

But try as she might, Maggie couldn't unsee that butterfly.



Preacher had run out of Poplar Bluff and never slowed through Perryville. A dog caught him just outside Hannibal. Beating the hound off with a heavy branch, he'd limped free, though days later he could barely crawl. The pain had swelled, and his strength had ebbed.

He'd avoided plantations till now. Old Merlin had told him plantations were perfect—slaves helped slaves, and the masters couldn't tell one from the other. But most slaves weren't tall enough to look their master's prize stallion in the eye, and Preacher could. And some slaves would turn you in for an extra portion of bacon fat. He'd found that out the hard way the night he ran. He'd stuffed food scraps into a feedbag as he had taken to doing several times a week. The next step was to snatch the last few scraps from the master's ancient hound. The hound never minded—it ate too well and liked its sleep. But that particular night, Old Ned had seen him. The man had nodded friendly-like and started walking away—before Old Ned's mother appeared and struck her son with a stick.

“He'll tell the master for bacon,” she'd told Preacher. “Hell, he'd tell just out of spite. You go on now. Get!”

Seeing the look in Old Ned's eyes, Preacher left the scraps and ran. He ran for six days.

He'd been able to eat here and there, doing some hunting but more stealing from gardens. Hadn't ate much since that dog bit him. Last night he had crept into the plantation, dug up a potato, and devoured it dirt and all. The scent of honeysuckle had promised a sweet treat, but he found it too much effort to eat. So, he'd hidden in this bush, hoping the bit of food and rest would be enough to keep him going.

He woke to a sound.

"Snatch it off careful," said a boy's voice, innocent and unaware of life's burden. "Now bite round the end, but not all the way. See? Like this."

"And that drop's the honey?" said another boy, seemingly younger still and full of wonder.

A movement caught Preacher's eye, long and black and sliding through the grass toward his bad leg.

"That's the honey."

Preacher crept his hand into position. Saying a quick prayer, he grabbed the serpent farther down the body than he'd wanted, but close enough it couldn't bite him. That dog had outsmarted him, but no damned snake would do the same.

"I thought honey came from bees."

The reptile thrashed about, rattling the bush until two little heads popped through. "What you doing, mister?" asked the older boy, his eyes wide.

Preacher showed him the black snake. "Looks like I'm saving your ass."

"Shoot. That's just a king snake...he can't hurt nothing."

Preacher held it out to the boy, who pulled back. He then twisted around and threw it as far as he could.

“What’s wrong with your leg?”

“Hound dog got it.”

The little one finally spoke. “Booker had a hound dog.”

“Buster! Tweed!” called a far-off voice. “You youngins hear me?”

Both boys looked over their shoulders.

“Don’t tell on me,” Preacher whispered. “We men take care of each other.”

The older boy seemed affronted at the accusation. “We won’t tell!”

“Where you boys at? Buster!” The woman’s voice sounded annoyed but with an anxious tone creeping in.

“Our secret from the womenfolk.” Preacher tried to smile.

Then the younger boy burst out, “Mammy!”

There was nothing Preacher could do but lie there and wait. When that third head poked through the flowering branches, the woman’s eyes grew bigger than the boys’ had been.

“His leg is hurt,” the older one told her.

She didn’t reply.

She looked old enough and then some to be the boy’s mammy. Still had muscle, and she was a reasonable size as far as women went, with a faded purple scarf covering her hair. Her eyes were full of some emotion, but Preacher couldn’t guess exactly what. He didn’t know if he was safe or dead where he lay.

