***Touching Stars* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
1865

(*Note: Like all the Shenandoah Album novels, Touching Stars is mostly a contemporary story, but there is a story in the past that connects to the one in the present. For fun, here's how* that *one begins.*)

I was a fat baby. Aunt Cora, who lives with her husband Ebenezer and his brother Ralph in a cabin close to the river's edge, once told me that I was so big, I like to have killed my mother getting born.

Aunt Cora has a way of putting things that leaves no doubts. "You was so fat, your skin folded up like some old pumpkin left in the field too long to make a pie. I could take a whole handful of it. . ." She extended her fingers like claws, and milked the air in front of me. "And you never even knowed you'd been pinched!"

When she said this she nodded with almost every word, the loose skin under her chin flapping in demonstration. Cora isn't really my aunt. She and Uncle Eb have worked for my father's family since long before my parents were married. Now she's an old woman, or at least she seems old to me. If the truth were told, since the war began nobody looks young anymore. When I glimpse my own narrow face in the still waters of the stock pond, my arms as thin as cornstalks poking out of shirts Aunt Cora patches for me, I glimpse the old man I will be someday.

I'm not fat anymore, but I remained round-faced and doughy almost until the day my father mounted the roan gelding he raised from a colt and rode off to join the Muhlenberg Rifles of the 10th Virginia Infantry. I wasn't yet eleven, and despite feeling frightened, I stood at my mother's side, the Virginia sun prickling my scalp. I remember the way the air smelled, the way the dust from the gelding's hooves became a fine, punishing grit I couldn't scrub away for weeks. The way my mother's mouth tightened into a long hard line, as straight as the blade of an axe.

My father packed his own supplies, but at that last moment Ma fingered the quilt he had chosen to bring with him. She told him the pattern was called Devil's Puzzle, and she thought his choice of it appropriate. This terrible war belonged to the devil, and it remained a puzzle to her that any good man would choose to fight in it.

She would not kiss my father goodbye. He was already dead to her, she said. She would not kiss a corpse.

I tried not to cry. I knew better than to cheer. I remember tears and pride being locked inside me, fighting a battle that ended in defeat for both. When the dust settled and hoofbeats were overshadowed by the squawking of one of Pa's prize roosters, I remember Ma telling Uncle Eb to find the bird and wring his neck. We would have

chicken and dumplings for supper while we still could. We did, too, but nobody was hungry.

Not long after that we were hungry almost all the time.

They say now that Lee has surrendered, the war is over, even though some soldiers are still fighting. I wonder if saying this makes it true? When I was younger I searched for a way to make the war end. I prayed, but nothing came of it. I wished on stars and on the first toad I saw in the spring until the day we learned my father had died trying to take Culp's Hill at Gettysburg. Then I stopped wishing and praying, because if those things hadn't saved my father, why would they save anybody else?

They sure didn't save Abraham Lincoln. A lot of unionists have been praying for their president since the war began. But early in April somebody killed him anyway. When it happened, the only thing I could think of was that maybe the man who pulled that trigger was like me. He'd stopped knowing what was real and what wasn't, what to believe and what to do. And whether anything he did would make a difference anyway.

Aunt Cora says that when men are intent on killing each other, the Lord above has to look away to keep from striking all of them dead. I think this time he didn't look away. Because even the men who are still living, the men who take the back roads of our county to avoid detection, men who stop by our farmhouse and beg for food or a place to sleep, look like dead men. I know because I have seen men laid out in their coffins, and if they have any look at all, they have that same sad surprise on their faces. Men in their coffins have copper pennies weighting their eyelids, but the eyes of the men who ask us for help are as blank and cold as copper. Uncle Eb says they have all seen hell and wonder why they're now walking through a land of cool, clear water and sweet green leaves.

Our land was not so cool or green last year when Sheridan and his men came through, burning houses and barns, destroying fields and crops and whatever animals the Union army hadn't already stole from Valley farms. Ralph, who helps tend our fields, told me Sheridan's men burned anything that might serve as food for the Confederate army. I guess it didn't matter that those of us left at home need food, as well. Uncle Eb and Ralph saw smoke in the distance and guessed what was about to happen. We had prepared, and we hid what we could, leaving just enough so the invaders would feel they had accomplished their mission.

But no soldier crossed the river to burn our house or barn. A month earlier the barn had nearly burned to the ground anyway, the fire set by a pipe still smoldering in the hand of a deserter who had fallen asleep in our hay loft. Lucky for us a heavy rain spared us the worse. Luckier still when Sheridan's men, intent on destroying everything that could be shipped elsewhere, left us mostly alone. Too far off the Valley Pike and the Back Road, on a shallow river with so many bends and twists that ships avoid it, we were of little interest.

Now I find it curious that Sheridan's generous and unanticipated gift of the food we had expected him to steal or burn, might have destroyed us anyway. Because our wealth, measured in grains of corn and the peeps of hatchling chicks, has brought brigades of strangers to our door.

Mostly they are men mustered out of service, on their way to somewhere and worried about what they will find. Saddest of all are the wounded and shattered who hardly remember their names. Like others throughout the countryside, my mother takes them in, feeding and sheltering and nursing whenever she can.

We are still poor, even if we have a little food. In return for whatever we do or give, Ma accepts help in our fields, wood chopped to keep us warm in winter, coins, coffee, tobacco or sugar to hide away. A man with nothing to offer sleeps beneath the half-charred roof of our barn. A man with something to give fares a little better, although he never receives encouragement. Ma is still young, even if she has aged five years for every year my father has been gone. Men look at her with an expression I have learned to recognize, but those who move too close find themselves staring down the barrels of Uncle Eb's shotgun.

Until April when Blackjack came to us.