

Remembered

The power of narrative to build community, shatter silence and reclaim the past

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

## Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to my supervisor, Jenn Ashworth, for encouraging me to create characters that are dynamic and flawed, and for loving them in spite of that; for listening as I cried about characters I killed off between chapters and rejoiced over unexpected resurrections; and for being generous with both time and contacts. As a supervisor and career mentor, I sincerely appreciate Jenn's close readings to the text and the networks and opportunities she has introduced me to both directly and indirectly by being actively engaged in the writing community.

Thank you to the members of the department who welcomed me as a colleague and shared career advice, introduced me to networks, edited funding applications and for generous support, financial or otherwise, of my research and public engagement.

My sincere thanks to my friend and colleague, Naomi Kruger, for undertaking the laborious task of proofreading my thesis and for supporting all of my creative endeavors; your commitment and enthusiasm is always appreciated.

My research has been funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to immerse myself in research and community. Without funding, my research would not have been possible.

Finally, my heartfelt appreciation to my children, Amira, Marat and Noah for travelling across the world in pursuit of my dreams, for your inexhaustible support and love, and for providing beacons of hope for the future that will always lead me home.

## Remembered

### The power of narrative to build community, shatter silence and reclaim the past

#### Abstract

This thesis is in two parts. First, a novel that explores motherhood, community, silence, identity, family, stereotypes and racism to illustrate the legacy of slavery by implicitly drawing parallels between the American past and the American present. The novel explores answers to questions about silence, reuniting the Black American family after the Emancipation, representing diverse characters, ethically portraying emancipated slave characters, and writing about slavery. In *Remembered*, a framed narrative, the past haunts the present in the form of Tempe, in the structure of the novel, and in the central conflicts within the narrative.

In the second part of the thesis I draw on explicit parallels between the past and the present to investigate the legacy of slavery both on the page and in contemporary American society. Throughout the creative reflection I examine the silencing of Black America both in life and in literature. This discussion explores the legacy of slavery including structural racism, lynching, denial and the erasure of black voices. In Chapter Two, I discuss the power of literature to build community, the importance of writing to reclaim story and identity, and the ethics of doing so. Chapter Three of the thesis is a creative examination of my writing practice. In this chapter I create a fictionalized version of my practice-based research project North West Literary Salon to reflect on my aims, challenges and process. The thesis concludes with Chapter Four, a discussion of motherhood that focuses on representations of black mothers in literature.

The discussion examines close readings of selected texts including *Remembered* to demonstrate the importance of context.

Overall, my thesis aims to provoke dialogue that challenges the rhetoric of oppression, that gives voice to diverse characters, and that shatters silences. Unless Americans recognize the importance of diverse stories and diverse characters both on and off the page, like Spring, we will forever be haunted by the past.

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Remembered

# The Voice

Sunday, February 20, 1910

## Negro Plows Streetcar into C

A night of terror erupted into a morning of much of the same as a Negro hurled a streetcar into dawn and Clyde's Department Store. Barreling down Main Avenue with what witnesses say was a revolver in one hand, the Negro was "hell bent on destroying everything in his path," according to witnesses.

In an evening that has seen hundreds maybe thousands of motormen pulled from streetcars, we can only

speculate as to how the Negro came to be operating the streetcar. Our thoughts and prayers are with the unfortunate streetcar operator who has yet to be found or identified.

As the bricks and glass flew, onlookers surrounded the remains of the car, dragging the Negro and holding until police arrived for questioning.

The Negro remains in critical condition.

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4:30 AM

She's sitting there on top of the chiffarobe rocking back and forth swinging her legs in time to some music she heard ten, twenty years ago. She's like that, Tempe. Get something stuck in her head and it stays there like a thumbprint in wet cement. I want to ask her what she's listening to but I haven't let on I know she's there. I can feel her watching me, smoldering. Hating me for ignoring her. It serves her right. It's been at least ten years since the last time she came. She can just sit there brewing and rocking and waiting on me like I been waiting on her since then.

'Mama's dead,' she had said.

It was fall then too. She popped up in the middle of the kitchen and plopped into my favorite chair like it was hers. Like she'd been there all along and hadn't wafted in smelling of cinnamon and cedar wood. Always burning. Even on a crisp autumn day. She strummed her fingers on the kitchen table, fingered the cracks. Waited. I turned back to the ham. Had to get supper ready in case Edward came home looking for some little bit to eat between shifts. She didn't care nothing about my ham drying out, my biscuits burning or my heart breaking. I couldn't think of nothing worse than having my dead sister sitting in my favorite chair talking about my dead mama.

'Mama been dead, Tempe,' I told her.

Wasn't no need turning to face her. I knew her eyes would be burning a hole in my back.

'She just now died.' She snapped her fingers. It sounded like twigs breaking. I wanted to ask her not to do that no more. 'You just thought she was dead. I knew she wasn't.'

‘If you knew she wasn’t dead, why wouldn’t you tell me?’ I asked. I basted the ham in pineapple juice and honey, put the biscuits in the hotbox, tidied the tea towels. When I couldn’t think of nothing else to do, I turned around. The look on her face said it all. Why would she have told me? We been keeping secrets since we was little girls. Why would death change that?

Beneath the covers, I press my hands together, almost in prayer. She laughs. It’s low and hoarse, unused. Whiff of cinnamon. All at once hot air rattles the shade, bumps against the window, lifts the edges of the wall calendar, flips slim pages. Searches. It whips around pictures on the bureau: Edward at six. The house, deed and all tucked behind a heavy frame. Edward and Lil. It tugs at my bed linen. I tilt my chin. Wouldn’t surprise me none if these covers wrapped round my neck. Eyes closed tight I turn to face the wall. How she can whip up a breeze with the window closed I will never know. Wouldn’t ask neither.

It’s too hot but I won’t complain none. Although she don’t ever carry nothing but bad news, I’m almost glad to have her home. Lola Mae, Spinner, Mama, Christian: each time somebody close dies, Tempe makes her way back to me. She say can’t none of them come theyselves cuz of me. Why you come? I ask. Spite, she said. She laughed. I know it wasn’t no joke.

I’m tired. Been tired. Maybe it’s time for me to go on home. Don’t expect I’m going to Heaven. I can think of some worse who shouldn’t be there either. Of course, I would prefer not to go down under. If I could just see Mama and them one more time, it wouldn’t matter one bit where I go. But please, don’t be coming here for my babies. They too young. Ain’t hardly lived yet. Lord, I ain’t called on you for nothing else, but please let Tempe be coming for me.

I breathe in her smells and hold my breath.

*Hurry up.*

I spread my arms and legs wide in surrender. ‘May as well just take me now.’

Who will find my body? It can't be Lillian. It would be a horrible start to her day to find me laid out in a messy bed, night dress bunched and wrinkled. Would she know what dress to lay me in? I hope it'll be Sable. She'll know how to lay me out just right. She's buried enough people. She ain't been out that house since they killed her boys. Will she come now? What if Edward finds me? He might put me in one of them slack sets he's been eyeing in the catalog.

I know the flowers will be lovely no matter what but who's going to do my hair? Not one of them can't-wait-to-move-in heifers. I'll just get myself dressed and save everybody the trouble. If I have time, I'll write a word or two that I wouldn't mind someone saying over my body. Don't have to be no church service but a few words couldn't hurt.

*Hurry up.*

'I'm up.' She sits on the edge of the bed. I want to reach out and touch her, to hold her but she's wispy, like smoke. She's old. What's the use of being a ghost if you still get old? All these years and she's still on fire. 'You still mad, Tempe? If I could change what happened, I would, you know I would.'

The air crackles. I should have saved her. If I had gone back all those years ago, pulled her out of the house she'd be alive. Or we'd at least both be dead. A warm hand above my shoulder.

*Get dressed.*

I pick through dress after dress: *too flashy, too homely, too proud.*

'If I knew what I was dressing for, I would know what to wear.'

The dresses are segregated by event. I flip through work, visiting, entertaining and celebrating. Sweat slips down my neck. The room gets hotter. Soon I'll be at the last dress. Please don't let me make it to the last dress.

I skip over consoling. Holding my breath I reach for the long, thick black dress in the back.

*Not yet.*

I breathe the thick woody air, swallow the salty lump that rises from my belly, and get dressed. Hope. I haven't worn this one in years.

Downstairs I click on the radio. Jubilee Earle's voice fills the front room. I set the kettle to boil. Nothing goes better with bad news than good coffee. Whatever Tempe has in mind, I'm going to need something warm to deal with it. Neither of us mentions my shaking hands or water sloshing out of the pot. I still haven't put the woodstove on. I don't expect I'll need to. I peeped in to Edward's room before I came down. Still-made bed, clothes neatly hung up, not a speck of anything on the floor. Edward never came home last night. Something's wrong. It's too quiet. My stomach keeps flip flopping. My chest rattles and tightens. I can't seem to get enough air. Can't smell nothing but death.

I've been staring into the cupboard for the past five minutes. Do I put a cup in front of Tempe or no? I ain't seen her eat or drink nothing since she been dead. I don't suspect she's hungry or thirsty. Mama wouldn't let nobody cross her door without offering them something to eat. What would she think? I grab two cups.

'Breaking News,' the announcer interrupts Jubilee. 'A collision has been reported on the corner of Broad and Main.' My heart thumps trying to drown out the voice filling up my kitchen. The cups get to rattling, the kettle whistle makes me jump. 'The late night Broad Street Trolley.'

‘Ain’t been nothing but bad news since them boys started this strike. Ain’t safe to be on the streets no more,’ I say. But I can still hear him talking.

Three months of strikes and now this. Does Tempe know? Don’t see why she wouldn’t. To hear her tell it there ain’t too much she don’t know about. What she think about it? Striking over pay. I done plenty of work without getting no pay at all. I ought to go on strike right now. Refuse to take in laundry, clean houses, bake pies, polish floors, scrub windows, clean pots till I get paid enough to do it. They lucky to be getting paid at all let alone paid enough.

I’ll ask Edward. He’ll know what’s going on. Can’t seem to get him to shut up bout what one side doing to the other. Bunch of school children. Busting folk up over money. I’ll get a nice roast on, he’ll like that. We’ll talk and eat. What about Tempe? She’s waited this long. Don’t reckon one supper will kill me. What if that’s it? What if she’s waiting on me to take a bite of my breakfast so I can choke and fall right out here in the middle of my kitchen? I’ll get these cups washed just in case.

‘Collided into the window of a corner store mangling innocent bystanders.’

Edward will be late for supper.

*Edward won’t be home for supper.*

‘According to witnesses, a Negro overtook the operator hurtling the trolley into Clyde’s.’

That’s all we need.

‘Thrown from the wreck into the crowd.’

Things is bad. Union threatening strikes, burning buildings, busting up tracks, beating up drivers, harassing yard workers. Company sabotaging lines, raising fares, doubling hours, cutting pay, bringing in strike workers. Now they crashing up trolleys into stores, killing innocent people? They don’t allow no colored folks to operate no trolley. Not even Edward and he been

there for years. He's gotta get out of there. They always trying to drag him into something. Laying off hardworking folk to pay new ones less and it's Edward fix this, Edward tote that. But won't let him operate though. Ain't ready for that. Don't hardly pay him enough to light a lamp. Don't pay him enough to get mixed up in all this mischief either. Next time he brings up getting one of them porter jobs, I'm going to tell him to take it. Just get away from all this. I'll take in tenants. One or two ought to make up for it. He's gotta get away from here.

'Police are questioning suspects.'

Questioning? The word makes my stomach drop, my throat tighten, my heart throb. The room swirls. The table, chairs, wardrobe, everything moves around me like a tornado. I can hardly stand. I turn to Tempe. She's the only thing rooted to one spot. She nods, slow.

I snap it off but the announcer's voice still bounces around the walls, glasses, plates, vases, chairs, floors, my heart and anything else it can find. I pull on a wool cap and thick gloves. The Reverend from Second Baptist will be leading congregations of stragglers, his posse of believers, marching to convert me, to lead me through this "test of Faith." Edward will be a cause.

*Get the book.*

I reach for the bible, thick and unused. What good can it do now?

*The other book.*

It's foolish to argue with a dead woman. I get the book.

Outside, the streets swell with prayer. Like hisses, voices slip beneath window frames, joints and cracks. They crowd my kitchen. The book is heavy in my hands. Memories and clippings, pictures and letters, pages stretch the spine. I slip it into my black purse and head to

the cellar door. I can climb down the rickety steps, maneuver through the damp enclosure and slip out of the back door, cut through the yard. Forced to use the back entrance of my own home?

I unlatch the bolt and open the front door. Through the wall, I hear Sable knocking goodbye. Ten years stuck in the house. Ten years of being afraid to walk the same streets, see the same faces, hear the same voices and not know which one of them killed your baby. After all this is over, we'll have a good visit. We'll sit in her front room with the heavy curtains drawn and talk about our boys, how they took them and how to let them go.

Outside, a group of men and women, the community grief-birth-death-wedding- new job- new family- justice team, a small congregation of collective faiths, has formed on 20<sup>th</sup> Street. Etta Mae organizes folk in to small clusters. In front of Sable's house, a group scrawls 'Justice for Edward' and 'Not One More' on the front of hand-made signs. Next door, another cluster practices chants: 'When one dies, we all weep! No more blood spilled in the streets!' Across the street old women wrap thick sandwiches in wax paper. In the middle of the street, men and women line up to march. They hardly notice me.

Buddy and Franklin stand on either side at the bottom of my steps. I search their faces; neither brother looks away. They know. Of course it was Edward.

'Tempe's back,' I say.

They stare at me, then past me. They look through her as if they can't see her. Probably can't. She's stubborn like that. Won't let anyone see her but me. They nod in her direction. She nods back.

I feel Sable peeping through the keyhole next door.

'Sister,' the Reverend calls from the sidewalk.

Sister? Even Tempe doesn't call me that anymore. It almost takes me back. I smell the river; feel the squishy bank beneath my toes. I shake my head, clear my throat. Settle down, it's a title, not a name.

'Spring,' Buddy corrects.

'Ms. Spring,' Franklin adds.

Their voices are deep but soft. The reverend clears his throat and steps back.

'Reverend,' I say. There's no time for polite conversation.

'It's Justice,' the reverend interrupts.

'Justice?' I can't have heard him right. My heart's beating, my throat's tightening, I can't stop opening and closing my fists.

The reverend brushes at the sweat creeping down his cheek. 'My name,' he says, 'Reverend Justice.'

'So it is.' Names are coats around here. People try them on. They slip in and out of them like religion, weather, mood or something else you can't afford to count on.

'We don't have much time. They done dragged Edward out the belly of the trolley. Tried him on the streets and found him guilty! If we don't put an end to this injustice, they gonna carry out the sentence right there in the middle of the street!'

*Cuz of you, he won't know where to go. Cuz of you he can't make his way home.*

'He'll make his way home to me,' I say. Tempe ain't got no right to blame me. I raised him, I near birthed him. I'm his mama. I clasp my hand to my chest. I can tell by the way they look at me, the crowd thinks I'm talking to them.

'Ain't no way Edward coulda done this,' Buddy says. 'I done known that boy all his natural life. Been there since he was this high.' He pinches two fingers together.



The loud snap startles me, reminds me to breathe.

‘Edward works on the rails, in the yard. If he was on that trolley, he had a good reason to be there,’ Franklin says. He nods like that says it all.

‘Oh, he had a reason,’ Maybelle hisses. I can tell it’s her without even looking up. No need to see her head-shaking sympathy. ‘Plowed that Express right in the middle of that high-priced store. No Coloreds Allowed. Serves them right.’

‘I was there,’ an angry voice answers. Still out of breath, the man pushes through the growing crowd. He pauses at the foot of the steps then turns to face them. ‘Seen the trolley damn near flying, sparks and metal everywhere. Folks scattering every which way. Bodies everywhere.’ His body ripples when he speaks like it can’t contain itself, excited. ‘Edward was where the operator ought to be. He was holding a stick or something in one hand and waving his arms back and forth. Didn’t look natural. Didn’t seem like he was trying to hit anybody but didn’t look like he was trying *not* to hit nobody either. All around him people running, screaming but you know what?’ The audience gathers closer. ‘He didn’t look a bit worried. Crashed right into the glass store front. Glass, metal, bodies everywhere and the look on his face stayed as calm as you please. Even as they pulled him out.’

The crowd looks at me for confirmation. My boy wouldn’t do that.

‘He has been acting strange,’ a whiny voice offers from somewhere in the back. ‘Hanging around with them union boys.’

‘They bound to put him up to it. You know they wouldn’t allow no colored to operate no trolley.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ a voice interrupts.

Sounds like something he would do,’ someone else chimes in.

Suddenly, everybody knows my boy. People ain't said hardly two words to him acting like they know what goes on in his head. Everybody knows what Edward might and might not do. I push past the Reverend.

'Just wait; things will all die down,' Etta Mae says. Even outside of church the Reverend's wife sounds the same. Always coaxing, cajoling, cautioning: 'wait, wait, wait.' Waiting was the best way to make it in to Heaven; the only way if your skin was brown. And after all that waiting on Earth, they would finally meet the King and wait on him too. I've been waiting all my life.

Snatches of conversations slap me in the face, sting my cheeks.

'He did it, I know he did it!'

'If he ain't do it, he's sure gonna wish he did.'

'Why'd he have to kill em' though? Things bad enough without this!'

'They gonna make this black against white. We all gonna look like Edward to them.'

'Already do that now.'

'I hope he did do it!'

'If we thought things were bad before, just wait.'

'Mmmhmmm,' they all seem to agree.

Children clamor noisily down 20<sup>th</sup> street. On 21<sup>st</sup>, horns honk, heels click, people yell. Quickly, as word spreads through the neighborhood, children are called, doors shut, windows locked. The warning: one of our own has killed a whole lot of theirs.

Hide.

What if he did it? The ground dips. It's a barely perceptible pulse; a movement too minor to fret over now that the stoop has begun to shake. The sidewalk burps and rumbles, the street lurches, houses pitch. The unfamiliar faces of the crowd fade into those of my dear friends Sable and Mother Beckett, Lillian, Watson, Watson Junior, Edward Senior, both my Mamas: Agnes and Ella, Meredith, Myrtle. All the faces of the past stand before me. One face doesn't belong. It's a shadow but I'd recognize him anywhere: Edward. 20<sup>th</sup> street vomits fragments of the past, spewing bile and memories of Sweetwater, Maryland. Thick green trees, always weeping, leaves interlocking like hands, trunks thick like men you can rely on. Over there the river, rising and falling without mercy as unfaithful as hymns. There the ramble shacks makeshift boxes of sticks and gum, leaves and paper. There the graves, a rock to mark this one from that. All around, straight, long rows of fat-bodied blueberries, thin-skinned and bleeding.

In the center of it all, rapidly taking shape is Walker Farm. It rises like a bruised, bloated hissing thing. Smoke pushes through the massive windows, curls around the huge frame, clutches at the wood, dry like skin. The Cherry wood door opens. Tempe, a dark, slender shadow, stares. Behind her flames beg *wait, wait*. Crackling, buckling, smoldering, popping, screaming.

Silence.

A siren on the other side of town.

*Get going.*

'Tempe?' I whisper. I don't trust my voice.

*Hush, they hear you. I done told you a hundred times. When you talking to me, use your inside voice.*

Don't leave me.

*I'll be here till it's done.*

I should get word to Lillian. She'll be at her day job washing and ironing for that family just outside of the city. Gideon might be between shifts at the factory. Those two got more jobs between them than other young folk I know. Might be nightfall before they get word. I hope it's sooner. I'd hate for Edward to die alone.

'Buddy, go find Lillian. Franklin, fetch Gideon,' Buddy opens his mouth to tell me something I already know. The news will get there before he does. 'Ain't right for them to hear it from nobody but family,' I say.

I make my way off 20<sup>th</sup> street. I don't bother to turn around to see if the crowd is following. They march, arms laden with posters, fish fry fliers and cake sale donation buckets, the other way.

'We need to gather more soldiers,' the Reverend explains. 'It's 1910. It's high time they stop killing our people. If we don't stop them now, it won't ever stop. This here is war.'

It is war. Tempe and I march head first into it.

## Chapter 2

7:00 AM

Don't seem like nobody doing nothing but yelling and slowing me down. Their voices take my breath away. Their words run together like one long curse: 'One of them Negros stole a trolley. Damned fool crashed right into the store window. Wasn't no accident, they trying to kill us. Knew this would happen one day. Only a matter of time. Send them back to Africa. Fixed him good, none of them will try that again.'

Back to Africa? My boy was born in Maryland just like his mama and papa. And my mama from round here somewhere right in Pennsylvania. How many of them can say they was born right here?

Just eight blocks to go and I want to run. I want to push through these angry red faces, kick my shoes off and run barefoot down the middle of the street. Fixed him? Lord help us. I march down Beacon, on to Pleasant and finally to Autumn Lane. Rows of people stacked up on both sides of the street. Union workers in dark blue uniforms gather on one side. Company men in dark suits on the other. Police guard the middle. Bottles and words hurl from one side to the

other. I put my head down, lean forward and head to the colored entrance of Autumn Asylum Home for the Poor; hospital of the damned.

My feet stop me at the door. I try real hard but I can't remember the face of anyone that's crossed this threshold twice. How many people come with a toothache and come out dead? Headache? Dead. Broke leg? Dead.

*Go in.*

There's not as many people inside as there are out. I don't blame them. No matter how busted up I was, if I could walk in here on my own, I'd walk to another hospital.

*There's worse things than being dead.*

You would say that.

*Don't worry about that now.*

Seems like now's just the right time to worry about it. Doctors have no business experimenting on my boy. Ain't the time to be trying nothing new. Now's the time for something old, something respected. He should be home where I can take care of him. A little honey, onion, lemon and river grass will do it. Where can I get river grass? Not Schuylkill grass. Lush, down home grass. If Mama was here she'd know what to do. I look into each face I pass. Are these the victims? Some stare. Others, angry, watch me. Do they know who I am? Do they think my boy's some kind of killer? He ain't. What they think don't change a damned thing. Their pain oozes from bruised eyes, broken arms, busted heads.

*Keep walking.*

'He can't have visitors,' the nurse announces to someone behind me. We've been standing in front of her for five minutes while she flips through charts, adjusts papers, waters a dying plant. She hasn't looked at me yet.

‘I’m not a visitor.’ Her face is twisted up like she don’t understand the words coming out of my mouth. ‘I’m his mama,’ I say, slow like she ain’t from around here.

The nurse looks at the top of my head. Her look could wilt the flower stuck in my cap. Without looking into my eyes, she looks from my dress down to my double-soled shoes and back to the top of my head. She frowns, glances at the chart, flips a few pages, skims a few notes. ‘It doesn’t say except for mothers. It says no visitors.’ Smug little heifer.

The only thing standing between me and my boy is this little bit of a thing can’t be no more than twenty if she’s that. What does she know about dying alone? About a whole heap of people wanting you dead? About ending up in a rundown hospital getting rundown supplies and secondhand care because you Colored and been accused of doing something don’t nobody care if you done or not? I can push past her and make it to my boy. Just her between me and--

*Go head then.*

‘What?’ Tempe’s always interrupting.

*Push past her. She ain’t but a little thing, go ahead. What’s stopping you?*

‘What about all these people?’

*Couldn’t nobody keep me from my boy, cept maybe you.*

‘I ain’t keep him from you. You left him. Who’d you think was gonna raise him, if not me?’ Tears fill my eyes, spill down my cheeks and splatter on the nurse’s station counter. I can’t stop them. My shoulders stoop, my body shakes.

‘She always like this?’ The nurse asks the room.

No one answers.

‘This seem normal to you people?’

‘Is everything alright? Is she having a fit?’ A red-haired nurse asks.

‘I just want to see my boy,’ I say.

‘I think she’s mad,’ the nurse nods her head toward me.

‘I ain’t mad. I ain’t. I’m disappointed, hurt, angry too if I’m honest. But I really just want to see my boy.’

‘She’s not mad,’ the older nurse diagnoses, ‘perhaps she’s had a fit.’

‘Does she take medication?’ They ask one another.

I shake my head.

‘I wouldn’t reckon so; they don’t usually go to the doctor until they’re dying.’

‘Let’s sit this one down. Keep an eye on her. See if she has another fit while I look for a bed.’

A bed? First they killing my son now they planning on killing me?

‘I don’t need no bed. Just my boy. I come for my boy.’

The nurses whisper to one another. One points at a chart, flips pages, jabs a pen in the air.

‘I’ll send someone to take you up,’ she says. For a second she meets my eyes. ‘Wait in there.’

The young nurse turns back to piles of paperwork. The other one marches down the corridor. One step from the desk and Tempe and I are in the small waiting room. Wooden benches squeezed into a small space. It would be called a water closet if it was somewhere else.

‘I saw the whole thing,’ a young woman in a heavily creased domestic’s uniform, clean except for the blood splatters dried across its front, tells an old man whose arm twists at a peculiar angle. Nothing a little Roseroot wouldn’t cure.

‘Me too,’ he answers.

‘That fool drove right in the store, aimed for it. Didn’t swerve or nothing. He aimed,’ her bobbing head punctuates each word.



‘That ain’t what I saw,’ the man says. ‘Looked like that boy was propped up, peculiar like, like someone done stuck him there.’

‘Woulda run me clear over if I hadn’t jumped out the way.’

‘You mean if he hadn’t hit a bunch of other people before you,’ he says.

‘Thank God for small miracles,’ the woman says. The words coming out of her mouth make her whole face look ugly. Shame too. She almost looks like the kind of gal that woulda been good for Edward. Good job. Home training, maybe not good home training. No sense in her head. Says the first thing that pops into it. Her voice makes my head hurt. I can’t stop staring at her mouth.

9:00 AM

*Just look at the floor.*

Every so often my heart stops. I study the pew-shaped benches, the cold, grey floor, even the thick pamphlets filled with dark-faced patients and white-faced doctors bear worn edges. The room has whittled Autumn's hurt down to patches, splinters and grooves. My eyes water as blood-red flowers drip on to the concrete floor. I concentrate on my shoes instead. The arch fit special to my wide feet, the thick soles for hours of standing, the tiny holes so my feet can breathe. Something else Edward thought I needed. Eyes stinging, I study the tops of people's heads, walls, the one window until everything peels into layers. I rock back and forth to keep my eyes open. The bench groans each time I lean back, creaks when I lean forward. Groan, creak, groan creak.

*Stay still!*

If I close them quick I can keep my eyes open longer. I try it. I blink. Edward in his work dungarees. Blink. Edward in his Army uniform. Blink. Edward in boxing gloves. Blink. Edward at his first colored dance. Blink. Edward's life flashes backward. If I close them too long, he'll be gone. I stare at the wall in front of me. Straight lines turn into squiggles, flecks of paint into people, colors swirl. If it hurts enough, maybe Edward will live. That's silly. I'll hold my breath. My breath for his. Lord, if I surrender, will you spare my boy?

*Don't be foolish.*

A body slides into the seat next to mine. It smells like fresh earth, sweat and death. Two long, slender feet, bare. A man-child rubs them together. The *shhh, shhh* of dry feet ignites the room. Small clumps of dirt drop to the floor. People whisper, shuffle. Bodies lean towards the door. No one gets up to leave but they all look like they want to.

‘Now look here,’ a nurse says loudly while rushing from behind useless stacks of paper. ‘I told you we don’t have any more room. We aren’t seeing anymore patients today. This is the Waiting Room.’

‘I am waitin’, Ma’am,’ the man replies. I know that voice. He leans into the bench, shifts his weight to one side, then the other, rubs his back against the pine, and finally leans forward, his hands on bony knees.

‘He with y’all?’ she asks the pamphlets, the stained walls, the dim light and bare floor. Soon she will have to look someone in the eye, to acknowledge the waiting.

Slender feet, bony knees, thick fingers, long arms, and broad chest. He looks older here than he did when he was trying to take over my stoop. What’s he doing here now? I wouldn’t be surprised if someone had bopped him straight in the mouth. Talking bout things he don’t know nothing about. Would serve him right.

‘I said, is he,’ she pinches her lips together so the words barely whistle through, ‘with one of you all?’

Right hand on gun, a police officer, young enough to be excited by the promise of conflict, saunters towards us.

‘He’s with us,’ I say. Don’t need no more lives on my hands.

The nurse hurries to the sanctuary of her paperwork, the officer fumbles with the button on his holster, the young man settles back into the pine, fidgets.

‘You ought to be more careful,’ I say. ‘You were about to end up dead.’

‘I’m in the right place for it,’ he laughs. ‘Ma’am, I didn’t get the chance to introduce myself properly. I’m Jacob. Jacob Wood. I’m here as a friend of Edward’s.’

Mint breath tickles my nose; a lie with a hint of sweet.

‘You ain’t sound like a friend when you was on my steps preaching he tried to kill folks,’ I say. The words and spittle hit his face. Jacob doesn’t flinch.

‘The truth don’t mean he ain’t my friend,’ he says. ‘I know he done it and meant to do it too, Ma Spring.’ He leans into me, too close. ‘It’s gonna take more than praying to get Edward outta’ here alive.’

The sweet, salty taste of blood fills my mouth. I turn, slip a handkerchief from my bag, spit and fold it into little pink blotted squares. ‘You some sort of doctor?’

‘Ma’am, we, my associates and I, have been thinking a lot about Edward’s situation.’

I can’t stand to look at him. All that youth wasted. How is he sitting here, plotting and lying while my boy, my good, kind boy, is somewhere broke up? Everything about him, from the words coming out of his mouth to his ashy feet, irritates me. I study his feet, thick and naked. Dry as two pickled hams. Toes as plump as figs. Dripping dirt. Dirt. In a hospital. Dirt that black is rich; hearty. Plant a seed in that and anything’s liable to sprout up. ‘You say you can help Edward?’

‘My associates and me think we can help you help Edward. All you got to do is remember right. Maybe it was him that come up with the plan to steal the trolley. Maybe he talked about it over supper. Maybe he was working for the company trying to rile people up by hiring a Negro operator. Had him plow the train into Clyde’s to make a point. Maybe it wasn’t no accident.’

‘My boy wouldn’t do that.’

‘You know, Edward ain’t no boy no more.’

This drumming in my head won’t quit. I can’t catch my breath. Can’t swallow. That boy’s mouth is still moving and thank The Lord, I can’t hear nothing but this high-pitched train whistle getting louder and louder. Rattling the room, shaking the pews, scattering pamphlets. The only thing it can’t do is wipe that grin off Jacob’s face. I close my eyes. Blink. Edward leaving for work yesterday. Starched uniform. Glistening smile. A wave goodbye.

## Chapter 3

10:00 AM

Soft, warm fingers wind around my wrist.

‘This way, Ms. Spring. It’s just a little piece further,’ the lie tumbles from the nurse’s clenched lips. ‘I’m sorry. I wish there was a faster way,’ she whispers.

The colored ward is separated from the waiting area by the women’s ward, the men’s ward, and the operating room. When it’s not serving as a mental health unit, the wards’ beds serve West Philadelphia’s homeless. When it’s not serving them, it serves West Philadelphia’s diseased, broken and dying. The treatment remains the same: Colored patients and visitors are ushered the long way around, down the concrete stairs, through the maintenance closet and up again, under the main wing, so as not to disturb the other patients.

‘It’s just,’ she continues.

‘How is my boy?’ I ask. Ammonia-scented mops and bleach-stained buckets tighten my lungs.

‘Careful, that stuff will kill a man. Sorry.’ The nurse has apologized for the narrow stairs, the concrete floors, the stains that won’t fade despite weekly scrubbing with bleach, ammonia, or lye; the patches of bright light filtered in through cracked windows; the stretches of dark not yet granted funding for electricity; and the walk—the need to walk beneath the hospital instead of through it. *I’m sorry* when it’s not your fault. *I’m sorry* when there’s nothing you can do. *I’m sorry* when you’re close to giving up. I’m fed up with I’m sorrys.

The nurse’s shoes click against the concrete. My stomach knots and untangles. My mouth sours with thick phlegm. Just a little bit longer. Below the busy main hospital it’s almost easy to pretend nothing else matters.

‘He’s pretty beat up,’ she says.

My heart’s been racing all morning so I know it when it stops. Where was I when they was dragging him from the trolley? When they threw him to the street? When he cried out for me? When he curled into a ball and they kicked and kicked and kicked? Tempe come to tell me. Did she know before it or not till after? If she’d have known before she would have told me, if she could. Even if there was some sort of rule that she couldn’t tell the living, she would have told me. She’d have done it for the boy. Unless there wasn’t nothing I could do about it. She would have stopped it, if she could. If she could have reached down and protected him, she would have. Can’t tell nothing till it’s too late. Can’t do nothing about it no how. What’s the use in hanging around if she can’t do no more than I can to keep him safe?

‘We almost there?’

The nurse stops walking. She clasps my hands tight like we’re schoolgirls. She bows her head. With no windows it’s near pitch black. The grating of air squeezes through a crack and the cadence of her prayer match my breathing. I time it: one, two, silence. One, two, silence.

‘Amen,’ she says. ‘You okay? You wheezing pretty bad.’

She leans closer.

‘It’s just my heart.’

I feel her fumbling with her stethoscope.

‘It’s breaking. I just need to get to my boy.’

‘Has your boy been acting different this past week?’ The officer asks. He ain’t looking at me.

I’ve been standing at this very spot since the nurse left me ten minutes ago. *The doctor would like a word with you before you go in*, she said rushing off like I got time to be waiting on words. This boy done asked me the same questions three times maybe more. Ain’t even writing down a word I say no how. I got questions too. You the one that put my boy here? Did you hold him down? Stomp him with them steel boots? ‘No, Sir.’ If I can just get past him and get to the end of the hall, I can be with my boy.

‘Staying out late? Coming home early?’ He tilts his head, licks his pink, cracked lips.

What that got to do with anything? ‘No, Sir. Can I see him?’

‘Your boy’s what, forty-something?’ He taps a black pen on a closed notepad.

Forty-Five. ‘Yes, Sir.’

‘And he’s living with you over on 20<sup>th</sup>?’

‘Edward takes care of me, always has.’

‘He have any reason to do what he did today?’ He leans close, his hot breath curdles into tiny drops of spit that sprinkle my face.

‘Yes, Sir.’



The officer's green eyes brighten. I must have said no last time he asked. He steps back, flips open the notepad. 'What is it?' Words and spit drop from his mouth. He licks his lips.

'Edward works every Monday, Sir,' I say.

The notepad clicks shut. 'Look here gal, you know they don't allow Coloreds to operate trolleys. What was your boy up to? Was he trying to start a riot? Who put him up to it? You could make it easy on him, you know that? Just tell me what you know.'

My stomach clenches. My throat tightens. My mouth fills with chunks from last night's dinner, bits of cornbread, a sliver of ham. If I open my mouth it will spill out, soil my words. He'll take my sick and call it guilt, evidence. I swallow it all, hot and slimy, soured. He watches, waits.

'Take your time,' he says. Pen tapping against notepad.

What do I know? Who put Edward up to what? What was he doing in the trolley? Was there a reason? Of course there was. As soon as I get to, I'll ask him. After I hold him again. After I tell him it'll be alright. After I believe it.

'Sir,' I say. 'Seems if Edward was operating a trolley like they say he was, it was a part of his job. Had to be. Edward loves that job and everything about it.'

'Enough to make sure he don't lose it?'

I'm nodding my head yes.

'So he would work with the union to start a riot, if it meant keeping his job.'

I'm shaking my head no. He's twisting the words soon as they drop from my mouth and I can't do nothing but watch them fall.

'Auntie, how about this, you go see your boy and you see if you don't remember anything he might have said about a job the union asked him to do. If you can remember a name,

why that's better. Now what's better than that is if you can ask him who put him up to it. We tried to get him to talk but by the time we got to him, he didn't have much to say.'

'Can I see him now, Sir?' I'm near whispering. Can barely hear the words come out my mouth but I know they there. In the air, hanging.

*You stay here asking permission. I'm going to see my boy.*

'Stealing a trolley, tampering with the brakes, murdering innocent folks and all that property damage. Your boy's in a heap of trouble. He couldn't do this without help. If it wasn't the union, it was the rails. They've been trying to force the city to negotiate and this sort of incident is just what they need. Just tell me who he's working for.'

'He works on the rails, Sir. I told y'all already. He gathers supplies, runs errands.'

'You find out who he's working with and we'll make it easier on him. All we need is a name, any name.'

They could have killed him. Could have swung him from a tree. Drowned him. Who would have stopped them? 'Sir, I'm grateful y'all took it easy on him today.'

The officer rubs his chubby fingers along his razor-bumped throat. 'He was thrown from the train. If the onlookers hadn't gotten to him first, he might be dead right now.'

'I reckon you all saved my boy's life.' They could have snatched him up. Locked him away God knows where. I wouldn't never know what happened to him. Never got to say goodbye.

'You could say that,' the officer straightens his tie; puffs out his chest. 'As soon as your boy wakes up, we'll get him to answer some more questions.'

‘The doctor is doing rounds,’ the nurse interrupts. She’s out of breath. Must have run from ward to ward. ‘I’ll just get you settled in and then go look again. Y’all done?’ She asks the officer while pulling me.

‘Bag,’ the officer says.

The nurse freezes.

‘Tell old girl to leave the bag here. Nothing in, nothing out.’

‘Can I please just take the book, Sir?’ I pull it from my purse, clutch it to my chest. I hold it up, an offering. Engraved, mahogany-skinned cover, thick pages stitched together by hand. Besides Tempe, it’s the only thing I have of Mama’s.

He nods, takes the bag and plops it down. My good compact rolls on the floor. The nurse is already pulling me down the hall.

‘Edward’s the last bed on the right. I just want to warn you, he don’t look good. He’s broke up. His lungs are punctured, his spleen’s been ruptured, his,’ the nurse stops, stares ahead. ‘I’m sorry. He’s bandaged up, plastered from head to foot. He’s in a coma.’

She squeezes my hand and slips out the door.

## Chapter 4

10:37 AM

The room is a lot brighter than it should be. Sunlight streams through the lone window. The grey walls and chamber pots practically sparkle. Tempe's glowing like a campfire. Lighting up the whole room. Six beds. I lightfoot past the patients. They don't pay me no never mind. Most of them staring after Tempe. She's standing at the head of Edward's bed, fidgeting. She don't seem to know what to do with her hands, trailing wisps of smoke as she touches his head, caresses his cheeks.

'Keep away from my boy.' I don't yell it but five heads turn to face me.

Tempe stares at me like I lost my mind. I squeeze past her to Edward's side. I barely feel his warmth. What isn't covered in strips of white gauze and plaster is swollen with purple bruises or hidden beneath a starched white sheet and thin, scratchy blanket. His eyes are swollen shut. His skull, ears, nose, and chin are distorted beneath layers of cotton. His neck is rigged to a contraption connecting his back and legs. I don't know where to put my hands.

*He wouldn't be here if it weren't for you!*

‘Just let me get him home to fix him. You come back some other time, Tempe.’

*I ain't leaving without my boy.*

‘What you come for? To watch him die? To watch me watch him die? Save him.’

*I can't.* She sucks the air from the room. I can't hardly breathe. Beds rattle, charts flip, drawers open and close.

‘Ain't got no time for none of your tantrums, Tempe. If you ain't here to help, go!’

*I'm taking him home.*

‘It ain't time. Take me instead.’

*You?* She spits the word like I'm not even good enough to be dead with her. Always second.

‘Then let me save him.’

*Like you saved me?* The room bursts into flames. Fire leaps from the walls, the floor, the ceiling. It's hotter than coal in a smokehouse. My heart would be racing if it hadn't stopped. Brick walls slip into dripping wood beams, concrete floors melt into hardwood. Grand windows burst through leaving Autumn in smoldering rubble. We're back inside Walker's place. Back to the day Tempe died.

She'll kill him and me both. ‘No, I ain't gonna do it,’ I say. ‘I'm staying right here with my boy.’

Everything but the smell of burning wood disappears.

*He can't hardly hear you over everybody else calling his name.*

‘I don't hear nobody.’

*Of course you don't. When it's your time, you won't hear them either. You done forgot all about home.*

‘You ain’t talking sense.’

*When’s the last time you talked about Mama?*

‘I think about her all the time.’

*When’s the last time you talked about her? Edward know about her?*

‘No.’

*Then he can’t hear her. That’s your doing.*

‘Then why can’t he hear me? He know me.’

*You think Mama the only one trying to call him?*

‘Who else then?’

Tempe stares at me for so long I’m not sure she’s going to answer.

*All I can do is lead him home. And I can’t do that if he don’t know who I am.*

The room spins round and round. I grab for Edward’s hand. ‘He’ll hate me.’

*Selfish.*

‘Who want to die hating their mama?’

*You ain’t no mama if you rather him go to hell thinking you his mama than go home with me.*

I put my head where Edward’s heart should be. I listen. Nothing.

‘I’m going to have to ask you not to touch the patient,’ someone says.

I put my hand on Edward’s chest. ‘Hold on, baby, I’ll be right here. I’m going to talk to the man a moment.’ The doctor must be about six foot.

‘He can’t hear you.’ His crisp coat matches the words clanging to the floor. ‘He’s comatose. Do you know what that means?’

‘How long till I can take him home?’

‘Ma’am, I’m Dr. Ross. Mr. Freeman is dying. Is he taking any medicines,’ he lowers his voice ‘from a doctor or otherwise?’

‘My son ain’t need no doctor since he left the Army.’

‘Did he get any pills then?’

‘If he did, it isn’t likely he’s still got em. That was years ago.’

‘Has he ever suffered any trauma to his head,’ the doctor pauses to study the chart, ‘before?’

‘I’m not sure what that has to do with him ending up here.’

‘If we know what caused him to go into shock...’

‘It wasn’t being thrown from the trolley?’

‘Ma’am,’ the doctor lowers his voice, places a warm hand on my shoulder. ‘We want to make him as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. If we can help him make it through the night, he just might make it to morning.’

And then what?

‘I’m going to look in on my other patients. I’ll be back to check in.’

‘He’s gone,’ I say when he is.

*If he live, they gonna kill him. You know that don’t you?*

‘Maybe they’ll leave him be. They’ll find out whoever did it and leave Edward in peace.’

Even in death Tempe’s laugh rattles my teeth.

‘Maybe it was that boy, Jacob, got Edward all mixed up in some union mess. Edward didn’t want no parts of it and Jacob made him, forced him. That’s what happened, isn’t it Edward?’ I put my ear to Edward’s mouth and listen for moans, gasps, bursts of air, anything that sounds like a yes. Every so often a prick of breath tickles my earlobe. ‘Probably got wind of

what they was trying to do, jumped board that trolley, wrestled it from that no gooder, lost control and in trying to steer clear of folk, crashed. He's a hero. They can't kill a hero.'

*Can't they?*

If they'd known, they wouldn't have done him like this. 'It's cuz they didn't know he was trying to save them.'

*Why didn't they ask him?*

I close my eyes. Edward barrels down the street in a runaway trolley, arms waving wildly. He's screaming for help. He can hardly reach the brake, the controls ain't responding. He's ten, a little boy in a big, flaming trolley wanting nothing more than to go home.

We wait. Around us, patients settle into heavy breathing, some slip in and out of fretful dreams and wake to their own screaming. Nurses jab, bandage and shift bodies. They note charts, check vitals. Metal wheels squeak as dying patients are replaced with other dying ones. It can't be long past midday but the clouds have hidden the sun. Rain beats down on the roof. Thunder rolls across the sky. Lightning flashes every so often. A thin stream of water leaks onto the floor. A nurse comes in with a bucket. Rain plops and keeps time, tick, tick, tick. Edward does not stir.

What if he didn't do nothing? Will they leave him alone or just put something else on him? If he don't die tonight, will they just kill him tomorrow? Even if he did it, if innocent people died because he was wrapped up in some union dispute over money, he wouldn't deserve to die this way. With no name, no kin, nowhere to go. Whether he's a hero or no, my boy is dying. 'I can't save him, can I?'

*You can lead him home.*

I settle down on Edward's bed, lift his head onto my lap. The weight feels good. I breathe the scent of bleach, soap, ammonia water, the faint smell of death. The book is heavy in my



hands. Its soft cover is flesh beneath my fingers. The pages flip rapidly. I turn back to the beginning. They flip again, stopping on articles about the war, the emancipation, the fire.

‘Tempe, if I’m going to tell this story, I’m going to tell it my way,’ I say.

*You ain’t got much time.*

‘I’ll either tell it my way, or it won’t get told.’

Five stories below, the streets call Edward’s name. Tempe huffs but she leaves the book alone.

‘Most of what I’m about to tell you ain’t in no history book, no newspaper article, no encyclopedia. There’s a whole heap of stories don’t ever get told. What I know comes straight from my sister’s lips to my heart and to this book. Some of it I seen with my own two eyes. Some with hers. You come from free people. From right here in Philadelphia. You wasn’t born here. It was me that brought you home.’

I open the book and begin.

## Chapter 5



Ella's neck is stiff but she won't rub it. What's five more minutes of discomfort compared to what other folks have to bear? Has it been five minutes yet? Time doesn't seem to be moving. If it wasn't for the sound of grinding and scraping and now the smell of fresh baked bread, Ella would swear time wasn't passing at all. Maybe not swear. She leans forward on her crate at the end of the row of West Philadelphia's Third Baptist Church wondering if the sermon would have been over already if she had gone over to East Philadelphia's. With her head still bowed, she peeks. All she can see is a row of shoes, some spit-shined some lightly dusted, some rooted to the floor, others tapping. None seem to be itching like hers to run.

'God loves even the slaves,' the preacher says. His voice fills the small store/pharmacy/church, one of the few places they can speak freely. 'Their suffering and pain has paved their way to the Heavenly Gates. Their earthly burdens will be replaced, their souls restored and they will suffer out of love for our Lord.'

Ella shifts her weight from one foot to the other. 'By the time service ends today, we'll all be meeting the Lord,' she mumbles.

Sister Adelaide, the oldest woman Ella has ever seen, whispers hot and spitty in her ear, 'hushhhhh.'

'The life of the heathen is full of despair,' the preacher continues, 'until our slave brothers and sisters let loose their shackles and embrace the Lord,' he pauses and throws off his thin sweater. With the windows shut and the congregation of thirty-five free men and women

held captive until service ends, the preacher launches into last Sunday's service. 'Won't none of us be free till we all free. Can I get an Amen?'

'Amen!' The congregation yells.

One hour later, after slipping the thin pamphlet, *The Price of Freedom: The Guide to the Young Christian Woman's Role in Saving the Heathen, the Slave and the less fortunate*, into the fold of her frock, Ella turns to leave. She has just enough time to get home before supper. Sister Adelaide starts twitching. Unless Ella can stop her, in a few minutes the twitch will reach her bones and her eighty-seven year-old body will spring off of the hard bench and dance up the aisle for near an hour.

'My God is an awesome God,' Ella sings out. Her voice is soft and clear like her mother's. 'He's truly amazing. My God gave his Son for me. With my voice I praise him...'

'He laid down his life for me,' a deep voice takes up the refrain.

Within minutes the entire congregation rocks and sways to the familiar song of benediction. The collection plate passes around. Folks hoping for an extra blessing surround the preacher. A nickel later, Ella slips out the back.

It's near dark. Mama will skin her alive if she's late again. Now, the only way to get home before sunset is to cut through the woods. The path is short: a thin trail, thick trees. She can cut right through and be almost home. She'll just have to run the rest of the way. If someone sees her she'll be in trouble for sure. Mama's told her not to cut through the woods near a thousand times. Almost as many times as she's told her to say her prayers, set the table, sit like a lady and act like she had some commonsense and home training.

Ella slips into the woods. The path is worn down by feet. Her leather soles barely leave a print. The thin trail is riddled with weeds. In the spring, lush patches of bright colored Bluebells,

Honeysuckles and Cherry Blossoms carpet the wood; it would be near impossible to find the path. But today, a breezy mid-Autumn evening, the brown grass, crisp leaves and thin branches bow and crunch. Before long the wood thins, the weeds part. Ella can just about see the dirt road. The sky is still light. She can make it. She slips out the wood shaking leaves and dirt from her clothes.

‘What you doing in them woods?’ He’s not from around here. Thin shoes, instead of work boots, the words scattering slow enough to pick them up if she wants to. His mouth twists like he tastes something rotten. He’s a stranger, a white one. Trouble.

‘Walking,’ Ella says. She stares at a slippery puddle of chewed tobacco at his feet. His toes seem about to burst through the thin leather.

‘Walking, what?’

‘Like this.’ She takes one large step, followed by a larger one, then another.

‘Don’t walk away while I’m talking to you!’

‘I’m just trying to explain what I’m doing,’ she says. ‘I’m taking the short cut from church so I get home in time for supper. Mama gets mad something fierce if I’m late.’ Ella looks around. Nothing but a lonely wagon stacked with chicken cages, a bureau and some thick mattresses tied to two horses. Any other time a neighbor or two would be in a garden pulling vegetables for supper, out back taking clothes off the line, walking down the street on the way home from work. Seems like everybody in Philadelphia is shut behind locked doors and here she is talking to some strange white man all alone. Papa will have a fit.

‘You supposed to be walking through the woods like that?’

‘Like what?’ Ella's right eye twitches. Run.

‘What's the matter with your eye?’

‘Tainted,’ she whispers. Words seem stuck in her throat. She can’t get enough air.

‘Damned my luck. First a bushel of broken ones back home and now this. Why me?’

The too-close man's hot breath wrinkles Ella's nose. She steps backwards.

‘Walker,’ a familiar voice calls from the other side of the wagon, ‘will you come on? I got to get back home before it gets too dark.’

‘Mr. Thompson?’ Ella calls. ‘I’m sure glad to see you!’ The words tumble fast, in time with her heart. She catches herself before running to hug him. The last thing she needs is Mama to come round the bend and see her arms wrapped around Mr. Thompson.

‘Ella? What you doing out here all by yourself? Your pa know where you at?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘You ain’t been sneaking round with no boy have you?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Don’t seem like your pa to let you go running around town by yourself. It seems like you’re always up under your mama’s skirts or running behind one of your brothers.’

‘Yes, Sir, I’m just on my way home now.’

‘Through the woods?’

‘I was taking a short cut. It seemed like the fastest way to get home. You know how my mama gets if I miss supper.’

Thompson smiles. ‘You should get on home then.’

Ella turns to go. She will have to run to make up the time. Won’t Mama be tickled when she tells her what a fright she had on the way home? Overreacting, that’s all. Just plain imagining. ‘I’ll tell Pa I saw you and Ma that you asked after her.’

‘Hold still, Negra,’ Walker demands.

Run. Run. Run. The birds chirp, chickens cluck, wind whispers it. Ella keeps walking. Her heart beats so loudly that she can barely make out Mr. Thompson's words behind her. Walker catches up and grips her shoulder tight.

'Walker, let that gal go!' Thompson yells out. 'Get on home, child.'

Walker tightens his grip. His thick fingernails dig into Ella's shoulder. 'You said if I did a few jobs for you, you'd help me catch one. Well, I caught one. First Negro we seen alone in miles. Must be some sort of sign. Now help me get her in the wagon.'

'The Lord is my shepherd... ' Ella prays. I'm going to die. I'm going to die.

'I didn't mean a tamed one. I meant one running around. One I don't know.'

'Well she's one I don't know,' Walker says. He pulls Ella towards the wagon. She digs her heels into the dirt. He drags her. Her leather shoes, the ones Mama cured, stitched, dyed instead of buying the readymade ones in the shop, scrunch and slide off Ella's feet. She fights. She flails and twists her arms, contorts her back. He clamps an arm around her neck, wrestles to pick her up.

'Wait a minute!' Thompson says, 'I don't want no trouble with her pa. He's good people.'

'For a colored.' Walker spits the words with a clump of chewing tobacco on the ground. 'Soon you be talking bout they just like us.'

'Just pick another one.' Thompson blocks the way to the wagon.

'Look here, Thompson. You good people. You work hard. Got a piece of land. Do right by your missus. Got yourself a reputation here. You gonna let this fool of a girl ruin all you building up? Don't you care about your family? I care about mine, I do. I don't know what kind of man that makes me but I can't go home without this gal. I can't do that to the missus. I ain't

told you before now but my place is bad off. You know how long it's been since we had a youngun? Something ain't right there. Need to start over. Build from the dirt up. Need a gal like this to break the curse.'

Thompson laughs. 'A curse? You talking just like them. There's no such thing as a curse.'

'No? Then there's no harm in taking this gal, is there?'

Thompson stares at Ella, wriggling in Walker's grasp.

'Ain't nothing wrong with what we doing,' Walker continues. 'What you think gonna happen to her if she keep running around with her uppity ways? Talking to folk any ol' kind of way? You want her pa to have to bury her cuz she don't know how to talk to white folk? And her ma, you want her ma to be chasing round trying to make her do right? Won't be long before some boy in her skirts. She won't bring nothing but shame.'

Walker's hands fumble over Ella's body as he tries to haul her into the wagon. Her pamphlet falls to the ground. She kicks hard like her brothers taught her and runs without turning to watch him double over.

'Call the law! Call the law!' Walker yells. 'You seen it. She attacked me!'

Ella's arms and legs pump as she runs down the road. Just a few strides more and she will be at the bend. Behind her someone stumbles, the earth crunches beneath the weight of too-tight shoes. A slippery hand tugs at the back of her dress. Thompson.

Wheezing, he grips a handful of cloth and hefts her off her feet. 'Stupid fool,' he whispers. 'Wouldn't none of this have happened if it weren't for you.'

She's dying. The high neckline grandmother had sworn by and insisted upon clings to her neck like stingy hands. Between the biting lace, Thompson shaking her so that her head rattles



and her lungs refusing to breathe, Ella's world turns black. She almost doesn't feel it when Walker hits her in the head with the side of a pistol.

It's dark when she comes to. Her head throbs. Her heart hurts. Her arms and legs, tied, are sore. Her throat is dry. Her tongue's thick. The drying vomit under her nose, around her mouth, covering her chin, suffocates her. Her head thumps against wood planks each time the wagon bumps, swerves. I want my mama. She lays on her side in the back of the wagon tied hands to feet under a thick row of scratchy blankets and smelly chicken crates. The squawking and scratching of the chickens muffles her screams. The wagon bounces for hours. Days. It is dawn when it finally stops. Shuffling feet, hushed voices and then Walker's voice, angry and short.

'Just tend the horses and unload the chickens. I'll get the rest.'

Ella screams.

A sharp bang on the side of the wagon is the only response. The horses are unhitched. The crates unloaded. The blankets lifted. A flash of light. Fresh air, dark brown eyes staring in to hers. Ella jumps.

Quickly a brown hand releases the blankets. Darkness.

Ella's heart pounds. Her clothes stick to her skin. Her skin sticks to the wooden wagon bottom. The ropes cut into her wrists and ankles.

Hours later she's dragged across the wagon floor, dumped to the ground. She stares up into an older version of Walker.

Walker joins them. He spits near her face.

‘Sir, there’s been some mistake,’ Ella says. Don’t look them in the eye. Lower your voice. Be respectful. Her throat is hoarse. ‘If you would just cut me loose, I can get back home.’

‘What’s she talking about?’

‘Damned if I know,’ Walker Junior says.

‘Would you shut her up so we can get down to business?’

Ella closes her eyes in time to see the sole of Junior’s shoe before he kicks her in the face.

## Chapter 6

For three days Ella is chained naked to a wooden beam a little thicker than she is. Her legs, arms, neck, and every piece of flesh aches. Flies buzz and settle in her hair, on her legs. Her muscles flinch; the flies, undaunted, lap at streaks of urine that dry down her inner thighs. A barn. The air is hot with the stench of manure, pee, sweat, and hate. The smells sizzle, filling Ella's nostrils. She had been left alone the first two nights. No food, no water, no answer to her screaming or begging to be set free. No glaring eyes. She is almost thankful.

Ella has heard stories about robbers creeping in through windows and snatching up colored children who didn't mind their parents or clean their plates. But she wasn't a kid anymore and these weren't googly-eyed demons. She hasn't been snatched from her bed. For as long as she can remember she's been warned of the dangers the night brings. There were stories. Always don't do, don't do, don't do or they'll snatch you. But in the broad daylight? Who warned her about that?

She prays. Please Lord let me see my papa again. Papa must be worrying a hole in the porch by now. Most likely he's rounded up the boys and the men from town, hitched up wagons

and corralled horses. He's armed with loaded rifles and unleashed hunting dogs. Right now Papa's on his way with his men and his guns and his fury. Just wait and see. Just wait.

For three days the cows stare—bored.

When they come, they come carrying candles. Two shadows circling, watching, appraising; casting lines.

'How much she cost?' The old one asks.

'I negotiated some good terms, you'd be proud.'

Sweat trickles into Ella's eyes. Her body burns all over. 'I've been stolen!' she screams.

The back of a hand cracks her dry, swollen lips.

'She ain't got no papers, son?'

'I am free!'

Hot fire presses under her arm; her skin burns. Ella screams. The candle flickers.

'What's the matter with you?' Thin hands press cloth on her skin. Smells of skin, lilac and turpentine swirl as the old man prods the fresh burn and stuffs the rag in Ella's mouth. Ella bites hoping for bone, flesh or blood, instead she holds a mouth full of fraying dirty rag and screams. 'Won't get near as much for her if she's scarred up.'

Fingers part folds of flesh, pinch. Ella writhes and squirms, twists from hands that are soft like pincushions.

'Look at her, heifer must be in heat.'

'You only got a few weeks to break her in. If you can't, I'll do it.'

'It won't hardly take that long, pa. She's mine now.'

Ella's stomach spasms. It constricts and tightens. I am not a slave, I am not a slave, I am not a slave. The dry cloth smothers the words before they can leave her mouth.

A few hours later, stars pepper the sky. It's not the carefree breeze of a Philadelphia night. The air is crisp, cold. Inside, candlelight flickers. In gentle voices the men worry over the loss of appetite of a milking cow. Hay rustles. A sweet scent. Cows cull. Heavy boots stomp, wood slides across cold floor. The men settle, wait. Their voices echo. She feels them, knows they are close. Soon Papa will come with her brothers and shotguns. The white men will be sorry. Will Papa kill them anyway? Probably.

But when the killing is over she'll get a whupping. It's her fault she's here chained to a beam in a stinky barn and not home. It's her fault she's been stolen. Something in her eyes, her walk, her voice. Whatever it is, it was in the way he looked at her. Like she was the devil. Soon as she gets home, she'll go to church, twice on Sundays. And no more sneaking out the house like she's been doing. From now on she'll do as she's told. She'll finish her chores and wait for her mother or grandmother to walk the five miles to the big church clear on the other side of the city. She won't complain about passing at least ten churches just to get there or being forced to sit through the children's service even though she's nearly 12 years old. She'll mind the young ones with their dirty hands reaching for her ribbons and just smile when they beg for sweets even though they know better than to ask for something before the bell rings. She'll smile and sing and tell stories and let them climb all over her and miss the service and ask Mama and them what the preacher said. She won't even think of sneaking back to her own church with the smell of warm bread where she sits with the grown folks and is chair of the Adult Reading group. If she's good, maybe Mama will let her go back to her little church even though there's "hardly any prospects there worth considering for a young lady," even though she's not even considering. If Mama does let her go back, for as long as she lives, she will never take another shortcut home.

Splinters pierce her skin clasping her to the beam. The chain winds around her neck, snakes across her belly, wraps around her thin thighs. It is old. It digs into her flesh leaving flecks of rust and blood on her skin. Heavy on her soul. As the air cools and the night thickens the men talk numbers, coins, pounds, percentages. They count cows, berries, acres, slaves down to the last penny.

‘Hips wide for breeding. What you reckon she’s good for ten, twelve?’

‘One a year for,’ Walker Junior taps his fingers loud against his palm, ‘that sounds about right.’

‘We should have a healthy stock in just a few years.’

‘You sure she can birth?’

‘I don’t see why not.’

‘Nothing else grows here. Ain’t no younguns’ been born here for over—’

‘—don’t start talking that curse nonsense. The only thing keeping these Negroes from birthing is the devil. They’re just too evil to birth babies.’

‘It ain’t just them.’

‘Son, your wife ain’t nothing like them. She’s delicate. Give her time. If there’s any wool to that curse yarn, this new gal will change it. Start afresh. And if there isn’t, well, she didn’t cost you much.’

Sour phlegm bubbles from Ella’s stomach, floods her mouth, saturates the cloth, seeps down her chin. She will die here. Of all the ways Ella has imagined dying: flattened by a runaway cart, trampled by an ornery mule, beat to within an inch of her life by Mama’s switch, choked by a rag full of throw-up wasn’t one of them. Ella M. Clarke, 12 years old. Dead.

‘The damned fool’s choking. How you choke on your own spit?’ The old man yanks the rag from her mouth. He folds the cloth, wipes streaks of vomit from her face with a scratchy patch of it and shoves the rag back in her mouth. ‘The way I see it, you done her a favor. Roaming the streets, clothes torn off like a hussy? It’s a wonder no one took her sooner. She coulda ended up dead.’

‘Sure coulda.’

Ella bangs her head against the solid wood. If she can get it to crack she can wake up. There will be blood, maybe a knot on her head, a headache. Even if her head splits wide open, it will be better than this. When she wakes up, maybe all this—the strange look in Thompson’s eyes, being stolen, soiled—is a touch of wine, Christ’s blood, sipped from the bottom of a jelly jar. She’d known better than to dip from the grown folks’ Communion glass. Any minute she’ll wake up and find herself lying in the middle of the cornfield out back of the church or swaying on the path through the woods, cocooned, safe. Her skirts might be damp, a bit muddy. She’ll have to run home for sure. If she can wake up, she’ll get home.

‘Stop it you damned fool!’ Sweaty hands around her waist. Senior tightens the heavy chain links. ‘Since you’re worrying about it, we ought to see if something’s wrong with her,’ he says. ‘I’ll do it.’ He unbuckles his belt.

‘No, Pa, what if she’s got something? No sense you getting it too.’

‘What you wanna do? Send for Doc? By the time you get him to come over here, he’ll be too fill of drink to think straight.’

‘No need to get him involved. I’ll get Little James, he’ll do.’ He’s out the door before his father can answer.

Before it stops, Ella's heart beats so loudly it echoes in the beam, the shutters seem to shake, the floor trembles. Her body shakes. The old man runs dry, thick fingers across her skin. He presses, pinches, slaps, twists. She worries his sandpaper fingers rubbing against her flesh will start a fire. Ignite them both, she hopes.

'Ain't nothing wrong with you, is there?' He asks. He probes, sinking his fingers deep inside her.

A few minutes later, Walker returns with Little James. He hangs a lantern on a nail. Nods his head in Ella's direction. 'Do your business,' he says.

James unhitches his breeches. 'Don't do this,' Ella begs through the rag. Her head barely reaches his chest. Little James is at least two heads taller and nearly as old as Papa. Without looking at her, he spits on his hands, rubs them together, spits on them again and pushes two fingers inside of Ella. She shrieks. James smothers her screams with his chest, he enters her. He ruts inside her. His cold sweat drips down her skin. She shivers.

'That's it,' he coaxes.

The beam wedges into her back. Splinters dig into her skin. Her body burns from the inside. James' body shakes. He grunts. A warm glob drips down Ella's thigh.

'Sorry,' he whispers. He pulls up his pants.

'Well?' Senior asks.

'Sir, sure don't feel like she tainted,' James declares. He adjusts his breeches.

'Good, good,' Senior says reaching to unbuckle his belt.

James rocks back and forth on his heels.

'Would you stay still?' Walker asks.



James fidgets. He rubs one thigh, then the other. Soon he is frantically rubbing them both. ‘I’m burning! I’m burning!’ He screams flinging himself to the floor. ‘Master, please take that rifle and shoot me.’ He crawls on his knees towards Walker. ‘I ain’t gonna be no use to you at all.’ His eyes roll in his head. Tears drip down his face.

Ella, Walker and Senior stare.

‘Pull yourself together,’ Walker demands. ‘Go down to the old woman see if she ain’t got something to keep it from falling off.’

‘That’s a damn shame,’ Senior says. ‘Thought for sure if there was a curse, and I ain’t saying there is, but if it was, wouldn’t expect this gal would already be touched.’

‘She was probably worn down when I got her. Damn Thompson sold me a rotten one.’

It’s nearly light when Walker returns. Ella whimpers. ‘Don’t you worry none,’ he says. ‘You still good for something.’ He unlocks the chains letting them clang to the floor around her feet. Before she can run he forces his fingers inside her—slaps her for being dumb enough to let a buck take her and for not having the decent morals of the lowest farm animal—pulls her to her knees, yanks the rag from her mouth and forces his man part between her teeth. Words flash behind her closed eyes. Slave. Breeding. Papa. God. Home. She bites down.

There isn’t nothing else to do but hold on. Junior howls and bucks. His fists crash into Ella’s head. Even as she lets go, the sides of her head, her mouth, her eyes, her chest, her belly, her legs, her special places crumple beneath the blows. Barefoot, he gives a final kick to her mouth. Teeth give way. She swallows them—eight teeth gulped like dreams.

Walker grabs her feet, drags her across the barn, across planks, nails, manure. He lifts her up high and tosses her into a mushy pile. If she hadn’t rolled off she would have died there, buried in a pile of dung. Darkness fills her head. Pain swirls into a melody. Tiny sharp rocks

bite into her back, her arms, her legs. They dig into her cheeks. Moving hurts. Not moving hurts. She measures short breaths: in, out, in, out with long pauses in between. The motion makes her sides hurt so she stops. Something inside is broken. Her eyes are puffy and sore, her jaw aches, her head rings like a church bell. She flicks her tongue along the oozing holes in her mouth. Gone. Her mouth is heavy with dirt and rocks, her tongue slippery with seed she will not swallow that thickens and mixes with spit and tears. Her flat palms press the cool earth. Her dull nails filled with dried slivers of skin and flecks of blood dig into the ground. Ella's lips are raw, swollen and blistered, gummed shut. She moans in a rich baritone that would have been the envy of all the girls in the choir.

A deeper voice joins in. A girl with hair thick and matted, clothes thin and worn; a voice sweet like love, forgiveness, peace, joy and anything at all worth having hums Ella's song.

Mama?

Ella lays naked surrounded by trash, leavings and dirt at the bottom of a hill. Her arms and legs twisted, her body bruised, sore, broken; her soul stolen. Through squinting eyes, the girl's smile is the last thing Ella sees. The darkness takes over. Ella Mae Clarke is going home.

## Chapter 7

Ella wakes to warm hands and cool water dripping over her body. She's still alive. Damn. The touch is gentle, loving. The hands move in circles kneading and cleansing. Ella's skin is raw. It flits and jumps.

'Way you was carrying on, thought you'd be all busted up,' a girl's voice says. Smelling of sweat and lilac, she's kneeling just beside her. Too close.

Ella tries to open her mouth.

'Don't try to talk. I haven't tended your mouth. Probably a good thing too. You's a screamer. I'm Agnes,' she says as if she isn't wiping blood and seed from between Ella's thighs. 'And don't you even think about running. You hear?' Agnes lays down her cloth and scoops up a rusted rifle. She points it at Ella's head. 'Massa say you even look like you thinking about running, I shoot.'

Ella flinches. Shoot me then.

‘I’m hoping I don’t have to shoot you none. Who you think gotta clean all that up?’

Agnes laughs, settles the rifle beside her.

It takes three trips to get enough fresh water from the river to clean Ella’s body to Agnes’ satisfaction. Agnes’ job is to tend the sick until Mama Skins gets around to them. She just moves the aches around to different places but Mama Skin is a healer.

When the sun goes down, Agnes pushes and pulls Ella across the pasture. How can it take so long to drag one little dainty gal home, Agnes thinks. Not like she’s helping neither. They’ve been moving forever and they aren’t even to the halfway post let alone to the gate. She’ll be late. If she doesn’t get back in time to feed the animals, Mama will kill her dead. And it will be her own fault too. If she dies tonight Mama will have no one to blame but her old fool self. *Agnes boil the meat. Agnes keep the gophers out of Master’s garden. Agnes keep the chickens out of Missus’ drawers. Agnes bring me that colored gal.* Like all she needed was one more thing to do. She props Ella up to see if she can stand. She slumps over and slides to the ground. Her head thuds softly on a bed of grass.

‘You’d think you’d have sense enough not to fall down,’ Agnes says staring down at her. She’s already had to leave her good bucket and cloths behind the barn, now she’ll have to leave Papa’s busted up rifle too. This gal sure is a lot of trouble. ‘I’m gonna leave this right here. So’s you know, I can run faster than a cow at a barbecue. You start to look like you running away and I’ll come right back and blow your head off. Clear off.’ In case she doesn’t understand, Agnes waves her hand in her best ‘your head rolling away’ motion. She puts the rifle down. With her hands beneath Ella’s armpits, she hoists her up again. She lets Ella lean against her. Agnes studies the small frame. Ella’s hair is thick and matted; her arms and legs are bruised; her lips are

busted up. She looks like a hen that got caught out in a real bad storm. ‘What if I just pick you up?’

Ella moans.

‘I’ll be careful.’

Ella moans louder.

‘Suit yourself.’ Agnes pushes her through the high grass of the far field. The grass stings her legs. If she’d only move those big feet. ‘If you’d walk, we’d get there faster,’ Agnes says.

Ella shakes her head hard. Agnes waits to see if it will pop off. If it does, Mama Skins will just put it back on.

‘Mama Skins is going to make the hurt stop. You’ll see. It won’t be so bad round here after that.’

Ella keeps shaking her head.

‘She gonna look after you.’

More head shaking.

‘You ain’t gotta like it. This is home now.’

The head shaking is joined by Ella rolling her eyes.

‘See that fence there. We make it to there, we can rest a spell.’

Ella digs her feet into the soil.

Still pulling her, Agnes plods ahead ignoring the tufts of dirt and grass she’ll have to replant. ‘Look, past that fence, we going through those woods, by the river and when we get to Mama Skins you can moan and twitch all you like, hear?’

Ella goes stiff. She even stops that annoying sliding motion she’d been getting away with.

Agnes has a good mind to slap her across the face. She stops pushing, twirls her around, puts her face close enough to Ella to breathe the same breath. Hand raised, she looks deep in Ella's eyes for a long time. They are brown and wide filled with fear, anger, hope and staring back at Agnes. Agnes turns away first. She lowers her hand, unwraps her shawl—old even before it was handed down from the Missus—and loosely hangs it on Ella's thin shoulders. 'We rest when we get to the woods. Then we head home.'

Just beyond the fence, Agnes lays Ella down in her favorite spot under the copse of Willow trees. Above them, thin branches interlock and embrace, sway and create a gentle breeze. The drooping leaves weave a canopy. Agnes wants to tell her that nothing bad happens here. Knees on the hard ground, she stretches her arms wide. 'All this,' she says instead, 'is Walker land.'

'Hmmphh'

'It is. Them fields, that barn, those pastures—morning and evening one—these woods, that river stretch from one end of Walker land clear to another and farther too. And you know what?'

'Hmmphh.'

'It's cursed.'

Ella tenses.

'Got our own haints right here. I ain't never seen nor heard em but everybody know it. Cept you. Course you wouldn't knowed it. But you should have felt it. First time they step foot on Walker Land most folk say they feel something pushing them right back off. And you know what again? They don't allow nothing to grow here that they don't want to. Them haints is stingy. Onliest thing that grow here is blueberries and carrots. That's it. Plant lettuce, know what

spring up? Blueberries. Plant good ol' mustard greens. Know what spring up? Blueberries.

Mantha and Meredith, them the cooks up at the house, got so good at making blueberry cakes, blueberry pie, blueberry tea, blueberry stew. They got everybody fooled into thinking they like blueberry. And if you don't, there's carrot cake, carrot pie, carrot tea, carrot stew. Like you some meat? A good ol' hog bone or calf foot? Don't even look at them cows out the pasture. Each and every cow on this place got a number and if one missing, there's hell to pay. Ain't no baby cows here, count of the curse. No baby nothing. No baby chicks, no baby pigs, no baby slaves. Only thing allowed to grow up on Walker is me. Know why?' She lies down next to Ella, buries her fingers into the dirt, breathes slowly as if she's fallen asleep. 'It's cuz they choose me. The haints do. Couldn't be no babies born on this place before or after me. All of them born dead. Mantha and Meredith babies died for they was born. And after that, Missus baby. And after that no more baby cows. And after that no more baby nothing. The haints sent Walker to find me. Told him exactly where to go to find my other mama dying in the woods, running off I suspect. Walker saved me. Brought me back to Mama Skins. I wasn't the first. He brought other ones home and you know what they did? Died.' She snaps her fingers, grins as Ella jumps. 'Wasn't nothing wrong with them till they got here. Haints ain't want 'em. Tried a few more after me. They died too. I'm the onliest one growed up here. I sure hope you don't die.' She jumps up and brushes her scratchy gingham dress off before nudging Ella with her barefoot. 'Think you can get up?'

Still on the ground, Ella folds her short body into a ball. Her bony knees bend into her little chest. Her thin arms wrap around her long legs. Her small feet tucked beneath her, she cries.

For a while Agnes watches her small back shake. 'You want to die here, fine.' She walks slow enough to give Ella time to change her mind, pull her body up, drag her feet in that slow

walk she has and catch up. She counts the trees: beech, beech, oak, oak, pine, pine, pine. What's taking her so long? She probably got lost. Even though the path is clear as day and Agnes hasn't even gone that far the poor little dumb thing is probably all turned around and scared worried she won't find her. Fine, she'll save the gal. Just one more thing to do.

She turns slowly half expecting to find Ella right behind her. She searches through the wood to the left of the path. Then to the right. Mama Skins will kill her if she's let the girl get lost. What if something has gobbled her up? Agnes hopes it will try to eat her too. Not a hungry bite but a little taste; maybe a nibble of foot. Mama Skins can't be mad if the thing takes a bite of her too. Just in case, she tiptoes back to where she left her. Ella lies there with her legs crossed ankle to ankle and her arms laced across her chest.

'Hey there,' Agnes whispers, 'you dead?' She lightfoots close enough to see Ella's chest moving. 'No? Well, I can't let you die in the woods, Mama Skins will kill me.' She stoops down close, whispers: 'If you dead when your papa come, what you want me to tell him?'

Ella twists her lips but holds her arms out.

'I heard you carrying on about your papa coming to rescue you. I expect they heard you clear up to the house and back down to the fields. I don't mind telling you, all that screaming set my spine to shivering. That's why Mama Skins sent for me. "Go get that gal before she get herself killed," she said. Mama Skins probably saved your life.' Ella doesn't say so much as a thank you, no smile or nothing. Agnes hefts her up, positions, and push-pulls her through the thick woods. Every few trees Agnes catches herself humming. No, if she wants silence I can be silent. There's the rock Little James fell from last planting season. That's where mamas go to pray for babies that ain't never been. There's where babies lay while they wait on their mamas to join them. Won't tell that haughty gal nothing. Let her stew in her own breathing and that loud



beat, beating of her heart. Her chest hardly moving but her heart pounding like a dying calf.  
Nope, won't tell her one thing.

The scent of the river fills her. The promise of washing away dirt, hurt and anger flows over rocks, through passages. It bubbles and swirls. Invites. Halfway between the house and the cabins, the river is a meeting place for Walker's slaves. The Washing Up place where pots and clothes from the house and pots and clothes from the cabins are scrubbed, soaked, boiled and seasoned. The only place slaves from the house can talk freely with fieldhands.

'This where I go to be free,' Agnes says. She can't stop the words from coming out. She's just not selfish like some folk, stingy with words. She sits down on the edge of the riverbank and lets her feet dangle in the water.

Ella slumps down beside her.

'This river comes from up North,' she continues. 'If I sit right here when the moon is bright and the river is high, the water from the north mix with the water from the south and in that very spot, I'm free.'

Ella's laugh, a low rumble, pierces the air.

'That's one ugly laugh,' Agnes says. 'You ought not to do it too often.' She crosses her arms, tilts her chin, purses her lips and thinks of all the things she will never tell Ella. She turns her back on her. At the edge, water laps at her toes. Dried leaves tickle her fingertips. Above, blue sky peeks through tangles of branches. Animals scurry all around. Bunnies, a deer or two. Nothing to be afraid of. Lessin you wasn't from around here. How far is this gal from home? Who'd she leave behind? Did she have a mama like Mama Skins waiting on her? A papa like Papa Johnah quick with a laugh, a kind word? Is she supposed to share them? She'll help in the fields, maybe the house, Master Walker had said. Just like that. Agnes is supposed to be the one

to go to the house. Mama Skins had promised. Who else but Agnes can carry two pots of boiling water from the river to the house faster than it can cool? She can carry more firewood than Little James, polish longer than Meridith, scrub as hard as Mantha, cook better than them too if she has a mind to it. Now all that means nothing. She'll be back in the fields soon as this gal learns her place. This girl's grating on her nerves. She isn't nothing but trouble.

'If you was free like Mama Skins and them says, what you doing here?' she asks. 'You here to take my mama and papa, you gonna have a hard way to go. You think you gonna come here and work in the house and leave me to the fields, I'm gonna stop you right there. I'm the one gonna work in the house. You hear?'

Ella moans.

'Good. Mama Skins and them says you here to birth babies seeings none of us can.'

Shaking her head, Ella sits up too fast, clutches her side, rises to her feet.

'They say the ones Master keeps is gonna work in the field soon they can walk. But they'll be yours. Unless they get sold away.'

Ella doubles over.

'No, wherever they be, they be yours.'

Sobs ripple through Ella's body, pouring out of her mouth. In her fourteen years, Agnes has seen a lot of pain.

'You don't want to birth no babies, do you?' she whispers.

Ella slides down to the thick grass, she crawls to the riverbank. At the edge, she slips her feet into the water. Her body rocks back and forth, back and forth. The river ebbs and flows, swells and rises. Over there a leaf swirls in lazy circles. Aways off a thick branch is swallowed whole.

‘It ain’t deep all the way through,’ Agnes says. ‘I studied it. Know its dips and turns like I know my own.’ She places a hand on her hip.

Ella leans forward.

She wouldn’t jump in. Only a fool would jump in the middle of a river buck-naked in broad daylight. Agnes leans back to make shapes with the clouds. ‘See that fluffy one over there?’ She raises one hand to shield her eyes and points with the other. ‘That looks just like a bushel of apples from the Missus’ garden. You try it. What that one look like to you?’

With hardly a splash Ella slips in.

That heifer better can swim. The tide pulls her to the middle of the river. Her arms and legs go every which way. Agnes doesn’t know whether to laugh or jump in after her. Ella doesn’t holler or ask for help. She just flops there like to drown in knee-deep brackish water.

‘You trying to kill yourself?’

Ella’s arms and legs flail. Water rains fat droplets onto Agnes’ good dress.

‘You gonna have to try harder than that you want to get somewhere,’ Agnes says. She scoots closer to the edge of the bank.

The river sucks and pulls at Ella. Mama, Agnes practices, *I was sitting there and she was sitting there and then she wasn’t. I only got the one good dress and with it being three days till the next washing day, I couldn’t get it dirtied up.* Agnes inspects her dress. She fingers the streaks of mud and grass stains.

‘Stand up you fool girl!’ she yells.

Can she even hear her over the splash she’s making? Agnes watches Ella’s tiny chest crumple in and out. Now she’s gone and made herself cry. She slips off her shift, steps out of her underthings and slides in the cold water. Agnes lets the water pull her down to the clay bottom.

The sand sucks her skin and squishes beneath her feet. She holds her breath and counts to ten. She keeps her head underwater and lets her body rise to the surface. The sun warms her back as she breaks through the water's skin. Slowly Agnes lets her feet sink to the bottom and stands up.

‘You go out too far the river will suck you clear through the bottom. I seen it happen. Swallowed whole men. What you think it do to a gal like you? It ain't gonna carry you home if that's what you thinking and I can't let it take you nowhere no how. Mama Skins said bring you home. I'm gonna bring you home. After that, we just have to wait and see.’

Wait and see. Ella lets the girl drag her from the water. Though she can't read her face, Ella half expects Agnes to slap her. Her movements are quick, she already has Ella propped up as she drags her across the dirt. Her hands are gentler this time which is good since she doesn't seem ready to let go anytime soon. But she's in the way. If it comes to it, she'll have to knock her in the head with something. Can't take her in a fair fight. Not with them strong arms. She's the fastest girl at the schoolhouse and could even take some of the boys but Ella can't outrun those long, muscled legs. Least not with her side burning up. If she can get to that shotgun she can scare her off, maybe. With the girl holding tight, she won't get far. Maybe if she talks to her, explains that she hasn't come for her mama or her papa, that all Ella wants is to go home, she'll just let her go. Let go, let go, Ella thinks. She closes her eyes. The girl's smooth hands are still stuck fast to Ella's shoulders. If she lets go, Ella won't have to hurt her. They're moving farther and farther away from where she left the shotgun. The trees here look like the ones before it, the fields even if the girl calls them by different names, look the same, the stories about who did

what where sound like one long eulogy. Nothing good has come from this place. Why would this girl be any different? She'll have to kill her, later. Until then, Ella marks the way tree by tree.

Going around it will take hours. Instead, they cross the river at The Shallow. On the other side, the grass beneath her feet is springy. Even for this time of year, the clumps cushion and soothe Agnes' cracked feet. Soon as they get home she'll rub them in sweet balm. Might even use some on the gal. Her skin is bruised from head to foot. What could she have done to deserve that? Nothing. Agnes would bet that busted shotgun on it. Mama Skins said she'd brought it on herself. Papa Jonah didn't say much of nothing c'ept *be gentle. Be quick*, Mama Skins had said. It was the closest thing to them arguing that Agnes had witnessed. Sure, there had been slamming pots, stomping feet, and if he was real mad an untouched plate. Mama Skins wasn't no stranger to anger either. Summer squash when she knew it backed him up, tea leaves instead of tobacco, and if she was real mad, silence. But Papa and Mama didn't argue before today. Even if the words were curt and whispered, things were different. It was all because of this gal.

Agnes knew enough to know there was something they weren't letting on about. Good thing Meredith and Mantha didn't feel the same. Soon as he could get clear of the house, Little James had told Agnes everything the two said. She still didn't believe it. This gal was gonna make life a whole heap better for everybody on the farm? Lessin grown folks sprung out from her belly ready to pick, plow, and do all that needed doing on this place? Agnes didn't see how. She can't help but smile. Little James' liable to tell her anything to get her to run off with him. The bottom of her feet start to tingle.

'This poison,' she says.

Ella stops moving.

‘No sense standing still. It’s all around here. Right there,’ she points to white-tipped bushes. ‘There, there and right there where you standing? It’s all up in there. Squeeze some of that juice from them leaves between your legs and any man who touch you will go crazy with itching and scratching.’ She breaks off a fat leaf and snaps it in half. ‘Rub some on you, see for yourself.’

Ella takes the leaf. She watches the clear, sticky goo drip out.

‘Just a drop now,’ Agnes coaxes. ‘I heard you done met my James.’

Ella’s fingers tingle. She rubs the liquid between her legs. Fire. She’s sure she’s on fire. Burning from the inside out. Sweat pours down her forehead, under her arms, down her legs.

‘It’ll cool down. Just takes getting used to. Think about something else. Take your mind off of it. It just takes a bit of time for it to work.’ She smiles, hums. ‘Now you won’t have no baby, least not by my James. Stop fidgeting!’ She taps her foot, kicks up soft tufts of dirt. ‘Just a little while longer.’ She watches the clouds scoot across the sky. ‘You thinking bout something else? Good. Don’t think nothing about no itching, no burning. Don’t scratch it! It’ll take your skin clear off. Then what? Just let it be. I like to die the first time Mama Skins put it on me. Had to be five, six. I scratched and scratched. Still got the marks. Now, I hardly notice it at all. Just used to it. You didn’t use too much did you? It’ll kill you. First it dries out your mouth.’

Ella tries to swallow.

‘Then your heart get to boom, boom, boomin’ and your eyes get to going every which way, and everything inside, well, it ain’t in there no more.’

Ella sways.

‘Next thing you know, you dead. Just like that.’ She claps her hands together. ‘Mama Skins got something she can give you in case you took too much. Just be sure to stay away from James.’

Ella’s stomach clenches. If she wasn’t about to die, she’d kill Agnes.

It is nearly dark by the time she finally pushes Ella through the slight frame of the small cabin she shares with Mama Skins and Papa Jonah. Inside it is dark and cool. Any cracks or holes had been patched with gum to keep the rain out. The floors are swept and smell of fresh lemon rind. In the center of the small room a steel pot glows. From the corner, Mama Skins unfolds herself and stands. Standing, she is smaller than she looks. She is head to head with Agnes. Her arms are thin and bare, smooth except for pockmarks. Her legs are hidden beneath layers of a frock made of patches of fabric, fur and animal hides. Dark patches scatter her forehead and cheeks. Wrinkles frame her mouth. Her thick grey hair is plaited and adorned with tiny pebbles and shells. Strung into necklaces that hang loose and woven into a belt wound around her slim waist, shells and stones clank together as she walks. She jingles over to the girls and even though Ella pulls away, she gathers them both in her strong arms. Her eyes glisten.

‘Rest,’ Mama Skins commands.

Although she’s shaking her head no, Ella falls asleep standing.

I can run. Knock down this spicy smelling sing-song talking shell-clacking old woman, straight out the rickety door, back the way we come. Find my way to the poison patch back to the river,

cross it, follow the path to the big willow, get the shotgun, go through the field and go where? Back to the barn? The River. I can follow the river. Sooner or later it's gotta cross the ocean. From there I'll make my way home. Ella lies on a thick blanket on the floor pretending to be asleep. What she wouldn't give to be in her own bed, piled high with old mattresses or curled up in a homemade quilt lying on her own wooden floor.

'I thought you were planning to sleep clear through the day,' Mama Skins says.

Ella opens her eyes and glances up at the woman's mouth then concentrates on her fingers instead. Legs crossed at the ankles, she's sitting next to Ella, elbows resting on the thin pallet, fingers deftly sewing swatches of cloth. Her slim fingers glide across the fabric, stretching then binding with precision. She stitches without looking down. Mama would be envious.

'My teeth?' she asks. 'Knocked out long ago,' she runs her tongue along her gums. 'When I was young I had a lot of mouth. They thought knocking out my teeth would make me keep it closed. It worked. But not how they expected.' Her laugh is like piano scales, practiced, beautiful.

Ella tries to sit up. Her back, arms, and legs are sore. Her skin is covered in large black and blue bruises and red welts. What will Mama say? Tears slide down her face.

'You ain't as broke up as you think you is,' Mama Skins says. 'I had to rub some of them herbs to get you blistered up. The worse you look, the longer they'll leave you be.' She tucks the soft covering, a blanket of animal hides stitched together, tight around Ella. 'Agnes told me she gave you some of that goo. She ought not to give you that. I don't suspect it was enough to stop no baby coming. No need in making it any worse than it's gonna be.' She moves closer, leans forward. 'It's done now. Just need to wait for it to wear off. Before you know it, you'll be having babies. Sooner you start, sooner you be finished.'



Ella can't feel her legs. If they were shaking like the rest of her body, she'd know it. Her teeth rattle, her head throbs, her whole body is in motion, except for her legs. No telling what they're doing. She pictures them already gone.

Mama Skins marks the cloth with a needle. 'Settle yourself down. It could be a lot worse. Just one, two, three babies at the most. Thanks to the curse, you'll get to keep them.' She holds the piece up. 'It's for you,' she nods at Ella, 'a dress of your very own.' She lays the garment on the end of the bed. 'These yours too.' She holds up a set of grinning teeth. 'Jonah's been working them since you came. Whittled a year's worth of wax. Now you be all pretty. Try em.' She pries open Ella's mouth, slides the grin in place. 'There.' She leans back, admires her work, squints. 'They'll take some getting used to.'

Ella presses her swollen tongue along the waxen grooves. The teeth, some large, others small, crowd her mouth. They force her jaw to shift, her cheeks to spread.

'See, I knew you'd be smiling before long,' Mama Skins says. 'Walker likes pretty little smiling faces around here. You'll be just fine.'

I want to go home! The words bounce around in Ella's head, rattle in her heart.

Laden with cream, eggs and cornmeal, Agnes tiptoes into the cabin. 'This is from the Missus,' she says. 'For her.' She nods her head towards Ella.

Mama Skins stares at a spot above Ella's head. 'It's the Missus' way of saying sorry,' she says.

Agnes puts the cream, eggs and cornmeal next to jars of pickled carrots, glasses of blueberry jam and stacks of peppermint soap. For supper, Mama Skins makes carrot mash with roasted blueberries. She leaves the cream to curdle. Ella doesn't so much as taste the sweet carrots or nibble the crunchy berries.

Agnes watches Mama Skins and Papa Jonah fuss over the gal at supper. They try to coax her to eat like she's a stubborn cow. She thinks she's too good for us, Agnes thinks. She reaches over to pluck a morsel from her plate but the look Mama Skins gives her forces her to change her mind. Fine, I'll wait, she thinks. She finishes her own supper and clears the plates. Mama Skins tells her to leave the gal's plate so she can eat it later. Fine, one less plate to clean. Agnes does the washing up and puts out the fire.

Later, because there is no-where left to sleep, Agnes pulls her bedroll next to Ella's. Ella has been scrubbed and rubbed with so many ointments and herbs, leaves and berries that she smells like one of Missus' sachets. Her sweet scent tickles Agnes' nose. Her breathing is shallow and fast, like deep water. Agnes tries to match it. Her head is light. Her body is weightless. She floats above Ella to the top of the cabin. Her fingers, wisps of grey smoke, peel back the thin layers of the roof. There are no stars in the sky, there is no moon. Freedom. If Little James come tonight talking about 'run away with me' she just might listen. 'You awake?' Agnes is close enough to touch her. She listens to the young girl's labored breathing. She's been crying, again. 'Ain't really no haints here,' she says. 'No magic, hoodoo, nothing to be afraid of.' Walker, Missus, Overseer. 'Nothing that ain't living.' Ella's breathing turns to light snores. 'I know you ain't sleeping.' Agnes pokes her in the ribs. 'Know what else I know?' She pauses, swallows, whispers close to Ella's ear. 'I don't care what my mama says, when you run off, I'm leaving with you.'

## Chapter 8

Agnes pulls clusters of carrots from the earth in angry clumps. The girl's hardly been here a week and they're already rushing her out the door. There's no way that gal's making life on Walker's better for anybody. She's been here nearly seven days and hasn't lifted a finger to help. She hasn't cleaned the cabin, picked one carrot, plucked one berry. Has she helped in the fields? Not one bit. *She's too weak to be out in the sun.* Nobody rushed her then. Why's Mama Skins so bent on rushing her to do this now? Glaring at Mama Skins' back does nothing to stop the woman from washing Ella. Mama Skins pulls, prods, dresses, oils all the while cooing 'won't last longer than it has to. Don't you look pretty? Ain't no use in crying, be over soon enough.'

Thick-braided hair, skin rich like firewood, voice soothing like a summer bird. She looks like the same Mama Skins but the woman readying a shaking bit of a gal for plundering ain't her mama. When Mama Skins is satisfied that she's ready, she pulls Ella towards the door.

'I mind as well take her myself,' Agnes says.

Before Mama Skins can respond, Agnes is up. She wiggles between the woman and the girl, then pushes, pulls Ella out the door, through the wood, towards the river. Ella fights her. She

digs her heels into the ground, her nails into Agnes' arms. Agnes drags her. They slip, stumble, fall. Each time they fall Ella picks up something to hit Agnes with. A handful of rocks, a thick branch. She isn't going to let Walker anywhere near her, doesn't matter what that crazy old coot or her crazy daughter says.

'I said I'd take you to the barn and I'm taking you to the barn. But first, we gonna get you some of that goo. Can't do nothing about him touching on you today but put enough up in there and he won't be bothering with you no more anytime soon.' Agnes leads her to the sweet-smelling patch of poison. 'Myrtle done got it in Walker's head that maybe ain't nothing wrong with you. That ain't nothing wrong with James that "a little time in the well" won't cure. As if soon as he got out she wouldn't be fussing over him.'

Ella's feet dig into the ground. Planted, her body goes rigid. She opens her mouth but instead of words, she speaks in guttural growls and wheezes. She spits. Drops of red and yellow sprinkle the ground in front of Agnes' feet.

'What's the matter with you?' Her words are like a hiss. 'I told you,' Agnes says, 'Little James don't want no parts of you. Only reason he done what he done was he had to. If it wasn't for James, Walker and them would be laying up with you way before now. Just like you to think he'd choose you.' Agnes scoops a handful of flowers, plucks the leaves off, squeezes the stems and drinks from the stalk. 'When he was in you, you know what he was thinking bout? Me. He told me so. Now Myrtle trying to mess it all up. Got Walker thinking my James is lying. Can you believe that? Walker got to beating on him. Beat him so bad even Myrtle got to saying maybe she was wrong. James say hearing Myrtle say that almost made it worth it. But Walker act like he ain't hear her though. Said he gonna find out for his damned self. If ain't nothing wrong with you, there ain't nothing wrong with James. And if ain't nothing wrong with James, soon as he

heals up, Walker's gonna sell him. You ain't gotta like him but he helped you. Now you gonna help him.'

She watches as Ella's lips twitch, her eyes squint. The hairs on Agnes' arms stand up. She's got something on her mind. Agnes steps away, turns her back to the girl. She listens as Ella moves closer. Her feet barely make a noise in the soft grass. Her breath is hot on Agnes' neck. She cocks her head to the side, tosses the words over her shoulder: 'Maybe you won't. Maybe you'll go in and tell Walker there ain't nothing wrong with you. What do you think will happen then? James will be sent down south. What about you? As soon as he knows there ain't nothing wrong with you he'll be on you like bark on a stick. First it will be Walker, then old Walker, overseer, who else? They'll get to bedding you all the time. Well, guess that's up to you too. But you right, you don't have to help James.'

Ignoring the burn, the girls slather the grainy mixture anywhere they think Walker might touch.

Five minutes after Agnes pushes her in the barn Walker, still cursing, storms out. Agnes creeps from her hiding place and rushes to find Ella. Blood trickles down the side of her mouth.

'Seems like you tainted just like the rest of us,' she says. Agnes slips down to the floor next to Ella. Puts her head in her lap. Smooths her hair. They sit until their hearts stop racing, until swallowing no longer hurts, until breathing steadies. 'Soon as James can walk without that limp, we leaving. Walker ain't gonna sell him over this but if it ain't this, it'll be something else. Ain't gonna wait to find out what that something else is. Don't see why you can't come too.'

'Why can't she come?' James asks for the third time. 'Because she don't do nothing for herself. She would slow us down.'

It's early in the morning, before the sun is up. Agnes and James lie side by side, her head touching his, in the tall grass.

'Ain't nothing wrong with her legs,' she says, 'she'll be plenty help when we get to town. We can all work. Besides, she can read.'

'How do you know? She can't even talk.'

'She can talk, just ain't got nothing to say.'

'She's got plenty to say from what I hear.'

'Not when she's awake.'

'What if one night she gets to talking about us running away? Then what?'

'Even if she do, at least my mama ain't gonna tell nobody about it.'

'Myrtle doesn't mean any harm.'

'Well, my mama wouldn't do what Myrtle done.'

'Are we going to sit here arguing about old women or are you going to hold me a spell before I have to get back? You know how Missus is if I'm late.'

Agnes nestles in his arms, breathes in his scent of furniture polish, lilac water and ash soap. 'She still coming,' she says.

'I know.'

Later, when Agnes tells her, Mama Skins says nothing. She has already heard the rumors: that gal ain't no savior. She murmurs, gestures, grunts but the yelling Agnes expects doesn't come. The silence is worse. Agnes can feel Mama Skins watching her as she lays Ella down, washes and clothes her. The woman's stare bores holes in her back as Agnes tidies the small cabin taking care not to get in her mother's way. She'll tell her about the leaving when Mama Skins is ready to listen. Until then, the women move in silence with Agnes mending, scrubbing,

dusting, polishing and touching every tin cup, wooden plank, worn hide or frayed cloth as if she was saying goodbye and Mama Skins watching her doing it. Keeping secrets don't come easy. Agnes moves outside on the step to settle next to Papa Jonah, she feels the woman's eyes even then.

'Wasn't nothing else I could do,' Agnes says. 'I had to use them herbs. She's one of us.'

Papa Jonah chews on his empty pipe. For a second, his warm hand presses into hers before letting go.

Evenings with Mama, Papa and even that girl give her something to look forward to during the long days. But picking, even if it is for her own supper, is still picking. The slave gardens behind the cabins are the coarsest on all Walker land. Still, year after year, Mama Skins' patch grows blueberries and carrots that taste like green beans, squash, onions and anything else that was planted and never grew. Her coveted concoctions are a natural delight. Agnes looks back at the tree Ella props up. She claps the vegetables together and watches the dirt rain down over gaping holes before snatching up another clump.

'I don't know how things work where you from but here, if you don't work,' she calls over her shoulder, 'you don't eat.'

Ella shrugs.

'Mama Skins said youse supposed to help me pick these vegetables for the circle.' She snatches a carrot up, curls her fingers tight around its hard flesh and shakes it like its Ella. 'You ain't fooling nobody, we know you can talk if you want to.'

Ella turns her back.

'Can run too.'

Ella straightens.

‘All night long you screaming *Papa! Papa, don’t leave me!* and kicking them legs like a mule on fire. That’s the honest truth. That’s why I had to move my roll from next to yours. I was afraid you’d kick me clear in the head. And you know what else? When you ain’t screaming, you mumbling all the time bout grabbing that rusty rifle and shooting somebody clear through the head. Shooting us that done helped and cared for, mended you. Even worse, you talk about leaving us where we lay, not even stopping to bury us, and drowning your fool self in the river. Why I gotta be dead for you to kill yourself? When you ain’t busy killing us or you, you talk about running away. Can’t seem to get you to shut up lessin’ youse awake. Some nights I just pray and pray, please Lord, let that gal wake up so I can get to sleep!’

Ella snorts.

‘Just so you know that rusted heap couldn’t shoot clear even if it did have gunpowder. So if you planning to kill us, you gonna have to find another way. Way I see it, there’s the poison down by the river. What’s to stop you from slipping a leaf or two into the pot when nobody’s looking? Time? Nah. Got plenty of that. Any chore Missus and them want doing, I been doing so you don’t have to. Who gonna see you? Field hands got better things to do than to wait for you to drag yourself cross the floor, down the step, through the grass. If you could find your way there. Laziness? Well, I ain’t one to say nothing about your mama but...’ She lets the words linger.

With one hand holding onto the tree and the other reaching for Agnes, Ella stands.

‘Only thing wrong with your legs is you. You want to get off this land? Run. Run as fast as you can because you know what? You ain’t gonna get nowhere dragging your legs behind you. You afraid? Got every call to be. You don’t know where you at. Don’t know how to get where you want to be. If you don’t know where you going, you ain’t never gonna get there. You



want to get back to your people? You better get yourself to the circle. If anyone can tell you what you need to know, it's them women. And if you want them to give you something, you better not get there without offering something in return.' Out of the corner of her eyes she watches Ella stomp over to a ripe row of tangled vines and stems, bushes overgrown to bursting. Ella pulls trying to rip up a tender carrot from the ground, root and all. Agnes grins and slows down her picking. Now she carefully lifts leaves and delicately pinches buds while Ella tears and rips. Agnes fingers the shell within her pocket. She wouldn't miss the circle because of that heifer.

'I ain't going to fight you. Come if you want to come, don't if you don't. But if there's news about your people, don't expect me to come running to find you.'

She gathers her vegetables and walks away. Ella follows.

The women, from *across the road, down the hill, and round the bend* arrive after sundown. They come worn from working in fields, houses, factories. They are a small, whispering cluster laden with slivers of meats, bits of breads, chunks of sweets, slices of soap and other snippets that can be spared, will not be missed or have been saved for the special occasion. They come smelling of flower-water and oils, sweat and food. Set off from neighboring plantations as soon as chores are finished, passes written, permission granted. So as not to *disturb the cows, trample the grass, block my view*, they file the long way: up the lane, close enough to the main house so Little James can tick their names off the list to show to Walker, around the garden and the planting field, pass the barn, by the grazing field, through the wood to form a circle in the high grass near the river. Even Samantha and Meredith, otherwise confined to the toil in the house or commanded to stay within earshot, are allowed to join the procession. Every full moon since Agnes remembers, the women of her life gather round to share stories.

Agnes is too far ahead. The sounds of hushed laughter and lilted voices guide Ella's steps toward the circle. Mouthing the words, she practices introducing herself to the group. They will want to know who she is, where she comes from, who her people are. They will have questions about freedom. If there's time she will minister to them; give them something to hold onto. She won't be here long but what else does she have to give? Will they ask what church she goes to? Will they ask her how a free girl like her ended up enslaved? She whispers her name. A hoarse moan from deep in her chest makes her jump. It's been weeks since she's allowed herself to speak. She tries again. A raspy, grating cough bubbles up, fills her throat and echoes into silence. She clutches her throat. She can hardly breathe. Her chest hurts. Darkness closes in. Leaves crack like knuckles underneath her feet. Branches reach for her like hands. Cold air tickles her neck, whispers in her ears: 'Ella, Ella, Ella.' Stumbling, she follows the whispers.

The women make room for her to sit next to Agnes. Agnes squeezes her hand. Ella steals glances at the women gathered. Embers glow. The fire will be roaring soon. She looks at their feet, their clothes, their hands but not their eyes. What must they think of her? A length of vines lies next to each woman. As they talk, the women weave and plait, knotting them in intricate ropes.

I can't talk, she mouths to Agnes.

Agnes nods to the side where Mama Skins and a young pregnant woman argue in hushed voices. 'That's Grace,' she whispers. 'She wants Mama Skins to give her something to stop the baby. Don't look over there!'

Ella looks away. She points to her mouth, slowly mouths I've lost my voice.

'She says she don't want her baby born a slave. Mama Skins says she waited too late,' Agnes continues.

Mama Skins joins the circle. Grace follows, slow and empty handed. The circle makes room.

‘Missus still mumbling about not getting this one,’ a woman nods her head towards Ella. ‘Walker done told her time and time again, she for breeding. But Missus say she want a city gal to show off to her friends. One can talk smart without putting on airs. Meredith,’ the woman points to Mama Skins, ‘she complainin all the time how you say she still broke up and not fit to have around her company. You know her just right.’ She laughs and adjusts her head scarf. ‘She wouldn’t have no busted-up gal up in her rooms any more than she’d have her serving her company or washing her drawers, no matter how she talked. And that one over there don’t even talk.’ She nods towards Ella. ‘You sending Agnes in her place sent Ol’Missus to spewing and hollering about insolence and whippings. That Agnes takes on so many jobs with only one telling that even Missus can’t complain for long.’

‘Do the voice, Mantha,’ another woman says touching her arm.

Samantha straightens and crosses her legs. ‘My Coloreds are educated and civilized. I teach them to read and write; to talk proper. I couldn’t abide a bunch of tribe talk in my home.’

The women laugh, some stomp their feet in amusement.

Ella’s skin prickles. Breeding?

‘They know if they were free they wouldn’t be any better off than they are right here,’ she continues, ‘a roof, a place to sleep, work; what more can they want?’ She raises an imaginary cup to her lips. ‘Myrtle, you do Ol’Missus,’ she says rubbing her friend’s back.

Myrtle lays down her vines, unwraps her headscarf and stuffs it in to her bosom. She primps it out like a stiff collar. ‘Sell em all!’ she says. She raises an imaginary cane. Her voice quivers. ‘Back home the darkies are respectable. They use their learning for bettering our lives;

as is their purpose. Who ever heard of a gaggle of Negros not being able to read? Walker you listening to me? Don't you walk away when I talk to you!'

The women laugh.

'I knew Agnes would satisfy the Missus,' Mama Skins interrupts. 'It didn't matter which one they got.'

'Sure do matter to Walker though,' Myrtle says. 'Walker got plans for that one that don't have nothing to do with talking proper or impressing guests. What he say, Mantha?'

Samantha stands, straightens her imaginary suspenders. She scowls. 'Dear, you don't understand how much it cost to get no bull to come up here. Most folk scared to touch anything got to do with Walker land. Can't even sell produce in town with the Walker name on it. Gotta go three towns over just to do business. Who she gonna breed with? Tell me that. Little James?' Samantha waves her arms in wide circles. 'Whole damned lot of them cursed.'

Agnes stiffens.

'I reckon I could do it,' Samantha continues. She shakes her head, looks down for emphasis.

On cue, Myrtle jumps up. She unfashions the collar, wraps the scarf into a bow and props it on the side of her head. 'You do enough for this place, darling. I don't want you catching nothing from that heathen. Mother will lend us the money and pay for the best bull this side of the Mississippi!'

'If that don't sound just like the missus,' Mama Skins laughs.

'You got a name?' Samantha asks. She jabs a finger at Ella.

Ella nods her head. She points to her throat.

The fire crackles and pops. Crickets chirp. Animals scurry through leaves.

‘She don’t say much of nothing,’ Agnes says.

‘Cept how she gonna kill us all?’ Samantha asks.

‘Mama!’ Agnes shoots her mama the closest thing she dares to a dirty look.

‘Ain’t heard that from me,’ Mama Skins says.

That Little James was as quick with his tongue coming as he was going. ‘She don’t mean nothing by it. She only talk like that when she sleep,’ Agnes says.

‘I’d sleep with both eyes open if I was you,’ Myrtle says. She frowns at Ella.

Ella stares at the ground.

‘I’d sleep with a frying pan,’ Samantha says. She smiles at Ella.

Ella steals a quick glance then stares into the fire.

‘Why don’t you give her one of them special sachets, Meredith?’

Even Ella stares at Grace.

‘Wrap it up real tight, put a pretty bow on it.’ Grace’s voice is deep, low. She glowers at Mama Skins across the flame. ‘Dead by morning. Isn’t that what you said?’

Mama Skins tosses a twig in the fire.

‘I’m still here. Baby’s still here,’ she pokes her belly. ‘I ain’t wake up dead.’

‘Don’t always work. I told you that too.’

‘Then give me some more of it!’ She scrambles to her feet. Grace grabs her belly as a ripple of pain shoots across her face.

‘Ain’t gonna be no more talk of that tonight. I said no.’

A chill plays up and down Ella’s spine. How will she ever see Papa and Mama again if one of these heathens kills her?

Myrtle settles Grace onto a patch of grass. Soothes her with soft words and low humming.

‘Iola,’ Mama Skins calls to a young woman. ‘Look like there’s something heavy on your heart. Nobody think any less of you if you change your mind.’

Iola sits across from her with her arms wrapped around her legs; her legs tight to her chest.

‘I’m scarerder than the devil at Mass but I’m going to find my babies,’ Iola answers.

Mama Skins nods. ‘Then it’s time,’ she says.

The women, even Grace, stand. Ella readies herself to rise. Agnes shakes her head no, grabs her hand and holds tight.

‘They took my babies,’ Iola says. Her words are mixed with old, deep sobs. ‘I’m bringing them home.’

The women nod as some strip Iola. Her clothes are tossed in the fire. Others rub her pocked, bruised skin with soothing oils.

‘I know what he done. Sampson ain’t said two words about it, he killed my babies,’ Iola says. ‘I knew what he was thinking soon as he seen how small they was but I didn’t expect him to kill my babies.’ She stares into the fire while the women work.

With deft fingers they wrap bundles of herbs and twine around Iola’s calves and thighs. They wind the knotted vine around her belly, over her breasts, around her sinewy arms and tie it around her neck.

‘It’s to throw off her scent; to give her time,’ Agnes whispers.

Mama Skins unrolls a stiff dress made out of animal skins and cured in skunk essence. The garment’s musky scent makes the air bitter.

‘For the dogs,’ Agnes says.

‘Plucked them from my arms like they was sacks of flour. Wasn’t more than a few hours old and they knew. They was screaming and hollering. I was screaming and hollering. Took seven hands to hold me down. I just wanted to hold them. Somebody knocked me in the head. By the time I woke up, they was dead. I could feel it. Wouldn’t nobody talk about it.’

Silently, the women sew pouches of vegetables and sweet grasses in the pockets and between the folds of skin now clothing Iola.

‘My babies don’t know me. How they gonna find me? How they gonna find the way home?’

‘We done,’ Mama Skins says.

The dress of skins makes Iola look wider, heavier. Weighed down like she is, she won’t get far. Ella looks around the group. She can feel the cool certainty of Iola’s failed escape. Iola slips into the night. The women resume their places around the fire. Ella jumps up to follow. If she can catch up with Iola, the two can help each other get away.

‘Let her have her chance,’ Myrtle says. Her annoyance clips the end of her words like teeth. ‘You’ll get your own chance. Besides, ain’t someone coming to rescue you?’

‘Wish someone come take me far away from here too. That somebody got room for one more?’ Samantha asks.

‘Hush,’ Mama Skins warns. ‘Ain’t nobody going nowhere. If her pa come for her, he can leave with her.’

‘I just want to know when they coming is all. She’s been here what, going on two weeks now and ain’t made things a lick better for nobody like you said she would.’

Ella slips her hand out from Agnes', she rubs her hands together, palm to palm, in quick circles before pressing them to her face for warmth. She's shaking.

'Walker set out to steal folks because he can't afford to buy no more,' Samantha continues.

'And on account none are born on this place,' Myrtle adds.

Ella stares at Mama Skins. She stands up trembling and pointing. If the old woman hadn't been poisoning them, they'd have babies of their own and Walker wouldn't have stolen her.

'Walker had a mind to do it and he did it. From the way I see it, you here now,' Mama Skins says. 'If you have babies and break the curse while you here,' she shrugs, 'so be it.'

'What if she don't break the curse?' Samantha asks. 'You gonna give him what he wants?' She nods towards Agnes.

'He ain't got no call to want Agnes.'

'You mean long as she can't have no babies neither,' Samantha adds.

'And thanks to that goo, he's too afraid to keep trying her,' Myrtle says. 'How long that gonna last? You think? If this one can't have no babies, what's gonna happen to her?'

Ella doesn't wait to find out. She stands, turns her back on the circle and slips into the waiting darkness. She feels her way through the woods. It's all her fault. All of it. Mama Skins ain't nothing but a pretty-faced devil. She's no better than Walker. One piece of dried bark feels the same as the next. The fresh smell of dirt, the scent of sweet grass, she could be anywhere. She stumbles. Listens. She follows the gurgling of the river. Which way is home? Settling herself in the high grass she measures her breathing. Slows her racing heart. If only she could wrap her hands around Mama Skins neck. She would shake and shake until the old woman begged her to stop, then she'd shake some more.



‘He took you because he wanted to and wasn’t nobody with a mind to stop him,’ Agnes says. She plops down next to Ella. ‘Mama Skins ain’t have nothing to do with it. Walker probably figured on getting you with child so he can afford all he’s missing out on like shoes and tobacco. Mama Skins is the only thing standing in the way between you and that.’ Agnes points towards Grace.

Ella hasn’t gotten as far as she thought. Nearby, the fire’s glow casts shadows on the women’s faces.

‘Y’all heard anything about Heywood?’ Grace asks. She rubs her legs, her head and finally rests her hands on her belly.

‘Nothing good,’ Samantha says. ‘I heard they got advertisements in every newspaper and posts up all around town. They got men riding from station to post asking if he showed up. They got a right description of him too: color, black; eyes, brown; hands, able.’

‘Who don’t that sound like?’ A woman laughs. She rubs her swollen feet by the fire.

‘I hope they catch him,’ Grace says. ‘He shouldn’t have left me with no baby coming. Selfish! Just selfish! *He can’t take no more. He’ll die if he stays.* He should have let them kill him then or died stead of just running off without me.’

‘Grace,’ a woman soothes, ‘if he’d stayed he’d a got you killed outright.’

‘I’m dying each day no how,’ the woman says. ‘Everyday that don’t kill me leave me wishing I was dead.’

‘What else you hear good?’ Mama Skins asks.

‘The usual,’ Myrtle says. ‘Walker promised Missus he’d hold on to every bit of his property should the “damn abolitionists” come trying to talk to one of his about being free. The

only way he'll set anyone free is if they dead and even then he expects some sort of due from the Devil.'

'Well, the Missus is gushing,' Samantha says, 'the price of goods is going up and an inspector is coming around to appraise Walker property down to the last blade of grass. Then the land will be mortgaged and won't be nowhere to lay Ol' Missus when the Lord calls her to glory but won't it be nice when the town stops talking about the Doctor and Mama Skins can be hired out again? What a blessing that'll be for everyone so the house can have more lanterns and a new icebox and a bull to hire out and for seeding.' Samantha slips into the Missus' voice. 'And won't it be lovely to have little brown babies underfoot, Samantha? And, Myrtle wouldn't you like a little dark baby of your very own?'

While they talk, Mama Skins passes a bursting basket around the circle. Whoever wants something is free to take it and if someone else wants it they can share it if it's enough or barter if it isn't. In this way meats are exchanged for fur scraps, vegetables for clay, and slivers of soap for herbs. Only Grace and Ella take nothing.

With a bundle of damp skins, Mama Skins smothers the flames. The smoke smells of cherry wood and sassafras. As the women chatter, Grace gathers her belly and leaves the warmth of the group to follow the soothing call of the river. With each step she takes, she puts a pebble in her mouth. She reaches the slippery bank and keeps walking. There is a soft splash as the water welcomes her. She walks to the middle of the river. The tide sucks and pushes her in deeper. She stops, as if uncertain. The tide pushes her on.

Ella watches the woman disappearing as the river swallows her a bite at a time. She shakes Agnes, points to the river, mimes jumping in.

‘You thirsty?’ Agnes asks.

Instead of watching Grace, the women watch Ella watching Grace. She’d rather do it herself than ask the old woman for help. Following the light from pale stars, Ella makes her way to the edge. The river rushes and bubbles, swirls.

Grace smiles, waves.

In her mind, Ella screams, help her!

‘She don’t want no help,’ Mama Skins says. ‘She waving goodbye.’

On the shore, the women wave heartily, silently. In the river, Grace sinks beneath the waves. Before the feuding starts, the women know there will be no more circles. Two in one night? Even if they didn’t believe it before, no one will deny Walker’s place is cursed. No owner would allow a slave to set foot on Walker soil. When they hug, they squeeze tight, linger. They settle their stories: some sort of spirit reached up and snatched Grace to the bottom of the river. Didn’t they try to help her? Yes. The women slip into the woods one by one leaving Agnes and Ella to stare into the water.

‘I ain’t leaving here like that,’ Agnes says. She crosses her arms to stop them from shaking. ‘When I leave this place, I’m gonna be alive. You stay here waiting on somebody to save you if you want to. I’ll be long gone.’

The next morning word filters down from the main house through Little James’ lips. The sun hasn’t been up a good ten minutes. The air is cool. The water, ice cold. It’s Sunday, Agnes’ favorite day. It’s the only day she can sleep late. Still, Agnes has been up since dawn. She likes to slip out of the cabin, a biscuit in each pocket, before Mama Skins can get started with her list

of things to do to occupy Agnes' time. As soon as she finishes the wash, beats the rugs up at the house and does the ironing, she can have the rest of the day to herself. She doesn't count on Little James interrupting her washing. She has already gathered firewood to set the pot boiling. She strings a line of clothes to soak. The branches crackle like footsteps. She wades knee-deep into the water, a trail of underclothes behind her. She half expects to see Grace staring up at her.

'Ain't none of y'all allowed to set foot off this property,' James calls from the river's edge. "No walking to town, visiting neighbors, evening strolls or trips to market.' He raises his voice above the lapping waves.

Agnes rolls her eyes and keeps walking. The water swirls and foams around her. She steps through nibbling fish and over slick grass.

'Not that any of y'all been allowed to leave since Mama Skins was accused of killing the doctor. No telling what would have happened if Old Missus hadn't convinced the sheriff your mama was too dumb to mix up a concoction that would have done it. Master says none of you will ever set another foot off this land and without his permission, ain't anybody allowed on it either. That means no more circle in case you wondering.'

Agnes stops walking. For a second she bobs along with the water before diving beneath the surface. She touches the soft bottom with her hands, plants them in the dirt, extends her legs and unfolds into a handstand. She wiggles her toes at James. Upside down her tears drain into the river. When she returns to the edge, her arms piled high with the washing, she puts the clothes into the pot to boil and sits, arms crossed, under a copse of trees. James joins her.

'The first thing I'm going to do when I take you away from here is build us a house near the water.'

'That's the first thing?'

‘You already mine.’

Agnes nods.

James puts his hand on Agnes’ stomach. ‘Soon as we free, we can start a family.’

‘You all the family I need. I don’t want to birth no babies until my babies can be free.’

‘So we aren’t ever going to have a family?’

‘Can you promise me they gonna be free?’

James stares into the river. He slips his hand into Agnes’. Their feet dangle over the edge.

Later, as Agnes gathers the drying clothes, James tells her stories.

‘The horses are still galloping and Doc Sampson comes jumping out of that buggy before it even stops. Walker Junior meets him before he can get to the ground. *Don’t you come here looking for no handouts*, he says.’ James runs from the left side to the right. ‘*Handouts?* Sampson asks in that quivering voice of his. *You owe me \$1,000 for ruining my I-Oh-La. I come to collect it!*’ He jumps back to the other side. ‘*A thousand? She wasn’t worth that much alive. I tasted her cooking!*’ He puffs to the other side. ‘*Don’t think I won’t get the sheriff. I’ll do it! This whole damned place cursed!* Sampson says. You know Walker Senior don’t like to hear talk like that so Junior gets to trying to whisper. Doc ain’t having no parts of it. He’s nearly yelling. *Don’t see why I allowed that visiting business in the first place! Bunch of Negroes gathering to do what? Share recipes and cleaning tips? More likely trying to figure out how to kill us all and you just setting there letting them! No more. You done cost me two heads. Two?* Walker says. *That crazy girl of yours walking off cost me my best hounds. You ought to be paying me! Your best hounds chased her clear over that blasted ledge. Don’t you send none of your people on this land no more. Ain’t none of y’all welcomed here! Welcomed here? You don’t have to worry about*

*that. Next time you see me, it will be with the law!* Gentlemen,' Little James says. He spreads his palms, wide. 'Let's settle this in doors, like neighbors.'

'Let me guess, that was you?' Agnes says. She folds the linen in tight squares and sprinkles them with dried herbs. Jasmine fills her nose.

'Who do you think kept them from killing one another?' James laughs.

'What really happened?'

James frowns. Stares across the river.

'I ain't mean nothing by it,' Agnes says. 'Tell it like you want to.'

'It ain't that,' James says. He stands behind her. Pulls her close. A sheet slips from her hands. He breathes in the smell of her hair. 'Things gonna get a whole lot worse around here.'

'What you mad for?' Agnes asks. Later, Ella sits on the step whittling away while Papa Jonah whittles at his pipe. Even layered in skins, her bones poke through the garb. The rise and fall of her back is the only sign she's breathing. 'No more circle? What that mean to you? I'm the one been suckling on them stories since before I could walk. What you think I grew this big on blueberries and carrots? Them women are my family and I don't get to see them no more till Walker and Sampson make nice or die. You don't see me burrowing a hole about it.'

Ella hasn't looked at her since supper. She'd sat there not even pretending to eat the steaming plate of coon tail and smothered carrots. Stood up before Agnes had even finished the telling and sat on the porch, without even asking Mama Skins if she could leave the cabin.

'Come on,' Agnes says slipping beside Jonah to stand face to face with Ella. She doesn't wait for Ella's silent response but drags her around the back of the cabin, through the garden and into the woods. The trees here are taller than any on Walker land. Agnes drops her hand. She

wraps her arms around a thick tree. She wiggles and stretches them but still, her fingers do not touch. ‘Go around the other side,’ she commands.

Ella rolls her eyes, drags her feet and faces the tree. She looks up and up and still can’t see the top of it. The bark is smooth in some places, worn in others. Here and there scars and holes dot the thick trunk. It oozes sweet smelling sap. Sniffing, she leans closer.

‘It ain’t gonna bite.’ Ants scurry up and down the thick bark. Patches of moss and clusters of leaves barely conceal knotted wood, holes and burrows. Sap slides lazily from seldom used holes. The tree tickles her cheek but Agnes waits. Finally Ella’s hot fingertips press against hers. ‘The end of the circle don’t mean we not gonna get out of here. Just mean none of them can help us. All I need you to do is hold on and I’m gonna hold on just like this,’ she says. ‘We keep holding on just a little while longer, we gonna both be free.’

That evening the girls sit with their backs pressed against the rough bark. The cool night air wrinkles Agnes’ nose. ‘Don’t nobody out there care nothing bout how you feel bout being here,’ she whispers. She breathes deeply so the air fills her lungs. ‘Just do what you told and don’t end up dead. You better start eating too.’

Ella snorts.

‘I mean it. I ain’t going to do all this planning just to end up carrying you. You heavier than you look. I swear them bones got to weigh more than a head of hogs.’

Ella giggles.

‘It ain’t gonna be long, you’ll see.’ No sense talking about bringing James. He’s coming no matter what.

Agnes is up before dawn the next morning. Before sunrise she has done her share of picking, washed the windows up at the house, soaked pots and scrubbed the front room. By noon she has washed the steps and beat the dough for supper.

Grinning, Samantha hands her a full chamber pot. She whispers above the stench, 'James heard that gal's pa is looking for her. Folks in town talking about a gang of black men heading this way. They gotta be her peoples. Sheriff sent them every which way but here. He told them this place is haunted but they heading here just the same, should arrive just before suppertime.'

Agnes nearly drops the pot. Its contents swirl and slosh like her stomach. Come to take her home. Agnes' hands tremble.

'Go tell your Ma,' Samantha says. 'She'll know what to do.'



## Chapter 9

Samantha and Myrtle hear them first. Trotting horses, stomping mules, murmuring voices, and one lopsided cart clomping up the path. Tufts of dirt and pebbles fling as they pass. Somebody's going to have to clean that up, Myrtle thinks. Black men tall as trees trail behind the sheriff and one of the Reverend's boys. This ain't no coffle. The men dismount. Clutching the reins in tight fists they stare. With sweeping gazes they take in the chipped paint, missing planks, coarse lawn, bare fields and slave hands dotting the fields. Myrtle wishes they had come ten years ago when the grass was thick, the house freshly painted, when the manor was plump with flowers, vegetables, cows and slaves. Young ones fetching milk, grabbing reins. Older ones watering horses, shoeing if need be. Fields covered with slaves picking, pulling, mending, fixing, plowing, maybe even singing. One or two babies underfoot. Myrtle would have looked at these men and known they appreciated all she did for the place. That was before Meredith come, before the fields were full of nothing but graves.

Walker Senior sits in the parlor, his legs crossed beneath his writing desk. Every once in a while he leans forwards, spits a wad of snuff into a kerchief, refolds it.

'What they doing now, James?' Walker Junior asks from the chair across from his father.

Big James parts the curtains wide enough to peep out. ‘Sir, they’ve dismounted. It looks like they’re just huddled up in front of the door. One’s looking right at me through the window and pointing up here. Should I invite them in?’ James has never seen anything like it. He’s heard of free black men but has never seen one. Skin the same color as his. Some taller, some shorter, some older, some younger. He could be any one of them, on the other side of the window. That one must be the pa. Them there could be brothers, uncles, cousins. He can tell by their stance, even if they don’t look the sheriff full in the eye, they are free.

‘No, you damned fool! Not till I tell you to,’ Junior snaps.

‘James, tell Myrtle to get supper going,’ Senior directs. ‘Son, that ain’t no way to treat company. Go see to the door,’ he says. He stands with his shotgun behind his chair and his pistol on the blotter. ‘It’s a good thing Sampson warned you they was coming. Where the gal at?’

‘Sent them both down to the river. Got them breaking up that circle. Take better part of the day to get all those rocks and logs cleared.’

James pushes the kitchen door open. ‘Master Walker says yalls to start supper to cooking,’ he says. When the door clicks shut he whispers, ‘send James to fetch Meredith.’ He grabs a tray of iced tea and glasses filled with fresh chipped ice. The things they think of for Little James to do.

‘Come in from that heat, Sheriff,’ Walker calls from the top of the porch.

The sheriff climbs up the steps, finds a patch of shade and leans against the railing. The rest of the party is left to wait out in the Maryland sun. ‘If it suits you, I’ll just stay out here,’ he says. ‘Been some time since I been up here, I’d say ten, eleven years?’

‘Sounds about right,’ Walker says.

‘Not since—’

‘The plague?’ Senior interrupts. He settles down in a wicker rocking chair, shotgun propped against his leg.

‘Weren’t no plague I can remember,’ the sheriff says. ‘Only hit here. Doc thought it was curious then. It’s curious now, don’t you think? Nothing much seems to grow here. Not since your baby, rest her soul, passed and then all them babies.’ He shakes his head. ‘Folks got to thinking your place had some sort of voodoo hoodoo.’

Senior laughs. ‘Folks liable to believe anything. We all Christians here. Every head on this place been Baptized.’

‘Even your slaves?’

‘Of course! They been baptized twice! Wouldn’t abide nobody on this land that didn’t belong to the Lord first.’ Senior’s chair creaks as he rocks back and forth. ‘Less you foolish enough to believe in ghosts.’

‘How many you got now?’

‘Ten, eleven. Been thinking on buying some more,’ Junior says.

‘Lot of land for just ten or eleven.’

‘They manage.’

‘How bout you? You manage? I hear you got to travel mighty far to sell anything these days.’

‘You know folks around here.’

‘I ain’t here to tell you how to run your affairs but that gal’s father been told you snatched her up in Pennsylvania. She’s free.’

‘I was in Pennsylvania a few weeks or so ago, wasn’t I, Pa? I’m sure quite a few people was too. Sold bushels and bushels. Bought back some livestock too. But ain’t buy no slaves. I

saw plenty of Negroes just running around the streets. I couldn't say for sure I seen one in particular.'

The deputy silences the men's grumbling voices below.

'He got something to say?' Senior asks. He cradles his shotgun in his lap.

'She ain't no slave,' Ella's father says.

'Boy,' the sheriff says, 'I know you upset but ain't gonna be no trouble here today.'

'It's his word against mine, ain't it?' Junior asks.

'His and Dwight Thompson's. Thompson's a businessman, much like yourself far as I can tell. Sheriff up in Philadelphia sent the pa down here with papers and testimony and asked me to help him look around and send him on his way. Says here Thompson don't usually go about telling tales. But now since Mr. Thompson ain't here, I reckon Thompson ain't sure what he saw if he saw anything at all.'

In the kitchen, Samantha readies supper. Myrtle slips out the back to look for James. That gal going sure is gonna undo all Meredith's fixing. All that scheming to save Agnes from Walker. All them dead babies scattered across them fields. When Walker find out she bout the only thing not dried up round here she'll be birthing babies aplenty. What Meredith gonna do then? She can't kill em all. Myrtle finds James cleaning out the barn. 'Your pa wants you to go get that gal. Her folks come to take her home.'

'Can I offer you another glass of tea, Master?' James asks the sheriff. Sweat slides down the pitcher of iced tea. His hands shake. Chunks of ice clink, colliding against one another before bobbing on the surface like bodies. James stares just above the sheriff's head. What's taking that boy so long? Little James could have run all the way down Meredith's and back three times before now. Probably fiddling in the woods with that Agnes. Like nobody knows. That boy could

take any house slave from almost any neighboring plantation, any one Master Walker is on good terms with, and he chooses a girl headed for the fields. He's probably rolling around in the dirt with her right now. What else could be taking him so long? He couldn't be still trying to come up with a plan. James had thought of at least ten, three of which seemed less likely to end with one of them getting killed. One even ended with the pa and them carrying her off alive. If she just come running along the fields like she was running from someplace else, why it wouldn't even look like Walker had set off with her. If it did, wouldn't nobody say it did. Happy to have found her, her pa would just leave. Walker would be madder than Old Missus in a rainstorm but things would settle down soon enough. If they said she'd escaped, maybe knocked one of them out it might not be so bad after a spell. The sheriff shoos him away.

'If it gets to court, Thompson's word against yours, I don't know whose side will hold up.'

'Sheriff, the only young gal I got on my property is Agnes,' Walker says. 'You met her yourself. She was born right here.'

'Rumor is that no children were born on this place, cuz it's haunted,' the sheriff says. 'Boy, give me some of that air.'

James waves a hand-folded fan in wide arcs.

'The place is a bit haunted, as you say, Sheriff. Just the other day a darkie was fished right out the river with rocks all in her mouth. They say she was held down by a big hand from the sky but I don't believe it. They liable to believe anything, you know. Another one was found strung up like a tree with vines and twigs all round her body wrapped up in animal fur. She turned on three tracking dogs, spooked them. It took three rounds of buckshot to take her down.'

It's getting dark but if you want to look and see if that gal done found her way down to my grounds some kinda way?'

'I hardly think that's necessary,' the sheriff says.

Thick clouds pass overhead. The wind swirls leaves in quick moving patches. Below, the men shift from one foot to the next. It's time to go.

'Agnes, the one you met, was born right before we started having all them troubles. Back then we had all sorts of things growing here. She the last one though,' Walker says. 'She's down the river right now, down the very spot where Sampson's gal got snatched up. You all are most welcomed to go down there and have a look around. That would satisfy all sides, wouldn't it?'

By the river, sweat drips down Agnes' forehead, into her eyes to her chin. It wouldn't take this long if she had someone to help. She's hauled three rocks and two logs and can still see the worn edges of the circle plain as day. Walker will kill her if Mama Skins don't do it first. Mama Skins won't have nobody to blame but herself. *You get started, I'm gonna take this one for a little walk*, Mama Skins said. As if Walker hadn't said he'd skin them all if there was anything left of the circle. She was lucky he hadn't already taken the whip to her. The way he'd come storming down after the men hauled Grace out of the water. Made them all watch as they slit her belly open in case the baby had survived. Had them carry mother and son to a ditch behind the far field, throw them in. They'd still be wandering Walker's if Mama Skins hadn't gone back late that night, said words over their graves, told stories of rising up, being together in Heaven.

Agnes' back and arms ache. Down yonder, field hands trill like doves. Closer, a familiar trill rings; James. Agnes trills bluebird in response. Listens. His response is clear. She trills robin, listens for Mama Skins' response. Trills again. Silence. Where could they have gone?

Deep in the woods, past the river, beyond the far field and the ditch, Mama Skins whittles a pipe out of a fresh stripped piece of bark. ‘This is just the wood I’ve been looking for. Couldn’t of found it without you,’ she says. ‘Jonah will be tickled.’

Ella sits on a large rock. Her feet dangle down the sides. Her fingers trace its cracks. The forest is alive with bird song. She stops to listen. Is that a robin?

‘Damned birds,’ Mama Skins says, ‘sounds like they eating up Master’s crop. No sense in hurrying home. We’ll head back when things settle down a bit. All this walking got me to thinking,’ Mama Skins pauses, tilts her head, listens. From between the layers of her garb she pulls out a cloth bundle, places it in front of Ella. She pulls out a bundle made of sewn hides. She unties the large bow. A bright green apple, a lemon, strawberries and a beet roll out. From another fold, she pulls out a blunt, rusted knife. Without looking up, she saws at the lemon. Bits of yellow skin sprinkle the rock. When she finally breaks through, she puts the lemon to her lips, sucks the juice out in quiet slurps. She wets a fingertip, gathers the scattered flesh before popping her finger into her mouth. ‘I hear you and Agnes thinking about running off. That true?’

‘What we gonna do?’ Little James asks. He’s out of breath from running to the circle and out of breath from pacing since he’s been there.

‘I don’t know,’ Agnes says for the third time. ‘Done looked everywhere they could be.’

‘They gotta be up to the house then. Your mama know they was coming. Coulda took her up there, handed her over to her pa. Think he bought your mama? Give her her papers as a thank you? Your ma wouldn’t go lessin’ she could take you. Walker wouldn’t allow that. She would expect you to take her place. Why, you could be free this very minute!’

‘You know Walker better than that.’

‘Why wouldn’t her pa at least buy you? You the one been taking care of her.’

Would Walker really sell her? Her, the only child from this place in a lifetime of dying babies? Would he sell her away from her mama and papa? From James and them? He could use the money but would he take it? If he did, would that make her free? Not quite free, sold to a free man. Would she be that little gal’s slave? What would happen to this place if she wasn’t there? Would Mama Skins keep doctoring? She’d probably kill Walker. Less he’s dead already. If that gal’s pa is anything like she say he is he could be half way to jail right now. Less he killed sheriff too.

‘We gotta get to the house!’ Agnes yells. She’s already sprinting through the grass. If he hadn’t killed anybody, if that gal’s pa is gonna buy her, Agnes will come back for James and Mama Skins and Papa Jonah. But she won’t be left behind.

Junior and Senior sip iced drinks on the porch. Below, the men gather around the sheriff in a circle. James catches tails of words: ‘lies, guns, cahoots.’ The sheriff’s ‘watch your mouth, son,’ rises up to the porch.

‘He’s a good sheriff,’ Junior says.

‘Not as good as the last one, though,’ Senior says. ‘Last one woulda come in, took off his hat, sat a while, then asked bout that gal after supper. He knew how to be respectful.’

I’m ready if they storm the house, James thinks. The circle seems to tighten up, to close in on the sheriff in ripples. Can’t hardly see the deputy over the broad backs and long necks of the gal’s kin. It’s the sheriff’s thin, whiny voice that wafts up in snatches. James can’t hear the men’s deep voices. As one, at least when he tells the story later, they tense, spread their feet,



reach for guns in holsters. James shivers. He'd hate to harm young Walker but he wouldn't mind knocking Master Walker upside the head once or twice. An icy wind blows. A crack of thunder, followed by another and a flash. God don't like this. Ice-cold rain pours over the men, the fields, the lane. Even as they stand there it washes away their footprints. The men mount donkeys and horses. Before they've even left the lane, all traces of them are gone.

Agnes, with James behind her, slips and runs through the rain, down the path, around the field, to the back of the house. Myrtle, Samantha and James sit in the kitchen praying.

'She gone? I miss her?' Agnes asks.

Agnes will never forget the looks on their faces and the shivers up and down her spine as they turn to stare at her.

## Chapter 10

It feels like days. The sky turns from black to pitch black and black again. Ella runs from tree to tree feeling for landmarks. Is this the tree she had sat under with Agnes? Is that? Thin, thorny branches, thick sap-filled cones, dry-rotting tree limbs; in the dark, it all looks, smells and feels the same. Ella runs through the night. She tumbles through woods and gets tangled up in briars and weeds. She hears dogs and runs left. Footsteps and runs right. Even with the bright light of the moon, the only thing she can see is that she's lost.

The rain has stopped but the air is still thick with it. Her feet sink into the mud, slip and slide on leaves and rocks. If only that whistling would stop Ella could clear her mind enough to figure out where she is. But it's closer—the whistling. It echoes her breathing, a raspy hiss that rattles. She tries to outrun it. It gets closer, louder. She collapses in a mound of leaves and sticks. Her lungs burn. Out of breath and panting, she picks herself up and lumbers on. Her body is soaked in sweat. She knows the dogs will pick up her scent soon if they haven't already. Her own smell of fear and sweat burn her nostrils.

Papa had come for her. Just like she knew he would, he had found her. But she was still here. Why had he left without her? No matter what Agnes, Mr. Jonah, Mr. James and them thought, Ella didn't believe that witch hadn't planned it from the start. *How was I to know?* Mama Skins had said. And them just standing there like they believed it or like they couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe after all these years the woman they trusted to run the plantation, to decide on the planting and the harvesting of the land and the people, couldn't do nothing to save one little slave girl. Why couldn't they see? If she'd wanted Ella saved, she would have been saved.

Wasn't that basket of food proof they were paying Skins to keep Ella a slave? They all sat there eating up them lies and that food. Ella's stomach grumbles. When nobody was looking, she had been picking at crumbs, pinching the crusts of bread. But not today. She refuses to sneak even a scrap of that *you done good for keeping a slave* basket. She'd rather die. She'd only been sneaking food to be ready. Just in case Agnes kept her word. How could she though? With her mother bent on keeping her around, Agnes couldn't get her own self free let alone help Ella. The look in the old woman's eyes when she asked if it was true she and Agnes were planning to run away was enough. Ella's silent no didn't even feel like a lie. Not then, not when the old woman said 'good, cuz I don't plan on losing this baby,' and not now.

Fresh dung clings to Ella's foot. It's been miles; she might even be in Pennsylvania by now. Her legs ache, the soles of her feet sting. It would be nice if Agnes could have come with her. But she's probably still huddled over her mother whispering 'it'll be alright' as if her life had been the one galloping down the road. As if it wasn't her fault Papa left. Them whispering and poor Mama Skining drove Ella to slip out of the cabin, down the mud path, through the woods and finally to start running. Poor Mama Skins? What has she lost? Some magic she ain't

never had? With everybody crowded around the old woman like she was a broke-up doll, no one seemed to notice her go. Ella had never wanted to hurt anybody as much as she wanted to hurt Mama Skins. With all of them standing guard, she couldn't get close enough and she had no intentions of staying one more night even if it meant waiting to kill her in her sleep. Please Lord, she prays, strike that crazy old devil woman dead right now.

She pictures Agnes bent over as the old lady's body goes rigid. Mr. Jonah and the Jameses will probably carry her to the pit. Walker will say a few words, slice her open to make sure she's dead. Toss her in. Agnes and James can run off. Will she leave her pa like that? Alone? Please Lord, maybe don't kill her, just let her get hurt up real bad. If you're going to kill anybody, let it be Walker, the old one too.

Just a little while longer and she'll be able to soak in a long bath of salts. She'll even suffer her grandmother's cure of Castor Oil, lemon and onion stock. She just has to make it home.

There are no stars.

Her lungs fill with the heavy musk of animal. She's close to a farm or field and if she keeps low and creeps through the tall grass she might find a quiet place to rest for the night. Before long Ella reaches a barn. She slips through a low opening, scraping a thigh on a splintered beam. Her feet give way underneath hay and feed. She crawls across the dirty barn floor to huddle behind a stack of hay. She'll just rest her eyes and be gone before morning.

She wakes to mooing and shaking. Her whole body rattles back and forth. The strong hands gripping her arms feel like one of her brothers trying to wake her for lessons. Home! Finally. Rapturous joy, sweet like molasses, fills her throat. Sleep crusts her eyes gluing her

lashes together. She reaches out to touch the heavenly face in front of hers. If only he'd stop shaking her.

'Gal, gal! Hush all that noise!' he whispers.

What's James doing in her bedroom? Mooing cows, sharp hay, dirty floor. She wipes the sleep from her eyes. Walker's. All that walking, running and sliding, all that praying.

'Better get you back, been hours since you left the cabin. Agnes been worrying all night. Ain't you hear her call?' He pulls her up, shakes his head. 'Thought for sure you'd be gone by now. I tol' Agnes, I says, Agnes, you just watch, that gal done took off after her pa and left you and me both. And Agnes, says no, she wouldn't leave without me. And I got to thinking, would you? I would. If my pa come, if my pa was free and if he come for me and somebody kept me from him,' James stops, watches her face.

For a second, Ella reaches out to him. Her hand hangs in the air. It's still James. No matter what Agnes said, he raped her. He's no better than that old woman. He'll still get what's coming to him. She prays she isn't there to see it. She clasps her hands together, nods her head, mouths the word yes. Finally, someone understands her. If only she didn't hate him. It's a momentary joy. Tears clog her throat.

'Agnes won't believe it. Ain't no way Mama Skins ain't know your folks was here. Samantha told Agnes to tell her they was coming day before last. She tell you?'

Ella wishes she was like her pa. No matter how good or bad the news, her pa's face won't give nothing away. No expression at all. His body either. He stands more often than not, feet firm on the ground, back straight. It's all in his hands. Ella and her brothers got good at recognizing the signs. He reacted to news in three ways: A hand under his chin, on a belt loop, or fingering a holster. She's more like her mother. Her eyes, mouth, the lines on her forehead, her

face reflects everything she feels. Her stomach curdles at bad news, her heart stops beating. Now, heart breaking, she crumples to the floor.

James kneels beside her. ‘I told her to tell you. Her mama said she’d take care of everything. Don’t blame Agnes for believing her. We gonna come up with a plan to get Agnes, me and you gone. We can part ways after that if you want to. You can’t get your way off here by yourself and we can’t get around out there without you. Way I see it that makes us family.’

Ella’s body shakes. She doesn’t trust James any more than she trusts Agnes but unless she can find another way, she’ll have to make do.

Agnes spoons a thick stew of mashed carrots and rabbit into a gourd. ‘Frown your face up all you like,’ she tells Ella, ‘ain’t nothing wrong with the way it smells.’

The smell of roasted meat mingling with the aroma of carrots and spices fills the cabin. Ella goes outside. Even sitting on the lone step of the porch, it’s overpowering. Eating her food don’t make us friends. Agnes sets a bowl on the porch. Ella takes turns staring at it, the sky, the trees, the scatter of slave cabins of people she’s never met, and back to the bowl. Ella slips a fingertip into it. The warmth feels good. Ignoring the muck underneath her growing fingernails, she sucks stew off her finger. Mama would kill her.

‘We got spoons,’ Agnes says. She plops one down on the porch.

Jonah must have made it. The careful grooves, smooth wedge and thick handle feel like him. Patient and biding. Like the porch. Hardly more than enough room for two people to stand side by side, Ella can picture Jonah whittling it out of some rotted tree trunks, discarded planks, throwaway pieces. Ignoring the spoon, she picks the bowl up between both hands. The warmth

of the gourd, the steam of the stew. She puts it to her lips and sips. Her stomach growls. And sips. Her stomach lurches. And sips. It is her first meal in weeks. She wipes her mouth on the back of her hand.

Agnes squeezes in beside Ella. The night air cools. Agnes shivers. She eats slowly, humming between spoonfuls as if each one is better than the last. Ella gets up, leaving the empty bowl behind. She walks round the back to the garden. Sits on a patch of packed earth. Watches the clean sheets billowing on the washing line. Dancing like ghosts.

‘That’s where Mama Skins’ babies buried,’ Agnes says.

Ella half expected Agnes to follow, still she jumps at the sound of her voice.

‘You can sit there, they don’t mind.’

I won’t give her the satisfaction of thinking I’m spooked. No such thing as ghosts. And if there were, first thing they’d do is get long from here. Only thing haunted is her and her mama.

‘Don’t you think that bout my mama,’ Agnes says. ‘She ain’t want to kill them babies!’ Agnes leans against the wash line.

Ella closes her eyes, pictures Mama Skins wringing baby necks.

‘Used to have to birth it first. She’d clean it, dress it real warm, love on it and by night, she’d smother it. Not in its sleep. While it was awake, so she could talk to it, tell it she loved it and how killing it was the most merciful thing she could do in this world. By the next morning she’d be back at Doc’s birthing babies for the farmers’ wives, merchants, anyone who could afford it. Was a time Mama Skins was sent for at all hours of the night. First one too. Before they even called the doctor they’d send for Mama. He’d taught her bout how mixing this with that could save this one, soothe that one, still another one. For long she was doctoring, just about. Then Doc up and died. You know how folks are. Ungrateful gossips. They got to saying she

killed him. My mama. As if she'd do that. Walker put a stop to all that talk. Stopped hiring her out too. She been doctoring here since.'

A sprinkle of poison in his tea, some of them itchy flowers on a roll, a rusted nail? Ella wonders how the old woman killed him.

'I wish I could take her with me when we go.'

Though she hasn't moved, Agnes is too close. Her voice stings Ella's skin like bees. Her words scatter from her mouth, buzz across the sky, attack. Ella scrambles to get up, to get away from Agnes, her foolish words and her pretend ways.

'You right,' Agnes calls to her back, 'she's too frail. The trip alone could kill her.'

That night Ella curls up like a cat, half on, half off the porch. In her head she recites her favorite prayers, practices hymns, lists names, birthdates and faces so she does not forget. She tries counting the days she's been here, forty-seven, but that makes her cry. So she counts the days until she goes home. One. Before long, she is asleep. Tomorrow she will follow the river's bends clear off Walker land. She will find a path and stay clear of it like the runaway slaves used to talk about during testimony. She will pack enough food for seven days. No meat, meat attracts dogs someone had said. She will bundle breads, carrots, blueberries while Agnes is in the fields and Papa Jonah runs around trying to keep the farm alive and Mama Skins runs around killing it. She will find a church and they will help her find her way home.

Mama Skins stands at the cabin door listening to the girl's dream planning. Inside, Agnes lies alone on her pallet watching her mother's silhouette.



Ella wakes to the cold early morning air. The sun is not up. Just as well, she thinks, she has to get ready. Her eyes aren't open a full minute when she feels someone squatting too close next to her.

'Master wants you down to the fields to help with the clearing,' Mama Skins says.

Slaving. She hasn't planned to be here this long. Forced to bend and break for the man who kidnapped her. Not able to speak up and if she could, what would she say? You know you wrong?

'Ain't gonna be no more nothing less you earn your keep. You gonna have to take your hand to something just like the rest of us. No sense sulking bout it. Sooner you get started, sooner you get done.'

'Leave her be, Mama. I'll help her,' Agnes says.

Ella follows Agnes to the river. Agnes points out markings along the way, she has a story for each one. That's where so and so broke his neck, that's where so and so got bit by a snake. Not one good thing happened on the whole place. Now's as good a time as any to get going. No food. She'll have to live off the water, maybe catch fish or something. She ain't been eating much anyway. The morning's near as dark as night. Once she gets to the river, she'll run. The fresh smell fills her nostrils. Not far now. A few steps more and she can hear it. Her heart beats in time with the rush of low and high tide meeting, swirling.

Agnes stops a few steps ahead. She clasps Ella's hands tight like a schoolgirl on the playground. 'James got a plan,' she says. Her words come out in bursts. 'Been waiting to tell you till it gets set but now's as good a time as any. Walker hired a hand!' She throws Ella's hands in the air. 'Coming here!' She twirls in a circle, her arms outstretched.

Ella resumes walking toward the river. What does one more set of hands have to do with her?

‘A free black hand. Someone to help with the hauling and clearing. Somebody who knows following that river is a sure enough way to get caught or killed or both.’

Ella stops walking.

Agnes talks over bathing. A few minutes later they set off for the fields. ‘Remember, all we got to do is be nice to him,’ Agnes says. ‘Not too nice. Let me see you smile. Oh Lord, no. Don’t do that no more. Like to scare him for days. Just let me do the talking and the smiling for both of us.’

It takes longer than Ella expects to get Bird, the hired hand working his way up North, to trust her. He spends most days not looking at her. Not looking into her lost brown eyes, not thinking about her broken spirit, her long legs. He’s been warned by the locals in town not to trust a soul on this place. But James and Agnes seem alright enough. They don’t look haunted. He feels bad about not accepting any of their food or drink, feels rude not to. But even if he hadn’t been warned ‘not to put so much as a crumb in his mouth lest he be tied to the place forever’ he won’t take the little bit they have. He eats supper with them. Clears and hauls side by side with them. At the end of each day he goes home to the boarding house he shares with ten other laborers, tumbles into bed and gets up before dawn to haul, lift and not look at that little bit of gal wasting away.

It takes ten days for the overseer to stop watching her, whip ready, waiting for her to walk too fast, haul too slow, carry too little. Agnes had told her how much to lift, how far to haul, how fast to move to satisfy him. Too fast got everyone else in trouble. Too slow meant the lash. It only takes once. One crack of tight wound leather heavy on her small back sends her

crumpled to the ground. The other slaves, including Agnes, keep working like the whoosh hasn't sliced through the air and her skin and her scream and flesh haven't torn from her body. But Bird drops his load of broken branches and stumps. He walks quickly, stepping around bent backs, over tangled roots to get there before the second lash.

'I'll teach her how to untangle them roots without messing with the crop,' he says. He's already scooping Ella up with one hand, picking up her hoe in the other. His body is a short wall between the overseer and Ella. Before the overseer can answer, Bird is leading her off, talking about berries and branches. He spends the next seven days teaching Ella to uproot bushes without killing the roots. He spends his nights thinking of ways to get her free.

'Bird's sweet on you,' Agnes whispers on the eighth night.

The girls lay on the edge of the riverbank. Despite the cold, they sleep here most nights 'to be closer to the fields,' Agnes had told her mother. Mama Skins fussing about it didn't stop Jonah and James from building the girls a small cabin near a copse of trees. Long as the girls took their supper at the house, Jonah didn't 'see a dang thing wrong with it.' He lined the roof with hides and furs, stuffed a fresh mattress with feathers and hides.

'He's been asking Little James about you. Tell me bout that gal,' Agnes whispers in her best Bird voice. 'You know that's as good as him asking if you's taken. James got to talking bout what a shame it is you been stolen from your people and if you could get up North, anywhere up North, it would be a miracle. He ain't say nothing else about it. Few days later, Bird come saying he didn't see why a gal like you should stay here. He said he thought he could buy you free.'

Ella's heart gets to beating out her chest.

‘Why, James liked to die. Ain’t no way Bird can afford to buy us all. No, James tells him, Walker wouldn’t sell you to nobody, least of all not to no black man who was just gonna set you free.’

Ella’s throat closes.

‘James left it at that. Today, Bird come up with a plan. Walker ain’t got to set her free. Just need papers that say she free.’

Ella’s stomach goes one way, her head the other. She waits.

‘Bird’s gonna buy passes soon as he saves enough. Got a friend to write them and everything. Just a little while longer. We’ll be free before you know it.’

A few weeks later, Samantha, Myrtle and Mama Skins gather at the river over the soapy undergarments and work-stained dungarees of the field slaves. The monthly washing is one of the few times the friends can talk openly. Mama Skins stirs a large boiling pot of clothes as the other two women dip them in the river and wring them out. When they finish they will call Agnes and Ella to hang them on makeshift lines made up of vines and rope.

‘What you know about Bird?’ Mama Skins asks.

‘Not much,’ Samantha says, ‘hardworking. Don’t talk much cept to Little James, Agnes and that gal.’ Her thin fingers pinch each drop of water from the worn fabric between her palms. After inspecting and wringing them again, she puts the breeches on the pile before scooping another from her woven river basket where they cool.

‘I think he sweet on her,’ Mama Skins says. ‘Could be he come and steal her away.’

‘That mess up all your planning though wouldn’t it?’ Myrtle asks. ‘All that working to save Agnes go soon as that girl go.’ She grins. ‘Isn’t that what you want? Save your gal?’

It’s in her voice, her eyes, the set of her mouth, the way she holds her head. Even if Mama Skins didn’t know her like she does, she’d recognize Myrtle’s jealous ways.

‘What you talking bout, Myrtle? Turns out, when that gal go, she gonna take my Agnes right on away from here. And if Agnes go, Little James gonna follow right on behind her.’ Mama Skins lets the words hang in the air with the soap bubbles.

‘But if she goes, who’s gonna be here for you? Who you gonna have left?’ Samantha asks.

‘Me and Jonah and of course, you and Myrtle and James and Little, no, not Little James. You practically raised that boy, ain’t you? Had your heart set on him and that gal from up the road getting together?’ Mama Skins shakes her head. ‘Well, soon’s they hit freedom, first thing he and Agnes probably do, I imagine, is get married.’ Hot soapy bubbles splatter Mama Skins’ skin. She doesn’t seem to take notice. She hums and stirs and waits.

Myrtle thrusts a work shirt under water. She holds it under like it’s fighting back. ‘Be back, need to get something up the house.’ She’s already moving before the two can respond.

‘Oh Meredith,’ Samantha says. ‘Why’d you say that? You know how Myrtle gets herself worked up.’

It's got nothing to do with Agnes and nothing to do with that bit of a gal either, Myrtle thinks as she trudges down the path. If it weren't for Meredith convincing them all to take that stuff, none of this would be happening. Her girls wouldn't have been sold off for being barren, her brothers wouldn't have been sold South to pick cotton, her friends, most of them gone now, wouldn't have buried baby after baby after baby. She stares straight ahead. She won't look at the heads poking up through the ground, blooming like spring flowers. Why should Meredith get what she wants? How many women come to her to keep their masters out their beds at night? How many had she given a little bit of this to? How many times had that little bit turned into a whole heap of that? When they were all shriveled up inside and Walker started buying babies, wasn't the pact to kill them? Won't be no more slaves after us, the women swore on it. When Walker brought a little baby, they all hugged on it, loved on it and in the morning, one of them would love it to death. Love it to freedom. How many was it?

They'd taken turns. She had Jebediah with the bright green eyes, Every with fingers long like vines, Shy with the pink lips. She can still see their faces, their eyes big with shock, the questions in their eyes. She told them stories, all of them, of who they were and who she was and where they came from and where they was going, all so they could make their way home. When Agnes come Meredith said the baby didn't need killing. Said Walker was convinced the place was haunted and one miracle baby wouldn't hurt nothing. Walker brought two more. They died the same day. Wasn't even Meredith's turn. 'Babies sometimes die,' she said like that was that. No more babies come until that gal. Shoulda been Myrtle's turn. That gal didn't need killing neither. Myrtle would have loved on her, been her mama. But Meredith fixed it so she'd go down to the cabins.

No more. Just a whisper in the missus' ear, a question: what do you think that laborer talks to the field hands about? That's all it would take to get missus' imagination to running. Before long she'd conjure up worse than Myrtle could say and that hand would be on his way north, alone and that little gal would be up the house, scrubbing and cooking and mending. She'd teach her who to look out for, how to make the days pass like lightning, how to stop hearing the whispers of the dead.

Voices drift through the woods.

'How we gonna put three people on one pass?' Little James. If he'd been born after Meredith come, there wouldn't be no Little James today.

'Can't. This pass says I got one slave, one. I told you I was coming for the gal. Now it's all mixed up,' another man says.

'But my woman and me, we're planning on leaving together.'

'Ain't trying to stop you, just can't do it on this pass.'

From behind a tree, Myrtle watches the silence settle like smoke between the two men.

'Whole lot easier for two to get free when one's already free,' the man finally says. 'You can come back for one, both of them or all four of em.'

'Four?' James asks.

'They both with child, ain't they?'

Could they be? Meredith hadn't given Agnes anything to dry her up and she sure didn't give that gal any although she told Agnes she would. There was no doubt Meredith had given Agnes something to keep Walker off of her for all these years. Agnes might have slipped some to that gal but babies? Meredith sure hadn't counted on this. Two of them? After all this time? James' hemming and hawing could get them all left.

‘Seems like you would have mentioned she was with child before now. Unless you didn’t know. But, I can’t be toting no pregnant gal. What happens if we get found out? She ain’t gonna be able to run. Get us both caught. Either you go or no. I ain’t gonna make up your mind for you.’

‘I am,’ Myrtle says. ‘Ain’t I been a mama to you most your life?’ Even though she’s stepped in front of the tree, both men jump like they’ve seen a ghost. Bird looks like he wants to run one way, James the other. ‘You gotta leave here while you got the chance,’ she continues. ‘Come back for Agnes when you get yourself set up. Get you a job, a place for the baby, her. I’ll take care of her and the other gal and her youngun too.’

‘What about my pa? He’ll die without me,’ James says.

‘You so full of yourself,’ Myrtle laughs. ‘He’ll be sorry you ain’t gone sooner. You think he want you to be a slave your whole natural life? Your mama wouldn’t want that neither.’

James shifts from foot to foot. Bird shifts from foot to foot.

‘It ain’t like you leaving us. You being free is like us all being free, one step at a time,’ she says. She wraps him in her arms, holds him tight like she held all them before him. Loving him to freedom. She lets go.

‘I’ll be back for y’all,’ James promises. ‘Tell them for me. Hear?’

Myrtle nods, takes a breath and almost skips to the far field. She hasn’t been there on purpose in years. She sits among the graves, chattering and laughing and singing. She’s still singing when the overseer finds her the next morning, singing and chattering about babies and graves. Walker drives her five towns over. He comes back the next morning with twin calves.



Agnes knows James is coming back for her. She feels it. Walker rallies a search party to save James from Bird ‘the slave-charming-abolitionist-thief.’ Damned Bird done tricked James into leaving. Soon as he can break free, James will be home. Agnes waits. Days pass, then weeks. Blueberries peek then burst through. It’s planting season. Just like James to make the most of things. He’s probably got himself a job, saving up to buy her. Hope he make enough to buy the gal too. If not, they’ll come back for her before long. Might have a room somewhere but more likely James done built a little something somewhere near the water, he likes the water. Agnes bundles clothes, shells, things she can’t stand to leave behind, wraps them in skins and buries them. She’d fold her mama and papa up too if she could. The hole is shallow. Buried in Mama Skins’ patch with the babies so they can keep an eye on it till it’s time. Won’t take a minute to scoop it up. James will be in a hurry.

Since Bird run off, Ella’s been waiting. Instead of counting days, she focuses on voices. Mama’s singing geography lessons: ‘The Monongahela through and through, river flows from me to you.’ Papa’s, ‘Oh how it glitters, oh how it shines, when dirt turns to soot, look out for the mines.’ Pastor’s ‘the Heavenly star, that shines clear and bright, leads straight to God’s North, keep freedom in sight.’ But the voice she hears most often is Hazel, a runaway slave she’d made a shawl for: ‘stay clear the shallow, stay clear the wide, cross at the rapids, where dogs fear to stride.’

She’ll need to be ready for when he comes back. Most likely Bird will know the way, least to Philadelphia. She can do the rest. Mornings she hauls and plans and waits, no Bird. Weeks pass. She’s hungry all the time. When she’s not throwing up yellow bile, she’s eating dirt, bark, starch, carrots. Her arms are lean, her legs strong, her belly round. Agnes’ is too. Must be

all that good eating. Deer, possum, raccoon. Agnes can catch anything. Agitated, Ella is waiting on Bird when it's time for planting. When grass and flowers sprout. When bushes and trees bloom. July brings hot sun and bursting blueberries ripe from the bush. They stain her fingers, her arms, her legs, her patience.

Mama Skins has been waiting too. Ever since Walker sold Myrtle off, the air has become thick. It stinks all over. Most days, she can hardly breathe. Fresh rain does nothing to wash the smell of rot from the dirt, the trees, her skin. Even if Agnes and that gal can't smell it, Samantha, Old James and Jonah do. They don't talk about it, don't need to. It hangs between Samantha and her like a pair of soiled undergarments at the river washing. Between Old James' words on the few times he brings news from the house. In that space between her and Jonah where she used to put her head on his chest at night. It's only a matter of time before Walker gets to selling other folk. She will never see Agnes again. Never hold her grandbaby. The baby will grow up a slave, just like Agnes, just like her. If she ain't never gonna see her again no how, Agnes may as well be free. She won't get far without that gal's book smarts. But two little gals won't get far weighed down with babies.

If she slips a handful of ground herbs into Agnes' stew, the baby won't be born at all. Mama Skins has been up since sunrise gathering and grinding herbs from her medicine garden. Some for Agnes, some for the gal. The carrots are slow cooking with rabbit and onions. In a small iron pot, the bitter herbs simmer. As it cooks, Mama Skins makes up memory bundles for both babies. She whispers stories into shells for safekeeping and to guide the babies home when they pass. She wraps the shells in fabric, a pocket from Agnes' dress, a torn ribbon she'd been holding onto since the gal came. She wraps these small treats in stolen scraps of newspaper, tufts

of fur, hides. She rocks the bundles in her arms, kisses them. She has supper on the table. For the girls, two black gourds, for her and Jonah, two brown.

The sun set hours ago. The day's been so long the moon doesn't even bother to come out. The sky is pitch black. Not one shining star. The stew has been heated twice. The herbs have steeped too long in their own juices. Picking season. As the summer air cools the few borrowed bodies Walker can afford make their way back to the shacks to live side by side with the few slaves left. After hours of waiting, slippery with sweat, the girls and Jonah plop on the porch.

'Y'all gonna wash before supper?' Mama Skins asks.

No one stirs.

Just as well. They'll have to wash all over again once the blood starts flowing. 'Supper's on the table,' Mama Skins says. She paces inside the cabin. Comes back to the door, waits.

'Meredith,' Jonah says, 'I ain't got no intention of getting up no more tonight. If that supper want me to eat it, it's gonna have to come right here for me to do it.'

'I'll get it, Mama.'

From the sound of her voice, don't sound like she could get up if she wanted to. 'I'll get it.' Mama Skins squints, fingers each gourd for nicks and grooves. She can't see the colors but knows each by heart. Satisfied, she balances one in each hand, elbows pressing the other two, one each to either side of her body. 'Huhn,' she says delivering Jonah's, then Agnes', then the gal's. She stands in the doorway, the black bowl cool between her fingertips. 'I been thinking. Won't be too long before Walker get to selling again,' she says. Sips deeply. 'We gotta make sure you two is gone before he do.'

There are four soft thuds: Agnes' sleeping head against the wood step as untouched stew slides to the porch and the brown bowl falls from her fingers. Papa Jonah's seizing body on the

ground as poison ripples through his veins turning his stomach against him. Mama Skins' insides pouring from every orifice of her quickly bloating body. Ella's feet running through the soft grass.

The overseer finds them the next morning. Agnes, still sleeping, on the porch. Her parents, one slumped over, one standing stock straight, both dead. Samantha and Big James come for her. They lead Agnes to her little cabin. Hush her screaming. They tell stories of Meredith before Agnes, before she became Mama Skins. Stories of a wild-eyed slave girl smarter than a soul for miles. So smart she got her learning from the good doctor. Learned her everything he knew. Meredith with a voice so strong she could sing the skin off a coon. The Meredith they remembered laughed and sang. The Meredith they remembered didn't kill babies.

Agnes hardly recognized the Meredith they described.

While James and Samantha split Meredith's story in two, her body was dumped in the pit with Jonah on top of her. On account of the oozing, Walker had the pile set on fire. Contractions hit the moment the flames roared. At the same time, Ella's body came bobbing to the surface. I was born head first in the bottom of the river. Tempe, my sister, popped out of Agnes' belly just one minute before me. To hear her tell it, she's the one that broke the curse and I'm just the one who broke the curse's sister. She never lets me forget it.

2:00 PM

*Hush.*

Tempe's whisper, hot like the whistle of a tea kettle, sends chills up the back of my neck. She's always trying to boss me. I tuck the yellow newspaper article, *Philadelphia North, November 28, 1850*, into the middle of the Bible. I put it in front of Tempe and put Edward's bandaged hands in between mine. 'It's gonna be alright, baby.' The lie springs to my lips before I can stop it.

The door clicks. A rush of warm air. The soft thump of the door, humming and the smell of lilacs lift the stale air. 'I'm going to need to check vitals,' a nurse announces to the room. A chart slaps against her hip. There are two of them. Accosting one patient after the other, they slip behind patient screens. Their shadows lift, turn, tug. Moans and grunts accompany orchestrated movements. The snap of rubber gloves. The stench of alcohol, urine; the slosh of a bucket. They make their way to Edward's bed. I glance at Tempe.

*Told you so.*

'We just need to check on Mr. Freeman,' one says. Staring at the chart, she nods her head at Edward.

'Just be a moment,' the other says. She's already got one hand clutched around my arm, pulling on me and the other reaching for my Bible. She's so close I can read the name, Bernadette, on her tag.

‘I’ll get it,’ I say.

We grab for it at the same time. My hand on one end, hers on the other. Years slip from the pages. 1855, 1860, 1865, 1880, 1901: scatter like Junebugs. *The Emancipation* slides on to the floor followed by *Missing girl*, *Reward for Runaway Slave*, *Lost: Woman Missing*, *Answers to Mama*, *Found: Baby, Six Months Old*, and *No Coloreds Allowed*. Damned fool. She lets go of the book. I clutch it tight but that don’t stop it from shaking none. It’s warm and throbbing like to jump right out of my arms. My arms get to shaking and my legs too. Tempe’s rolling her eyes, shaking her head at me from the corner. Spiteful words gurgle in my throat. *Toe stomping*, *speckled heifer* is pushing its way pass my tongue. Bernadette holds the clippings clumped together so that *Lost* is on one end, *Found* on the other. She gives them to me gently, and ushers me away from the bed.

‘How long they gonna keep him?’ the younger nurse says. She lifts and prods.

Bernadette peels one of Edward’s eyelids back, stares, writes. Peels the next. ‘Why, til he gets better, of course.’

‘Expect that’s possible?’

The look the older one gives her could stop a heart. She puts her head down, scribbles notes.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if Mr. Freeman got up in a few days ready to shake all this off and put the past behind him.’

‘I would,’ the young nurse whispers.

‘Excuse us.’ Bernadette pulls a curtain attached to a metal frame around the bed. The contraption rattles and clinks into place. As soon as the starched, thin piece of cloth is in place, she starts talking. ‘What ever made you say that?’ Her body casts shadows across the screen. Her

hands are on her hips. She leans forward, bends almost double. ‘I’ve told you a thousand times; don’t talk like that in front of them.’

‘I didn’t mean nothing by it. I been hearing bout this case all—’

‘Patient. Out there, it’s a case. In here, he’s a patient.’

‘I been hearing about this all day. I’m surprised he’s still alive. Soon’s as I heard it on the radio I just knew he’d be here and that I’d be one of the last people to see him alive. I just knew it. I said Maddy, you gonna be the last face that ol’ Colored boy see.’

‘Will you hush?’

The hiss of words is replaced by the whoosh of ripping gauze as they remove and replace strips of fabric with new ones. Through the curtain, they roll and unroll, measure, snip and tuck.

‘I left soon as I could. Mama was all: *where you going so early?* and I said *Mama, I’m going to work, they need me.* I couldn’t get out the door without her fussing and packing supper in case I had to work through the night. Can’t be fooling around with no bus or trolley today. And wasn’t I right? Wasn’t off my porch step when people came running up the street asking me if I heard the news and in the same breath saying stay indoors. They was gonna go round up the Coloreds so there wouldn’t be no trouble till it was all over. That sounded like trouble to me so I said, don’t you do that. Don’t you go riling them folks up. It’ll all blow over. And they said *damned right.* Just like that. Folks standing round waiting on the Broad Line or the Vine Express like it didn’t matter what time they showed up. Mother Matthews would have me scrubbing chamber pots for a month, two if I was that late. I walked clear here.’ Her hands are moving at the same time her mouth is.

‘I’ve been here since first thing this morning. Buses have been tied up ever since it happened.’

‘You walk her up?’

‘Oh heavens no, Maddy, Claudine did that. Seemed like she was hoping to stay around. I don’t blame her. I wouldn’t want to be walking out there right now if I was her.’

‘All she has to say is *I’m a nurse* and they’ll let her right through.’

‘Who will?’

‘The police. They all around the hospital. So is the Klan and everyone else. Tell me you can’t hear people chanting *throw him down, throw him down!* I swear it’s like they right outside the window knowing exactly where he is. I feel like they’re watching me right now. Who do you think is keeping them from coming right in here, dragging him from this bed and tossing him out the window?’

‘Well, it’ll all be over soon.’

‘How do you figure? The police can’t figure out if he was pulled or did the pulling. And just what was he doing operating the trolley anyhow? Is he working for the strikers or the rails? Ought to be ashamed. Ramming into a heap of—’

‘—wasn’t a heap. Shop wasn’t even open yet. It couldn’t have been more than a couple of people in there.’

‘That’s not bad enough?’

‘A few is less than a whole heap. Ones we getting are from after the accident.’

‘A certain amount of violence is to be expected after events like this,’ Maddy says. She puts her hands on her hips, shakes her head.

‘Don’t you sound just like that man from the radio?’

‘Mama loves when I do that. Says I got it just right. I said it to the officer by the door earlier. He didn’t smile or nothing.’



‘Of course not, he’s been there all day. I’m sure he can’t wait until it’s all over. Did he say how long he’ll be out there?’

‘Wait, let me do it like he says.’ She tilts her head, puts a hand up to an imaginary cap. ‘till it’s all over, Ma’am.’

‘Then that won’t be much longer now.’

‘They’ll move on once he’s gone.’

‘Don’t see why folks stick around. Even if he did do it, he won’t be able to tell them nothing about it.’

‘When I came in the police were calling on the Coloreds to go home peacefully. I could hear it before I even got here. *Just go home and you won’t get hurt.* They didn’t listen though. Some of them started singing and praying and chanting. Then people and water came gushing down the street. I just stopped. Right there. When it turned to a steady stream of pink, I come on through. Seen a whole heap of them, no a few, police had arrested a few. Seem to think they must be in cahoots or something. I hope one of them confesses soon. We don’t have that much room to take many more.’

‘I don’t think he did it,’ Bernadette says.

‘I don’t see why not. He was in it, wasn’t it?’

‘That’s what they say.’

‘A whole lot of folks say that.’

‘I heard they’re already questioning somebody else.’

Maddy sucks her teeth.

‘A union boy from up North sent down to get the strikers worked up.’

‘Don’t need much riling up. They been at it since they got fired yesterday. Been boiling over before that if you ask me.’

They tuck the covers tight around Edward.

‘Don’t much matter now, does it?’ Bernadette asks.

I don’t realize until the curtain starts billowing that I’ve been holding my breath ever since they started talking. My chest hurts. My mouth is dry. The curtain flails and rustles. It slaps against one’s back, creeps against the other’s legs.

‘Oh, my!’ Their mumbles grow louder as wind presses the cloth against them.

Tempe. She’s standing right next to me red-faced, huffing like an old freight train. Hot air streams from her mouth blowing the curtain, rattling and shaking the thin railing. I didn’t know she could do that. Edward. I know she can hear me so I just mouth the word. She stops blowing. The curtain stops moving. By the time the nurses, flustered, can pull it back, I’m standing below the window. Even with it closed I can hear faint noises outside. A horn wailing. People chanting. Anger rising. With their backs to Edward, the nurses straighten their clothes, fix their hair, gather the charts.

‘All finished Mrs. Freeman,’ Bernadette says. She plasters a smile on her face. I ain’t never seen two people in such a rush to get from a place.

‘Tempe?’ She’s faint. I can just about see through her. Seems indecent being able to see sunlight streaming clear through her head. I don’t turn away though. She’s huffing like she can’t catch her breath. ‘You need something?’

*Hurry up. There ain’t that much time.*

The pages flip through the years. Tempe ain’t never had too much patience.

## Chapter 11

March 11, 1855

Tempe pokes out her bottom lip, letting it droop while staring down at the bare wood floor as if she's lost something important but can't remember what she's lost.

'Like this, Mama?' she asks. She slowly raises her eyes. Her lips part innocently.

'Not quite, Sugar,' Mama shakes her head so even the shells in her hair clatter with exasperation. 'Let me see you walk.'

Tempe stomps across the floor with long, wide steps. She swooshes her imaginary layered skirts as her arms swing up, then down, then up in unison. It takes Mama a while to recognize the airs and when she does she holds her hand to her chest and laughs with her mouth wide open. Mama has the most beautiful laugh in the world.

'You shouldn't poke fun at the Missus,' I say. 'She's sickly.'

'It's not my fault. That's how she walks.' Tempe scrunches her face up like she's trying to hold her laughter in her chest but it bubbles out before she can stop it. She parades around our cooking/sleeping/visiting/sewing room. Her bare feet slap against the wood floor. She pretends to inspect and poke pots and pans, boxes and cases. 'What's this? What do you call that?'

‘She’s just curious. You stop that. She don’t mean no harm,’ Mama chides.

‘Ok, how about this one?’ Just like that, the missus is gone. Tempe smoothes her thick shift, two old dresses sewn together, and stands with her head up high. She unbinds her plaits letting her hair fall around her ears in thick, chocolate curls. Licking her lips she raises her eyes level with Mamas before cocking her head to the side. Before Mama can stop her, she’s sashaying across the room, long legs and hips slowly swaying with each step.

‘Where’d you learn to walk that way?’ Mama asks.

‘From you. It’s how you walk when you think no one’s watching.’

‘Don’t walk that way, people will stare.’

‘I don’t walk that way, Mama, I walk like I got good sense,’ I say. Mama smiles, nods without looking at me.

‘So?’ Tempe puckers her lips in the nasty way the hired hands taught her.

Mama stares at Tempe’s feet, slightly dusted as if they never touched the ground for long. I know she’s looking at her golden brown calves and up to her thick waist. Mama’s been fooling herself if she thought that scratchy yard frock hid Tempe’s long arms and slender fingers. Maybe she ain’t notice it til now. Eleven years old and Tempe’s filling out. And if she’s been around them hired hands long enough to pick up their ways, it’s been long enough for them to recognize she ain’t gonna be no little gal for long. Her body might be that of a woman but it will be her eyes, wine colored in the light or those lips, full and sculptured, that will ruin us all.

Tempe looks at the floor while Mama stares. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other then rocks back and forth while idly tugging at strings on her dress, fidgeting. At least she’s got the good sense to look shy.

‘Ok, how about this?’ Tempe hunches her back as if she’s carrying the Missus’ packages weighed down with gifts for this person or that but never for anyone else really. Her body looks heavy. Her walk is slow and clumsy and a bit unsure. Mama watches her walk the length of the cabin.

‘Perfect, you look just perfect,’ Mama says.

‘I can do it too, Mama. I can look ugly.’

‘Of course you can, Sister,’ Tempe says, ‘you don’t have to try near as hard.’

Mama grabs her bony arms and shakes her. Tempe’s little head rattles and bobs like to fall right off. ‘Don’t you ever say nothing like that again,’ Mama hisses. ‘Them words sound ugly coming out of your mouth. I ain’t raisin’ nobody to be mean to nobody else just because. Nary one of y’all are ugly on the outside and I won’t let you be ugly on the inside neither.’

What if Mama kills her? My sister will be buried around back with the bunny we tried to save last winter and the frogs from before that. Will Mama find the critters when she digs the little hole to dump Tempe in? Will she split her open like James say they used to do? With Tempe gone will I have to do her chores? ‘She didn’t mean it, Mama, she says stuff like that all the time and she don’t mean none of it.’

Mama pinches Tempe’s arm. Tempe whimpers.

‘There’s plenty enough people to be nasty to my girls. I won’t have one of you being mean to the other.’

‘Mama, Master’s all the time saying how ugly she is—’

‘—don’t you bring nothing that man says into this house.’

‘Master says it’s his house—’

‘Mama said don’t go repeating anything Master said.’ I put my hands on my hips.

‘Take your hands off your hips, you ain’t grown,’ Mama says.

‘Yeah, you ain’t grown. Mama, Sister’s got her fists balled up like she’s gonna hit me again.’

‘Tempe, you lying! I ain’t never hit you—’

‘—have never,’ Tempe says.

‘See, she’s lying!’

‘Spring, Tempe, why don’t both of you go out back and fetch something for supper?’

‘Cuz ain’t nothing out there,’ Tempe says.

‘There’s greens and radishes and onions and potatoes,’ I say. Mama’s garden is almost better than Walker’s.

‘Ain’t no ham, no thick pork chops, no plump roast.’ Tempe runs down the list from memory.

‘Just pick something we do have,’ Mama says in her *don’t push me* voice.

Tempe ain’t but two steps behind me when we run out the door. She pushes past me when we get out on the small, rickety porch leaving me to trail behind. I run round back and start pulling beans and potatoes and sprouts. My peach crate’s almost full before I notice Tempe hasn’t put a thing in hers.

‘Mama’s gonna get you if you don’t start filling that crate.’

‘Why Agnes always get so mad anyway?’ Tempe whispers.

Running around calling Mama by her given name. Least she’s got sense enough to lower her voice. I keep picking.

‘She’s almost as bad as overseer,’ Tempe continues.

‘How you even know? You ain’t supposed to be out in the fields.’

‘Overseer ain’t tied to the fields.’

‘Where you go that he go?’

‘Sometimes I see him when I’m running errands to the house or out by the barn. I see most everybody on this place.’

‘Well, I’ve seen him too.’

‘Know what else I seen?’

‘What, Tempe?’

She twirls and dances, tiptoeing her way through the rows of Mama’s garden.

‘Mama’s gonna get you,’ I yell. But I know Mama won’t. Tempe can dance up and down these rows without stepping on anything she don’t want to. I put down my crate, pick hers up and start tossing in leaves and clumps.

‘Meet me by the river, I’ll tell you then.’

‘But Mama said...’

She’s already gone.

She’s naked as a bluebird when I catch up.

You’ll die. The warning catches in my throat. How many times has Mama said to stay away from the river? Tempe slips in. I wait for her to come up. I watch the sun shining on the river skin. Leaves float on the surface. What if she dies? What will I tell Mama? Tempe jumped right in the river and it swallowed her up, just like you said it would. I tried to help. I look at my dress. It’s my favorite. A few splashes of water won’t hurt it none. Will she float up like a fish or get tangled in the weeds? Who will cut her out? Mama? James? I bet I’d have to do it. I look for

something to cut the reeds. My hands will have to do. Lord please let her rise to the top right here on the bank. Then I won't have to go in after her.

'Tempe!' I yell.

'Hush!' Her head breaks through the surface. 'Sister, you sure are a worrying somebody.' She laughs when I jump. 'I wasn't gonna drown. I ain't the one afraid of the water.' She bobs near the middle of the river.

'I ain't either.'

'Then come in. Just a little. Just poke your little toe—'

'So what do you see?'

'Come closer and I'll tell you.' She opens and closes her arms like a starfish. The river moves in little ripples with her.

I know better but I go to the edge. She moves her mouth but I can't make out the words. I scoot closer to the edge. She's whispering so I have to lean over to hear.

'Up at the house they got so much food they can't even eat it all,' she whispers, 'roasts, ham, chicken, taters, pies, fruits; and that's just for supper. Ivy sends plates piled this high with all sorts of juicy stuff and most times plates comes back with food still on it. And no one can touch none of it till Missus say she had her fill and what's to be kept for when and who.'

'If they got all that food, why are we hungry?'

'Cuz we black.'

'Being black don't have nothing to do with being hungry.'

'Master say we always want more than we need and it's up to him to make sure we don't get nothing we don't need.'

'When he say all that?'



‘When he was hitting Rose in the mouth,’ Tempe says.

‘When was that?’

‘I don’t know musta been the other day. I was waiting on Samantha to finish packing supper for the hands so she could get me the fabric to take round to the sewing shack and Rose was carrying trays stacked with plates and saucers and cups this high,’ she points to the sky.

‘When she went back with the after-supper coffee, Master said he smelled meat on her breath. Rose said she hadn’t eaten any meat and maybe some spilled on her from cooking out back all day and Master said she was calling him a liar and Rose said she hadn’t called him any such thing and Master got to screaming that she had called him a liar twice and he hit her, pop pop, in the mouth.’ Tempe splashes water with each pop. ‘He told her don’t take nothing without asking and no one said nothing about it after but I hope Samantha said something cuz Rose didn’t eat no food off no plate. I did.’

‘Tempe!’ I yell.

Water covers her chin. It swallows her mouth, her nose and eyes—still open—and finally her head.

‘Why do you keep your eyes open?’ I ask.

Laughing again, Tempe jumps out of the river and twists into her shift. Now she lies with her wet hair on my back. I’m drenched. I don’t move.

‘You can’t see em’ with your eyes closed,’ Tempe whispers.

‘Can’t see who?’

‘The dead.’

‘Then how do you know they’re down there?’

‘I can just tell. You know that spot where the water goes ice cold for no reason? The sun will be hot as a skillet. Water almost boiling when you get in. You wade in deep. Just go where the water takes you. It’s just you and the river pushing and pulling you where it wants you to go. You let yourself be; you just let the water do what the water’s gonna do. You know?’

‘What do you see?’

‘Souls,’ Tempe answers.

‘How do they look?’

‘Mad. I’m hungry.’

‘Mama will make something good—’

‘I know, but let’s go up the house first.’

At first I think she’s talking about the old shack Mama lived in before, back when she was just Agnes. Even though Mama don’t like it, Tempe and me play there all the time. The busted-up roof and sides bout to lean in make a cave. Just me and Tempe and them bundles of shells and stuff Mama don’t think we know about. To Mama and them, it’s a shack. To me and Tempe, it is home. But Tempe ain’t talking about home. The House. I follow. I have to. Tempe runs down the trail through the woods and instead of going around the fields like we’ve been told a thousand times, she runs straight through one. It’s Harvest time but everybody’s down the main field. Not a soul around for acres. The forbidden dirt feels softer. Even the air smells sweeter. We race. I would have won if I had known where we were going. If we were just running up to the house to slap the old girl like we usually did when wasn’t anybody around to tell Mama, I’d have won. I’m about to smack right on a smooth beam when Tempe runs toward the back. She’s going to knock on the kitchen door! If she finds out we went knocking on the kitchen door begging Samantha for food, Mama will be madder than she was the time Tempe threatened to

tell Walker on her if Mama hit her again. I don't want to see nothing like that again. I run around back to catch up.

'You'll get them in trouble if you go begging for food,' I say. I'm out of breath. I hold my side and lean against the cellar door.

'I ain't asking them.' She darts past the side to the front.

'Tempe!' I whisper but I know she can hear me.

The back door swings open. Rose stares at me.

'What you doing hollering back here?' Her rich voice is warm and deep.

I don't mean to but I smile.

Tempe reaches the front of the house. She skips up onto the large, white porch. By then Rose, Samantha and me have reached the side. Tempe knocks on the door. The wind carries James' surprised voice and his attempts to shoo Tempe off the porch. Master Walker comes out. I can tell by the way she's standing, she wasn't expecting him to be home. Serves her right.

'Oh no,' Samantha moans.

Instead of knocking her down like I expect, Walker stoops down to talk to her. Whatever he says, Tempe shakes her head no. He says something else. She shakes her head yes. A few minutes of headshaking and she's inside. The door shuts behind her.

It's almost dark before the back door opens.

Tempe ain't said nothing since she come out the back door cradling that hunk of ham between her hands.

'What's wrong with you?' I ask. Mama will kill me if something happened to her.

‘Nothing.’

‘Something happen in there?’

‘Nope.’

‘Somebody hurt you?’

‘Nope.’

‘You ever gonna tell me what happened?’

‘Nope.’

She never does. Instead, she grabs my hand and we run through the woods till we get home. We let the door bounce against the frame behind us and tumble onto the floor. After pulling them from under the planks, we unwrap both bundles. Tempe rubs the stones against her face, kisses a smooth lump of hide, breathes deep. She splits the hunks of meat in two and puts one in each satchel *for later* before wrapping them back up.

‘Why’d he give you that?’ I ask.

‘Did you know ain’t no babies born here cept us for years and years and years? Not one. Not even Agnes.’

‘Mama will kill you if she hears you calling her that.’

‘That’s what Master calls her.’

I give her my *you know better than that look*. ‘Besides, Mama was born right here on Walker Farm.’

‘Was not.’

‘Was too. Lived right here with her ma and her pa since she was born.’

Tempe’s already shaking her head. ‘That ain’t hardly true,’ she says. ‘Agnes lived here with a mama and a papa. Walker gave her to them. He’s gonna give you and me babies one day

too. In about a year when we older. Walker bought her when she was a baby. Bought plenty of babies too. Even bought one wasn't a baby.'

She's staring at me like she's gonna be sick and throw words up all over the floor. Sweat starts beading up around my forehead then popping up under my arms. I'm holding my breath, waiting. 'If he bought babies here, where they at?' I ask.

'Dead.'

'All of them?'

'Cept Agnes. Walker says the whole place was cursed. Wouldn't nothing hardly grow. Then Mama's folks died and the curse was lifted. I popped out and then running behind me, you. Walker says I'm a miracle.'

'You?'

'He said you and me both. He meant me cuz I was first.'

'Then why ain't no babies come after me?'

'Maybe you brought the curse back with you.'

Later, when Tempe tells Mama, she leaves out the part about Walker buying her. She don't call her Agnes neither. Mama doesn't listen anyway, not after the part about giving me and Tempe babies. I want to ask her if I'm cursed. I don't though. Even though I tell her I wasn't in the house Mama scrubs us both with every sliver of homemade soap she can find. When that's used up she uses lemon peels and tomatoes. She scrubs until my skin tingles. Then she says our insides need cleaning. We drink four jars each of "inner ointment." The smell of lemon and onion and the thick gooey tree sap is enough to make you sick but I don't dare drop a drip. Tempe lets a dollop fall to the ground and has to drink a whole other jar to replace it. I drink mine fast so I can't taste it. We do our business out back downwind from the house. By the time

it runs through us, we're tired, sweaty and empty. Our stomachs rumble when we finally lay on our thin bed of stuffed skins. Tempe shakes next to me. For months Mama makes me and Tempe drink that concoction. I drink mine every night. Tempe dumps hers in between the floorboard underneath her pallet. I watch her do it. As we get older, Mama adds a cream to rub between our legs, some herbs to put on our tongues. I do mine every morning. Tempe stands right there and watches me wiggle and squirm and pretend my insides ain't burning up. She watches and shakes her head. She don't wiggle or squirm except when Mama's watching. When Mama's there, Tempe dips her hand in the jar, rubs her fingers between her legs and then jumps and hollers like she's on fire. Mama stands there telling her it'll be okay like she believes it. She tells us the cream is like medicine. When Tempe says we ain't sick, Mama says you take it before you need it. Then come the herbs. Mama dips into a satchel and measures out a pinch each of bitter herbs. We ain't supposed to swallow them, just suck on them until it tingles. Tempe never gets it right. Because she's the oldest, Mama puts the herbs in her hand and lets Tempe slip them on her tongue. She don't do it though. Soon as Mama turns to give me mine, Tempe slips hers into her pocket or scatters them on the floor. By the time Mama turns back, Tempe's pretending her mouth is on fire. Sometimes I make her wait. I hold them on my tongue until my eyes start to water and my throat burns. The juice burns going down. It's worth it though. Mama smiles relieved that her girls are safe. She gives us pressed blueberry syrup to drink after. The dosing becomes a routine, every morning before sunrise. Now that Mama stopped watching us do it, Tempe don't bother to pretend.

## Chapter 12

August 17, 1857

‘Why do we have to go, Mama?’ Tempe asks. She sits cross-legged on the floor stuck between Mama’s legs. She squirms and yelps like Mama’s killing her while she gets her hair plaited.

A preacher’s coming. Walker’s taken to going to church and having preachers, reverends and ministers for Sunday supper but this is the first one I will ever see. Walker sent down new dresses for the women and dungarees and shirts for the men. We all got hats and headscarves and new shoes. He called for all the slaves, even them from the house, to worship.

‘We’re going to hear the word,’ I say. Mama done my hair earlier. I stand on the porch careful not to lean on the new rail Mama built and careful not to dirty my new dress or sweat out my puffs.

‘The preacher is going to talk to us about God,’ Mama says. She twists and pulls Tempe’s thick hair. Tempe jumps. ‘Sit still.’

‘We already talked about God. What can he tell us that you don’t know?’

‘What’s God look like?’ I ask.

‘Us,’ Mama says.

I picture God, his brown face and eyes lit up like stars. He’s long-legged and tall, taller than any man I’ve ever seen with arms as long as trees stretched wide enough to hold me, Mama and Tempe too. He’s standing there smiling with a smile so bright it’s like looking into the sun and he’s waiting, just waiting.

‘Does God’s Mama make him sit still while she pulls and yanks on his hair too?’

‘Tempe!’ Mama yells. She laughs. ‘Ask God yourself.’

‘I ask God a lot of things but he don’t never answer,’ Tempe says.

It’s hot. Including the hired hands, there are only fifteen or so of us here but it’s boiling. The preacher wants to hold service in the barn. Even though it’s warm as could be outside, he got the door shut and the shutters closed.

‘Y’all ought to be thankful to Master Walker for allowing me to spread the Lord’s Good Word to you lowly heathens,’ the preacher says. His face is pink and shiny. Even worse, he’s a whisperer. We have to lean in close to hear him.

‘What’d he say?’ someone asks.

‘He said we ought to be thankful to the Lord for heathens,’ someone else answers.

Darned hired hands mock everything. The way Tempe milks a cow, the way I walk and now this. And on Sunday!

‘That ain’t what he said at all,’ one of them says. ‘He said we should be thankful heathens.’

‘I said—’

‘Well, why’s he yelling? Lord got him all enraptured already?’



‘Praise Lord! Hallelujah!’ Rose gets to singing.

‘Amen, amen,’ someone says, ‘that was a right good sermon.’

The hands turn to go.

‘We ain’t finished!’ The preacher’s pink face goes red. ‘I’ll say when it’s time to go!’ He fans himself with one of them wicker fans Rose uses to cool the Missus. ‘Now the Lord in his infinite wisdom has seen to it to give you all to Master Walker for his care. The burden of responsibility is lifted and all you have to do now is serve your Master on Earth and serve your Master in Heaven and—’

‘What he say?’

‘Repeat after me,’ the preacher says. He wipes his face. ‘Y’all are heathens sent to pay for the sins of your father.’

‘Y’all heathens sent to pay for the sins of your father,’ the hands repeat.

‘No! Say I’m a heathen damned to—’

‘What he say?’

‘He’s damned! He’s damned!’

‘Oh Lord Jesus, save us, save us Lord! He’s damned!’

‘I’m not damned, you all are damned!’

Don’t seem to be nothing he can do. Them hands hightail it out of there like the barn’s on fire. Door not even shut good and I can hear them laughing out there in the cool air. It’s just Mama, James, Rose, Samantha, Tempe and me left.

‘You sent here to save us?’ James asks.

The preacher looks relieved. He taps on his Bible and straightens the brim on his hat. 'I am here to save you, with the word!' His voice bellows. I jump. 'That's right, heathen,' his eyes burn into mine. 'God knows you evil. He gave you the mark of the devil.'

I look at Mama. If he's right, I ain't the only one cursed.

'It's your skin, your skin!' He yells. He waves his Bible frantically. 'The mark of the curse is the black of your skin. God made you in the devil's image.'

'Have you seen God?' Tempe asks. She steps closer.

'Everyone knows what God looks like.' The preacher waves her back with his hand. 'He looks like me and like Master Walker and—'

'You and Master Walker don't look nothing alike. How your God look like you and him both?'

He paces the length of his imaginary pulpit. 'It isn't my God and your God. There's only one God. God has seen fit to yoke your people with the chains of slavery and it's your job to uphold those chains until God sets you free.'

'Freedom? God's going to set us free? Hallelujah!' James says. Tears stream down his face.

'When you die,' the preacher raises his voice, 'you will shake off the chains of slavery and serve your new Master in Heaven.'

'According to that book you got there I'm called to hold the chains up and you called to lay them on?' James asks.

'That's one way to look at it,' the preacher says. His head bobs up and down. 'Escaping your obligation to the Lord is a sin. If you were to cast off your chains without God or Master Walker setting you free you'd go straight to Hell and live a life of eternal damnation.'

‘What’s hell like exactly?’ Mama asks.

‘It’s fiery hot with no cool water to drink or cool grass for shade. Non-stop work. The devil’s work is never done from sunup to sundown. Non-stop pain too; whipping and harsh words. The burden is never lifted. And if your family isn’t there with you, but then, you wouldn’t want your family there with you, would you? Well if they aren’t then it’s you all alone with no one to love you. Can you imagine? Being separated from your loved ones for eternity?’

Samantha, Rose, Mama and James look at each other. Preacher must feel it. Anger. Blood rushes in my ears.

‘How about a song?’ the preacher suggests. He starts to hum a fidgety tune as he edges closer to the barn door.

Samantha picks up the tune and adds a melody. I still don’t know the words but the rest of us join in.

‘Amen, amen,’ the preacher murmurs as he ushers us out.

‘I don’t believe in your old made up book,’ Tempe whispers on the way out.

The preacher grabs her by the shoulder and lifts her off the floor.

‘She don’t mean that,’ Mama says.

Tempe reaches out her hand to Mama. Mama don’t move.

‘What you mean, child?’ the preacher asks.

‘I don’t believe no God would make one group to be better than another and expect them not to do nothing about it.’

‘You are an ignorant little thing aren’t you? Your Mama believe it, don’t you, gal?’

‘Yes Sir, I believe there are words in that book that I never will understand.’

‘And you believe you’se all put on this Earth to serve white people, don’t you?’ Preacher asks.

‘We all believe it, Master,’ James interrupts.

Samantha and Rose stand close to the preacher. Fiddling with tools, the nearby hands watch. ‘You gonna lay hands on us all, Sir? So we all get saved?’ Samantha asks.

The preacher stares down at his hand and at Tempe fastened to it. He drops her. Mama scoops her up, walks away.

The preacher looks at me. ‘You know that little gal is going to hell and if you don’t watch it you’ll go right along with her,’ he says.

I run to catch up with Mama and them.

‘Mama, is Tempe really going to hell?’ I ask that night. It’s so hot we’re all sleeping out back right in the summer grass.

‘For what, Angel?’

‘For not believing we damned.’

‘Don’t you go mistaking anything that preacher says for the truth,’ Mama says.

‘Will I go then? Since I’m cursed?’

‘What kind of curse you got?’

‘Don’t know. Why weren’t there no babies born here after me?’

Mama don’t answer.

## Chapter 13

September 23, 1862

It's early. The day hasn't even started and we're already preparing supper. It's like this every De-haunting. The whole plantation is up hours before dawn preparing for the evening's celebration. It's the one day Walker allows us to do nothing at all. If only Mama would allow the same. Just like they been doing every year since we been born, Samantha and Rose have probably been up all night baking pies and cakes. James is off readying the *new slaves* though there ain't but two of them and they been here for years. The three of us sit on the porch gathered around two baskets: one brimming with green beans, the other with a smattering of tips. If Tempe did her share, we'd be finished before now. It seems like we've been snapping beans for days.

'Tempe, you and Spring keep the little ones out of trouble,' Mama says.

Like this year would be any different than the year before. Seems like Tempe and me do an awful lot of work for a day celebrating us being born and *lifting the curse*. Please Lord, don't let Tempe start complaining.

'What you think gonna happen to us when Walker dies?' Tempe asks instead of shucking.

'Hush, don't talk like that.'

Mama don't like talking about the dead.

‘He’s bound to die one day,’ Tempe says anyway. ‘It ain’t natural for nobody to live forever. Even white folks face their maker.’ Tempe crosses her arms.

‘You think Walker Senior’s in Heaven serving the Lord, Mama?’ I ask.

I picture angels with fluffy wings and a smiling God surrounded by shiny faces filling goblets and emptying chamber pots and scrubbing those golden floors and polishing those iron gates. Angels dripping rivers of sweat with their sweat-soaked angel wings: perspiring for the Lord. This time, instead of picturing them white, I picture black faces staring up at God. When my eyes blur from not blinking I see a God with a face as brown as mine staring back.

Mama looks down. ‘It ain’t likely.’ She wipes her hands on a scrap of newspaper.

It leaves streaks of black, like words, on her palms. The paper was worn before we got it. Between chores, the hired hands give scraps to me and Tempe. Presents with pretty squiggles from all over the world. News they been saving or thinking on, travelling with. Most of them can’t read neither but the stories they tell! Get them filled up on some of Mama’s good supper and they get to ‘reading.’ This here say so and so did such and such, one will start up and get to saying who done what. That ain’t the whole truth. Let me tell you what really happened, another will say. That’s my favorite part. I could listen for hours. We not supposed to but me and Tempe find reasons to be around the men. Mama don’t seem to trust them but since Samantha’s getting on in age, we bring supper, wait for jugs and jars, wash em and carry em back to the house. Mama can’t find cause to complain in that. Of course, she still do.

‘Don’t trust them papers any more than I trust them hands,’ she says. She rips one in half and throws it to the floor. ‘Lies and liars.’

Tempe rescues what she can. What she can't save lays scattered like a rug beneath Mama. Mama slides her bare feet along smudged pages. I wonder if she has the words *Freedom* and *Emancipation* rubbed into her soles. I know better than to check.

'What if you wrong, Mama,' Tempe asks for the hundredth time. 'What if freedom is coming this time?'

'According to them papers,' I say, 'freedom comes every few years and then it don't. Don't see how this time is any different than the last.' I sound just like Mama.

Even if I can't read her lips, the look in Tempe's eyes hushes me.

'When the families get here, go off and take care of the kids,' Mama says.

Seem like Mama don't want to be around them children any more than I do. The celebration always seems to make her sad. I pinch the ends of each long, green bean, one at a time: plink, plink, plunk into the slowly filling tub. Just last week me and Tempe had been *young enough to play Gotcha*; a few days ago we were *too old to roughhouse like that* and now we're *too young to listen to grown folks' talk*. We grown older and younger in the same week.

'I don't mind, Mama,' I say. A trail of heat rises from the middle of my chest to the top of my head. Tempe's stare can take the hot out of fire. I concentrate on snapping beans and the soft plunk each one makes as it glides slowly to the pile.

'I suppose that means you don't mind either, do you Tempe?'

Plink, plink, plop; plink, plink, plop; head, feet, spine; head, feet, spine; Tempe snips the head off of each thin stringbean, two at a time like each one has my name on it.

'No, Ma'am, I don't mind. Just seems like you could use a hand around here. Dehaunting Day always seems to make you sad. Don't you wanna remember the day me and Sister was born?'

Even though James told us don't never bring it up, I know Tempe's about to ask.

'Two little slave babies. Ain't we the best thing that ever happened to you?' she asks.

The look on Mama's face scares me for just a second. Her forehead wrinkles, her eyes darken. She's Agnes. Young and hurt and angry. Agnes stares at us from behind Mama's eyes. She don't come out often. Only when Mama's real scared or mad or when we talk about her mama, the babies in the backyard or the list of things Samantha and James told us not to talk about. Me and Tempe both run to her. We wrap her in our arms, pet her hair, shush her crying. We rock and wait. There's nothing else we can do.

The smell of neckbones and simmering beans fills the air about the same time as the families arrive. Every Dehaunting Day slaves from as far as Sampson's place travel to Walker's for the festivities. It's like the whole world's celebrating me and Tempe. Soon as they drop off their passes at the house and get counted, women in colorful dresses made of cloth, sacks, hand-me-downs and scraps of other garments; men in pressed shirts, dungarees and boots if they have them and children with scrubbed faces arrive laden with offerings of meats, vegetables, drink, sweets and news. This is the last of the large gatherings.

Today, women rush out back to the cooking pot with meat in need of a few more minutes over the fire, collards almost done and biscuits that are near ready. Jars and jugs of tea are placed on chips of ice, a gift from Walker, to chill before supper.

'It never fails,' Too-Wide John remarks after being told where to put this, where to prop that and then sent, with a kiss on the forehead, to the small porch to help the men set up the crates for the food. 'This time every year Glenda Mae gets up first thing and you know what she does?'



‘What’s she do, John?’ Samuel asks.

‘She starts cooking!’

‘Noo!’ A deep chorus of male voices grumble in practiced disbelief.

‘I ain’t lying. She cooks. In between boiling and stirring and skinning, she scrubs them kids and shuts em up in the shack and when I come home with a fat possum for dinner you know what she says?’

‘I don’t hear no crates scraping,’ Ms. Glenda Mae calls from inside.

‘I ain’t lying. On the one day I get to sleep late, she gets me up before the sun is good and set in the sky and she says go get some more meat for supper. Like that, like it’s easy. Like I can just walk down the road a piece with a sack and say excuse me Mr. Possum, would you mind jumping in to this here sack? Celebration or not, you know Sampson don’t allow no slave to go that far without no pass anyhow and I swear those possums know just how far I can go cuz more than one leaped right cross the road and just sat and sort of looked at me: daring me to cross that road and scoop him up.’

The loud clanging of pots and clinking of pans does little to stifle the men’s laughter.

‘Well, I fixed this here possum,’ John pauses looking into the eyes of each member of his audience: the men lining up crates before covering them with cloth to make a long family table and the children barely off the porch about to light off to play in the woods. He points to the meat still steaming on the serving tin. ‘This possum ran right across the road in front of Old Johnson’s buggy. Without so much as a warning, Johnson’s boy veered a bit to the right, clipped the ol’ possum, straightened up the reins, tipped his head in my direction and off he rode, horses, buggy and all. I scooped the fat possum up and here he is.’

The men applaud John's hunting skills. I laugh along with the children. The women moan. Tempe watches in silence.

'When I come home with this fat possum you know what she says?'

'You got them crates ready?' Glenda Mae asks.

'That ain't what she says,' John whispers loud enough for the ladies inside to hear. 'She says "hurry up and get cleaned up." Now I ask you,' John pauses to pull a splintered crate into place next to a lopsided box: 'Is that a fine thank you?'

'I think I can do you one better,' Carter says with a laugh. 'My woman gets up Sunday mornings and she bangs and clangs empty pots loud enough to wake the dead. When I'm up you know what she says?'

'What?'

'Did I wake you?'

'Empty?' a man asks.

'Empty,' Carter confirms with a slow nod and a slow smile. 'I know they're empty cuz she gets me to drag each one round the side and pump em full of spring water. Then she dumps whole children—with their clothes still on—in the pots. She scrubs and scrubs til they're all wrinkled. Then she sews fasteners and darns socks, she starches long underwear and presses sacks. While this is going on breads rising and pies are cooling on the sill. When it's all done you know what she says?'

'What?' One of the children asks.

'Hurry up and sit down so the Lord don't catch us working. The Lord didn't see me pulling them tubs round the back and emptying them and filling them up again?'

'The Lord don't see plenty if you ask me,' Tempe says.

‘You children go run and play,’ Mama calls from the doorway.

Quickly, we gather the seven children and lead them across the yard to the edge of the garden. Most of them are Sampson’s, some are from closer, some farther. We only have a few hours before sunset: before they all have to be back and counted. The sun is too bright. It’s too hot for running games but running games keep little hands clean.

‘What makes you the boss?’ Franklin asks. He’s about as tall and thick as Old Oak, the oldest tree on Walker land. That don’t stop Tempe.

‘You on my place, you bide by my rules.’

‘Last I checked this place and all y’all belong to Walker,’ Franklin says. He spreads his lips in what he thinks is a smile.

‘Brother’s right there,’ Buddy says between spits. He’s taken to chewing on sweet grass to make his breath sweet—just in case. He leans close to Tempe. ‘No cause to play children’s games when you and me can go round yonder and play something (spit) more becoming. Ain’t that right, Sister.’

What’s Watson been telling him? ‘I ain’t your sister,’ I say. ‘Only Tempe can call me that.’

‘What would I want to lay with you for when I can lay with Franklin here?’ Tempe asks. ‘He’s the smart one between the two of you. How many brothers and sisters y’all have now?’

‘Four,’ Franklin answers, ‘our mama has the widest birthing hips on Master’s land. Pa says all Master has to do is say “Dessa, I need another pair of hands” and Mama obliges.’

‘She sounds right fertile,’ Tempe says. She twists her lips and wiggles her hips.

‘Ever since that old witch died, seem like everybody fertile, cept your Mama,’ Buddy says.

Tempe balls up her fists.

‘According to Mama,’ Franklin says, ‘your mama’s mama made it so wouldn’t no children grow anywhere around here.’

‘You a damned fool,’ I say. ‘If that was true, Tempe and me wouldn’t be standing here, would we?’

‘Maybe you one of them ghost babies too,’ Buddy says.

I’m not sure which is the bigger fool: Buddy or his brother.

‘I guess you still saving yourself for your Master,’ Franklin says. ‘Ain’t he gonna get you with child this year?’

Franklin. He’s the bigger fool.

‘You be careful,’ his brother says. ‘She’ll put something on you that you won’t be able to get off.’

‘You want to call me something?’ Tempe asks. She steps closer to Franklin.

He moves back. ‘Nah, we all know you and your sister witches. Just like your mama.’

Tempe springs. She wraps her legs around his chest and her arms around his neck.

‘I knew you were my kind of gal,’ Franklin laughs. His laugh turns to coughing, then to heaving.

‘She killing him!’ someone screams.

‘Franklin, leave that little gal alone!’ his father yells from around front.

‘But, Pa—’ Buddy says.

‘Don’t make me...’ the shuffling of crates finishes the sentence for him.

Tempe turns Franklin loose. Watson squeezes in to the space between them. I’m not sure if he’s protecting Tempe or Franklin.

‘They don’t mean nothing by it,’ he says. ‘You alright?’

That voice. I get to licking my lips imagining his salty skin on my tongue, picturing his hands along my back, his fingers tracing the curve of my neck. His lips, soft against mine. With his skilled hands and sharp mind he’s on Walker land more often than not. He belongs to the Kirk’s. Some nights, he belongs to me. If he sees half the money he makes from being hired out, he should be able to buy me in no time. His smooth hands rub Tempe’s back. He leans his head so close to hers that his lips graze her ear.

‘She’ll be fine if you quit breathing on her,’ I say. My throat is tight. The words squeeze up and push out my mouth.

‘You should take you a woman,’ Franklin says.

‘Got one,’ Watson answers.

My heart stops. I’m licking my lips again.

‘What’s the matter with you? You got something?’ Tempe asks.

Buddy, Franklin and even Watson laugh.

‘What you think about this talk about Freedom coming?’ I ask everybody except for Watson. Laugh at me? It’ll be a long time before he gets to lie in the grass with me again.

Something like hate flashes across Watson’s face. ‘I don’t reckon I believe it until it gets here.’

‘Pa says if it comes down to a fight, he’s ready to join the soldiers to set us all free,’ Buddy whispers.

‘Ma don’t want him to do it. She says he’ll end up dead if he runs off,’ Franklin says.

‘I’d rather be dead any day,’ Watson says.

If I had seen it, the light in his eyes, I would have been ready.

Only the porch is base. It has to be. Anyone fool enough to bound up the creaking wooden step, hop one-legged down the sagging porch, run around the shaky dinner table made up of splintering crates, and risk toppling tinplates and wooden bowls while yelling Sanctuary and skirting around a ring full of women who had spent hours baking, dusting, cleaning and boiling, and now only wanted a minute to relax without someone underfoot deserves to be free from being tagged. Fair is fair.

‘You know the rules,’ Tempe announces, ‘no hiding in the water.’

‘No hiding near the water,’ I add.

‘No getting dirty,’ Tempe says.

‘No getting anyone else dirty.’

‘No loud yelling.’

‘No rough housing.’

‘What can we do?’ Watson, always grinning, asks.

‘Boy, with all those teeth in your mouth at one time, how do you have room for questions?’ Tempe teases.

Watson flinches.

‘Tempe’s going to count to a hundred. You all run and hide. We’ll find you,’ I say.

‘What if you don’t find us before supper?’ Little Ivy asks.

‘You won’t eat,’ Tempe answers.

‘We’ll find you and if not, I won’t eat until we do.’ I smooth the sprinkling of tears off Ivy’s cheek.

‘And if you reach Sanctuary,’ Tempe pauses winding her arms in wide flourishing circles while I point to the porch, ‘you win.’

‘Has anyone ever reached Sanctuary?’ Watson asks.

Tempe and I think it over. ‘Nope.’

I close my eyes and hold a finger up as Tempe counts.

‘One...two...three...’

The heavy padding of careless feet gives the little ones away. One hides in a nearby tree. One scampers to the edge of the wood, turns and burrows beneath the canopy. Two hide in tall grass on the side of the house. One heavy-footed one, probably Franklin, stomps behind the house. Another one hides underneath a tin washtub. One shifts one foot to the other. There’s always a runner.

Please just go hide behind the house. I’m sweaty and the thought of chasing one of em makes me hotter.

‘What do you think they talk about in there?’ Tempe asks somewhere between twenty-five and twenty-nine.

‘Men.’

‘Why would they do that?’

‘Well you heard the men, they just talk about the women.’ I’ve been practicing my grown-up voice.

‘The men only talk about the women when they want the women to know what they’re talking about.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I’ve heard what men talk about when women ain’t around.’

‘Are y’all even counting?’ A little voice asks from behind the washbasin.

‘Sixty-five!’ Tempe yells.

Giggles, swishing grass, the curling and uncurling of little legs in tight places, and then silence: the silence of little children waiting for something good and terrible all at once. *Gotcha* makes little hearts beat faster.

‘Well, what do they talk about?’ I ask.

‘Sex.’

‘Told ya.’

‘And politics and religion and war and freedom.’

‘All that?’

‘And more when they get riled up.’

‘Is that what you do at night? Go down and listen to the hired hands talk?’

‘Sometimes.’

The words fall out and I can’t do nothing to get them back. Tempe looks down when she answers. Tempe can’t hold her lies any more than Old Missus can hold her liquor. Flash of brown skin and dingy denim.

‘Ready or not, here we come!’ Tempe shouts.

Watson, long brown legs and thin bony arms flailing, is already half way to the porch. He’s panting and sweating. His chest pumps hard. I just watch it, glistening.

Run.

Tempe’s long, shapely legs carry her to within inches of Watson. It don’t look like she’s hardly breathing. She cuts through the yard with hardly no effort at all. It don’t seem fair. Tempe can catch him anytime she wants. She knows the land and made the rules.



‘Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha,’ I tap each little head quickly dashing from one to the next so I can turn back to the race. There are no tears this time. The little hearts race along with Watson’s.

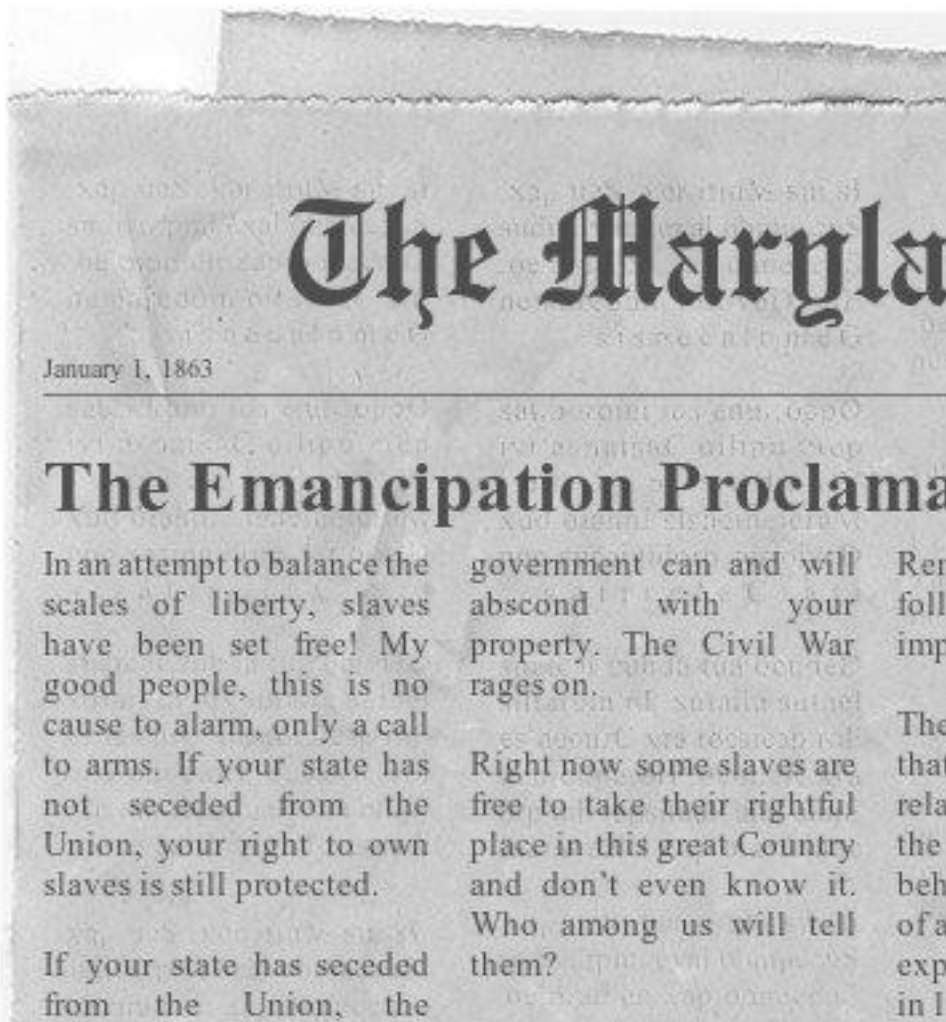
Run.

Watson is just a few strides ahead of Tempe. If she leans forward just a little more she’ll have him. If not, he’ll reach the porch, Sanctuary, seconds before her. He slows, even from the back of his head I know he’s grinning. He zags sharply. You’re running the wrong way! I can’t get the words out fast enough. But then I see. He isn’t running the wrong way at all.

The women must have heard the commotion. Armed with broomsticks they take to the porch in synchronized annoyance. They stand guard. Around back, the men have already stopped talking about the war, escape and freedom. They’re out front gruff voices whispering: Run.

Tempe must have seen it then. We all do. Watson isn’t running for the porch. Tempe stops. She stands still whispering: Run, run, run along with everybody else. Watson never stops running. I wish he had taken me with him.

Chapter 14



Things ain't been the same since Dehaunting Day. The day ended well enough. The visitors ate, sang, celebrated. They knew it would take another miracle for them to step foot on Walker land and didn't know what it would take for any of us to get off it. When the celebrating was over, they gathered their belongings and hugged Mama and us tight. The men went to the back door to gather the passes and be counted. According to James, between men coming up twice and women sending kids up that ain't never been counted, some of them was counted two and three times. Wasn't until Master Kirk come back late that night talking about you one short, that they noticed Watson was gone. Dogs been barking for three days straight.

'Don't let on you sweet on him,' Mama says.

'What you mean, sweet on him?' I ask.

I ain't never told nobody about Watson and me. I'm promised to him and nobody, including him, seem to know. Mama just looks at me and I know she knows exactly how I feel. She holds me. She smells like cinnamon, lilac, hyacinth and jasmine. I breathe her in.

'I tried to tell you, you should be getting to know one of them hands,' Tempe says, 'least they free.'

I wait for Mama to tell her it don't make no difference what he do as long as he can take care of me.

'Loving a slave is hard work,' is all she says.

It seems like everything changes when Watson runs off. Walker starts sending for me or Tempe to come up to the house. Don't matter which one he sends for, Mama sends us both. Whether we're scrubbing floorboards, beating rugs, soaking drapes, or darning socks, it seems

like he ain't never too far off. Watching. Since Ol' Missus passed, Missus been visiting with her sister up North. She took Rose with her. The more she's away, the more Walker want me or Tempe around. As long as she can help it, Mama don't let that happen. When she can, she goes in our place. The more Walker send for us, the more Mama sends us down to help the hired hands instead. She says we need to learn a skill so we can make money. She works it out so we make little trinkets and the hired hands sell them for us in town.

The first time I get a silver coin I about die. Tempe and I add it to our collection: newspaper clippings, teeth, feathers, shells and then coins of all shapes and colors. We need to find someplace to keep our treasures. The bundles are fraying. There's no telling how long they'll keep. Since we've been doing more around the place, Mama lets Tempe and me sleep in the tiny shack by the river. The floorboards underneath start to sink in but we don't mind. The dirt's a good hiding place until the river coughs it up.

It's been raining for weeks. The fields are flooding. The cabins are flooding. Even Walker House is flooding. Walker's got hands from three towns helping the slaves pick soggy berries, bloated cabbages and anything worth saving. Even Old James and Old Samantha out there slipping in mud, wrestling with limp branches. The whole place is underwater. Can't walk from one side to the next without being knee deep in it. That's why I don't notice the river swelling and spilling. It bleeds clear over the bank. It flows and flows like ain't no stopping it. Swallows the shack, the path. The river, the rain or both fills up the ditch all the way on the other side of Walker. We collect bones and bundles long after the river seeps back and the mud dries. We make up stories for each one. Each piece is remembered. Out of sweet cherry wood, we carve our very own book. The hands bring us paper. We stitch them together. Stuff the

newspapers, like bookmarks, in between. Though neither one of us can read or write, each page holds a story. We remember.

Thanks to the flooding Walker hires hands to help fix the place up while me and Tempe seem to be doing twice as much. They don't seem to be helping much. At least, not at first.

'Edward?' Buddy clears his throat, raises his voice and calls up to his friend's sweating back.

'Seems to me you done developed one of them afflictions,' he says. He wipes the sweat from his eyes with the back of one hand and holds the thick rope with the other. He lowers his voice.

'What you think, Brother?'

'Bout what?' Franklin asks.

I know he knows just what Buddy's talking about cuz I know it too and I'm clear on the other side of the barn. Without looking up, Franklin bundles four planks of wood together, ties the thick rope around them and tugs. On his signal, Buddy pulls the rope to send the pile up to Edward. I sure wish Tempe would hurry up. All she has to do is bring supper from the house. I've been sweeping and piling, lugging and listening to them speculate on which one Edward should take for his wife.

'Seem like Edward done caught something from round here,' Buddy continues.

Every time we get there with supper, Buddy and Franklin get to teasing Edward about being sweet on Tempe.

'Don't think it's catching, do ya?' Franklin glances at his friend and back to his brother.  
'I don't want nothing from here I can't give back.'

Edward unties the planks, halves two by fours and gets to knocking them together.

‘You might like what he done caught.’ Buddy unrigs the rope and throws it into a wheelbarrow stuffed with nails, debris and rags. ‘Cept it seem to make whoever catch it clumsier than a mule in a cane field.’

‘That don’t make no kind of sense,’ Edward calls down.

‘Can’t seem to keep a shirt on neither,’ Buddy continues. ‘Always walking around bare-chested. It must be something fierce. Soon’s he step one foot on Walker land that shirt must get to itching and scratching cuz seem like he get to ripping it off, buttons popping everywhere.’

‘Too much starch probably,’ Franklin says. ‘Not saying nothing bout your Mama, Edward.’

‘If you ask me,’ Buddy continues, ‘whatever he caught he got right here. Seems like the same thing you was trying to catch not too long ago, Brother.’

‘Don’t seem likely,’ Franklin replies. ‘Although, now that you mention, he has been a mite bit clumsy. Wasn’t you trying to catch the very same thing then too? That’s how I remember it. Edward, Don’t you go bustin up nothing up there again.’ Franklin runs inside the drafty barn and hoists himself up the repaired ladder.

‘He break anything yet?’

‘Nah, just fumbling with an old rickety piece of something he done made to look bout to fall apart, I swear before God.’

‘It ain’t finished yet,’ Edward says. ‘I’m planning.’

‘Your planning got us mending and re-mending the same drafty holes for near two months since you been here,’ Buddy yells up. ‘Done seen more fixed up, broke and fixed again

now than ever before. New roof, near about, new hatch, new beams and a window with a ledge for mice.'

'It's for birds, for watching and feeding birds,' Edward interrupts.

'Walker don't seem like the bird feeding type, you ask me,' Franklin says. 'From here you can see clear cross the fields to the house. Man like Walker might like to come up here time and again to see what his people get up to. And what's that? You done made him a little bed for,' he stops.

The air in the barn seems to pop. I don't hear Edward's answer and I don't need to.

I been sweeping the same spot for the past hour. Still clutching the broom, I run to beneath the ladder. Mama will kill me if I go up there by myself. 'Y'all need a broom up there?' I call.

Thankfully, they laugh.

'How long you hired here for?' Buddy asks.

Edward has more talent than anyone, white or black, this side of the Chesapeake. Master said it at least a hundred times. Since he's been here he's patched and fixed the slave cabins, plugged leaks, patched walls, stained floors and rebuilt the barn from the beams up. Don't seem to be anything that man can't do, except talk to Tempe.

'Til the work run out,' he says.

'Sampson hired us out for two seasons before we go on home,' Franklin says.

'I hire my own self out,' Edward answers. 'I says what I can do and what I can't and someone like Walker says what they can pay and what they can't and we strike up a sort of deal.'

'And he pay you your money just like that?' Buddy's thick fingers snap.

‘Don’t usually have no trouble bout getting paid. I heard bout some workers doing all sorts of work and when it comes time to get paid, the person say they ain’t gonna pay em.’

‘I do believe Sampson would kill Walker if he don’t pay.’

‘Ain’t that easy. I ain’t got no Sampson or such. I’m free. I’m my own man. I can say I done the work. White man say I ain’t gonna pay. What can I do? If I take down all I put up the sheriff come around saying I destroyed something wasn’t mine. I can’t hardly take him to court. Alls I can do is wish real hard that something bad happen to him.’

‘That work? Cuz it don’t work for me,’ Buddy says.

‘I didn’t say it works; just said that’s all I can do. I can get mad but don’t nobody care bout me getting mad. I got myself real good at a whole lot of things. Ain’t much I can’t do. People think twice before not paying me. Never know when they need me for something else.’

‘What you gonna do when the work dry up here? Sooner or later Walker’s gonna realize on account of you he got more things that need doing than that’s getting fixed,’ Buddy says.

‘I been thinking on that.’

‘He ain’t never gonna let Tempe go. It ain’t his way. I can’t think of no one that left this place that didn’t leave dead or end up that way.’

He can’t be talking about my Watson. Buddy’s just trying to rile me up.

‘Maybe for enough money he’d have to,’ Edward says.

Edward buy Tempe? What about me and Mama?

‘You know it don’t work like that,’ Franklin says. ‘How long did it take you to buy yourself free?’

‘A long, long time. You planning on buying you and your brother free?’



‘Don’t know. Don’t see no difference in the way they treat you and the way they treat me.’

For a few minutes, all I can hear is scraping.

‘Who this belong to?’ Edward asks.

‘It’s yourn,’ Buddy says. ‘You made it.’

‘Right, that’s being free. Buy your freedom. Don’t matter how long it takes to get it.’

A little something comes falling down. I snatch it up. Two strands of straw knotted together and braided into a tight ring. I slip it onto my finger. Finally, Tempe comes trudging in dripping a bucket of water and carrying a satchel around her chest. She smells of cornbread and Mama’s greens. I slip the ring into my pocket.

‘Y’all gonna have to come down if you want to eat!’ Tempe yells.

The men scramble to their feet. Edward swears as he bumps into the ladder and nearly topples down.

‘There’s plenty to eat, no rush,’ Tempe says. ‘Mama made enough for all y’all.’ She nods her head towards the ladder as Buddy and Franklin make their way down.

‘Tempe,’ they mumble.

‘Boys.’

Edward grunts and lifts the water bucket from her hands. He peers inside. I wait for him to ask where the rest of the water gone. He don’t. He nods his head at Tempe, dips the drinking spoon in the bucket and drinks. Water slides down his chin. Tempe takes a long time deciding where to unwrap the satchel of food Mama sent.

‘Why don’t you take it upstairs?’ Buddy suggests.

‘Go on up there first,’ she says.

‘Gal, ain’t nothing up there gonna bite you,’ Franklin says.

‘If it do I bet you I’ll--’

‘What you gonna do, Little Bit?’ Buddy interrupts.

‘I’ll be sure to tell my Mama you don’t want none of her buttered biscuits, collard greens and neckbones or fried chicken gizzards to cross your lips,’ Tempe snatches the bundle and turns to go.

‘I didn’t say that,’ Buddy says. He reaches for the kerchief as if he don’t know better.

Tempe’s thin foot shoots out and catches him in the knee. ‘Don’t you put your dirty hands on nothing I got. I done told you that long time ago.’

‘And I done told you,’ Buddy begins. He lowers his eyes and steps toward Tempe.

Franklin rushes from behind. I stand in between the two; both panting and staring holes through me.

‘I wouldn’t say no to whatever you got in that bundle, Ms. Tempe,’ Edward says. His soft voice makes both Buddy and Tempe jump. He edges my body out of the way and stands in front of Tempe, his back to Buddy. ‘Can I carry that up to the loft for you?’

‘I got it.’ The words barely push through Tempe’s clenched lips.

‘I can see that, Ma’am, just wanting to help. I wouldn’t want to miss none of your Mama’s cooking, good as it is.’ He licks his lips.

‘I helped,’ Tempe lies.

The smell of supper trails behind her as she nears the steps. She hands the bundle to Edward before climbing the ladder. Edward, Buddy and Franklin follow her upstairs. I count to five waiting on her to get down like she got some sense. What’s she doing up there with three grown men? Even if two are almost like brothers, they’re grown men now. Heavy footsteps

stomp above my head. Tempe's light feet flutter across the loft followed by her coos of delight as if the whole thing has been done up just for her. I sit on the bottom rung of the ladder, swirling my dirty finger in the water bucket. The ice had melted long ago. Fat drops of rain hit the dust outside the open barn door. Even with Buddy and Franklin there to look after her, Mama will kill me if I leave her alone.

'For me?' Tempe crows in surprise. As if we hadn't just last night crept up to the loft. There were little pictures scrawled in corners, in between crevices, in places most people—except Tempe—wouldn't bother looking. Tempe said they were flowers; they looked like legs to me.

'Sister, you really should come see what they've done up here. It looks like a little house. All that's missing is—'

'You want me to bring the bucket up there? You gotta go or something?'

The men whoop above. Their foot stomping and backslapping put an end to her sashaying and high stepping. She's downstairs faster than I would have thought. Seems like her feet don't hardly touch the ladder at all.

'You heifer.' Her hot words scorch the back of my neck.

'I ain't jealous,' I whisper between panting.

I'm out of breath. Tempe's too far ahead to hear me. I can't catch up even if I want to. She runs out of the barn leaving me to gather the empty wrappings and cloths, bucket, even one of Edward's ripped shirts for Mama to mend. For a while she stalks down the path swinging her arms in wide, angry circles every so often chopping at the sky with her hand or punching with a clenched fist. 'Hussy, wide-hipped heifer.' Snatches of words drift behind her as if even the burden of holding her tongue is too much. As if she's the one gonna be left behind. She slows as

she nears the river allowing me to catch up. I walk slower. She stops walking when she reaches the deepest end, where the reeds are tall and thick in the air and tangled in a jumble of roots below the surface from what I've heard.

'Ain't got no sense at all, do you?' she hisses. How she can get words out of her mouth with her lips so tight shut I would never know.

With her hands on her bony hips, her feet planted on either side of the path, her cheeks puffed out and her mouth wide open, she blocks my way.

'Mama said not to go upstairs,' I remind her.

Her eyes close into brown slits.

'She did.'

Tempe steps toward me.

I take a step backward. 'She just don't want you to be fast.'

She takes a big step forward.

My heart jumps. I take a bigger step back. 'Besides, Walker said he'll get you a baby. What you want with Edward?' My heart beats so loud she seems to hear it. She stares at my chest mesmerized. I'm too close. Mud sucks at my feet. She pulls me close, like she's going to hug me, spins and pushes me. I can't catch my breath or close my mouth or think of nothing but dying.

## Chapter 15

Hands. Hands on my head, on my back, on my arms, on my legs, on my throat. They're everywhere pushing and pulling and holding me under. Thick fingers, smooth palms, thin fingers, dried skin. Rough ones pinch, pluck, pull. Gentle ones soothe, caress. I fight. I kick. As soon as I shake one off, another grabs hold. I punch. One lets loose another holds tight. Salty water fills my mouth. Hands push me down to the river bed squishing me to, on and through the muddy bottom. I can't breathe. My nose fills with water, dirt. My eyes fill with crawling things. My ears fill with moans.

Faces. They come all at once. Brown, black, white, tan, swirls of faces press against mine. Lips on my lips, lips on my head, lips on my forehead, lips on my cheeks. Kisses on kisses. Death is as sweet as raspberry preserves on buttered biscuits. Warm as Mama's quilt on a winter morning. Quiet as midnight after a rainstorm. It's as big as everything. It's love. My eyes. My lips. My cheeks. My blood. Each face has something of me in it. I know. They're kin and I don't even know their names. But when they touch me, I am them. We're lost. All of us. I don't

know what's worse, not knowing who they are or not knowing who I am. I'm trying to remember to kick, to hold my breath but I'm trying so hard to live that I'm dying. Names flash across my eyes but none of them fit. My body stops working. The faces are gone and I'm alone. I'm scared and cold and I can't stop shaking. Finally, hands push, pull and lift me up.

There is nothing I can do. 'Not yet,' a voice says.

'No!' I scream. I'm not ready to leave. The word echoes inside my chest.

'Stop that damn yelling,' Tempe says. Her rough hands grab my waist. 'It ain't nothing but knee deep and you acting like you bout to die.'

I spit. Brush the hair out of my eyes. Shiver. 'I did die,' I say.

Tempe pulls me to my feet. She shakes her head. 'How you have time to die? You ain't been in but a minute. You fell in, I walked in after you.' She snaps her fingers. 'It wasn't no longer than that.'

'There were hands pulling me under the water.'

Tempe laughs. 'Course there were hands. How you think I pulled you out? With my teeth?'

'Not your hands.' I bend down, press my face to the water. I can't see beneath the reddish murk. 'There's somebody down there.'

'What the devil are you doing? Come on, we gotta get back to Mama.' She yanks me up by the back of my head. Her fingers catch in my hair. 'I don't know if you got knocked in the head down there but if you don't stop this foolishness I'm gonna knock you in the head right here.' With one hand still in my hair, she puts a fist up to my face.

'You gonna hit me before you leave me? Or after?'

'What you talking about?'

‘You gonna marry Edward, he gonna buy you and you gonna leave me and Mama right here.’

She lets go of my head. My scalp tingles. Tempe just stands there watching snot and tears stream down my face. She stares for a full minute. ‘That what Edward say?’ She ain’t even trying to hide it. She’s so excited she’s doing a little dance right there in the river. It would serve her right if she slipped and fell right in.

‘It’s true then. You’d leave us?’

‘Ain’t nobody leaving nobody. If he talking about marrying and buying my freedom, I can buy yours and Mama’s too.’

‘How you gonna save enough? Walker ain’t gonna hire you out.’

‘I don’t know. Edward ain’t even ask me yet. I got time to think on a way.’

‘What if he just up and leave, like Watson did?’

Tempe don’t say nothing for a long time. She gets out the river. I follow.

‘If he can, Watson will come back for you. If he can’t, once we buy you free, you’ll find him.’

‘Okay, Tempe,’ I say like the world isn’t much bigger than acres and acres of Walker Land, like either of us has ever been off this property, like I’ll ever see Watson again. Maybe it won’t matter. As long as I got Mama and Tempe, what else do I need?

Tempe and me are sick in bed when Edward comes around a few days later with a wheelbarrow full of slates, nails, scraps of wood and baubles to ask Mama if she needs any work done around the cabin before he leaves. He stands out on the porch, hat in hand, blocking a good view of the outside. Even after days of Mama’s onion, lemon and honey elixir, my chest is full of phlegm.

Tempe's too. That don't stop her from jumping up, slipping something over her head and running out to the porch faster than Mama can say no. She's too late. By the time she reaches the porch, Edward is gone.

'Oh, Mama,' she wails without even trying to be respectful. 'Why you go and run him away?'

'Child,' Mama warns.

'Mama, there's plenty a man like Edward could fix around here.'

'Tempe,' Mama says.

Tempe keeps right on talking. 'Look at this porch, you always saying it's rickety. You liable to fall clear off it one day. And what about this door?' She bangs it shut. It pops open. 'See? No privacy at all. Some strange man wandering up the road could see all the Good Lord,' she slides her hands over her frame, 'created right through this open door. The roof too. Between the rain and the squirrels dropping through the roof, it's a wonder we ain't all about to die!'

'Girl, if you would just listen!'

'Plenty around here that could use his big, strong hands, his warm gentle touch, his broad—'

'—Excuse me,' Edward interrupts, 'I found the tools out where you said they was. I'll just start round back so as not to,' he pauses, 'interrupt you ladies' discussion.'

The porch creaks. I turn my back to the door, shut my eyes, snore loud. Tempe flies inside. Her breath takes up the whole cabin.



‘If you feeling good enough to run like that, you well enough to help out again. Go on out there and help Edward in the garden,’ Mama says. ‘I been meaning to fix up that fence back there for the longest.’

Lilac. Tempe grabs a lilac scented cloth from my things. I picture her wiping under her arms, around her neck, between her legs—just in case—scrubbing any bit of skin that Edward might see, touch or smell.

‘I know you ain’t asleep,’ she calls before closing the door and leaving the scent of lilac behind.

It can’t take no more than a minute for me to get up, pull a dress over my head, fix my side of the bed and get to the door but Tempe’s already around back before I hit the porch. I haven’t stepped one foot outside before Mama stops me.

‘Mind as well set out here with me. She’s gonna be a while.’

‘Not if I help, she won’t.’ I lean towards the step.

‘Ain’t no rush. Sit down a while,’ Mama says. She tucks her skirts, scooches over and pats the space beside her.

‘I won’t be but a minute,’ I say. My heart’s racing, my underarms itch. Sweat drips down my back. ‘I’ll come right back when I finish helping Tempe and them with the chores.’

‘Tempe don’t need no help, Spring.’

Maybe Mama don’t know how Edward watches Tempe when he thinks nobody’s looking. Maybe she don’t know how Tempe watches him back. I bet if she knew Edward was planning on buying Tempe away she wouldn’t be so quick to push them together. I inch closer to

the edge of the porch. With Mama near blocking the step, there isn't much sense in acting like I can't just step clear off the edge if I want to.

'Mama, I been meaning to do some fixing up around here. There's plenty I can do to help.'

'I got some work you can do right here.'

She pats the spot next to her again. I sit. My legs spill over the porch. I tap my feet.

'How you doing? Been a while since Watson run off. Hasn't it?'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'I had someone run off too,' Mama says.

She rubs my back in wide circles. I check to see that it ain't Agnes staring back at me but it ain't. 'Told me we was gonna run away together. Guess time just seemed right and he run off.'

'He ain't come back for you?'

Mama shook her head.

'Ever hear what happened to him?'

Mama shook her head, mouthed no.

'Something must have happened to him. He wouldn't have just left you. Maybe he's dead. I hope that's what it is.'

'That ain't nothing to hope for,' Mama says. 'I was angry when he run off, hurt, disappointed. I wanted them to catch him, drag him back. Until I learned what that means. You know what would have happened to him if he come back for me?'

I want to say they would have run and kept on running till they got to freedom. Like me and Watson will do. But it sounds childish. I shake my head.

‘They’d have killed him. His body or his spirit or both. He wouldn’t have been mine no more. Before I figured that out, I just waited. I waited so long that when there was something needed doing, something I could have stopped, someone I could have helped, I didn’t see it. I was too late. Don’t spend your whole life waiting.’

Mama don’t seem in too much of a hurry to do anything this morning. Laughter drifts to the porch from around back. What kind of work can they be doing that’s so funny? Their laughter makes Mama smile. I can just see it: Edward chasing Tempe through rows of fresh-planted vegetables. Her sashaying and side-stepping vines and roots I hadn’t cleared yet. Both of them tripping over rocks and tumbling, her first and him on top, onto the ground. Ain’t nothing to be smiling about. The laughter stops. Mama rocks back and forth on the porch, waiting.

‘What you think they doing back there?’ I ask. If she thinks they digging up turnips, she has another think coming.

‘What you think they doing?’ she asks.

Giggles. Tempe is too old to be giggling like that with a grown man.

‘Not working,’ I say.

‘Sound like work to me,’ Mama says. She scoots closer. We sit arm to arm both of our feet tapping the ground. ‘I got a job in mind for Edward.’

‘What you need doing that I can’t do?’

‘Marrying.’

Without wanting to, my breathing matches hers. My body rocks with hers. But my heart races.

‘What’s gonna happen once they get married?’

Mama looks at me full in the face. She gives me her mothering look. ‘Well, first Edward will—’

‘Not that, Mama! I know all about that!’

Mama looks at me strange again.

‘I mean,’ I say, ‘I heard all about that. Where she gonna live?’

‘I suspect Edward will have to live here or visit her till he saves enough to buy her.’

I about fall off the porch. ‘Buy her freedom you mean.’

Mama stares at her feet. She wiggles her toes, buries them in the dirt. ‘I want to see both of my girls free before I die,’ she says. ‘Not runaways, free.’

‘That why you set on Edward marrying Tempe?’

‘He bought his Mama. He can buy my baby too.’

‘If he buy her, she be his slave?’

‘When he buy her, she’ll be his.’

## Chapter 16

May 17, 1864

Sunlight slips through the cracks of the cabin. It brightens the glimmer in Tempe's eyes, the shine on Mama's hairpins, the crooked stitch in the cloth between my fingers. We've been working through much of the night. I take the stitch out and start again.

'How do I look?' Tempe twirls slow; a pirouette of lace, lavender and flowers. Flower petals in her hair, flower petals on her wrists, flower petals on her feet. Pink, rose and lavender petals adorn her hair, her gown, her belly.

'Doesn't she look beautiful?'

'She sure does.'

'I do, don't I?' Tempe laughs with her hands on her hips.

'Stop moving so much. I need to check a few things first,' Mama says.

Tempe closes her eyes while Mama realigns pleats and smooths creases. Mama's shaking hands brush Tempe's belly. Tempe jumps.

'Tempe? There's something different about you.'

‘Maybe she’s nervous about the wedding,’ I say.

‘No,’ Mama shakes her head slowly, ‘that’s not it.’

‘Maybe she ate something that don’t agree with her.’

Mama’s lips twist like they do when she smells something rotting like a piece of meat, some curdling milk, or a lie. ‘You complaining about my cooking?’

‘No, Ma’am, ain’t nothing wrong with your cooking.’

‘Is there something you want to tell me?’

Tempe shakes her head.

Mama raises a hand to Tempe’s face, presses her forehead to Tempe’s forehead and with her eyes closed she feels Tempe’s belly. Tears roll down her cheeks. ‘It must really be a miracle,’ she says. ‘All them ointments and lixirs and you still with child.’ She puts her head to Tempe’s belly.

Tempe’s staring at me over Mama’s head, daring me to say something. Without asking why, I drank every drop, rubbed every dollop. And I ain’t never gonna have a baby of my own. Not one drop crossed Tempe’s lips. Not one sliver slipped inside her. She’s the one been lying for years. She’ll have Edward and a baby and her freedom. What’s left for me?

They so wrapped up in each other’s arms that they don’t notice me go. I don’t want to but my feet lead me straight to the river. The cool grass cushions my feet. I sit on the bank, legs dangling. The river kisses my soles. Don’t know how long I been crying when I feel a hand on my shoulder. He sits down next to me, quiet as a keep. Even though I don’t expect to hear nothing but how everything’s gonna turn out alright, I tell him everything. James listens in silence and after a few minutes, he does the same. He tells me things I won’t believe until years

later when Tempe tells me they true. By the time I get back to the cabin, Samantha and Rose are there. Mama and Tempe stand on the porch still fawning over one another.

‘She’s gonna have a baby,’ Mama says. ‘A free child.’

‘Half free,’ Samantha says. She’s wearing a limp flower in her hair; her special occasions hat.

‘Long as Tempe a slave, that baby’s a slave,’ Rose says.

‘Yep, a little free baby,’ Mama says. She nods her head like she and Rose said the exact same thing. ‘It’s time to have a wedding!’

There are gifts: flowers with long stems, a thick home-made quilt, thin shells and words. One by one they lay hands on Tempe covering her in prayers.

‘Lord, may this child know your undying love and unwavering mercy in her times of need,’ Rose says.

‘Yahweh, may she never forget to praise your name,’ Samantha says.

‘Lord, let this baby be born free,’ Mama says.

Before leading the women’s march to the river, Tempe gives me a quick hug. I hold on too long. The sun shines but it’s not warm. The air is cool; crisp enough to hurry our steps. Tempe’s eyes are covered with a thick cloth. According to Samantha, slaves been getting married like this for generations. Can’t nobody prove she’s wrong. Samantha twirls Tempe round and round till she’s about dizzy. She pushes her forward. ‘Your heart will lead the way,’ she says. ‘If Edward is the man for you, your heart will lead you to him.’ She covers all of our eyes with scraps of cloth.

We walk slowly behind, trusting Tempe will know the way. Blindfolded, the walk from the cabin to the river is a lot longer than I remember. Every so often Tempe hollers for us to duck

down, watch our heads, move a bit to the side. Nettles stick to the bottoms of my feet. More than once she leads us straight through a briar patch or bed of pine needles. Over the years, our feet done worn paths all through the woods, the grass, around the fields. She can't seem to find none of them. She stumbles and falls. We stumble and fall. She gets up and slips. We get up and slip. She seems to be able to find all the leftover slick mud. Gnats swarm around my head. My hair gets snagged in tree branches. Bushes prick my legs. We circle back twice before reaching the same long, spongy slick of grass leading to the mud we done slid in twice already. This time, Tempe leads us around it. I ain't the only one happy about that. Mama starts to hum. We all get to walking and humming and then Tempe stops.

There's a loud splash, followed by another. Chattering chipmunks, songs of wild birds and cheers of the men drown out Tempe's squeals and Edward's laughter. I uncover my eyes. Tempe jumps in the river. Edward in a pressed shirt and new dungarees runs to the edge and jumps in. He splashes through the river, running to her and her just about gliding to him. He holds her like it's forever. I believe it. Edward's gonna buy Tempe's freedom. They gonna save up and buy Mama and me. By the time the baby come we'll have a cottage and land, a mule. We'll be a family. Forever.



Chapter 17



Things start turning up missing. First it's little things like doorknobs and cutlery from the main house and washtubs and fruit baskets from the slave cabins. Pretty soon it's cows and horses and people. The few field hands Walker had gone missing too. Walker sent down word that they'd run off—all of them at once. We don't believe it though. Been so busy, ain't seen much of James, Rose or Samantha.

'When you finish the washing, get out to the fields and see if there's anything needs picking.' Mama starts each day with a list of work for Tempe and me. 'Stay together. Check the barns, muck the stables.'

'Ain't hardly nothing left to clean up after,' Tempe says.

Everyday I roll up the bed, do my business, get fresh water for Mama and Tempe, grind meal for the evening's supper and wait. Some mornings I pick vegetables and weeds to pass the time. Mama can't stand to see us idle.

'Just do what I tell you,' Mama says.

'Soon as Edward makes enough money I'm going to get away from here and ain't gonna be nobody here for you to boss around but her and I'm taking her with me!'

I'm out on the porch with a bucket of carrots, cabbage and kale. 'Why you always so mad?' I ask. She can't hear me though. I set the bucket down and follow her. She's already down the river, hitching up her dress like I hadn't already hauled up a tub full of water for her to bathe in. I pull weeds nearby.

'I should be tending to my husband's house.'

There ain't nothing I can say that won't make her mad.

‘You know, I ain’t never even been there? Never set one foot in that door. Never slept one night on that bed. Never even met his Mama. She’s in there scraping Edward’s pots, scrubbing Edward’s floors, cooking Edward’s food.’

‘You mad cuz Mama ask you to do chores round here and you want to be doing them around there?’

‘Mama ain’t ask me to do one thing for her since I been grown. Everything she tell me to do is for him.’ She waves her hand in the air.

I look up.

‘Not him, him. Walker. Edward’s been to see him twice since we been married. He ask for a price. Walker say not for sale. He ask for a pass for me to be with him. Walker say too much work round here for me to be running off *playing free*.’

‘What you got to go around there for anyhow? Edward’s up here working more every day.’

‘Course he’s working. Walker done sold off all the field slaves right after harvest. Edward says he’s letting go of all he can, to hold on to what he got.’

‘How he just sell a body away?’ Mama had talked about it. Auctions. Shackles. Down South. Bedtime stories to make Tempe and me mind.

‘What? You thought Mama and them made them stories up like them stories about Gitche Goo-Goos?’

Slave cabins emptied. Cooking boxes, beds, people, all sold.

‘Why don’t y’all run off?’

‘Where we gonna run to? Edward’s house? That’s about the stupidest thing I heard yet.’

‘Edward should have saved up enough to get youse a good start up North.’

‘How we gonna get up North?’

‘I can tell you how to get to—’

‘You keep your run away plans right to yourself, you hear? I don’t want no parts of no plan you and Watson cooked up.’

‘It worked for Watson.’

‘It ain’t done you no favors and I ain’t sure I believe it’s done Watson any good neither.’

‘Buddy and Franklin would have told me if they’d heard something.’

Tempe slips into the water. There’s no sun to speak of that woulda dried her but she stays in, knee deep. ‘I spect they would tell you if they’d heard something. What about his Mama?’

‘Watson ain’t got no Mama.’

‘Edward’s Mama. She’s liable to meet the sheriff at the gate. Her boy running off with a slave; leaving her behind? She probably tell the law before we even get good and—’

‘You couldn’t just leave her, she’s family.’

‘She’s Edward’s family.’

‘And Mama and me?’

‘Youse family.’

‘Not Edward’s family.’

‘What difference that make?’ Her words are clipped. For a second, she don’t sound like Tempe.

A few days later, Walker sends word not to go up to the house unless we called for. For months we tend our garden and the ones of the slaves who ain’t been back. Walker hired Edward, Buddy and Franklin to tear the cabins down and carry the wood to the soldiers—his effort for the war.

One night after supper, Tempe drags me up to the house. With Old Miss and Old Walker dead and Young Missus sent away before the war got started good, we hoping to see Samantha and James tending the fire or stirring up something good. We peek in the kitchen window. Ain't nothing to see. No pots cooking, no fire burning, nothing.

A few days later, Walker sends for Mama.

'Keep yourselves and this place clean,' Mama says. She keeps looking from Tempe to me, from me to Tempe. No matter where she is she keeps her eyes on both of us. And her hands. Her long fingers, cool to the touch, on our faces and eyelids, pressed against foreheads, wound around curly hair. 'Take care of each other. There's enough people out there that want to hurt you, tear you down, don't you never do nothing but help each other up.'

'Mama, you just gonna be up the house,' Tempe says like she believes it.

We hold each other tight. Squeeze till the breath almost run out right there and then.

'Can't we run?' I ask. 'Go far away from here together. Don't matter where longs as we together.'

'I don't know nobody that ever run that lived.'

'Mama, if you run off would you come back? I sure wouldn't. Course you don't know nobody that run off and lived,' Tempe says.

'I lost plenty that died running,' Mama says. 'Ain't gonna be no talk of running.' She's pacing. 'I don't want to hear no more about it. Tempe, Edward's gonna buy you. You two buy your sister.'

'Walker done said he ain't gonna sell me, not ever.'

'Maybe he just needs some convincing. Only way I know to save us is for me to go up to that house like I been called to do. I can't do nothing for you girls down here but from up there,

I'll be watching over my gals—no matter what. As long as Walker got me up there, he won't bother with you two down here. If we ever get separated, if anything tear us apart, I'll find my way back to you both. No matter where,' she stops, sinks to her knees and holds us tight. 'As long as y'all don't ever forget me, I'll make my way back to you.'

The sun sets same as it always do. Mama rips off a piece of her dress for each of us to hold onto. She wraps it around a handful of shells, some small rocks, a ribbon. By sunrise, before she can say I love you or whisper goodbye, Mama is gone.

Months later and we're inside the barn. It's cool and about empty. Animals are gone but it still smells like manure. Edward is standing with his head hanging low and his shoulders slouched looking every bit like he wouldn't harm a nest full of bees. He looks down at Tempe's feet. 'I says, Master Walker, I tell you how much he like it when I call him that?'

Tempe and me nod yes. It's taken him thirty minutes to get to the good part of the story and he ain't there yet.

Edward clears his throat. 'Master Walker, I been thinking on how I can help out in this war.'

'What about Mama?' Tempe interrupts.

'I'm getting to that part,' Edward says. He leans over, kisses your mama's belly.

It's nearly time to get back to chores. Ain't nobody left to do them all except for Tempe, Edward and me. Mostly Edward and me. Walker's given up on pretending to pay him but Edward comes around just the same. He mends, plants, weeds, harvests and plows and does most

of Tempe's work besides. Tempe can't reach over to pick up so much as a basket of clothes without Edward picking it up for her. If Tempe wants a hole dug she just has to pick up a shovel and Edward will get to digging it. Don't seem to matter where she is, Edward finds her. You'd have thought she was the only woman to ever have a baby. He even has his mama doing Tempe's work. He carries home shirts with holes and scraps of fabric and brings back starched shirts and winter blankets. She sends buckets of biscuits and greens, hot yams, cornbread. Anything Tempe has a hankering for, Edward's mama can get her hands on it. Seems like everybody but maybe me and Walker waiting on Tempe. Only Walker's waiting too, I didn't know it then.

'Tempe, you want another piece of sugarcane to suck on?' I ask. I've been sucking on this cane since Edward brought it. I stripped the bark and whittled down the rough stalk. I'm near the sweet, juicy flesh and don't want to share. But, if it will keep her mouth busy. I offer my ripe piece of cane. She sniffs at it and turns her nose up. I can just about taste the sap on my lips. I must have smiled. She snatches it and shoves an end in her mouth. Don't savor it or nothing. She rubs her belly with one hand and wipes the juice from her mouth with the other. I never do get the rest of that cane back.

'So I say,' Edward continues, 'been thinking bout signing up to go fight alongside my brothers but then I get to thinking bout leaving Tempe. *She be fine*, he says, *don't I look after her?* And I get to worrying bout you, sir, and how you here with only those two little gals here to cook and fend and hoe. *They strong enough to do all that need doing*, he say. *Bout time they do more round here*. Yes Sir, but when them Yankees come tearing up the land, burning houses, killing up folks, who gonna protect y'all? I knows you sent Missus and Mama somewhere for safe keeping but what Tempe know about no gun? What Spring know about no hatchet. How they gonna keep them Yankee soldiers from killing you?'

Tempe laughs so hard I think she'll fall right off of the log Edward has set up for her.

'Keep them from killing him?'

'I'd save him,' I say. Edward and Tempe stare at me hard. 'If he dead, how he gonna tell me how to find Mama?'

Tempe sucks her teeth. Edward nods.

'*What you make of all this fighting? he asks,*' Edward continues, 'I says, Sir, I tell you the truth, this fighting got me scared. Yankees near burned up the whole town. Even the church been razed. They just running poor white folks, good ones too, out in the open and—well, no need to tell you what they do to them once they catch em. Ain't safe. With all the men and boys off fighting they done left the land and the womenfolk at the mercy of the Lord. *No gentlemen would attack a lady.* These ain't gentlemen, Sir. *I'd have gone and fought,* he says like he ain't paid a boy from town to take his place. I say, I hear the Yanks getting closer and closer everyday. Winning more and more. Killing up folks and tearing part families and leaving em everywhichaway.'

'The Yanks!' Tempe says. She beats me to it.

'Let me tell it,' Edward says. He throws up his hands pretending to be mad.

'Go on,' I say.

'*Can't nobody beat our boys here on Southern soil, don't you worry about that,* he says. *Before long this war will be all over and things will just be like they was in the good days.* But then I slip, the good days, Sir? He gets to eyeing me up and down like he's weighing me. *What you think it'll be like if those damned Yanks win? They stealing our land, taking our women. What you think they gonna do with you? You won't be safe, you know that. They ain't gonna take care of you and your family. Let you work for em, get you no safe place to live. You sure right*



about that, Sir. I was almost snatched up the other night on my way home. Streets no place to be. *Didn't I tell you? Them Yankees, can't trust em.* No, Sir. These were men from round here, I say. Said they would string me up if I even thought about joining the Yankee side. *It's not fitting to turn your back on your home, boy. You ought to know that. South done born and raised you,* Walker says. *We got to defend her. Streets ain't safe no how. A strong, able man like yourself ought to be out there fighting for our way of life. Got just as much right to defend the South as anybody. Don't you think?* Sir, I couldn't abide killing folks. Thought of it just turns my stomach something fierce. Walker smiles like that's what he been waiting on. *Why don't you stay here awhile, until the war's over?* No thank you, Sir, my Ma's aging poorly and I wouldn't want her to need for nothing during the night. *Can she cook?* He asks. He's getting excited. She think she can, Sir. Sure do. Why the last thing my Pa said, Lord have Mercy on his soul, the last thing he said--before he met the Good Lord-- was woman, you sure is a mighty fine cook. Least, that's what she says he said. By the time I came in to help, he was dead, a piece of cornbread still in his hand. No, Sir, wasn't that much around the kitchen before she took sick but now, well, I just took to cooking for us both. *Does she clean?* he asks. My mama's floors so clean you could eat clear off em. Strays come in off the streets just to eat offa my mama's floors, I tell him.'

I hold my sides in from laughing so hard. I ain't never met Edward's mama but from what he says, Ms. Lola Mae would kill him if he got her mixed up with Walker.

*'I been thinking on bringing Tempe or Spring up to the house, he says, about time they start earning their keep around here. Maybe even pay them a little something.* Now I can tell he's still thinking about having my mama up there cooking and cleaning for free cuz he done forgot he ain't paid me nothing. *She could buy her baby, he says. Wouldn't she like that? Can*

you believe it? Buy the baby? It ain't exactly how we planned but it's a start! First we buy the baby, then you.'

He stops talking. He don't say and then we'll buy Spring. Just first the baby, then you.

Tempe stands up. She puts her hands on her hips. 'Ain't planning on being here when the baby's born,' she says.

'Don't see where you reckon you can hide with my baby bout to climb out any day now. It's too dangerous. Streets ain't safe. Woods ain't safe. Least if we wait till the baby's born and buy him, my child will be free.'

'Baby ain't yourn.'

Edward straightens. His hands clench. His jaw clenches.

'This baby Walker's baby,' she says. 'You know that. Long as Walker got my papers, this baby his.'

The cool April breeze stops. Edward moves to pass.

'You gonna kill him?' Tempe asks. 'Cuz unless you feinin' to kill him, bury him, and send him straight to hell, ain't no reason to go up there. And if'n you kill him, you better make sure he dead before you get to running off and make sure he tell you where Mama is before that.'

Edward bends down. He presses his face to her belly. Tempe leans over, rests her head on his.

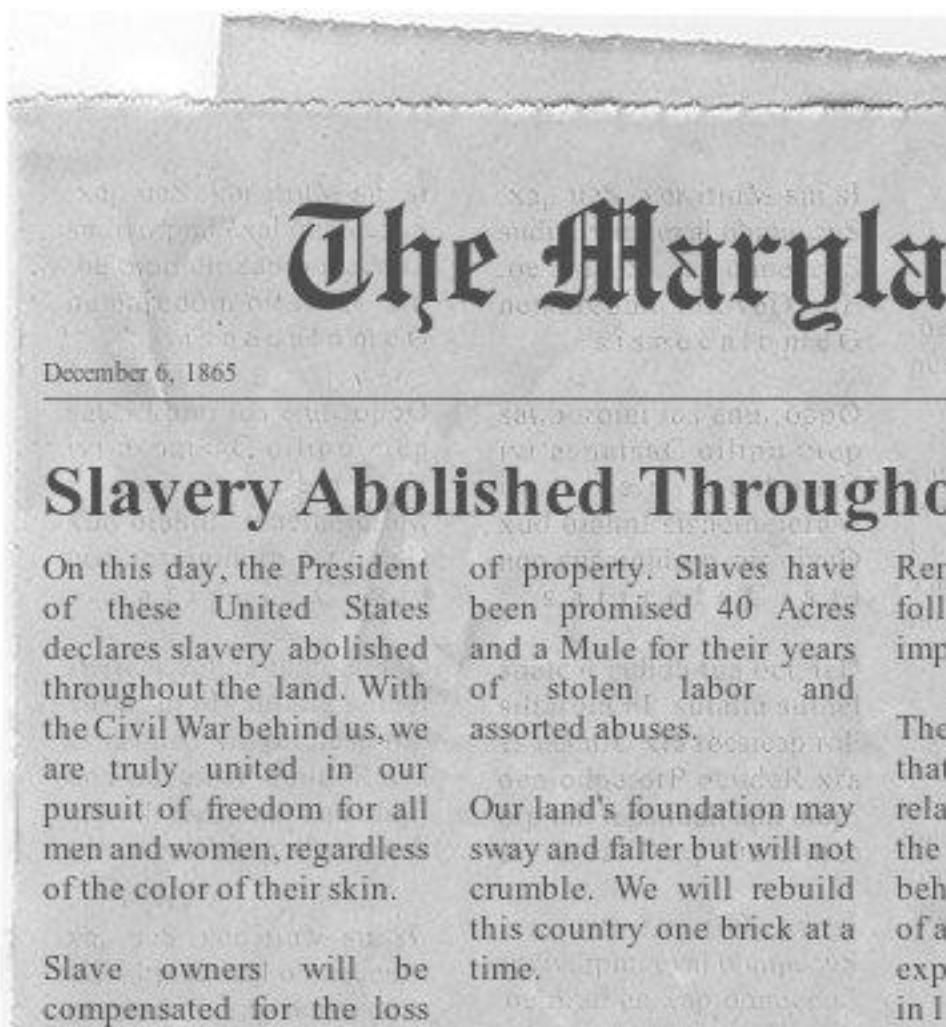
'I don't know what more I can do,' he says.

'We'll think of something,' Tempe says.

'Promise me you ain't gonna run away,' Edward says.

'Promise,' Tempe says.

## Chapter 18



Tempe and me is all the time talking about running. The bigger her belly gets, the more we talk about it. Neither one of us wants you to be no slave. Your pa don't neither, but he's scared. Every plan we come up with he ends with 'wait until after the baby.' His eye gets to twitching every time we mention it. Pretty soon his wait turns into no: What if we? No. What about? No. How about? No. Nothing is careful enough. Gets to the point Tempe and me wait on him to slip away for the night to talk about leaving. The longer the war lasts, the harder it is for Edward to get back. Days at a time go by before we see him. Any news we get come from Edward.

'How you gonna get Edward to come along?'

'With this baby,' Tempe says.

We're lying out in the wet grass watching the clouds pass across the moon. The air is crisp. It's been months since we heard any but we listen for the familiar rumbling of far away gunshots. I imagine thunder is the roar of a cannon. If I close my eyes tight and put my ear to the earth I swear I can hear screams. Hoots, squeals, chirps, the night is noisy. All around the cabin, the garden, the wood, is thick with animals hunting, being hunted. The silence creeps up on us like a ghost. A loud, twig-breaking ghost. Tempe tenses beside me. A bird screeches. I want to jump but Tempe's nails digging into my arm pin me down.

'I said,' a boy says, 'is it safe to come out?' He repeats the screech. 'It's a call, don't ya'll got one?' He steps out from behind a row of trees.

Me and Tempe sit up. I reach around for a branch or rock or something, in case I need it.

'I didn't expect to run into nobody,' the boy says, 'what y'all doing here?'

‘Living,’ Tempe says.

‘Slaving’s over,’ the boy says.

‘What you talking about?’ I ask. Poor thing. He can’t be more than ten years old.

Running around thinking he’s free.

‘Gal, y’all must be the last two slaves in the whole-wide world. Maryland been free since last year and slaves all over been free for weeks.’

‘Then what you running around slipping through the woods for?’ Tempe asks.

‘Roads ain’t safe,’ he says, ‘patrollers on the roads rounding people up.’

‘Didn’t you just not one minute ago say slaving is over, we free?’

‘They catching people up here, sending them to workhouses, planting them on farms, selling them to folks. Y’all coming?’

Free? No running away, buying ourselves, just free. Mama will be home any day now.

‘We waiting on our mama to get back,’ I say. ‘Soon’s she get back, we’ll be on our way.’

‘I got to get moving. My mama out there somewhere looking for me. I’m gonna find her.’

‘How you know where to look?’

The boy presses a splayed hand over his heart. ‘This right here.’

‘You ain’t got no map? You end up dead just following that.’

‘I end up dead staying here too,’ he says. ‘Don’t see the point of just waiting on being found. What if she hurt up? Some mean somebody might be keeping her and she can’t get back to me. No, I ain’t gonna wait here one more night. How long you gonna wait?’

I don't know. My whole body is shaking. Free? What if he's right? Should we just go and ask Walker? Wait on your pa? If this boy's running to find his mama, Watson could be making his way back to me.

'Whatchu gonna do if you don't find your mama?' Tempe asks.

'I'm gonna find her,' he says.

'Your master just let you go?'

'I left. Soon as word came that we was free, we left. The master tried to convince us to stay. Said we was family and family don't just walk away. When that didn't work he said he'd pay us. I don't have no need for nothing. I have to get to my mama. Wasn't no price he could afford that could make me wait longer than I had to. I wasn't the only one felt like that. Some stayed. The rest of us packed up what we could but we didn't get to keep it. When he found out we were leaving, the crazy goat came chasing after us with shotguns. He was carrying on about us owing him and him collecting in blood. Good thing he can't see straight. I would be dead right now if someone hadn't already run off with his ammunition.'

We laugh along with him. I want to ask what it's like, freedom, if the stars don't look brighter, the water taste cooler, the berries sweeter but I don't have time. He's caught his wind and is already edging back to the woods. 'Y'all sure you ain't coming?' he asks.

I'm halfway up.

'We sure,' Tempe says for the both of us.

He's already gone. The night settles as if he was never there.

Tempe lies back down. 'We ain't free until Walker says we free,' she says. Before long she's snoring.

I lay back down too but I don't sleep.

By morning we decide to wait for your pa to come back. Tempe don't want to leave without him. Between planning how to get Walker to tell us where Mama is, where she want to move, how she want the house to look and how she gonna act when she meets Edward's mama, Tempe don't hardly have time for me to talk about trying to find Watson. Soon as I bring him up, Tempe brings him down: need to find yourself a born-free man, she says. Like she done forgot your pa was born a slave just like we was. I don't argue with her. Soon as we get settled somewhere new, I'm gonna find Watson. I spend most of the days rolling last names around my mouth. Spring Kirk. What if Watson changed his name? I wouldn't blame if he did. Who will I be then? Mrs. Watson. I can't get farther than that. River, Sanctuary, Grass. I think of all the places we shared. Would he choose one of those as a name? I just hope I like our new name. It would be awful to get saddled with a name that don't sound right but I won't complain, won't make a face or nothing. I won't let on that I don't like it, seeing as he worked hard to get us a name. At night I plan the wedding and the house we'll build between Tempe and Edward's and Mama's. I'll have to tell Watson there won't be no babies. But we'll have you. Won't need no babies of our own. I don't tell Tempe nothing. During the day I work harder than I ever done. Weeks pass.

'Ain't nothing wrong with your hands,' I say. I spit.

Sweat and dirt are in my mouth. I been digging up all our treasures. Don't leave nothing behind, Tempe said instead of helping. When I finish digging, Tempe gets to telling me what to put where and how to tie this bundle and that one. She got one more time to call me dim-witted. Before I can tell her, your pa come running through the woods. He quiets Tempe's fussing with kisses and hugs.

‘Where you been?’ I ask. ‘We been waiting on you.’

Tempe gives me a look that could freeze the damned.

‘I wasn’t sure I’d find y’all here,’ he says. ‘I been worried something fierce bout where you two would be.’

I can’t help myself, I smile.

‘Don’t know what I would do if something happened to you and my baby,’ Edward continues. ‘Soon as I heard y’all was free, I go see Walker. I says, I’m here to take my family home. He says, you ain’t taking nothing of mine nowhere. I says, slavery done ended, Master Walker. He says, not here. I tell him yes, Sir, right here and all over Maryland. And he says then we moving down South, me, Tempe, Spring and the baby. I says, no Sir, no you ain’t, slavery is dead all over. He says, you right, I be right back. By the time he comes back to the porch waving that rifle, I’m already halfway across the field. Ain’t stop him from shooting at me. I ran. I couldn’t stay away no longer. I was worried he’d move you away before I could get back. I was praying you’d still be here. We gonna have to leave tonight. I got a friend who can get us on a train North. Done arranged everything. Further north we get, less chance Walker following. Woods is getting as dangerous as the roads but I don’t see no way around it.’

‘We’ll leave first thing in the morning,’ Tempe says.

‘We ain’t got till morning,’ Edward says. ‘Got to be right now. I got us passage.’

Tempe and Edward might have forgotten about Mama but not me. I’m not leaving without her.

‘It’s too dark, Edward, what about the baby?’ Your ma pats her belly.

It’s settled. No matter how well Edward knows his way, it’s safer to leave in the morning. It’s the tears that convince him. Least if we wait till morning, we can stop for help if we need it. I



can see your pa don't want to but he agrees to see if he can't switch times with another family. He'll be back by sunrise. Soon as he leaves we get planning.

'We gonna have to get Walker to tell us where Mama is,' Tempe says.

'How we know he even knows where she at?'

'Of course he knows. If he don't who do?'

'Alright, I'm gonna ask him.'

'Why would he tell you anything?' Tempe asks. It's dark. No moon to speak of but I know she's standing there with her hands on her hips.

'Cuz I'm a miracle.'

'No you ain't. I am.'

'And if he don't tell you?'

'He dies knowing something we don't.'

Kill him. The more we talk on it, the easier it seems. Before long, don't seem to be no other way. We gonna wait til morning and give him a chance to save his life. It's only Christian. We'll ask him where Mama is. Least he can do for Tempe lifting the curse is tell us. If we right, we leave and go find her. If we wrong, he dies. He ain't gonna sell neither one of us. We too excited to sleep. We spend hours thinking how to do it. We'll go right up the front steps, up to the door, knock. He'll probably be expecting us to scrub the floors or get ironing or cooking. With nobody but him there, the place is bound to be knee-deep in dust. He'll let us in. We'll ask him then. We talk through turn after turn. Laughter, anger, begging; we got all his responses covered. If it comes to it, we got ours too.

Tempe's set on poison. If we're going to do it, I want something quick, painless. Shooting him seems easiest. Between cleaning them and using them to guard the Missus' garden

from critters, Tempe and me been handling shotguns for years. Know just where to find them too.

‘What about the law?’ Tempe asks. ‘If the Missus ever do come back, the first thing she’ll see is Walker lying round with a big ol’ hole in his head. The second thing is you and me gone. It won’t be long before somebody’s looking for us.’

If we drag him out the back door, through the fields and such, we can drop him in the ditch. But Tempe drags her foot along the dirt. I follow the trail she makes. Fire. If Walker won’t tell us where Mama is, we’ll send him straight to hell. Won’t even kill him first. Tempe will ask about Mama while I say it’s chilly and get a fire going. The curtains will be first. I always hated washing and re-washing that brocade cloth. It made my fingers stiff. After the curtains, the rugs, the settee, Walker. Tempe’s set on if he don’t tell. I try to picture Walker telling us where to find Mama and me and Tempe walking out the front door and down the path free. I can’t see it.

We’re too excited to wait until morning. We set off for the house. Tempe lumbers behind me. I carry both of our bundles. She stops every few steps. We’d be there by now if she would just keep walking. She’s breathing heavy. Just before we reach the river, her heavy breathing turns to moaning. A few more steps and she falls to her knees.

‘The baby?’ I don’t need to ask. We waited too long.

‘Help me up.’

The more I pull, the more her body seems to root to the spot. I heave her to her feet.

‘Wanna go back?’

She don’t bother to answer. We time our pace with her pains. Sweat drenches her body making it hard to even hold onto her hand. She bites down on snapped-off pieces of bark to keep from screaming. She needs to rest. We sitting there swinging our feet at the edge of the river

when Tempe's water come down. You won't be far behind it. Owls screech. Crickets chirp. Nightbirds call. Tempe screams a few seconds later, you do too. Your cry is an angry wail. I take some scraps from my bundle, soak them. Your mama washes your little wrinkled body. It's the happiest I ever seen her. We slice the cord with a hunting knife. I bury the cord nearby.

She's rocking back and forth, singing to you while you nurse.

'What's his name?'

'Edward Jonah Freeman.'

She's holding you so tight I'm worried you can't breathe. 'Want me to hold him?'

She's bundling you up and already walking towards the house. I gather up our belongings and hurry to catch up thinking *we can't do this, we can't do this*. I don't say a word.

Walker's sitting on the porch rocking in that chair like he been up all night just waiting. 'You put her up to this,' he says pointing at me. 'You more like your mama than I thought. Ain't I done everything for you? I gave you a mama when your own up and killed herself.'

James was right. I can't catch my breath. Don't seem like my body is working at all. My heart ain't beating. I can't swallow. Can't blink. All I can do is hear.

'Should have known you'd have had some of that devil in you,' he says. 'Nothing but the devil. First chance you get you run off and drag your sister and that baby through the woods. And why? Cuz somebody done told you you suppose to be free?' He spits a dark clump of tobacco that near hits me. I don't move. 'Well, they done lied to y'all. The war done ended and they ain't set you free, did they? Ain't nobody come knocking on your door, door I provided, to give you no papers or nothing. I coulda told you wouldn't nothing change but you wouldn't have believed it, would you? How could you? Too full of your mama and her evil ways to know when

somebody doing you right. It ain't your fault.' He pauses, leans forward so far I think he'll fall clear out his chair. 'Ain't Tempe's either. It's mine. I got my own self to blame. Treating you like family, like equals. I was going to let you all go right on working and I was going to go right on taking care of you all. No bad blood or nothing. But I see we can't do that. Can't be civil with animals. You want to be free. You free. There's your papers right there.' He balls up a sheet of paper and tosses it by my feet. Go on.'

'What about Mama?' Tempe asks.

Walker gets to grinning. 'That's what you come for? Agnes?' He laughs. 'Why all you had to do was ask! I got the papers right there in the house. Come on in and help me get them,' he says.

I step up on the porch and press my palm against the wood door. The smell of dust and mold hits me soon as I open the door. I hold my breath; don't get one foot across the threshold.

'Not you,' Walker says, 'you.' He points to Tempe.

Your mama kisses you on the top of your head, squeezes you tight and puts you in my arms.

'Just for safekeeping,' she says.

She takes my place at the door. Walker closes it behind them.

I'm out there rocking you when your pa comes. I put you in his arms. He's holding and kissing and loving on you. He's still holding you when your mama screams. Smoke's streaming from the roof. Windows get to popping. The house is on fire. A shot. More screaming. Your pa puts you in my arms.

'Run! Keep my boy safe!'

The house is splintering, cracking in two. It's being eaten alive and taking Tempe with it. Your pa runs up the steps, hurls through what's left of the door. Two more shots, one more scream. We run. You hungry, soiled and angry. I don't know where we heading but I plan to stay in the woods most of the day. I ain't the only one. Freedom come alright. For most of us, it hasn't come on horses or with golden trumpets. Wasn't no angel going around saving all the slaves. Some owners turning people loose. Some slaves walking off. Far as I know, wasn't nobody going round checking if people had turned slaves loose. And don't seem like nobody's making sure we stay free either.

Everybody's carrying some bit of news or looking for some. I can't rest at a log or sip along the river without a somebody slipping behind me asking if I know their brother, sister, mother, father. If I can help them find their daughter, cousin, grandmama. I'm carrying you tight to my breasts. You mad about it and let me know it. I emptied one of them bundles and wrapped you up inside it. Left them shells, rocks, molded food behind. Memories scattered all over Maryland. From your smell, won't be too long before I have to empty the other one. All I have left is this book, a few skins, a little bit of food and you. Between screaming, you rooting around and biting on me. More than once I wonder if babies can drink blood cuz you sure seem fit to draw it.

'He's hungry,' a woman says like I don't know it. I been trying to mash anything I could find to settle you. 'You ain't got no milk?' She puts out her arms. I undo the bundle. Hand you to her. She's shaking her head and clucking about how small you is and how lucky you is to be free. She nurses you til you fall asleep. 'You ain't gonna get far with this baby and no milk.'

I don't ask her why she got milk and no babies. She looks like she been running day and night since the war began. She fidgets when she sits, while she talks. She's itching to get on her way.

'Now we gonna have to watch out,' she says. 'Everybody ain't ready to stop slaving. They done set up so many rules and laws, the woods is the safest place to be right now. But won't be for long. So many soldiers marching, slipping and running through the woods on the way to or from some battle pretty soon we'll have to take the main road. The baby's likely to slow us down. Don't make no never mind, we'll head North at nightfall.'

We? I don't even know this gal's name and she's already tied herself to us. You fall asleep in her arms. She ain't far behind you. Both of you snuggled up against a tree trunk, snoring. Soon as she wakes up I'll tell her we ain't going. What do I know about up North? How can I leave Tempe behind?

I can't sleep with the woods and my head filled with moaning, crying and footsteps. I close my eyes and see your mama standing in the doorway burning. Each time I blink, my heart jumps. I hear crackling, popping, screaming. Before long it's like I'm in the house watching Tempe ask Walker about Mama. I can hear him laughing. Pushing up against her, whispering in her ear how he done sold Mama Lord knows where to God knows who. He grabs for her. She snatches up a poker. He reaches for it. She swings. The curtains catch afire, then the settee, then Walker. The shots splintering the sky like lightning splitting wood? Sometimes it's a shotgun in Walker's hand. Sometimes it's in Tempe's. It's always me pulling the trigger.

The sun's steady shining down on my head. I don't need no ad in the paper, no crow flying over my shadow, or no cock crowing to tell me Tempe's dead. I'm lying there holding my breath, one two three, thinking about her, Mama, Watson, Edward. Everybody gone. I'm thinking about the times I ain't never known that Samantha told us about. The things James said. The stories. Back when he was little Watson, me and the kids from the other plantations playing out back of the cabin, snatching crumbs of grown-folk talk, thinking we was grown. Mama teaching me to walk, to run, to be Spring and not Sister all the time. Not my mama? They wrong. All of them. The rumbling snores stop. There's no wind blowing. Nothing. I ain't breathing, ain't holding my breath no more and not bursting for air. It's pitch black. Something's moving. It's light-footed, graceful, close. It's right next to me, warm. It smells like cinnamon. Ain't no man, no animal either. I know it ain't nothing else but Tempe.

Seems like soon as I know it, I can see her. The only light comes from her. Her entire body smolders like burning coal. I feel like I should holler out or scream or pray but I don't do none of those things. I just wait. She kisses you all over. She can't get enough of you. I can't move, don't want to. She sits beside me. She holds my hands in her warm, smooth ones. We stay there, her sitting and rocking and humming and me just lying there not able to smile, to talk, to breathe. I can't open my lips, can't make the words come out. Can't tell her I love her.

I feel a stinging sensation of love all around me, through me. She tells me everything she's seen since she been dead. How she flips through time like pages and sees whole lives. She tells me about Ella and Mama, Papa Jonah and Mama Skins. Remember, she says. She don't tell me everything but I don't know it then. She don't say it, but I know she wouldn't have done it if it weren't for me. She wouldn't have left you if there had been some other way. If I hadn't put it in her head that she could save us, that Walker would tell her where Mama was, she'd be alive

today instead of me. My heart starts beating fast. I take a deep breath and hold it. I know by the time I let it out, she'll be gone. I hold it for as long as I can. Sooner or later I breathe.

Night comes quick. I been setting here watching it sneak in. You're bound to my bosom, full and happy. She's jumpy, ready to move. She's weaved some hides to make something you can hold onto. When we reach the river, she fills one with water, stitches it. We set off following the river. Twice as many folks out at night as during the day. She's asking folks about her kin: An old woman with eyes that twinkle when she laughs and nails as long and thick as fingers. A baby that ain't never opened her eyes.

'Ain't you got nobody to find?' she asks.

'You seen a woman called Agnes?' I ask the next person we see.

The woman stares at me, waits. 'Agnes, what?' She asks.

'Walker, we belonged to Walker.'

She purses her lips. 'Whose your kin?'

'Just Mama and my sister, Tempe.'

'What she look like?'

I get to describing her. Soon's as I say one thing, I remember another. 'She's about this tall, no, this tall. About this wide, no,' I picture her again, 'this wide. She's got a laugh that could make the birds take notice. Her voice sounds like trickling rain, she moves like the river.'

The woman grabs both of my hands in hers. 'If I see her, I'll tell her you looking for her. God Bless,' she says.

'You ain't never gonna find your mama like that,' my companion says after a few days.



I picture her twinkling eyed, long-nailed mama. I'm not the only one, I think. We been walking for miles before I find out her name. We stopped a few minutes ago. She's nursing you for the umpteenth time.

'What's his name?'

You're suckling on one teat already eyeing the other one.

'Edward Freeman, just like his pa. What's yours?'

'Spinner, like my ma. She was the best spinner on the whole plantation. I'm gonna change my name though. What they call you?'

Flames lick at the bottom of my feet, up my calves and thighs, to my belly, through my chest. They creep up my neck. Not sister, not any more. 'Spring, my name's Spring.'

## Chapter 19

It's been days. Spinner tries names on and off as we travel. For a few miles she's Rose, she goes a whole day as Sunshine and a few steps as Tallulah. We've been practicing describing people. I've gone from asking about Mama to asking about Mama, Watson, James and Samantha. The last time I described Watson as a flash of muscled-brown goodness, she stopped me: 'Don't nobody care bout how he looks in your head. What's he look like for real?' Since then, my descriptions are more precise. It's my memories that fade. I lose count of how many people I describe them to. I interrupt a man in the middle of fishing. I'm halfway through describing Watson's long, brown arms.

'Does he have one of them grins that get people to smiling? Like this?' He demonstrates.

My body's shaking. He's asking about Watson's walk, the way he stands and leans to one leg, the way his arms swing just a little, the way his face don't tell nothing at all about what he's thinking. I'm swallowing hard trying to keep what's inside in. I'm crying and shouting. You crying. By the time we get you settled down good it's night. We set out following the fisherman's directions at dawn. We don't have far to go but I'm out of breath by the time we get there. A post office/general store/fishery in the middle of a town just outside of Baltimore. The place reeks of fresh fish, crabs and spices I ain't never smelled before. I know this is the place. It's no bigger than a slave shack but I'm the only one that seems to notice. People are lined up

two-a-head from out the front door to clear around the corner. I ain't never seen so many folks in one place. I'm standing there with my mouth open. All them people. I see myself in their eyes. I'm sweating. My shift feels like rags. It clings to me. My bare feet are caked in mud, dirt and animal droppings. I pat my hair. My tight curls are matted. I smell myself. I want to hide.

Spinner's looking like I feel. She swings her head from the front of the line to the back and back up again. Her mouth's wide open. She's jittery. I look back to the line. It's getting longer by the minute. All sorts of people wait in it. Old, young, men, women, poor, well to do, they got one thing in common, ain't none of them paying Spinner and me no mind. I hoist you up, straighten my shoulders, grab Spinner by the hand and lead us to the back of the line. The procession is mostly silent. Every so often a ripple of conversation moves through the crowd from lips to lips.

'Looking for a gal named Delilah, bout nine years old, chocolate brown skin, this tall. Her folks are Antonia and Lewis Coleman from Salisbury,' the man in front of me says.

He starts shifting from foot to foot. His eyes are like large dark pools pulling me in. I know cuz he's staring at me. Seems like everyone in front of me turns too. You let out an angry cry. I'm squeezing you tight. Trying to find something to hold onto so I don't get lost in his eyes.

'We don't know her,' Spinner says. She passes the message to the person behind us.

The man nods his head, turns ahead to await more news. News travels from one end of the line to the other for hours before we reach the shop door. Inside, fish hang from hooks, crabs scabble around in buckets. The walls are plastered with pictures and newspaper ads. Lost, Lost, Lost. They all seem to say the same thing. Some got pictures. We shuffle passed them. Can't neither of us read. I'm watching folks for signs of Watson. A familiar walk, gesture, shake of the head. Something. My heart's beating fast.

‘What can I get you?’ a man asks.

His apron is stained with blood. I can’t seem to see nothing else but streaks of bloody handprints. Till I see a hole. Just like the hole that must be gaping from Walker’s chest. Spinner is as jumpy as a cat in heat. She’s grabbing on my arm and whispering in my ear but I can’t make out a word she’s saying. I’m about tired of her hot breath on the side of my face and spin around to tell her so when I catch a glimpse of something from the corner of my eye. His forehead’s all creased up but I’d know that face anywhere. It ain’t Watson. He don’t look nothing like him. But Spinner’s squealing about how I found him and how he looks exactly like I been describing and what a miracle it is. Before I can set her straight, he’s around the counter grabbing me with thick arms. He pushes me back, looks me over from head to toe then hugs me again. He’s crushing you to me. He don’t notice until you scream to tell him about it.

‘He yourn?’ Franklin asks.

And before I know it, you are. I let him hold you. He’s staring at you. If he can see your pa in your long fingers and thin lips he don’t say nothing. His boss gives him a pack of sandwiches and five minutes to get back to work. Franklin leads us out back. I’m hungrier than I thought. Between gulps of tomato and cheese sandwiches, Spinner, me and Franklin try to squeeze in all we got to say. Franklin’s watching Spinner nurse. I’m waiting on him to ask about my milk.

‘Y’all caught me just in time,’ he’s saying, ‘me and Buddy heading up to Pennsylvania. He got a friend up there. Got jobs lined up and everything.’

‘You heard anything bout Watson?’ I ask. My throat’s dry. I try to picture him right. The color of his eyes, the shape of his head, anything. All I can make out for sure is his back.

He don't say nothing for about a minute. Then he smiles. 'Last time I seen Watson, he was smoking past Tempe heading due North. Fast as he was running, I don't suspect he stopped till he got clear to Canada. You know they would have killed him if he came back, don't you? Kirk had a bounty out on him. Dead or alive, Kirk didn't care which. Between the patrollers and slave catchers, that boy couldn't slow down till he crossed the border and even then, with them pulling folks back and selling them further south, seems like there wasn't no time for him to stop running.' Franklin closes his eyes like he can see Watson running.

I'm smiling right along with him, trying to make his memory mine.

Buddy strolls up thirty minutes later. Seeing him is better than I remember. He's quiet, almost gentle. Years in the service have made him think before speaking. We're late. Franklin's scrubbed down the shop and himself, said his goodbyes and got his last pay. Buddy's been telling us about the places he's been. Seems like he's seen the whole world.

'It ain't gonna be easy in Philadelphia,' he says, 'ain't none of us strangers to hard work. Long as we don't expect no handouts, won't be surprised when we don't get none. Between what me and Buddy's got saved, we be able to get a room for you two. Try to keep close as we can. Got jobs lined up for the both of us. There's farming outside the city. In the city there's domestic work and even factories. You two can take turns caring for the baby.'

He's got it all figured out except Spinner's having second thoughts about leaving without finding her mama. Second thoughts turn to thirds. How will her mama know where to find her? She won't, we agree. Unless someone can get word to her. We can put an ad in the paper. Spinner's shaking her head, her mama can't read. What if her mama's up North? No, Spinner

says, there ain't no reason to think her mother would be up North already set free and not send for her only girl-child. No, she ain't up North. The more Spinner talks about it, the more convinced she is that her mama is right there in Maryland looking for her. Don't have the heart to speculate on her being down South. None of us do. Spinner will stay behind. Buddy asks if I want to stay with her and have them send for me. I can't stop thinking about my own room. Making my own money. Picking and choosing my own work and being paid for it. Nobody telling me what needs doing or when to do it. Seem like everything about slaving is right here and freedom is right across that line.

Buddy's ready to go. He knows a place Spinner can stay until she's ready to join us in Philadelphia. He shows her how to get news to him through the shop where we found Franklin. Franklin will put in a good word for her so she can find work. It won't be long. Soon as she finds her mama, they can join us in Philadelphia.

'What about the baby, what will he eat?' Spinner asks. 'Let him stay with me, til he's off the teat.' She's reaching for you, her fingers opening and closing like claws.

You're all I have. Besides, your mama would kill me. I'm shaking my head no. You watching me with your mama's eyes just daring me to give you away. 'We'll figure something out,' I say. I swear you smile up at me and wink.

We have a minute to say goodbye and then a truck pulls up behind the shop. The back is full of furniture, mattresses and people. Farm hands, travelers, and other workers take up each inch of space. Franklin goes around front to talk to the driver. Two men jump out the back. They

exchange brief greetings before Buddy hops in. The driver's still fussing about numbers not adding up. After a bit of to and fro Franklin comes back, lifts you up to Buddy, hoists his self up and puts his hand out to me. It's crowded but people make room.

'If anyone asks,' he says, 'you Buddy's wife, this his boy.'

No one asks the entire ride but I'm rolling the words around my mouth just in case. We ride for miles, stopping every few feet for someone to jump off and a new somebody to jump on. Each person has a story. Your pa tells one about the war. By the time he's finished, he's made you a gourd and fashioned a nipple for you to chew on. Your uncle's tale is about the last time he saw his mama. Mine is about the last time I seen mine. It goes on like that for hours. Laughing, crying, whispering, singing, shouting, we swap stories in between bumping along the road. We're supposed to remember them, to pass them on to folks we meet. Everyone's looking for someone. Like a bucket, I'm carrying a head full of names and stories. Older ones spill out to make room for new ones.

After a while it's our turn to jump off. We're in the middle of a field. Somebody has given us milk for you and apples for each of us. If this is Philadelphia, it sure ain't what I pictured. It stinks of horse manure. Piles of it are just stacked on top of each other like crates. The air is so thick with flies I can't tell where the dirt ends. But it's free thick air and though I can't hardly breathe, I'll make do. Tracks run through the fields. On either side of them, rickety shacks rattle and shake every time the wind blows good. Don't look like they big enough to hold all of us but if we take turns, one inside, one out, we'll be alright. I just hope we don't have to walk too far to use the pot. Buddy and Franklin start walking beside the train tracks. I'm right alongside them. You're in Buddy's arms, sleep-smiling up at him like you know he's family now. The sun's bright but it's cold. It's winter. We're walking farther away from the smell of

dung. Grass crunches beneath our feet. Birds sing. The air is crisp with the smell of snow. Fat flakes begin falling. A train whistles from far off. Smoke billows across the sky.

‘I thought there’d be more people in Philadelphia,’ I say.

They laugh, mouths open, heads back, laughter. Even though they laughing at me, it sounds good.

‘If this was Philadelphia, these railroad tracks would be dollar bills. And them shacks, would be grand houses. Them horses and cows over there would be Misters and Missus lined up with trays of fish eggs and frog legs and champagne just waiting to serve someone like me.’

‘Franklin’s just funning. In Philadelphia, all the buildings this high, and the men are this tall and the women right up there, this tall. You short. People will know straight away you ain’t from there. But me and Brother will fit right in, we’ll tell them you’re with us. You’ll be fine. They got roads and streets bigger than any you seen before. The sun shines longer, brighter cuz it’s bigger there.’

‘You been there?’ I ask.

Your father nods, yes.

‘Then why you come back?’

‘I come back for what’s mine.’

His eyes get dark. Franklin smiles but I don’t think Buddy’s talking about him and I don’t ask.

‘What kind of work they got there in Philadelphia?’ I ask.

‘Bud and me got factory jobs lined up. All sorts of steel work for train parts, buildings, automobiles, you name it, they need it. They got factories for factories. Buttons, shoes, dresses, rugs, anything you can think of come in or out of a factory.’



‘Maybe I’ll get me one of them factory jobs.’

‘You could get a job as a domestic like this,’ Franklin snaps his fingers, ‘cooking, cleaning, baking, washing, mending or farm work.’

‘And I’d get paid for it, right?’

‘Sure enough, gal! This ain’t slaving, this working,’ he says.

‘We have to get you fixed up, of course,’ Buddy says. ‘Can’t have you out there looking like no slave.’

Before I know it, I’m walking faster. They huffing to keep up.

‘You beautiful all cleaned up,’ he continues. ‘Don’t see why the world shouldn’t see how pretty my woman is.’

Now, between you and me, I ain’t have no intentions on slowing down. But my legs start to thinking it’s a good time to stop moving. Buddy and Franklin speed right on past me before they notice I ain’t coming. I gather my common sense and catch up. Buddy puts his hand in mine. We talking about how we gonna save money to buy a big house. Each of us will have a room and there will be a room for our mamas, Spinner and her mama, anybody else that need a room. We’ll charge for dinners, have rent parties. Between all us working and making money doing odd jobs, we’ll be rich. I don’t know how long we walk. The train whistles again. It’s loud and close. It’s barreling down the tracks. A flash of yellow, purple, red, black.

‘Hop on,’ Franklin calls. He’s halfway in.

Your father hands you to your uncle and leaps in beside him. All that smoke and noise and y’all rolling right out of my life on a fast-moving monstrous beast. My feet scramble every which way. I’m close enough to touch the side. I lift my arms up to try to slow it down or grab

hold of something. Buddy grabs one hand, Franklin takes the other, and they hoist me up and into the car. We all huffing and puffing. I'm loud-laughing so they don't hear my heart.

After a while we settle down and I can look good around the car. It's a freight train. We ain't the only ones in there. Skeletons of machines, stacks of crates and people cram just about every inch of that car. Outdoors races by. Inside we rock and shake as we rumble across the country. Smoke and whistles. I jump at each wail of the train. My stomach lurches with each dip and bump. I busy myself with you. But soon as you fed, you fall asleep like the loud noise suits you just fine. I clear off a little patch of floor that isn't covered in hay and whatnot and set out supper. I can't eat none of it. With all this rocking, don't expect it would stay down no how. I make the mistake of taking a deep breath. I like to choke. Sweat, bodies, manure, dirt. Going up north sure better be worth it.

People hop on and off all the way to Philadelphia. Some of them don't hardly say a word. Some won't stop talking. To pass the time I pull out the book me and Tempe made. After a while I get folks to write their name or make their mark in it. Some write a few lines. Some draw pictures. Some give me clippings to add to it. Newspaper headlines, pages from books, Wanted Posters, receipts. The longer we rattle on, the more I collect. I tell stories. Grand ones about escapes and revolts and little ones about people holding onto treasures. The whole world races pass.

By the time I finally get to sleep, Buddy's shaking me. Franklin's hollering 'this our stop!' like the train ain't still moving. If I was awake good, no telling when we'd have got off. I must be still half asleep. The train's moving through a station. We're going slow enough that I can see the wooden platform, the yellow and green station house, the looks on people's faces. Franklin's at the opening, folks lined up beside him. Buddy's still shaking me. He pulls me up,

gathers my bundle, pulls us towards Franklin. Before I can say a word, Franklin leap-steps right off the train. The others follow. It's our turn and I'm saying 'what about the baby?' when I feel my whole body leap. My feet hit the wood and don't stop moving till I feel a hand pulling me back.

'Slow down there,' Buddy says. He's laughing and wiping sweat from his forehead. 'We got a while to travel before we home. You plan on running all the way?'

The station aint' but a little thing. We in it and out it in one step. It's nice though. Shiny wood benches, wood doors, my back aches for whoever's got to scrub all that. I know right then I was born to be in Philadelphia. Smells of baked bread, fried fish and smoked meats hit me as soon as I'm outdoors. Right in front of the station, women braid and sell warm pretzels. Boys roast chestnuts, sell newspapers. Men sell shoe shines, information and rides. The street is a ball of bees and they all buying or selling something. Franklin gets directions and we're on our way. Whole hogs glare at me through plate-glass windows, merchants yell prices, housewives haggle over discounts. People rush through the streets, work clothes starched and pressed. Trolleys drawn by horses trip up and down Chestnut. I feel eyes watching us like we're some picture show. I feel myself shrinking. Head down, shoulders slumped, body folded inward to make myself smaller, to disappear, I shuffle between the two brothers.

Franklin pinches me. 'Stop walking like that,' he says. His back is straight, so is Buddy's. They fit in with the crowd of folk going and coming. I clutch you tight, straighten my shoulders, hold my head up too and do my best to look like I belong.

We reach the church before nightfall. It's a stone building with a wooden cross on the front. I want to touch it. Men and women rush in and out of the door carrying slips of paper, pressed uniforms, bags of food. Little kids play outside while older children learn their lessons.

‘A, B, C,’ they repeat. I want to stay and listen but Buddy’s got his hand pressed against my back pushing me across the threshold. Inside, music plays, a choir sings, people laugh, argue, pray. For a little while, it feels like home.

The woman, Mrs. Leyland, rolls her eyes for what has to be the umpteenth time. She sucks her teeth. Crosses herself. Whispers a prayer under her breath and tries again. ‘What did you do before you got here?’ She holds the pencil poised over the form.

‘I done told you,’ I answer, ‘I was a slave.’ I have told her no less than five times. ‘I done everything.’

She drops the pencil to the desk. Rubs her eyes. She closes them, then peeks from under her long lashes. I’m still there. She stares at me like she wishes I wasn’t. Her eyes liked to burn holes through mine.

‘I told you, I can’t write that. People don’t want to hire ex-slaves.’

‘It’s the truth. All of us,’ I point to Buddy and Franklin, ‘born slaves.’

‘That may be true, but I can’t write that on this form. Ms. Spring, no one wants to be reminded you were a slave. Is that what you want people to think of when they look at you? When they look at your boy?’

‘Well, I ain’t lying,’ I say. I cross my arms. The wooden chair creaks as I lean forward. ‘I did the planting, plowing, harvesting, washing, mending, baking, cooking, smoking--’

She holds up a slim, manicured hand. I hide mine, nails bit short, skin calloused, beneath me. She snatches up the pencil, scrawls on the page. ‘Domestic,’ she says. ‘It means you good at everything. I have quite a few domestic positions. Once we get you cleaned up, you’ll be good for any one of them. Got to get someone to care for the baby.’ She taps her nails on the tip of her desk. ‘I got just the place!’

‘I ain’t giving up my boy.’ I’m ready to go.

‘Of course not,’ she says. ‘We have to get you set up with a place to live and I have something in mind for you and the baby.’ Barely looking up, she glances at Buddy and Franklin. ‘You two come with fine references. One of you will be working at the shipyard, the other at a steel factory.’ She shuffles papers in her hands. She looks Buddy over, then Franklin, reads the forms again. ‘Here.’ She gives them each a sheet.

They look them over, switch the papers and fold them carefully in their pockets. Franklin gives her a wink. Mrs. Leyland don’t say nothing. She goes back to filling out the form. Race, religion, age, she asks. Don’t seem to matter what I say. She’s half writing before I open my mouth. She pushes away the stack of papers and pulls out a thick book. She thumbs through listings of rooms for rent. Some have photos; others are just markings and checks in boxes. ‘You two have been set up on the even side of Grammercy and it just so happens that we have an opening across the street for your wife and boy.’

Your father thanks her.

‘I’ll put you on the family list so when a spot opens you can live together. Do you know what date it was when you got married?’

No women praying over me, no splashing through the river, no love. Married and not even a pretty dress.

‘Wasn’t too long ago, Ma’am,’ Buddy says.

She fills out a paper. ‘We’ll just set it for today. Pastor will sign that. He doesn’t place much stock in jumping the broom weddings. Did you have one of those?’

I close my eyes. I can see your mother flitting through the woods searching for Edward.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says. ‘It doesn’t seem likely a slave owner would allow time for much more than that anyhow. We just need to get a few more papers filled out. What’s the baby’s name?’

Just as I open my mouth to tell her, your father answers Bud. Like that’s a name. She starts writing like she can’t see me shaking my head. ‘It’s Edward, Ma’am,’ I say.

‘Bud Edward? Or Edward Bud?’ she asks.

‘Just Edward,’ I say.

‘Now, that’s an interesting name.’ She’s smiling and nodding. ‘Short for Justice? One of them powerful names. People need strong names to live up to.’

I don’t understand City folk. Franklin’s smiling and flirting and smoothing corners. He’s saying your name is Edward and how youse named after a friend of the family. Every so often she smiles and nods. She’s shuffling papers and asks, casual like, ‘what’s the family name?’

We standing there inventing whole lives and got five minutes to do it. Walker? Too much tied up to that place. Everything I had, I got and lost right there on Walker land. Walker wasn’t family. No matter what happened before, Buddy, Franklin and you are the only family I got. Right now I can choose a different me. Free from years of slaving. Free from being a second-best miracle. Seem like everybody I met was shedding theyselves in the woods, in the truck, on the train, right here. I can let loose the past. I’m rolling names around on my tongue. It’s got to be a name with a future. One that’s strong and proud and free.

‘Well, Ma’am,’ Buddy’s saying. ‘We all free men, all of us.’

‘That’s fine, Mr. Freeman,’ she says as she writes.

Between the ones with our addresses, directions to the new houses, and Buddy and Franklin's job assignments, seem like we got a hundred papers between us. We about as ready to go as she seems ready for us to go. There's already people lined up outside the open door.

'Can y'all read them papers?' she asks.

'Learned to read in the service,' Buddy says like she done splashed him with hot water.

Franklin's grinning. 'Ain't seen much call for it, yet,' he says. He's eyeing her like she's a good book and the only thing standing between him figuring her out is book learning.

'I'll set you up for evening classes right here,' she says.

'You the teacher?'

'No, but I can check in from time to time.' She's grinning so wide I can see all the teeth in her mouth. 'My husband leads the men's classes, Mr. Freeman.'

Franklin can't get out of there fast enough. I'm not too far behind him.

'Ms. Spring? I have you signed up for the women's classes. Reading, cooking, Bible classes, sewing, talking and walking. We'll have you all fixed up in no time.' She's loading me up with pamphlets full of pictures of women standing tall, eating with silverware, wearing long dresses with smiling faces and women slouched over, eating open mouthed, wearing shifts with bright X's splashed over them. 'It's the Learner's Edition,' she says. 'I put them together so women could get started right before the first class. See you tomorrow.' She's pushing me out the door as I shove the pamphlets in my bag and bundle you up close.

Before we can get out, we're loaded down with bags of food and clothes, blankets for you and more pamphlets for us. There are safety pamphlets filled with the names of streets to travel and ones to stay off, warnings about the Klan and things to look out for. Buddy stops at the

*Looking Wall.* He reads out names of people searching for family, descriptions of lost and found folk. Don't none of them sound like me. Who would be looking for me anyway?



## Chapter 20

It's 1866. Grammercy back then don't look nothing like it do now. Rows and rows of houses line both sides of the streets. Each brick house is shoulder to shoulder with the next one. Scrubbed walkways lead up to spic and span steps and fresh-painted doors. Beside each house is a garden full of plump fruit and vegetables and colorful flowers. Children laugh and squeal. Shop doors are swung open. Inside one, women get their hair done. In another, men sit lathered for the razor. In another, meat sizzles as people stroll in one door and out another with greasy bags. One whole shop is full of nothing but books, another with newspapers from all over the world. I finally get my hands on one of them pretzels. I don't mind walking from one end of Grammercy to clear across the other.

When we finally get to 20<sup>th</sup> Street, we're tired. I'll be at One Hundred and Seventeen, 20<sup>th</sup> Street. Buddy and Franklin at One Hundred and Twenty across the street. We stand out front for a good while. It's neat, cared for. My first three-storey house. The door is painted red, the steps damp and freshly scrubbed. It smells of honeysuckle and lemon and fresh bread. I'm hoping it's the right place. The house next door looks empty. Flower petals litter the front of sagging, dirty steps leading up to a peeling door. It's staring at me through gaping holes where windows should

be. I can see clear through. Cross the threshold through the dining room, sitting room, kitchen and out back to the gardenless yard. I can picture it though. With your father fixing the roof and your uncle fixing the floors, and the rest up to God, it could be a home.

‘You ain’t near as ornery looking as I heard you was,’ a woman says. She introduces herself, laughs. ‘Ain’t that just the prettiest little baby?’

I turn fast almost spinning right into the prettiest woman I have ever seen, Sable. Her voice is sweet like music. She’s smiling. Her black hair is pinned up into tight curls that bounce when she talks. She don’t look much older than us. Since this is a rooming house, she must be one of the boarders. She studies my face, hands, body, feet. ‘Etta Mae got you signed up for all sorts of classes, don’t she?’ She laughs. ‘That’s Mrs. Leyland to you. Don’t worry about all that. I’ll help you settle in. You and the baby will be staying here. The church will cover the rent for four weeks, did she tell you that? She don’t never seem to remember nothing about the money. After that, it’s up to you to pay. Of course, I’d hate to have to put you and the baby on the streets. I got a boy of my own. Big as you,’ she points to Buddy and Franklin. ‘His name’s Christian. Seemed fitting. He’s on his way back. Fought in the Civil War. Did you know that? I told Etta Mae to tell you this is temporary.’

‘Now, you look too good to have a boy grown as me. You sure about that?’ Franklin says.

She shoos him away like she don’t believe nothing he says but she’s smiling just the same. ‘I done heard all about you,’ she says. She cocks her head to the side and looks us over like she isn’t sure she believes whatever she’s heard. ‘Etta Mae already has a line of gals in mind for you to meet, eligible ones.’

He winks.

‘For marrying,’ she continues.

Your uncle does a pretend shiver. ‘I’d just as soon wait on you to marry me, thank you.’

‘I done married and buried men twice your age,’ she says. She reaches her arms out and you wiggle like a pig at a fair. You two always been thick as honey. She plucks you from my arms like a cherry. ‘You’ll work during the day and go to classes at night.’ She sways side to side while she speaks. Before long your eyes start blinking fast trying to stay awake. You give in and sleep. ‘I’ll mind the baby while you work, study, or go to church. No late nights out. Seeing as you’re married, I’ll make an exception on male visitors but no single ones.’ She smiles at Franklin. ‘Your husband can come around anytime between ten in the morning and seven in the evening. Your visits will be in the sitting room. Two other ladies share the house. We share the kitchen, outhouse, and dayroom. I provide the food. We all do the cooking, can you cook?’ She don’t wait for an answer. ‘Good, sometimes we can take turns doing the cooking. You girls will help with the housework. I keep a list of who does what on what day. Washing up, scrubbing floors and walls, this ain’t no hotel so we all got to do.’ She edges us up the path and closer to the steps while she talks. ‘Any unlocked door is an open door. You want privacy you rent you some private time somewhere. In my house, I can go in any room I please. As for you, you free to sit, read, stare out the window or do whatever you choose to do except smoking, drinking and cussing, I don’t allow none of that. Only rooms locked are the front parlor, that’s where I do my reading and thinking and Christian’s room. He’ll need a place when he comes home. Be back any day now. Don’t you worry I won’t just put you out on the street soon as he gets back, especially not with no new baby. I intend to get the house next door fixed up so you girls can have it all to yourself. I wouldn’t expect single gals to be living with no single man, not under my roof. What would your husband think you living here with my strong, handsome, single son?’

A Veteran. You two should get going,' she waves your father and uncle off. 'You'll be staying with Mr. Johnson. You ought to get there before supper. He's a good cook. Almost makes it worth it. He'll talk right through supper if you let him. If you need someplace quiet to think, just go right next door, let yourself in, and while you're there, pick up a hammer, some nails and put your hands to use. Your backs too,' she laughs.

Buddy and Franklin wave and head across the street. Your pa rushes back and kisses you on the head, brushes his dry lips against my cheek. They stroll over to a group of men.

While they're over there laughing, Sable's fussing over my clothes and hair. 'Next time that husband of yours sees you you'll be looking like a wife. We gonna get started tonight.' She's push-pulling me up the stairs into the house.

I ain't never seen nothing like it. She's flitting from room to room: parlor, sitting room, kitchen, backroom, frontroom. Up the stairs are bedrooms behind numbered wooden doors. Room one is hers, room two Delilah's, room three Lillian's, rooms four and five are for Christian, so he got his choice. Up another few stairs, across a landing it's room six, our room. I ain't never had my own anything. As long as I can pay the rent, this is our home. She unlocks the door and fresh air smacks me in the face. The window is wide open. Thin lacey curtains snap and blow on the breeze. I can't wait until we're alone. I put the bundle down by the door and hold my arms out for her to hand you over.

She's inside the room pointing out back. 'The outhouse is right there next to the washhouse,' she says. 'We got a schedule for washing. Of course, the outhouse is whoever gets in first. We all keep it clean.'

Over the top of her head I see two wooden shacks, side by side. There ain't no fence but I can tell where the backyard ends. The apple tree is in the center. Bushes and plants circle around

it. The grass is bright green, soft looking. I can't wait to run barefoot out there. The backyard next door is tidy but barren. The grass is brown. Nothing seems to grow there at all. She don't hardly seem to notice it.

'I'm gonna get this little one fed while you get yourself settled. What's he a month?'

I nod. The milk's curdled. I know before I check but I give it to her anyway.

'You make that yourself?' She's studying the curve of the little jug, the soft nipple.

I'm ready to tell her why I ain't got no milk, how I'm the mama you got now but not the mama that birthed you.

'I'll dig up something I had from when my boys was his age,' she says. 'I kept just about everything, you know, for grandbabies.' Then she's telling me what time dinner is, and not to eat in my room. That reminds her to tell me there's no smoking or drinking or gambling except when there's a party and that while I'm invited to hers, if I want to have a gathering it will cost me extra. I want to ask her how many boys she got, where they at and why she only talks about Christian coming back. But I don't do it. I wish I had. It would have been nice to have met them before they died. She's talking about how she can't wait until I meet the girls and chattering as she closes the door behind her.

All the sound goes with her. I ain't never sat on no real bed before. I press it with both hands just to feel it push up against my fingertips. I practice sitting on it, crossing and uncrossing my legs like I'm Mrs. Leyland. I lay back slow. The bed squeaks. The mattress is firm beneath me. I lay flat on my back, then on my stomach, on one side, then the other. It squishes and bounces. I love it more than anything until I feel the pillow and I love that even more. I'm never getting up.

Across from the bed, there's a big bureau full of drawers and cabinets. I start imagining it's full of treasures: dresses and shoes, coats and just maybe, in one of the little ones, something pretty like a necklace, a ring or a shell. I run over and open each drawer. Other than scattered, dried flowers, there ain't nothing in them. I empty the bag of clothes the church gave us. I hang up two dresses and put one thing in each drawer. There's a door on one side of the cabinet and inside, there's a mirror. I'm staring back at me. My dress is stained. It looks like I haven't washed in months. Mama would kill me for walking around looking like this. I shut the door quick. I put the book on the top of the bureau.

I'm setting on the edge of the bed bouncing up and down soft like. It starts feeling good. I'm smiling and giggling and before I know it, I'm standing on the bed jumping up and down trying to touch the ceiling. I'm laughing. There's a sharp knock on the door.

I get down quick and answer it.

'You got somebody in here?' Sable asks. We both know ain't nobody up here but me.

I hear giggling and shushing from just below the steps. I'm out of breath but I answer 'why no,' in my best Missus' voice. She peeks her head around me. She's staring so hard I look too. Black footsteps all over her white linens. She's mumbling about grown-up children playing while babies trying to sleep. She strips the bed. She don't seem mad but I don't never jump on her furniture again.

I'm back sitting on the edge of the bed waiting till the laughter dies down to go meet the girls when the room gets hot. I got the book on my lap. I'm fingering the grooves in the skin. I look up and Tempe's watching me.

*You sure got a way of messing things up,* she says.

I jump.

*You look just like pa when you do that.*

We ain't never had no pa. I'm about to tell her but she's already shaking her head.

*Did too. Who you know born whole without no mama or papa?* She sits down on the bed. *This is nice.* Smoke comes out her mouth when she talks. I'm worried Sable will charge me for smoking in the room. She won't believe I ain't. By now the room smells of charred wood. Tempe's laughing so hard she can't hardly tell me. But she's talking about how our father, Little James, escaped Walker's. He almost got North when he got caught by patrollers and sent South. He run off again and joined a rebellion group. Lived off a little patch of swamp. By now she's wiping her eyes even though I don't see no tears. *All that and know how he died?*

I don't even know how he lived. How would I know? I shrug. I'm getting used to her sitting next to me. Wispy and thin. You been eating? I want to ask. She's beautiful, even now. Her body is like one long question mark. Her neck curves slightly when she leans down to talk to me. I don't remember her being so much taller than me. The rest of her body pulses in time with her heart. I know it's rude to, but I'm staring at her heart bump, bumping in her chest and watching her skin blow like air: in and out, in and out. She don't seem to mind. Always did like being the center of attention.

*He fell in a ditch, broke his neck and snap, he died.*

It takes me a second to get what she's saying. We had a father and now we don't but I ain't had no father before now either and I won't. I'm crying. She's tickled. She's laughing again and smacking her thigh. I'm waiting for a knock on the door, wiping snot and tears from my face and trying to catch my breath and wondering: are we both crazy? She's cackling like death is about the funniest thing she can imagine. Will they put me away in one of them asylums? What will happen to Edward?

She stops laughing just like that. She's staring at me. *He and I laugh about it but I can see why you wouldn't think it was funny.* She says it like she's feeling sorry for me for not being dead.

Here I am free and don't have to be dead to be it. I got a family, a husband, a baby. And she's feeling sorry for me? Then because she's all in my head and it don't matter no how I tell her. 'You ain't nothing but a haint and there ain't no such a thing. You ain't even here. I'm here, that baby here. And he's mine. Like it or no, I'm his mama and he ain't gonna know nothing about you. I mean it.' I get up and put the book way back in a drawer. I slam it shut. She's gone when I finish but I'm holding my breath, waiting for her to hit me or set me on fire. Do something. I'm setting here shaking when Lillian comes in.

'You better not let Sable catch you smoking in here, she'll double your rent,' she says.

By the time we get to the backdoor, Lillian's telling me to act surprised. She swings open the door and there's you in a dressing gown in Sable's arms with at least half a dozen women gathered around you.

'It's your welcome party,' Lillian says. She grabs my hands and leads me to the group.

There's musicians playing and somebody singing. Someone's frying up fish, another's turning a corncake. I'm trying to make my way over to you but each time I get close, somebody stops me. You look just like so and so one says. You sure you not related to the Jones or Watsons or Smiths or Fowlers? I hear it all. I ain't sure about none of it. I tell them I don't know who my people are or where to find them. They look at me like they know what that's like, some of them are lost too. Somebody looking for you, they ask.

I don't know what to say. What's the newspaper say about Walker? How do folks back home think he, Tempe and Edward died? What they think happened to me? They know I done it?



Got em all shot and set the place on fire? Are they looking for me? Patrolling the woods, lanterns shining, dogs barking, sniffing me out? How long until they lose my scent?

Do they think I'm dead? Think it's Tempe running around with her feet in this soft, Philadelphia grass? Did they bury me? Go around the house separating soot from bone and throw me in a ditch out back? What if the whole house is gone? Burst into fire like a dry piece of wood. Or swallowed whole and sent straight down to hell. Is that where Tempe is? Is that why she's burning? Next time she comes, I'll ask her. Lillian plucks me free from the women and delivers me to the washhouse.

Delilah's waiting on me with a bucket of water, some soap and a scrubber. 'These yours,' she says. She's pushing me inside. 'Scrub your hair too. Take your time.'

Can't be but a few minutes later when she's banging on the door talking about it's time to get dressed. I ain't bring no clothes down with me. She pops the door open and hands me a towel. I got about a minute to dry off before she opens the door again and trades me the towel for some undergarments and what feels like a soft piece of fabric. It's too dark to make nothing so I'm not sure what she's expecting me to do.

'You got it on yet?' she whispers through the peephole.

I know I don't have long before she throws the door wide open with me buck-naked standing in a washhouse for the whole world to see. I feel for the holes and slip it over my head. It's a dress. It moves when I twirl and kisses the back of my legs. I open the door and step out.

'Looks good on you,' she says.

She winds the towel around my hair and leads me to a woman on a stool. I don't catch her name but she's pushing me down, so I sit between her legs with my back to her. 'It's May-Belle,' she repeats her name loud, in case I can't hear her. I feel like a child. She pats my hair

dry, then she's twisting and oiling. My scalp tingles and soaks up the moisture it's been missing. My head smells like lavender. I reach up to touch. Maybelle swats my hand and giggles. Out the corner of my eye I see you passed around and kissed, cooed at and cooing. You're laughing. For a second I'm jealous till I remember, youse mine.

Sable pulls up a chair to sit next to Maybelle. 'Your boy still looking for work?' she asks.

Maybelle snatches up some strands of my hair. She's pulling too tight. 'Still looking. He can't seem to find nothing. With all these country folk coming to town, there's no way for decent folk to make a living. Sorry, honey,' she says.

I don't know if she's sorry for talking bad about country folks, cuz I'm country folk or for pulling own my hair so tight my head hurts.

'Maybelle, ain't nobody coming here taking no job your boy wants. He mop floors, muck stables, clean outhouses? Work seven days and seven nights for pennies? Until he's ready to do that, he can't say nothing about nobody taking no job from his bony, little hands. There's work enough for everybody, everybody who want to work.'

'Who gonna hire him? They making all sorts of laws and regulations against hiring colored folks. I ain't saying it's cuz of them. I'm just saying it wasn't like that before them.'

'My boy got a job lined up before he left, a good job,' Sable says. 'A nice factory job working two shifts a day, six days a week, just waiting on him to come home and fill it.'

Maybelle's twisting my head down in a way I'm not sure it's supposed to go. I'm thinking my neck's about to give way. Even if my neck snaps she's still be holding onto the braid of hair she's been pulling on for the past minute. Finally she releases it. I just about got my head where I want it when she turns me to the side, my head on her lap. She's wetting a fingertip in her mouth. She aims it at the side of my hair, smoothes down baby hairs around my ears.

‘What makes you think Christian’s gonna come back to Philadelphia after he done seen the world? He ain’t come back yet. Maybe he found himself a wife and they staying somewhere down South near her people.’

‘He’d write or visit. Most likely both. If he found a wife he’ll bring her here. Plenty of room. Even got an extra one for a baby or two. Don’t be spiteful, Maybelle, it ain’t becoming.’

‘By the time he gets back, one of them old slaves will have snapped up his job. Wait and see. Everybody wanna hire a “yes-sir-er.” Any job you set them to, them fresh out the fields Negroes will do it. They be so happy to get a job, probably end up paying the bossman for giving it to them.’

Lillian and Delilah rescue me. ‘The baby needs his mama,’ they say. They’re standing there smiling and you laying in Lillian’s arms just sleeping.

‘Just a second,’ Maybelle says. Another finger in her mouth, she smoothes the other side of my face. ‘Done.’

‘She don’t mean no harm,’ Lillian says.

You’re asleep in my arms. We’re sitting in the grass under the apple tree sharing hot fried fish and a steaming slab of corncake.

Delilah’s tapping her feet to the music. ‘Oh yes she does,’ she says. ‘She just don’t know half of what comes out of her mouth. I blame the drink.’

‘Now you know she don’t touch no liquor.’

‘That’s the problem!’

We’re laughing when Mrs. Leyland sets down. ‘You ladies ready for class?’

Don’t know how long we sit there reciting sounds and words. By the time Sable comes to collect you, we tracing numbers and letters. Lillian and Delilah faster than me. They been

working at it longer but Mrs. Leyland says I'll catch up in no time. The party's over. We blow out the lanterns and clean up the backyard. The women leave me with presents: combs for my hair, my first bracelet, a scarf. You sleeping with Sable since she "got the little dumpling washed and fed and can't stand to wake" you. I let her get away with it. There's a candle in my room when I get there. I light it and lay on the bed watching shapes creep up the wall. I can't sleep none. I sit by the window. Bats fly through the night. The city's as loud as the country. Across Sable's yard, there's a whole other row of houses. Beyond them another row and another. We all shut up tight.

I climb back in bed and just lay there thinking about watching you grow up and wondering will you look like your mama and praying you don't hate me for making you mine. I wake to the smell of coffee. It's Sunday morning. Your pa's already downstairs with you in his arms. We set in the parlor a spell; you, me and Buddy. He's been talking to Sable about fixing up the house next door so when her boy come she won't have to kick nobody out. I ask him if we a family for real.

'Don't see why not,' he says.

I want to love him. He's reliable, a good provider and a good man. Sable brings us eggs and toast and lets us sit in the parlor and eat it. She takes you after breakfast so we can get started next door. We standing in the doorway, with one hammer between us wondering how we gonna fix all this with four hands.

'Gonna take a whole lot of Sundays,' your pa says.

He gets started. He's pulling at nails. I'm piling moldy bed things and curtains in the middle of the parlor. While we busy working, folk just start turning up. Franklin's first. Next, men carrying tools tip their hats to me and look for Buddy or Franklin, whichever's closest. After

brief discussions, some go on up to the roof, some to different parts of the house. Some get to banging on walls, others are pulling up floorboards. It's a choir of sawing and hammering and talking and laughing. It's a wonder they get anything done at all. After the men get a good rhythm going, women come with buckets, scrub brushes, and washtubs. Some drop off children next door, some set them to work.

Above the scraping and scrubbing, clipping and cutting, sweeping and digging, they talk.

'You got work lined up?' someone asks.

I tell them I think so.

'Keep your head about you,' a woman says.

'Don't look none of them in the eye,' someone warns.

'Just keep your mouth shut, your head down, get your work done and make sure they pay you,' someone else says.

'How am I supposed to do that?' I ask.

There's plenty of advice.

'If somebody don't pay you, don't complain about it,' a woman says. 'Go right next door to the neighbor and do a better job there than you did for the first. Get them to start competing with each other. Sooner or later they'll be paying you more than you ask for.'

It sounds like a lot of work to me. How am I supposed to get two jobs when it's hard enough to get one? It's even harder to keep one. A few of the women had been slaves from further south. They swap stories over soapsuds. Every so often somebody shares a tale of whippings and lynchings. There was one about slaves getting up to whip the overseers, another about bodies swinging down from trees and chasing the would-be murderers. I keep my stories to myself. Once in a while, a story bubbles too close to the truth.

‘I ain’t never gonna find my baby,’ a woman cries.

I want to say she might, to tell her stories about folks finding one another in the same town, on the same train, through newspaper ads and church grapevines but I don’t know any. I could tell her about Buddy finding Franklin and me finding him or about men in the woods with names on their tongues waiting on people to ask about them. About women staying behind searching for their mothers. It don’t seem like enough. I can’t look her in the eyes and tell her to hope or pray or wish harder than she hoping or praying or wishing right now. I can’t. ‘I know,’ I say instead.

The silent ones scare me the most. They scrub floors, beat carpets, chip at old wallpapers and I can tell they doing more than just fixing this house. It’s almost dark when warm hands lift me up from the floor. My knees ache, my back hurts but that floor sparkles. By the looks of the sky we’ve been at it for hours.

‘Time to head to church,’ Sable says. She’s got you in a different nightdress. It matches hers. ‘Took longer than a day for this place to get run down. Gonna take more than one to set it right again.’

‘I’ll just do one more room,’ I say.

She waves her hand around. I follow the movement with my eyes. All around floors and walls have been patched and scrubbed, rooms that had doors are flung open wide, aired out. There’s a window where there wasn’t one before. The men are already outside. The women finish packing up. They leave their supplies in the house for next weekend.

‘Everybody’s looking forward to meeting y’all,’ Sable says.

It’s almost gentle, one minute we in the house, the next we out. We walk to church together. Delilah and Lillian stride arm in arm ahead of us. Buddy and Franklin walk behind us

with the rest of the men. Sable and I are in a cluster of women and children. We march down the sidewalks of Grammercy like soldiers. I watch the women wave to old folks and ignore, like a herd, a girl digging through trash.

‘Why they ain’t say hello to that girl?’ I ask.

‘Who?’

I don’t say nothing. I know she knows who I’m talking about. I walk slow-footed.

Without turning her head, Sable says, ‘She ain’t one of them.’

‘One of them what?’

‘One of us.’

‘They treat her like that cuz she don’t believe in their God?’

‘She don’t believe in nothing far as I can tell. She’s lost.’

‘How she gonna get found if y’all don’t help her?’

‘She can follow behind. We’re leading the way, ain’t we?’

I look back, wave. The girl stares like she don’t see me. She turns away, goes back to rooting through garbage.

‘She’s gonna be a mama,’ I say.

‘Yep.’

Mama. I’m staring at that girl so hard I see her. She’s shaking her head, looking like she raised me better than this. She’s ashamed of me. Then she does it, she slips into Agnes. It’s so quick, I can’t breathe. She turns away, turns her back on me and I’m running. Before she’s gone I wrap my arms around her, hold her, hold her, I tell her I’m sorry and I love her. It’s a whisper, nothing more than a hot word pressed against my ear. ‘Remember,’ she says but it sounds like I

love you and it fills me and I'm holding and holding but she's slipping away. Then Agnes is gone and that girl's pushing me away, sharp nails and bony fingers.

'I'll be back,' I'm saying but I don't touch her no more. I catch up with Sable. I'm waiting on her to say something. She squeezes my hand and we march on, just behind the women. That girl isn't no more lost than the rest of them, and we all know it.



## Chapter 21

Music shakes the foundation of the stone church. It's the same one we were at just yesterday but it seems bigger. The ceilings look higher. Thanks to the candles, I notice the windows are painted over in bright watercolors. The walls are bold red and rich gold. It isn't like any church I could have imagined and none I seen since. If there's one, there are hundreds of painted Jesuses. Jesus with milky white, bronze or mahogany skin, staring down from brown, blue or black eyes hang from the ceiling, the walls, the backs of pews. He's everywhere.

So is everyone else. Seems like all of Grammercy is packed inside them four walls. The children are sent to the corner for Children's Service. There they are greeted by stern-faced teachers dressed in starched-white uniforms. Their fussing and chattering quickly settles into reciting psalms. A nurse comes to take you to the Baby Room where you won't be 'disturbed' but I know it's so you don't get to crying. The Baby Room is in another corner, hidden behind a thin wall of books that only half-covers the nurse when she sits down to rock you. You ain't but a month old. Don't seem to care who holding you as long as they singing, talking or feeding you.

The men head over to another corner of the church so they can talk in private. We pretend not to hear them whisper about the Klan and lynchings. Every once in a while one tells of a new job opening or warns about somebody who won't pay. The women mostly seem to talk about

whose kid is doing what, what employer to watch out for and where to get bargain stew meat. For a time, talk turns to good work shoes and hair. It gets crowded when the Leylands enter the room.

The women, married and single, start fanning themselves like the room done gone hot. Mrs. Leyland greets me only it's Etta Mae tonight, Sister Etta Mae, she tells me. She's telling me how pretty I look and kissing me on the cheek. I'm sure there's a splotch of lipstick where the wet mark is but I leave it till I get home. With one eye on her husband, she talks with each woman a second before standing beside him. He introduces himself, The Reverend Justice Leyland and kisses my hand. I don't want to but I know I'm blushing.

'And her husband, Buddy Freeman, is just over there, dear. You met him last night,' Etta Mae says. She's got her hand on his shoulder and her head leaning towards him.

With his arm wrapped around her waist and the way he's watching the words tumble out her mouth I see like everyone else, this is love. Ten minutes later and Reverend Leyland is transformed into the man standing in the middle of the room, sweat dripping down his forehead, veins popping from his neck as he clutches the Bible in front of him. 'Brothers and Sisters,' he says. 'I say the Grace of God has let loose the chains and set our brothers and sisters free from bondage. Ain't that right?'

'Lord have Mercy!' the crowd responds.

'Now the Lord has fulfilled his part. Today, the heathens walk amongst us and the Mighty Lord has said to me, them heathens sinners, every last one of them!'

'Amen!'

Heathen? Sweat drips down my back. I'm looking toward the door wishing I was on the other side. Some fresh air will feel good right about now.

‘Ain’t their fault, oh no! The white man kept the Good Book from them!’

‘Bring em low!’ the congregation responds on cue.

‘Kept it for himself! Kept our brothers and sisters in ignorance so they would go straight to,’ he pauses, mops his forehead. ‘Now I’m just gonna say it, cuz we all know brothers and sisters, they going straight to Hell!’ He roars. Sweat drips down his face, his voice shakes. His body don’t move one inch. Only his eyes slide round the room. ‘God only knows what the white man had our brothers and sisters doing. Fornicating! Drinking! Lying! Working on the Sabbath! God seen it all!’

From above his head, baby Jesus glares straight at me. Working on Sunday.

‘Why he let them keep us slaves?’ a woman near me asks.

‘The Lord works in mysterious ways,’ Reverend responds.

‘Where was he when they sold my babies?’ another woman asks.

‘Right there, keeping you safe,’ Reverend says.

A nurse swoops in. Shushes her, holds her while she cries.

‘Was he in the war?’ someone asks.

‘Right there beside you on the battlefield,’ Reverend says.

‘And when my mama died rather than stay a slave?’ a man asks.

‘Right there, guiding her way to Him.’ The reverend wipes his brow. He shifts his weight from foot to foot.

‘That ain’t God,’ a familiar voice whispers. It sounds old, tired, hurt, sad and so afraid I weep for it. It’s me. ‘All that stealing and selling folks and chaining them, that ain’t no parts of God.’

‘The heathen speaks the truth!’ Reverend says. He launches into a sermon about forgiveness and sin. I’m etching closer to the door when the choir starts. Only thing keeping me from that door is their sweet voices. The words wash over every ache of my body. They heal every cut and stitch every wound. Too quick they finish.

‘We got a whole lot of new faces in the community,’ the reverend says. He’s looking pleased with himself. ‘Ain’t none of you alone. Would all the newcomers please gather around me? We’re going to make a nice big circle with the newcomers up front and a ring around them.’

It takes a while to get settled. The women make up one side, the men the other. The closer I edge toward the door, the more the circle draws me in. It closes in on me.

‘This’ll do,’ he says. ‘Now we’re going to start at the outside and work our way in as we confess our sins. Brother Ezekiel, we’ll start with you.’

Brother Ezekiel stole socks off a line, someone else let food go to waste, someone else used the Lord’s name in vain. The confessions go quick, like people can’t wait to get them out their mouths. Not working hard enough, sassing an elder, no matter what sins they confess, the circle says nothing. It’s nearly my turn. I imagine my confession. Which one do I say first? What will they think of me? It’s my turn. Words jumble around in my head. I take so long to answer that someone squeezes my elbow, someone else pats my back.

I open my mouth. ‘I’m not sure I believe,’ I say.

Silence. They gonna push me out like they did that girl. I don’t care. I don’t need none of them. As long as I got you, Buddy and Franklin, I don’t need nothing else. Will Sable kick me out? She’ll have to. She’ll turn her back on me and walk away. Only, I’ll be the one walking. First thing in the morning we’ll set off, if she gives me till morning. Won’t give her the

satisfaction of putting us out. We'll set out tonight. Won't have nowhere to sleep, but it'll be alright. I been through worse. We'll sleep outdoors. You'll be in my arms, safe.

The reverend nods, moves on to the next. My heart's beating loud. Then there's an organ playing and the choir's singing. Etta Mae slips beside me. She's smiling like she feels sorry for me, like she didn't expect nothing less. I'm mad and I'm hurting and I don't know why.

'We got Bible classes twice a week,' she says. 'I signed you up for both. You got Reading on Monday nights and Arithmetic on Tuesdays. There's Celebration Committee, Sick and Shut-In Committee, Sewing and Darning Committee, Cooking Committee, Cleaning Committee, Worship Team and the Mourning Group. I'm on the Education Team. All of us on the Welcome Committee. You can try them all out and see which you good at.'

Over the years, the groups roll into one.

A week or so later, Sable takes you in to sleep with her so Buddy and I can talk. We in the backyard laying in the grass pretending we in love. He's holding my hand and stroking my face and telling me how beautiful I am. I'm telling him how strong he is and how handsome he looks all grown up. I'm trying to get the words I love you to come out my mouth. He must be trying too, cuz he opens in mouth and instead of words, his tongue pops out. Then it's in my mouth and I don't mean to but I jump. We laugh and let loose our hands.

'I would have loved you before the war,' he says.

I'm looking up at the stars and practicing counting. One, two, three. The moon's bright. Far across the city, train whistles blow. Gas lights burn in the houses across the backyard.

‘I seen people willing to kill people they love, just to keep us slaves,’ he says. ‘I fought beside people in the same uniform who wouldn’t sit beside me and eat. I buried men who were like brothers. Men who would die for me. For you too, without even knowing you. Make sure that boy knows that.’

‘Where you going?’

‘I can’t stay here,’ he says. Your pa’s watching me watch the sky. I know he wants me to look at him. To tell him it’s alright, to go on. ‘I can’t sleep at night without waking up screaming.’ I put my head on his chest and listen to the beat of his heart, the sound of his voice vibrating before it hits the night air. ‘In the day I see ghosts. I can’t hardly look at you without seeing Tempe beside you. I’m losing my mind.’

I tell him about your mama. He don’t say nothing for a long time.

‘When it’s time, teach that boy where he come from. Ain’t no running from it. You ain’t no slave. But no sense running from what you was.’ His hand’s in my hair. ‘I been fired from the factory cuz my hands start shaking every time I hold metal. I got me a job out on the ocean. A big old fishing rig. Get to travel for a bit, let the sea soothe my soul. The house next door is all fixed up for you and the baby. Soon as you ready, you move in. I done put down a deposit. I told Sable I’ll pay on the rest once a month. It’ll take a way but the place will be yours.’

We sleep out in the yard side by side like brother and sister. In the morning, he kisses you on the head, me on the cheek and sets off. It’s years before he makes his way back home.

## Chapter 22

1867

It's been a year since we moved in the house next door. Franklin still lives across the street. I moved in a few weeks after Buddy's first check arrived. Between his pay and what I make working shifts down the factory, doing odd domestic work and sweeping up hair at the salon, we do alright. Still, soon as she hears Christian's coming back, Sable sends Lillian over to me to 'help with the rent.' She tries to send Delilah too but she falls in love with the grocer a few blocks over and moves closer to be near him instead.

When she gets word he's coming, Sable sends for the Welcome Committee. The lawn is cut, the house scrubbed from floor to floor. Cracks filled, joints oiled. She gets Delilah to get her a good deal on a whole hog. The whole thing, even the head, is slow roasting in a pit for a full day before Christian even gets home. Women drop off cakes and pies. There's fresh ice and gutted fish. Lillian and me scrub and bake right along with the rest of them. That's how I notice she's gonna have a baby. We sitting alone in Sable's kitchen ripping out sharp fish bones and soft innards. I'm scooping em out and setting them on a newspaper next to their heads like Sable told us to.

‘You sure you feeling alright?’ I ask for the third time.

She’s bent over a pot spilling out breakfast she ain’t but just ate.

‘My cooking don’t agree with you?’

She’s coughing up more and more. I run to get Sable. She takes Lillian to a friend’s.

Someone fetches a doctor. Lillian don’t come back for a few hours. By the time she does, I got the heads wrapped in paper so she don’t have to look at them. She’s smiling and holding her belly.

‘I’m with child,’ she says.

That don’t explain the coughing but we all too happy to notice and when she dies two years later, we don’t remember her being sick at all.

Sable’s just settled Lillian in the backroom, propped her feet up and the window too. I’m sure she can hear us. ‘So you just gonna let her stay here till the baby come?’ she asks.

At least that’s what I think she says. With her mouth full of laundry pins I can’t be sure. The food is all cooked, the table’s just about set when Sable notices a spot on the tablecloth. Instead of putting something on top of it to cover it like Lillian had suggested, Sable strips down the table. She scrubs the tiny spot until it’s three times as wide but clean. We out back hanging it to dry in the sun. She saying she hope it don’t rain but I’m hoping it do. Not a lot, just enough to make her wish she hadn’t put up such a fuss about that little thumbprint of a spot. The crisp, white cloth flaps in the wind. Sometimes I pretend not to hear her.

‘Don’t think I set no time to how long she can stay,’ I say.

‘What will the church say?’



‘I reckon they gonna ask how they can help and if they should have the committee make the baby some bonnets.’

Sable sucks her teeth. I only go on special occasions: welcomes and funerals. What difference do it make what they say?

‘What about me? Don’t you care about what I think?’

I don’t say nothing for a while. Out of the corner of my eye I watch Sable wringing a rag like it’s a little neck. You over a year old. You toddling round on unsteady legs trying to catch rolling apples.

‘Course I do,’ I say. ‘I spend lots of time thinking bout what you want. I say Spring and I put my hand on my hip like this,’ I show her. ‘Spring, now what you think Sable gonna say when you let Lillian stay with you in her condition? A woman in the family way with no family to speak of? And I say hush gal, if Sable wants her out, she’ll put her out. This is her house, cuz it is, so it’s up to her who lives here or no. Don’t matter if you paying on the house month by month. If Sable wants to keep that whole house empty, it’ll stay empty. And if she gives a room to someone that’s been like a daughter to her, someone who now more than ever needs a place for her and her child, who am I to speak on it?’

‘I ain’t known you to not speak on something since you been here,’ Sable says.

‘Sure nice to have a celebration,’ I say to get her mind off Lillian. ‘A baby and your boy coming back all in the same day.’

‘You think Franklin’s in love with her?’

I don’t think no such thing. ‘Sure, why not?’

She’s cooking up some idea. I go back to the kitchen.

‘She putting me out?’ Lillian asks.

‘Not if I can help it.’

I make her some tea to stop her from shivering. It’s late when he comes. Christian is bigger than Sable said. He looks just like her, acts like her too. He dotes on her. Can’t seem to get enough of her. He’s hugging and kissing on her, picking her up, twirling her around. She’s laughing and entertaining. The committee does the rest. Someone sets the table; someone piles it high with food. Someone else organizes a line: men first, then women. Someone keeps the punch flowing. There’s music and singing, dancing. While Sable eats, Christian tells stories about places he’s been. When that’s done, he sings with the band. Then he takes turns dancing with all the women. He’s got his mama’s knack for socializing.

The dancing is just getting good when Etta Mae and Justice show up. They work their way around the yard. Before long, Etta Mae’s got Lillian cornered in the kitchen and Justice got Franklin hemmed up in the back yard.

‘There’s gonna be a wedding,’ Sable says. Her voice is giddy and I’m about to ask her what’s in that jar she’s been sipping out of when Etta Mae asks the musicians to stop playing for a spell.

‘Folks, we about to have a wedding,’ Justice says but he ain’t Justice no more. He’s the Reverend.

Folks are whispering, we’re all wondering whose getting married. Franklin’s standing with his hands in his pockets rocking back and forth on his heels like he’s wondering too. He’s surrounded by a group of men. I can’t tell if they’re holding him up or holding him in. Is he here for the wedding? Etta Mae’s leading Lillian by the arm. At least she’ll be up front, get to see the whole thing. Instead of sitting her down, Etta Mae delivers her up front to Franklin only it looks like he’s stepping backwards. They’re standing about as far away as they can from one another

when Reverend says something over the air in between them. Before either of them can say a word, they married. Poor thing, ain't even near no river for a proper wedding. The men are slapping him on the back and pushing Franklin so before long he's kissing Lillian full on the lips. Except for me, everyone's clapping and cheering.

Sable's grinning. They'll take the front room so Lil can be close to the outhouse. You and me got the whole second floor to ourselves.

You run yourself tired. Somebody takes you in to lie down. I'm setting in the grass thinking bout nothing much at all when Christian sets beside me.

'My mama says you used to be a slave. That right?' he asks.

I nod my head yes.

'Whereabouts?'

I tell him near as I know.

'Who your people?'

Something in his voice makes me want to make something up. Lay claim to kin with names I don't know in places I can't even imagine. I try to think of all the people I met these past few months. They were from all over. I can see their faces, hear the sounds of their voices but the names of their people and the places they call home sound like one long moan. Snatches of my own life flick off my tongue. River, Fire, Farmer, Story, Freedom, Present. None of them sounds like much of a name. He's watching my lips like he's just waiting for a lie to drop out so he can scoop it up and eat it. I can't help myself. 'Walker,' I say.

'Sure nough?'

'I ought to go check on the baby.' I'm half-way up.

'Shame what they done to your sister.'

I know that I'm shaking cuz he's helping me sit back down and his hand is holding tight to my arm.

'Like killing her once wasn't enough,' he says.

I don't want to hear no more but the band is still playing even though there ain't no more music. The choir's still singing but ain't no more song. There's crickets aplenty but none of them chirping, the only thing there is, is his voice. I want to call him a liar. But he's talking about a band of farmers seeing the house all blazed up and running in to save Walker and instead finding Tempe bleeding to death with a hole in her chest and what looked like two men dead beside her. Between the fire and smoke, couldn't make out what parts was Walker's and what wasn't so they mixed them both up and buried them. They figured she done it. Took hours to cool her body down enough to grab hold of.

'Truth is,' he's saying, 'she's probably dead long before it but they don't want to let her get away with killing two men so they string her up to a tree and hang her. Cut her down and scatter her body parts every which way. She'll be forever tied to this Earth, wandering.'

I'm laying in the grass now. My eyes are closed. I'm watching my sister burning when I feel my insides swell up. My whole body's burning from the inside. I'm shaking. Feel like I need to be somewhere else. To do something.

He's lying beside me just watching me cry without tears. When he gets tired of that he starts making things out of grass. Rips it up from the ground and makes little nooses for my fingers. He slides three of them on. 'Seems you ought to be thanking me for setting you free.' He's puckering up his lips for a kiss.

'You set me free?'

He's nodding his head and pointing to his mouth.

‘And now, cuz it ain’t enough, I gotta act thankful everyday for someone giving me something they act like ain’t mine, I’m supposed to thank you too?’

‘Fine, don’t thank me,’ he says. He’s pretend-pouting. ‘You could at least be thankful I made your life easier.’

I laugh. Can’t even help myself. ‘This is easy? Why if you ain’t told me, I wouldn’t of recognized it for myself. I got four jobs,’ I say. I hold up four fingers.

‘Ought to be thankful you got one,’ Sable interrupts.

‘I’m thankful for every little penny I get. I scrub, cook, bake, mend,’ I say. I don’t know how long she been standing there. I sit up.

‘You get more jobs than anyone I know. Just can’t seem to keep them,’ she says. She’s shaking her head at me.

Christian winks and slips away. He’s out by what’s left of the pig, singing with a group of men.

‘Don’t know how you keep getting them and losing them, sometimes in the same day,’ Lillian says. She plops down onto a nearby seat.

‘Oh I can tell you how,’ Sable says like somebody asks her. ‘She gets there when the sun comes up, talks to the wife. You got work you need help doing? She sings in that sing song voice.’

‘I don’t talk like that.’ Nobody’s paying me no attention.

‘You know how she do,’ she continues. Lillian’s bobbing her head like they done solved a crime. ‘She gets to scrubbing with one hand, baking with the other, mopping with one foot, sewing with the other and the lady of the house gets to thinking, damn, if she can do all that, what more can she do? Why, little Spring here shows her. She’s inside doing housework and

outside harvesting potatoes ain't even been planted yet. If she can do all that, the lady thinks, she can mind the kids.'

'Well ain't that right where she messes up?' Lillian interrupts.

'Sure enough it is! So she there supervising the doing and the minding and the husband get home and they sit there talking about how good the wife is at supervising and minding and how tired she must be. His poor wife needs a rest would Spring mind putting the kids to bed and telling them a story? Why'd he go and ask that for? Spring go on and bathe em and put them to bed and blow out the candles and she get to telling them a story. Them kids get to wailing, the parents come a-running. Mama, the oldest one says, Spring told a story about men in sheets coming round and snatching up folk, the boy cries. Then the girl, who's always adding her two cents says: Mama, she said if we don't go to sleep, we get snatched up and sold down South! That ain't never gonna happen, the father say. Tell them ain't no such a thing as being sold away from your family, the mother says. Kids just a boohooing by then. The husband red-faced with his hand on his wife's shoulder daring Spring to tell them that someone could come up in their house and steal their children and sell them off. Like such a thing is possible.'

'It happened to my mama,' I say. 'Stole right from her family. Why couldn't it happen again? It ain't like everybody give up on slaving. Why it make sense for my folk to be stole but not them?'

'Your folk ain't white,' Lillian says.

She says it like it's logical. One and one is two. Black and black is slave. We done had this conversation a hundred times or more. She says it like I should know better.

'Now, Spring, get to humming stead of talking,' Sable says. 'You know how that riles folks up. They get to telling her she's ungrateful for not thanking them for giving her a job and

that they aren't paying her since she spoiled their family by bringing slave stories and besides, she don't bake that good nohow!

'Now that ain't nothing but a lie,' I say. 'I'm a darn good baker!'

They right though. My mouth has cost me many a job. To hear them tell it, if I ain't humming slave songs or hanging my head like an old dog, I'm working slower than I can, working faster than I should, ungrateful, dimwitted and angry for no good reason. Most of the jobs I get, I get cuz I was a slave. People expect there ain't nothing I can't do, nothing I won't do. More than a few times a supervisor or some other boss put his hand somewhere it didn't belong. I ain't say nothing about it though. Just slipped a bit of ground tobacco in his tea or coffee, some ground leaves in a meat stew. Not enough to kill nobody, just enough to make them run to the pot and pray to God they'd make it. Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. Depended on what they done and what I remembered from Mama's old scrawlings. Her notes are more pictures than anything else. Most of them look like blueberry bushes or things that don't grow here in the city. I don't expect no harm to come from it but doing it makes me feel good for a little while. Makes me stop feeling like I'm burning up each time somebody ask me something they don't want to know about anyway.

Most of the jobs I lost, I lost for telling the truth. A wife would corner me and ask while I was busy scrubbing out her dirty sheets, if I didn't like it a little bit when the master showed me some attention. She'd giggle and ask if she should be worried about her husband, if she should trust me alone. It wasn't nothing for a grown man to ask to see the scars he imagined ran up and down my back, to ask how the whip felt on my skin. They want to be close up to pain, until they are. When I get mad about them telling me all they think they know about my life, they call me angry. They say it like I ain't got no cause at all to be upset, sad. Can't hardly feel nothing

without somebody telling me how I should feel instead. I can fall down a whole flight of stairs and won't there be somebody at the bottom telling me I should be grateful to be alive?

If I'm tired of being accused of working too fast or too slow, of being called a whore cause somebody's husband done watched me walk away, I should work slower or faster and not be a temptation. If I'm sick from carrying loads of laundry and smashing rocks and planting crops, I'm a 'lazy-little-ungrateful heifer lucky I can't be whipped no more but who needs to be reminded of how good things are now.' And when I can't seem to stay two steps ahead or just really want somebody who don't want or need something from me to wrap their arms around me, I should smile, laugh, sing more and not look so sad sometimes because Lord knows I ain't got nothing to be sad about. With all these people telling me how to feel, it's a wonder I feel anything at all. But I feel everything all at once. Happy, sad, scared, lonely, disappointed, mad, lost. Who can I tell? Everybody's so busy making up their minds about me, nobody wants to hear me tell them nothing different.

We clean up the backyard. Wrap the bones up to send to the butcher, put the tables in the cellar, blow out the lanterns. Everyone's said their goodbyes. I know Sable's in there pretending to be sleep so I don't come take you home. So, I'm heading home empty-handed. I'm almost to the back door when Christian whispers.

'You ready to stop burning?'

His hands are on my wrist and his mouth is so close to my ear that I feel the words go straight to my brain. I nod my head, yes. His hand is on my back and before I know it, we make love in the grass and I don't mean no harm but inside I'm still burning.

'Ready?' he asks.



He's half-way up, putting his clothes on in the dark before I'm standing. I get dressed too. He grabs my hand. We slip out of the yard into an alley. We run through the alley like school kids. We're giggling and knocking over trashcans. Each clatter of metal on concrete is like music. Scattered piles of spilled garbage with rotting food and broken bottles are like paintings. We dance through the streets. He's always a few steps ahead. It's a game of Gotcha. I'm it. He's slipping in and out of alleys, behind buildings, through yards. Maybe he's my Edward. I'm trying to make my way to him. If I love him, I'll be able to find him. He's getting farther away. Now, he's nothing more than a shadow beneath dim streetlights, a stone tripping down an empty street. I'm on fire. I can't stop moving. I don't even know where I'm going. But there's a brick in my hand and the first window shatters. He makes his way back to me. He's grinning, proud. We bust out five shop windows before the chill sets in.

The river. We've run through so many alleys I don't know where I am. There are no streetlights here. There's little light at all but the stars and a sliver of moon. I don't need light to see it. It's small, like a trickle and muddy but I recognize it by the way it moves like breath. It's been here all along, waiting on me. His footsteps are soft splashes. He's laughing and sliding his way to the other side. It ain't no wider than a front room. He holds out his hand. I see Tempe splashing and running her way to Edward, him rushing to her. I reach out my hand but he's gone. Tiptoeing up the bank. Hands on hips, head cocked, impatient.

'Well, come on!' he yells. 'Ain't nobody gonna carry you over.'

I slide down the soft grass. Mud kisses my shoes, sucks and pulls. I fall. He's on the other side, laughing. I could die here. In the middle of this dirty stream. It's nothing like the water back home. The word sinks into the sludge. This is home now. I could follow this little bit of river all the way back to Walker's and it wouldn't carry me home. Wherever my family is, that's home.

I'm on my hands and knees in the mud in the middle of the night. I won't die here. You waiting on me. I got a family, I got a home. I stand up, brush the mud and leaves off my dress. I'll wash it in the morning before anyone's up. Without looking at him, I head home.

He drips along behind me. I'm pretending he's not there until he puts his shirt over my shoulders. It's damp and spattered but I thank him. We hold hands as if they aren't caked with mud. Our palms flake as we press them tight. I'm walking lopsided. My soles are thick with dirt, one more than the other. I'm stomping, trying to bang the dirt from beneath my feet and keep up with him both. How does he manage? I look to see if his shoes aren't covered in mud too. His toes, swaddled in mud wiggle when he walks. Behind him he leaves a trail, like manure. I laugh. The more he asks me what I'm laughing for, the harder I laugh. I laugh till my sides hurt, till I'm empty.

'I love you.' He whispers it in the air above me.

I'm still laughing when I say it back. I know it won't last when he kisses me on the forehead but I slip in the house. It doesn't matter. Not yet.

Chapter 23



We're terrorizing the folks of Grammercy for months. Some nights we don't even make love. Just get right to making havoc. I spend less time being angry during the day. I'm even singing more. I see less of you, Lillian and Franklin. So it's a while before I notice her getting sicker and bigger and you calling her mama.

I work every day. Get fired from one job and pick up another one. I don't mind what I'm doing, what hours I'm keeping. I set my life by the sun, slip in the house when it rises, slip out when it sets. As long as I'm bringing in money, shouldn't matter none. But of course it do. One morning I'm about to slip in the door, I'm taking off my shoes so I don't clip clop across the floor, got one hand on the knob and it don't turn. It must be stuck. I rattle and shake but it don't budge. I run around to the back, hot as it is the windows are closed. I tap on a window. No answer. Tap on another one, no answer. I'm getting mad now. I'm locked out my own house. I'm back around front, my tapping turns to banging. I'm looking around for something to bust out a window. I got a rock in my hand but I can't throw it. By the time Franklin opens the door, I'm slumped in the doorway, cradling the rock like it's my baby.

'You want to act like a stranger, we treat you like one,' he says.

For a few nights I'm in by dark. A week passes, then another one. Finally, each night me and Christian get more and more reckless. We get closer and closer to the imaginary line dividing the black folks from the white ones. Only, it ain't really imaginary. There's a thick row of trees keeping us apart. I done been on the other side. Worked in some of them grand houses where I had to walk past a city block full of trees just to get to the other side and then up some slope to a house where I had to come in through the backdoor. I hate those damned trees. Don't

seem able to stop hating them. Some nights Christian and me flip through the book. He laughs and makes faces when I tell him the truth so I make up stories about running away, rebellions.

‘Your master ever take you?’ he asks. He’s angry, mad at me for something I couldn’t have kept from happening in the first place.

I shake my head no.

‘You sure?’

His mind’s already made up so I don’t bother trying to change it. I don’t answer no more. I don’t share the book with him no more neither. When he asks me about it, I tell him the past makes me sad. Pretty soon he stops asking.

Over time we make friends with a few other folks who ready to take charge anyway we can. It’s time we take what’s ours, they say. To hear them tell it, the only thing keeping us down is the white man and the only thing he got that we don’t is them trees. We sit around in basements talking about sawing them down. Sometimes we talking about the trees, sometimes we ain’t. I ain’t never heard of no quiet saw. ‘How you gonna down something with nobody noticing?’ I ask.

The point ain’t for nobody not to notice, the point is just to cut them down, they say. I don’t see how we gonna get close enough to cut one down let alone all of them. The closer we get to that line, the closer the police get to us. As long as we causing trouble on our own streets, don’t seem to matter none. But bust a window down on Main Street and it makes the news.

‘I’m gonna make the front page,’ Christian says.

I tell myself I’m doing it for you and for Tempe and Mama, for all of us. We been talking for hours about not taking this and not doing that, setting boundaries. I’m tired of talking. ‘I got an idea,’ I say.

In less than an hour, the two of them, me and Christian are in front of them trees and they burning. The thick trunks and branches are lit up, pure fire. Burning branches catch the grass and soon the grass is on fire too. We stand back. The wind picks up. Burning leaves kiss dry flowers and soon all of Grammercy, white and black, is burning.

We run. Christian and me make it almost all the way home before we realize we the only two running.

‘They must have gone another way,’ he says.

In the morning we hear how people was pulled from their houses for all-night questioning. How they was beaten and broken even if they didn’t know nothing. I’m waiting for a knock on the door. I don’t go nowhere for weeks. Lose my jobs. I take in washing. Between shifts, Franklin delivers it for me. I’m there when Lillian’s throwing up blood. I run to get Sable to keep you and to send Christian for a doctor.

‘Mama?’ you ask. You looking straight at Lillian.

I’m about to correct you.

‘I’m alright, baby,’ she says. ‘He calls me that. I don’t mind.’ Blood’s bubbling up through her mouth.

I’m banging on the front door with you in my arms.

‘He’s been gone for weeks,’ Sable says, ‘left for New York looking for work. Coulda sworn he would have told you.’

She don’t say nothing about it but I know she knows about us. ‘Can the baby stay with you?’ I ask.

She opens her arms. ‘Mama!’ you squeal.

‘Say bye to your mama,’ Sable says.

‘Bye, Spring,’ you say.

The door closes. I’m knocking on another door asking somebody to send for a doctor. I get back and Lillian’s passed out on the floor. Tempe’s sitting beside her, holding her hand.

‘What you doing here?’ I ask.

*Waiting.*

By the time the doctor gets there, Franklin’s home and Lillian’s sitting up saying she feels so silly to have fell out and how a little bit of blood ain’t cause for alarm. The doctor talks to Franklin in private. I’m holding her hand making plans for when the baby come. I’m telling her I’m gonna be home more.

‘Stop all that busting stuff up,’ she says. ‘Please. That baby needs you. This one too.’

For a few weeks everything’s fine. We have a routine. You and me get up early, just after Franklin sets off for work for the day. I get a nice bath ready for Lillian while you set with her. Sable comes over with breakfast. I teach you shapes and colors. When she’s up to it, Lillian recites songs for you. Sable teaches you stories. After supper we sit out on the front steps. After dinner we go out back. I do Lillian’s hair while you play in the yard. I bathe you, feed you and put you to bed. You fall asleep in my arms.

‘Night, Mama,’ you say one night.

That night, the fire stops burning. All I have, I have for you. I ain’t just Sister or Spring no more. Seems like that night, I become a mother. You don’t stop calling Lillian and Sable mama but at least you calling me mama too.

It's a few nights later and we already in bed when Lillian's screams wake us. The baby. Franklin's yelling he'll be back and running out the front door. You and me run down to her room and Lillian's laying on the floor there sweating and moaning. I'm holding one hand, Tempe's holding the other. I can tell you can see her too from the way you smiling up at her. You ain't afraid. Don't seem odd to you that you can see through her body, assuming you can. She running a hand through your hair, patting you on the head, she can't stop touching you.

*Just this once*, she says.

I know that if Lillian wasn't dying, she wouldn't be able to touch Tempe and Tempe wouldn't be able to touch you. Tempe scoops you up in her arms. She holds you for a second before you slip through her. I catch you before you fall. The midwife comes in saying this ain't no place for a baby. She hands you to Franklin and shuts you both out.

'We ain't got much time,' she says.

The baby pushes out. The midwife puts her to Lillian's blue lips for 'a kiss for safe keeping.'

Sable helps me take care of you both. We a family. Buddy when he's here, Franklin in between jobs, Sable, you, Little Lillian and me. The Mourning Committee makes burial arrangements, does the baking and cooking and the washing. Takes weeks to get them out of my house. They trying to help but they always underfoot. They set up a schedule for them to take turns caring for you and your sister so I can take in more work. For a few weeks, we're a cause. They spinning clothes, creating pamphlets, organizing bake sales. They got bags full of baby clothes, blankets



and books. All donated from the folks of Grammercy. I'm starting to get used to them cooking and praying and dusting and singing when somebody round the corner dies and they gone.

I'm surprised to find that I miss them. Christian is back with a wife taking up Sable's time. We don't see much of her. Some nights I can hear her laughing through the living room wall. If I set out in the hall, I can hear whole conversations. I don't do it often but I'm there getting ready to go out and sweep the front steps when Christian tells her he's moving to Canada where a black man can make a 'decent living.' She's fussing about not seeing him or his wife and telling him stay a little while longer, stay a little while longer, things will get better here. She'll give him that whole house if only he'll stay. She'll move in next door and he won't have to see no more of her than he wants to. He'll be the man of his own house and for a year he is.

I can't stand to listen no more so I creep back inside. The next morning she lets herself in. She takes the backroom of the second floor. I take on more jobs and with Buddy and Franklin working and saving too, we buy the house in a few years. She cooks the breakfast, I cook supper, we both fix dinner. She takes care of Franklin like he's her son, he lets her do it. From time to time when Buddy comes, she don't ask why he sleeps in the front room if I'm all the way up on the third floor. It don't seem to matter where any of us sleep, for as long as we live, we home.

'Edward, I know how it is to have nothing to live for, to be so close to the edge there ain't nothing left to do but jump. I just want you to know, if you did do it, if you jumped into that anger, I'm sorry. Sorry for making you feel there wasn't no other way. Sorry for not listening to you when you talked about being fed up. Sorry for making you swallow your pain. For not saying, you right, it shouldn't be this way. For not standing up for you when grown men pushed

you down. For not teaching you how to turn away when you was hurt, to mask your feelings. For not saying, nothing in this whole world makes a damned bit of sense.

‘And if you didn’t do it, I know how that feels too. To be blamed for something you ain’t done whether you thought about doing it or not. To be told how you would have acted or would have felt by people who don’t know nothing about how you did act or did feel. Who don’t want to know nothing about how it is to be you. I know how it feels to know something ain’t right and to not be able to change it or to be scared of changing it because everybody around you need you to say it’s alright. Mostly, I know how it is to not have a home to go back to. You got a home, someplace you belong. As long as you remember, you can go home.’

## Chapter 24

4:00 AM

The glow from the streetlamps below casts shadows against the walls. A pitchfork here, a sinister looking ghost in a pointed hat there. I can hardly trust my eyes. The bed creaks. The other beds are empty. Patients must have moved on some way or the other. Edward's the only one left.

*Hush.*

It's Jacob. He's wearing shoes but the shuffle sounds familiar.

'I hope you don't mind, Ma'am,' he says. 'But I was in the room next door and thought I'd pay Edward a visit.' His lip is split. He smells of blood, sweat and sweet mint.

'How you get busted up like that in the hospital?' I ask.

He looks at me like I don't know more people get broken up in here than outside of here.

'Officers had some questions they wanted to ask me.'

He's close now. Breathing up all my good air. Wasting the little time I got left.

'Did you have answers?' I ask.

'That's the thing. Seems like ain't nothing I have to say, nothing they want to hear. All they want to know is if Edward is working with the railway to bust up the strike or if he's working with the unions to strengthen it.'

I set there rubbing the wood of the book. Tempe's standing behind him. Can he smell her burning?

'Don't you want to know?' he asks.

'I don't see how it would make much difference either way,' I say. 'He's my boy, no matter what side he was on. And you can take the opportunity to remind me that my boy ain't no boy like I don't see he's a full-grown man and I'll take the time to remind you that no matter how old he is, he's my boy.'

'Ma'am, I just meant, Edward's made some decisions that only a man can make.'

'Like what?'

'Like changing his future.'

I look from him to the bandages they tell me is my boy. He's under there somewhere, waiting.

'Changing his future? Or changing yours? See, if you or somebody put him up to some sort of plan to break the strike or start one, if he come up with it or didn't, if he's working for the union or against it, if he was aiming for the store or swerving away for it, my boy's still going to die for it.'

'Then let him die a hero.'

'The death of a hero is no different than the death of an average man.'

'Average men are forgotten. Heroes aren't.'

'I'm going to make the headlines.' It's like sitting here all these years ago with Christian talking about spilling fire like blood through the streets. I'm blinking but I can't stop seeing his face. If Sable hadn't convinced him to stay in Grammercy, he wouldn't have ended up swinging from some tree. He'd be alive now laughing about hot-bloodied men and the women that love

them. Would he be laughing? Would he look at my boy and say just like his mama? Hot-headed. Would he be down there with my family? Holding Lillian's hand, patting Gideon on the shoulder, staring into silence with Buddy and Franklin? Or out there raising hell with the police and the protestors? Maybe he would have led Edward into the riots.

Either way, we here now.

'Can I talk to him, alone?' Jacob's asking.

Tempe's nodding yes.

I lean over and kiss Edward's forehead. Tears stain the bandage. 'I love you, son. Always will,' I say.

Jacob's sliding the curtain behind me. I'm in Tempe's arms. I feel her holding me up before I realize what it means. I'm holding her tight.

'Man,' he says. 'You right about your mama. She's a bird and a half. I see why you want to do right by her. I don't know why you don't want to let her in on nothing though. Seems like she can handle the truth. If you want her to think this got something to do with the riots, I'll go right on letting her think it. Police sure don't seem to have no problem with it. Neither side do either. The union all riled up calling for the police to round up all the scabs, railways calling for blood and legislation, strikers going wild. They stealing trolleys and setting them on fire. This is the start of something big and there you are in the middle of it. You ought to see it. You in the papers and everything. Couldn't have been me. You a hero, man, no matter how you want me to tell it.'

Tempe's looking excited. She's all lit up. No. Not yet. Please. I pull the screen away, push Jacob aside. I hold Edward's hands tight. I'm thinking don't go, don't leave me but I don't say it. 'Remember,' I say. I got my head to his mouth listening for breathing, words, something.

I'm sitting there when the doctor comes to declare the time of death: 4:30 AM. Lillian's there when I get to the waiting room. They all are: her, Gideon, Buddy and Franklin, even Sable and the Mourning Committee. I let them hold me up, lead me through the few picketers left, past the police. Other than us, there are only a few people on the streets this time of morning. I'm burning. I'm so angry that I'm surprised when I look down and see my feet don't leave scorch marks on the road. There's a high pitch sound in my head, wailing. I cover my mouth but it ain't coming from me. The chorus. They singing about saviors and warriors and heroes and wanderers.

This emptiness won't ever fill up. But I ain't never going to let no one forget my boy and how they took him and I won't let him go. It's 1910. Sooner or later there'll be justice. Sooner or later, the killing's got to stop.

# The Gramm

February 21, 1910

## Philadelphia Riots Heat Up

A series of arrests, crack downs and investigations have led to the arrests of dozens of union agitators across the streets of Philadelphia.

According to officials, the police's prime suspect, Edward Freeman, was posthumously acquitted of all charges.

Protesters hit the streets chanting "Murders end in 1910!"

Though the Chief of Police says he will lead an investigation into the tactics employed to gather information and question witnesses, he "remains of strong supporter of the Department and their commitment to justice for all communities."

He is calling for calm and has called on help from the military to ensure our fair citizens are safe from more riots and destruction.

###End###

## Chapter One

### In Their Own Words, the Power of Story

*Suppose a three-hundred-year-old Black man had decided, oh, say when he was about ten, to keep a scrapbook—a record of what it was like for himself and his people in these United States* (Cosby, iii).

*Remembered* is the story of a mother reconciling with a painful past in order to survive a heart-breaking future. The novel unfolds within a frame story that uses narrative techniques, complex characters, ghosts and ephemera to connect the framed past to the framing present through a narrative lens that features Black American<sup>1</sup> characters reclaiming post-Emancipation stories. The novel exposes society-mandated and condoned post-Emancipation silences in the U.S., the effects of silence on community and in literature, and engages in difficult conversations on subjects such as race, identity, stereotypes and racially biased justice in America. Silence is both dramatized by the action of the novel and shattered by the writing of it.

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<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging race is a social construct, I use black and Black interchangeably throughout the thesis. I use the term African American when referring to people born in Africa who have now settled in the U.S.



At a time when movements like Black Lives Matter<sup>2</sup> are necessary to challenge the rhetoric and narrative repeated by American media in the face of an alarming number of police related murders of unarmed black men and women in 2015, America<sup>3</sup> needs stories about black characters written by black authors. According to *The Counted*, The Guardian's database counting killings by police in 2015, 'there were 1,138' people killed by police and 'Black people were killed by police at more than twice the rate of white people in 2015' (J. Swaine, et.al). Americans need stories that challenge dangerous stereotypes and dehumanizing narratives while giving voice to a population silenced in literature, the publishing industry, history and life. Diverse, dynamic, rounded characters engaged in human conflicts like rebuilding family, claiming identity, and navigating oppression, introduce readers to characters whose circumstances may differ but whose human responses, traits and failings make them not heroes or villains but human. Stories build connections and empathy<sup>4</sup>. According to Cognitive Scientist Keith Oatley, '[r]ecent findings indicate that those who engage in such simulations, readers of literary art, which is mostly fiction, have better understandings of other people than those who do not' (618). Story has the power to reclaim and recreate relationships and to heal the ruptures created by trauma such as racism, stereotypes, violence and silence. Just as narrative has the power to perpetuate stereotypes and divide society, narrative has the power to save lives,

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<sup>2</sup> American based justice movement started in 2012: "Black Lives Matter is a chapter-based national organization working for the validity of Black life. We are working to (re)build the Black liberation movement" (About Black Lives Matter, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Although racism is a worldwide problem, as a black American woman raising black American children, my focus is on race in America and the ability of literature to recreate narratives, challenge stereotypes and impact lives.

<sup>4</sup> I personally build connections to others through their stories. As well as studies that support this theory, my practice-based research including public engagement projects Stories at the Storey and North West Literary Salon allows me to witness the development of friendships and relationships and community building through participants sharing stories.

empower people, shape identity and create the space for healing. But, how can narrative save lives? According to Oatley, '[i]n a developing trend of research on narrative [64,85] it has been found that, rather than being just a pass-time, engaging with fiction is fundamentally helpful in enabling us to understand each other as human beings' (626).

America has a lot of healing to do. Slavery caused trauma. It has led to a legacy of trauma. According to sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in irrevocable ways' (1). Alexander argues the significance of cultural trauma in creating cultural identity within story and narrative (12). I am interested in fiction as a catalyst for healing cultural trauma. In this chapter, I will argue that through its unique structure and form, fiction can fill the gaps of history and provide the language to repair ruptures caused by cultural trauma. The physical act of slavery led to emotional, cultural, financial and psychological repercussions that America lives with today. Narrative creates dialogue, space to build and create relationships, necessary discussions and identity that shatters tropes and stereotypes while reclaiming story.

The story of Black American trauma is the story of American trauma. Through her analysis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, trauma theorist Cathy Caruth argues: 'that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas' (24). Black American history is entangled in America's history in much the way American history is implicated in the black experience in America. Though we may not be able to point to one distinctive traumatic act, I argue that there are many wounds in history and in present-day society and that narrative that exposes and shatters silence is a crucial step in the healing process. Black people are being silenced in life and in text. What can we do about it?

For many Americans, time is running out. According to Mapping Police Violence<sup>5</sup>, in 2015 at least ‘100 unarmed Black people were killed by police’ with an overwhelming number of the narratives ending with the same rhetoric: ‘No officers have been charged with a crime’ (*The Guardian*). Whether complying with commands or resisting arrest, in confrontations with police, too many black people end up dead. As America slides into another year of black lives lost due to a nation’s inability to challenge the rhetoric within an overarching narrative that sees white as construct and black as ‘destruct,’ America needs diverse narratives to heal the ruptures created by silencing stories in fact and in fiction. Silence disguises and distorts, it does not heal. Slavery consisted of many physical, mental and emotional traumas. The slaves were liberated, not their suffering.

Slavery and racism led to a dark legacy in America. Before the Emancipation, millions of African and Black American people were enslaved. Spanning over two centuries, generation after generation was kidnapped, sold, auctioned, bred, and born into slavery. Generally, they lived and died as slaves with little hope of being free. Slaves were counted as property. They had no rights. Slaves were subject to unspeakable horrors, stripped of humanity, dignity and voice. There was no court in which they could appeal their condition. They lived within a society that fought for and believed in freedom for all men, yet slaves were not considered humans. Because slaves and slave owners were human, conditions could vary from situation to situation. With little government interference or sanction, slaves could be beaten, tortured, refused medical care, raped, sold and auctioned. They lacked legal protection. There was legislation specific to slaves. Some laws included prohibiting teaching slaves to read, making it illegal for slaves to testify

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<sup>5</sup> An ongoing project that collects and compiles data from various civilian sources to paint a picture of police killings in America over the past three years (“About the Data”).

against white people, making it illegal for slaves to speak with free black people (“Slave Life and Slave Codes”). Even free black people were in danger of being enslaved. According to the Independence Hall Association in Philadelphia, free Black people also lacked legal protection: ‘Most horrifically, free Blacks could not testify in court. If a slave catcher claimed that a free African-American was a slave, the accused could not defend himself in court’ (“Free? African-Americans”). Though people endured, lived, reproduced and potentially survived, slavery created legalized terrorism. Because slave property was the property of the master, often family was the only thing a slave had.

Yet, slave families were separated, renamed and uprooted for any number of reasons. With these separations, came the loss of identity, history, family, and connections to community. Other than memory and oral story, without the ability to read and write, generations were disconnected; ties to ancestry severed. There are accounts of families maintaining familial relationships during slavery and of slaves sold away who still remained in contact with one another.<sup>6</sup> Still, with slaves sold at auctions, sold to southern states, renamed, miscounted and underrepresented in the Census, after the Emancipation many slaves were never reunited with their families and those that were, had to repair relationships ruptured by fear, racism, violence, mistrust, inability to protect and shame. Slavery’s legacy is tangled and enduring.

Slavery was a systematic industry that shattered lives before, during and after it. Problems indigenous to slavery were inherited by its descendants. Even today, black people are victims of police profiling, political agendas and racism. In 2016, the United Nations declared a human

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<sup>6</sup> The United States National Archives holds records and online databases collected from the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau). The records include photographs, interviews and marriage certificates as well as letters requesting assistance locating family, mediating legal issues and rescuing family from former owners (African American Records, Freedman’s Bureau).

rights crisis in America: ‘The colonial history, the legacy of enslavement, racial subordination and segregation, racial terrorism, and racial inequality in the US remains a serious challenge as there has been no real commitment to reparations and to truth and reconciliation for people of African descent’ (“Statement”). Institutionalized racism, stereotypes and prejudices that allowed slavery to flourish were not emancipated when the slaves were. After the Emancipation, former slaves were still subjected to racism and laws designed to ensure social incapacitation. The slave codes that governed their lives as slaves gave way to black codes: laws created to keep black people in a form of bondage. As Columbia University Professor Hollis R. Lynch explains, ‘the laws were designed to replace the social controls of slavery that had been removed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and were thus intended to assure continuance of white supremacy’ (“The Black Codes”). Emancipated slaves could not travel freely, were subject to re-enslavement if they could not support themselves or their family, and were subject to harassment, terror and cruelty (Lynch). The Emancipation gave way to black codes, segregation, the rise of the Klu Klux Klan and Jim Crow Laws<sup>7</sup>. Remnants of slavery manifested themselves in various forms of institutionalized racism including, and not limited to, policing, legislation, education, housing, healthcare, representation and publishing. For many former slaves, freedom was dangerous.

The African American/Black American community had little reason to trust the judicial system even after the emancipation: ‘the Negroes refused to believe the evidence of white witnesses or the fairness of white juries’ (Dubois, 146). Emancipated slaves were struggling to reconnect with families, build communities, find jobs, support themselves and develop identities

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Library of Congress, ‘Jim Crow was not enacted as a universal, written law of the land. Instead, a patchwork of state and local laws, codes, and agreements enforced segregation to different degrees and in different ways across the nation’ (“Jim Crow”); these laws would take over a century to overturn with it taking even longer to overcome the sentiments and repercussions.

after centuries of having their identities stripped and mined. Yet they often found themselves on the wrong side of the legal system. They still could not testify against white people, and juries of their peers as promised by The Constitution, were instead juries made up of white men. Black testimony was silenced. During the Reconstruction, African Americans received the right to ‘testify in court (only in cases involving people of their own race)’ (“Black codes - black history”). Historically, cases alleging lynchings, riots, attacks, rapes, discrimination, civil injustices and other legalized brutalities have been suppressed. Their impacts have been muted and shaped by the media, politicians and those in power. Color controls narrative.

To many Americans, slavery and racism are concepts from the past. In *A Rap About Race*, James Baldwin explains the problem of history and denial in a conversation with Margaret Mead: ‘Nevertheless, if I don’t, if I, Jimmy, don’t accept the very brutal facts of the past, then I have no present. I know that this brutality is not extraordinary. It’s happened to everyone else in the world, too. I know that. But if I pretend that it did not happen to me, that I was not there, then I cannot live’ (198). America has not learned from the past. According to the 2016 United Nations’ statement to the media, the legacy of slavery lives on in the present:

There is a profound need to acknowledge that the transatlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity and among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and that Africans and people of African descent were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences. Past injustices and crimes against African Americans need to be addressed with reparatory justice (ohchr.org)

The United Nations’ report was not widely reported in America. The dialogue has been muted. But the need for ‘reparatory justice’ echoes throughout the country. For too long, justice

has circumvented the judicial system as American streets transform into courtrooms, the American people into judges and the American police, the executioners. This form of American justice is not new. America is in crisis. We have been in crisis for centuries. In *From Slavery to Freedom*, a brief chronicle of African American history from the 1800s to the late 1990s, John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. write about lynchings that were never investigated and that, like Marie Thompson's, were 'unopposed' by authorities (313). For decades, lynching and violence were used to suppress the voices of black America. Robert Gibson asserts that justice for too many came in the form of lynching regardless of the alleged crime: 'In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the lynching of Black people in the Southern and border states became an institutionalized method used by whites to terrorize Blacks and maintain white supremacy' ('Negro Holocaust'). It is difficult to get accurate statistics for the number of lynchings and other murders; there are some unofficial counts of lynchings from 1860-1920 in America: 'According to the Tuskegee Institute figures, between the years 1882 and 1951, 4,730 people were lynched in the United States: 3,437 Negro and 1,293 white' (Gibson).

Lynching, restrictions, lack of rights and education, lost family, poverty, and racism: what more could emancipated slaves endure? According to Gibson there were other atrocities in store:

In the decade immediately preceding World War I, a pattern of racial violence began to emerge in which white mob assaults were directed against entire Black communities.

These race riots were the product of white society's desire to maintain its superiority over Blacks, vent its frustrations in times of distress, and attack those least able to defend themselves ( "Negro Holocaust")

Gibson also attempted to measure the scale of the violence,

In [1919] During that summer there were twenty-six race riots in such cities as Chicago, Illinois; Washington, D.C.; Elaine, Arkansas; Charleston, South Carolina; Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee; Longview, Texas; and Omaha, Nebraska. More than one hundred Blacks were killed in these riots, and thousands were wounded and left homeless (“Negro Holocaust”)

The period after the emancipation was wrought with tension that played out in the form of violence, oppression and the systematic silencing of black voices.

The American Civil Rights Movement led to a change in America. Still, America has exchanged plantations for prisons. According to a 2014 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, ‘Black men had the highest imprisonment rate in every age group and were in state or federal facilities 3.8 to 10.5 times more often than white men and 1.4 to 3.1 times more often than Hispanic men’ (“Prisoners in 2014”). Even after they have ‘served their debt to society’ rehabilitated offenders are stripped of the right to vote; they are further silenced. Incarceration is not the only form of silencing. Confrontations with black civilians and white police play out repetitions of the same narrative. These confrontations often end in deadly silence. In the article, “Obama Says Police Killings of Two Black Men Should Trouble All Americans,” The Wall Street Journal contextualizes President Obama’s statement as captured in a 2016 press conference addressing two killings of unarmed Black Americans in two different states within two days: President Obama verbalized the feelings of many Black Americans when he declared that ‘[w]e have seen tragedies like this too many times’ (Lee). Thanks to social media, Americans witnessed these murders. Witnesses like Diamond Reynolds, the girlfriend of Philando Castile, a black man killed by police as he sat in his car during what police claimed was a routine traffic stop, have been streaming killings by police on live social media. These videos



provide viewers instant access and proximity to death. Although followed by versions of a police narrative, we witness these killings on video. The rhetoric has shifted. Black Americans have greater access to the narrative and thanks to social media we are sharing it. If only that was enough.

We may never know how many voices are silenced each year. As of 2016, neither the United States Department of Justice nor the Federal Bureau of Investigations keeps an effective database on police killings.<sup>8</sup> As of 2015, the FBI's database was problematic and inaccurately measured a system often considered guilty of systematic racism: 'The FBI runs a voluntary program through which law enforcement agencies may or may not choose to submit their annual count of "justifiable homicides", which it defines as 'the killing of a felon in the line of duty' ("About the Project"). According to *The Guardian*, the newspaper outlet chronicles police killings in the U.S. 'to monitor their demographics and to tell the stories of how they died' ("About the Project"). Each brief summary provides the victim's name and a condensed version of the circumstances reported by witnesses and/or police. While more akin to snapshots, thanks to the pictures and ages that accompany most profiles, these stories humanize the victims. People identify with people. Stories and memories are often the only legacies people leave behind. Unfortunately, the database is not all inclusive. The database does not include people like Sandra Bland<sup>9</sup> and countless other Americans arrested without probable cause who died under mysterious

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<sup>8</sup> According to *The Guardian*, in 2016, the Department of Justice has issued a statement declaring they will begin trial of a program that still allows police departments to self report while also relying on media and outside sources to gain a count that is more reflective than the data collected from the current voluntary system (*Police will be required to report officer-involved deaths under new US system*. August 2016.)

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Bland was arrested July 10, 2015 and found dead in her cell three days later. While the police maintain it was 'death by suicide' according to CNN and other news sources: "Still, Bland's family and friends remain steadfast in their belief that she had too much to live for and never would have taken her own life" (Payne, 2015). Although acquitted for murder, the officer has since been discharged for perjury.

circumstances while in police custody. Their stories still count even if no one is keeping an official tally. Their stories deserve to be shared, even when no one is recording.

America claims versions of its past. Perspectives on the slave trade, slavery in America, the Emancipation and segregation are well documented in history. But, the documentation is sometimes problematic. National memory is distorted. For example, The Library of Congress resource for teachers on the topic of teaching slavery, reports that slaves were largely in control of their own destiny: ‘While no rational person would wish to be a slave, the slaves were active agents in their own lives’ (“National Expansion”). This resource fails to mention the swift repercussions, including whipping, raping, being sold and/or death that mitigated any illusion of slaves’ agency. The American past is revised and reinvented. In 2015, textbook publisher McGraw-Hill changed history. According to textbooks approved by the state of Texas school board, ‘The Atlantic Slave Trade between the 1500s-1800s brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations’ (McAfee).<sup>10</sup> Slaves were not workers who set sail for the U.S. in the hopes for a better life. They were stolen, sold, enslaved. Names matter. Can a nation set on reinventing the past, move forward from it? According to the United Nations, properly acknowledging the past is an important step in the process of reconciling the country: ‘Consistently, the school curriculum in each state should reflect appropriately the history of the slave trade’ (“Statement”). Furthermore, the United Nations has made several recommendations to begin the process of healing America:

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<sup>10</sup> The textbooks have been distributed to Texas school districts, after public response to a mother’s complaint on social media, the publisher apologized: ‘To communicate these facts more clearly, we will update this caption to describe the arrival of African slaves in the U.S. as a forced migration and emphasize that their work was done as slave labor’ (McAfee).

During the International Decade for People of African Descent [2015-2024] public forums or hearings should be held with African American communities to enter into a constructive and open dialogue in which organizations, social movements have access to share experiences and to engage with the policy makers and institutions and local state and federal government on ways to address the current crisis. (“Statement”)

Truth and reconciliation<sup>11</sup> are important components to heal nations divided by trauma.

Although both the House and Senate have approved two separate apologies, the President of the United States has yet to issue an official apology for slavery. In 1988, the United States Congress issued the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 formally apologizing to Japanese descendants of U.S. internment camps. The apology included monetary compensation and was among other things, ‘To apologize on behalf of the people of the United States for the evacuation, internment, and relocations of such citizens and permanent residing aliens’ (“Children of the Camps”). The apology was signed by the president in 1993.

A few states have issued apologies for slavery; the country has not. In 2008 the House introduced a resolution apologizing for slavery. It did not pass the Senate. In 2009 the Senate issued its own apology. The apology acknowledges slavery and the racism that continues long after it: ‘Whereas African-Americans continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery and Jim Crow laws—long after both systems were formally abolished—through enormous damage

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<sup>11</sup> According to the United States Institute of Peace, (USIP) ‘The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created to investigate gross human rights violations that were perpetrated during the period of the Apartheid regime from 1960 to 1994, including abductions, killings, torture’ (Truth Commission, ). This commission had the authority to grant pardons and amnesty, prosecute and to recommend reparations for victims. According to the USIP, many of the victims never received reparations and government continues to protect perpetrators (Truth). Still, a fascinating component of the process was the value placed on truth: ‘Controversially the TRC was empowered to grant amnesty to perpetrators who confessed their crimes truthfully and completely to the commission;’ (Truth) the report goes on to say that most of the amnesty claims were denied.

and loss, both tangible and intangible, including the loss of human dignity and liberty...’ (“Congressional Resolution”). The Senate apology also acknowledges an official apology as an integral component in repairing the ruptures caused by the trauma:

‘Whereas it is important for the people of the United States, who legally recognized slavery through the Constitution and the laws of the United States, to make a formal apology for slavery and for its successor, Jim Crow, so they can move forward and seek reconciliation, justice, and harmony for all people of the United States...’ (Congressional Resolution)

The resolution does not propose accepting responsibility or honoring reparations<sup>12</sup>:

‘DISCLAIMER- Nothing in this resolution—(A) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or (B) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.’ (“Congressional Resolution”)

Although it is a positive step towards reconciliation, this apology has yet to be signed by the president. The apologies lack both presidential support and the opportunity for dialogue; the victims are not granted the opportunity to speak.

America is no stranger to apologies and retribution. In 1942, The Allies set up The Nuremberg trials to prosecute Nazi officers for crimes including ‘crimes against humanity—namely, murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war’ (“The Nuremberg Trials”). One of the trials gave victims the opportunity to confront the past: ‘The testimony of hundreds of witnesses, many of them survivors, was followed all over the world’ (“The Nuremberg Trials”). Black

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<sup>12</sup> Emancipated slaves were promised reparations of 40 acres and a mule. There has been no legislation to enforce this promise.

Americans need the opportunity to confront police, legislators, the judicial system, the education system and any system infused with institutionalized racism. Whether in the courtroom, in the classroom or in the streets, America needs to create the space for dialogue:

Monuments, memorials and markers should be erected to facilitate this important public dialogue. Education must be accompanied by acts of reconciliation, which are needed to overcome acts of racial bigotry and legacies of injustice. To accelerate the process of desegregation, federal and state legislation should be passed recognizing the experience of enslavement. (United Nations)

Without discussions that include a national apology, as happened at Nuremberg, as well as national acceptance of the lingering effects of slavery, silence will continue to echo into the future. Black Americans are murdered on the streets, silenced in the courtrooms and in the classrooms<sup>13</sup>, incarcerated, and denied human rights. The deadly silencing of black Americans in life is often reflected by our absence in fiction. Fiction can lead by example. Publishing novels filled with complex-diverse Black American characters on the page is a step towards recognizing that black lives and black narratives are crucial to shattering dangerous silences that plunge America into a state of crisis that threatens to erase the country one story at a time.

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<sup>13</sup> The UN Statement also reports on the presence of police in schools labeled predominantly black and the aggressive policing by these officers as well as policies that target black American students. Videos and articles have been reported about children being abused, violently restrained and otherwise targeted by police in schools; according to the UN, 'Policing in schools should be abolished' ("Statement").

## Chapter Two: All Hope is Not Lost, the Power of Novel to Recreate the Past

‘If you brave enough to live it, the least I can do is listen’ (Bond, 298).

As a child I loved nothing more than to slip in and out of the pages of a good book. Books that relied on my imagination to bring them to life were my gateway into wider worlds. In these worlds, I met beings from other galaxies, explored lush landscapes and found myself whether solving crimes or saving the underdog, an active participant, a doer of good, a heroine. The only price I had to pay was the ability to believe; access to these worlds meant suspending belief and imagining me somewhere, anywhere else.

As I grew older, the cost of entry rose. It was no longer enough to imagine these worlds, it was now important to accept my absence. The price I was required to pay was exclusion. As a child, I could excuse the writer if a character’s blond hair and blue eyes turned up in odd places like while a character was wiping the wind from her hair or solving a crime. But as a more nuanced reader it was the presence of a random black waiter, taxi driver, maid, co-worker or other minor character that served to remind me that I could no longer afford to pay the price. As

a writer I am often jarred by the absence of fully-developed black characters on the pages of mainstream literature. I am appalled by this exclusion and saddened at the price we all pay for it.

America's civil rights crisis stems from an inability and/or unwillingness to acknowledge that we need diversity on and off the page. Without narrative that reflects multi-cultural, multi-ethnic characters and their stories, characters otherwise muted in mainstream American literature, the silencing of Black America will continue. To solve the multi-faceted problems facing America, we must change the narrative and we must include black stories and black characters. Black people and characters, even in stories about black people, are often minor characters. This minimization invites readers to consider us as shattered, fragments, splinters in the side of the larger narrative.

Adam Hochschild's *Bury the Chains* is a creative nonfiction text that paints a picture of slavery through the eyes of its abolitionists on the shores of Britain. It is a collection of well-told stories focusing on the cause rather than the victims and largely on the white abolitionists. It attempts to tackle slavery from inception to abolition. The book generalizes the conditions of many people including poor white people and black slaves. These sweeping gestures make it challenging to identify with particular individuals other than those who exist within cameo appearances or within the narratives of other characters. The work, a merger of history within a contemporary context, is surprisingly lacking in actual slave biographies. But for what it lacks in individual stories, it delivers in general ones like Carleton's narrative where readers meet Boston King, one of 'the largest community of free Blacks in one spot anywhere in British territory in the Americas' sailing to Nova Scotia as Carleton sought to uphold Britain's word (105). The work is a historical representation that attempts to personalize abolitionists. The untold stories, representations of black narratives, are often as stark and painful as the few narratives explored

in detail. Between the pages of stories of nameless slaves there are personal narratives that paint pictures of white historical figures like Granville Sharp who waged legal war against slavery and General Sir Guy Carleton whose sense of justice, not humanity, ‘upheld Britain’s...promise of freedom to any American slave who deserted a rebel master and joined the British Army’ (98) despite the British/U.S. treaty that re-enslaved them (101).

Using third-person narration and narrative strategies and peppered with historical characters, *Bury the Chains* leads readers through many of the nuances from its beginnings to the end of slavery in Britain and within British colonies. In the epilogue, the text explores the impact of freedom on the slaves after their 1838 emancipation by declaring that [t]he end of slavery did not mean the end of injustice, but one measure of human progress, surely, is that today enslaving others is a ‘crime against humanity’ (360). Hochschild talks of the poverty and restrictions and ponders the architecture left behind (360-366). He leaves readers where they began, with the abolitionists that began the tale: ‘the abolitionists placed their hope not in sacred texts, but in human empathy. We live with that hope still’ (366). Perhaps for the abolitionists the story does end there. For emancipated slaves, the story begins.

These are their stories. The narratives of emancipated slaves could allow readers access to memories, experiences and emotional terrain not often afforded to slaves in American history books. This access can humanize the past and allow current and future generations to acknowledge the past, learn from it and also learn to accept diverse stories. This acceptance could lead to changes in an America that stereotypes black and white as bad versus good. When we change the narrative that perceives black people and black stories as ‘other’ we can begin to view people as individuals, build stronger communities, empathize and truly reconstruct the nation.



Through letters and interviews provided by historians, churches, and projects like The Library of Congress Memory Project, organizations like The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, usually referred to as simply the Freedmen's Bureau (Freedman's Bureau), and interviews conducted by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) there are nonfiction accounts of emancipated slaves facing racism, distance and time to find one another.<sup>14</sup> Many accounts of the slave past exist within the Slave Narratives. These autobiographical accounts help contemporary readers in search of a multi-layered, diverse past, in ways they may have inspired the target audience of the past: white readers who needed to be convinced of slavery's atrocities in order to take action. Numerous volumes containing collections of slave narratives have been edited by Ira Berlin and other researchers. Many of these discussions are first-person accounts as in those collected in Belinda Hurmence's *My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk about Slavery: Twenty-one Oral Histories of Former North Carolina Slaves* or Charles Ball's *Fifty Years in Chains or The Life of an American Slave: Charles Ball*. Yet the stories and voices of emancipated slaves as characters who live, love and search do not breathe on many pages. Stories of mourning and rediscovery, of perpetual searching, of trying to reconnect, of searching for loved ones who would never be found, of anger and sorrow are seldom published.

Although limited in scope, the published narratives are necessary. They function as first-person accounts of a past many choose to forget. The narratives act as witness to traumatic events allowing contemporary readers access to voices silenced through self or societal censorship in life and finally in death. The silences within the pages of the narrative challenge the availability of the texts making them inaccessible to some, unreliable to others. Often

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<sup>14</sup> Resources like the Freedmen and Southern Project provide a wealth of digitized transcripts of letters, proceedings and rulings that provide details and context to the slave narratives, The Emancipation, and the Reconstruction while the National Archives contains hand written originals as well as photos and other ephemera.

stripped of emotion, the slave narratives may appear distant, removed. The slave narratives are first-person chronicles. Most of the accounts show and tell events without dwelling on emotions or motives; they rely on readers' emotional landscape. As a genre there are certain expectations. According to historian Norman Yetman, one of the problems of the first person interviews of emancipated slaves collected for the WPA project is the reliability of the interviews themselves (*Limitations*). The interviewers' questions guide the narrative (Yetman, *The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection*). The overall narrative may become a barrier by providing a sense of continuity that desensitizes readers and detracts from the individual stories. There is a pattern; a narrative being created: *what's your name, how old are you, was your owner good to you; tell me about your childhood, do you know your parents, did you have enough to eat, have you ever seen a patroller; did you see any one get whipped, how were you treated as a slave; did you have medical care and how did you feel about freedom?* The same questions seem to guide each interview sometimes making the interviews feel like continuations or repetitions of one another. Anna Richardson explores similar challenges in relation to Holocaust testimonies: 'I myself have become acutely conscious of this, given that my own research heavily relies upon the fact that Holocaust survivor testimonies follow similar narrative patterns, almost to the point of becoming formulaic' (6). Because of the sheer volume of interviews, these patterns could leave readers to become desensitized.

For those not daunted by the patterns within the slave narratives, there are multiple ripe volumes to pick from. Despite the rich resource, according to Yetman, not only did some interviewers exercise creative license to stray from the interview questions, they also edited the responses: 'In addition, as Rawick's searches of state Writers' Project records indicate, some of the writers and editors themselves undertook to revise, alter, or censor the accounts'

(*Limitations*). The power to shape the emancipated slaves' written experience lay in the hands of interviewers who were disproportionately white, '...and some of their interviewers were even members of the former slaveholding families' (Yetman, *Limitations*). Effective interviews require trust and mutual respect. Fear, resentment, racism, stereotypes and prejudice may have distorted the integrity of the interview process leading to misunderstandings, preconceptions and misinterpretations.

While the interviewers may have taken creative liberties, Yetman asserts that these liberties were not necessarily sanctioned. The project's editor Peter Lomax instructed the writers that '[i]t should be remembered that the Federal Writers' Project is not interested in taking sides on any question. The worker should not censor any materials collected regardless of its [*sic*] nature' (Yetman, *The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection*). On either side of the color line, slavery did not cultivate the truth: 'as a result, informants may frequently have told their white interviewers "what they wanted to hear."' For similar reasons many were undoubtedly less than fully candid or refused to tell a complete story, resulting in a kind of self-censorship' (Yetman, *Limitations*). Considering racism in America, the Reconstruction, Jim Crow, segregation, lynchings and other influences of the time period, how freely could emancipated slaves speak? Did race factor into information disclosure? According to Yetman, it did: 'Twenty-six percent of those responding to white interviewers expressed unfavorable attitudes toward their former masters compared to thirty-nine percent of those who responded to Black interviewers' (*Voices*, 364).

The problems with the Narratives go deeper than black and white. According to Yetman, at the time of the interviews America was in the Depression: people were poor (*Limitations*). Along with poverty, the emancipated slaves interviewed may have suffered memory loss:

Those interviewed were extremely old and most were living in conditions of abject poverty during the Depression years of the 1930s. These factors often combined to make them look upon the past through rose-colored glasses; they fondly described events and situations that had not been, in reality, so positive as they recalled them. (*Limitations*). Yetman sums up many of the frustrations some modern readers have with the narratives: ‘the combination of weaknesses that characterizes the ex-slave narratives restricts their reliable data to such matters as childhood under slavery, some aspects of family life, some details on slave genealogies, and some unintended insights into the nature of memory and of interview psychology’ (*Limitations*). The essay still goes on to say that yes, despite the challenges the narratives present, if viewed as potentially unreliable narrators, the narratives are valuable, the stories useful.

At best with the awareness that a totalizing of history cannot be reconstructed from these interested, selective, and fragmentary accounts and with an acknowledgment of the interventionist role of the interpreter, the equally interested labor of historical revision, and the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns. (Yetman, *Limitations*)

Who better to tell their story than the people who lived it? First-person accounts, for all of their problems, give voice to those formerly rendered mute. Conversations about slavery are conversations still worth having. Although emancipated slaves are no longer alive to share them, some researchers are still interested in their stories.

In a voluminous range of literature published since the early 1970s, the published ex-slave interviews have been the single most important source of data used to examine the

‘peculiar institution’ and its impact [36]. Thus the comprehension of American slavery has been enhanced immeasurably by these testimonies. (Yetman, *The Importance* ).

For readers, emancipated slave narratives are painful. In *My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk about Slavery: Twenty-one Oral Histories of Former North Carolina Slaves*, Belinda Hurmence offers a collection of slave narratives that share various memories of former slaves. In her narrative, emancipated slave Patsy Mitchner remembers: ‘slavery was better for us than things is now in some cases...Now they got to shuffle around and live on just what the white folks mind to give them’ (Hurmence, 79). There seems little sense of entitlement. Former slaves, at least in the narratives I have read so far, did not (in interviews) call for retribution. In the interviews, many mentioned loved ones who were gone but at least in this collection there were a few stories of reuniting. In a touching quote Mitchner posits that ‘slaves prayed for freedom; then they got it and didn’t know what to do with it’ (Hurmence, 79). This appearance of longing contradicts what we know about slavery. Perhaps part of what appears to be nostalgia in the narratives is due to the hard times and racism many emancipated slaves endured. Maybe it was because they were being asked by white people and had learned that truth is seldom rewarded. Perhaps emancipated slaves were providing a modern day coded message: Just as the songs that often tricked overseers and listeners into believing slaves were happy, the interviews that say how fortunate slaves were are coded messages that mean what Mitchner later says: ‘slavery was a bad thing, and freedom, of the kind we got, with nothing to live on, was bad’ (Hurmence, 80). In his account, emancipated slave Parker Pool explains, ‘The colored people are slaves more now than they ever been...If you works a horse and don’t have him to feed, you is better off than if you had to feed and care for him’ (Hurmence, 86). It isn’t that emancipated slaves missed slavery; they wanted to be entirely free.

Emancipated slaves and the millions of untold stories are gone.<sup>15</sup> While the stories that remain are often problematic, in terms of history, story is often all we have left. Although able to elicit emotion from readers, narratives of former slaves and other historical accounts are often detached from emotion. When reading slave narratives like those written by Charles Ball or Harriet Jacobs, seldom do the narratives convey the anger some slaves must have felt nor the action the anger would have ignited. Perhaps some could not afford to acknowledge anger, disappointment, and resentment, even to themselves and certainly not if they garnered hopes of their narratives paving a path to abolish slavery. The authors of the Slave Narratives were writing for an audience they hoped would abolish slavery. To get their work published, there were guidelines they had to follow.

In *I was Born a Slave, Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature*, James Olney explores the similarities of texts within the Slave Narrative Genre. As Olney explains, ‘the autobiographer is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper’ (46). Olney explores the narratives as a narrative strategy employing memory, recollection and creativity (47). Olney argues, ‘the slave narrative, with a very few exceptions, tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act’ (48). The individual was in a position of editing the past, [t]he writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of "slavery as it is” (48). According to Olney, introducing techniques more akin to fiction could challenge the authenticity of the narratives by readers of that time period

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<sup>15</sup> The National Museum of African American History and Culture is in the process of digitizing data that could help some descendants piece together their past and reconcile the present. Until the data is actually released, the impact is unclear.

(49) so that the narration must remain 'episodic' and event driven (48). To be considered authentic, the writers needed to appeal to the sensibilities of the readers and to their expectations (49).

As a result, the slave narrative is most often a non-memorial description fitted to a preformed mold, a mold with regular depressions here and equally regular prominences there--virtually obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances, and authentications--that carry over from narrative to narrative and give to them as a group the species character that we designate by the phrase "slave narrative." (49)

Olney's outline of the slave narratives and his analysis of them lead him to the understanding that '[a]n autobiography or a piece of imaginative literature may of course observe certain conventions, but it cannot be only, merely conventional without ceasing to be satisfactory as either autobiography or literature, and that is the case, I should say, with all the slave narratives except the great one by Frederick Douglass' (65). His conclusion is that the narratives were often orchestrated by abolitionists, 'as the narrators show themselves more or less content to remain slaves to a prescribed, conventional, and imposed form; or perhaps it would be more precise to say that they were captive to the abolitionist intentions and so the question of their being content or otherwise hardly entered in' (65). Narrative is shaped by those in power. The Slave Narratives, although chronicling black lives, were shaped by those in a position to silence them.

Not all attempts at giving voice to the black experience of slavery and trauma are represented through words. *The Black Book*, edited by Toni Morrison, is a compilation of touching, painful moments, snapshots of the black narrative. They include, among other things, ephemera, articles, newspaper clippings, deeds, fugitive slave posters and photographs that chronicle some of the most harrowing moments of the black experience in America. These are

curated memories. While the layout creates a narrative, there is no context, no characterization. There are no storytelling techniques or conventions. This is not an embroidered version of the past. This is a visual representation of lived past. It is painful, raw, and vivid. The 1973 introduction invites readers to ‘imagine a three-hundred-year-old Black man had decided, oh, say when he was about ten, to keep a scrapbook—a record of what it was like for himself and his people in these United States’ (Cosby, iii). *The Black Book* challenges the reader to imagine. By offering what are often short ads or articles, the reader is invited to create the context, to ask the question what happened next and to ask the often repeated and unanswered question: why? In the foreword of the *Black Book* Toni Morrison explains the importance of remembering the past: ‘Its new life is more than a welcome gift; it is a requirement for national health’ (1). These pictures provide warnings lest we forget, lest we fail to imagine the past. But what can we do with these pictures, these reminders? What do they show us about ourselves?

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag encourages similar questions while discussing pictures of lynchings, including the body of the murdered and often groups of spectators who may or may not have included the murderers, and draws similar conclusions:

The pictures were taken as souvenirs and made, some of them, into postcards, more than a few show grinning spectators, good churchgoing citizens as most of them had to be, posing for a camera with the backdrop of a naked, charred, mutilated body hanging from a tree. (82)

Sontag echoes questions asked of a collection of photos featuring lynchings; one of the questions is: ‘Don’t they rather just confirm what we already know (or want to know)?’ (82). Photographs provide evidence; without this evidence there will be those who deny the existence of racism and of its potential deadly consequences. According to Sontag,



[n]evertheless, it was argued, there is an obligation to examine - the more clinical “examine” is substituted for “look at” - the pictures. It was further argued that submitting to the ordeal should help us understand such atrocities not as the acts of “barbarians” but as the reflection of a belief system, racism, that by defining one people as less human than other legitimates torture and murder. (83)

The pictures show the ugliness of racism. While these pictures reflect a painful truth, according to Sontag, we have a responsibility to look:

Probably, if we are Americans, we think that it would be morbid to go out of our way to look at pictures of burnt victims of atomic bombing or the napalmed flesh of the civilian victims of the American war on Vietnam, but that we have a duty to look at the lynching pictures - if we belong to the party of the right-thinking, which on this issue is now very large. A stepped-up recognition of the monstrosity of the slave system that once existed, unquestioned by most, in the United States is a national project of recent decades that many Euro-Americans feel some tug of obligation to join. This ongoing project is a great achievement, a benchmark of civic virtue. (84)

Are pictures of the past enough to make America address the effects of racism in America and the lingering effects of slavery? No. According to Sontag, ‘[h]arrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand.

Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us’ (80).

America will forever be haunted by the past.

Literature offers writers the opportunity and platform to create complex characters within historical contexts and diverse narratives. With narrative tools such as free indirect speech, point

of view, narrative distance, as well as with access to historical landscapes, documents and memories, writers are able to create narratives from multiple perspectives. This rich, diverse narrative affords readers access to the ‘other’. This access builds relationships, creates empathy, allows readers to question versions of truth and empowers them to do the work of reconstructing their own memory of the past and repositioning themselves in the future. Narrative does the work of creating necessary discourse for resolution.

Fiction allows readers access to multi-dimensional characters with flaws, a range of emotions, wants and needs, values and stories that challenge our perceptions. It invites readers to get to know characters in a created world that may resemble or challenge life as we know it. Through fiction, we grapple with questions in society and confront themes like family, identity, racism, stereotypes, naming, home, belonging, and acceptance. Through fiction, anything is possible. Employing narrative techniques allows readers different perspectives and glimpses into characters’ psychologies. Tools like narrative choices, details, description, conflict, resolution, setting and genre work to create a story with the power to challenge conceptions of how we view one another, the past and our relation to it. Is fiction more reliable than fact?

In fiction, first-person narration allows readers to experience the story as the character does. In nonfiction, first-person narration relies on memory, recollection, perception and inaccuracies. If as discussed in Chapter One, critics of The WPA Slave Narratives question the memory and narrative of slaves, run-away slaves and emancipated slaves, readers may consider even unreliable first-person narrators as more reliable than first-person narration in nonfiction.

When writing slave narratives, first-person narrators like Harriet Jacobs could not assume authority over their own narrative and must declare, ‘Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction’ (2) as well as have the narrative further authenticated as truth: ‘The author of the

following autobiography is personally known to me and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence...'<sup>16</sup> (4). In *Remembered* I grappled with issues of authority and Spring's reliability as a narrator. I was concerned readers would dismiss Spring's testimony as the faulty memories of an aging woman. Through the process of drafting and interrogating the novel and receiving feedback from my thesis supervisor and other readers, I constructed scenes where Spring establishes authority as a narrator. Through third-person narration and later in first-person narration, I show and then tell how Spring has access to events, characters and dialogue she is not alive to witness. When recreating the past, Spring re-establishes authority by revealing the source of her knowledge to Edward: 'What I know comes straight from my sister's lips to my heart and to this book. Some of it I seen with my own two eyes. Some with hers' (35). By tethering the information to Tempe, I ground the narrative within fictional fact so as not to distract the reader with questions of Spring's reliability as a narrator. I constructed a truth so as not to create a rupture between the reader and the narrative. According to researchers believability is important, 'fictional narratives present characters, events and the setting of a story in such a way that the reader can become transported, and hence change through the narrative' (Bal, Veltkamp, 2).

Fiction can repair identities, stories and relationships ruptured by trauma. Using tools like point of view shifts, tense, narrative lens and free direct speech as well as techniques like juxtaposing time to demonstrate parallels using framing narratives, narratives grant readers access to characters and situations they may otherwise be denied access to. Fiction makes the impossible, possible. It has the potential to make the traumatic accessible. Slavery was traumatic

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<sup>16</sup> In "Site of Memory" (1995), Toni Morrison offers additional insight on the limitations of the Slave Narratives and her need as a writer: 'Along with personal recollection, the matrix of the work I do is the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives' (99).

for its victims, survivors and for those who inherited its legacy. There are many definitions for trauma. Through *Remembered* I attempt to explore multiple traumas such as slavery, the loss of family, Ella's being kidnapped and enslaved, the inability to protect children from slavery, the selling of children away from parents, the threat of rape, Edward's beating, police-sanctioned violence, racism, the legacy of oppression, and loss of family, and the effects these traumas have on the creation of and search for identity. While each trauma varies in immediacy, they combine to create an ongoing crisis and legacy.

Throughout this argument I refer to trauma as defined by theorists Michelle Balaev and Cathy Caruth. Balaev defines trauma as:

Trauma, in my analysis, refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. The term "trauma novel" refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. (150)

Balaev's definition of the trauma novel has been useful in articulating my ambitions for *Remembered* and my belief in the importance of narrative in creating constructive dialogue that engages with racism in America: 'The trauma novel conveys a diversity of extreme emotional states through an assortment of narrative innovations, such as landscape imagery, temporal fissures, silence, or narrative omission-the withholding of graphic, visceral traumatic detail' ("Trends").

Cathy Caruth defines the borders of trauma:

in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (11)

Both definitions are useful when considering trauma and the toll it takes on an individual and wider society.

According to Caruth, ‘trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on’ (4). Access to traumatic memory is denied, ‘for the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension’ (Caruth, 153). By Caruth’s definition, victims cannot narrate trauma: ‘the trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that slows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’ knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characters traumatic recall’ (153). Perhaps this is the case with the Slave Narratives and the WPA Slave Narrative collection. Perhaps the problem is that America does not believe the structured accounts:

The concern with false memories also teaches us, I believe, another and equally important lesson: the difficulty that many people have in believing memories that seem to them to be false simply because they do not appear in easily recognizable forms, and the urgency of creating new ways of listening and recognizing the truth of memories that would under traditional criteria, be considered to be false. (Caruth, viii)

When trauma is edited to fit narrative, does it, as Caruth suggests, lose its power?

Caruth argues that yes, it does: ‘the danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much (154). According to Caruth, ‘[t]he impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not

necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth' (154). Literature fills the space between representing and accessing trauma. While analyzing a literary analysis of Freud's Caruth argues,

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the context relation between knowing and not knowing.

And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet.

*(Unclaimed, 3)*

In relation to trauma, narrative does the work of navigating the unknown and exploring rupture.

As Caruth says when speaking of trauma: 'Through the notion of trauma, I will argue, we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not' (11). In the preface to *Trauma Explorations in Memory*, Caruth discusses a potential consequence of exploring trauma within narrative: 'the problem of how to help relieve suffering, and how to understand the nature of the suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us. To cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of one's story or both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy' (vii).

The telling, according to Caruth, could be problematic for both the narrator and the reader: 'The difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike' (vii). This is also a task for writers.

In writing about traumas of the Black American experience, I attempt to create complex characters facing crisis manifested out of racism, slavery and loss of identity. Because of my research including reading slave narratives, novels, articles, newspapers and nonfiction texts, as well as prior reading on slavery, I was faced with the challenge of creating a new landscape for my characters to navigate that did not further perpetuate stereotypes of slavery, the emancipation nor claim a quintessential black experience. Through its framing structure, *Remembered* is a representation of the ruptures, trauma and subject matter that aims to encourage dialogue, no matter how painful, that can challenge the rhetoric of racism. By interrupting the twenty-four hour present narrative with twenty-four years in the past, I decided to disrupt the present chronological story by showing how the present is haunted by the past.

In order to heal from the ongoing crisis of cultural trauma and its manifestations, we must navigate the terrain between memory and trauma. Michelle Balaev argues that '[c]ontemporary pluralistic approaches in literary trauma theory are more likely to acknowledge both the neurobiological and social contexts of the experience, response, and narratives, as well as the possibilities that language can convey the variable meanings of trauma' (8). Balaev explores the need for a multi-theoretical approach within trauma theory to respond to the diverse experiences of trauma and more fully include experience: 'The range of pluralistic models showcased in this collection moves away from the focus on trauma as unrepresentable and towards a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration' (8). Narrative does not replicate trauma, it represents it. In her essay "Trends in Literary Theory" where Balaev presents multiple theories to analyze texts like *Beloved*, she argues that literature may be able to represent experiences that victims cannot:

Considering the variety of models of memory and dissociation in the trauma novel leads to a position that reconsiders the claim that trauma is unspeakable. Writers express painful, incoherent, and transcendent emotional states in order to demonstrate the ways traumatic experience restructures perceptions, as well as the ways meaning and value are constructed after the event. (161)

Literary theorist Anne Whitehead also argues that trauma can be represented through narrative structure. According to Whitehead, trauma fiction is informed by trauma theory (3). To Whitehead, '[r]ather than simply illustrating the theory, the readings are an extension of the theory's own silences' (4). Narrative has the potential of being therapeutic for the victims, the survivors and the descendants of trauma. When analyzing Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Anne Whitehead argues, 'As traumatic memory is resolved into narrative, the characters gradually cease to be haunted by the past' (142). Narrative techniques build connections between narrator and reader, create empathy and allow space to re-imagine stereotypes while recognizing individuality and experience. Narrative navigates dangerous silences by presenting complex characters that challenge preconceptions. This challenge can lead to displacement of stereotypes.

In *Remembered* I decided to use Tempe's haunting to rupture the present tense narrative to represent the ways the past haunts contemporary America. That Tempe is the bearer of bad news does not undermine Spring's elation and anticipation of her visits. Bad news is inevitable in Spring's life, as are pain, degradation and racism. Still, her painful past brings comfort and understanding as she navigates an equally painful present where her only son lies dying, victim of a predisposed pattern of destruction. In analyzing Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Whitehead argues 'that the novel can do the work of recreating memory and reclaiming story: 'Morrison's fiction,



and black literature more broadly, constructs a counter-narrative which asserts what the historical or literary record has “forgotten” (155).

Still, Whitehead warns that although narrative may possess the language and structures to represent trauma, to be successful, it must resist closure:

I have suggested, on the contrary, that such experimentation represents a creative attempt to articulate in formal terms the impact of trauma. Narrative needs to understand enough, so that it can convey a forgotten and excluded history, but it should simultaneously resist understanding too much, so that it can also convey the disruptive and resistant force of a traumatic historicity. (160)

In *Remembered* I decided to develop a temporal structure that would position the past in conversation with the present through use of the framed narrative, Tempe’s haunting, and explorations of silence. By recreating Spring’s representation of the past, *Remembered* creates discussion that challenges readers to humanize the ‘other’ as opposed to relying on tropes, stereotypes and racist rhetoric. Spring is only able to narrate the past when faced with a current traumatic event and even then, her testimony is shared with a silent witness. She is forced to navigate her silences and to reconcile the past within her present.

Is representing trauma ethical? Just as Caruth warns about the potential of narrative to minimize trauma, Anna Richardson argues that to critics like Berel Lang there are potential dangers to representing the Holocaust:

In other words, any representation of the Holocaust in literature or art can never adequately convey the reality of a lived experience; it will always be bound to convey a

representation of that experience particular to the situation in which it (the representation) was produced (2).

To some theorists, narrative representation of trauma is dangerous because it leaves room for other interpretations:

Lang goes on to qualify any form of representation as essentially a ‘representation-as,’ in which case we can see that any representation is entirely subjective: whereas a survivor of Auschwitz might represent the Holocaust as a living hell, a surviving SS officer might represent the same experience as an excellent career opportunity. (Richardson, 2)

The essay questions the ethics of representing the Holocaust and the potential for misrepresentation.

Still, Richardson argues that not speaking about the Holocaust leads to a unique phenomenon: ‘in addition to this, there is a further difficulty in silence that is particular to the Holocaust... In maintaining a silence there is always a chance that some other party will take the opportunity to fill that silence, and here we come across the spectre of Holocaust denial’ (5). Denial is not merely the realm of the Holocaust. Although few deny slavery, there are people who claim that slavery wasn’t as horrible as people think. In response to Michelle’s Obama’s speech at the Democratic National Convention (2016) during which she said ‘I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves,’ Fox News Reporter, Bill O’Reilly said ‘[s]laves that worked there were well-fed and had decent lodgings provided by the government, which stopped hiring slave labor in 1802’ (Graham). O’Reilly’s misconceptions are in contrast to former first lady Abigail Adams’<sup>17</sup> observations as quoted in the same article: ‘Two of our hardy N England

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<sup>17</sup> ‘As O’Reilly noted, Michelle Obama’s predecessor as first lady, Abigail Adams was living in the White House at the time when slaves were building it, and she recorded her observations of those working on landscaping the grounds’ (Graham).

men would do as much work in a day as the whole 12, but it is true Republicanism that drive the Slaves half fed, and destitute of cloathing, ... to labour, whilst the owner waches about Idle, tho his one Slave is all the property he can boast' (Graham).

In the article, journalist David A. Graham discusses the phenomenon where people attempt to minimize slavery in America when in reality slavery was woven into the American currency:

But as my colleague Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, slavery was the engine of the entire antebellum American economy: "In the seven cotton states, one-third of all white income was derived from slavery. By 1840, cotton produced by slave labor constituted 59 percent of the country's exports." Coates quotes historian David Blight, who wrote, "Slaves were the single largest, by far, financial asset of property in the entire American economy."

(How Abigail...)

Just as there are those who would strive to minimize the significance of slavery, there are others like Rush Limbaugh<sup>18</sup> who declares that America is untouched by the legacy of its slaveholding past. This population is able to deny police profiling, the murder of unarmed black people, the amount of black people in jails and other embedded forms of systematic racism. To this population, racism is not a problem until it is their problem. According to Limbaugh, talking about oppression is problematic. In speaking about the same Michelle Obama speech referenced above, he says:

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<sup>18</sup> Limbaugh is an American conservative radio show presenter.

No matter, no matter when or what the occasion, they can't stop talking about slavery. And largely, in a context of, "Hey, you know what? It isn't settled yet. Hey, you know what? We haven't fixed it yet." I mean, that's their starting point. And I think that's a no-win situation for us. Because we've made great strides. ("The 2000 Recount...")

The transcript of the show provides some interesting information. Limbaugh's point seems to be that Democrats in general and the President and First Lady specifically, need to look at all America has done for minorities since the emancipation. On-air he provides his listeners with an analogy he says he created for a listener during an off-air conversation:

Now, imagine, sir, every argument you have, you continue to remind her that she's to blame for everything because she's the one that had the affair. I said your relationship doesn't have a prayer if you can't let it go. If all you can do is continue to remind her what you've already forgiven her for, then the days of your relationship are over. And the grievance industry does that. They don't want solutions. They want to be able to do just that. No matter what progress, no matter what agreements, no matter what, they don't want to acknowledge that anything has been done. And that's how I hear the Obamas. ("The 2000 Recount...")

To be clear, slavery was not a marriage. In modern America, marriage is generally conceived of as a loving relationship between consenting adults. Not only were children slaves but slaves did not consent to slavery. In Limbaugh's analogy, America is the cheating wife. Cheating, while it creates distrust and is hurtful, is not the same as enslaving millions of people, stealing their identities, forcing them to work without compensation, forcibly separating families, creating laws that dehumanize and perpetuate the demonization of a people or any of the other

atrocities slavery entailed. In his scenario, Black Americans become the husband who has forgiven his wife. As discussed earlier, America has not officially apologized for slavery and if it had, asking for forgiveness is not the same as being forgiven. To be more accurate, Limbaugh's analogy would need to include the wife's continued cheating, her lack of an apology and add layers of psychological abuse, denial, humiliation and her power to control and ultimately silence her husband.

Silence is more dangerous than the potential for misrepresentation identified by Lang. In questioning the ethics of writing Holocaust fiction, Richardson argues that not writing about it is a form of erasure and that fiction is a catalyst for discussion and understanding (7). Humanizing survivors of trauma opens up necessary dialogue that leads to healing the traumatized and the community. Richardson argues Holocaust fiction is capable of representing a wider terrain than survivor testimony:

In other words, survivor testimony can never express the full Holocaust experience, as by definition those who survived did not go to the gas chamber. In this instance fiction has the advantage, as it is technically possible to convey what happens at the moment of death in a fictional narrative. (7)

Considering Whitehead's remarks on structure and Richardson's on silence and my readings of neo-slave narratives and contemporary fiction, I decided to create *Remembered* with complex characters, free indirect style narration, limited point of view characters, framing structure and present tense narrative to allow readers to witness slavery and 1910 racism from the point of view of a select group of characters. The characters, plot and setting presents a fictional representation of slavery and the Emancipation in America as well as some of the

legacies of slavery. The novel does not purport to represent a quintessential slave experience. Narration is focalized through Black point of view characters. The white characters in the novel are peripheral. As history often reflects on slavery as experienced by those who were not slaves, in *Remembered* I chose to focus on slave and emancipated slave characters building their identity and community as they navigate tragedy, opportunity and pain with white characters represented only in relation to black characters. Through reclaiming story, we can revise the narrative.

Contemporary African and Black American writers continue to challenge silence. Ntozake Shange and Bayeza Ifa's *Some Sing, Some Dance*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (banned) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, explore American's silences. It is these works that make my writing possible. It is an honor to use my writing to raise my voice to protest dangerous silences.

### Chapter Three North West Literary Salon: Remembered

A discussion of practice-based research through drafting, editing and revising *Remembered*

‘When sculpture, painting, acting, dancing, literature neither reflect nor suggest anything in nature or human experience we turn away with a dull wonder in our hearts at why the thing was done’ (Hurstun, 28).

North West Literary Salon is a monthly literary event featuring writers from the North West.

This salon constituted a practice-based research project investigating the formation and impact of local literary communities. The salon was produced by my colleague Naomi Kruger and I. I created the salon out of my need for community and stories; I build connections through stories. It developed through networking, research and support, and grew from concept into a monthly sold-out event supported by Lancaster University’s Friend Programme, Public Engagement with Research and Graduate College and supported by Lancaster Arts City’s First Fridays. The salon is a BBC Get Creative Champion and a BBC Get Creative Event.

Each month from May 2015-May 2016, we invited two published authors with a connection to the North West of England, to give dramatic readings from their work. The readings were followed by music provided by a local musician, locally catered food and discussions of process, craft and the author's writing lives. These discussions were moderated by my colleague and I and we invited the audience to ask questions. After the hour-long event, the audience was able to talk with authors and have books signed as well as engage with one another.

The audience ranged from late teens to seniors and included readers as well as writers. During the discussions, audience members asked questions about the mechanics of writing, building a platform, finding an agent, getting work published, finding opportunities, the importance of networking and more. Readers asked questions about the characters, the background and motivation for writing the work(s), influences and more. The discussions were engaging, challenging and enlightening and allowed the audience, myself included, an insight into the writer's process.

In this chapter I will use the stage of North West Literary Salon to discuss my writing process, influences and decisions behind *Remembered*. This forum allows me to creatively, constructively and critically reflect on the process as both a writer and a reader. For the purpose of this chapter, I appear as both host and guest. While representative of the salon's audience, the characters in this chapter are fictional.



## ACT I

### Scene 1

Location: Waterstones King Street, Lancaster, UK

Interior Salon: two leather chairs centered in the bookstore. AUDIENCE is made up of 50 people age 19-65. AUDIENCE sits in rows of chairs facing staged area. Some stand. Five VOLUNTEERS serve food, entertain guests. MUSICIAN has just exited the stage. AUDIENCE applauds.

*(HOST stands, speaks to AUDIENCE)* HOST: Thank you for joining us for this evening's North West Literary Salon. Tonight we are joined by novelist Yvonne Battle-Felton. Yvonne is a novelist and also writes short stories as well as Creative Nonfiction. She is the creator and executive producer of *The Writing Life* and *Stories at the Storey*, a creator of community arts projects and a reader. She is an American writer here in the UK. Yvonne will be reading from her novel, *Remembered*, answering questions and then, I hope, signing books and perhaps joining us at the pub later. *Remembered* is Yvonne's debut novel. I can't wait to hear about her creative practice.

YVONNE: Thank you for having me and for that warm welcome, it's lovely to be on this side of the salon. To give you a little context before I begin reading, *Remembered* is a historically-

influenced novel set in 1910. It is a story of haunting. The 24-hour circadian 1910's present narrative is haunted by the 24-year framed past. Structurally the haunting represents the haunting of contemporary America by our forgotten past. In the novel, Spring is forced to revisit the past first as a witness and as an observer as she reconstructs it. This painful reconstruction does not serve to save Edward's life but to save and preserve memory, and to bring Edward home. Throughout the text, Spring is both haunted by the past and living it as it exists in the present. Edward's beating is both representative of the 1910's racial violence and reflective of modern police brutality in America. Spring is also haunted by Tempe who represents the remembered, transient and sometimes unreliable past.

*YVONNE pauses, leans forward, transforms into the character of Spring. YVONNE reads Sanctuary (pages 152-155) in the voice of Spring. Yvonne speaks slower with pauses between words, lingering eye contact and often looks off into the distance as if at the scene unfolding. She imitates the voices of the other characters within the scene.*

YVONNE: Watson never stops running. I wish he had taken me with him.

*(CHARACTERS: TEMPE, EDWARD, MAMA SKINS, ELLA and SPRING walk in disrupting the silence. The five shuffle guests around to make room. Chairs scrape. Murmuring voices. The group settles. AUDIENCE applauds.)*

EDWARD: We missed the reading. I love that scene. It's one of my favorites.

TEMPE: I heard it before. We didn't miss nothing. You ain't even in that part.

EDWARD: I ain't in most of them but I'm not complaining. If I was in it I would have made the scene though. Me dashing ahead of y'all breaking myself free and dragging you all with me. I wouldn't have left nobody behind.

MAMA SKINS: Your generation don't know nothing about being no slave. Always talking about what you would have done. No telling what you would do if you was really there. Besides, I done my part.

ELLA: You sure did. No one can accuse you of not doing your part.

HOST: Please settle down quietly. You don't want to miss anything.

SPRING: I don't need to hear it. I already know how it ends.

*(CHARACTERS settle down in silence. During the discussion that follows, both HOST and YVONNE engage in conversation, including AUDIENCE with eye contact, etc...the discussion is natural in terms of body language and interaction).*

HOST: Thank you that was lovely. I'm going to get us started with questions and then I'll open it up to the audience. It's 2016 and slavery is a part of the past that society would rather forget. Books like *Remembered*, *Beloved*, *Roots* and *Kindred* won't let us. Why is that? How can we

move forward if writers keep pulling us into the past? In other words, what made you write this book? What do you hope to achieve and why now?

YVONNE: I've always been interested in questions that explore what happened next. The novel started out as my way of answering my own questions like what happened the day after slaves were freed? How did families find one another? I had heard about churches helping people and about the Freedmen's Bureau,<sup>19</sup> but I felt certain that few families were reunited and if they were reunited, I wondered how they reconstructed family, identity and roles. How do you become a mother again? After the pain of separation, even forced separation, as a mother I wondered how mothers forgave themselves and as a daughter, I wondered how children forgave parents. There is a logical level where both parents and their children would have understood that they were often powerless to stop these separations but if I've learned anything from being a mother and a daughter it's that logic does not always govern emotions.

I wanted to know, or needed to know, how people stripped of humanity heal because when it comes down to it, we're broken. 'We,' as in people in general, do some awful things to one another.

ELLA: (*interrupts*) Not all of us do.

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<sup>19</sup> According to the U.S. National Archives, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen Bureau) 'provided assistance to tens of thousands of former slaves and impoverished whites in the Southern States and the District of Columbia' (African American Records: Freedmen's Bureau).

YVONNE: Slavery created ruptures in families and in individuals; how do those ruptures heal? I had another question: whose job is it to heal the Black American community? By ‘community,’ it’s important for me to consider Kai Erikson’s essay “Notes on Trauma and Community”<sup>20</sup> where the theorist writes, ‘Still, trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can...estrangement becomes the basis for communality, as if persons without homes or citizenship or any other niche in the larger order of things were invited to gather in a quarter set aside for the disenfranchised, a ghetto for the unattached’ (Erikson 194).

So that when I say black community, I don’t necessarily mean those residing in specific neighborhoods. As a community, wherever we reside, we need to heal in a way that we haven’t been privileged enough to have had time for. When would we? And if we were grieving, were we writing about it? In the essay ‘In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,’ Alice Walker writes eloquently about the luxury of time and education when she asks the question: ‘How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write’ (234).

There wasn’t a grieving period. There wasn’t a pause between slavery and freedom where Black Americans, as a mass, homogenous group, could afford to sit back and reflect on all that transpired. There were laws created to control where black people travelled and how and laws that could force them right back into slavery if they could not support themselves or family.

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<sup>20</sup> The essay appears in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. Print. p. 183-199.

Realistically, a collective grieving period wouldn't have happened anyway. Black Americans are not a homogenous group. What group is? Within this ethnic identity there are individuals and wherever there are individuals, there are stories. I wanted to know what happened to those stories. I wanted to read them.

AGNES: I wanted to read them too but that part where I learned to read didn't make it in that book, did it?

YVONNE: It was there. I had to take it out. Since beginning my research I have had the honor of reading letters and interviews written by or about emancipated slaves. I have read about families connecting and rebuilding and of course, I have read letters and excerpts about those who did not (Berlin, Miller and Rowland 90-121). Now, while my characters couldn't read, they could tell stories. I build connections through stories. It's how I get to understand people and how I begin to accept, care for and know them. But these stories of emancipated slaves didn't exist within my family. We never sat around and told stories of resilient and industrious slaves escaping, surviving or enduring and we didn't share stories of emancipated slaves searching for and finding kin or searching and not finding them. I don't know if that's because they don't have these stories but my family covets stories. At least those who have them do. On both my maternal and paternal sides of the family, individuals have traced back our ancestors to as far as they can trace. But, they won't share the stories.

SPRING: Maybe these ain't your stories to tell then.

YVONNE: If not mine, who's are they? If not me, who will tell them? I have inherited these stories if not by blood, then by birth. When it comes to my family, I'm told records and books exist but I have never seen them. I am told there is a price to pay for the information and although I recognize there is a value, I can't bring myself to pay it. So if there are stories, I can't access them and I need them. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* H. Porter Abbot writes that 'we do not have any mental record of who we are until narrative is present as a kind of armature, giving shape to that record' (3); black Americans have been underrepresented in literature. We need these stories. And so, I write them. *Remembered* is as much a novel about figuring out my past as it is about navigating my future.

Now while the stories of emancipated slaves are in the past, the past is not that far behind us. It's hard to forget the past when we're still living it. I'm a Black American woman raising Black American children; I can't afford the luxury of believing these aren't dangerous times. America needs stories written by black writers that challenge, expose and shatter a past where black narratives are easily silenced and that acknowledge, dissect and deconstruct the present-day silences; the legacy of slavery that exists today. In *Remembered*, the framing narrative is 1910 America. I selected this timeframe because I wanted to explore stories of emancipated slaves that featured emancipated slave characters. I also became interested in the context of the 1910 train riots of Philadelphia<sup>21</sup>. While researching, I read a *New York Times* article about a man waving a

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<sup>21</sup> During The General Strike of 1910: 'Newspapers reported violence and sabotage to render trolleys inoperable, as well as retaliation by strikebreakers who shot into crowds and accelerated along their routes, causing several bystander fatalities. Newspapers reported that at least two young children lost life and limb from the trolleys, and that as many as ten strikers and bystanders were killed by gunfire from strikebreakers and police' ("General Strike").

gun and barreling down the streets of Philadelphia in a runaway trolley.<sup>22</sup> He was dragged from the trolley and killed. In my mind, the tracks are lit up in flames. What drove him to that action? The man in the article would have been white. Black Americans were not allowed to operate trolleys in Philadelphia in 1910.

EDWARD: That's why I couldn't be the driver? Cause real folk couldn't? You coulda just made it up.

YVONNE: It wouldn't have been true to history.

EDWARD: This fiction, ain't it?

YVONNE: I couldn't afford to just go around inventing facts. I needed to create a believable world. I needed to write *Remembered*. I'm quite literally trying to save lives with literature. Now, this is not without precedence. Writers have turned to literature to save lives for centuries. The Bible and other religious texts provide stories to demonstrate lessons, to illustrate beliefs, to create connections and instruct. Likewise, some contemporary writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison turn to literature to advocate. Novels invite readers into worlds they may not otherwise have entry to. In *Remembered* I take readers through the past as reconstructed by Spring. The text allows room for the reader to draw parallels between the text and the world we live in. There are painful parallels that exist within the text that explore America as I know it

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<sup>22</sup> The article "Special To The New York Times, 'MOB RULE IN PHILADELPHIA'; *The New York Times*, 20 February 1910, captures the riots, violence and general unrest surrounding the Philadelphia train strikes of 1910. The article reports on smashed cars, police being beaten, rocks hurling and destruction.



today. I need people to look at my children, to look at me, to look at Black Americans and in a larger sense, to look at individuals and remember that everyone has a story. These narratives are not the ones shaped and published by mass media, they are not generalizations or stereotypes. They are not stories of the other. They are stories of the self.

In Toni Morrison's 1996 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, Morrison tells a story of a woman who approached her. What I found most touching is the belief in the power of words: 'You have to help us. They are shooting us down in the street. By us, she meant women who wrote against the grain. What can I do? I ask her. She said I don't know, but you have to try. There isn't anybody else' (The Dancing Mind, 12).

I experience a feeling of urgency when I write. I'm writing to save my children's lives. *Remembered* is my stand. It's me lifting my voice in protest against the killing of my people. I recognize that the killing of black people by those in authority is not a new phenomenon and that scares me. Technology, social media, advocacy, everyday people sharing experiences, all of these components makes the stories, the deaths that escape mainstream news outlets, more accessible to the public. But what also scares me is that even with national attention people are still being murdered by police and there are still people denying the underlying problems. The novel engages in necessary dialogue about race and humanity; it challenges the rhetoric of oppression and racism and exposes systematic racism while exploring the legacies of slavery.

I say exposes; those who live with it are aware of racism and injustice even if the causes, the roots, aren't laid bare. My book is as much for them as it is for readers who do not recognize racism in the world we live in. So my intention with the novel is to heal the Black American community and to save us. When Alice Walker discusses this sense of urgency in her essay, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she says,

Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded. (240)

Although my extended family doesn't share some stories, the women in my family share other stories. The stories of my grandmother and my mother, the ones from my childhood, came bearing warnings and lessons. They wove in advice about life and love. These warnings were layered within the protection of stories. They were the stories of their lives. Like a quilt, these stories wrapped me, warmed me and kept me safe, now it's my turn.

MAMA SKINS: Mothers do what they can to protect their babies. You give stories. I give herbs.

That's what you wanted, ain't it? To be a little bit like me?

ELLA: Mommas ain't supposed to do what you done.

MAMA SKINS: I ain't the one who wrote you a mama who couldn't protect you.

YVONNE: Ella's mother protected her the best she could. All the mothers did.

ELLA jumps out of her chair, reaches for MAMA SKINS. AGNES *stands between the two women, one hand on each woman's chest. AGNES glares at MAMA SKINS before leading ELLA away.*

HOST: As a writer of both fiction and Creative Nonfiction, you have also written personal essays. Why did you choose to craft a novel for this particular story?

SPRING: Yeah, why you tell our business instead of your own?

YVONNE: I decided to write a novel as opposed to a series of personal essays responding to slavery, race and stereotypes because I wanted to write the stories of the emancipated slaves living, breathing, loving, wanting and pursuing. I was never a slave and I don't know anyone who was. Emancipated slaves aren't alive to tell me their stories. Fiction offered me a wealth of strategies to explore and employ. I wanted stories of well-rounded characters who were exposed, laid bare and somewhat vulnerable in their own truth. I didn't want to put stories in real people's mouths<sup>23</sup> and I didn't want to write someone else's true story. I'm cautious about my limitations as a nonfiction writer. I worry about representing people ethically and about drawing assumptions based on my research; judging their actions and drawing conclusions that assume I understand them. For me, it's a dangerous slope.

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<sup>23</sup> I recognize the irony of this statement given that I am fictionalized within this chapter.

SPRING: But you pushed us right down it. You don't want people knowing as much about you as they know about us?

YVONNE: Right. I'm not as comfortable on the page as I am off of it. So I created the characters and got to know them intimately and then let them tell me their stories. That created multiple challenges. *Remembered* is what remains of the challenges of ethically and creatively crafting and representing a painful past that challenges the notion that there is one story of the emancipation. I wanted to engage a contemporary readership in stories featuring emancipated slaves as protagonists in their own narratives. Through *Remembered* I explore tense, character development, representations of time, language and voice. The research process allowed me to focus on characters and their motivations and goals at a very human level. This intimacy is portrayed in the choices I make about narration, tense, disclosure, setting. My goal is for readers to experience this intimacy. Through word choice, point of view and narrative lens the characters read as if they can step off of the page. My aim is to create characters that have as Chimamanda Adiche and Zadie Smith discuss in a conversation at the Schomburg Center when discussing Chimanda's book *Americanah*, 'psychological acuity' (O'Neill); a quality that makes characters feel real to readers.

TEMPE: Feel real? We are real!

YVONNE: (*nods agreement*) Exactly. I wanted to create characters who felt true to the reality or world I created. For example, when we meet Ella she's in church. Her world view is a religious one. She's a girl of twelve who would otherwise be struggling to make choices. Many of these

choices would be made for her or with the guidance of her family, with social standing and background in mind. Ella teaches runaway slaves to read. Reading is currency. If all she possesses is her ability to read, she gives it freely. That's not all she has. She has the priceless gift of freedom and it's stolen from her. Through the theft of her freedom, the rapes she endures, the traumas of being enslaved and the pain, the realization that Mama Skins is somehow responsible for her being there, Ella remains unable to speak. Her voice is stolen. This inability to speak, to articulate her pain, does not mean she does not have it. She expresses it in her gestures and expressions and her thoughts. When she wonders, in the midst of her enslavement, what the women will think of her (60) that shows us about her life before slavery; the ways she situates herself within the world. Through free indirect discourse, characters are brought to life. Readers have access to their feelings, something we don't always have access to, even when the characters do not admit them freely or seem aware of them.

SPRING: You spilled my innards all through them pages inviting anyone to come traipsing through my memories leaving footprints through my past. Do you go around telling people just everything that comes to your own mind? Seems like you do that with us.

YVONNE: I talk to myself all the time. I spend a lot of time narrating my life. I spent a lot of time narrating yours too. While writing it, I read the novel out loud as I wrote so that I could hear all of you. I wanted readers to hear that too. Throughout the novel, free indirect discourse serves to show characters as they develop, interact and engage while allowing the reader access to characters they may not otherwise get to know intimately. Often characters' free indirect narration is at odds with their reactions, actions, narration and dialogue. As a tool it allows room

for readers to engage and navigate the text, often with knowledge the narrator does not possess.

I use free indirect discourse to provide access to central characters throughout the narrative.

There are some characters we know only through their gestures, dialogue, actions, and reactions to circumstances.

MAMA SKINS: They don't know enough about some of us.

YVONNE: Readers may not hear from all of you directly but they learn about you all just the same.

HOST: Can you speak a bit more about the characters? I wanted to like them, all of them. I liked some of them some of the time but few, if any, all of the time.

YVONNE: In *Remembered* the characters are flawed.

MAMA SKINS: Speak for yourself.

YVONNE: There are no saints. They didn't start out that way. In earlier drafts Mama Skins was one-dimensional. She was a character without agency who reacted rather than acted. Through feedback and revision she has developed into a more fully-rounded character. She is a mother willing to do anything within her power to save her daughter. As a slave she has limited resources and opportunity. Fiction allows me to develop her character in a more nuanced way, to present her in ways I would not have access to through other mediums so that readers may not

like her but they can perhaps understand the choices she makes and their consequences. The novel allows me to create a context and to allow the characters with their goals, motivations, their ‘reality’ if you will, to respond to that context as they see fit.

MAMA SKINS: As they see fit? If I had my way, the story wouldn’t have ended like that.

TEMPE: I wouldn’t have ended it that way either. First off, we would have been free a whole lot sooner. Better yet, we would have been slaves in the first place.

YVONNE: But then it wouldn’t have been about emancipated slaves.

MAMA SKINS: I can’t say for sure it’s about us at all. Seems to me, each character is a version of you as a mother. Daring, helpless, hopeful, haunting. Each one of us got a little bit of you inside.

YVONNE: I couldn’t possibly be in each character. Besides, if I was in it the story would have to go into present day. You’ll notice the novel ends way before I was born.

HOST: I read in an interview that when you set out to write this novel, you decided it would not be in first person. Why is that? What changed?

MAMA SKINS: Cause she more like me than she wanted y’all to know.

YVONNE: I was worried about the voice of my first-person narrator, my internal narrative voice, taking over the text. My internal narrative voice is somewhat sinister. I was worried my voice would overshadow the text and make the characters unlikable. It isn't that readers need to like all of my characters but I didn't want this dislike to lead them to doubt Spring's version of events and to cast her as an unreliable narrator. I didn't want readers to justify her ending based on her or my voice. I wanted to avoid readers blaming Spring or somehow thinking she got what she deserved. So in earlier drafts, the narrative was third-person limited omniscient with multiple point of view characters and Spring, Ella, Mama Skins, Tempe and Agnes were all kind, caring, generous people; they were caricatures but I felt powerless to change that.

SPRING: I kinda liked that draft. Sort of wish it had never changed.

YVONNE: What started the shift was having readers read my work. My thesis supervisor, Jenn Ashworth, was able to read through the carefully crafted subterfuge to see that Spring was jealous of Tempe and that Agnes and Ella weren't necessarily on the same side and that Mama Skins would have her own motivations. She was able to see this and not judge them. We had a discussion about it. After that I did more research. The problem wasn't just that the narrative was in third person but there were other problems like how did Spring get the information, was she reliable and who, if not Spring, was telling the story?

SPRING: Couldn't nobody but me tell it.



YVONNE: I agree. Spring is the perfect character to tell the story. It's her story. The novel allowed me to make narrative choices about focalization. For several drafts, I struggled with point of view. I had written entire chapters that moved between point of view characters, sometimes within paragraphs. Readers often found this narrative style confusing because there was no indication of how the narrator had acquired the information, who the narrator was and what information was reliable. I wasn't, readers pointed out in workshops, guiding the reader. In subsequent drafts I minimized point of view characters but it wasn't until I settled on Spring as the narrator that the narrative began to take shape and the narration began to focus. Through the process, I read quite a bit about narrative lens and focus and read other novels to experience how writers handled this.

Essays on writing by writers like Emma Darwin confirmed the need to adjust the narrative view throughout the novel ("Psychic Distance"). This reminder was integral in allowing me to experiment with a variety of voices and lenses. As I researched, I realized it is the writer's job to adjust the lens and to know where and why it is at any given point (Darwin). According to Darwin, the problem is not in narrating with multiple points of view but that as a writer I had to 'make sure [to] give the reader some handholds' ('Psychic Distance') or risk losing them. Readers had warned me of this too but it wasn't until I read *Dessa Rose* (1986) that I began to understand what they meant. *Dessa Rose* is narrated from multiple point of view characters at varying narrative distances so that scenes are often told and then retold through another point of view character. It provides a sort of layering of narrative that can prove challenging to unpeel. In earlier drafts, *Remembered* was told solely through third person narration as narrated by Spring.

After receiving feedback and through further research, I made the decision to have Spring narrate the past in first person, present tense while retaining the cinematic qualities I enjoyed creating and allowing readers access through. By focusing on Spring as the narrator I limited the number of point of view characters so as not to as Darwin warns ‘break the connection’ they have with the narrators or characters (“Point of View”). These connections are important to me as a writer and as a reader. In *On Writing Fiction Rethinking Conventional Wisdom About the Craft* David Jauss writes, ‘perhaps the most important purpose of point of view is to manipulate the degree of distance between the characters and the reader in order to achieve the emotional, intellectual, and moral responses the author desires’ (“Long Shots”); it’s a tool, a technique to create space for the reader to get to know diverse characters.

There were other advantages to first-person narration and to narrowing in on Spring as the narrator. Through revision Spring has become a focalizer and narrator. I am using Mieke Bal’s definition of focalization: ‘focalization is the relationship between the “vision,” the agent that sees, and that which is seen’ (118). Spring witnesses scenes from the past and those that she does not witness are framed by her perspective. And so readers get to know Spring through her narration, by the words she uses to describe people, places and events and by the details she leaves behind. Bal writes that ‘the way in which a subject is presented gives information about that object itself and about the focalizer’ (123). But a concern I had with first-person narration was not just that readers would learn about Spring by the way she narrates but that they would learn about me by the decisions I made as well. I wrote through that challenge.

SPRING: For somebody who don't want people to know too much about her, you sure do talk a whole lot about yourself. Who helped me through that challenge? Who decided how much I shared and when?

YVONNE: I did. I made the decisions. I outlined the characters and then fleshed them out more fully; I got to know them and I saw them for their imperfections and still loved them. Then I was able to write them. Before I sit down to write, I need to hear the story. And when I do that, the voice I hear narrating *Remembered*, Spring's voice, is in first person. So I wrote the novel, the framed narrative, in first person.

SPRING: This is you loving us? Slaving my mama, killing her before I got to meet her, taking Watson, Mama, Tempe, leaving me all alone, all that happened because you love us?

YVONNE: If I didn't love you all, I wouldn't have been able to develop you and the novel would have suffered.

EDWARD: Better for us to suffer than the precious novel.

YVONNE: In a way, yes.

HOST: The novel has changed significantly since you began the project. The novel's name is also a significant revision. Can you tell us a bit about the decision to change the title?

EDWARD: I quite liked the old one myself. It had a particular sound to it.

YVONNE: The novel began as *Letters to Edward*. The title came very early on and eventually I wrote around it. I had this idea of the novel existing around a frame of ephemera: a collection of letters and then letters and articles and deeds and receipts but it began with an idea of letters written from Tempe to her son, Edward. I was developing Tempe's voice, the setting, the conflicts and rising action but I had this puzzle and I knew the center but not how all of the pieces fit together. I was in a position of writing the letters into scenes where they didn't fit. Jenn asked who was collecting the article clippings, deeds and other documentation of their lives, the answer was clear: the women of Walker's place would have held tight to anything they could pass down. The only thing they had of value were stories. They may not have been interested in what was written about them.

TEMPE: (*interrupts*) I would have been. I would have wanted to know!

YVONNE: In the stories behind what was written, that's where their history lay. The ephemera would be a catalyst for discussion for story, memory, identity, family. They provided evidence without background. But who was going to write the letters? In drafts I had created scenes where Ella taught Agnes to read and Agnes taught Mary Helen to read but then characters started dying.

MAMA SKINS I suppose you blame me for that too? I didn't have nothing to do with half of all them killings. You ain't got no one to blame but yourself.

YVONNE: Yes, revisions were a bit diabolical. A lot of characters died. Even those that lived were often scarred or silenced. Because I had stripped Ella of her voice and because of reader response and feedback I had decided to shorten Ella's captivity; there was no opportunity for her to pass on the skills of reading, the power of it. While perceptions are important to the Walkers they are not interested in teaching slaves to read. Not just because it was illegal - people break laws all of the time - but because of positioning. One of the characteristics of Walker's place is its location. It is so remote from others that it becomes a self-governed entity. Walker controls that domain. Reading is power and so is history. He is in possession of a narrative, one based on lies, stereotypes, racism and hate. He is in a position to perpetuate and control the rhetoric around the narrative, at least in his presence. Of course the slaves have their own version of history and of self and identity. So Walker controls the written narrative and the slaves control the narratives they pass on to one another. I had to let the letters go.

SPRING: I can't keep hold of nothing. Even the stories I carry ain't all mine.

YVONNE: After practice-based research, I found that cementing a novel around the image (a bundle of priceless letters) no longer drives the story in much the same way as the title, *Letters to Edward*, no longer fits. Once I made the decision to change the title, the narrative opened up in ways that had before been limited. *Remembered* is about remembering, recreating the past. Throughout the novel, Spring narrates the remembered, constructed past.

HOST: When I heard you read a section of the novel a year or so ago, it was in past tense. What led to the decision to change to present tense and how does that affect the reading of the text?

YVONNE: Yes, the first drafts were narrated in past tense. As a writer I found it challenging to develop and maintain the major and minor characters' voices and the voice of the narrator. There are multiple drafts where I hammered it through with jumps in time that I felt, at the time, added depth, pace and perhaps intrigue. Jenn, my first reader, found the jumps in time jarring. I wanted the text, the story itself and the reading of it, to be jarring in that there are things people endure and that others make them endure because of racism, prejudice, and I wanted the reading, the proximity and exposure, the witnessing of pain, to be difficult but not the technical aspects of the novel. I had read David Lodge's *Consciousness and the Novel* on narrative techniques and misinterpreted it.

TEMPE: You found the jumps jarring? Try living them.

YVONNE: Instead of living them, I wrote them. So in *Remembered* I went back, after reflecting on feedback from my thesis supervisor, my peers in the works in progress workshops, and a writer friend, I changed the opening chapter to add a sense of immediacy and changed to present tense. Also instead of making the narrative anti-chronological, I made the narration chronological to cover 24 years in the past and 24 years in the novel's present. This shift added to the narrative tension and I hope, guides the reader through the text while allowing them to immerse themselves in their world. Some of my favorite novels have been ones where the lines have been blurred and I dive in and feel as if I have connections with the characters. Even if we don't speak the same language, as in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

I remember reading that as a young woman and being enamored with the telling, the language the settings and intricate relationships. I found the language a bit of a barrier at the time. The characters spoke in a dialect that I couldn't always understand and their worlds were filled with regrets and men who had let them down. It was, I recognize now, the pursuit of what we all want that I identified with. Hurston created empathy. David Lodge writes that "Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams but telling stories and more particularly connecting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are" (Daniel Dennet as quoted by David Lodge, 16). The books I have always loved have had at their core these connections that brought me as a reader closer to something I needed even if I didn't realize it at the time so I made the decision to change the tense to create a connection with the text.

HOST: You mentioned Zora Neale Hurston. When I've read some Black American fiction, especially post-Emancipation fiction I've noticed the dialect seems to follow certain patterns and conventions. What decisions did you make about dialect and narration?

SPRING: I've been wondering that very same thing.

YVONNE: I made the decision to have my characters, black and white, speak in Standard American English as it might have existed in 1850-1910 rural Pennsylvania and Maryland as opposed to having them speak what is today referred to by some as African American

Vernacular English (AAVE).<sup>24</sup> Choices about literary dialect, defined by Lisa Cohen Minnick in *Dialect and Dichotomy, Literary Representations of African American Speech* ‘as written attempts at representing social, regional or other types of spoken linguistic variation’ (xvi), make the story accessible to readers not fluent in what some consider African American English or black dialect: defined by linguist Geneva Smitherman as ‘a style of speaking English words with Black flava—with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns’

(3). The language choices I make in *Remembered* feel more authentic to my style of writing and my voice as a writer as well as the various voices present within the text. As a Pennsylvania/New Jersey/Maryland native, many of the voices I heard growing up were products of upbringing in rural Pennsylvania or the rural South. According to Smitherman, ‘[g]enerational continuity is important to understanding the relationship between language and race. On the one hand, race does not determine what language a child will speak, there is no such thing as a “racial language” and no race or ethnic group is born with a particular language’ (5). The English of my grandmother, born in 1919 was a product of her upbringing by Southern parents born in the 1890s. It was also a product of her education, region and experience. So that some of the language and dialect choices in *Remembered* represent voices of my past. I am not fluent in AAVE so part of the choice is a fundamental one. Another aspect of the choice is the importance of having the characters speak in their own voices.

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<sup>24</sup> According to the University of Hawaii: ‘African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is the variety formerly known as Black English Vernacular or Vernacular Black English among sociolinguists, and commonly called Ebonics outside the academic community’ and ‘[u]nfortunately, many public policy makers and sections of the public hold on to mistaken and prejudiced understandings of what AAVE is and what it says about the people who speak it’ (“African American Vernacular English”).



I wrote them as I hear them. Language is a beautiful construct and within it there is room for creativity and expression. Take the dialect of my characters: the Walkers come from means. Mrs. Walker is somewhat educated and Walkers Senior and Junior are slaveholders, farmers and business people. They have access to education denied to the slaves. When speaking to one another, the Walkers use familial and colloquial language as well as Standard English. The house slaves have access to this English both as audience and as repeaters. In this way, language is carried from the house to the field. When Myrtle and Samantha emulate the Missus, they speak using her language: ‘My Coloreds are educated and civilized. I teach them to read and write; to talk proper. I couldn’t abide a bunch of tribe talk in my home’ (77). I use language and dialect to show relationships between characters and their relation to society and place.

Many Black American writers have used language to demonstrate African American characters as bilingual; possessing the ability to communicate both within the community and outside of it. Still, readers expecting black writers to conform to a standardized rendition of black dialect would be mistaken. In her essay “My People! My People!” Zora Neale Hurston writes,

still, if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My people!  
My People! (237)

Black characters, just like characters from other ethnic groups, will adapt and adopt language in a variety of ways; some that conform and others that resist standardized speech.

EDWARD: It would have been nice to hear my voice somewhere in there.

YVONNE: You spoke as a baby, once. Remember? Still, it would have been interesting to hear how your voice was influenced by freedom, Spring's silences, your education, opportunities and racism. Anyway, another reason I chose to avoid stereotypical dialect is rooted in Minnick's discussion on African American speech as represented in American literature. According to Minnick, what readers may have considered black dialect was not written by black writers '[a]nd in fact, until quite late in the century, most of the writers who represented African American dialect were white' (10). Minnick goes on to summarize research by linguist Michelle Birnbaum:

Birnbaum takes the argument beyond issues of national linguistic identity, however, and contends that the rise in American dialect writing by the last decades of the nineteenth century, especially the representations of black speech by white authors, had less to do with realism in characterization than with the agitated reaction of Southern whites to radical shifts in the social order resulting from the Emancipation (10).

So the expectation of a universal black dialect is not the black reader's expectation.

In her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Zora Neale Hurston, cultivator of language, anthropologist, writer, biographer, researcher and interviewer, simultaneously offers readers a guide to dialect within black literature and a warning: 'I know that I run the risk of being damned as an infidel for declaring that nowhere can be found the Negro who asks "am it?" nor yet his brother who announces "Ise uh gwinter.'" He exists only for a certain type of writers and performers' (Hurston, 31). After offering readers general examples of dialect, Hurston goes on to warn: 'I am mentioning only the most general rules in dialect because there are so many quirks that belong only to certain localities that nothing less than a volume would be adequate' (31).

In reality, the Black Americans that I know and the White Americans that I know speak the same English. What may differ are the references, emotions and perceptions. In life as within literature, people and characters slip in and out of language based on the characters they are speaking to, context and other narrative pressures. In *Remembered*, James speaks more formally with the master (92) than he does when speaking with Agnes (118). Spring navigates the realms of language both as narrator and as character. When speaking with the officer and the nurse her words are measured, her word choice is concise (24-29). She knows what is at stake: they control not only whether she sees her son but how long he lives. Think about that...she is not allowed to mourn, grieve but must act, even then, to balance someone else's perception. She is also on trial. Through her interior monologue we have access to her language.

Ella is educated. She thinks in a representation of regional Standard English (page 76) but is otherwise silent. The silence is also a form of dialogue in the novel, it reflects the ways the characters navigate the space between words. Agnes, Mama Skins and presumably Jonah can hear Ella talking in her sleep. They have access to her inner thoughts only when she is not able to grant access. The women are forced to navigate Ella's silences, to interpret them. The silence leads to misinterpretations like when Agnes doesn't expect Ella to drown herself and yet, she tries (48) and later when Ella tries to tell Agnes that she has lost her voice, Agnes misunderstands (76). Agnes continues to misinterpret silences at points throughout the novel (as on page 85) while Mama Skins purposely mistranslates Ella's intentions but is able to read her quite clearly. When Grace walks into the river, Mama Skins understands both women (85). Despite her silence, the reader, who has access to Ella's thoughts as well as gestures and the narrative, witnesses the disconnect within the dialogue. I'm interested in silences and in the

things people think they know; the ways we interpret one another's gestures, stories or dismiss them and the way silence is used against people.

The women have complicated relationships. Agnes is Ella's captor, working for the master, the daughter of Mama Skins, the accomplice or co-conspirator and lover of James, Ella's rapist. Agnes is at first jealous and then sees the girl as a possible way out. Their relationships are complicated by their experiences, motivations, needs, their perceptions and of course the varied ways they are all being silenced and how they navigate that.

HOST: How did you make the decision of who gets to speak and who remains silent?

EDWARD: I had that exact same question!

YVONNE: In the way that texts choose who to focus on and who remains silenced, I chose to silence white characters in *Remembered* to allow them to be heard only when their stories are authenticated by black voices. This is their story. The white characters provide much of the tension, plot and conflict; black characters act as focalizers. Silencing white characters allows me to manipulate perceptions; just because you do not hear their voices does not minimize their impact. They are still there. Ella's silence is a consequence of the physical and psychological trauma she endures. It is her response to the assault of the rape and the beating afterwards and to her ongoing enslavement. In drafts, Ella's silence gave me the opportunity to explore Cathy Caruth's theory of silence in relation to trauma, death and those left behind ("Parting Words" 10). Through revision I was also able to explore Kai Erikson's theory that "[t]he most violent

wrenching in the world, that is to say, have no clinical standing unless they harm the workings of a mind or body, so it is the damage done that defines and gives shape to the initial event, the damage done that gives it its name' (185). These representations of silence allow me to explore ways characters survive, endure or succumb. Edward's silence is also a consequence of the violence he endures. Many characters are silenced within the text. Silence acts to protect and to wound; it is both a shield and a sword.

EDWARD: But I could have at least said some last words. It would have been a brilliant scene.

YVONNE: But it wouldn't fit the narrative. I could have forced some final words into a dramatic death scene but they wouldn't have fit.

HOST: Family, blood, identity, naming, memory, relationships; there are key reoccurring themes explored within the novel. I was curious about the role of mothers and the theme of mothering in the novel. In *Remembered*, motherhood provides characters with strengths. How do these relationships represent motherhood in your life?

YVONNE: Mothers are amazing people. They are some of the most courageous, resilient people that I know. I'm interested in how far a mother will go to protect her children and what that edge might look like. As a mother I have fears about protecting my own children, being a good parent; these are, I think, human themes. I don't ever want to be in a position to know what I'm willing to do to save my children.

MAMA SKINS: Why not? You showed the world what I'm willing to do.

YVONNE: In *Remembered* I explore the lengths a mother will go to save her child. To lead Edward home, Spring is willing to reconstruct her past and let it take her somewhere she has not consciously allowed herself to go in decades. Recreating the past opens Spring up to vulnerabilities. In this case the discussion is both the cure to and the cause of duress. Spring is engaging in a challenging conversation under stressful circumstances.

Modern parenting is filled with uncomfortable conversations. Today we warn children about how to be safe, how to talk to strangers or not to, how to talk to people in authority. How do you tell them that to someone, their life has no value, no meaning? What might these conversations have been like in the past? How would you teach a child to be a slave in 1855? Earlier in the novel Agnes teaches Ella how to survive in the fields (108), later she instructs her daughters in the art of appearing undesirable (125). She would have this conversations many times. She defines the boundaries and laws of her house (127) even when the reality, a slave owner and growing daughters, challenge her boundaries. For example, surely the girls know the house belongs to Walker and that they are slaves. Yet when Agnes is reminded of it by Tempe, she grabs her by the arms and shakes her (127). It is, I think, reminiscent of the reminders of the struggle between raising a family and parenting and being a slave parent; recognizing that as a slave, you are not the final authority in their lives. In *Beloved* (1987) Sethe's love for her children forces her to make a difficult choice: save her children from slavery or let them live as slaves. Either way, the children and Sethe are doomed: 'for a used-to-be slave woman to love

anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love' (54).

In *Remembered*, I explore how my characters navigate motherhood. Agnes tries to protect her children but is not always able to keep them safe. When Tempe challenges the preacher's teachings on religion and Agnes stands powerless to intervene (141) it is not only a representation of the past but it is how parenting in 2016 can feel to me as a black mother. When I watch the news, have conversations with my children, plan the future, I am reminded that as a black mother to black children there are limits to how safe my children are. They can be perceived as a threat. At times I feel almost powerless to protect my children in the face of injustice, racism, brutality. I can be angry, hurt, indignant, silent or vocal but to feel powerless, I do not want to feel that.

Later in the text Agnes attempts to construct a future for the family (170-174). In Agnes' experience, marrying a free man is a step towards being free. While she is in a position to exercise some agency over her own life and that of her girls, her resources are limited by her place within society, on the plantation and her lack of experience off of the plantation. She has never known freedom. Having and wanting a family must have been a precarious situation for a slave parent. On one hand wanting a family is a very human response to life. Imagine not being able, legally, to protect your child? Not knowing you would have it or for how long? Although it will be born a slave, Agnes is still excited about the birth of her grandchild (176). I hope to show the blurred line between wanting a family and knowing you have no control, no guarantees. We take a lot of things for granted.

But that fear, the fear that makes you think staying a slave is safer than running away, then running for freedom, it's a very real fear and I wanted to do it justice, to be ethical in the writing of it. I didn't want to pass judgment on slaves who wanted to stay alive and so who seemed complaisant in bondage. That was not the case, could not have been the case for everyone. There were slave catchers, patrollers, sheriffs; the laws were in place to make fighting or running for freedom illegal. Can you imagine? Laws in place that say someone has the right to own you and you have only the right to be owned. That they can beat, maim, kill, rape you at their will and there are no protections because as black people you can't testify against a white person and because white people were the ones making the laws and rules. Who would you trust? So that when Agnes tells the girls not to run away, to stay and wait for Edward to purchase their freedom (183) it's a true representation of the world she lives in and her place within it.

Mama Skins takes different risks and faces different obstacles but ultimately has a similar motivation: to keep her child safe. She is willing to kill for her child; she has killed for that.

MAMA SKINS: I knew it! You done all this to us to think on your own self. Selfish. That's what that is. Being a mother changed me. But you knew it would, didn't you?

YVONNE: Motherhood seems to change people. It tests them. When the novel closes, Spring's earlier fire is reignited. How will she use that? She still has Lillian, she's still a mother. She is both a mother turned loose and a mother restrained, tethered.



HOST: Largely because of Mama Skins, the slave women have solidarity and agency. They control whether they have children, are raped, their genealogical footprint. How did you reach decisions about agency and medicine?

YVONNE: It was important to me when writing to be as true to human nature, individuals and medical parameters as possible. People have been using herbs to self medicate for centuries before prescriptions were in fashion. Still, I contacted a medical listserv to ask medical specialists for guidance. These specialists are researchers and practitioners from around the world. In the original draft I wanted Edward to have a hereditary disorder. Through research I learned that medical science did not support this. According to the doctors and research the African American population suffered tuberculosis but it would have been easily detected. I wanted there to be a condition that could only be traced through the blood leading up to the revelation that Spring was not Edward's biological mother. Everything, the rising action was leading up to the central conflict and Spring revealing this. Through feedback and reflection I realized his biological parentage wasn't really, especially in that timeframe, that unique. What was most interesting was motherhood and limits. I had been searching for an herb that could be used to minimize fertility and abort a baby; a herb that would stay in the blood. My clinical pursuit seemed to add more complications than I solved. According to doctors, there was no such herb. Another doctor recommended I make it up. I didn't want readers to get distracted by the fact that an herb I claimed did one thing, did nothing of the sort. Of course I also didn't want readers testing it out. I thought I knew, or heard or read stories about slaves exercising a degree

of agency by taking herbs to induce miscarriages and those stories intrigue me.<sup>25</sup> As a researcher, I have not found any credible evidence to support what may have been merely my need as a black woman to imagine a way slave women could endure. These imaginings took into account only slavery and nothing of religion, hope or the human capacity and desire for family and love. In *Remembered*, the women of the circle are held together by community, history and by secrets. It seems logical to me that they would share pains as well as remedies. But these remedies do not come easy; they come at a price. Some women pay it, some do not. Ella exercises agency as well. When she refuses to eat (68) this is her protest against the circumstances, against her enslavement and later against the women she blames for it. As narrator Spring has agency over representations of the text by how she narrates it. Early in the text she sets the parameters for what she knows and what stories she is authorized and able to give voice to (4). Later, she sets the parameters for the way she will tell it: 'Tempe, if I'm going to tell this story, I'm going to tell it my way' (35). Tempe, who both has access to the history and has lived it, does not have the voice. She cannot communicate directly with Edward and must either concede to letting Spring tell it or risk the story being silenced along with her. Although Spring tells Edward how she acquires the knowledge, the limited omniscience allows readers to question her reliability. Spring is creating and re-creating her past for an audience making it a rendition or performance. In this way, Spring reclaims a past that attempts to erase, control and/or color her role in her own narrative.

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<sup>25</sup> "Slave Medicine: Herbal Lessons from American History" (1998) provides a brief compilation of first-person accounts of herbal medical uses as told by emancipated slaves. These are cures for ailments; not to induce miscarriage.

HOST: Much of the novel is narrated from within the hospital room. Hospitals are typically a place of healing. Can you tell us about the role of setting in the novel?

YVONNE: The hospital is still a place of healing. Edward is sent there to be relieved of physical pain. Spring is also wounded. She is healed or revived by her time there. After the painful recreation of her past and set in motion by the fabula, Edward is dying, her passion is reignited. Spring regains her voice. The past undergoes a sort of surgery, a reconstructive one as Spring shapes, molds and brings it to life. In *Remembered* the hospital also acts as a courtroom where Edward, who has already been sentenced, stands trial. The hospital room provides a healing backdrop against the violent present that lies outside of the door (the police) and outside of the window (the mob) while Edward, the narratee and captive audience who cannot respond, is between life and death, fact and fiction, acceptance and denial of a past created and recreated to lead him home. The hospital was also a crucial point in my decision to create a fictitious neighborhood.

HOST: Watching you read that was like watching a character brought to life. How did you develop Spring's voice? She's around 65 when we first meet her.

SPRING: You just setting there giving out all my secrets. Do you hear me telling anybody how old you are?

HOST: I'm sorry. When Spring narrates, she's a young woman. She is narrating events that she knows the outcome of for instance, when she narrates the scene you've just read about Watson

running away, it is with the knowledge that she will never see him again. How does this knowledge of the outcome determine the information Spring relays to Edward and the way she relays it? What choices does she make as both editor and writer of the past?

SPRING: You think I had choices? Tell this, don't tell that? I tell what I told for my boy.

YVONNE: *Remembered* invites readers to re-imagine the reconstructed past. It is a dialogue between the present and the past. When we meet Spring in 1910, she has knowledge of the past both as she has experienced it and as she has learned it through Tempe, a ghost and representation of the past. Spring's experiences give her perspective over facts and with that perspective comes an interpretation of them as well as a narrative distance. I'm interested in some of the ways history is interpreted. In America, history is often interpreted from the perspective of the majority. This means that black voices and black stories are often edited out, forgotten, misrepresented. Through *Remembered*, I introduce complex characters who recreate a fragmented past. I struggled with my own need to justify or verify Spring's version through documentation so the reader does not discount her recreation of the past. Still, what does Spring want Edward to think about her and her actions?

Spring is conscious of an audience: the patients, Tempe, the hospital staff, Edward. When narrating, she paints a picture to show the story. For example, she says 'Ella gets up, leaving the empty bowl behind. She walks round the back to the garden. Sits on a patch of packed earth. Watches the clean sheets billowing on the washing line. Dancing like ghosts' (105). She is a storyteller. Still, she is worried he will judge her, judge those before her and ultimately judge

himself by buying into stereotypes of claims by white society that he is not good enough, or is not worthy of trust, compassion. She is worried that he will know her past, her human responses, and reject her. But in order to lead him home, to let him die among those who would welcome him, she reveals her truths, jealousies and vulnerabilities.

HOST: We have a few minutes left. Let's open the discussion up to the audience.

AUDIENCE #1: Was the book always going to be haunted?

SPRING: Haunted? There ain't no ghosts in this story.

YVONNE: No, in the first draft Tempe was alive. She was destined to die but she wouldn't do it. Rather, in my mind I saw her die several times but unlike other characters that died, Tempe wouldn't stay dead. She haunted later drafts so that when I imagined the story she was always in it, lingering. Tempe carries the past. She is the embodiment, the spirit of the past. She haunts the present narrative in the ways we are still haunted by the past. When writing about *Beloved*, Walter Benn Matthews writes, 'It is only when the events of the past can be imagined not only to have consequences for the present but to live on in the present that they can become part of our experience and can testify to who we are' (8). It strikes me that the haunting represents the past in necessary ways both in the narrative and the structure of *Remembered*.

I didn't realize there was a stereotype about black people and religion or ghosts until Jenn mentioned it. The black people I've grown up with and around have all been religious, in their

own ways sometimes more zealous than others. When reading the slave narratives and the interview questions provided by the Library of Congress Archives I was surprised that the interviewers assumed the slaves were all Pentecostal and that they had all seen ‘haints.’ But I wanted to play with this idea because it interested me, the question of the ways the mind copes with stress, trauma and everyday injustices. I wanted to explore the ways we carry the past with us, the ways it chases us and haunts us and the ways we are defined by it. Still, in earlier drafts, I wanted a love story. I wanted Spring to find and keep love. There is plenty of love in her life but lasting romantic love just didn’t seem to fit the narrative.

AUDIENCE #2: There’s a lot of attention placed on the names of characters. How important are names within the text?

YVONNE: Many of the names are names I’ve grown up with: Agnes, Tempe, Edward although in different contexts and seldom with a view to them as characters with stories that pre-dated their relation to me. Who was my great grandmother before she became Tempie Watson? Through *Remembered* I explore imagined connections to the past but the novel does not represent the history of Agnes, my great-aunt, Tempie, my great-grandmother, or Edward, my grandfather, in any true sense.

Names connect us to the past and the future. When Spring finally gets to pick a family name, the choice is made for her. She doesn’t have time to consider possibilities, pasts and futures (216). It’s a potentially poignant moment for her. Barring nicknames where family members, the community or the child chooses the names people are known by, people enjoy a level of freedom

and take pride in naming. Imagine not having that right. Imagine being a parent and having someone else name your child. Having the name changed when the child, like livestock, is sold from owner to owner. How would you find that child? With or without a name, memories become important but memories are not always translatable or recognizable when shared. Because I have challenges with memory I'm curious about the unreliability of memory (202) and how this inaccuracy can complicate finding others (204). How many people would have encountered situations where they relied on memories to reconstruct images of loved ones? In an earlier draft, there was a scene where there was a naming ceremony. While the scene helped me explore how personal names are, their power and significance, the scene did not make it into the final draft. It was complicated by its existence within a scenario that saw Edward grieving the loss of Tempe. He could not reconcile the physical loss without the physical body and so he began searching for her. The search and circumstances began to drive him insane. The naming ceremony allowed emancipated slaves to carve their old names in a tree, scratch them out and carve new ones to name themselves. The scene has been deleted. I hadn't made clear to the readers how Spring might have found Edward's mother's house and other details. Through revision I recognized the scene had major problems. Names and naming remain important themes I explore in *Remembered*.

AUDIENCE #3: The novel takes place in Maryland and Pennsylvania. The novel opens and closes in a fictional town of Grammercy. What led to creating a fictional location?

YVONNE: The novel is historical fiction. I hadn't quite settled on place even as I wrote the novel. Jenn's feedback was often about lack of describing where something was in relation to

something else and providing the reader with concrete locations. The need to clarify place led me to more research about Philadelphia, events and locations. It also led to the decision to fictionalize a Philadelphia neighborhood where my characters can live without the constraints of conforming to real people's narratives. At times, I found writing historical fiction ethically challenging. Research on which streets were segregated and which hospitals accepted black patients led me to research alleyways that did not serve the interests of my novel. I became, for a while, so entrenched in Philadelphia's past that I could not write without worrying about representations of places and assigning a history to them.

My example is Old Buckley Hospital. A medical forum comprised of nursing professionals, academics and historians told me the hospital would have accepted black patients in 1920. My patients were then sent to Old Buckley. There is a scene where Spring is led through the bowels of the hospital beneath the white portion of the hospital to the decrepit black section. As far as I know, this did not happen in life. But what does the fictionalized past that I create say about Old Buckley? In what ways am I willing to compromise its integrity or authenticity to serve my story? At what point does the past become a corpse for my characters to dance on?

Research, feedback and reading helped me anchor the novel in the past and to create a historically-informed fiction. In A.S. Byatt's essay 'True Stories and the Facts in Fiction' she asks the question: 'How far can one change "truth" in fiction' (105)? I would argue that as writers, we must tread carefully when representing named individuals and places. It is one thing to craft fiction and present it as fiction and quite another to present fiction as fact. Through researching about slavery, the emancipation, Philadelphia, laws and texts that document them, through drafting, revision, feedback and the process of reading the work aloud, I created a



representation of the past. Once I gave myself permission to create a location, the novel opened up in fundamental ways.

TEMPE: Seems to me you gave yourself permission to create a whole lot of things.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #4: But is this another form of voice appropriation?

YVONNE: As a writer, I enjoy a certain amount of creative license. Through revision and feedback, developing my creative process I have created characters that challenge stereotypes, assumptions and prejudices. My characters are male and female; they span generations and social classes. I try to craft them as complex characters unique from one another and to tell their stories because they cannot. Generally speaking emancipated slaves are dead, and when I say emancipated slaves, I mean those actually set free and am not talking about modern-day slavery, human trafficking or other forms of slavery that existed then and/or as a result of. So, generally speaking emancipated slaves are dead. We need to write their stories and write them as characters so as not to risk over-generalizing, forgetting, ignoring and erasing their identities and experiences. Appropriation is when you take the voice of the other; when you take a story that could be otherwise told by the group represented. There are quite a few stories that do it. People justify it, make cases for it, argue for it and against it but cultural appropriation and voice appropriation are legitimate concerns. Is it ethical? Appropriate? It depends on why you are doing it. Take Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Some readers were angered by it. At that time, works by black authors needed an introduction by a white member of society. Their voices and stories needed to be authenticated in ways white writers' did not. Stowe's work

likely reached a wider audience than it would have if it been written by a black author. She gave voice to a population that laws, society and the publishing industry denied.

In terms of contemporary writers, consider Barbara Hambly. Her historical fiction, *A Free Man of Color* (1998) features a black male protagonist, an emancipated slave. Her purpose for the novel is ‘to entertain’ readers (iii). In the foreword Hambly acknowledges the appropriation: ‘I have tried to portray attitudes held by the free people of color toward the blacks—those of full or almost full African descent, either slave or free—and toward the Creoles...as I have encountered them in my research’ (ii). Hambly goes on to acknowledge the trespass: ‘the territory is touchy for those who have suffered, or whose families have suffered, from the prejudices and discrimination that once was—and still is to some extent—commonplace. To them I apologize if I have inadvertently offended’ (iii).

Is it her story to write? Is it mine? One of the things I find problematic in terms of voice and cultural appropriation in literature is the assumption that the culture cannot speak for itself. It is true that African American/Black American society has been silenced. This silence is also represented within publishing; an industry where in the past, stories written by white authors featuring black characters were published when works written by black authors were not and where today there are few black editors at major publishing houses. Writing across cultures, ethnicities and nations can enrich us all. If you are doing it ethically; presenting characters that are well-rounded and complex and sharing their stories in a way that the culture cannot speak for itself, I believe it can be done.

In writing *Remembered*, I am not claiming to be an author who is necessarily a descendant of slaves—I do not know and because my ancestry is in other people’s stories, I will not find out easily. But in terms of modern-day American racism, I am affected regardless. I am a black American woman. The culture of racism that existed prior to slavery and that has survived it is woven into legislation, policing, judicial systems, the penal system and the very fabric of America. I may not be a descendant of slaves but I have inherited the modern day racism that lives on.

EDWARD: Is that why I don’t get any dialogue? Because you ain’t a man?

YVONNE: I’ve never been a slave, an emancipated slave, a woman in my sixties. I haven’t been a whole lot of things but through research, imagination and creativity, I created characters that do not represent me. You don’t have any dialogue because you are in a coma.

EDWARD: Tempe gets to speak from the dead and I can’t speak alive?

YVONNE: I’m letting you speak now.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2: You are an American writer writing about American slavery while in the UK. How did the location influence the writing?

YVONNE: My writing is informed by my experiences as a reader, a writer and my perceptions of the world I live in. I came to Lancaster to write stories of reuniting the Black American family

after the Emancipation. As a full-time researcher, I expected to have time to create, to research and to explore techniques. I found that and more. Being in Lancaster allowed me to understand the role of Britain in the slave trade. Through conversations with taxi drivers, people I have met in pubs and on walks, and other Lancaster locals, I have a fuller picture of the diaspora and slavery's legacy in other parts of the world. Whether wandering along Lancaster's quiet yet flourishing streets or strolling along the canal, I am reminded of the cost African slaves paid for Lancaster's wealth.

Still, I feel welcomed in Lancaster. Here, conversations with strangers turn to research and then to questions about whether I have seen Sambo's grave. The question is accompanied by the story of the grave. The teller watches my expression to see if I believe the tale of a distraught slave mourning his dead master. I don't. Typically, the teller does not either. Before I can slip away, I am armed with advice to look for stained glass windows, street signs and other relics of slavery. I am touched by something else. It isn't the person's story that moves me but their need to tell me; it seems a relief to admit the past as if to speak it renders it mute. I am still not used to strangers talking openly about race, to their need to claim the past or to the need, not maliciously, but gently, to reveal a past they do not take pride in—or rather, to reveal it to me. I thought *Remembered* was the story of slavery in America. I have learned that it is a global story recreated, revised and represented around the world in many languages and many, many outcomes.

Distance has created freedom for me to look at America more objectively. To love a country that despises you and casts you as 'the other' within your own narrative is a hard thing. To write

about it objectively while being immersed in the melting pot would prove challenging. Distance gave me time to write and time to grieve. I came to Lancaster in 2013. Since then, the melting pot of America has bubbled and boiled over but it is not an American recipe. In the past I considered slavery, racism and stereotypes American inventions. It seemed that America had a patent on racism and had exploited it relentlessly. This ignorance was not in response to history or textbooks. It was due to perception: if things are so bad here, surely they have to be better somewhere else. What time away from the U.S. has allowed me is a wider perspective that is both sad and somewhat liberating. Obviously, America did not invent racism or slavery. American policing, the amount of black people killed at the hands of police officers is horrifying. Around the world, black and brown people have been and are victims of racism, genocide, colonization and other race-related atrocities.

But being in Lancaster gave me something else, something I didn't recognize I needed. It gave me community. For the first time in a long time, I felt I needed to be a part of something. This need helped me develop a greater understanding of the power of story. In 2014 a colleague and I created *Stories at the Storey*, a true story open mic night. This platform encourages people to share their true stories around a theme. I have learned more about people through their stories than I have through any other form of communication. *Stories at the Storey* is practice-based research. Through the project, I witness stories build community, reshape narrative and create connections.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #5: Where can I find your book?

YVONNE: Here at Waterstones it will be in the fiction section. In America it will depend on the bookstore. It may be in Historical Fiction. In U.S. libraries it varies. While some libraries shelve books in the African American section, novels like Edward P. Jones' *The Unknown World* can be found in the African American section as well as in literary fiction and historical fiction on Amazon. The internet challenges the ways readers view the world and grants access to characters, stories and places by limiting or removing barriers that challenge diversity. Unlike the library where every book is given one place on the shelf, the internet offers books the opportunity to transcend boundaries and categories with the ability to virtually exist wherever readers look for them. In many American libraries, books written by Black American writers end up in the African American section regardless of subject or genre (MD Pratt/SLRC Librarian Email). The African American section is a wondrous place.

On one hand, having an African American section evidences the segregation of books. Books written by non-black American writers are elsewhere and books written by Black American writers are shelved in this section:

I would say that the fiction in that Department and in most African American collections is by African American authors. A work of fiction by a white author with African American characters would probably not be included. Unless it had a huge impact on African American history, like say, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (MD Pratt/SLRC Librarian Email)

How can readers find diverse books? According to a chat with a Maryland librarian, this may not necessarily be problematic because many books in the African American section are also in other sections of the library. If that's the case, why do readers need an African American section?

American Libraries Magazine provides an interesting timeline that chronicles the history of library segregation through to desegregation (Wheeler, Johnson-Houston, Boyd). Is the African American section a remnant of the Jim Crow era or an opportunity to celebrate Black American writers?

Twenty years ago I found the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore. I was greeted by the largest African American collection of works I have to this day ever seen. The section is ensconced behind a glass entry. The section feels well loved. Enoch Pratt is an old library with a long history. Each section of it has a different atmosphere. The one in the African American section is welcoming. The section contains fiction, nonfiction and genres in between. Depending on what I'm looking for, I always stop in the African American section. There are no 'colored only' signs reminiscent of the American Jim Crow segregation era. Anyone can gain access to the treasures found within its shelves. The entire library is open for perusal by anyone. It does not feel like segregation. The African American section with its rich furnishings and dark wood paneling feels historic. I have been in smaller African American sections.

The Woodlawn library has a few shelves dedicated to African American literature. No matter what genre I'm looking for, as long as it's written by an African American writer, the book is there. From vampires to romance, African American writers are housed within the African American section. Like many readers, if it wasn't for this section, I would search through general fiction or genre sections and stumble upon diverse writers with diverse stories and characters. Today, while many writers do not want to end up on the African American shelves the African American section was my entry into worlds peopled with characters that looked like me. Their

locations, circumstances, yearnings, truths were as different as the many plots, writing styles, narrators, timeframes and locations in which they lived were unlike my reality, but the discovery of a section dedicated to works by African American authors showed me that stories with people that look like me written by people that look like me are real.

Depending on your local library, you'll find my works near Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler and Alice Walker; not because we write about similar themes or because we have written Neo-Slave Narratives<sup>26</sup>, but because we are black writers first, regardless of theme. My target audience includes both black and white readers. *Remembered* is for black readers who appreciate novels with strong female characters and explore slavery and its legacy. While these readers are familiar with racism in America, *Remembered* may provide opportunities to interrogate their own responses. Likewise, being reflected on the page is empowering. White readers who already value diverse stories may choose to search for new novels within the African American section of their local library. Because they are already there, *Remembered* will offer them the opportunity to connect with characters they may or may not have intimate knowledge of. The process of reading the novel may strengthen relationships or engage them in constructive dialogue about race and the legacy of slavery. White readers with limited interaction with black people and black characters are less likely to wander willingly into the African American section. If these readers are resistant to diverse characters and more likely to make assumptions

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<sup>26</sup> As defined by Valerie Smith in her essay 'Neo-Slave Narratives,' (2007), contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives '...provide a perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses, among them: the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities)' 168.



based on stereotypes, they are the readers I need most to reach. I can't reach diverse audiences from a segregated shelf.

AUDIENCE: What happens next? At the close of the novel Spring is surrounded by community, she's angry and burning. Does this mean she will return to violence? Are you advocating the black community resort to violence against police brutality and other forms of silencing?

YVONNE: By itself, violence doesn't work. I'm a writer. Part of my contribution to an America that actively dismantles systematic racism, ends centuries of abuse and recognizes the importance and power of story is to write to raise my voice in advocacy. There are marches and protests, boycotts and shootings in protest. Alone, nothing works. Collectively, we can save lives.

SPRING: Whatever happens next Edward will still be dead. Tempe will be dead. Mama Skins, Ella and my own mama will be dead. It can't end no other way.

YVONNE: I can create complex characters that readers empathize with and that deconstruct racist stereotypes. Nothing I can do will bring the dead back to life. I'm writing to represent the lives of the dead and to save the lives of the living.

HOST: Thank you all for joining us for this month's North West Literary Salon. Please join us for refreshments after this song from tonight's MUSICIAN.

(MUSICIAN takes stage. MUSIC plays as lights fade to black)

END

## Chapter Four

### Mothering from the Grave

*'You don't want them to grow up to be slaves, but you do want your children to grow up'*  
(Cooper, 25).

My mother's decision to leave when I was sixteen sent me into a period where I felt rejected. I mourned the relationship we had, the future I had expected to have. Hers was not a death but a representation of death; a physical departure that left me motherless. It would be years before she returned and decades before our relationship was repaired.<sup>27</sup> For the purpose of this discussion, I will examine mothering from the grave in *Remembered* to explore the relationships between mothers and daughters and the impact of my mother's own departure on my writing, as well as the importance of context when considering choice and the illusion of choice. Through discussion of select texts, I will explore some of the ways *A Mercy*, *Family* and *Remembered* represent and interrogate concepts of motherhood.

My worry as a mother is that I will, as Alice Walker discusses in "Sunniness and Shade" be one of the many mothers of the world and in literature who make choices that lead to

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<sup>27</sup>My mother's determination and the texts I encountered and created while researching *Remembered* are largely responsible for repairing this wound.

disastrous consequences (74). Decisions I have made and attempted in *Remembered* have allowed me to interrogate my own views of motherhood, the relationships I have with my children and my own mother, as well as to face my expectations of mothers. Finally, through practice based research, I was able to see how my own relationships impact my work and are reflected in my writing. My hope is that as with the mothers in *Remembered*, *A Mercy* and *Family*, my choices will not be taken out of context and that my efforts to protect my children will not ruin us all. Finally, my hope as a black woman, mother and writer writing about black mothers is that I do not fall into the trap of creating or perpetuating stereotypes but that I, like Angela Davis declares in her essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” when confronted with stereotypes and skeletons of mother’s judged without benefit of context ‘must assume responsibility for shattering them’ (2). Mothers sometimes make choices that without context seem violent, selfish or ill-conceived.

Some of these choices are explorations of stories encountered in other narratives. In *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*, Angelyn Mitchell explores the ‘intertextuality-texts speaking to other texts’ of black women writing to explain how writers use concepts from the slave narratives and a collective concept to inform our own writing: ‘the liberatory narrative interrupts and challenges what we think we know about slavery’ (12). In this way, my work, like works before and after it, needs other works for context and clues; the world I craft relies in part on the worlds’ of others. My understanding of slavery exists because of stories both factual and fictional. Though some contemporary black writing may exist in conversation with other works, they are all unique stories written, according to Mitchell, ‘for a contemporary readership in need of strategies of enfranchisement, resistance, survival and recovery’ (14). Novels build, connect and empower.

Through Toni Morrison's *Beloved* I became familiar with the story of Margaret Gardner, an enslaved mother who murdered her own children to save them from slavery. For Gardner, like the novel's Sethe, 'for a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love' (54) there must have seemed no other way to save them. In *Some Sing, Some Dance*, I was introduced to an enslaved mother who killed the former master and encouraged her children to run away to save them from rape (119). In *Dessa Rose* (1986) I met a pregnant woman, a slave, burdened with the knowledge that she will be killed as soon as her child is born. These mothers are strong, resilient and seemingly fearless and selfless. They sacrifice, or attempt to, their children to save them, to spare them from a lifetime of slavery they have no reason to expect to live to see abolished. I met the mothers who would help shape my idea of motherhood in life and in literature.

Without context, mothers like Floren's mother, referred to as *minha mae*, in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Clora in J. California Cooper's *Family* and Mama Skins in *Remembered* could appear to be making choices that are uncharacteristic for mothers. Without considering the sociological context, the relationship between mother and daughter is severed. Without context, not even time will repair this wound. In *Remembered*, I explore the boundaries enslaved mothers are forced to cross and I wonder about my own. What am I willing to do to keep my children safe? It was not until I read Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," an essay exploring the inheritance of black creativity as handed down from our mothers and their mothers that I realized through writing I'm really questioning my mother's choices and my own: 'Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories (240). It is not only my mother's stories that I attempt to reconstruct but our story, that of mother and daughter,

the mother in absentia and the daughter left behind, that I recreate through literature and seek to test, challenge and comprehend.

*A Mercy* is the story of a slave, Florens, haunted by dreams of her mother's rejection. Florens is narrating the story, writing the words on the floors and walls of the third house, the house no one is allowed to enter; the words are for the blacksmith, her former lover, although she knows he cannot read (159). The story is an intricate tale of how her rejection by her mother has led to her rejection by her lover. At eight years old Florens was sold from her home. She remembers the scene vividly: 'take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me.' (5). As an unreliable narrator, Florens is able to only see the choice: her mother proposes Jacobs take her daughter, instead of her and her baby boy. As she matures, she dreams of the incident. In the dreams her mother is trying to tell her something that Florens is unable to hear or understand. She is haunted by it:

But I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand. (6)

Without a mother, Florens grows into a young woman who needs maternal praise: 'Not only was she consistently trustworthy, she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval' (59). This affection often takes the form of stories: 'Especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters' (59). Stories of mothers fighting to protect children from nature were fairytales to a child whose own mother fought to save her from man and the unnatural bonds of slavery the only way she could. Lina, the daughterless slave, and Florens, the motherless slave, create a

family based on need. Both suffered from '[m]other hunger—to be one or to have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone' (61).

Florens' former owner, D'Ortega, was not going to sell Florens' mother or her son; the baby would stay with her at least while he nursed. In Jacob, the mother sees an escape for her daughter. It is the closest thing to saving her she can offer. What appears to be rejection is the mother exercising agency to protect her within the boundaries of slavery and time (24). The description of D'Ortega as repulsive and violent adds urgency to the mother's request: 'her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking the urgency' (24) and the 'terror in her eyes' (24). What must that have sounded like to Florens? Her mother's sending her in her place is overlooked and misunderstood not only by the narrator but by the other characters:

In time Rebekka thawed, relaxed, was even amused by Florens' eagerness for approval...However slight, any kindness shown her she munched like a rabbit. Jacob said the mother had no use for her which, Rebekka decided, explained her need to please. (94)

This need to please and be pleasing lead her to misunderstand why she is chosen. Later in the novel Florens is sent on an errand to save her Mistresses' life. While traveling she meets a family where the daughter is under suspicion of being a witch. After escaping the cottage where she is examined under suspicion that her dark skin makes her a demon, Florens thinks she is damned, cursed not by the color of her skin, but an inner darkness (113). She is judged to be evil by 'eyes that do not recognize me' (112). She suddenly feels abandoned, judged: 'something precious is leaving me' (113). She is stripped not just of clothes but her sense of identity is challenged. Alone and afraid she wonders, 'is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to life without' (113). Florens spends her entire life misunderstanding; the choice is not which

child to save. The choice Florens' mother makes is to save her child from a life of pain she knows. In selling her to a stranger, Florens' mother gives her hope.

In *A Mercy*, Sorrow, a free woman rescued from a shipwreck and now enslaved and renamed, is pregnant. She is largely silenced throughout the novel. Readers gain access to Sorrow through third-person narration focalized through other point of view characters. Near the close of the novel the focalization shifts finally to Sorrow (114). Sorrow blames Lina for the death of her firstborn and carries that pain with her (130); she keeps counsel with an imagined version of herself who disappears when Sorrow no longer needs her and she is more aware than other characters realize (114-132). To other characters, Sorrow is unreliable. Sorrow becomes more attentive and reliable after giving birth to her daughter. She also changes her name, claiming her own identity: 'I am your mother...My name is Complete' (132). In motherhood Sorrow is made whole.

Florens carries her mother's choice like it is rejection (133-134); it guides her reactions: 'this expel cannot happen again' (135). It is a burden she can neither put down or discard and it smothers her until she uses it to measure other relationships and ends up hurting a child she is worried has replaced her in her lover's heart (138). Her fear of rejection leads to her lover's choice. Jealous of the relationship her lover has with an orphan, Florens breaks the child's arm. Her lover returns and witnessing the final moments of Florens attack, he chooses the child Florens has broken over Florens, the broken adult (138). Her search for a mother and her limited understanding of the events has led to her fears turning true: she ends up alone (156). After telling her story Florens shares her final regret: 'I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Now can she know what I am wanting to tell her' (159). In the final chapter we hear from Florens' mother. She tells of vulnerability and assault



and the limits of motherhood: ‘there was no protection’ she explains, from rape (160). She chose to save her daughter because she knew what awaited her if she stayed: ‘neither one will want your brother’ (160). She tells of the journey into slavery, of being sold by black men to white ones and of the ship where some survived because ‘it was hard to figure out how to die’ (162). All the mother has to offer is hope: ‘one chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference... Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight’ (164). The choice does not save Florens; it offers her a different type of slavery.

My own feelings of rejection are exorcised within my writing. In *Remembered* I force mothers to make difficult choices. I constructed their enslavement using imagination, memory texts, historical accounts and my emotional response to slavery and motherhood. Once the boundaries were in place, I constructed relationships. These relationships were not free from sociological context. As slaves, the characters were subject to limitations and expectations. Throughout *Remembered* I explore representations of mothering within bondage. Through these explorations I am able to create complex characters burdened with the human need to protect their young cast against the conflict of bondage. To protect herself and the women on Walker’s Farm, Mama Skins gives the women herbs; there will be no children born into slavery. When children are brought to Walker Farm, the slave community kills them. While the mothers long for children, they will not sentence them to a lifetime of slavery. Her instincts to protect a child and her desire to mother cause Mama Skins to decide to keep Agnes; this choice begins a legacy of slavery she is powerless to stop.

In *Remembered* I challenge each of the bonds that tie the enslaved mothers to their children. In various ways, Tempe, Spring, Agnes, Ella and Grace are pushed to choose between their lives and those of their children. I decided to stretch these boundaries. In this way I

interrogate my mother's choice to move to Germany when I was 16. Stagnant within a career she was already at the plateau of and restless for challenge and opportunity, my mother had tried to create the context for her decision. Like Florens, I was too young to hear her. And so in my writing, I push my characters to choose between themselves and their children. When considering the choices, it is important to consider the conflict inherent in the sociological context, the dangers the characters face: what may appear to be a choice between death as a slave and death as a runaway hold wider implications to the familial relationship. When Tempe chooses death in order to find out what happens to her own mother, not even death is strong enough to keep her from her son.

J. California Cooper's *Family* provides a supernatural view of motherhood from beyond the grave. In *Family*, Clora is as powerless to save her children in death as she is in life. In life she is as a ghost, only able to bear witness to her children's enslavement and abuse. Clora is the narrator of the novel. After rape and having children sold into slavery, her grandmother ends her own enslavement and that of her unborn children: 'That's why I didn't have no grandmother on her side cause Grandmother had killed herself rather than stay in slavery and keep on bringing more babies into the world to be made more slaves or whatever anybody wanted them to be' (5). Being a mother during slavery must have been like an extra pair of shackles around a mother's heart. After a lifetime of slavery, Clora's mother frees herself and attempts to make life better for her daughter: 'I was about twelve years old when my mama just musta decided she just couldn't take life no more. All her babies gone cept me...and always havin to harken to the white Master of the Land and get another baby to lose out into anywhere-land, she just couldn't take it no

more' (5). The day the slave owner decides to let his son rape Clora's mother, she is forced to make a choice that breaks hers and her daughter's heart; a choice to end life as she knows it (9).

After acknowledging that Clora is growing up and that soon the owners will consider her a woman, Clora's mother is forced to recognize the limitations of her role as a mother: 'I can't help you none, baby. Mama can't even help herself' (10). Forced into a position where neither her body nor her children belonged to her, Clora's mother is pushed to the edge: 'Clora child, your mama done killed herself...she killed the Master too' (12). Clora is 12 years old when she is raped and 13 when she becomes a mother. She is raped by the son, now master of the plantation. When the son's mother finds out his son raped her she calls Clora a 'slut' (17); it is the same reaction the mother has to her husband raping Clora's mother. The slaves are held responsible for the owner's actions. Now as both daughter and mother, Clora immediately knows the pain of mothering within slavery: 'Lord how I cried for this girl-child right after I got through being glad I had a baby' (17). From the moment she is born, Clora knows her daughter's future: 'somebody had already decided what her life was to be. How far she would go in life...in anything, for as long as she drew breath on this earth' (17).

Throughout the narrative, Clora describes the act of loving and protecting children she cannot physically protect or emotionally spare. Although she thinks of running away she is afraid: 'I thought white folks was everywhere and owned everything on earth' (27). Desperate to save her children from a future without hope, Clora plans to kill them; it is the closest thing to freedom she can give (33). Her attempt to set them free fails. Clora dies and her children live. She is doomed to watch her children and then their children as her ancestors people the world, after emancipation and beyond freedom. As in life, she is not able to protect them, warn them,

shelter them. She can only witness. Throughout the novel, Cooper introduces other women, all in mourning for ‘babies sold in exchange for land, for someone else’s gain’ (92). Clora watches as her daughter Always, the only child left in slavery, plans for the future, for her child; the only family she has left for certain (110-113). As part of her plan to save her son from slavery, she switches her baby with the slave owner and his wife’s baby. She loves her son by birth and grows to love the son she claims as her own (146) as he loves her. Still, she sends Soon, the son she raises, to war with her biological son ‘with her blessings to be with Doak, to watch him, to protect him, to even die for him, she said’ (151). The choices she makes can amount to life and death and relationships torn beyond repair. Over the years the rest of Always’ children are sold. One makes his way back to her (155). When Loretta, the slaveowner’s new wife, becomes pregnant with Always’ son’s baby, she does not want the baby to live and is shocked by Always’ response: ‘you be so lucky, so blessed, able to keep your baby’ (167). It has never occurred to her that Always loves her children as Loretta would have loved her own (167). And because she acknowledges it, voices it, Loretta says, ‘you are an evil woman, Always’ (167).

Clora’s attempts to protect her children lead to permanent displacement. Even after their death, Clora haunts the present, the future without her children in it. Throughout the novel, the narrator can only watch her children and grandchildren through pain and joy, slavery and freedom. She is a witness to their separations and their reunion, able to rejoice but not facilitate her family’s reconstruction.

In *Remembered*, enslaved women are empowered as well as encumbered by motherhood. Mama Skins allows herself one child. Because of this, she is able to risk Ella, a child she cares for but does not mother. Agnes, the mother of two children, is less likely to risk her safety and

that of her girls. She seeks freedom for Tempe through marriage to Edward and hopes the couple will later buy Spring's freedom. It is when Tempe becomes pregnant that she begins to actively court freedom. Freedom for her child, as well as the prospect of finding her own mother, leads her to plot to escape and to kill Walker. In death, Tempe is still bound to Edward. She mothers from the grave by providing Spring with familial information about deaths. Through this sharing of information she attempts to be remembered by Spring and reunite the family. Tempe is unable to touch Edward. She can only mother from afar as a witness, an interloper. Until his death, she is not able to communicate with him or be seen by him. Her visitation is an attempt for Edward to know the past so that he can join Tempe in death. Tempe's choice to confront and ultimately kill Walker leads to the loss of her son. I explore vulnerability and freedom by considering the ways Spring, once she fully accepts motherhood of first Edward and then Lillian, changes: the burning within her ceases. Edward's beating reawakens the memories along with the anger that has been confined to the past. While Edward's death appears to unleash Spring's rage, she is still tethered and tempered by her role as Lillian's mother. I am able to explore a mother's rage and pain when she is unable to unleash it. Alice Walker writes she once advised someone to have just one child 'because with one you can move...with more you're a sitting duck' (161). Motherhood is a sort of vulnerability. As a woman it keeps me human. As a writer, throughout *Remembered*, I investigate nuances within motherhood and explore the ability to women to be transformed not by the physical act of giving birth but by the nurturing act of assuming the role and with it, the responsibility of motherhood.

Judged by merely their actions, Mama Skins and Tempe might be seen as unloving; willing to risk the little they have for control of their lives and families. To judge them thus dismisses the context of their constraints. In his essay "The Middle Passage: Beloved," Linden

Peach discusses the importance of context when considering mothering and what appears to be agency or the process of making a choice between what seems to be two impossible choices. In the novel, Sethe blames herself for Beloved's death:

Behind Sethe's shouldering of responsibility is a history of the individual as autonomous, free-thinking, self-sufficient and, at all times, individually culpable. But behind Baby Suggs' version there is a different history that insists upon contextualizing the behavior of individuals .(110)

Contextualizing motherhood within sociological contexts such as slavery, racism and oppression allows me to position my own writing in conversation with works that explore mother-daughter relationships in interesting ways. Unlike in *A Mercy* and *Family*, which are perhaps closer to representatives of the slave narratives, in *Remembered*, I decided to explore anger, disappointment and resentment as well as hope. This range of emotion is in opposition to the slave narratives and to works that adhere to Bernard W. Bell's definition of neo-slave narratives<sup>28</sup> and seek to recreate the narratives in fiction. My intention is not to recreate the slave narratives but through research to interrogate my preconceptions about slavery, identity, motherhood and ultimately my place within the wider sociological context of literature in a time of crisis. In "The Site of Memory" Toni Morrison said the writers of the slave narratives, written also in a time of crisis had two aims: 'One: "This is my historical life - my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race." Two: "I write this text to persuade other people - you, the reader, who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of

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<sup>28</sup> As Valerie Smith writes: 'According to conventional wisdom, the term "neo-slave narratives" originated with Bernard W. Bell's 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Bell described "neo-slave narratives" as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom,"<sup>1</sup> although over time that definition has expanded to include a more diverse set of texts than Bell's initial description could have anticipated' ("Neo-Slave Narratives, 1).

God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery' (86). As a mother and a daughter, as a writer, I expand upon these aims: Three: when faced with the stereotype of the angry black woman, consider the context of her rage; read her story.

Engaging with other texts, drafting and redrafting mother-daughter relationships to better reflect the sociological context, and entering into meaningful dialogue with my own mother have strengthened my relationships both with my mother and with my own daughter. No longer do I compare my mother's responses to literary counterparts. I no longer compare my mother's departure with that of characters in novels. I am able to hear and to comprehend in ways I was not willing or able to. My mother did not choose herself over me. In choosing to leave, she quite possibly saved my life. Finally, now that I have pushed my characters to the borders of motherhood, I can set them free.

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