

Born to be Brothers chronicles the exploits of private soldiers, Kentlock Falconer of the Confederate Army, and Rudolphus Zoll, a Union soldier. Their stories are played out against the backdrop of a vicious struggle known as the American Civil War.

Born to Be Brothers, An American Civil War Epic

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Born to be Brothers



An American Civil War Epic

**By
T. Wayne Babb**

CHAPTER 1

The receding red ball that was a late April sun balanced atop the low rolling hills. Its rays filled the open areas of the valley with a soft vermilion glow that caused the shadows to take on a deep purple hue. The tree frogs and crickets, silent during the heat of the day, began to serenade all who would listen to their shrill evening song. The only beings to hear their harsh refrain were a mule and the boy who toiled at the plow behind it.

Kentlock Falconer watched the horse flies buzzing around the rump of the coal-black mule. The animal's tail swished in a vain attempt to discourage the pests and, as the tail swung from side-to-side, Kent caught an occasional unsightly glimpse of its rectum. Lord, how he hated that mule.

The blade of the plow bit deep into the rich black dirt of Georgia and it was pleasingly cool under Kent's bare feet. He watched the blade throw the damp clods to each side of the furrow and thought back over the springs he had tilled this ground. Although the work was hard, the memories were good.

The mule reached the end of the furrow and stopped, its nose pressed against the rail fence that divided the field from the Peavine Church cemetery. Kent tugged firmly on the right guideline and yelled, "Gee, Satan! Gee around there!"

The mule did not respond.

"Gee, you no-count, flop-eared, raggedy-ass worthless bag of bones! Get your black ass around there! *GEE!*"

Kent's ear-rending demands reverberated off the surrounding hills, causing the tree frogs and crickets to momentarily quit their incessant singing. Satan looked back at his angry master, lifted his tail, and dropped a large glob of manure on the newly plowed ground. Kent recoiled as the aroma drifted up to him. "Come on now, Satan," he pleaded in a low voice. "Gee; please, Gee," he begged.

He tugged one more time on the right guideline. The mule relented to the boy's imploring and, giving Kent one last disdainful glance, slowly turned and headed in the opposite direction. Gawd! How he hated that mule.

"Kent! Finish up that row and lets get on up to the house," the older man bellowed. "Your Mama's prob'ly got supper on the table. Hurry up now."

Zebulon Falconer stood on the crest of the low knoll that lay adjacent to the field his son was plowing. He had been there to hear the verbal abuse the boy had lavished upon the mule and his chest swelled with pride. "Only nineteen years old," he thought, "and can cuss a mule as good as any skinner in Walker County."

Kent took the harness off the mule and leaned the plow against the trunk of a large live oak that stood between the edge of the field and the sluggish waters of Chickamauga Creek. Taking the bit in Satan's mouth, he headed up the hill where his father stood silhouetted against the pink sky.

"How'd it go with the stump clearing over at the Brotherton place," Kent asked as he reached the crest of the hill.

"Goin' slow," his father replied. "But we should be done in a few days. Then I'll be able to get back over here and help you finish up the plowin'. But it's been worth every back breakin' minute. Sure gonna be nice when George brings Jim and Tom over this fall to help out with the harvestin'."

The tired pair started up the dusty dirt road with Satan following at Kent's insistence. Before long, the sun disappeared behind Lookout Mountain to plunge the valley into semi-darkness, causing them to quicken their pace in order to get home before total darkness set in.

Although almost twenty years separated their ages, their physical appearance was remarkably similar. Both were lanky and moved with long, measured strides, kicking up a tiny cloud of dust around the calves of their legs. A thick shock of wheat-yellow, unruly hair accented Kent's long, angular face. Zeb's hair was equally blond and disheveled, but the passage of time had thinned it considerably. Man and boy had gray-green eyes set wide and separated by long straight noses. Colorless homespun clothing hung loosely from their wiry frames and their feet were bare.

As they walked they exchanged chitchat, but soon the subject turned to one that had been the talk of the valley for the past four months--secession. Finally, Kent asked, "What do *you* think's gonna happen now that we done seceded ourselves outta the Union, Pa?

I've heard that the Yankees ain't gonna stand for it--might even come on down here and try to make us join back up. What to you think?"

"Hell, I don't know, Son," the older Falconer replied. "Mister Lincoln sure does want to keep all the states tied together and Jeff Davis is just as hard headed about the states havin' the right to do what they wanna do. The planters I've talked to see it the same way old Jeff does and they're backin' him all the way. They know if we go back in the Union, they might have to give up their darkies and there ain't no way they're gonna do that," Zeb said as they walked into the dark barn and began taking the yoke off Satan.

"Well, if the Yankees want us back in and we won't go back in," Kent reasoned as he hung up the yoke, "then I guess we'll just square off and have us a good fight."

"They might--we won't," Zeb responded. "It don't matter to me if we're in the Union or not. I ain't got darkies. All I got is old Satan, and goin' back in the Union ain't gonna make me lose him. So let 'em fight--I'll watch."

"But, Pa! What about them Yankees tellin' us what we can and can't do," Kent protested.

"What about it? I don't like it, but I ain't gonna kill somebody to keep 'em from doin' it," Zeb said calmly. "Now that's enough talk about this. Your Ma's probably got supper done and she's waitin'."

As predicted, the food was on the table when they came through the kitchen door. "Faith! Bring the young 'uns and lets eat before it's cold," Zeb yelled as he seated himself at the head of the table. Kent climbed onto the bench along the side.

The three junior Falconers came scampering into the kitchen, laughing and giggling. A statuesque woman who had been a striking beauty followed them. The moment she entered the room, it was obvious that Faith Falconer was in complete command of this household. "Kenneth, Kelly, Samantha! Sit down! Hurry up, now," she commanded and the children obeyed without question.

Faith brushed a stray wisp of blond hair from her forehead as her cold blue eyes swept the table in admiration of her handiwork. The Falconer family was poor in material possessions but, thanks to Faith's efforts, they ate well.

An oval platter filled with slices of fried ham decorated the center of the table. The platter was surrounded by a bowl of grease gravy, a fresh mess of collard greens, buttered mashed potatoes, and a plate of fried okra battered in corn meal. At each end of the long table, within easy reach of Faith and her husband, sat a pitcher of buttermilk flanked by steaming hot biscuits and a crock of fresh butter. Four-year-old Samantha extended a small, pudgy hand for one of the biscuits, but got a swat on the wrist for her trouble. "Say the blessin', Zeb," Faith said, clasping her hands on the table and bowing her head.

The rest of the Falconers followed suit and Zeb, in his most solemn voice, began the familiar prayer. "Lord bless this food that we are about to partake and grant that it nourish our bodies and keep us whole. Make me a fit father and husband that I may provide food for the mouths of my family. In Jesus' name we pray....." And then he stopped.

The children knew that to lift their eyes before Zeb's "Amen" would bring down the wrath of their mother, so during the long pause that followed, the family kept their heads dutifully bowed. Finally, Zeb drew a deep breath and continued. ".....and one more thing, Lord. If Mister Lincoln decides to make us come back in the Union, there's sure to be one hellava war. Lord, don't let that war touch my family. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

When Zeb raised his head, Samantha reached for the biscuits again and received another swat on her wrist. "Not 'till your Pa gets his," Faith admonished. She picked up the platter of ham and had it passed to the other end of the table where Zeb sat, the king of his humble castle.

"You shouldn't mention such scary things as war at the supper table, Zeb. You'll scare the living daylights outta the young 'uns," Faith scolded as she dipped a mound of mashed potatoes onto her plate.

"It's not just scary talk, Faith. It's comin'. And when it comes, they'll mash us like steppin' on a cow patty. Pass the okra."

"Zebulon Falconer! Such talk!" Faith glowered at her husband while she gulped at her glass of buttermilk. Her tongue flicked off the thin white line of liquid from her upper lip when she removed

the glass. "Let's talk about something else. War is such an unpleasant thing to talk about."

The subject was dropped, for when Faith Falconer made a suggestion, it could usually be interpreted as a command. The meal was completed in silence and when it was over, Kent and his father took their places in front of the fireplace. Although the days were pleasingly warm, the evenings needed a fire to keep the chill off. While Zeb busied himself lighting the fire, Faith cleaned the kitchen and hustled the smaller children off to bed.

With the fire crackling in the fireplace, Zeb rocked peacefully in his high-back rocker, puffing reflectively on his pipe while Kent sat on the floor by his side. Soon, the clatter of dishes died away in the kitchen, the chattering of the children was gone, and Faith joined her men by the fire.

She sat in a cane-bottomed chair behind Zeb and, picking up her mending basket, addressed Kent. "Got a copy of the *Times Herald* today, Son. You feel like readin'?" She rocked gently while she placed a knee patch on one of the children's trousers and waited for an answer.

Zeb could not read or write and Faith did so very poorly, but Kent had received enough schooling to read fairly well. He enjoyed the activity, especially when he had the opportunity to read to his mother and father.

"Yesssem, I suppose I could read a few lines. Where's it at?" Faith rose from her chair and retrieved the neatly folded newspaper from the shelf at the other side of the room. As always, Kent began at the very top of the very first page.

**"The Chattanooga Times-Herald
The Voice of the Mid-South
Wednesday, April 13th, 1861"**

When he finished the date, he turned to his parents in anticipation of the encouragement he knew would come. "You're awful smart, Son," his mother said. "Now go ahead and read to me and your Pa."

Kent spread the yellow newsprint across his folded legs and, squinting in the poor light given off by the fireplace, read the bold black headline.

**"FORT SUMTER FIRED UPON
BY CONFEDERATE TROOPS"**

"Where's Fort Sumter, Pa," Kent asked, looking up from the paper.

"Don't know," Zeb replied, taking a long pull from his pipe. "It'll probably tell in there somewhere; you just go ahead with the readin', Son."

Kent went to the column directly under the oversized letters he had just read and, once again, began to read aloud.

"CHARLSTON, SOUTH CAROLINA (H.M. Murdock reporting): On the morning of April 12th, 1861 at 4:30 A.M., the Fort Johnson battery of the Third South Carolina Artillery Regiment, under the command of Colonel Pierre G. T. Beauregard, opened fire on the Federal garrison at Fort Sumter located in Charleston Harbor. As has been reported by this columnist in the past, the Federal troops commanded by Major Robert Anderson have occupied the stronghold since the secession from the Union of the sovereign state of South Carolina on December 20th past. Constant urging by both the political establishment and the military authorities to abandon the fortress has gone unheeded by Major Anderson and the Federal Government.

"It has been common knowledge among the elite of Charleston society for the past few days that the bombardment was imminent. As early as three o'clock this morning, the citizens of this fair city began to arrive at the waterfront to observe the rout of the Yankees. Many of the ladies brought along covered dishes of food and a festive mood prevailed throughout the early and mid-morning hours. It is now 10:30 in the evening and the last of the spectators have long since departed. But the shelling relentlessly continues.

"It is obvious that the bombardment will ultimately be a success. No mortal man could withstand the intensity of the shelling that has

ravaged Fort Sumter. The invaders will be driven from Confederate soil, but when they have gone, others will surely return.

"It is the opinion of this reporter that the Federal Government will not allow this incident to go unavenged. The citizens of the sovereign states of South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas must prepare to defend, if necessary to the death, our beloved Confederacy. Our numbers are few and the Northern hoard will come in numbers to rival the grains of sand on a sunny beach. Hear me countrymen! Prepare yourselves for war! If we hesitate, if we procrastinate, the menace to the North will surely wash over us to bury our young nation while it yet lies an infant in the cradle."

Kent allowed the paper to slip to the bare boards of the floor. "There was a lot of big words that I didn't understand," he said, "but I think I know what Mister Murdock was tryin' to say. Did what he said mean that the po' ass state of Georgia is gonna go to war against the whole Gawddamn United States?"

Faith's face blushed deep red as she dropped her needlework to her lap and slammed the front legs of her chair to the floor. "Kentlock Falconer! Watch your tongue! I just want you to remember....."

"Hush, Faith." Zeb's voice was firm but not overbearing. "This is men's talk. I know you can't abide cussin', but it happens sometimes when men talk. If you don't want to listen, maybe you'd like to go in the kitchen and mix me and Kent up a toddy."

Faith Falconer was a strong influence in this house, but she knew when to press an issue and when not to press an issue. So she rose indignantly from her chair and made a stately exit toward the kitchen to prepare two toddies for her men.

Zeb continued to rock with an easy rhythm while he puffed steadily on his pipe. "No, Son. That don't mean that the po' ass state of Georgia gonna go to war against the Yankees. What it does mean is that Georgia is gonna band together with all them other po' as states and *then* go to war against the Yankees."

Faith swept back into the room carrying a wooden tray with two steaming mugs resting in its center. Naturally, Zeb was presented the tray first and, after he had selected the mug he wanted, the tray

was passed to Kent. "Hope it's spiced right," Faith fretted aloud while she waited for approval.

Zeb took a long pull on his mug, made a face, and then smiled at his wife. "It's just like always, Faith. Sweetened just right and heated up real good. How you like it, Son?"

Kent had never drunk anything stronger than the hard cider his mother put up every fall. Being allowed to share a toddy with his father was a big step. He took a swig of the brew, shuddered at the strong taste, then said, "It's all right, Pa. But I think this 'un will be plenty for me tonight."

Faith settled herself on her chair and returned to her sewing. Kent took another sip of the foul liquid then frowned up at his father. "How Georgia gonna fight a war when it ain't got no army?"

Zeb winked at his son and said, "South Carolina didn't have no army either. But you seen it in the paper there; they gonna run them Yankees right outta that fort. If they try to come down here and take over Georgia, you'll see yourself an army quick enough."

"'Spose so, Pa," Kent slurred, his head a bit light. They sat silently, the three senior Falconers, before the embers of the dying fire. When the silence was finally broken, it was Faith who spoke. "I don't think we'll ever see any Yankees. They could never come this far south—not all the way to Georgia! Virginia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee is settin' between here and there and when the Yanks start stompin' around on them folks back yards, they gonna fight like the dickens. There's a lot of good Southern ground between here and where the Yankees are."

On that note of optimism, Kent downed the remainder of his toddy and stumbled off toward his bed in the attic. No, the Yankees would never reach Georgia, but if they did, they'd get a licking the likes of which they'd never seen. He was sure of it!

CHAPTER 2

He pulled the ill-fitting straw hat lower over his burning eyes to block out the late evening sun. Its rays beat mercilessly down upon his body, causing rivulets of perspiration to cascade down his aching torso. To take his mind off his discomfort, he began to hum along to the mournful song his companions were singing as they walked. The tune stuck in his parched throat.

Behind him lay the partially cleared field he had toiled in since sunrise, felling giant white pines and digging up their useless stumps. Ahead lay a meager meal of fatback, watercress, and corn fritters washed down by weak tea made with thrice-used leaves. There would be another night of fitful sleep on the husk-stuffed pallets where he and the other bucks had slept countless other nights. His dreams would be of fine food, an occasional sip of whiskey, lusty wenches, and sweet freedom—the dreams of a slave.

His name was Mule Head, a name given him because of the unusual oblong shape of his skull. He hated the name and often longed for a more suitable one like those of his friends: Silky, Blue, Domino, Midnight, Tiger-Eye—anything but Mule Head. But no matter how intensely he detested the name, Mule Head it would always be. Massa Kell said so.

Massa Kell was Mule Head's God. Massa Kell had allowed his mammy to be impregnated by one of the breeding studs; Massa Kell had allowed him to be born; Massa Kell had given him his name; Massa Kell had allowed him to reach maturity. He clothed him, fed him, and housed him. When he was good, Massa Kell allowed him to stud a wench; when he was bad, Massa Kell had the whip laid hard on his back. He lived and would die at the whim of Massa Joe Ben Kell and, when he did die, Mule Head was sure Massa Kell would have the final say as to whether he went to Haven or Hell. But he didn't feel sorry for himself. In fact the only emotion he was capable of was hate for Massa Joe Ben Kell.

They were near the big house now and Mule Head could make out the swarms of darkies milling around the veranda, attending the needs of three white folks seated around the circular table. There

was Joe Ben Kell, his son McIntosh, and a young woman Mule Head had not seen before. He was close enough to see the tall, frosty green glasses they sipped from. The scene reminded him of the burning dryness in his throat.

As the work gang moved past the big house, Mule Head craned his head to the left in an attempt to hold the scene on the veranda in his view. The heavy club caught him just behind the left ear, causing his head to snap back to the right and his already wobbly legs to buckle. His face slammed into the powdery dirt of the road, triggering a small cloud of dust around his head.

“What you gawkin’ at, Nigger? You lookin’ at that white woman up there on the porch, ain’t you!” Mule Head pushed hard to turn over and face his assailant, but before he could complete the move, the club slammed down hard into the small of his back. He felt the sound start low in his throat and he fought to keep it from passing his swollen, cracked lips. It did no good. The curdling, sick sound of pain tumbled out and he slammed back into the dirt. He lay face down for a long moment, the dust filling his mouth and nostrils with each labored breath, waiting for the next blow to fall. “Get up, Nigger! You get up and look at me!”

Mule Head wanted nothing more than to stand. From somewhere deep within, he mustered strength he did not know he possessed and pushed himself onto his hands and knees. He was in that vulnerable position when the remainder of his strength abandoned him. He spoke in a low voice toward the overseer’s feet. “Can’t get up, Massa Charles. Just can’t do it.”

He saw the dust crusted boot go back then flash forward in a long, low arc. It hit with a sickening thud in his lower abdomen. This time he didn’t cry out. The bile in his throat and mouth would not allow it. He was back in the choking dust when he heard the overseer speak again. “Domino! Sampson! Pick that no-count nigger up. I still got some talkin’ to do to him.”

Mule Head felt the iron grasp of Sampson and the gentle, reassuring hands of his friend Domino grasp his arms and he was hauled to his feet. He tried to look the overseer in the eye, but could not lift his head quite high enough. “Don’t hit me no more, Massa Charles. Old Mule Head, he don’t mean nothin’. Just lookin’ at the

pretty green glass Massa Joe Ben drinkin' from. Weren't lookin' at no white gal, Massa Charles. Swear to God!"

"Don't lie to me, Nigger! I seen you. I seen the way you oglin' Miss Mae. And I know what you was thinkin'. You just achin' to get your filthy black hands on her pretty white skin. You know what thoughts like that'll get you, Nigger? It'll get your black ass killed, that's what it'll get you."

"What's goin' on here, Charles? What're you doin' beatin' up on this man?" Mule Head managed to lift his throbbing head high enough to look across the overseer's shoulder in the direction of the voice. Joe Ben Kell, tall, erect, and immaculately dressed in a white suit, walked briskly toward where they stood. "I don't cotton to my hired help mistreatin' my property. Whuppin' up on my niggers or mules without a good reason is worse than pissin' in my well."

"Had good reason, Massa Joe Ben. Sure did. Caught this no-count nigger gapin' at Miss Mae. Could just tell he was havin' evil thoughts. Knowed you wouldn't approve, Massa. Knowed it'd make you madder'n hell if you knowed what old Mule Head thinkin'. Made *me* maddern' hell. So I whomped him. Knowed that's what you'd want me to do, Massa Joe Ben, so I done it."

"You done good, Charles. Give a nigger an inch, and he'll take a mile. Let old Mule Head get away with anything, next thing you know, you got every buck on the place thinkin' he can top a white woman any time he wants to. Can't have people sayin' Joe Ben Kell got uppity niggers that ain't got no respect for white folks. Can't let Pine Haven Plantation get that kind of reputation. Gonna have to whup him."

Mule Head's heart leapt into his throat and he felt sick to his stomach. He had felt the bite of the whip many times, but a Pine Haven whipping was something one did not become accustomed to. He didn't think he could live through another one. "Ain't true, Massa Kell. Mule Head know better'n even think about a white woman. Massa Charles, he wrong. Please don't...."

The overseer's knee landed squarely in Mule Head's groin, cutting off his plea in mid-sentence. "You callin' me a liar, Nigger?" Charles snarled through clinched teeth as he drew his knee back for another assault.

"Hold it, Charles," Joe Ben grunted. "We don't need no more of that. You go makin' mush outta Mule Head's balls, he ain't gonna be able to make me no more little niggers. The whip won't harm his privates none, but it'll sure teach him not to look at any more white women. Now bring him on up to the well house and let's get it over with."

"You heard Massa Joe Ben," Charles barked at the work gang. "Get this uppity nigger up to the well house. Gonna show you what happens when bucks start getting' ideas about white gals."

A woeful buzz of concern rippled through the group as they moved up the grassy hill toward the big house and the well house beyond. Mule Head tried to move under his own power, but faltered after only a few steps. Now, he was flanked by Sampson and Domino who half drug, half carried him to his punishment. "Ain't gonna hurt all that bad, Mule Head," Domino whispered soothingly into his friend's ear. "You gonna be alright."

"Shut up, Nigger," Sampson snapped from the other side of Mule Head. "It gonna hurt. Gonna hurt like a som' bitch. But don't you cry, Boy. Don't let that white bastard see you cry." Mule Head nodded his silent acknowledgement.

"Hey, Pa! You gotta whup that nigger," McIntosh called gleefully from the veranda.

"Don't want to, Son," Joe Ben replied as he led the band past the veranda, "but got to. You know old Mule Head. Awful stubborn. Got that mean streak in him, too. And now Charles done caught him havin' lustful thoughts about Miss Mae."

The younger Kell leaped onto the lawn in front of his father, blocking his line of march. The group came to a dawdling halt. "You mean to tell me you caught a nigger lustin' after my fiancée' and all you gonna do is whup him? He's gotta die, Pa! I want him skinned alive! Kill him, Pa! *KILL HIM!*"

"Now don't go getting' excited, Boy. He didn't touch the girl, he just thought about it. Can't kill a good nigger for that. He's young and strong and works good most of the time. No, I ain't gonna kill him just for lookin' and thinkin'. Now he ever *touch* a white gal, I'll boil him alive in oil—and you can start the fire."

"But, Pa...." McIntosh whined as Joe Ben brushed him aside and continued toward the well house. Realizing his father would not

be swayed, McIntosh returned to the veranda where his fiancée waited. "Ever see a nigger get whupped before," he asked excitedly.

The young girl tossed her head from side to side, causing her long black ringlets to brush against her rosy cheeks. "Pa never let me at home," she replied breathlessly. "Sure would like to though. Think your Pa would care?" Her dark green eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Naw—he won't care. Just a nigger. Come on, or it'll be over before we get there," he said, grasping the girl's slender arm and guiding her down the steps.

By the time they reached the well house, Mule Head's hands had been bound behind his back and Charles was tossing a rope across a limb on the towering pine that stood beside the well house. One end of the rope was tied to Mule Head's bonds before Charles gave the word to hoist away. The work gang grasped the rope and began to pull. Mule Head's arms came slowly up behind his back until there was a loud pop and a scream as the upper arms left their sockets. Then his body rose slowly skyward until his feet were six inches off the ground.

"Cut off his clothes," Charles barked to Sampson as he tossed his hunting knife, butt first, toward the giant slave. Sampson snapped the knife from mid-air, then advanced on the tragic figure dangling from the end of the rope.

Mule Head's arms were stretched grotesquely behind his back, causing his body to jack-knife forward, his face to point to the ground. Sampson gathered a wad of shirt material in his paw and pulled the unfortunate Mule Head closer. As he began to rip and tear at the clothing with the knife, he spoke softly into Mule Head's kinky hair. "Hush your whimperin', Nigger. It'll be over soon enough and you can do all the squallin' you want to back at the shanty. That white slut over there just can't wait to hear you holler and beg. Don't you holler and beg. Don't you give that bitch the satisfaction."

Mule Head had not noticed the presence of the young lady who was the crux of his present predicament. Now he managed to lift his head enough to find her in the crowd. Something in her eyes made a mixture of humiliation, embarrassment, and revulsion ripple through the length of his body. He felt the cold blade of the knife on his

stomach as Sampson grasped the waistband of his trousers and began to slice them from his body.

McIntosh stood impatiently with his arm around Mae's waist, his hand resting lightly on her well-shaped buttocks. He wished that black bastard Sampson would hurry with the disrobing so the whipping could begin. He had witnessed many such beatings and he loved the sensations they always induced in him. He saw the blade flash in Sampson's hand, then the washed-out material slip down Mule Head's dangling legs, gathering in a wad around his ankles. While Sampson struggled to get the trousers past Mule Head's bare feet, McIntosh sensed the blood rushing to his head, causing his temples to throb.

Mae flinched when McIntosh's hand slid lower on her hip as Mule Head's trousers fell from his loins. The sight of the naked buck was exquisite. She knew her face was flush and everyone must know what she was thinking. She did not care.

"Get the whup outta the well house," Charles ordered Sampson, "and lay fifteen good ones on him." Sampson moved silently toward the well house to fetch the cursed strip of plaited leather. He wanted to cry. Mule Head was his friend—with the exception of Domino, his only friend. Yet he dared not lighten his strokes. He tried that once, just after his arrival at Pine Haven. Massa Joe Ben had had him whipped in place of the man he was supposed to whip. Since then, he had never swung light—and he wouldn't swing light for Mule Head.

Sampson stepped from the well house with the long black whip coiled menacingly in his paw. He looked neither left nor right, but walked directly to a position behind the hapless Mule Head. Without pausing, his arm came forward, and the whip followed in a wide arch.

A blinding pain flashed from the juncture of Mule Head's neck and shoulder diagonally across his back to just above his buttocks. His body jerked forward, the weight tearing at his shoulder sockets, then swung slowly back to meet the next blow. It landed almost on top of the first ugly welt, splitting the skin and bringing an almost inaudible whimper from Mule Head. Sampson's arm came forward a third time, the whip cut deeper, and blood began to ooze. Pain

blotted all thought from Mule Head's foggy mind except for Sampson's whispered order: "Don't give that bitch the satisfaction."

Willpower alone allowed Mule Head to remain silent through most of the beating. But when the whip slammed into the bloody mass of his back for the tenth time, an eerie scream pierced the still air. He could no longer feel the bite of the whip. It was all pain now, his entire body saturated with it. Pure, exquisite pain demanding expression. He lost control. Again and again the rasping screech ripped itself from his vocal cords until, thankfully, unconsciousness washed over him. The last stroke fell on a limp, unknowing Mule head—and then it was over.

When Charles barked "Fifteen!", Sampson's arm fell limp, his head drooped, and he took in great gulps of air through flared nostrils. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed the tragic figure swinging gently from the end of the taut rope and he suddenly felt sick to his stomach. For a brief instant, the thought crossed his mind to turn the whip on Massa Joe Ben and Massa Charles. But the thought was gone as quickly as it came. He knew to do so would be futile and would bring him certain death. So he stood despondently, hating himself for what he had done and hating his white masters for making him do it.

"Cut him down," Charles said to Sampson, "and haul him to his shanty. I want him up and ready to work by mornin'."

Then he turned to the work gang, pacing as he talked. "I want the rest 'o you boys to take a good look at Old Mule Head here. Want you to remember real good. What you see here is what comes of niggers that lust after a white woman and then get uppity about it. Ain't needin' no uppity niggers 'round here. Now get yourselves movin' on down to the shanties and be smart about it."

The near-lifeless form crumpled to the ground when the rope was cut. Without a sound, the work gang gathered the mutilated body and tattered clothing that had covered it and moved solemnly toward the long row of squat shanties that lined the track on the other side of the big house. Only Sampson remained behind to return the knife to Charles and replace the blood-clotted whip to its peg.

When he finished, the white members of the party were just turning to head back to the veranda and their waiting juleps.

Just so happen to be Mule Head that gave ‘em the excuse. Coulda been any one o’ you.”

Mule Head gave a low moan and pulled his head back onto the pallet. As consciousness returned to him, the searing pain in his back and the almost unbearable ache in his upper arms also returned. He knew this routine well. He had participated many times, both as minister and recipient. He knew that while he was unconscious, his shoulders had been popped back into their sockets and his back had been washed with salty water then coated with a healing ointment. He would not sleep this night and tomorrow would be the longest day of his life. He would suffer greatly, but he would not die. He would wish it many times, but he knew death would not relieve him. He would live to see the end of the day.

These were the thoughts that filled Mule Head’s mind while he gathered the strength to roll onto his side and the courage to open his eyes. He managed both tasks with a great deal of difficulty, then managed to lift his head enough to survey his surroundings. He recognized the dim interior of the cabin he called home with its earthen floor and the randomly scattered pallets upon it. A semicircle of brown feet surrounded him, their toes kneading the loose dirt. He tried to look up at the faces that belonged to the feet, but the effort was too much. He dropped his head back to the pallet and spoke for the first time. “You here, Sampson?” His voice was a raspy whisper.

“I here, Mule Head,” Sampson answered as he waddled on his knees to a point where Mule Head could more easily see him. Mule Head opened his eyes again to see the perspiration beaded belly of his friend. “How bad is it,” he asked, knowing the answer before he asked the question.

“Ain’t gonna lie to you, Mule Head. It bad—maybe as bad as I ever seen. You gonna wish you dead a hundred times before the sun go down tomorrow.”

Mule Head grunted a one-syllable acknowledgement then rested before trying again. “I don’t ever want to go through that again. Don’t think I could stand it. If it ever happen again, I want you to kill me, Sampson. When they give you that knife to cut my clothes off, you just bury that knife right up to the hilt in my gut. Won’t hurt

but a minute and then it'll be over. Promise me you'll do that, Sampson. Promise."

Sampson hesitated a long moment, studying the hands that had delivered such devastation on his friend's body. When he answered, there was an audible tremble in his husky voice. "You know I can't do that, Mule Head. It would be worser'n killin' Massa Joe Ben's stud bull. He'd have me skinned alive and drawn and quartered. And you know he would, Mule Head."

Mule Head knew his friend spoke the truth. To do what he had asked would mean certain death for Sampson. But that didn't change the fact that he could never face another beating. "You right, Sampson. You killin' me would be like takin' a wad o' money outta Massa Joe Ben's pocket. So that just leave me two choices—either I gotta run or I gotta kill Massa Joe Ben."

The gravity of Mule Head's words fell hard on the group and a stunned silence filled the stuffy cabin. They refused to believe what they had heard. Domino was the first to regain his composure. "You don't know what you're sayin', Mule Head. Ain't nobody ever run from Pine Haven and made it. And even if you made it, where you gonna go? Ain't no white folk in these parts gonna help you. And *kill* Massa Joe Ben? That beatin' musta made mush outta your brain, Boy."

Mule Head had slumped back to the pallet, wishing he had never shared his thoughts. But Sampson was on his feet at the middle of the semicircle taking in the group with a steely stare. "Well, I don't know about the rest o' you, but I'm thinkin' what Mule Head say make some sense. Most everybody here felt the whup at one time or the other and most of them times it was for somethin' you didn't deserve a whuppin' for. You got them whuppins because some white man enjoyed seein' you get 'em. It ain't gonna happen to me no more. I'm with Mule Head. But I don't think we ought to just pick up and run. I think we ought to kill all the white folk on the place and then run."

The words coming from Mule Head had been the blithering of a poor pain-crazed soul, but coming from Sampson, the words gained credence. If Sampson said it could be done, then it must be so. "All we gotta do is wait for the right time," Sampson continued. "We got all the weapons we could want; the axe, the rope, the machete.

They's three overseers and Massa Joe Ben and Massa McIntosh—five of them against the twenty of us in this shanty. If we kill 'em all, it might take weeks before any white folk find 'em. We could be a long ways north before anybody ever know we're gone."

A low hum of conversation broke out as Sampson's voice died away and the whites of eyes rolling in the sockets of black heads filled the room. Could it be done? Could the madness that Sampson and Mule Head spoke really come to pass? Could they escape the hell of Pine Haven and reach freedom to the north? They had heard stories of a paradise up north where there were no slaves, where a man could work for wages to feed himself and his kin, and white folk treated black folk just fine. But to kill white men here and then trek over the hundreds of miles without being caught.....

Before they had a chance to weigh the odds and come to the obvious conclusion, Sampson spoke again. "It *can* be done," he implored. "Believe me when I tell you it can be done. Just do what I tell you. Wait for the right time then hit 'em hard and show no mercy. The right time may be a long time comin', or it may be tomorrow, but 'till it come, we gotta act just like we always have. Don't give 'em any reason to think anything is different. And don't let anything that's been said here be resaid outside this shanty—ever! The man that does is dead. I'll see to it myself."

And they knew he would. Like it or not, they were members of a conspiracy and to rebel against it would be folly.

Sampson stepped forward and the middle of the semi-circle parted, allowing him to pass. He covered the length of the cabin, then bent over the candle and, pursing his lips, extinguished the flame. He turned to the almost total darkness of the center of the cabin and spoke for the last time. "Go to bed. Tomorrow, act like nothin's happened. And remember this: we gonna get away from this place and anybody that betrays us dies."

No one dared offer a rebuttal as the conspirators fumbled their way toward their respective pallets. Soon the cabin was completely quiet and Mule Head heard the steady breathing of sleep as, one after the other, the men fell into the arms of Morpheus. Lying on his side, he peered out the cabin door at the big house with its warmly lit windows and tried to envision what was happening behind its immaculate white walls. He occupied his mind in this fashion for

almost an hour then whispered into the darkness, "Sampson, you awake?"

"I awake, Mule Head," Sampson answered in his harsh whisper. "What you want?"

"Can we do it? Can we get away?"

There was a long pause before Sampson answered. "No," he replied. "But it better to die runnin' than die sittin' here doin' nothin'."

Mule head grunted then rolled onto his stomach and wished sleep would overcome his aching body.

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