed over at Uncle John's house that night, the adults filling the beds and the children sleeping together on pallets on the floor. But in spite of the cramped accommodations, John Henry slept well. He liked being surrounded by his family. He felt safe inside that close circle of cousins and aunts and uncles, and only wished that his three Holliday uncles still off at the war could be with them, too. Uncle Rob, Mattie's father, was still off fighting; as were Aunt Martha's husband Colonel James Johnson and Aunt Rebecca's husband John Jones. In fact, of all the men in the family, only Uncle John Holliday had not gone off to war, choosing instead to serve in the Georgia Home Guard Cavalry. As a doctor and a surgeon, his medical skills would be needed at home should Georgia ever be threatened with direct attack by the Federals.

For as long as he could remember, John Henry had been fascinated by his uncle's medical practice. He loved to spend time in the everyday parlor Uncle John used as a medical office, looking through the collection of medicine bottles in the tall apothecary cabinet and admiring the collection of surgical tools stored neatly near the examining table: saws and lancets, bone forceps, bullet extractors and long-handled surgical probes. His uncle even had a real human skeleton hanging on a metal frame, left over from his school days at the Medical College of Augusta; a gruesome and wonderful sight for a wide-eyed eleven-year-old boy.

The medical office was just off the entry hall, with one door leading to the side yard so that patients could come and go without disturbing the rest of the family, and another door leading to the guest room where surgical patients could stay over a night for observation, and it was there that John Henry would sometimes hide, leaving the door to the office open just a crack so that he could hear Uncle John's conversations with his patients. A boy could learn a lot about life that way, he'd discovered through the years, overhearing everything from headache remedies to tooth pullings -- and sometimes far more private matters. He was eavesdropping, he knew, but he excused himself with the notion that he might someday follow his uncle into the professional field and would need all the knowledge he could glean.

And so it was that on the morning following the funeral, as his father saw to packing up the spring wagon for their trip back home to Griffin and John Henry stole a few free moments listening near the medical office door, he overheard his uncle in intimate conversation with his mother -- and wished that he hadn't heard at all.

“Alice Jane, my dear,” his Uncle John said, in a voice surprisingly tender for a doctor’s office. “My dear, sweet sister-in-law...”

“Please, John, don’t,” John Henry’s mother said, her own lovely voice full of emotion. “Don’t say anything just now. Henry mustn’t see I’ve been cryin’, or he’s sure to suspect somethin’. You must promise me.”

“But he’s my own brother! I don’t know how long I can go on bein’ disloyal to him like this.”

“He’ll find out soon enough, and we’ll deal with it then,” Alice Jane said. “And when the time comes, I’ll tell him myself, in my own way. You must promise me!”

“If only he hadn’t come home just now, and sick as he’s been,” Uncle John said. “I do hate to burden him with the news of this...”

“Then it must remain our secret, dear John. Now kiss me and wish me well, for I’ve a hard road ahead, it seems.”

“You have such strength, my dear! All right, then. I’ll keep my silence awhile longer.”

Then came a brief silence, when his uncle must have given his mother the asked for kiss. And sitting on the floor of the room next door, his head leaning against the doorframe, John Henry felt his heart slowly turn over inside of him. How could Uncle John be so despicable? And how could his perfect mother welcome his uncle’s advances? Oh, if only he hadn’t been listening at all...

Then he heard his own name, and he had to keep on listening.

“And what of the boy?” his uncle said. “What about John Henry?”

“My darling boy...” Alice Jane said on a sigh. “I suppose my little sisters will have to look after him. Margaret and Ella and Helena are livin’ with us now, you know, since our own father passed away. Until they’re married themselves, they can tend to him.”

“He could come here. He’d have a good home here. My boys are like brothers to him already.”

“No, dear John. His father would never let him go, you know that. But perhaps Henry will remarry, give my son a new mother...” Then she began to weep. “Oh, John! It’s leavin’ my little boy that makes this so hard! I don’t think I can bear it!”

“Then we won’t talk of it anymore. God willing, he’ll be grown before the time comes.”

Then there was another long pause that might have been another embrace, and John Henry thought that he would never again hear anything as awful as that intimate silence. But there was more, and worse. For when his uncle spoke again, his voice cooler now, professional again, his words had nothing at all to do with any supposed faithlessness, and John Henry knew he had been rash in judging him.

“You may have years yet, Alice Jane. Consumption is a long illness. And there are spontaneous remissions...”

“Miracles, you mean? Then I’ll pray for a miracle. But you must remember that Henry will not know until I am ready to tell him. It won’t help him to recover from his battle sickness to be worrying about me. And he’ll need all his own strength, soon enough. So, brother to my husband or not, you must be my own doctor first and promise to keep my confidence. And if you do love me as a sister, as you say, you will honor my request, and not tell Henry that I have the consumption.”

Consumption -- John Henry mouthed the word in disbelief. He knew from other overheard diagnoses that consumption was always fatal. But worse than knowing that his mother was dying, was knowing and not being able to tell.

~~~~~

The homeward road from Fayetteville to Griffin led through dense woods and across winding streams that often washed out the low wooden bridges, and there was always the possibility of some adventure along the way. Now and then a deer would leap out of the green darkness and cross the path before them, and Henry would grab at a loaded rifle and try for a quick shot, startling the stillness and leaving a smell of gunpowder in the air. And sometimes, John Henry would imagine that the deer was followed by the quick silent footfalls of Indians, their dark skins hiding them in the darker shadows of the trees. But that was just imagination, he knew, for the Indians who had walked the paths and followed the deer were gone now, driven out by the white men, though their names remained on the countryside: Chattahoochee, Etowa, Kennesaw, Oconee. He liked to let the words linger in his mind like an incantation, bringing the past back to life. And sometimes, he imagined it was Yankees in those shadowy woods, and his father’s shot had been lucky and found its mark in a blue-coat’s heart. The Yanks weren’t nearly as romantic as the Indians, but with the War still dragging on, they were a more likely foe.

But on this long trip, he hadn't the heart to watch for deer or worry about the Yanks. He was weighed down with the awful secret he had just discovered, and all he could think about was the fact that his mother was dying.

"You're quiet today, John Henry," Alice Jane said, looking back to where he sat on a pallet of blankets in the wagon bed. "Aren't you feelin' well?"

And it was all he could do to keep his emotions in check, looking back at her sitting beside his father on the board wagon bed. But he mustn't let on what he had learned, so he shrugged his shoulders under the wool blanket that covered him, keeping him warm in the chilly November air, and said: "I'm fine, Ma."

"Probably just worn out from the visit," his father said, and glanced at his wife. "You're quiet today, too, Alice Jane. Somethin' on your mind?"

"Nothin', dear," she said, and John Henry believed it was the first time he had ever heard his mother tell a lie.

"Then why aren't you singin'?" Henry asked. "You're usually like a lark on these trips. John Henry, has your mama ever told you she could have been an opera singer, if she hadn't got married to me?"

"Yes, Pa," John Henry said, "she told me."

Alice Jane McKey's lovely soprano voice was famous around Griffin, and folks said she could have been an opera diva, if she hadn't married so young. But when handsome Lieutenant Henry Holliday had come calling, fresh from his service in the Mexican War, Alice Jane had fallen head-over-heels and forgotten about everything else. Within just a few months they were married, and by the end of their first year together, Alice Jane was a mother. And though her little Martha Eleanora had lived only a few months, John Henry came along soon after, and Alice Jane had been a devoted mother ever since. She still sang some, though, for weddings and funerals and such, and gave piano lessons to neighbor children. All the McKeys were musical, from Aunt Ella and Aunt Margaret who played piano for Sunday services to Uncle Tom McKey who had gone off to War as a musician in the Griffin Light Guards Band.

"Well," Henry said, "let's hear a song. No point in havin' a wife with a pretty voice if I can't have some entertainment to help me drive."

And as Alice Jane obediently started into the strains of a hymn, John Henry thought he knew why she had chosen this particular one:

*“Abide with me fast falls the eventide!  
The darkness deepens, lord with me abide!  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!*

*Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day.  
Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away.  
Change and decay in all around I see,  
O Thou, who changest not, abide with me...”*

Her voice broke on the words and she started to weep, and John Henry reached out to touch her shoulder as if he could comfort her pain.

“I’m sorry,” she said, reaching a gloved hand to his. “I guess I’m still feelin’ poorly about Grandpa Bob’s passing.”

“I know, Ma,” he said, and meant *I know*. “Pa? Is Uncle John really a good doctor? I mean, does he really know all that much about things?”

“He knows more than most of these country doctors do, since he went to the medical college for his degree. Why do you ask?”

And when he hesitated a moment too long in answering, his mother gave him a questioning look, and he had to turn his eyes away from hers.

“Aw, you know I always liked to watch Uncle John work,” he said, which was true at least, though not really an answer to his father’s question. “In fact, I’ve been thinkin’ about bein’ a doctor myself one day. You know Uncle John let me help when he pulled Littleton Clark’s tooth last time we came to visit?”

“Your mother mentioned something about that.”

And with the subject safely changed away from his mother’s illness and his own ill-mannered eavesdropping, he went on more easily.

“I was thinkin’ that maybe I could go over to Fayetteville next summer when school is out, spend some time in Uncle John’s office. I could assist him again and learn a whole lot...”

“Not next summer, son,” Henry said. “Next summer we’ll be busy movin’.”

“Movin’?” Alice Jane said in surprise. “Movin’ where? What are you talkin’ about, Henry?”

“I’m talkin’ about gettin’ out of Griffin before the Yankees get here. You know Lincoln’s issued an Emancipation Proclamation, freein’ all the slaves in the rebel states? I fear that once the emancipation takes effect come January, things are goin’ to get hot down here in Georgia, and I don’t want my family anywhere near it.”

“But where will we go?” she asked, bewildered. “Everything we have is here; your family in Fayetteville, my family in Griffin. We have my sisters livin’ with us. What will they do? And our baby girl is buried in Griffin! We can’t leave her all alone...”

“We’re goin’ down to south Georgia,” Henry stated, ignoring her protestations, “a little place called Valdosta, and your sisters will just have to come along. I hear the land down there is good for cotton.”

“What land?” Alice Jane said, her voice growing desperate. “We don’t own any land down there! Please, Henry, surely you’re not serious about this...”

But he was serious, and seemingly set upon his new plan.

“We’ll have some land soon enough,” he replied, “once my father’s estate is settled. You know that place of his out by the Harp’s farm? Well, John’s neighbor Colonel Dorsey has made an offer on it, and a good one for these hard times. Once the sale’s done, my brothers and I will split the profit as our inheritance. There ought to be plenty to buy a place down in Valdosta, and some field darkies as well. You’ll see, Alice, it’ll be like a new life for us, and in a few years...”

“In a few years...” she echoed, and John Henry expected to hear her start weeping again, thinking of how few years she might have to share her husband’s dream. But instead she smiled bravely and put her hand on Henry’s arm. “It sounds wonderful, my dear. You’ll have so much to do, so much to think about. Why, I believe we’ll love livin’ out in the country, won’t we John Henry? You’ve always wanted a horse of your own. Now maybe you can have one.”

“Yes, Ma,” he said, and thought that, in her own genteel and ladylike way, his mother was as much of a hero as his father was.