

The Silence of Sorrowful Hours

by April Kutger©

Chapter 2

Ethan stood up and pushed the reeds to either side of him. He had walked along the creek for an hour. He crossed the wide part where there was a small island in the middle, just north of a small town. The current wasn't dangerous in the late summer so he had made it without much effort. He wasn't a good swimmer and didn't look forward to dying from drowning after all he'd been through for the past thirteen months. He still had miles to go before he would find the fork in the creek and then the small cabin set almost on top of it. Now, twenty-five yards back, he had seen the axe mark on a tree, but he heard voices and ducked into the reeds.

He crept toward the cabin, then stopped. He whistled, the multiple-toned sound of a wood thrush. A man and a woman were sitting on the floor of the porch, leaning against the rails, laughing. The man must have seen him. He held the woman's arm and gave her a small nod so she would keep still. He got up and swung himself over the rail. Ethan ducked down.

"It's all right," the man said. "You're at the right place." The tall, slim farmer walked toward the reeds with the friendly but formal bearing of the Quakers he had met in Philadelphia. He put his big hand out toward the cowering fellow in the bush. His strength, when he pulled Ethan forward, made Ethan think twice about taking advantage of his pleasant nature.

“I’m Osborne Hoffmann,” the lanky man said. His smile revealed dimples that creased his cheeks. He had a high forehead, and when he pushed back his sun-lightened, wavy brown hair, he revealed a hairline that formed a “v” shape.

Not meeting his eye, Ethan mumbled his name.

“Come here, brother.” Osborne motioned for Ethan to follow him. When he opened the front door of the cabin, Angelise was standing on the threshold with open arms. Ethan didn’t know what to do, but Angelise grabbed his hands and pulled him to her, giving him a warm embrace. She almost gagged when she caught the rancid odor emanating from his unwashed clothes.

“Welcome to my little home,” she said. “It is your home until you’re on your way again.” She reached her hand to Osborne; he squeezed it lightly, then let it drop.

When Ethan was still in the cabin a week later, Osborne said, “Why is he staying longer than the others we’ve seen through?”

“He wants to get his wife.”

“Yes. But it’s unlikely. And we could get entangled with the law. If we keep a Negro here, people might...”

“He doesn’t want to go. He wants to stay here and try to get her. Maybe send someone else for her. Maybe me.”

“Angelise, you can’t be...”

“Just let him stay a little while longer...”

“Very well. For a little while.”

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Angelise was tired. She was used to taking afternoon naps, but she was exceptionally tired this afternoon. Perhaps it was the days of expectation and, in some ways, the dread she had been feeling since she received Ethan's letter.

At the opposite end of the hall from where she had installed Ethan, she laid on top of a light cotton bed cover. Her mind drifted back to when the Hoffmann farm had become a stop on the Underground Railroad, which eventually brought Ethan to them.

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It was a steaming day; it felt like the weight of water pushed against every movement. A soundless breeze from the west bode a cooler evening and, perhaps, a break in the heat wave. Rushing breathlessly into Osborne's office, Angelise blurted, "I was out riding the old trail south of the creek, and I found an injured Negro wishing to go to Canada. He needs our help."

"Show me where he is," Osborne said without hesitation.

They rode together to the place where the trembling youth was propped up against a tree. He was cradling his useless left arm in his right. It was obvious it was broken; it was bent in the middle of the forearm. "What happened, young man?" Osborne asked.

"I'se broke ma arm. Can't feel ma fingers," the slim boy said, trying to hold back his tears. His amber color, wavy russet hair and hazel eyes put Osborne in mind of

Angelise. She noticed it, too, and was more aware than ever that she could easily be taken for a mulatto if she lived in the South.

“What’s your name?” The boy winced when Osborne ripped the sleeve of his shirt. “And how did you get yourself in this predicament?”

“Name’s Joseph, but dey calls me Joby. Jumped from over dere.” He pointed to a rock jutting out from a slight rise in the earth.

“Trying to have some fun, were you?”

“No, suh,” Joby said sheepishly. He gritted his teeth at Osborne’s probing fingers. Angelise wanted to ease his pain, but didn’t know what to do.

“I think both bones are broken. It will have to be set.”

“Can’t let no slave catcher find me,” Joby said. “I’s in big trouble.”

“We don’t want that either,” Angelise said. Curly wisps of her hair had pulled free from the ribbon attempting to hold her hair at the back of her neck. She removed the ribbon and retied it after pulling all the loose pieces together.

“Suh, please leave me. I’s rather be free dan have two good arms.”

“My manager has set animal bones. Could we bring him out to take a look?”

Joby looked at Angelise with fearful, questioning eyes. “You can trust us,” she said.

“Where did you come from, Joby?” Osborne asked.

“I’s not sayin’.”

“Very well.” Osborne turned and spoke quietly to Angelise. “You stay here. I’ll go for Mr. Engle.”

“Make sure he’s agreeable,” she said with firm look.

“I will. I’ll talk to him. See how he feels in general.”

After Osborne left, Angelise asked Joby if he wanted some water, though she didn’t want to leave him. He shook his head and grimaced in pain. He continued to hold back embarrassing tears. “How do you plan to get all the way to Canada?” she asked.

“I knows how ta get ta da next stop and dey’ll tell me how ta make it from dere.”

“It sounds dangerous,” she whispered. “Where did you come from?”

“Can’t say, ma’am.”

“Very well. I understand. But we’re abolitionists. My mother met Sojourner Truth.”

“Still can’t say, ma’am.”

“If I knew, I would offer to help them. I’d offer to let other runaways stay here.”

“Please don’t press me, ma’am,” Joby said. “I’se not assured your man done gone ta get da law.”

“He would never do that.” She frowned at the boy and sputtered, “You’ll see.”

Some months after they saw Joby on his way with a splint and sling fashioned by Mr. Engle, Osborne sat with Angelise at the kitchen table. Nelson had already gone to bed, when he said, “I met a Negro farmer, Ed Mathews from Pine Hill, when I went to the college library last week.” Osborne was learning what he could about horse breeding.

“He’s working with a Mennonite community to help runaways hide and move on.”

“Where’s Pine Hill?”

“About five miles north out of Gettysburg. The Dobbins’ send men and women and whole families on to him.”

“I’d like to meet him. Could we invite him out here?”

“I don’t know... He’s very busy... and it would be a long way for him to come. The thing is...”

“Maybe I could meet him in Gettysburg like you did,” Angelise said with an edge in her voice. Was he afraid to invite a black man to dinner? Anyway, she hated that Osborne could go places and do things that she was excluded from because of her sex or her age, although she would soon be nineteen.

“Angelise, listen to me.”

“Sorry.”

“Mr. Mathews asked me if we could help him and Basil Biggs...” He stopped and looked into her eyes, holding his breath. It could be dangerous to hide runaways. If they were found, they could be hauled off down South, back to their owners. And the ones who hid them could be charged according to the Fugitive Slave Act.

“What would we have to do?”

“Let runaways stay here, usually only one or two at a time. Probably for only a few days. Feed them, tell them where to go next. Give them provisions for the road.”

“I’d do it,” Angelise said. “But what if people find out and someone comes after them – or us?” She spoke calmly; she wasn’t afraid for herself. “Would we be putting Nelson in danger?”

“There are some things people must do, Angelise,” Osborne said.

That was the end of their discussion. But a week later, Angelise had a proposition for Osborne.

Using a long-handled hook to pull the iron arm of the kettle crane from the fire, Angelise tasted the stew from a wooden spoon. “Ouch,” she said, blowing on her tongue. She set out plates and spoons on the table. Then she added a loaf of bread and a ball of butter. They were eating late because Osborne had been gone all day. She had given Nelson his supper at five o’clock and he had fallen asleep in the wing back chair by the fireplace. The fire was dying, but the lingering warmth was welcomed. Despite the warm spring days, the evenings were still cool and damp.

“You know the old cabin on Plum Run about a mile southeast of here?” Angelise asked.

“That old fishing hut? Is it still standing?” Osborne was working his mashed potatoes into a cone shape in the middle of his plate. “My grandfather built that, but I think it was to get away from my grandmother and their wild children,” Osborne chuckled.

“I can’t imagine Uncle Jonathan was ever a wild child...”

“Oh, yes. Or so my mother told me. It was a story my father...”

“I was thinking I could fix it up for myself.”

“Is it worth it?”

“It’s not completely derelict. I’ve been inside.” Angelise diverted her eyes and fingered a loose strand of hair.

“I’m sure it’s dangerous...”

“It’s not! The floorboards held me. I stepped around the broken glass. There’s an old lamp in there that still has oil in it.”

“It sounds like you’ve done more than test the floorboards,” Osborne said with his strict father expression.

“It’s fun to have a little place to hide.”

“Angelise, you’re too old for playhouses. And you’ve never complained about sitting on a rock to fish.”

“I remember when we used to do that together,” she said with reproach in her voice. With a more plaintive tone, she went on. “I don’t want it for fishing. ... I mean, I could fish right from the porch in a comfortable chair, but I wanted to fix it up as a little house only for me.”

“Why? I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. A place to go to be by myself.”

“You can be alone whenever you want.”

“No, I can’t, not in a way. ... I want a place I can make my own. Fix it the way I want. Have only my things in it. Sleep there, if I want.” She paused. “In the summer.”

“I see.”

“I thought we could fix it up. It needs new window glass, some repair to the pilings, new floorboards, paint...”

“Hold on, Miss Lindstrom. That sounds like building a new house. It probably needs a new roof, too...”

“It does.” Angelise started to giggle. Then she said, “Stop. Don’t make me laugh. We’ll wake Nelson.”

“You could do it,” he said after some thought. “It would take a while...”

“I don’t want anyone to know.”

As if she hadn't spoken, Osborne went on, "I'd have to get lumber cut to order. That would take some time ... and the glass. Paint. But I could get most of what I need in Bonaughtown or Gettysburg."

"This is for me, Osborne, not you."

"What do you mean?"

"You're saying, 'I will do this. I can get that...'"

"It's only because I'm going to fix it up for you."

With wide eyes, she smiled and said, "I was hoping we could have it finished by summer."

"Two months? I don't know. We're still sowing seed."

"I would move the bee crates to be closer to the cabin, too, and have my own garden. ... I'd grow strawberries and..."

"It sounds like you want to set up your own little household over there."

"I want my own place. Mrs. Engle's been running your house since long before I came here. Romy follows her around like a puppy..."

"This will give you a way to run away from your life."

"That's what I *do* want! Osborne, this is not my life. In your house. On your farm. In the middle of nowhere!"

"Do you think this is my life?" he growled. "Sometimes I..."

"This is your life! Everything here is yours!"

"You know it's not what I wanted. It's not what you wanted, but we..."

"Stop it!" Angelise put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot.

"Don't lose your composure..."

“I will! You want me to be like everyone else. Like Mrs. Engle, for heaven’s sake! I know you do!”

“Please, Angelise, we’re talking about the cabin...”

“You have no idea what it’s like for me.” Her face was red and it looked like she was about to cry. Her hair was falling out of her cap.

“We’ve talked about his too many times. Be quiet and listen to me.”

“You see? You’re telling me what to do again. ‘Be quiet and listen.’ Mrs. Engle tells me. Mr. Engle does. ‘You didn’t get the clod out of Nancy’s left rear hoof.’ Just this morning! It was the size of a pea!”

Whispering and pointing to Nelson readjusting himself in the chair, Osborne said, “Let’s go over there tomorrow. See what’s needed.” He walked to the fireplace and picked up a small dish and fingered the coins in it. “I hope it’s not too muddy out there.”

Angelise, speaking more seriously now, said, “I was thinking that we could use the cabin to hide runaways.”

“Oh, now I see...”

“No, Osborne, that’s not the reason...”

“I think it’s a grand scheme. It would be safer for everyone. Them and us.”

“And my bees might be an additional hindrance to anyone snooping around.”

Angelise laughed; Osborne didn’t exactly smile, but he stopped frowning. Nelson made a noise and sat up straight in his chair. Angelise whispered, “You’d better take him to his bed.”

When Osborne was climbing the stairs with Nelson in his arms, she said, “Take off his dirty clothes before you put him in bed.” Osborne nodded, revealing a look of contentment with his small family.

Angelise knew Osborne’s proposal to help runaways was the right thing to do, particularly after getting the terrified Joby’s arm set and sending him on his way. But every plan put off her dream to return to St. Pierre. At least this one could be a great adventure.