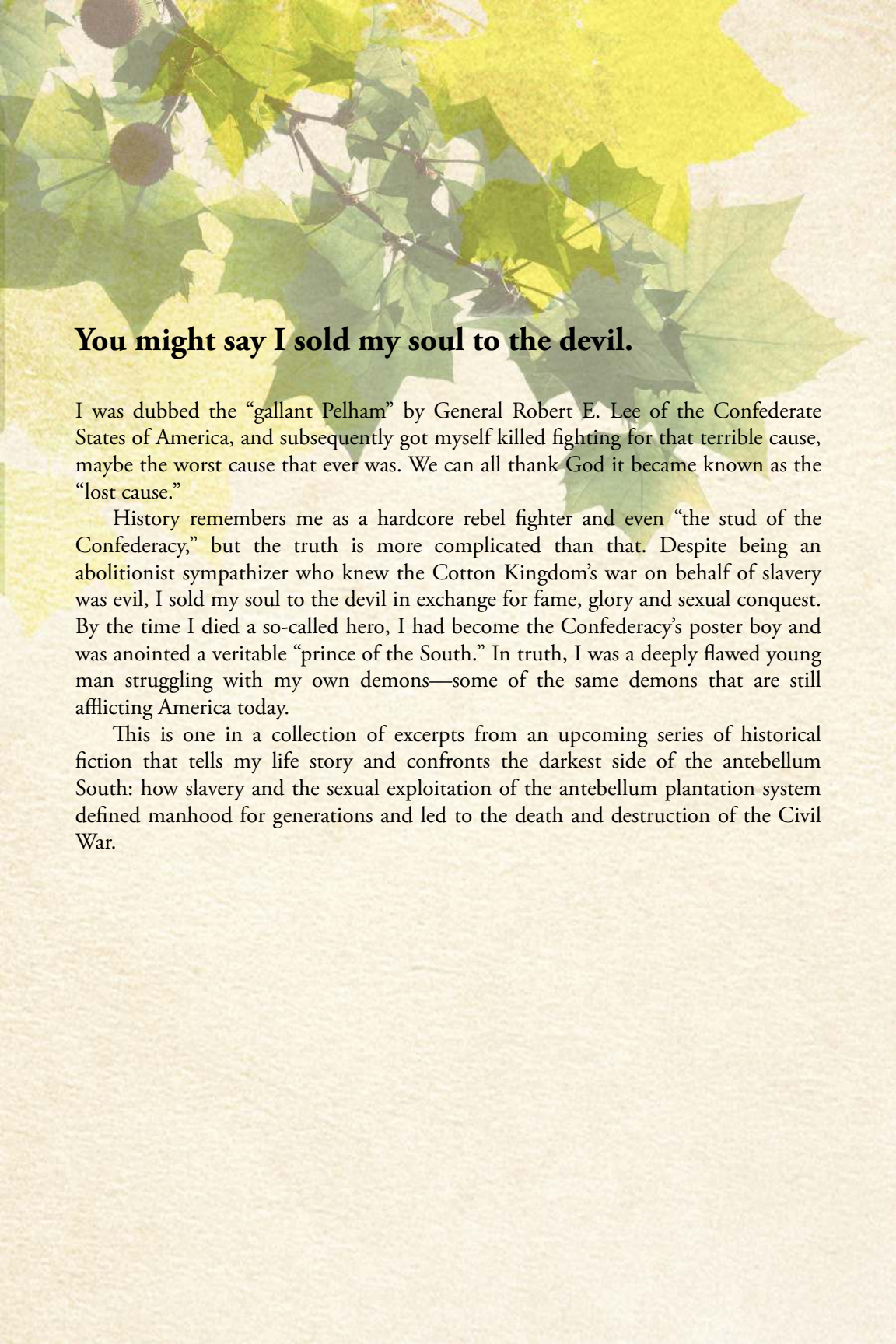




# Saying Goodbye to Aryanna





## **You might say I sold my soul to the devil.**

I was dubbed the “gallant Pelham” by General Robert E. Lee of the Confederate States of America, and subsequently got myself killed fighting for that terrible cause, maybe the worst cause that ever was. We can all thank God it became known as the “lost cause.”

History remembers me as a hardcore rebel fighter and even “the stud of the Confederacy,” but the truth is more complicated than that. Despite being an abolitionist sympathizer who knew the Cotton Kingdom’s war on behalf of slavery was evil, I sold my soul to the devil in exchange for fame, glory and sexual conquest. By the time I died a so-called hero, I had become the Confederacy’s poster boy and was anointed a veritable “prince of the South.” In truth, I was a deeply flawed young man struggling with my own demons—some of the same demons that are still afflicting America today.

This is one in a collection of excerpts from an upcoming series of historical fiction that tells my life story and confronts the darkest side of the antebellum South: how slavery and the sexual exploitation of the antebellum plantation system defined manhood for generations and led to the death and destruction of the Civil War.



**“When I was about twelve years old, I got some more cruel lessons about slavery, and what was what on that farm where I lived.”**

Mama was sitting in her favorite chair with a big ball of yarn in her lap, along with what looked to be the beginnings of a sweater for one of John's younger siblings.

“Sit down, John,” she said, motioning at the divan.

John slid back against the pillows, his legs sticking straight out like one of his sister Betty's dolls. Sitting across from Mama wasn't nearly as intimidating as sitting in front of Doctor Pelham's desk, but that divan seemed like it would swallow him up.

“Why do you sometimes refer to Mammy Katie as your aunt?” she asked him, her tone more serious than usual.

Of all the things John thought he might hear, that wasn't one of them. “I only call her that sometimes,” he replied. “Mostly I still call her Mammy.”

Mama looked disappointed, as though his explanation was insufficient.

“Aryanna calls her Aunt Katie,” he added with a shrug. “That's what everyone calls her.”

“Everyone?” Mama raised her eyebrows. “Philip and Andrew don't call her that. No one else in the family does either.”

Was he really the only one in the family who sometimes called her Aunt Katie? “I guess I meant...all the *Negroes*,” he said.

“That's hardly everyone. And you're not a Negro.”

John began to flush. “Why does it matter what I call her?”

“I don't want you talking like a Negro. It's not just what you call Mammy Katie. I've noticed you picking up all sorts of Negro expressions lately.”

“What Negro expressions?”

His mama looked a little flustered. “It's not just the way you talk,” she said, shaking her head, seeming annoyed. “You spend too much time with Aryanna. I always thought you'd grow out of it, but you haven't.”

John's bafflement was growing; it had never occurred to him that he was doing anything wrong by playing with Aryanna. “I thought you liked her,” he said.

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"I do like her; I like her very much. But that's not the point. You and Aryanna aren't little children anymore. You're growing up, and it doesn't look right." She gave a slight sigh. "John, you're getting too old to be fraternizing with a Negro girl."

He wasn't sure what *fraternizing* meant, but it sounded scary. He remembered what Doctor Pelham had told him about the races having to be separate, but for some reason he never thought it would apply to Aryanna and himself. "But she's a mulatto," he said, his voice cracking. "You always said she was a beautiful mulatto girl."

"She is beautiful. She's very beautiful, but it doesn't matter. Aryanna is a Negro, no matter what she looks like." His mother had never sounded more serious. "You can never be anything but master and slave. Do you understand?"

John wasn't ready to nod his agreement. "Why are mulattoes considered black if they're half-white?" he asked, his voice cracking again. "Why are they still treated like Negroes?"

"That's how things are. I know how fond you are of Aryanna—I really do—but when you're older, you'll understand."

John was almost in tears. "I still don't see how we're fraternizing."

His mama shook her head, looking as if she'd never been more disappointed in him. "I forbid you from playing with Aryanna," she said. "You're not to speak with her except for the simplest, cordial greeting."

John was beside himself. How had this all happened? Where did it come from? "But she won't understand," he said, unable to stop his tears. "What will I tell her?"

"Tell her the truth. She'll understand. If she doesn't, Mammy Katie or one of the other Negroes will explain it to her. Aryanna has to learn about the world too. We're not doing her a favor by pretending things are different than they are."

John couldn't stop crying.

Mama leaned forward. "If you'd like, I can have Mammy tell her."

John shook his head. "I'll tell her," he managed to say.

"Your brothers understand that Negroes are different. You're so smart about everything else; I don't see why you have such a hard time grasping what comes naturally to them."



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Even if there were no such thing as slavery, telling Aryanna goodbye would have been terrible. But now that he understood the way of things, it made it even worse. Maybe she was a mulatto who lived out in the quarters, but as long as he was her friend, did everything she did, and went everywhere she went, she didn't seem quite so condemned to her fate. But once he stopped fraternizing with her, or whatever his mother called it, she would be nothing but another Negro on the farm, doomed to a life of bondage. He wasn't just telling her goodbye but as good as branding her as his property, then and there.

John managed to avoid Aryanna for almost a week, but she finally came to the kitchen door—right when he was sitting in his favorite chair with nowhere to hide—and asked Mammy Katie where he was, if he was sick or something.

"He's right here," Mammy said, turning around to John, who pretended to be engrossed in one of his schoolbooks. "Masar John, your friend Aryanna's come looking for you."

John got up and walked over to where he could see Aryanna's face through one of the panes, hardly recognizable in the dimming light. He yanked the door open so fast that Aryanna gave a start. "Let's go down to the pond," he said.

He pushed past her and bounded down the porch steps. "What's the matter?" she called, chasing him across the yard. "Where have you been?"

"Nowhere," he called back to her, glancing over his shoulder. "Just here."

John wasn't sure why he wanted to go down by the pond, to their favorite spot under the sycamore, but he did. Given how late it was and how the daylight was fading, he cut through one of the cornfields rather than following the usual roundabout path through the woods. He kept running, maybe faster than he'd ever run, a part of him hoping to get away from Aryanna and what he had to tell her.

It was fall and the corn was ripe, the stalks having turned a faded gold, and the ears hanging in heavy clusters ready for picking. The stalks were so tall—more than twice John's height—that in the twilight it felt like a secret passage through a dark, never-ending forest.

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"Where are you going?" Aryanna hollered, having fallen farther behind. "And don't say nowhere 'cause I don't like it in here." She rubbed her arm. "The stalks are sharp."

John stopped and waited for her. "It's a shortcut down to the pond," he said when she was in earshot.

Aryanna gave him a skeptical look. "You're acting mighty peculiar, John Pelham."

The corn stalks finally ended, and John and Aryanna came out into the last rays of the sunset. It was just as he'd hoped; they were standing right where the path started down the hill, the highest branches of the big sycamore spread out in a gray, looming silhouette.

When they reached their usual spot, John sat down and started rubbing a twig on the rocks. Aryanna sat down beside him, but he avoided looking at her, staring over at the windmill and up into the tree instead. The sycamore's tired fall leaves were so still that it was hard to imagine them ever rustling in a breeze.

"What's wrong?" Aryanna asked. "Why'd you bring me out here?" She folded her arms in front of her. "I'm already chilly."

John still couldn't bring himself to tell her; it turned out that being down there at the pond in their favorite spot only made it worse. But it was getting dark and he had no choice; they might never find their way back up the path if he waited any longer, and he'd heard too many of Mammy's stories about the wild animals that came out at night.

He turned to her but just as quickly glanced away, looking out over the pond as if it were any other day. "We're not supposed to play together anymore," he finally said, feeling awfully childish for using the word *play*. "We're not supposed to see each other or have anything to do with each other."

"Why not?"

John was too ashamed to look at her; how could he betray her that way? His knees were scrunched up to his chest, and he was grinding his twig back and forth between his feet. The usually pleasant creaking of the windmill was just loud enough to prod him sadistically, unmercifully; there must have been more strength to Cane Creek than he had ever realized. "Because you're a mulatto," he said. "You're not white."



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"Everyone knows I'm not white; that's why I live out in the quarters. It must be something more than that."

John started to cry, putting his head down and practically turning himself into a ball that might disappear, hoping to emerge in a world where he and Aryanna could still be friends.

Aryanna put her arm around him. "It's not your fault," she said.

John shook his head and looked across the pond at the windmill; there he was, downright abandoning her, and she was still trying to comfort him. "You don't understand," he said, fighting his tears. "It's because we're growing up, because we're not little children anymore. It was fine for us to play together when we were younger, but we're not young anymore." John threw his twig into the pond. "My mama says white boys don't fraternize with black girls when they reach a certain age."

She took her arm off his shoulder and moved slightly away, as if he'd struck her. "What does frat...er...nize mean?"

"To be friends with someone, to associate with someone who's the enemy." He shrugged and pursed his lips. "I looked it up in my papa's dictionary."

Aryanna looked stunned. "How am I the enemy?"

John shook his head, his eyes clamped shut. "I don't know. I don't know."

"Well I'm not your enemy," she said, sounding as if she intended to speak with Mammy and work it all out, put things right again.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "You're the one who taught me that white people owned black people," he said, realizing he probably sounded cruel. "I think it all comes back to us making you our slaves."

Aryanna turned away and began to cry, a deep, painful cry of the sort he'd never heard, as if maybe he'd killed her very spirit.

John touched her arm. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know it doesn't make sense."

Aryanna shook her head, looking too upset to speak. "Yes, it does," she managed to say. "Aunt Katie warned me that Master John couldn't be my friend forever, that one day you'd be my master and I'd be...just another one of your slaves."

Aryanna scrambled to her feet and ran up the path, sobbing, disappearing into the darkening woods.

"You'll never be my slave," John called after her.

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**“As we got older it was becoming apparent that my two older brothers, Philip and Andrew, were different from me. They didn’t see anything wrong with slavery or the plantation system, didn’t have the slightest sympathy for the Negroes, and generally thought everything should stay just as it was. And to their minds, I think my feelings for Aryanna, including the obvious heartache that came with her loss, were part of what made me different, something they resented and feared.”**

John was straggling behind his two brothers on their way home from the schoolhouse when Philip turned around and waited for him to catch up. “So they took your little picaninny away from you,” he said in that cruel tone he shared with Andrew.

Andrew gave a forced laugh as if, indeed, he and Philip were of one mind.

“Don’t call her that,” John snapped. “Aryanna is a mulatto: she’s half-white.”

“Don’t matter,” Philip said. “She’s still a nigger.”

John was incredulous that his brothers were using that word again. And the way Philip said it, like a declaration of superiority, reeked of arrogance. “Don’t use that word,” John said. “We weren’t brought up to talk like that.”

“I’ll use any word I want,” Philip said, stepping forward, challenging John to hit him.

“Maybe you can,” John said. “But you sound like poor trash; that’s what Pa would say. And Mammy would wash your mouth out with soap and water if she heard you talk that way.”

“Mammy’s nothing but a nigger herself,” Andrew blurted out.

“An old *nigger*,” Philip said, looking pleased with himself.

John wanted to fight them both as hard as he could but knew he’d get the worst of it. He couldn’t fathom the source of their anger toward Mammy Katie; she’d taken care of them since they were babies, never been anything but good and kind to them. She’d given them a whipping when they had it coming, but if she hadn’t, Doctor Pelham would have done it instead, only a whole lot worse. Maybe something was making Philip and Andrew think in peculiar ways, something John couldn’t discern and for whatever reason wasn’t susceptible to. “Why are you so hateful?” he asked, his voice cracking.



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Philip was silent, seemingly searching for an answer, and without his older brother to mimic, Andrew drew a blank expression.

“It’s not hateful,” Philip said after a moment. “It’s just what is.”

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