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## *Trouble in Warrensburg*

By the time Hollis Ingraham left the schoolyard he was moving at a dead run. He knew it would be dark by the time he got home. He hadn't meant to stay so late, but now the golden autumn sun had dipped behind the rim of the Adirondack Mountains. The blazing archway of the sugar maples that lined his path became a darkening tunnel. The houses along his route faded into the evening, then sprang back to life one by one, as lanterns were lit and placed in the windows to welcome their families home. Hollis felt that he could see into those homes. In his mind he saw the mothers, the fathers, the children, dinners on the tables. In his heart he could hear the laughter, feel the love. He ached with longing and ran faster.

This evening of late September bit through his too-small, threadbare coat. He tried to pull it around his body, but it insisted on flapping out behind him like wings, as though willing him to fly. His lungs were on fire, but still he couldn't slow down. There was the abandoned tannery, its ghostly smokestacks and bark piles eerily outlined against the night sky. "Burhans, Gray & Co.," it said on the side of the building. Even though it was too dark to actually read it, he recited it anyway, like a ritual. He always did when he passed. "Burhans, Gray & Co." As always, he pronounced it "coe" rather than "company" as it was intended. And as always, he shuddered and looked away, hastening his pace even more. There was a stench of death at the tannery, and it chased him.

Down the hill, across the bridge, feet pounding, heart pounding, lungs screaming. Hollis didn't slow his pace until he reached the postage-stamp yard in front of the shabby River Street cottage that was home to him and his mother. It was utterly dark. Ma wasn't home yet. Panting, he passed through the gap in the rickety fence where the gate had long ago rotted off its hinges. He slipped down the narrow alley between his house and its neighboring twin. Climbing the back steps and skipping the broken one, he hesitated a moment on the back stoop. Then he made himself enter the pitchblack kitchen.

His practiced hand reached for the iron matchbox that hung on the wall behind the cold enamel stove. He took one of the few remaining matches there and struck it briskly on the raspy plaster of the wall. It sprang to life, and that small circle of brightness led him to the kerosene lantern centered on the tidy square of oilcloth on the rickety kitchen table. In a moment he had the lantern glowing and he shook out the match, satisfied that at least Ma wouldn't have to come home to a dark house. He knew she'd been out making the rounds, asking for work. Every day since the woolen mill shut down, she had gone up Elm Street and down Main Street, stopping at each house, shop and hotel, sometimes finding someone who needed her to do some household chores for a small wage. It

was never enough.

Hollis shivered. The unheated house seemed colder than the outdoors. Ma would be chilled when she got here. He picked up the coal hod, remembering only then that there was no more coal, no more money to buy it and no more credit to beg it. Grabbing the lamp, he stepped back out into the yard, surveying the area for something that would burn. He loaded the hod with bounty fallen from the giant old maple behind the house. Then, in a decisive moment, he grabbed the spongy board that had rotted off the steps. There! It might as well serve some purpose.

Hollis opened the firebox of the stove and carefully arranged his finds from smallest to largest. He opened the stove's damper, lit the second match and held it under the leaves. Gently blowing, he coaxed the glowing leaves into flame, then the twigs. At last the larger sticks caught, and Hollis broke up the rotten board and added a few pieces to the fire. He knew there would be heat for a little while, at least until he could crawl under the covers of his bed. The wood was nearly used up when Ma finally came in, but the kitchen was almost warm. Usually Hollis could tell how her day had gone by reading her face. Tonight her features were a mask, and she kept her eyes lowered.

"How did it go?" he asked finally.

Ma fidgeted with the corner of her apron.

"Did you find any work?"

Ma cleared her throat and busied herself taking a pan of johnnycake out of the cupboard.

"Ma?"

"Yes," she said slowly.

"That's great!" Hollis exclaimed excitedly. "Where?"

Ma didn't answer. When she did speak, it wasn't really an answer, it was one of those maddening things that grownups say when they don't want to tell you something bad. "Hollis, you're getting to be such a young man."

"What does that have to do with it?" he asked, alarm causing his voice to rise.

"I have to talk to you."

Hollis waited anxiously while she chose the exact words she needed.

"You know that things have been difficult lately."

He nodded. Since the mill laid her off her eyes had had worry wrinkles around them all the time. She had even allowed the church ladies to give them some food and clothing.

"It's got so I can't hold my head up when I walk down the street.

As hard as I try, the store bill just keeps going up and up. It's a wonder they even give us credit anymore. And the rent is three months past due. It's a good thing the landlord was a friend of your father or we would have been turned out on the street long ago."

Hollis knew all that. Why was Ma going over all this again?

Why was she babbling on and on?

"As it is, Mr. Watson says we have to be out of the house by the end of the month." Her voice cracked as she finished and she struggled

to regain her composure.

Embarrassed, Hollis poured words into the silence. "But you said you've found work now, right? So we can stay, right?" Ma couldn't meet his gaze. "This is the hardest part," she said, staring at her shoes. She grasped both of his hands in hers, wanting to force him to understand. "I should have prepared you for this, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell you before now." She took a deep breath then and looked him straight in the eye. "We have to be separated for awhile. I've got work at the hotel. I'm going to live in the maid's room in the attic there. Mrs. Emerson will let me have free room and board as part of my pay for doing cooking, cleaning and ironing at the hotel. Without rent to pay, I can put most of my pay toward our bills. And you—"

"I can help!" Hollis exclaimed. "I can quit school and get a job."

"I won't let you quit school," Ma said firmly.

"You never let me help. You always want to keep me tied up in your apron strings!"

"You need your education."

"But, Ma—"

"No 'buts', Hollis. I simply can't afford to keep you with me. I've sent a letter to your father's people, and word came just yesterday that they will keep you till I get on my feet again. You're to go to Thurman and live with your Grandma and Grandpa Ingraham. You'll be picked up tomorrow morning, early," Ma said, scarcely able to control her voice.

"Tomorrow!" Hollis gasped in dismay. "You can't just send me off to live with strangers!"

"Strangers! They're not strangers; they're your grandparents!"

Hollis, please understand. I've made the best decision I could. I've got to make things right. The best way you can help me now is to go live with them in Thurman, work hard in school and be a good boy." Ma rumbled his hair. She pulled the crisp white tea towel off the johnnycake and cut him a large piece. "Here," she said, handing it to him as though that would make everything better, "eat this. I'm sorry. There's nothing else. No butter, even." She stretched out her hands in a helpless gesture.

Nothing else. He knew it was true. Nothing else to eat, nothing else to do. He wanted to scream. Ashamed of his emotions, he bolted from the kitchen to bury himself under the coverlet on his bed, pulling the pillow over his head. He pounded his lumpy mattress with both fists, hot tears of rage and frustration streaming down his face, and silent sobs wracking his body. He couldn't let Ma hear him.

If only his father were here. It seemed foolish to think of that.

He hardly remembered his father. There was just a faint recollection of golden sunlight and warm laughter, of strong hands lifting him high in the air, of the rich smell of pine sawdust. He should be here. The unfairness of it all released another flood of silent tears, tears that floated Hollis into a troubled, dream-torn sleep.

In his dream he was back at the tannery, only it wasn't Burhans, Gray & Co. It was another tannery, one he had never seen, only

heard about. There was something awful here, and he felt deep dread. He wanted to run away, but a terrible force pulled him in, drawing him down between the seemingly endless rows of bark piles toward the one place he most didn't want to go, to the barkgrinding shed. Now he heard a voice calling to him. "Hollis!" The voice drew him forward.

In his dream he heard the voice again. "Hollis, help me!" It was his father's voice. He knew that, even though he couldn't remember his father's voice. He must go to him, but his feet were leaden. He saw a hand—his father's hand—outstretched toward him, reaching from the shadows of the shed. "Hollis!" Hollis tried to reach out to the hand, but his arms wouldn't move. He saw then that they were bound to his sides mummy-fashion, wrapped snugly with long white starched apron ties. Frantically he inched his way closer to the hand until he could wrap his fingers around it. Grasping the hand as hard as he could, he began to pull. With horror he felt it squish and crumble in his grip as he wrenched it from the sleeve in the blackness of the shed. He couldn't breathe.

"Hollis!" This time it was Ma's voice.

"Ma! Help!" he gasped.

"Hollis, wake up!" It was his mother again, and his mother's strong hand was gently shaking his shoulder. He opened his eyes and saw her beside him, her face illuminated in the glow of the kerosene lamp. Relief washed over him.

"Ma?" he said.

"It's time to get up, sleepyhead," she said with forced cheerfulness. Then she asked in surprise, "Why, what have you got in your hand?"

With a start Hollis looked down at his clenched fist. Crumbly yellow mush was oozing from it.

"Is that what you did with the johnnycake I gave you last night?" Ma laughed.

Still drowsily unconvinced that it was really cornbread and not the rotting hand of his father, he blinked his eyes, trying to sift dream from reality.

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"Never mind that now," Ma said. "You have to get ready to leave."

Leave! A thousand words welled up in his throat. He wanted to beg her to let him stay. He wanted to tell her he wouldn't be any trouble, that he would stay in school, sleep on the floor of her little attic room, do anything, if he just wouldn't have to go away. Instead he buried the feelings deep inside himself and just watched her as she quickly packed the few things he owned into a small cloth flour sack. "Come on," she said with a note of urgency in her voice, "grab your hat and boots and let's get down to the kitchen so we won't keep them waiting."

Down in the kitchen Hollis sat by the window, watching for the wagon that was to pick him up and take him away from everything that he knew and loved. The dark streets of the small Adirondack

town were already alive with heavy wagons rumbling toward the markets with loads of produce, hay, and firewood.

Ma was carving off another hunk of johnnycake and packing it in Hollis' dinner pail. "This will help tide you over until you get to your grandma's good cooking." She smiled at him gently. "You remember your grandma, don't you?"

He nodded, struggling to conjure up a picture of her—a somber, dark-haired, black-dressed woman riding stiffly on a farm wagon. He remembered how she touched his cheek with a surprisingly gentle hand that smelled of lye soap and smiled at him with bright blue eyes.

Ma continued, "Of course, they haven't been to see us in years—only once since your father..." Her voice trailed off. She never said it. Never said, "died." It was as though by not saying it, all the pain and loss had never happened. Hollis never said it either. "Why not?" he asked. "Why didn't they come?"

Ma hesitated. "They thought...they blamed...oh, I don't know. It was all so long ago. They said—well, things were said, and it seemed like there was no turning back."

Just then Hollis spotted a pair of lanterns approaching the house and slowing to a halt. He could barely make out the form of the large wagon from which they hung.

"Ma, they're here!" he exclaimed, fear cracking his voice.

"Come quickly, son," Ma said anxiously, grabbing his hand, snatching up the sack and dinner pail and heading out the kitchen door.