

Chapter 1

The Blooms



Josh Bloom loved stories – all kinds of stories – but most of all he loved to hear the stories that his Uncle Henry told him about a general named Edgar Pennington. Most evenings, when Henry came in from work he barely had time to hang his coat up and untie his shoe laces before Josh pulled a stool over to the fire and sat eagerly waiting to hear which of the general’s great adventures Henry would share with him this time.

‘Have I ever told you about the time the general fell into the serpent’s pit?’ asked Henry, with a little lift of his left brow.

Josh’s eyes widened.

‘No, Henry!’ he gasped.

Just as Henry sat forward in his chair to begin the story, Josh’s Aunt Nell came in from the kitchen.

‘There’s a hot meal for both of you on the table, if you’re

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interested. That's if you're not too busy filling the boy's head with yet another one of your silly stories.'

Josh smiled at his aunt.

'They're not silly, Nell. The general was a great adventurer – the greatest. Isn't that right, Henry?'

Henry looked at Josh with both brows raised. He knew that Nell didn't really approve of his stories, no matter how exciting they were.

'Let's go and have dinner,' he suggested. Then he leaned a little closer to Josh and winked, 'Your aunt Nell goes to her club tonight.'



'The stench was almost unbearable,' began Henry. 'As the general moved further into the darkness, the smell of death grew stronger.'

'Why didn't he try to climb back out?' asked Josh. He was engrossed in Henry's story.

'He wouldn't,' said Henry, while lighting up his pipe – a gift from the general, many years before.

'Why not?' worried Josh. 'I would have climbed back out.'

Henry bit on the tip of his pipe then pulled it away from his mouth and pointed it toward Josh, 'I asked the general that very same question, and do you know what he told me?'

Josh just shook his head.

‘He said, “Don’t be foolish, Henry, adventures are not for going backwards. Forward and fearless, that’s the only way to find truth in one’s journey.”’

Josh felt a shiver rush down his spine. *I wish I had met the general!* he thought.

‘What happened next, Henry?’

Henry sank back into his chair and returned to biting his pipe.

‘He moved deeper and deeper into darkness until eventually the stench was so bad that it became almost unbearable to breathe – and then ...’ Henry paused.

Josh was hanging off the edge of his stool – the tips of his fingers were white from gripping the seat of the stool so tightly.

‘What, Henry?’ cried Josh. ‘Henry, come on, tell me!’

Henry slowly moved his eyes toward the cottage ceiling.

Josh did the same, only swifter.

‘What, Henry?’

‘It came from above!’ said Henry.

‘The serpent!’ gasped Josh, returning his eyes to the ceiling once more just to check that nothing was above *him*.

Henry nodded his head.

‘Did he kill it?’ asked Josh. ‘Was it big? Did it attack him? Did it—’

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Josh's frenzy of questions was interrupted by the sound of Aunt Nell turning her key in the front door.

Henry jumped in his chair. Nell was home early.

'Henry, what happened?' Josh persisted.

As Nell shook the rain from her broolly at the door, Henry made a move toward the kitchen door.

'Tea, Nell?' he called.

Josh followed Henry into the kitchen.

'You have to finish the story, Henry.'

'I will,' whispered Henry. 'The next time you visit me at work after school, I'll finish the story. But for now, let's just say that the general didn't kill the serpent but he left it with a nasty scar along the top of its head.'



Josh went to sleep that night thinking of Henry's story. He rubbed his finger along a scar on his right arm, and even though he knew that he had got it from a fall when he was a baby, he fell asleep and dreamt that he got his scar on an adventure with the general.

He woke up the next morning still thinking of Henry's story, almost forgetting that it was his birthday – his thirteenth birthday! Nell and Henry were eagerly waiting for Josh in the kitchen, and when he walked in, Nell threw her

arms around him.

‘Don’t kiss me, Nell!’ cried Josh. ‘I’m too old for that now.’

Nell wouldn’t let go of Josh until she got her kiss. She was like that – the loving kind – firm and strict, but very loving nonetheless.

Henry stood up from the table and stretched out his arm.

‘Happy birthday, boy,’ he smiled.

Josh shook his uncle’s hand.

‘Thanks, Henry.’

Henry had a really proud look on his face, the very same look he had on all of Josh’s birthdays. Josh always felt that Henry would have loved him to be his son; he never really questioned his uncle or his aunt on his past and his parents because he didn’t want to make them feel that they weren’t enough for him. But for some reason, maybe because it was his birthday, Josh felt the urge to ask Henry about his past.

‘What were my parents like? My dad, what was he like? Was he like the general?’ Josh smiled across the table to Henry.

Henry shifted his eyes to Nell as if to pass the question onto her. Nell began to fidget uncomfortably with the tea towel. Josh knew instantly that it was awkward for them, so he tried a different approach.

‘Was my dad your brother, Henry? I hope he was.’

Henry smiled. He knew that Josh was just trying to make him feel good, but still he shifted his eyes toward Nell, who

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drew a deep breath, then put the tea towel down and crossed her hands on the table.

‘I suppose you’re thirteen now, Josh, and, well, there’s no point in pretending that you’re not going to be curious about, well, lots of things really.’

Nell was struggling to get to the point she was trying to make.

Henry decided to help out, ‘What your aunt is trying to tell you, Josh, is that we’ll always be here for you and you know that we love you very much, so you don’t have to worry about anything like that.’

Nell interrupted, ‘Just tell him, Henry.’

‘Tell me what?’ asked Josh.

‘We’ve never met your parents,’ said Henry. ‘I mean, I’m not your father’s brother or your mother’s and neither is Nell, I mean, you know what I mean. I’m trying to say that of course we’re your aunt and uncle, but we’re—’

Josh didn’t let Henry finish his sentence. He stood up and leaned over to his uncle and gave him a big hug.

Henry laughed, ‘Whoa! Easy boy, these bones are getting old.’

Tears filled Nell’s eyes, but she wouldn’t cry. That was just the way Nell was – hard exterior and soft on the inside.

There was no more discussion that morning of Josh’s real parents or even of his past, and he and Henry and Nell cel-

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celebrated his birthday like they always did by letting him skip school for the day and taking a trip into the centre of Charlotte to pick out a birthday present.