

A TALE OF BLOOD
AND SUGAR

SLAVERY AND WAR

LATASHA A. PROCTOR

Content Warning: Sex, Violence, Death, Etc.

This book is intended for mature audiences. (18+)

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In remembrance of those who died in slavery and all those
who fought for freedom.

CONTENTS

Prologue	1
The Beginning of the End	
Chapter 1	9
The Middle Passage	
Chapter 2	19
Forbidden Love in Antebellum Georgia	
Chapter 3	29
To Be a Thing	
Chapter 4	39
A Reckoning	
Chapter 5	49
A Nation Divided	
Chapter 6	67
Abel	
Chapter 7	73
Cold Harbor	
Chapter 8	85
Johnny Reb	
Chapter 9	97
Not so Black and White	
Chapter 10	103
Paths Collide	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	117
GLOSSARY	123
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	125

Prologue

The Beginning of the End

A very long time ago, misguided people voted away their rights in exchange for a false sense of security and created more laws to ensure their safety. They erased parts of history, toppled statues, desecrated holy places, burned down cities, censored words and subjects to make sure not to offend anyone, intimidating almost all who opposed them.

The masses traded in their freedom for promises and the idea of a better world. In essence, creating a society mute of voice, void of opinion, and unable to defend itself. A place where the truth could be punished just as much as a lie, and all words were carefully chosen, but disputes were rife.

After the wars, after the great sickness, after men were branded, a few duplicitous houses ruled over all the lands—under one flag, while the invisible eye watched everyone. With the passing of time, almost all of the past was forgotten, erased, or rewritten – leaving only legends and folktales, and the very few that knew were labeled as heretics.

In this topsy-turvy world, there was a great disparity between the rich and the poor. The lower castes hastily worked, not knowing they were slaves, grateful to have the opportunity of barely scraping by while they groveled at the master's feet, and dreamed of one day becoming like them. Man only lived for what he had to gain; he had forgotten how to give and how to love. To be honest, none of these things had any value to him.

The people's bodies could no longer house their souls because their logical mind was at war with their essence. All the magic died when the people no longer believed. The world had forgotten love and lost its path to truth. As the forests burned and machines flourished, people traded in their hearts for money, and the Earth died a little at a time. Man had become a parasite, divorcing his mother Earth and raping her for wealth. The skies became toxic, and the ground was laden with poison. The animals died, and people were born as half men—void of spirit and the majority unable to procreate. Most children were created in petri dishes, in labs, genetically engineered to excel. They lost the imperfections that made them human. They lost their instincts, and traded in common sense for logic.

They created a society absent of individual rights, one in which all sacrifices are made in the name of the greater good, one in which no sacrifice is too big, and laws were equated to morals, no matter how unjust or corrupt. They created an efficient society that prized conformity, one in which everything has its place, and everything is centered around the bottom line, a place where those that don't fit become obsolete. A place where the elderly and disabled have no place, and euthanasia is a humane way of disposing of the faulty and unwanted human burdens of society.

In the land of the beautiful, where everyone who matters has been nipped and tucked, genetically modified or bred to be perfect, conformity is a must—perfection the ultimate goal. Creating a population where all but the lowest castes resemble cookie cutter molds—eerily similar to one another, almost as if they stepped off a production line. As a consequence, the ugly and fat are classified as visual pollution, the obese penalized for being unhealthy, and the poor—cheap dispensable mules for labor.

By supreme design, cultural differences and all the races faded into one, creating a world absent of racism but strife with divisions in a glittery cesspool of homogenization. To maintain control, the youth were indoctrinated at a young age, free-thinking discouraged, and the traditional family deconstructed. In dividing that which makes a family, that which makes a community, and that which makes a people united—the powers that be disconnected the links that made us strong, where no one could

stand united. Instead, they pointed fingers at one another while the master puppeteer pulled their strings.

To further maintain supremacy, the oligarchy silenced all information deemed unfit, declared the Gods dead, and man king of the universe—where the most high remained in constant worship of their ultimate self. Creating a place where everyone and everything is forced to bow to the most powerful under an iron fist of tyranny disguised as a helping hand. Where the masses live in an invisible cage under the guise of freedom, one where every interaction is monitored, every key stroke recorded, and paper currency obsolete. Where all except the elite are graded on a scale, and the masses assigned a number and microchipped.

Like sheep, the people followed; empty without a want for more they grazed knowing the wolf was there and the shepherd dead. With no one to blame but themselves, they became even more complacent and accepted everything just like it was, without question.

Everything was always someone else's problem, someone else's fault, or someone else's responsibility, so they never ever considered trying to fix anything, and as usual, took responsibility for nothing. Let them fix it, they said, and that's just what the wolf did, just as he had been doing all along.

They created a world in which the people were charged a tax on the air they breathed, a world void of God-given rights, where the concept of family was obsolete, the idea of freedom unfathomable, and cherished holidays part of the forgotten. Creating

a shiny bright utopia where no one has to experience pain, displeasure, or an unpleasant thought, because everything could be cured with a pill or a minor brain adjustment, leaving the most destitute without want for a better future.

When the music died, the creators, the painters, the storytellers, and the poets all but disappeared—becoming obsolete in a world void of magic. They were no longer valued, and they no longer had a place, so they wandered broken and unheard, traveling place to place looking for home. Finding no reprieve, they suffered in a spurious land void of empathy. This supposed modern utopia was dipped in a false veil of enlightenment. Under the guise of progress, the girl and people like her wept, walking unseen and mute of voice; disposable outcasts unable to fit into societal molds, clinging to an elusive riddle that only they sought to understand.

The heavens turned black. The skies raged, trees bent to the wind's will as she stood in front of a forbidden temple in a cursed land, her fingers touching the wet grey stones as she stared into the face of long-forgotten Gods. Stopping to rest in front of a strange symbol, a memory that was not her own came to mind, causing her to long for a world that she'd never known but somehow knew once existed.

She stood in a land the great houses had forsaken, amongst the rubble of what once was, one of the few places the all-seeing eye did not watch and most logical people dare not enter. In this place, the spirits of a thousand men loomed. The living were not

that different from the dead. They wandered in a perpetual state of grief, and all noticed that she did not belong there.

As lightning struck the temple, the ground shook, and the girl fell to her knees, consumed in a wave of darkness. In the absence of light, she lit a candle within, retreating to the recesses of her mind as her body trembled. Opening her eyes in one who came generations before her, remembering as she did, feeling as she did, losing all sense of self, in essence, becoming her for a moment in time.

I was once that girl who fell to her knees in front of the temple. These paragraphs are my words describing what I saw in a moment of time while standing in the embodiment of another soul, a soul that was not my own.

These chapters belong to another who shared the same bloodline and possessed similar gifts to mine, the one with a curly Lion's mane and fiery brown eyes, the one called Talia. This journal is hers. To understand my journey, you must first understand the past that came before me. I think it's only logical to start at the beginning, but first, you must see a very special moment through my eyes—a glimpse into the being of another—the birth of a very special child named Bella.

I found myself at the entrance of a world that had no beginning and no end, sailing over blue skies, basking in bright sun-kissed mornings. Flowers lifted their heads in prayer toward the heavens. Petals soft as silk and delicate as the snow trembled under the morning dew. They were like sunshine to the senses,

the smell of running water, air after a rain, sugar and fruit all combined, warm but distant, familiar but aloof--conjuring lost memories. As I took a golden seed from her petals, I saw the world in my hand, heard the music in the wind, and the whisper of trees. Day melded into night, the sky into the sea, and the rain into the sun. The stars danced about as I disappeared, becoming everything and nothing, I felt the universe inside.

Kingdoms rose and kingdoms fell, no beginning and no end; it always was and always will be one, always constant, alive, separate but intertwined. I traveled on a web, standing in the light of a thousand suns. I saw a reflection of me and all that came before me. The sound of drums and a warm distant light beckoned me to the shores. I stood at the entrance of a striped red and white lighthouse, looking in. I saw a labyrinth of endless winding stairs that seemed to touch the heavens and continue through eternity. The smell of baking cookies and the magnetic sound of familiar laughter captivated my soul, luring me to the never-ending plethora of stairs.

With the first step, complete silence surrounded me. I looked at the cosmos above, the air void of movement. My small boat sailed on an infinity of still black reflective water. I sat in a place void of time for what could have been minutes, days, decades, centuries, or eons. I felt neither hunger nor thirst, fear nor longing.

I sat patiently, content, alone in the black abyss. At some point, my hand touched the lukewarm water, and I saw a re-

flection that wasn't my own. It was my mother; her long dark brown curly hair hung over her light caramel shoulders like a lion's mane. Her big brown eyes and bright smile beckoned me to follow her as tears fell from my eyes. Her arm rose from the deep black water. I grabbed her hand and heard the words, "It's time to meet your family."

As I willfully melted into the abyss, I felt my mother's heartbeat, tucked away in her body. I was engulfed in a love I had long forgotten. Surrounded by warm darkness, I played and listened to the sounds of the outside world as I blissfully floated. While running my foot along her side, I suddenly felt a hand lifting me out of her body. An unfamiliar coldness touched my skin as I was engulfed in bright light and familiar sounds. My grandfather held my mother's hand, and my father looked in from a window as I was laid on my mother's chest. While I rested on her chest, she whispered in my ear.

"I will love you until the sun fades, until the North Star no longer shines, and the west wind no longer blows. I will love you until the moon no longer rises and the Earth shatters. I will love you when everything crumbles, and be your shield in the late-night hours.

"I will fall before I let any harm come to you, and I will love you beyond my dying breath, beyond my earthly existence. You are my daylight, my stars, and my moon. You came from me, a gift from God. When I cease loving you, I will exist no more. Beyond my last breath, I am yours.

Chapter 1

The Middle Passage

My journey began long before my first breath. Before I was born, pieces of me resided elsewhere. In the DNA of my forefathers, I traveled incomplete, unknowingly waiting for the day that the pieces would connect and I would be realized.

-LATASHA A. PROCTOR

Suddenly, I was hurled back in time. Blackness and the smell of shit surrounded me. Vomit covered my chest as my screams mixed with the muted cries of others. My blood oozed from where the shackles cut my ankles. Forced to lie naked, flies and maggots settled into my wounds, and splinters embedded themselves in my back. I could move neither

right nor left. Forced to lie in my own excrement, I choked from excruciating heat and lack of oxygen. My strength melted away.

I dreamt of my daughter, and I cried to my Gods as they raped me. I forgot love, and I cursed my ancestors. My only reprieve was sleep, but I was still haunted in my dreams of a home I would never see again, and a family I was ripped away from. I would dream of my husband holding me in his arms as we watched our youngest daughter play, imagine my son becoming a man, and the elders telling stories around the fire as the men danced and the woman sang. I would then wake to the realization—that I was nothing, that everyone, and everything I longed for—was gone. I wished for death, but even that failed me.

No one answered my cries; my tears fell in vain as they threw the dead overboard. Salty buckets of water were thrown on our open wounds, and when I refused to eat—food was forced down my throat while they laughed, and spoke harshly in a strange tongue. I crumbled. I used to be beautiful; I used to be loved. My beautiful black skin—now beaten and bruised. Gashes adorned my back, and my lips bleed from lack of water.

Broken and at the mercy of monsters, I looked at the vast sea of nothingness that surrounded me, and realized that I was lost forever. Where some of my fellow men were blessed with death—I suffered with the living.

Suddenly back on the stairs, I gasped for breath, shaking as it rained. In the darkness I cried. The sound of thunder echoed through the lighthouse, and lightning devoured the sky—causing the heavens to splinter, producing an illicit roar that caused ravens to fall to their death and angels to call out in sorrow.

Adrenaline surged through my veins as I reeled from pain and confusion. In a state of shock, I panicked and screamed for help, but no one came. I prayed but no one answered. When I turned to run, I saw emptiness. In the blackness, I felt for descending stairs and felt only open sky. Not having the option of retreat, I took another step forward.

The banister transformed into deep black vines covered in razor-sharp thorns. Crimson roses cried tears of blood as they erupted from large deep green leaves, quickly melting, and rising again. Dark green moss covered the steps. A large weeping willow blocked the morning sun as a ray of light forced its way through the impenetrable blackness.

Red liquid traveled diagonal grooves down my back, breaking free and forming a small reflective pool at the base of my feet. A cat o' nine tails lay to the left of me, and shackles clasped around my feet. Dandelions grew where my tears landed, pollen drifted from their yellow blooms, creating a sweet smell in the mist of decay, their tiny petals transformed into feather-light, luminescent ethereal globes, rising and dispersing into a thousand seeds, releasing a single butterfly.

A praying mantis bowed its head in meditation as a cricket played a mundane song. Insects scurried across the tattered, decaying interior lighthouse walls in search of shelter, while a spider lay in wait. A brightly colored snake slithered through the tumbled stones, stopping to feast on a robin in its nest. The tiny butterfly from before landed on my shoulder, quickly plunging into the reflective pool of blood below.

At the exact moment the butterfly submerged—venom entered the robin’s throat, and puncture wounds appeared on my neck. As the snake swallowed—so did I. The taste of sugar permeated my tongue as the praying mantis opened its eyes. The clock struck twilight. Church bells rang in the distance. Thousands of doves, each carrying a prayer—exited the cuckoo clock carved into the weeping willow’s trunk. Below it coins glistened in a wishing well.

The cricket’s song ceased, in the stillness—I looked down to see a reflection in a pool of blood identical to mine, but not my own. My long, matted, dark curly hair hung limp, draping my shoulders in a layer of wetness. Big brown, almond-shaped eyes glistened, but my lips stayed still as she spoke. “Inside you resides both light and dark. You are as much the robin as you are the snake—all of this is you; open your eyes and see yourself.”

The puddle soaked into the moss-covered stairs as quickly as it came. My reflection faded; the roses crumbled and turned to dust. Cotton plants grew where the pool of blood once stood, with the bursting of a bloom—her eyes caught mine from the

auction block! The ground shook as she stared into me—never blinking, her gaze never wavering. Realizing that she was the woman on the slave ship, and that at one point—I was her! I stood motionless in the sweltering Charleston, South Carolina heat, not knowing what to do, unable to move, I stared back in horror as a man hollered, "Sold! The nigger woman goes to the tall, dark-haired gentleman in the faded trousers!"

The vision faded. In its place a strikingly handsome man by the name of James stood ankle-deep in mud, bent over in a rice field, his stained overalls covered in muck, and his pockets empty. A thin layer of dirt covered his face, making his hypnotic blue eyes stand out more than usual. A partially missing front tooth came into view as his pouty pink lips opened wide while gasping for air.

James' thin, tall, muscular body swayed side to side as he ferociously swung his bagging hook in tandem with Tim, one of his three slaves—a big, muscular black man. The blue-black woman from the slave auction trailed far behind, her long slender arms gracefully moving as she struggled to keep up. Stopping to rest, her high cheekbones reflected the light. Her voluptuous lips parted, taking in the warm, humid South Carolina air. Dolly radiated an earthly beauty as sweat dripped from her round face. While trying to catch her breath, she nervously smiled as her unborn baby kicked.

James came from nothing and was determined not to go back! He didn't have much. He had to beg, borrow, and sweat

to get the little old red farmhouse and a parcel of land—that he still owed money on. He cared little for polite society or what other people thought of him, but he cared very much about his family and the opinion of his wife. Seeing her smile meant everything to him. They were happier than most, and his eyes never strayed, but things weren't easy. He felt like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders, and he knew that failing wasn't an option. Come hell or high water, he would make things work! What he lacked in education, he made up in unrelenting determination and grit.

James didn't necessarily believe in slavery, but he thought it necessary to get to where he wanted to go and he would not let morals stand in his way. James couldn't afford to be righteous, so he did what needed to be done, good or bad.

Unable to keep up, and six months pregnant—Dolly fell as the sting of the whip cut across her back. Tim turned in a rage as he charged the master, stopping two feet shy, bagging hook raised high above his head. James calmly stood his ground, speaking loud and clear so that everyone could hear.

"I've grown fond of you over the years, but make no mistake, if you lay a hand on me—I will kill you! If you, or any other nigger on this farm so much as hurts a hair on me—or mine, this farm and your wellbeing will no longer be a concern of mine. Without conscience—I will kill all of you in a most excruciating way!"

Tim, knowing that James meant what he said, reluctantly lowered the bagging hook and was made an example out of. James left him a bloody mess, believing that if the shoe was on the other foot, Tim would have done the same. Fortunate to have not been killed and an inch from death, Tim counted his blessings.

Afterwards, James washed the blood from his mud-soaked, callused, and cracked hands in a basin, wiped his face with a wet cloth, and ran a comb through his sweaty black hair. The dirt in his nails remained as he kissed his wife on the cheek, patting his little girl on the head before sitting down to dinner.

"Can you pass the cornbread, dear?" Aberdeen looked up with a coy smile, her pretty brown eyes blinking flirtatiously as she secretly rubbed his leg with her foot while passing the cornbread. James smiled as he put a big dollop of butter on the moist yellow biscuit. Too tired to flirt back, he plowed his food down while his wife took dainty bites of fried chicken. Their four-year-old daughter giggled as she drew shapes in her mashed potatoes, making a complete mess.

That night James, like every night before, slept with a loaded gun beside his bed and let the hounds roam free to ensure the slaves would stay in their hut. While James slept with one eye open, his wife and child slept soundly. Inola, a grey-haired Native American woman, sat crossed-legged on a dirt floor as she rinsed Tim's wounds, afterward quietly applying a salve of honey, aloe, and herbs, covering Tim's back in a thin layer of

oak leaves. Once done, she retired to a coarse blanket on the hard-packed dirt floor.

Inola was won many years ago in a card game—James' first slave. She was a tiny, soft-spoken woman with doleful eyes and delicate, dainty hands, even with a tattered soul—she radiated love to those closest to her. Tim and Dolly had become family to her. They shared everything in their tiny cabin and relied on each other in the roughest of times.

Too old to work the fields, Inola fed the hogs, tended to menial chores, cooked the meals in their little hut, and helped the missus in the little red farmhouse, sometimes coming back with scraps of leftovers, if she was lucky a piece of cake—which she would share with the others.

On Sundays, they enjoyed what little pleasures they had. Dolly sang while picking greens, turnips, and yams from their little garden. Inola sat in the sun, weaving a basket as Tim rested. Hunched over and still recovering from his wounds, he played the banjo. Lost in music, Tim looked dreamily at a flock of birds passing by and wished that he could fly. Hearing footsteps—he dropped the banjo and looked up as the master handed him their weekly rations of cornmeal, pork, lard, and molasses.

A few months later, late one night, Dolly gave birth to a beautiful baby boy who looked just like Tim. The arrival of the little one filled their tiny cabin full of joy. Dolly told stories of

tigers, zebras, elephants, and great warriors. Baby John giggled on Dolly's lap, while Inola made tiny shoes out of rabbit fur, and Tim looked on lovingly.

The days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into years, one by one—their little family grew. Everything repeating itself, becoming a pattern full of flaws. Happiness eluded Dolly, but she found pieces of humanity and love through those closest to her, but even that was fragile in a world where everything could be taken away. The day her oldest son was ripped from her arms—her heart broke for the second time, leaving a greater void than before. She watched him shackled and led away on a cart—to be sold on the auction block. She knew that she would never see his face or hear his voice again. Despair and uncertainty became a permanent part of her existence. She watched almost every one of her children taken away, and could do nothing.

Dolly never talked about what happened on that ship. Never a day went by that she didn't think about her home, and never a night passed that she didn't dream about the children lost to her. It's safe to say that Dolly hated James with every ounce of her being, while James thought of her as nothing more than chattel.

Chapter 2

Forbidden Love in Antebellum Georgia

An adorable dark chocolate girl wiggled in her father's lap, accidentally kicking him on the shin as her feet swung back and forth. Looking up with her big brown eyes, she asked question after question, barely stopping for breath. "Tell me yo big ma's stories! Was they really striped horses and cats big like mules? Do ya love Mama? When did ya and Mama meet? Daddy, was Mama ya first love? Daddy . . . Daddy . . . Daddy . . ."

Her father sat expressionless, almost catatonic with an empty look on his face. Frustrated by her father's lack of response, the little girl hollered louder, yanking his beard with both hands. Levi looked down and smiled, hugging his daughter tighter, kiss-

ing Viola on the forehead before drifting elsewhere. The room and everyone in it disappeared as his mind wandered to another time.

Huge white pillars adorned the sides of an extravagant two-storied plantation home. Dressed impeccably, Ethen sat catawampus in an antique wooden rocking chair that was one size too small for his sizable derrière. Under the shade of a large wrap-around porch, he smiled, tapping his perfectly manicured nails against an etched crystal glass before twirling his brandy and drinking deeply.

A voluptuous mulatto woman named Tandy stood beside him, touching the back of his chair as she fanned the flies away. Ethen's red hair was drenched in a layer of sweat, and his chubby cheeks blushed from the Georgia heat. Squinty green eyes hid behind a pair of tiny spectacles as he read his newspaper, licking his index finger with the turn of each page and giggling.

He was a peculiar man, possessing a gregarious personality, and a flamboyant demeanor, annoyingly jolly, and owning a bit of a potty mouth. His upturned mustache, perfectly manicured beard, ginormous stomach, tiny hands, and flaming red cheeks gave him a comical appearance—which was in stark contrast to his sometimes fiery temper. Overall, he somewhat resembled a ginger-headed Santa Claus.

Something in the newspaper brought Ethen to a roaring laugh. Almost out of the clear blue sky Ethen slapped his knee, his lips puckered, and brandy shot from his nostrils! He laughed himself

into such a stupor that his stomach jiggled uncontrollably. While trying to gain his composure, he fell from his chair. Once able to catch his breath—the words, “Butter my butt and call me a biscuit,” shot from his mouth like a racehorse out of the gate!

Ethen’s wife glared at him through the window, secretly wishing he would choke to death. There wasn’t a day that Ethen wasn’t tipsy. Sue Ann had the personality of a dishrag and looked like she had been beaten with an ugly stick. She tried her best to hide her disdain for her husband, but to be frank—she wouldn’t piss on him if he was on fire, preferring him to burn to death!

For the most part, Ethen’s children felt the same way about him as their mother did, calling him a laughable disgrace on numerous occasions. To be honest, Ethen didn’t care much for them either, classifying them as a self-righteous, entitled lot, not worthy to be born of his seed, excluding his youngest girl—whom he adored, and who in return adored him.

Done laughing, Ethen squeezed himself back into the chair, resting his newspaper on his prominent belly, complaining in a melodic, high-pitched Southern voice, “Good lord, I’m sweatin like a whore in church, It’s hotta than hell fire out here! This insufferable heat will be the death of me! Suga, can you pour an old man a glass of water?” Ethen’s hand lingered on Tandy’s side, playing with the ruffled fabric as he accepted the water. When Tandy turned to walk away, Ethen grabbed her hand, whispering in her ear. “I don’t know what I would ever do without you.”

What Ethen said was true. Tandy was the only one who accepted him exactly as he was, the one who laughed at all his jokes and didn't walk the other direction every time he entered a room. Life without her would be unbearable. He loved her so much he sometimes thought his heart would explode! In a different world, Tandy would have been his wife, but in reality, she was his slave. It's written in some books that Southerners turned a blind eye regarding sexual relations between master and slave, but love was unacceptable, downright dangerous!

Quickly gulping down the water, their voices turned to whispers. Tandy smiled and leaned forward, caressing his hand as she took the empty glass. To her surprise, Ethen's wife was standing directly behind her, stern-faced and arms folded. Tandy lowered her head and quickly walked off the porch. Ethen and his wife slept in separate rooms and despised each other's touch, but at one point, she loved him. Ethen never felt that way about his wife; his heart always belonged to another. They were both locked in a loveless marriage. Sue Ann was his obligation; some might say his burden.

His youngest daughter May sat on the other side of the porch, giggling with her best friend Lily. Lily was given to May on May's third birthday, a gift from Ethen, her personal lady-in-waiting. They were inseparable, and Lily catered to the girl's every whim. As Lily fanned the little miss, her skin glistened in the summer heat. She blotted away the drops of dew that gathered on her forehead. While affectionately looking at May, she noticed that

the little girl strongly resembled her. Maybe the whispers were true, she thought.

Everything else in the world became silent—except for his mother’s screams. They dragged him from his mother’s arms, just as they had done to his father before him. Levi’s heart broke, but he didn’t shed a tear, refusing to give them the satisfaction of seeing him cry, learning at a young age that tears don’t help, and that God doesn’t hear the cries of slaves.

Knowing he would never see his mother again, he held everything inside, and his heart turned to stone—until he saw her. Dressed in white, slightly crooked front teeth, a whimsical smile, and plum-red, thin lips. Freckles dotted her rosy cheeks, and bright green eyes hid behind her messy, ginger hair. Loose curls hung clear down her back, caressing a bright pink bow that tightly clung to a tiny waist.

Their eyes met for a fraction of a second. Lily’s slight smile turned into a mischievous grin. She bit her lower lip and looked straight into his eyes while twirling a long curl around her index finger. Her cheeks blushed red as she provocatively bent over to pick up a fan—that just so happened to fall from her fingers. Upon standing, she blew a kiss. He was captivated by her. At that moment, Levi fell in love and lust all at the same time! His heart raced as he envisioned ripping the pretty buttons from her blouse, lifting up her long, ruffled skirt and . . . “Boy, whatcha doing down hea? Get back to dem fields!” the overseer hollered as his whip came down.

As infatuated people sometimes do, Levi painted a picture that wasn't entirely accurate. What he took as Lily provocatively biting her lower lip was actually Lily scratching a small, annoying itch on her bottom lip by using her two front teeth. Her cheeks blushed red because of the Southern heat, and she didn't provocatively bend over to pick up the fan; she tripped over her own foot and fell, the fan falling along the way. The kiss she blew was actually a sneeze from all the excess pollen in the air.

In reality, Lily was a cute, pimple-faced, somewhat awkward teenager, who walked with a hunch in her shoulders and possessed a strange tendency to trip over flat surfaces and fall over her own two feet. Either way, their eyes met and both felt an automatic attraction for each other.

They were worlds apart, he a field slave, and she a precocious young quadroon who resided in the master's house. Lily wore beautiful hand-me-downs from the master's oldest daughter, while Levi wore rags, barely kept together by fraying strings. She as white as snow, untarnished, and he, dark as night, and covered in scars. She knew how to read and write, while he couldn't identify a letter in the alphabet. Lily rambled on and on, while Levi sometimes spoke with a nervous stutter. Lily knew exactly what to say, while Levi never seemed to find the right words. As far as two people were concerned, they were the perfect oxymoron.

Tandy would never agree to her daughter courting a common field slave, let alone one black as night. Knowing how her mother felt, Lily kept her distance from Levi, but eventually, their secret

glances turned into late-night walks along the river banks; holding hands led to kisses, and kisses turned into something more. His full lips kissed every part of her body, his tongue lingering in the most intimate parts. Lily tried her best to conceal her muffled moans as Levi parted her thighs, filling her tiny crevice for the first time, and shattering her hymen. He laid his hard, muscular body on top of her, going deeper with each push, thrusting harder until he reached the deepest part of her.

Everything Levi ever felt he poured into Lily, his love, his hate, his sorrow, his vengeance, his pain, and his seed. He wanted to meld into her, to be one and the same and never let go. This was the closest he'd ever been to heaven and she was his angel, but deep down he knew nothing lasts forever. Only after Lily's complete submission did he relent; only after he squeezed every last drop of love out of her did he feel whole. She was his, even if it wasn't forever.

Amongst tall blades of grass, he held Lily tightly, gently caressing her porcelain skin, never wanting to let her go. Under the moonlight, they looked up at the North Star and talked about running away together. While lying with her head on his chest, she listened to his heartbeat and felt exhilarated—while he experienced happiness for the first time. As daylight approached, they privately exchanged vows. Not having a broom, they jumped over a small fallen tree to symbolize the union of man and wife. Soon after, they said goodbye and snuck back to their separate worlds.

For a time, they stole bits of happiness, finding peace and joy in the arms of each other, until one dreadful day. The news spread quickly; the master was dead. The house slaves wept, and field slaves celebrated, while Levi stood motionless—void of expression. He knew Lily and her mother were no longer untouchable.

The missus feigned tears, but secretly felt relief. The death of her husband meant that she would no longer have to suffer Ethen's humiliations, no longer have to tolerate the abomination—the quadron who paraded around like a loyal servant to her youngest daughter. She would no longer have to see the daily reminder that her husband sired a half breed with a mulatto whore! Without hesitation, Sue Ann instructed her eldest son to have the overseer promptly remove Lily and Tandy from the plantation.

May wept and pleaded for her friend to stay. Sue Ann held her inconsolable child, rocking back and forth while trying to explain the situation. "Honey, we can't keep thieves. Lily and her mommy took something very important of ours, and unfortunately they can't be trusted! Mommy will find a new, better friend for you." The little girl, screaming and sobbing, leapt from her mother's arms, throwing herself on the floor in a pile of tears.

As Lily and her mother were carted away, two dark-complexioned female field slaves watched, grinning ear to ear as they tried to hide their laughter, believing that Tandy and her uppity, pale-faced daughter would finally get what they deserved. Meanwhile, Levi watched—hidden behind an old oak tree, his

heart shattered into a million little pieces, but still, he refused to break. Believing that tears were a sign of weakness, he bottled up everything inside and slowly walked away.

The overseer stopped along the way and did what he always longed to do. Lily cried and begged while her dress was torn. Her mother, bound and unable to intercede, helplessly listened to her daughter scream while being raped, all the while wishing Lily had never been born, believing it a sin to bring such a sweet child into an awful world. Tandy finally understood why “Margaret Garner” killed her own child. For a moment, believing it was more merciful for a child to die from the hands of a loving mother’s blade and be sent into the arms of God than to endure a lifetime of torment and hell at the mercy of merciless monsters.

While Tandy reeled from losing Ethen and the rape of her daughter, Lily’s tears disappeared into the ground as if they were never there. While they suffered, Ethen’s wife felt relief. Sue Ann sat comfortably, surrounded by supportive family and friends while she sipped tea, proud of her Godly ways, silently pondering her thoughts; a lesser woman would have had both Tandy and Lily beaten half to death.

As Ethen promised, Tandy and their daughter Lily’s papers of freedom lay signed in the bottom of a drawer, purposely disregarded by his wife and eldest son, leaving Ethen’s last wish undone.

That night in the slave quarters, the drums played and the slaves danced. Levi sat quietly while staring aimlessly at the

North Star. He remembered a story passed down through generations. A time long ago, in Africa, scantily clad black bodies moved wildly around an inferno of flames. Drums echoed as the spirits whispered and the priestess spoke. While seeing visions in the fire, her eyes rolled back, and tears fell like rain.

As she rocked back and forth, the moon rose in a dark red hue. The priestess saw monsters plucking men from the shores. Opposing tribes selling black bodies in great numbers. African kings and tribal leaders selling their own people for profit, great vessels, and a never-ending sea forever dividing her people from their homes, and 245 years of torment before they would slowly rise, many falling along the way. The old woman removed a small pouch that hung around her neck, throwing it in the fire.

As I stood on the steps amongst the flames, my flesh remained untouched. I saw the priestess's kind black eyes, dark wrinkled skin, and heard her speak in a language I didn't understand. The young woman from the auction block sat next to her, a baby nursing at her breast. Finally understanding, I picked up the small gris-gris bag. The flames disappeared, and I stood unharmed with shackles unlocked.

Gazing into the fire again, I saw Viola still sitting on her father's lap. While pulling his beard, she asked, "Daddy, was Mama yo first love?"

When he didn't answer, she tugged harder on his beard, pulling his head down and kissing him on his cheek. Slowly coming back to reality, the little girl's father replied, " No, baby, but she is my foreva love."

Chapter 3

To Be a Thing

Angelique twirled in ecstasy. Her pink chiffon dress clung to her body as she looked up in bliss. A magnificent crystal chandelier hung high above; tiny crystals reflected small rainbows of light on dark cream walls. Her feet moved in a circular pattern on a brightly colored artisan rug as she giggled. Her delicate hands caressed magnificent tapestries and paintings as she ran. The pitter-patter of her feet echoed off black oak floors, while the warm glow of candelabras illuminated blood-red velvet curtains and reflected light off large stained-glass windows, giving her skin an eerie glow as she stood under a large arched doorway.

In the parlor, black fingers danced over a grand piano. The player never looking up, sang a melodic tune while Angelique rolled on purple silk couches, caressing gold embroidered pillows as Master Gaspard trailed fast behind her. Giggling, she leapt from the couch as he tore a tiny ribbon from her dress.

Tired of playing cat and mouse, Gaspard wrapped his arms around her, laying her on a bearskin rug, tearing the thin transparent dress from her body, pinning her hands behind her head as flames danced in the fireplace. The wood logs cracked and hissed. The wind howled as Gaspard licked his thin lips and reveled in the fragility of her nude body, ravishing her as the handsome coal-black man played the Ninth Symphony.

I could never tire of this, she thought, as Gaspard wiggled his body on top of hers like a dying worm having convulsions. His mini, carrot-sized penis poked her awkwardly in-between the legs while he whispered obscenities in her ear. The stench from his breath made her want to vomit. She moaned softly, while counting the minutes; she took the time to reflect. She was proud to have married into such a wealthy family. She envisioned herself in beautiful ball gowns, covered in jewels, and hosting extravagant parties.

Startled, she opened her eyes and saw a puddle of drool radiating from her husband's mouth onto her chest. Angelique moaned louder hoping he would finish soon. Instead, he flipped her over on her stomach, forced her head into the bear-

skin rug, and finished off, imagining someone else, a handsome young bearded man.

Tiny caramel hands handed them a blanket as they lay nude. Another young girl came with a tray of assorted chocolates and two glasses of champagne. Looking down, she nervously placed the silver tray in front of them, her long honey-brown hair swaying as she scurried off. Gaspard's eyes followed the slave girl as she disappeared into the darkness. He excused himself.

Oblivious, Angelique blissfully enjoyed the fire and delight in the tray of delectable candies. Titillating chocolates with a sweet liqueur center exploded under the pressure of her teeth, ejaculating illustrious undertones of dark cherries and mint, lubricating her tongue in a tenacious layer of sweet, gooey goodness, leaving behind a trail. Sucking the liquid off of her fingers one by one, she secretly wished that her husband could be more like chocolate.

It was an enigma to everyone how the apple could have fallen so far from the tree. Gaspard was the only son, and the runt of the family, hated by everyone, including his mother and the family dog. He wasn't an attractive man; in fact, he was strikingly ugly—hideous, to be exact! A skinny, Pinocchio-nosed, yellow-toothed, arrogant, pretentious, self-absorbed, well-educated idiot, with the common sense of a dodo bird and the compassion of a gnat! He had no shred of decency in him, and there was rarely a sin he hadn't committed—a true psychopath

reveling in all his glory ruled the plantation with an iron fist, toying with everyone and everything for his amusement.

Angelique was a Southern belle, the most beautiful woman in five counties. Born of a lower class than Gaspard, she had high aspirations and never-ending expectations. A well-mannered, mischievous, extremely intelligent young woman who lacked life experience and thought everything could be taught from a book. Common sense eluded her, and she had a habit of trying to make people into what she wanted them to be, and Gaspard was to be her project. She didn't mind that he was unattractive; she was beautiful enough to hold the spotlight for both of them.

Gaspard quickly bored of Angelique, and she soon became just another one of his things—a beautiful thing, who would bear male heirs, and be a public ornament on his arm. Adorning her with gifts was an easy task; he preferred to use honey instead of vinegar, and if that failed, the punishment would be brutal. With the passing time, Angelique forgot her place, almost acting like she was his equal; it didn't go unnoticed by Gaspard.

A familiar, impeccably dressed, stoic, coal-black footman pulled out Angelique's chair. The brand on his cheek a permanent reminder of when he tried to run away. The master was a collector of people and beautiful things. Sampson was his prized slave, a strikingly handsome man, his face chiseled to perfection, and the physique of an Adonai. He played the

piano like an angel and sang like a mythical siren. Sampson was well-spoken, only spoke when spoken to, emotionless, blending into the walls as if he wasn't there, only becoming visible when needed.

Sampson's beauty was undeniable, Angelique had no idea how Gaspard found such a man, and neither did anyone else! Sampson was an enigma, a gilded bird in a cage, just like everyone else on that plantation, including Angelique. Everyone had purpose or a use. The field slaves were beasts of burden, intricately bred to withstand what would break a lesser man. The house slaves strikingly beautiful, or possessing great talent. Angelique was a lawful incubator that would produce a valid heir. No matter the position, everyone had one thing in common—misery.

Abruptly uncrossing his legs, Gaspard turned all shades of red, salivating at the mouth, and shaking from rage. A book tumbled from his hands as he slammed his fist into the table, failing to make a dent, but hurting his hand and spilling his coffee. He screeched in agony as he held his fist! Gaspard's eyes filled with water as he kicked his chair. Limping on one foot he hollered, "Damn wretched Harriet Beecher Stow and her distasteful, irresponsible book has all the North sympathizing with slaves and glorifying those damn Quakers!" Angelique tried her best to hide her horror and amusement by looking away, but couldn't help but giggle as her husband jumped up and down on one foot, resembling a clown throwing a massive fit.

Thinking it best to comfort him, she slowly walked over and gently grabbed his hurt fist, whispering, "Calm down, darling, everything will be okay."

He glared, backing her against a wall while forcefully holding her little tear-filled face between his hands and hollering. "Pretty soon they will want to grant women the right to vote! I'll be damned before I have someone in a dress telling me what to do!"

Once her husband left the room, Angelique wiped the tears away and quickly patted the wrinkles from her dress. Stopping to look at her sad reflection in an ornate wall mirror, she forced a smile and quickly regained her composure. She picked up the book and hid it in a drawer for later review. Any book that infuriated her husband that much was of great curiosity to her. Knowing better than to enter during times of duress, Sampson waited. Only when the commotion was done did he enter and take the plates away.

Upon exiting the dining room, Gaspard, already annoyed, saw Delilah, a mousy-haired, brown-eyed, Irish girl—stolen from a widowed and desolate mother at three by an unscrupulous slave trader and labeled as an Octoroon. What I unsuccessfully attempted to say, is that the slave trader didn't follow the laws regarding slavery. Kidnapping a free person was illegal, but when do criminals follow the law and slavers possess morals? It might have been very unusual that Delilah was white and in this circumstance, but it wasn't entirely unheard of.

She gloomily scrubbed the dark oak floors. Now four months pregnant with Gaspard's child, and permanently labeled a slave. By law, every child that exited a slave woman's womb would be doomed to the mother's fate—no matter the race of the father. Even if Gaspard knew, he would never have acknowledged the child as his own, or set Delilah free—believing that women, the Irish, and the poor were far beneath him. As far as slaves went, he believed it was his God-given right to own and do with them as he pleased.

Gaspard glared, tired of seeing Delilah mope about. He stood impatiently tapping his fingers on the wall as Delilah looked down. Her hands trembled as she continued with her chores, somehow hoping to become invisible. Gaspard kicked the wet rag from her hand, and Delilah shook as he spoke.

"Seeing that you are so unappreciative of my kind care, I think I might have a remedy for your ailments. Your services are no longer required in my lovely abode. As of tomorrow and perhaps the rest of your life, you shall live, labor, and breed with field slaves!" Delilah cowered like a dog as she hung onto Gaspard's shoe, feverishly begging to stay. Becoming a field slave was a fate that all the house slaves desperately wished to avoid.

Gaspard smiled, and peeled Delilah from his leg, like a person would peel gum from the bottom of their shoe. Without further thought, he quickly turned on his heels and exited the house, the door slamming behind him. Once outside, he brisk-

ly mounted his horse and galloped to the fields. As he surveyed his crop, a handsome mulatto man of good stature stood to his left. Cain, his driver, half-brother, and slave, smiled. He both admired and feared Gaspard; he despised and also wished to be him.

Some would say that Cain simultaneously hated and loved Gaspard. I think that Cain never knew what love was. Everything he had was because of the master, and he tried his best never to disappoint. Retaining his position was crucial. Cain was third in command, second to the overseer, and wielded his power like a tyrant on a long leash over all those under him; the slaves feared him just as much, or more, than Gaspard.

A few hours before bed, Angelique sat dreading the approach of nightfall, lamenting on the activities to come. She found her wifely duties revolting, but felt confident that after she produced a male heir, they would cease, or dramatically decrease. She wasn't completely naive. She knew Gaspard fooled around. It was expected of a man with his wealth and stature not to deny himself earthly pleasures, and anyone who took his sexual attention away from her was a welcomed guest! Until one rain-filled Sunday afternoon, she heard the screams of a girl echoing from upstairs. Never did she expect to see Gaspard with his pants below his knees, groaning loudly as a prepubescent girl kicked and screamed under him.

Angelique instinctually charged, smacking him, and pushing him off of the girl! Gaspard's face changed from pleasure to rage.

With his pants still around his ankles, he grabbed Angelique as she scratched, kicked, and screamed! Gaspard tightly placed both hands around her neck and squeezed until she stopped struggling and went unconscious, her body collapsing. Rolling her over like a rag doll, he tore Angelique's undergarments off and shoved himself inside, planting a seed in her womb.

Angelique woke up with the doll-like child next to her. Sherry sat shocked. Never did she expect anyone, especially a white woman, to come to her defense. Angelique cried as the little girl's tiny caramel hands pushed the straw blond hair from her blue eyes. A look of confusion crossed Angelique's face as the little girl held her hand and whispered everything would be okay. It was the first time in many months that anyone had shown warmth to Angelique. At that moment, she felt a tenderness for the girl, something she thought she would never feel towards a slave. Out of that dreadful moment, a fragile and unusual bond was born.

Chapter 4

A Reckoning

At a table that fit eight, only two sat. A beautiful French lace tablecloth gently draped around an elaborately decorated oak table. Lovely, fragrant purple flowers placed in crystal vases stood between them. Gaspard sat at the head of the table and Angelique at the tail. Hate and disgust further divided them. Fear, Angelique's only bond, forced her to stay.

Gaspard sat up straight, legs crossed, his right pinky stretched out to the side as he sipped coffee from a gold-trimmed teacup, his large emerald ring reflecting the sunlight with each sip as his right foot shook ferociously. A silver fork gently caressed a piece of dark chocolate cake, reading material laid in front of him as he glared at Angelique.

"Do you have anything that you wish to tell me? An apology would be the appropriate thing for you to do. I never thought the day would come that you would assault me, your husband, over the honor of a slave girl, a nigger!"

Angelique touched her bruised neck as she looked down. She tried to speak, but nothing came out. Gaspard slowly walked over, lifting Angelique's chin with his index finger as he whispered in her ear, "I'm waiting."

Angelique sat motionless. Her body tensed and her stomach churned as the words, "I'm sorry for being such a thoughtless and ungrateful wife," poured from her mouth. Gaspard smiled, patting her on the head and saying good girl as if she were a dog, before exiting the dining room.

Whenever Gaspard left the house, Sherry made her way into the kitchen. As usual, Big Bessie, a chunky, milk chocolate woman with multiple rolls on her neck and gray stubble on her chin, stood firmly with her hands on hips and a grin on her face. (Just by looking at her, you knew she was a good cook.)

Bessie gave Sherry a big hug and a kiss on the cheek before looking at her suspiciously and commenting, "Girrrl, whatcha little bony butt doin' round hea, sneaking in my kitchen? You knows you ain't supposed to be in hea!"

"Missus don't mind," Sherry chirped as she reached for a slice of dark chocolate cake.

Big Bessie quickly smacked her hand. Wagging her finger in Sherry's face, she snapped, "Don't go trustin' no white woman,

and don't eat that cake now, you hea! That's only for Masta Gaspard! Hea, have a cookie."

Sherry smiled, "The missus aint like dat!"

Big Bessie rolled her eyes, "They's all like dat. You's just too young to knows it yet." Sherry took the cookie and rolled her eyes. Disregarding everything Big Bessie said, Sherry ran upstairs to the missus.

After assuring Gaspard's leave, they secretly read Uncle Tom's Cabin (the book that turned the South, and her husband, various shades of red). Reading aloud, Angelique changed the tone of her voice to mimic certain characters. Sherry giggled as the missus turned the pages, all the while keeping one ear open for the sound of Master Gaspard's footsteps.

The more they read, the more Angelique analyzed her life, the more she saw unwelcomed reflections. In time she questioned her long-held beliefs, eventually seeing Sherry as a person, an unfortunate little girl who brought compassion into her life, and a friend in need of protection. Unbeknownst to Angelique, Sherry was one of Gaspard's numerous bastard children.

In the years that followed, Angelique would try her best to outmaneuver Gaspard, but Gaspard was as revolting as he was suspicious. Lifting his head back and taking a deep swig of cognac, he quickly spit. A look of terror crossed his face. He called for Angelique. "Angelique darling, won't you please come here?"

Angelique's heart raced as she tried to hide her terror. With a suspicious look in his eyes, Gaspard handed her the glass. "Drink

this and tell me if you sense anything off." Knowing a refusal would point to her impending crime and end in her untimely death, Angelique quickly guesstimated that it would take half a glass to kill her. She took a noticeable swallow as Gaspard carefully watched. Noticing a decrease in the liquid level, he then asked her a couple of questions to make absolutely sure the cognac had indeed been swallowed. Once satisfied, he kissed his wife on the forehead and left for the fields, leaving the glass of poisoned cognac in Angelique's trembling hands.

The bearded man from Gaspard's fantasy was not under any illusion he was in a position of power. He both desired his master and found him revolting. Cain did what the master told him to do, at that moment what they both wanted to do. Pushing deeper and moaning, he released inside of Gaspard. Gaspard enjoyed the thrust of a man more powerful than him. Being in a position of vulnerability and knowing that the big, beautiful man riding him was completely at his mercy, excited him like nothing else! Cain gave the master what he desired most—complete submission and admiration. In exchange, Gaspard granted him power and adorned him with gifts.

Reassured by Cain that Delilah had been broken, Gaspard smiled, and delighted in seeing the makeover. Lifeless, void of spirit, beaten, bruised, and suffering a miscarriage, Delilah plastered a fake smile across her angelic face. Like a broken dog, she obeyed and did exactly as Gaspard said. With her mind elsewhere, her body followed instructions. Delighted in the results,

Gaspard instructed Delilah to put back on her dress, welcoming her back to his lovely abode. She was completely compliant, or so he thought.

Angelique almost immediately became ill. Two days after drinking the poison cognac she lost the baby she carried in her womb, but that didn't quell her attempts to have Gaspard meet the devil early. After several years and four failed attempts to kill Gaspard, Angelique gave up, believing that her husband made a deal with the devil, or was possibly the devil himself! She thought about killing herself, but the thought of spending an eternity in hell with Gaspard quickly changed her mind and gave her the will to live.

The next morning Angelique sat across from Gaspard, as was their long-held Sunday routine. Her long golden blond hair swept up into an elegant bun, her porcelain skin glowed, and her blue eyes tried not to show sadness as she forced her little heart-shaped mouth into a smile. Pearls adorned her lovely neck. Purple bruises hid behind a baby blue imported silk dress. Her semi-voluptuous body radiated femininity. Still beautiful and the envy of most men, but to Gaspard, she resembled a portly pig past its prime. He stared across the table at her in disgust; his beautiful fifteen-year-old bride was now a twenty-two-year-old hag! Through the years, her long straight body had blossomed into that of a woman.

Gaspard was never one to stick up his nose at anything perverse. His diseased pecker took refuge in any crevice available. Like

an animal infested with worms, there was no satisfying his hunger! Angelique's breasts and shapely hips did not rank high on Gaspard's menu. He enjoyed straight lines, Youth, the innocent fragility of a child, or the masculine strength of a man. He viewed women as untrustworthy, finding something offensive in their form and deceitful in their touch, but using them all the same.

As for Gaspard, Angelique would soon be of no use. Angelique had produced a male heir, and with the birth of a backup male heir, her job would be done. After that she could blend into the furniture, or die for all he cared!

Angelique looked away in disgust as Gaspard took a big bite of his favorite dark chocolate cake. She hated chocolate cake; it reminded her of Gaspard. While the master played with the few remaining crumbs on his porcelain plate, Big Bessie stood in the kitchen with a big smile on her face. Gaspard, completely oblivious, had been eating shit for years, hog shit to be exact! Sometimes Big Bessie would put a little something special in it. On this particular day it was a slight sprinkling of rat poison. Gaspard avoided the kitchen like most dogs try to avoid a bath, believing that a man had no place in the kitchen. Because of this, Big Bessie avoided most of his wrath, but his evil deeds didn't go unnoticed. She knew what he did to Sherry and the others; all of the slaves knew!

Angelique wiped her mouth and asked to be excused. With Gaspard's approval, she exited the dining room. Once again pregnant, she waddled as she walked, her ankles slightly swollen.

Her feet ached as she headed toward the west wing. Pausing to catch her breath, she stopped under the staircase, looked up, and screamed. Delilah hung from the banisters, a noose around her neck! Limp, blue in color, and also pregnant again with Gaspard's child, she hung limp.

As Gaspard turned the corner, his dull brown eyes widened. He stared in admiration, dumbfounded that Delilah had the gumption to deify him by taking her own life! He smiled. Delilah was not the first, second, or third slave to meet an unfortunate end on that plantation. Gaspard's depravities had no limits. Tired of Delilah's dead body taking center stage, Gaspard called for Sampson to have the body discarded.

That night, the sky was vacant of wind, absent of stars, and void of moon. The crickets remained silent, and the bullfrogs held in their song as unsanctioned drums echoed, and fires raged in the slave quarters. The spirits walked, and the slaves gathered. The overseer fled, and Cain hid! The master locked all the doors, retreating to his parlor. Gaspard sat alone, warming his cold hands in front of a fire while listening to the sound of music. Sampson's fingers danced upon ivory keys as he thought about the death of Delilah. Unlike Gaspard, he loved her, and when she died, so did the last remainder of his heart. Sampson's voice, heavy with pain, sang the saddest tune as the windows came crashing in and Master Gaspard's self-portrait slammed to the floor. The fire went black, and a slight smile crossed Sampson's face as the master tried his best to hide his terror.

Two male slaves willingly slit their own throats, one after the other—payment for the death of the master’s heirs, leaving Gaspard and Cain to the wrath of Abel. With the release of their blood, a ubiquitous sadness swept through the plantation, entering everything it touched, transforming into an entity of its own, connected through tragedy and unleashed through rage! The spirits had answered the call of the living, and a time for a reckoning had begun. Shadows crossed the walls, and the candelabras went black as Angelique screamed, giving birth to a still-born male child.

The next day sickness swept through the house—taking with it their remaining boy. The following day Gaspard woke up with a strange mark on his arm and a head full of grey hair. They talked of spirits, but Gaspard didn’t believe in ghosts. Convincing himself that it was typhoid, he continued in his evil ways, chalking up the occasional mousy brown hair on his pillow, and footsteps in the night to fatigue, the swinging of chandeliers, and the tipping over of glasses to a never-before-mentioned tilt in the house. Unable to sleep and afraid of his own shadow, Gaspard came unraveled, grinding his teeth and biting his nails long after his fingers bled.

Keeping the Sunday morning ritual was a matter of principle, his weekly reminder he was king, but this Sunday would be different than all of the Sundays before. Gaspard sat uncomfortably as Angelique glared, unable to force a smile and not caring about the consequences. It went unnoticed. Gaspard had more

important things on his mind than her or his plantation. He sat, tired in the face, slightly thinner, and a bit green in color, trying not to fidget as his private parts burned. A prominent sore on his upper lip oozed slightly as he took a small bite of chocolate cake, coughing, and spitting cake everywhere as his inflated stomach felt like it was about to explode. He had contracted both herpes and syphilis from his oversized libido, parasites from eating chocolate cake infused with hog shit, and a greenish tinge from the occasional sprinkling of arsenic.

Angelique sat numb, paying Gaspard no mind, her hair disheveled and her dress black and wrinkled. Annette, her last remaining child, sat safely in her lap. The pretty rose-papered walls showed signs of age, the oak floor worn with scratches, the food tasteless, and the air stale. The chandelier swayed in a room full of closed windows and vacant of breeze as Gaspard looked at his reflection in a spoon. He started to speak, envisioning himself leading the entire Southern army.

"I am a man of principle. What type of man would I be if I shriveled like a coward and let someone take what is rightfully mine! The North shall not prevail in its thievery, disrespect, and the destruction of our ways! The South is, and always will be a force to reckon with!" Gaspard wanted to proceed with his long-winded, pompous speech, but his bowels said otherwise. So he quickly and uncomfortably blurted out, "I have enlisted in the Confederate Army and I depart after breakfast!"

Awkwardly adjusting his inflamed crotch, he uncomfortably stood, squeezing his butt cheeks together tightly as a loud noise

escaped from his derriere. A trail of putrid gas followed Gaspard as he walked briskly, quickly stopping to hand Angelique an envelope. While trying not to defecate on himself, he blurted out, “You will find my instructions inside.”

As the door closed, tears of relief fell from Angelique’s eyes. She held her little girl, rocking back and forth, no longer immured by Gaspard but completely broken. She would never be the woman that she once was.

Gaspard stood outside the front door feeling betrayed, unappreciated, and unacknowledged. Everything they had was because of him, and without him, they would be nothing! He seriously contemplated burning down his home—with everyone (except himself) locked inside, but he thought it would be a distraction from his greater goal.

Cain trailed closely behind Gaspard, believing that the North would never win. If freedom just so happened to impossibly arrive, where would he be? What position would he hold? Everything he had was because of Gaspard. Cain feared the other slaves, and in turn, they wished him dead. Staying behind was not an option. Knowing he could never make amends, Cain chose to be a demon in hell and ride with the devil than fall righteously. He was a man without a people, having no place on either side. Seeing himself above the common field slave and far superior to his darker-skinned brethren, he sided against his own freedom and willingly followed Gaspard.

Chapter 5

A Nation Divided

As the soldiers passed through a small town on their way to Gettysburg, red, white, and blue decorations graced the buildings. Smiling people waved handkerchiefs and flags in support; some cheered, some cried as they watched the soldiers march. Some handed out water and food, while others smiled. Men shook hands with the soldiers in appreciation, while young, unmarried women blushed. It was a Union town; when the people looked at the soldiers, they were reminded of their husbands, fathers, and sons, taking great appreciation in their service.

Preacher's gruff voice, strangely melodic, conveyed a tenderness hiding deep inside as he wearily sang. Attempting to dance,

he took three or four off-beat steps to the tune of the bassoon as a little girl ran forward, wrapping her tiny arms around his right leg and squeezing with all her might, hollering, “Daddy” at the top of her lungs as she looked up! Preacher picked up the little, straw-blond girl and gave her a heartfelt hug.

The child’s embarrassed mother rushed over. “Honey, that’s not Daddy! I know he looks a lot like Daddy, but he isn’t! Daddy will be home soon.” Preacher smiled and handed her the child. The embarrassed mom and child rushed off as Preacher thought about his little blond, blue-eyed daughter back home. The little girl’s hug overwhelmed him; he could barely hold back the tears as he continued to march.

Preacher was born a downtrodden bastard, a man troubled by vices and plagued by failure. The will to do right radiated through every inch of him. With every loss he’d try again, but he was imperfect by nature. Preacher wasn’t his given name, but that’s what everyone called him. He was one of God’s unlikeliest of madmen, anointed in blood, whiskey, and holy water. A righteous and fallible man—who heard the voice of God and answered his call! He carried a small Bible in his back pocket, a picture of his wife in his front pocket, a jar of moonshine in his knapsack, a rifle in his right hand, a long blade at his left side, a pocket knife in his boot, and a cud of tobacco in his lip. He had a gaunt face; high cheekbones; a long, pointed nose; wild blond hair; and an unruly beard.

Preacher's deep-set, sea blue eyes shined like two polished marbles, and his gruff, raspy voice echoed when he talked. He wore a smile or a scowl; there was no in-between. You loved him or you hated him. He was not a man of lukewarm composition. When he smiled, his tobacco-stained teeth lit up a room. His laugh was contagious and his love for music comical!

Behind his burly and raggedy appearance shined a heart of gold and a hard-hitting fist. He liked to talk, but wasn't a man of elaborate words. He didn't possess much, and didn't seek wealth, status, or grandeur—he sought justice, and intended to lend a helping hand in making things right. He was an abolitionist born deep in the Appalachia mountains, a true mountain man. Driven by his beliefs and inspired by John Brown—a white man who declared war on slavery, hung by a noose almost three years before the Civil War, considered a terrorist to the South and a martyr to the North. Like John, Preacher believed that freedom would only come through war and bloodshed. He loved his family and didn't wish to see an early death, but he felt that some things were more important than his life, and abolishing slavery was one of them!

Elijah walked silently, delighting in the reprieve from the mud and dirt. He enjoyed the music, something that he had prohibited himself from doing before, but he dared not dance, still seeing a bit of the devil in it! The smiling faces made him feel welcomed. He relaxed a bit more than usual, eating a delicious butter biscuit as he walked, rolling the crumbs in-between his forefinger and

thumb before licking his fingers, and reaching into his left pocket and pulling out a piece of taffy.

Elijah didn't drink, smoke, gamble, gossip, or dance, but he loved butter biscuits and taffy candy! He was as good as they come. His intentions were always well thought out and honorable. He monitored his actions and even tried to regulate his thoughts, yet he felt guilty at times. If anyone was getting into heaven's pearly gates, it would be Elijah.

Lorenzo grinned ear to ear, snapping his fingers to the music, and puffing out his chest in response to the cheers of the crowd. He felt like a hero. All the pretty women waving flags made his heart skip a couple of beats. Immoral thoughts passed through his head as he saw more than a few pretty women he would like to make his wife. He scanned the crowd looking for an eager face, inappropriately trying his luck from afar—he blew kisses while looking for a woman who didn't turn her head in modesty.

A wanton woman answered his call, blowing a kiss back in disregard to the shock and disgust of the morally obligated women around her. To his delight, the skinny, brown-eyed, buck-toothed girl lifted her big poofy, inappropriately red dress, showing a bit of ankle before disappearing behind a corner. Lorenzo quickly followed, almost skipping along the way. To be honest, he was irresistible to most women, his muscular build, broad chest, strong chin, black wavy hair, and hazelnut eyes got feelings stirring down below in the most chaste of women, but very few

would risk their reputation. Susan wasn't one of those women; already fallen—she did as she pleased.

They grinded and bumped in the middle of daylight behind an old shack. The smell of BO, rancid vagina, and cheap perfume, mixed with horse shit—filling the hot, humid air with a strong stench. Lorenzo's nose itched as he swatted flies away. He tried to hold his breath while thrusting wildly, unintentionally forcing Susan to hold onto an old wooden post. While trying not to get splinters in her hands, Susan tried her best to maintain her balance as Lorenzo rode her from behind like a cowboy rides a bronco! Her withered, flat breasts flopped wildly as the sound of Lorenzo's powerful thrusts made wet clapping sounds. She giggled, egging him on—until she lost her balance, and they both fell over in a small pile of dirt and red ants. Knowing he had to get back, still covered in dirt, he eagerly climbed back on and released himself, quickly jumping off.

Susan batted pesky mosquitoes from her damp skin as Lorenzo wiped the red ants from his body. While Susan squatted to take a pee, Lorenzo handed her his last dollar. Never asking for her address, he quickly departed, accidentally stepping in shit as he promised to write.

Contrary to most men, Lorenzo didn't want a virtuous woman—he found them more work than worth, humdrum, boring, predictable, prudish, demanding, and in the long run more expensive; he wanted excitement and fun! He wanted to spend the

rest of his life with a woman like the one he just finished mounting.

Unbeknownst to Lorenzo, everything wasn't fun and games for Susan. Her husband died in the war, and she had three hungry mouths to feed. Like many other women in her position—she would be dead in four years from disease, and her children would be destitute and without a mother.

Like most men of Lorenzo's character, he mistook a destitute woman to be wild and free—when in reality, she was a loving mother—doing whatever was necessary to feed her children. Susan learned early on that most men preferred a happy, flirtatious whore, as opposed to a sullen desperate woman. So, she played the game, when in reality she was trapped in a bad situation, desperately wishing for the stability that Lorenzo so wished to avoid.

Lorenzo grew up in a Roman Catholic household with a strict father and an uptight mother. As a kid, he decided he wanted no part of what his parents had. To be honest, he really didn't know what he wanted. He just went by what made him feel good. To be fair, he never saw the underbelly of life until he entered the army, and in his naivety, he thought he understood the entire picture—when in reality, he was just a tourist passing through that didn't know his head from his ass. Unlike Susan, he had no responsibility but himself. He lived every day like it was his last, almost as if he was trying to suck the marrow out of life. Like so many young men, if he was going to die—he would live on the edge until he was dead.

Lorenzo rejoined the line as if nothing happened, laughing with Patrick and Dale. Somehow, he managed to retain a youthful, upbeat vigor, always keeping a sense of humor even in the direst of situations. Danny, on the other hand, was a nervous wreck as usual. The chirping of birds bothered him, the sky was too bright, the people too loud, and the celebration too overwhelming. With each handshake he half suspected a knife in the side, or a Confederate soldier hiding in the midst. He envisioned the enemy behind every corner and crouched down in every shadow. He held his rifle tight, finger slightly twitching on the trigger as beads of sweat formed on his forehead, halfway jumping out of his skin with every noise.

A loud bang radiated through the air as a bullet lodged into the side of an old building. The men instinctively aimed their guns toward the sound, fingers on triggers, and ready to fire! Danny stood alone, fifty guns pointed at him. Suddenly, Lorenzo broke out in laughter, as did the rest of the men, realizing it was just Danny having a bad day. Preacher found no humor in it and confiscated Danny's gun for safekeeping. Elijah tried his best to ease Danny's mind by walking silently by his side, neither of them uttering a word.

The town responded very different to General Robert E. Lee's army. "The rebels are coming! The rebels are coming!" the boy shouted as he ran down the street. Children evacuated school, running home as fast as their tiny feet would take them. Shops locked their doors, dragging heavy furniture in front of them,

and nailed pieces of wood across their windows. The women and children hid, while husbands held their guns or prayed—most did both.

From a distance, it looked like thousands of grey locusts descending into town. When they got closer—you could see the angry, tattered men and hear them screaming in the streets, firing their guns in the air and cursing loudly as they broke into shops and homes, taking whatever they pleased.

Claudel hated Union towns! He found the people insulting, their glares irritating, and their shock of a Southerner being able to form an eloquent sentence while stating demands infuriating. Furthermore, he found it demeaning that someone far beneath him would have the audacity to treat him as if he were a flea-riddled vagrant dog—that they were too afraid to shoo away! He hated the way the women looked at him, the fear of rape in their eyes. Claudel believed that any woman with an ounce of common sense would be perusing him for a hand in marriage, or a roll in the hay. Besides, most were below his standards. Forcing himself on a woman was beneath him.

Most of their fellow soldiers vandalized and plundered—while Claudel and the Beast threatened to burn down every house that harbored fugitive slaves or free people of color. Fearing little repercussion, the Beast took a liking to raping Negro women. He particularly enjoyed forcing the misses of the house to watch, reviling in the look of terror on her face.

When out from under Claudel's supervision, and away from disagreeing eyes, the Beast would inappropriately fondle and rape any woman, regardless of age or race! Knowing that the penalty could very well mean death if he picked a white woman—he picked the most vulnerable to rape, heavily gambling on the idea that no one would believe the words of a whore. In other instances, he relied heavily on the idea that a virtuous woman would never speak of such an incident, believing that the fear of being perceived as unchaste or tainted would be far more detrimental to her reputation than rape. After all, not too many men wanted a sullied woman as a wife. To be honest, all women were the same in the Beast's eyes; the only thing of value they held was the hole between their legs.

Once done plundering and stealing, they forcefully took the fugitive slaves and free people of color using Confederate Vice President's "Cornerstone Speech" as a justifiable reason.

“. . . Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition . . . ”

— Alexander H. Stephens

Johnny and Jeremy took no part in the rounding up of Negroes, the humiliation of women, or families, instead breaking

into a bakery. Their dirt-covered hands grabbed bread and pastries by the arm full, frantically stuffing their mouths and swallowing as quickly as possible before reaching for more, gorging themselves until they felt like their guts would literally burst from the inside out. They then took to stealing, taking money, or anything small and of value they could fit in their knapsack, and later sell.

Upon returning to their unit, the Beast looked at Johnny and smiled a sinister smile. As he patted the huge sausage-shaped bulge in his pants, the words, “Ya wern there to save this one!” proudly poured from his mouth. Johnny touched his stitches in anger, remembering the beating he took the last time he intervened in one of the Beast’s rapes. He hated the Beast, and the Beast thoroughly enjoyed the look of contempt in Johnny’s eyes. The angrier Johnny became, the more he tormented him.

The Beast was a hairy, ugly man, who sweated profusely! Previously obese before the war, now rail-thin, his cheeks hung like two wobbly pieces of meat, giving him the appearance of an anorexic bulldog. Pockmarks covered his face, and an unruly thick unibrow mimicked the appearance of a dead, hairy animal lying across his forehead, giving the impression of a permanent frown. His pug nose, always red and runny from allergies, his skin greasy like a frying pan, and a repugnant body odor that smelled like rotting eggs and fish radiated from his pores. The overwhelming burning in his crotch helped to inflame his nasty disposition, and his continued crotch adjustments made him hard to look at.

His wide-set, caca brown eyes seemed to penetrate everything he looked at, making anyone he rested his eyes upon feel violated!

The Beast was the type of man that you could easily mistake for having rabies, and his breath smelled like the bottom of a latrine. When angry, he foamed at the mouth and the whites of his eyes turned a bloodshot red. If he were a dog, he would be immediately put down and never talked about again; unfortunately, he was human, and men like him were sometimes valued in times of war. He preferred close contact, looking his enemy in the eyes; like a dog, nothing got his blood pumping like chasing a man down. In the battlefield, he felt alive!

Adrenaline rushed through the Beast's body as he impaled a Union soldier. The shrill screams and warm feel of blood sent shivers up his spine! A splatter of blood landed on his tongue, drawing a smile to his face, and an erection in his pants, causing his cock to get rock hard. With each kill, he felt a sense of accomplishment. He prided himself in his skill, taking the occasional souvenir—sometimes an ear, sometimes a finger, a trophy of sorts.

As for women—anything with a vagina turned him on. When he was younger, the Beast was caught having sex with a sheep. Instead of being embarrassed, he kept on going. The excitement of someone being repulsed by his actions egged him on more! The only thing that could halfway keep him in line was fear, and very few men could scare him—Claudel was one of them. In the butcher's mind he was both friend and foe.

Claudel, straight-faced and calculating, cautiously moved forward, strategically placing his body behind other men or solid objects, aiming and firing. He preferred to keep his distance, hating the idea of another man's blood on his uniform. When absolutely necessary, he would use his bayonet, trying to keep as clean as possible, saving his fists for the worst-case scenarios. Claudel hated when things got messy, or unorderly! Somehow, he always managed to smell like cinnamon and soap. To be honest, Claudel cringed just thinking about most people touching him, but somehow stayed gentlemanly at all times, handling things in the most measured of ways, but when he snapped—he could intimidate even the most savage around him.

Gaspard was an entitled brat, persistently missing his target, blaming others for his follies, at times even throwing full-blown temper tantrums in the heat of battle, endangering his fellow soldiers. Beauford was a coward, dodging the enemy, stumbling, falling, and in a constant state of anxiousness—everyone was surprised that he wasn't dead yet. Waylon did just enough not to get court-martialed, Johnny begrudgingly did what needed to be done, and Jeremy followed Johnny's lead. Allen could hardly walk, let alone hold a gun. Trenton believed in the cause. The South was his home. He'd be damned if there was a fight and he wasn't in it! Timothy, was doing what he thought the Lord wanted him to do. Jamie, a fifteen-year-old bugle boy with dreams of grandeur, fought for an idea, and Earl--never mind Earl—he deserted.

The men had their conflicts, but when it came time to fight, all except for Gaspard put their differences aside, and right now with thousands of other Confederate soldiers—they were driving the Union troops back through the streets of Gettysburg to Cemetery Hill, south of the town. The Union gained a foothold on Culp's Hill on the second day.

The third day, the Union army fought like hell! Union and Confederate flags collided as blood splattered into Preacher's eyes, and sweat dripped down his forehead! Not having the time to load and reload his gun, Preacher swung his blade wildly at anything fast moving and dressed in grey. Elijah did the same, knowing the outcome if he stopped. Patrick was like a machine, five feet in front of them, mowing through men like blades of grass!

After three days of fighting, Gettysburg resembled hell on Earth. Legions of vultures circled overhead, below them, bloated decaying maggot-infested bodies and the stench of death. Screeching rodents nibbled on human fingers, while the desperate or greedy sifted through the dead's belongings looking for valuables as the Plum Run ran red. Horses lay sprawled out, lifeless, with legs twisted and broken as thousands of Confederate soldiers retreated, the defeated procession stretching thirteen miles long and traveling forty miles to Williamsport, Maryland. The severely injured were placed in wagons, while those able to stand, limp, walk, or crawl, did so.

While part of the Union Army pursued the retreating Confederates, other soldiers had the chore of burying the dead, while some sat wearily; all that survived the terrible ordeal were shaken but relieved to be alive, Preacher was one of them. He sat hunched over on a rock, his uniform covered in dirt and grime as he longingly looked at his wife's picture and thought of home.

Benjamin, the little drummer boy, held his drumsticks close to his chest. His body trembled and his heart raced as he fought sleep. Each time his eyes closed, he heard the screams of men dying and saw himself in a pile of dead bodies. He hollered for help, but his voice was drowned out by the sound of heavy artillery fire. The bodies would become so heavy he could barely breathe. Gasping for breath, he would wake up in a cold sweat.

Concerned, Lorenzo looked up from his card game with Dale. "Ben, you having those night terrors again?"

"N-n-no, sir. I, I mean, yes, sir . . . I, suppose . . . I am, sir . . ." Ben mumbled in a low voice.

"Have you been with a woman yet?" Lorenzo asked.

"N-no, sir, but I-I would like to be . . . I heard it's real nice, sir!"

Lorenzo laughed. "When we get out of here, I'll find a real nice public woman for you. Until then rest your eyes on this!" He handed him a picture of a partially nude woman. "In the meantime, this should take your mind off those night terrors of yours."

Preacher's gruff voice interjected, "Haven't we enough cases of the clap? Weren't you complaining of an itch down yonder a

couple of days ago? Don't go giving that boy unholy notions. He has enough problems as it is!"

"I was just trying to help the boy! What would your holiness suggest?" muttered Lorenzo in a jovial manner while throwing his cards down, and grabbing Dale's last two remaining dollars.

Preacher took a deep swig of whiskey and roared, "We don't need no more whore mongers, General Hooker's bad enough! If we ain't careful the entire Northern army might be put down by the pox and clap!"

Ben, scared that he'd miss his only chance with a woman, nervously spoke up. "I . . . I, really don't mind seeing a public woman, sir . . . I-I agree with Lorenzo . . . it might help, sir!"

Preacher laughed, "Just don't come running to me when your pants are on fire and you're pissing blood!"

Lorenzo responded, "You say that with great pride and ease, seeing you have a wife to go home to. Ben and I have no such luck!"

When Lorenzo saw Preacher reaching for his Bible, he felt it was time for the conversation to end. "I really don't feel like hearing the word of God tonight. I'm a heathen and I plan on staying one!"

Preacher laughed, "Your soul not mine!"

Tired of Preacher's hypocrisy, Lorenzo became frustrated and shouted, "Don't think that I don't know about your little mishap!"

Preacher looked down. Overcome with guilt, he mumbled, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Lord knows I try to be a good man.”

Everyone became silent. A fiddle played in the background as Elijah looked down, and Preacher awkwardly tapped his foot to an off-tune beat. Elijah was a Quaker; the fiddle and dancing were on a long list of things associated with the devil. The Quakers played a big role in the abolition movement against slavery, believing that slavery harmed both the slave and the slaveholder. Quakers were pacifists, traditionally rejecting war and violence, but when the Civil War came around, Elijah dropped his pacifist ways and picked up arms with the Union! Unbeknownst to most, the small, soft-spoken, unassuming man with a pleasant face possessed the courage and conviction of a lion!

Elijah took off his spectacles, closed his journal, and put down his quill, reading a few verses from the Bible before saying his nightly prayers and retiring to bed. Benjamin, the little drummer boy, fell asleep with the picture of the half-naked woman on his chest and had the most enjoyable dream of his life! Lorenzo, unable to sleep, wandered around camp looking for the company of a public woman. Finding none available, he returned to his tent disappointed. With no other option, he satisfied himself. Patrick cleaned his gun, falling asleep in the most awkward of positions while thinking of his mother’s coddle stew and soda bread. Preacher snuck away from camp. While dreamily looking up at

the North Star, he thought about his wife, their late-night walks together, and his little girl's insatiable fascination with the moon.

While Preacher looked up at the North Star, the Beast held his head low, hate and shame radiating from his body. Claudel still beautiful, quietly moved forward. It was the first time he had ever experienced defeat and didn't quite know what to make of his emotions. Timothy was nowhere in sight, and Allen collapsed from dysentery, dying from dehydration soon after. Unable to properly mourn, they kept moving—determined to live. Gettysburg had been a failure for them, thousands dead, thousands wounded, and the Union Army trailing fast behind them.

It had been twenty-four hours since the fall of Gettysburg, and neither Johnny nor his brother had eaten a thing in two days. Their hair was matted, feet bloody, clothes torn and drenched in rain. Gaspard, at his wit's end, hung on to Cain like a toddler hanging on to his mother, forcing Cain to carry him and all of his belongings, while Waylon limped closely behind.

Their heads hung low as they wearily placed one foot in front of another, occasionally slipping in mud and falling, their bodies torn, battered, and bruised, each step heavier than the next. Finding it exceedingly difficult to place one foot in front of the other, too weak to continue and too tired to stand, they collapsed in a heap under a big tree thirty feet from the beaten path. Claudel and the rest continued; rain, mud, fatigue, and hunger would not be a deterrent to their survival.

Trembling from apprehension, they fought sleep as their eyes closed. Johnny, dreaming of better times, suddenly heard his mother whisper to wake up. As Jeremy slept soundly, Johnny opened his eyes, unable to move. Drops of blood ran down his face from entrails wrapped around branches, Cain and Gaspard's gutted, headless bodies swung upside down from their feet high above him, mimicking the appearance of inverted crosses, both their severed heads impaled on sticks. The other soldier lay dead with a wound through his chest. Johnny, frozen under a spell, helplessly looked at the carnage in terror, while a massive black man with the eyes of a dead man stood over him.

Johnny tried to scream as Abel swung his sword, the blade stopping half an inch from his neck, almost as if it was held back by an unseen force. Lowering his blade, he looked deep into Johnny's eyes, vanishing. Only after Abel's departure did his little brother Jeremy wake from under the spell, and Johnny become unfrozen.

Chapter 6

Abel

I don't know if Abel was a man or a legend, a myth maybe. Some say he refused both heaven and hell, a distraught spirit waiting until the day he would be called upon to rectify the wrongs. He was sculpted from the earth by the hands of an old slave woman and given breath by the North winds, rising to the sound of the Civil War. There are many different stories about Abel, but I will tell you the story that's been passed down to me.

Abel was not a praying man. While cursing the heavens one morning, the unexpected happened. Under the command of Union Colonel James Montgomery, three Union gunboats

sailed up the mine-filled waters of the Combahee River. Harriet Tubman stood on the bow of the *John Adams*. As cannons fired, she watched overseers flee, masters run, plantations burn, mills decimated, supply lines crippled, and over 700 slaves freed.

Most people knew her as a former slave that freed others. To the black soldiers on the ship, the small, disabled, unassuming woman—known as the black Moses—was not only an abolitionist, Union spy, nurse, and icon, but the most revered conductor of the Underground Railroad and savior to many. She was also the only woman known to have led a military operation during the American Civil War. It's believed by some that Abel was one of the slaves rescued by that ship.

Abel never knew his father, and his mother died at thirteen, giving birth to her second child. His wife and children were defiled and sold. He was regarded as a beast of burden, a field slave bred to withstand what would break a lesser man. He was beaten within an inch of his life on several occasions. His existence had been a living hell, and if there was a heaven—he was sure he wouldn't be in it. Abel had the look of a man well beyond his age. He was broken but strong, massive but agile. He was a goliath of a man, possessing the eyes of a corpse. A jagged scar ran from his temple to his chin. He was the color of dark earth, his nose broad, and his lips full. A web of raised scars crisscrossed his back, and he walked with a limp.

He knew what it was like to be beaten at another man's will, to be considered less than human, to wish for justice and have

none, to be without choice and at the mercy of monsters. Abel was a broken man with a dream and a heart full of pain. To live as a slave was a punishment worse than death. Abel had nothing to lose and everything to gain from the Civil War. When the opportunity arose, he picked up arms and fought for freedom!

Robert Gould Shaw led his regiment into battle as he shouted, “The eyes of thousands will look on what you do tonight! Forward, 54th, forward!” Bullets tore through Shaw’s chest as the 54th Black Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry charged into the mouth of hell.

Flashes filled the night sky, the ground shook, and the air filled with smoke. They pushed forward as bullets rained upon them, penetrating their soft flesh, causing men to fall one after another, creating vast rivers of blood. Black bodies piled high as a little bugle boy played a Confederate tune.

Greatly outnumbered and his fellow soldiers dying one by one, Abel moved forward with the fortitude of 100 men, unafraid of death, and unaccepting of failure! He gave no mercy or compassion for those who opposed him. When he saw the Union flag fly high in the battlefield, his heart quickened because he knew the once unfathomable was possible! In the midst of blood and loss—he saw a future, felt a purpose, and a reason to live! For the first time in his life, he could hold his head up high; there was no going back. He would have freedom or he would have death; there would be no compromise!

That day Abel, along with many other men in the 54th Black Regiment died. They lost the battle, but the war raged on. They weren't naive to the realities of war. They knew the risks, but they stood anyway and fought for something greater than themselves, the right to be human, the right to be free! They chose to die on their feet as men rather than on their knees as slaves, and if they had to do it over again, I believe they would willingly do so!

The body of their commander Robert Shaw was stripped of clothing, robbed of all belongings, and discarded in an unmarked trench with his soldiers. Confederate General Johnson Hagood said, "Had he been in command of white troops, I should have given him an honorable burial; as it is, I shall bury him in the common trench with the niggers that fell with him."

Johnson Hagood's actions were intended to infuriate and demean the Shaws. Instead, it was seen as an honor by the Shaw family that he was buried with his men. When later efforts were made to remove Shaw's body from where it laid, his father replied, "We can imagine no holier place than that in which he lies, among his brave and devoted followers, nor wish for him better company. What a bodyguard he has!"

It's been said that General Johnson Hagood's actions infuriated the North so much that it made more men willing to step forward in a war they might have otherwise wished to avoid.

Upon Abel's death, his eyes were replaced with the sight from beyond. Unbeknownst to most, Abel was a spirit of mid-

dle ground. Both good and evil resided in him, so much so that he belonged to both heaven and hell. He believed a benevolent God would not allow his children to suffer, and the devil—in life he knew the devil's deeds well. Having no desire to serve either—he struck a deal, becoming a bringer of light and dark! He carried a sword made by Satan and tempered in hell's fire, blessed by God, and gifted to him by an archangel. If a person's soul contained more shadow than light, Abel had the right to judge them. His sword could only penetrate the bodies of men who tipped the scales in favor of the dark, doing both the work of both God and the devil; in essence, Abel served both.

Abel's seething hatred for the Confederate army and all its sympathizers grew in magnitude, becoming a raging inferno after his death. Well aware that the North was not without sin, he turned a blind eye, instead focusing on the bigger picture. The freedom of his people rested in the hands of the Northern army. A Southern victory would mean the continuation of slavery, causing his sacrifice, the sacrifice of his fellow soldiers, and so many others to be in vain. Abel would do everything in his power to prevent that from happening.

Even in death, Abel refused to fail. He would do whatever was necessary, even if that meant riding with the devil at times. There was no cost, sacrifice, or consequence too high! Unbeknownst to the Northern army, Abel fought beside them, taking as many Rebel soldiers to hell as his sword would allow. The

blade he swung was enchanted. Any harm it inflicted on Earth would follow the wearer to hell. Abel had good intentions behind his horrendous deeds, maiming the wicked in such a way that they couldn't inflict pain even in hell.

The killing of Cain and Master Gaspard was personal, removing the eyes to prevent lust, the hands to prevent evil deeds, their cocks to prevent rape, their tongues to prevent the spread of deceit, and finally decapitating them for his own personal enjoyment--leaving their bodies hanging upside down as a sign to evil men—that payment for their evil deeds was being collected! On his departure, he took Cain's still-beating heart and Gaspard's eyes as insurance. If there ever came a day they were put back together, Gaspard and Cain would be forced to find him for their missing parts. On such a day, he would send them back to hell in pieces once again, eternal payment for the defiling of his wife and child, the murder of his baby girl, and the unintentional death of his mother, inadvertently caused by bringing his half-brother and arch nemesis Cain into the world.

Chapter 7

Cold Harbor

A foreboding feeling surrounded the battle-hardened men as they prepared for death and hoped for the best. Aware of the impending situation, they attached name tags to their uniforms to make it easier to identify their bodies should they pass. As night progressed, the men sat quietly with hardly a word exchanged between them, each feeling blue, lost in their own world. Elijah closed his eyes in prayer, picturing the face of every Confederate soldier he killed, asking for forgiveness as he pictured fatherless children, and widows on small farms similar to his.

Preacher stood alone under a weeping willow, whiskey bottle in one hand, a picture of his wife in the other. He held back tears

as he rubbed a small iron cross he found. As Patrick cleaned his musket a sadness swept through him. He remembered the faces of each one of his friends killed by Confederate soldiers. He then thought of the men sitting next to him; they were family, and he would risk his life to save almost any one of theirs. Nate was past the point of caring; his flip had been switched a long time ago. He made a promise to himself that he would never be taken hostage, preferring to die than be put in the South's prison camps, left to starve and rot away from disease, dysentery, and scurvy. Never would he allow himself to be at the mercy of an enemy, and if he was going to die, he would not die alone; he would take as many Rebs as he could with him!

Cedrick laid on his back as he looked at the stars. Nothing seemed real to him. He felt as if he was a victim in a horror novel, looking from the outside in. Danny contemplated between suicide and desertion as he anxiously sat, his hands shaking as he placed the barrel of a loaded gun in his mouth while rocking back and forth. Lorenzo and Dale always seemed to find humor in every situation. On death's doorstep they played a haphazard game of cards, while seriously contemplating spreading a thin layer of shit all over their bodies to detour the Rebs from stealing their clothes should they die. As for everyone else, I have no idea, but I do know that none slept soundly, knowing the Confederate soldiers were dug in deep, waiting for their approach.

In the blackness, moments before daybreak, they stood side by side with thousands of men, proceeding into a thick fog with

guns drawn. Suddenly Confederate bullets and cannonballs were unleashed. Heavy artillery fire mixed with the whizzing of bullets, and the screams of men erupted into one loud, indistinguishable roar. Complete chaos ensued; men crashed into one another, unintentionally trampling their fellow soldiers as they charged across an open field to reach an enemy residing in heavily fortified trenches, all the while being decimated by rebel fire.

Preacher leaped over dead bodies, dodging bayonets. Covered in the blood of other men, he fought his way to the little drummer boy, who lay motionless partially buried in a pile of men, unconscious, his shredded drum next to him. Elijah charged towards Preacher, gun pointed, and bullets firing, accidentally grazing Preacher's cheek, filling his nostrils with the smell of gunpowder as a ball of lead lodged in the heart of the Confederate soldier seconds away from decapitating Preacher. As Preacher dug through dead bodies, the drummer boy gasped for air, and the little Quaker held his ground, loading his gun and firing, loading his gun and firing, never stepping back, never pausing until Preacher had the little drummer boy safely over his shoulder.

Everything became a blur. A swarm of blue and grey collided, swords clashed, cannons fired, bullets penetrated flesh, men screamed out in terror, trumpets roared, and horses fell to their knees. Everything faded into each other as Confederate Rebels released a battle cry from the pits of their stomachs. One sound became indistinguishable from the next, transforming into a

thunderous roar. The soldiers ran on adrenaline, hate, and fear, each hoping to live another day!

True to his word, Nate somehow made it over shoulder-high breastwork and into enemy trenches. Lorenzo, two feet behind him, took a bullet to the head. Adrenaline rushed through Nate's body as he loaded and reloaded his gun. Encumbered by the narrow space and out of bullets, he pulled out his knife, driving its blade into a Rebel's chest, quickly pulling it out and slitting another soldier's throat. Blood covered him as he kicked a charging Reb in the knee, slamming his fist into the wounded man's face and implanting sharp steel deep in the opposing soldier's side. A sudden, unexpected pain seared through Nate's body. He looked down to see the end of a bayonet protruding from his stomach. Seconds later, he lost consciousness, bleeding out.

In the first hour of the battle, the Union suffered 7,000 casualties give or take. Charging into enemy fire was suicide, and the attacks failed. Later that day when General Ulysses S. Grant issued another attack, many units and soldiers refused to run head-first into a plethora of bullets. Preacher and Elijah were two of them. They had no problem with fighting, but charging into bullets was suicide. Even Major General William F. "Baldy" Smith objected, calling the order a "wanton waste of life", ignoring his commander's order.

Some called Ulysses S. Grant a butcher; others called him a brilliant strategist, but there was one thing mostly everyone

agreed on: Ulysses S. Grant was willing to do what was necessary to win the war, no matter the costs!

In the hot, humid, sweltering air, bodies of Union soldiers lay scattered, severely injured, or dead. Frantically Preacher dug his hands into the ground, vigorously throwing handfuls of red dirt as Elijah used his feet, thrusting the earth with every ounce of strength, unintentionally kicking up old bones of soldiers who died in the former Battle of Cold Harbor. In a frenzy, their fellow Union soldiers used metal cups, bayonets, anything they could find, in the end digging much shallower trenches than the Confederates.

Thousands of men lay in the tight trenches across from each other within shooting range. The man lying to the left of Preacher raised his head a little too high and quickly fell dead from a bullet in-between the eyes. Elijah sat crouched to the right of Preacher. Fecal matter covered the bottom of his boots. They shared what little food and water they had left in their knapsacks. Within a couple of days, their lips were chapped and bleeding, and hunger and thirst rested in the pit of their stomachs. An injured soldier a few men down, half-crazed, slit his own throat as a release from the pain. Danny sat crouched, shaken, and withdrawn, smack dab in the midst of a psychotic break with a crumpled newspaper in his hand, talking to an imaginary friend over the news of Fort Pillow.

Preacher threw his empty whiskey bottle to the ground, shaking from withdrawals, and loudly cursing as he angrily beat the

flies off of him. Elijah sat quietly, deep in thought, unable to stand, unable to stretch. They awkwardly crouched or lay while packed in like sardines in a can. Eaten alive from mosquitoes and tormented by flies, they waited. The sun beat down on them as they sweated profusely, scratching vigorously from lice as they ducked bullets and listened to the cries of wounded and dying soldiers. The sick coughed, the religious prayed, the angry cursed, and the sad cried—no man lay in those trenches without feeling something.

Vultures and crows circled overhead, while decaying flesh, urine, shit, blood, insects, rodents, and sweat surrounded both Union and Confederate soldiers alike. For days, injured men lay dying, trapped in-between the two armies, finally agreeing to a truce on June 7th. With most the wounded men already dead, they buried the bloated, rotting, putrid, maggot-filled corpses of their fellow soldiers in shallow graves. Weary men in dark blue, dirty, faded, ragged, and torn uniforms retreated a few days later with dark circles under their eyes, bruised, beaten, and defeated.

Preacher, unable to walk upright, had taken a blow to the ribs with the butt of a musket. His feet ached as he listened to Elijah quietly recite the Lord's Prayer while Cedrick relentlessly complained.

“Why don't ya just go and kill yourself!” Preacher snapped.

Elijah abruptly stopped reciting the Lord's Prayer, interjecting, “That would be ill-advised. Killing one's self is a mortal sin!”

“I’ve thought about it several times,” Cedrick mumbled under his breath.

A look of concern crossed Elijah’s face as he stepped in front of Preacher, stopping him in his tracks. “This young man needs the Lord’s help!”

“The Lord helps those that help themselves!” Preacher snapped before reluctantly looking back at the hunched-over, anxiety-riddled soldier. Unexpectedly feeling a tinge of guilt, he started over with the conversation.

“Look boy, life is like blood and sugar. You are forced to take the cards that you’re dealt. You take the good with the bad, endure the pain, and rejoice when times are good. Everything is seasonal; nothing in this world lasts forever. You do the best you can with what you got. You stand by your beliefs, value the people who value you, and climb back up every time you fall. Death is guaranteed to us all. It’s how you live and what you stand for that counts!

A scowl crossed Cedrick’s face, and he hollered. “I don’t think you fully comprehend the magnitude of this situation. Look around! What are you, blind?” He gestured to the weary men around him.

Preacher roared, “I fully comprehend this situation!” Pointing at various soldiers, he added, “Your discomfort is no greater than the next man’s. Your life is no more important than the next man’s, but yet you wallow in your misery like a selfish child, while all these men march to the same drum as you! We all feel

fear; we all long for life! Every man here has loved ones that he left behind, and friends lost, but the righteous amongst us stand, until God calls us home!”

Cedrick became irate. “I don’t belong here!”

Preacher exhausted and, out of patience, snapped, “I’ve got no sympathy to give a coward. If you wanna cry, find another man’s shoulder!”

Unable to relate to a word that was said, the young man scurried off. Concerned, Elijah followed close behind him. Cedrick’s eyes swelled with tears, and his body shook with anger as he looked down at Elijah and spoke. “I was conscripted. I don’t believe in God. I don’t believe in the hereafter, and I don’t believe that we are fighting for a righteous cause. I don’t care about no niggers! I don’t care about the preservation of the Union! I care about me! Save your care and kind words for someone who gives a damn, and leave me be!”

A few days later, the men made camp. Preacher and a handful of soldiers raided a nearby farm, bringing back poultry, eggs, and a pig. Some men shook from hunger as they swallowed raw eggs while anxiously waiting for the chicken to cook on a small fire. Preacher handed Elijah a chicken leg, which he refused.

“Thou shalt not steal!”

Preacher snapped, “The Bible also says thou shalt not kill, but here you are—rifle in hand killing!” He tossed a chicken leg in Elijah’s lap.

Elijah, calm but firm, stood his ground. “We fight a righteous war; I would not have picked up arms if for a second I believed otherwise. Do not attempt to twist my good intentions with your wicked deeds.”

Preacher sighed. “This is gettin' tiresome. Eat the damn chicken leg before I shove it down your throat!”

“I’m not a thief. I don’t take food out of the mouths of women and children.”

Preacher abruptly pointed in the direction of the farmhouse. “Their husbands and sons are the ones out there killing us. Their wives and children wish us all to hell! Why do you care so much about people who wish you dead! What about your wife? What about your children? What about the people you fight for? Do you think they showed their slaves mercy? Do you think they would show you the slightest bit of care? No, they would put a bullet through your heart without giving it a second thought! This war is pointless if we starve ourselves to death!”

Elijah pictured his wife and children on their small farm as he stood, adjusting his spectacles before taking a deep breath and looking Preacher in the eyes. “I will not let this war change me from a man into a monster! I will not become what I despise or embrace a philosophy that is not of God. ‘But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.’”

Preacher turned red in the face and also quoted from the King James Bible. “For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid, for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. —Romans 13:4 KJV”

Elijah, a bit annoyed, looked back and forth from Cedrick to Preacher. “Why is your fist torn to shreds and Cedrick battered and bruised? Front teeth suddenly don’t go missing on their own accord!”

Preacher looked at Cedrick before punching him in the face one last time. “He was attempting to defile a slave woman, ex-slave—they have been emancipated.”

Elijah turned red in the face, focusing on Cedrick. “If the wrath of God won’t deter men like you, I’m sure Abraham Lincoln’s Lieber Code will!

“Section II, (Article 44) clearly states that, ‘All wanton violence committed against persons in the invaded country, all destruction of property not commanded by the authorized officer, all robbery, all pillage or sacking, even after taking place by main force, all rape, wounding, maiming, or killing of such inhabitants, are prohibited under the penalty of death, or such other severe punishment as may seem adequate for the gravity of the offences.’ That protection applies to all women, black and white alike!”

Preacher rubbed the back of his neck, awkwardly stretching, taking a pause before shrugging his shoulders and starting to

speak. “Evil men do evil deeds, regardless of the law, but I think I can rightfully say that Cedrick won’t be stepping out of line after the beating he got.”

Preacher looked at Elijah. “I’m sure you’re aware of the New York riots, in regards to the Union draft and the burning of a black orphanage. Resentment is brewing in some of our soldiers in regards to the freed slaves. They’re blamin’ them for this war and our current situation. They believe that we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for them.”

Looking up from thought, Elijah noticed Patrick’s black mangled finger. “I strongly recommend that you get that looked at. I’ve seen this before; we need to promptly amputate that finger before the infection travels further in.”

Patrick replied in a strong Irish accent, “What type of man do I look like going to see the doctor over a finger when there are men losing their arms and legs? I’ll do it myself.” Looking up, he said, “Preacher, ya got any more of that whiskey?”

“No, but I managed to confiscate some moonshine from that house up yonder.”

Patrick grabbed the bottle of moonshine and laid his blade in the fire, throwing back his head, and taking a few deep swallows before laying his hand over a large rock. Without so much as a wince, Patrick sliced through his finger as if he was cutting a piece of cheese, afterwards searing the bloody stub with the flat part of his blade while cursing Danny.

“I’m done saving your pacifist ass. It’s because of you that my finger got all mangled, and I almost got killed! If I remember rightly, you were bragging about how ya entered this war on your own accord. What did ya think war consisted of? Next time I expect you to be a man, not a wee lass, and stop talking to yourself and fidgeting so damn much. You’re making me nervous!”

Danny sat rocking back and forth, holding his gun tight, a ragged, hand-rolled cigarette held tightly between his fingers while anxiously looking around and muttering to himself. “I don’t know what happened. I just couldn’t.”

What he envisioned war to be and what war was, were two entirely different things. He thought it would be easy to kill a man, but when the time came, he looked into the eyes of someone just like him... and couldn’t pull the trigger.

Chapter 8

Johnny Reb

They hadn't received pay in months. They suffered from deprivation and acute food shortages, but both Johnny and Jeremy were happy to have won the battle and relieved to be alive. The brothers wearily walked in the early morning hours amongst bloated and decaying corpses, replacing their tattered items for those slightly less used.

"I think these will fit you nicely," said Johnny while looking away from the dead man's chewed-off face, forcefully pulling the black boots off the rotting Union soldier while anxiously looking around for vicious wild hogs. A huge smile appeared over his little brother's face as he removed his tattered and worn-through shoes, gratefully accepting the ones Johnny held in his hands.

Jeremy's feet were covered in blood blisters and scabs. Peeling skin scrunched around his toes from walking miles in threadbare shoes for months on end. They continued picking through the dead corpses, oblivious to the numerous rats as they looked for scraps of food, canteens, clothing, weapons, money, anything that could be of use or bartered. Johnny did whatever was necessary for him and his brother to survive. At this point, shame wasn't a deterrent. They were alive and in need; the dead had no use for earthly possessions. What benefit would a pair of shoes bring a dead man?

Johnny was eighteen years old when he was conscripted; his brother Jeremy, only fifteen, followed him to war because he had no one else. Johnny's gums were bleeding from scurvy. He was malnourished, underweight, infested with lice, hookworms, and suffering from a nasty case of scabies, which caused an intolerable itch. As bad as Johnny looked, Jeremy looked worse.

Their stomachs were almost always empty. They had no family, no home to go back to, no money, and received no care packages or letters. The brothers begged, borrowed, and stole just to survive, as did some of the other soldiers. To make matters worse, the Butcher and Claudel became very suspicious of them after the Gettysburg incident, believing Johnny's story to be a ruse, pegging them both as nigger-loving Yankees and traders.

Back at camp, Johnny quietly sat, his brother half-asleep leaned against him. Reed, a blue-eyed, blond-haired, freckled, fourteen-year-old bugle boy, sat to their right. Reed's family didn't own land, and hunger was part of his daily life. He was born to dirt-

poor tenant farmers and grew up in a dirt-floor shack, like a lot of other poor white Southerners. He fought out of a sense of duty and obligation. The South was his home, and if the South fought, so did he. Reed didn't have two pennies to rub together, but he had his metal toy soldiers, a picture of his mother, and his pride. Thoughts of beautiful women and grandeur motivated him to run away from home and join the army. He imagined going home a man, a hero, metals adorning his neck and women falling at his feet. He eagerly listened as the men hurled insults at one another.

“You are an imbecile,” shouted Claudel. “We seceded from the Union because of property rights, slavery!”

Trenton glared back, shouting louder. “If you believe that the South seceded from the Union over slavery, you’re the imbecile, not me! This war is because of tax revenues, money! Think how much money the North will lose because of our secession; if I recall correctly, the South paid somewhere around 80% of all tariffs, and the North had the audacity to ask for more! The South can stand on its own, even flourish without the North piggy-backing on her. It’s the North who needs the South!”

Beauford adjusted his spectacles and cleared his throat, politely raising his hand and interjecting, “Gentlemen it started with the violation of the 10th Amendment. We seceded from the Union in protest against federal legislation that limited the expansion of slavery. We are in this war to protect our economic system. The North is a threat to our way of life!”

Claudel interjected, “Gentlemen, let’s be realistic, Before the war began, we all knew that the election of Abraham Lincoln and his black Republicans would bring forth nationwide emancipation and the collapse of the South as we know it. I am sure you remember Abraham Lincoln’s June 16, 1858 “A House Divided” speech. If not, I will refresh your memory!”

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. — Abraham Lincoln”

The Beast sat wide-eyed, staring a hole into Johnny. “What-cha think ‘bout dat, boy?”

Johnny responded earnestly. “To be honest, I don’t give a damn about any of it. A nigger ain’t never done anything bad to me, and if the South does secede, it ain’t gonna help me none. I’ll still be poor! It’s because of the rich planters, the master class, the Southern elite, that us poor whites suffer so horribly! We can’t compete with the labor the slaves provide. Heck, I can’t even find employment most of the time, and when I do, they work me like a slave for next to nothing. I say let them go free. From where I sit, I ain’t got nothing to lose. Heck, I’ll probably fare a hell of a lot better! Better yet, let the politicians fight it out amongst themselves and die. Leave us regular folks alone!”

Claudel’s mouth dropped wide open as did everyone else’s. Johnny had the audacity to say out loud what some of the other men were thinking but were too afraid to say. Never letting

an opportunity pass without him being the center of attention, Claudel seized the moment and took center stage like a lawyer in court, taking an intimidating posture and clearing his throat before speaking.

“Boy, those remarks of yours are tantamount to treason! Poor white trash like you are a blight on our beautiful Southern communities, no better than filthy cockroaches, barely a step above niggers. Where I come from, we hang men from trees for saying much less than you said. Perhaps you’ve had a brief absence of judgment. Being the diplomatic gentleman that I am, I’ll let it pass for now, but by the end of this war, you will be on your knees begging me for my forgiveness.”

Turning to address the rest of the men, Claudel laughed, “It appears that our ignorant, young, contumelious Johnny here has forgot his place! The Bible talks of a time when brother shall deliver up brother to death! That’s happening now, both literally and figuratively. My own flesh and blood brother betrayed his family fighting for those damn Yankee devils!

“Whoever thought there would come a day when white men would fight alongside niggers to kill his fellow brethren? Race traders—that’s what they are! For all I know, those Yankees might have already set my plantation afire. Sherman and his men already set Atlanta ablaze and my dear cousin’s plantation along with it. The good people of Atlanta have no food, no shelter; they’re starving! Our women suffer unprotected while niggers and Yankees run around free, looting, stealing, and God knows

what! Once-proud Southerners are now reduced to vagabonds! What is it that Sherman said?

“‘War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it; the crueller it is, the sooner it will be over.’ I pray one day Sherman will be forced to suffer his own words.”

Tired of being humiliated and belittled, Johnny angrily interjected, “Sherman also said, ‘In our country... one class of men makes war and leaves another to fight it out.’”

Already livid and feeling vengeful, Claudel ground his teeth as he looked at Johnny and smiled. “I’d be very mindful in interrupting me, boy!” Patting his lap dog, the Butcher, on the shoulder, he added, “I’m sure you are very aware of how the Butcher got his byname bestowed upon him. If not, maybe we should remind you.”

Johnny’s right hand gripped his rifle as the Beast calmly reached into his left pocket, pulling out a severed ear and throwing it in Johnny’s face. Johnny sprang to his feet, rifle pointed. The Butcher laughed, showing a row of rotten and missing teeth while walking straight into the barrel of the loaded and cocked gun.

“Go, ‘head boy, pull dat trigga! I’m su ya know da penalty fo killing a fellow Confederate soldier!” The surrounding men stayed quiet, not wanting to make trouble for themselves while Claudel grinned ear to ear as he leaned forward, eagerly watching the entire ordeal as if it were a sport.

Beauford, the slightly chubby, a well-mannered accountant, interjected, moving very slowly as he talked. “I do believe that we

can rectify this situation in a calm, orderly fashion that doesn't involve bloodshed. We have Yankee devils that wish to destroy us. Let's not do their bidding for them." Sweat dripped from his head as he calmly redirected Johnny's barrel from the Butcher's head. "Now gentlemen, we either stand together or perish as one. Let's not implode before we have the pleasure of sending the Yankee devils and their niggers to hell. What the two of you do after the war is of no concern to me. Until then, we need every man standing!"

Jeremy stood behind his older brother, nervous but ready to back Johnny in whatever decision he made. Johnny was the only family he had left. If they hung, they hung together. Like Reed's family, and the majority of other Southerners, Johnny and Jeremy didn't own slaves. Unlike Claudel and the Butcher, Johnny and Jeremy wanted no part of the war.

Not having any of the occupational criteria to exempt them from battle, or able to pay a substitute to fight in their place, Johnny and Jeremy were forced to take up arms, a punishment for being poor. More than a few Confederate and Union soldiers called the whole ordeal a "rich man's war, poor man's fight." Johnny was one of them, and he made the unfortunate mistake of making his thoughts very clear. His only goal was for him and his younger brother to stay alive. They were fighting to live; he would much rather someone else's cold body be sent home than his or Jeremy's.

The tension dissipated, but Johnny knew it wasn't over. The Beast wasn't the type to let things go. He was a mad man who

modeled himself after the legendary and deadly pro-Confederate guerrilla fighter named Bloody Bill. Killing Union soldiers and sympathizers was his passion, and he was as determined as he was psychotic. Some said his blood lust was insatiable! Johnny knew the only way to handle a man like that was to be as crazy as he was. Backing down to a predator would only put him and his brother in the position of prey. Johnny knew one day he'd have to face the Butcher.

As usual, Claudel defused the awkward silence by filling the still air with self-admiration. His bright blue eyes looked back at him in a small hand-held mirror as he admired his undeniable beauty, perfectly white teeth, and strong jawline. Running the comb through his thick golden brown hair one last time before putting the mirror down, he commented, "Damn, I'm handsome! I've never met a woman that could resist my charm or a bank that didn't want my business." After taking a cup of coffee from his slave, he looked at the Butcher, "What do you say we find ourselves a couple of public women to better our moods. My treat."

The Butcher grinned. "Dipping my stick in a dumb whore sounds just 'bout right, right 'bout now!"

Claudel smiled. The light in his eyes reflected beauty as he looked at Johnny. "Boy, fetch me my boots!" After waiting a couple of seconds, an annoyed and impatient look crossed his face. "Now, I say! What are you, deaf and dumb?"

A look of hatred crossed Johnny's face as he responded, "I ain't one of your unfortunate slaves, Claudel. Get off your lazy, spoiled, educated ass and get it yourself!"

Claudel's jaw dropped once again. The Beast laughed hysterically, accidentally shooting whiskey out of the rotted-out gaps in-between his remaining decayed teeth. Johnny could smell the mint on Claudel's breath as he calmly responded in a fiery, honeyed tone.

"You and your kind wouldn't be suited to wash my dirty underwear. That rock over there has more intelligence than you and your raggedy brother combined! I'll wager that you don't even know how to spell rock. Come on, let's give it a go—R-O-C-K. Unbeknownst to Claudel, Johnny and his brother could read and write, but more than a few of the men in his unit couldn't. The Beast was one of them, and he was no longer laughing.

Seeing the perfect opportunity, Johnny replied, "I have a question." Claudel's eyes met Johnny's. "Do you wipe your own ass, or does your manservant do it for you?"

Knowing that all eyes were on him, Claudel smiled and replied very calmly, but in an assertive manner. "Let me make something perfectly clear. A man of my wealth and stature could have easily avoided this war and the likes of you and your kind, but I'm here. What does that say about my character versus yours? If my memory serves me right, you are conscripted, and I'm a volunteer with a lot to lose. You don't even have two pennies to rub together or a home to go back to. You possess nothing but your sickly looking

brother over there, and you can't even take proper care of him. Hell, my slaves look better than the two of you. I would think twice before insulting a man like me. Now fetch me my boots!"

Johnny didn't move. Claudel sat as still as a statue, flawless porcelain skin, handsome in every physical way, not a flaw on him. From the outside looking in, he was perfect, Ivy league-educated, fabulously wealthy, charismatic, superior fighting skills, combined with the ability to stay immaculately clean in the midst of blood and carnage.

Beauford tried his best to emulate Claudel, and tried his darndest to stay clean and tidy, but he just ended up looking befuddled and dim-witted, but that didn't deter him from trying his best to win Claudel's favor. Behaving a bit like a schoolboy presenting a girl with flowers, Beauford awkwardly waddled over, presenting Claudel with his boots and hat for extra measure. His body wiggled a bit like a dog when Claudel patted him on the shoulder.

Just the sight of Claudel was enough to get under Johnny's skin. They were opposites in every way. Claudel was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and Johnny had been jinxed from birth. Claudel was tall, strong, handsome, calculating, wealthy, articulate, charismatic, and manipulative. At times he'd be so polite and use such large, fancy words that you'd have to think about exactly what he was trying to say, needing time to translate his grandiose words and untangle his elaborate poetic sentences inside your head. By the time you figured out what the hell Clau-

del was saying, you'd already shaken your head, yes, in agreement to avoid looking like an idiot! Maybe that was the point—to make everyone else feel dumb!

Johnny was the exact opposite, always uncompromisingly upright in his communication, plain-spoken and to the point. He didn't use flowery words or use ten sentences to say something that could be said in one. He was below average weight and average height. He was rail-thin, mediocre in appearance, dark hair, dark eyes, poor, impulsive, a sass mouth, and transparent in character. Claudel represented everything Johnny hated. He was forced from his home to fight for the rights of rich men to own slaves, rich men who could lawfully afford to avoid conscription, while poor men like him were forced to serve or possibly receive a bullet for desertion!

To Johnny's defense, Claudel thought of himself as superior to most people, deserving of more than others, and as a consequence, demanded more than others and devalued those he deemed beneath him. Unlike some of the other soldiers, Johnny didn't think of himself as below Claudel, or fortunate to be in the same vicinity as him; however, he felt poor and disadvantaged, something that Claudel would probably never feel. The one thing that Johnny had, that no one could ever take away from him, was his fighting spirit. No matter what, no matter how hard life hit him, no matter how hard he fell, no matter how bruised, Johnny would dust himself off and stand right back up for more!

Unlike Claudel, he didn't attend church on Sundays or need a following of minions. He believed some of the biggest devils and hypocrites attended church every Sunday. Ever since Johnny could remember, he was angry with God, being granted the short end of the stick from the day he was born. His whole life was a series of unfortunate events and tragedies. Even when he tried, he failed; he'd take two steps forward, only to be thrown back four. It's easy to imagine why he believed that a benevolent God wouldn't allow him and his little brother to suffer so much. Jeremy couldn't understand why people stood inside of a building worshipping an imaginary God. He didn't believe in God--luck, fate, heaven or hell, you live and you die—that's it.

Some people said that Johnny and Jeremy had bad luck. Johnny thought they were cursed! You see, Jeremy never saw Abel. He was in a deep sleep. When he opened his eyes, he saw his older brother holding a knife and dead bodies surrounding them. If he saw what Johnny saw, he might have thought they were cursed also. When Johnny told him what happened, Jeremy kept quiet, not asking the who's, what's, or why's. Unable to find a logical explanation, he belied that Johnny may have committed the murders, not that it would've mattered; it was always the two of them against the world. No matter what, Jeremy would have stood by his older brother; whether he was right or wrong was inconsequential. When anyone asked, Jeremy always repeated the story just as Johnny did, always stating that he saw it with his own two eyes.

Chapter 9

Not so Black and White

Petersburg was imperative in supplying Confederate General Robert E. Lee's army and the Confederate capital of Richmond, making it an attractive target for General Ulysses S. Grant and the Union army. Lee, knowing this, fortified the city. Both freedmen and slaves were employed in various war functions, one of which was digging a defense of trenches and batteries around the city.

The Petersburg campaign consisted of 292 days of combat, maneuver, and trench warfare between June 15, 1864, and April 2, 1865. African Americans were present at Petersburg on both sides of the conflict. The Confederate Army was untethered so

badly that on January 11, 1865, General Robert E. Lee wrote a letter to Andrew Hunter, a member of the Senate of Virginia, discussing the possible enlistment of slaves into the Confederate Army, stating in one part of the letter.

“I think, therefore, we must decide whether slavery shall be extinguished by our enemies and the slaves be used against us, or use them ourselves at the risk of the effects which must be produced upon our social institutions. I believe that with proper regulations, they can be made into efficient soldiers.”

On April 1, 1865, the Petersburg Daily Express displayed an ad calling for black recruits, stating, "To the slave is offered freedom and undisturbed residences at their old homes in the Confederacy after the war. Not freedom of sufferance, but honorable and self-won by the gallantry and devotion which grateful countrymen will never cease to remember and reward."

It's been said, that the first “official” black Confederate company, maybe the only, was formed in Richmond in late March 1865. A week or so later the Confederacy fell; whether the company saw battle, I have no idea. Believe it or not, there were a few whispered reports of African Americans fighting alongside the Confederates long before the Confederacy request went out. The validity of it, the legality of it, and the reasons are questions I leave you to answer. I do know that Frederick Douglass wrote an article published in *Douglas Monthly*, titled “Fighting Rebels With Only One Hand” in September 1861, in which he stated,

“It is now pretty well established that there are at the present moment many colored men in the Confederate army doing duty not only as cooks, servants, and laborers, but as real soldiers, having muskets on their shoulders, and bullets in their pockets, ready to shoot down any loyal troops and do all that soldiers may do to destroy the federal government and build up that of the traitors and Rebels.”

I never heard of such a thing in history class; to be honest, I would never have fathomed such a thing. In the past, I might have called it a flat-out fabrication, a lie, but not all truths are ones that we want to be true or are prepared to hear. Being of one race does not make one's thinking or actions monolithic. Being of one race, let alone the same species, does not mean we all share one brain or unified consciousness. We don't download all the same thoughts, have the same exact collective experiences, or respond in the same way. There is always the majority, but the majority does not account for the individual. The majority might share the same beliefs, agree, or act in one way, but there are always those who don't fit into the mold—the minority, the few, sometimes the rare few who stand separate from the rest, whether good or bad.

In my research, I stumbled upon one such group, a very minute group, sometimes called the black pseudo aristocracy. According to some accounts, they may have identified more with the planter class. Owning slaves and property themselves

perhaps influenced some to protect their economic interests, hence leaning towards the Confederacy.

One day I stumbled upon a letter addressed to Thomas J. Grantt, Esq. where a small group of biracial blacks stated that their allegiance was due to South Carolina and her defense. The following is part of that letter.

“We are by birth citizens of South-Carolina. In our veins flows the blood of the white race—in some, half, in others, much more than half, white blood. Our attachments are with you; our hopes of safety and protection from you; our allegiance is due to South-Carolina, and in her defense, we are willing to offer up our lives, and all that is dear to us.”

The motivation for their statement can be debated. Perhaps they feared the consequences of not supporting the Confederacy. Perhaps they meant what they said. I don't know.

Although I hesitantly mentioned the above, I can say without a shadow of a doubt that the vast majority of African Americans did not support the Confederacy, and the minute number that embraced Southern ideology and the bondage of their fellow man were looked upon as race traders by their own people. The slaves trapped behind Confederate lines, acting in positions as cooks, servants, laborers, etc., desperately prayed for freedom. It must have been perplexing, downright maddening to say the least, to be forced to support an army they wholeheartedly wished to fail.

Three-fourths of white Southerners did not own slaves, and the idea that all white Southerners voted or wished for secession is a fallacy. While the elite were able to avoid conscription, the poor weren't so lucky. The Appalachian Mountains contained strong pockets of opposition to the war. There were even accounts of some poor whites being hauled off to war in chains, while others hid in the mountains, woods, and swamps. Believe it or not, some didn't even fully understand why they were going to war, while others refused to die for an idea that they didn't believe in. It's been said by many that a lot of the poor, non-slaveholding Southern whites did not want war, and as a consequence, they deserted the Confederate army by the thousands. Some even joined with other anti-Confederates, forming groups.

Either way, Abel detested the Confederacy and all that participated in it, but nothing inflamed his wrath more than a black man or woman embracing the ideology of elite, Southern antebellum hegemony, or worse, the previously enslaved becoming enslavers themselves. But let's backtrack a little and get back to the story at hand. We will leave the discussion of Abel for a later time.

Chapter 10

Paths Collide

The war showed on Preacher's face. Deep lines crossed his forehead. Harsh wrinkles formed around his eyes. His blond beard now gray and his weathered, chapped skin gave him the appearance of a man fifteen years beyond his age. His deep-set sea blue eyes showed a sadness of a man that had seen too much. His hands showed signs of battle--beaten, bruised, and chapped. A thin layer of dirt resided under his nails, and a layer of dust permeated his hair. Preacher knew it was the end; deep down a man knows when he is going to die.

While rubbing his silver wedding ring and taking a deep breath, he looked at Elijah. "You know we may not come out of this alive."

Elijah forced a smile, but his eyes showed his true emotions. “I know. Why did you re-enlist?”

Preacher looked down, becoming reflective. “I have to see this through. If I leave now, I will betray the men who have died and abandon the men who now fight by my side. I would falter on God’s call, betray the people who need me the most, and live with that guilt for the rest of my years.”

He looked straight ahead as if talking to himself. “I would love nothin’ more than to see my wife and child, but what type of man would I be if I depended on others to change the way things are? I refuse to sit comfortably in my home while other men bleed, fighting for a cause that I believe in but am too cowardice to stand for. Sometimes a man has to stand, consequences be damned!”

Preacher turned to Elijah. “Why did you stay?”

Elijah responded, “The same exact reasons as you. We haven’t seen eye to eye on a lot of issues, but I want you to know that I consider you my brother and my dearest friend.” Preacher rested his large hand on Elijah’s shoulder, his words eradicated by the sound of cannonballs blowing through the Confederate fortification.

Ten minutes before the blast, Johnny anxiously fidgeted, shifting his weight from left to right like an anxious animal trapped inside of a cage. A feeling of impending doom resided in the pit of his empty stomach as a burning sensation traveled up his chest, leaving an acidic, salty, sour taste in the back of his throat,

tickling his tonsils. They had been in the trenches for months. Supplies were running low or nonexistent; the Confederates were literally on the verge of starving to death. Johnny was on edge, and his brother Jeremy was more pale than usual.

The Beast, already suspicious and demented, was pushed completely over the edge, far surpassing insanity. Long accustomed to the brutality that surrounded him, he had become numb to the euphoric high he once experienced when committing acts of violence. In search of that adrenaline rush, he took to more sadistic acts of savagery, hoping to feel something again. When that failed, he took to self-mutilation to release his angst.

Claudel's once-tidy appearance suffered tremendously, and his charming demeanor was reduced to a fraction of what it once was. Large, hollow bags detracted from his lovely blue eyes, giving him the appearance of someone who hadn't slept in weeks. The large rolls of Confederate money in his knapsack, now worthless, his supply of coffee long gone, his lavish plantation burned to the ground, and his lack of soap reduced him to a filthy commoner. To make matters worse, the war was unraveling him. He wasn't accustomed to losing, and he now questioned the outcome of a war he was once so sure to win. Claudel never thought he'd see the day white men would unite with niggers, together picking up arms for the sole purpose of destroying the South.

Where would he fit in this new world? He couldn't deny it anymore. The South was falling before his very eyes and long-held beliefs crumbling, the slaves freed, and the economic impact

devastating. He pictured complete chaos and anarchy, followed by the destruction of everything he believed in. His thoughts tormented him, wandering further and further into the future. He envisioned women voting, black men being equal to white men, the lawful marriage of Negro men and white women, legitimate half-breed children running around everywhere, and people smiling in approval. A deep rage multiplied in him, slithering up from his belly like an angry snake released from a trap. He punched the entrenchment wall, telling himself that everything he just envisioned was nothing more than hogwash, but he was a very intelligent man; deep down, he knew better.

While Claudel continued to lament over the future, 100 yards away, the Beast stood blocking Johnny's way. "Boy, tell me again how'd you and dat scrawny brotha of yours survived, when three men who was betta den both yous died? Why would a demonic Yankee nigger spare you and yo brother and gut da rest of the men with you? Y'all was wearing da same Confederate uniform dat they was wearing. How'd one nigger kill three widout so much as making a noise? Betta yet, how'd you and yo scrawny brotha kill three men widout so much as havin' a scratch on ya? I don't know hows ya did it, and I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe dat y'all's lying, and you and yo nigger-lovin brother is fixin' to pay fo yo sins." The Butcher plunged his bayonet towards Johnny's chest as the fortification's outermost wall came crashing in.

Everything went black as Johnny collapsed and Union soldiers came rushing in. When Johnny opened his eyes, he was partially deaf, and his lower body buried beneath a mound of dirt. With his head pounding, he frantically looked for Jeremy amongst the fighting soldiers. Unable to find Jeremy, he dug wildly through the fallen debris, finding dead bodies buried beneath the collapsed entrenchment wall. In a complete panic, he shuffled through the bloody pieces of carnage, pulling out arms, a partial leg, and a piece of torso, eventually finding Jeremy's partially crushed head. In a state of shock, Johnny vomited clear acidic liquid as his legs gave out from underneath him. Shaking, he curled up into a little ball, cradling what was left of Jeremy in his arms, placing his head against his little brother's, and whispering that everything will be okay.

He had no family and no home. The only thing in the world that Johnny loved was taken away from him. They weren't supposed to have been there. They weren't supposed to be standing there. The Beast blocked him and his brother's path, preventing them from getting into position with the rest of their unit. As he continued to hold what was left of his brother's lifeless, emaciated head, he suddenly realized that Jeremy was gone, and at that exact instant, a part of Johnny died. He didn't care about the North or the South. He didn't care about the outcome of the war, whether he lived or died. What he wanted was revenge. Nothing mattered after that!

As Claudel looked into the bright green eyes of a surrendering Union soldier, he saw a race trader, the embodiment of everything he despised, and a glaring example of everything wrong with the world, all totaling up to a grand waste of life. With all the pent-up rage residing in Claudel, it wasn't surprising that he snapped, pulling the trigger. While screaming profanities at the top of his lungs, he kicked, punched, gouged, bit, beheaded, and dismembered the already dead soldier while somehow simultaneously bayoneting anything that moved within a four-foot perimeter of him!

Afterward, he repeatedly bayoneted the corpses that surrounded him, almost as if he were afraid they would rise again. Winded and crazed, he unbuttoned his trousers and urinated on the pile of dead carnage. Suddenly seeing a stick of dynamite, he lunged, instantaneously deciding to become a martyr! Before the match touched the wick, Claudel was wrestled to the ground by three of his comrades, only to be set free after the dynamite was relinquished from his hands.

The smell of utter terror ignited the Beast's predatory instincts as he chased down a retreating Union soldier. Danny, cornered and mentally at the end of his rope, gave up, falling to his knees and begging for mercy, tightly closing his eyes as the Beast raised his bayonet. Suddenly a bullet grazed the Beast, narrowly missing his liver.

Elijah, not having time to reload his gun and not owning a bayonet, leaped onto the giant of a man, attempting to drive his

knife into the Beast's back only to be thwarted. Preacher, ten feet behind Elijah, aimed his rifle at the Beast's head. Nanoseconds away from pulling the trigger, he felt a warm sensation pouring from his throat as he struggled to breathe. He collapsed to the ground, helplessly watching as Elijah was bayoneted repeatedly by the Beast.

Preacher's last memory was the murder of his best friend. A look of peace rested on Elijah's face. Even in death, Elijah refused to hate the man killing him. Somehow, he managed to see a bit of God in everyone, believing that in the darkest hour, there was light. As unbelievable as it sounds, Elijah fought from a place of love, believing that the actions of men like him would bring about a massive change. He was right.

Claudel stood over Preacher's dead body, wiping the blade across his chest before turning his back and perusing another Union soldier, leaving behind an all-too-gleeful Beast. Taking a few souvenirs, the Beast, far beyond deranged, gleefully hummed as he eagerly collected tiny bits of soldier. Reminiscent of a little girl collecting Easter eggs, he stuffed his empty pockets full of fingers, ears, and toes.

The Beast grunted in jubilation; a look of complete bliss lit up his face as he abruptly stopped to slice off a dead man's nose. While adjusting the bloody appendage over his own, an unexpected and searing pain traveled through his back to his gut. The Butcher fell forward as Johnny withdrew his bayonet. Grabbing a handful of the Beast's greasy hair, he pulled back hard, slitting the

Butcher's neck from ear to ear, afterward calmly walking away, leaving his knife, gun, and the war behind.

Unbeknownst to the outside world, Abel strolled through the blood-soaked trenches, sending as many Confederate soldiers to hell as his sword would allow, when something called out to him. Instinctively following the whisper, he abruptly stopped at Preacher's lifeless body. Somehow this one was different. Kneeling down, he looked into deep-set, sea blue eyes and saw a message in the hands of a drowning man addressed to him.

With the unwrapping of the paperless note, a look of complete confusion appeared on Abel's hardened face. His murdered baby girl had been given a second chance at life, reincarnated as Preacher's little girl. The memories of her past life and pain was erased, her soul untouched.

Abel, initially not knowing how to respond, became full of rage, falling into a profound, inconsolable anguish. The one thing he couldn't possibly fathom happened. At his core resided a deep distrust and hatred for all white people. For his beloved daughter to be born into the race he so vehemently despised was the most inconceivable and diabolical thing that anyone could bestow upon him!

At the exact moment Abel hated God more than ever, the skies blackened, and complete silence surrounded him. Time froze, and all movement ceased as an intolerable coldness blanketed him, causing the tips of his fingers to freeze and his eyebrows to rise in fear. As the demon spoke, Abel dared not move.

“What type of God would send his only begotten son to suffer and die for other men’s sins? Would you willingly inflict such a fate on your child? What type of benevolent God would allow generations of men, women, and children to live as nothing more than chattel, to be bought and sold? What type of God would allow your infant girl to be born a slave and endure the pain of rape and death, then reincarnate her in the flock of your foe?”

With a flash of lightning and a strike of thunder, a second voice ripped through Abel as a searing heat melted the frost away. “A God who wants you to see that we are all his children. Does your child’s current skin color make her less valuable or diminish the love that you have for her?” Abel bowed his head and remained silent, never daring to look the Seraph in the face as she continued to speak.

“Those past happenings were not the choices of God, but of man. With the giving of free will, man has a choice. God did none of those awful things to you. This blue-eyed blond man you now look down upon is not your foe or your enemy. He is a friend and an ally that you unfairly despise. The time for you to make a choice has come. You can no longer serve both God and the devil.”

Forced to look deeper, Abel searched Preacher’s eyes once again and saw a man who sacrificed his life for the freedom of a people who weren’t his own, a white man who saw slaves as his

equal, an imperfect man who chose to do what was right, even if it meant death, and most importantly, a man who loved his baby girl just as much as he did. Abel finally understood what the angel said.

Tears ran down his dark cheeks as he made a choice. The choice he made had nothing to do with God or the devil, heaven or hell. He chose his daughter; God knew all along. The one thing that could make Abel see past his hatred was the love of his child. Abel chose to give his baby girl the life she never had by sacrificing himself, so Preacher could live, becoming the father Abel could never be.

Abel closed his eyes, remembering the last time he held his baby girl, under the light of a full moon. On that night he made a promise. No matter how far apart they were from each other, no matter what happened, as long as they both lived, they would forever stand under the same night sky, and when his time came to an end, the moon would stand in his place as a reminder of his undying love and unwavering devotion to her.

It was Abel's undying love and devotion for his daughter that saved Preacher's life. Lifting the drowning man from the sea, Abel carried Preacher beyond the forests of petrified woods, beyond the fields of bones, beyond the endless dunes of sand, to the end of nothingness and the beginning of everything. Negotiating death's door, he made a deal. As Preacher stepped into the light, Abel stood alone in the dark. Closing his eyes once again, he ex-

haled, filling Preacher's lungs with the North wind and turning to dust, as if he was never there.

Preacher opened his eyes, unaware of the gift he had been given. Unbeknownst to Abel, God left a memory behind in his daughter's subconscious mind. In her mind resided Abel's promise, thus Preacher's daughter's fascination with the moon.

On April 9, 1865 was the final battle of many battles that the Army of the Potomac would face against the Army of Northern Virginia. On that day General Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia at the Appomattox Court House to Union General Ulysses S. Grant. On that day, like many days before, Preacher stood with the Army of the Potomac. He cried tears of joy as he touched the scar across his neck. He had no memory of how he got the scar. The only thing he remembered about that horrid day was carrying Elijah's lifeless body from the trench.

As Preacher looked upon the surrendering Confederate soldiers, he heard Elijah's voice in the back of his head, talking to him as if he were there. "They are men just like you and me. Fathers, husbands, and sons, divided by a hegemony, divided by an imaginary line between North and South, divided by opposing beliefs, divided by chains, divided by oppression. Some of them were forced to pick up arms; others fought on their own accord. But all of them, all of us—good, bad, rich, poor, slave, freeman, Southern, and Northern—are all men with hopes, dreams, and families, just like you and me.

“We all feel pain, sorrow, loss, love, and happiness, but all men are not equal in character. Being a man doesn’t make someone less of a monster or cement them as a saint. It comes down to choice. In fighting for what’s right, in fighting for the freedom of others, in standing up for the injustices of others, I refused to let this war make me into a monster. Even in death, I stood by my beliefs. When we dehumanize someone or something, we can justify great atrocities.

“Have compassion for the less fortunate, the weak, the starving, the forsaken, and the lost. Man, woman, child, black, white, Confederate, and Union—we are all God’s children and equal in his eyes. The war is over, my friend. It’s time to put down your gun.”

In that instant, he realized why Elijah prayed for the families whose fathers he took away. In that instant Preacher found the strength to relinquish his hatred, somehow finding the strength to forgive, finding peace and clarity through Elijah’s words.

Preacher wasn’t sorry for his beliefs or the choice he made to fight for those beliefs. He was disappointed about losing a bit of his humanity along the way, but proud to have stood for what was right and elated to have won the war. But in that bittersweet moment, something bothered Preacher. He felt like there was something important that he forgot, but little did he know that he was doing what Abel knew he would. Preacher was becoming the man he was meant to be and the father Abel always longed to become.

Some said that Abel could look into a man's eyes and see his past, present, and future; that was true. Some thought that Abel cared too little, but in reality, he cared way too much, so much so that he was able to answer the call of an old slave woman and draw the attention of both heaven and hell. The strength of his will broke through the veil, allowing his spirit to enter the side of the living. Old wrinkled black hands sculpted his body out of the dark earth, and he was given breath by the North winds.

Some say that Abel was without compassion. That wasn't true. Unbeknownst to most, he had the ability to take the breath given to him and give it to another, but at a price. Without the breath, his body would change into the soil from which it came. Till this day, Abel's spirit walks between the veil, waiting until the day he's called on again.

Pearl rocked back and forth with her newborn child in her arms as I continued to tell the story. "Many black families believed that Abel was related to them in some way. Your Big Ma Viola believes that Abel is the spirit of her dead husband. I believe that Abel was a myth, a representation of many men. I also believe that he was more human than most of us, embracing both the good and bad, fallible in nature. When he lived, he fought for what was right. He fought for freedom and accepted the consequences so that people like you and me could have a better future than his own.

"Some men fought because they were forced to pick up arms. Some men fought because they believed it was the right thing

to do. Either way, I will always be grateful for the brave Union men, both black and white, who sacrificed themselves so people like you and me could be free. They truly are shining examples of their brother's keepers. You Clarence, were born with the firing of the last bullets of the Civil War, a free black baby boy, born to an emancipated ex-slave.”

Clarence looked at me perplexed, his mother completely unaware of my presence as I continued to speak. As for the other characters, Claudel hung on staunchly to his beliefs, becoming a prominent Southern politician and staying a devout Democrat. Elijah did indeed enter the pearly gates. Johnny—with all the chaos no one noticed anything. Most believed Johnny died in the explosion alongside his brother. Unbeknownst to them, he started all over again, homesteading out West and starting a family of his own. Preacher became the man and father he was always meant to be, putting the bottle down and leading through example.

I said goodbye, kissing Clarence on his forehead, his mother still completely oblivious to my presence. Right before I took the next step, I saw a large shadow from the corner of my eye, and for an instant thought I heard Abel's laugh.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A Tale of Blood and Sugar is an interesting story. It started with a dream and turned into a year's worth of research and three years' worth of intermittent writing, eventually transforming from one book into three. I remember sitting at my little desk during the midnight hours, my fingers waltzing across the keyboard breaking the silence while most of the world slept. Surrounded by hundreds of notes and stacks of books, I relentlessly turned pages and combed the Internet in search of a better understanding.

To better understand the present, I felt like I needed to start with the past. My research took me from the coasts of Africa and England—to America, through the Civil War, through the civil rights movement, to modern times. It took me through several religions and created more questions than answers, eventually causing me to ponder a future beyond my earthly timeline, a time unknown but envisioned.

Digging deeper, I opened doors and looked into the highs and lows of humanity, into the faces of monsters and saints as I asked myself what separated men from monsters—and found that sometimes they were one and the same. I found shades of grey and vibrant colors, along with blackest of nights and the brightest stars. At times it inspired me, and at other times I found it extremely frustrating and disheartening. Many times I would slam my laptop shut, but something inside never let me quit.

To understand the inspiration behind the trilogy *A Tale of Blood and Sugar*, you need to understand my background. My mother is a black woman from Selma, Alabama, who, as a teenager, participated in the civil rights movement. My father is a blue-eyed man, born to a tough pioneer ranching family. It's safe to say that my parents are almost polar opposites of each other, which put me smack dab in the center of two different cultures—which I both embrace and claim as my own.

I might be an LA girl, but I was born to a woman from the Deep South and raised in Southern culture. I grew up eating cornbread, collard greens, chitlins, and black-eyed peas on New Year's. I knew better than to ever talk back to my Big Ma, which is what a lot of black Southerners traditionally called their grandmother. I knew about Jim Crow and the civil rights movement before ever setting foot in school. I also knew all about the Wild West and cowboys from my father's side of the family. It wasn't until I was older that I realized I had a unique background.

The Proctor side of my family were and still are great storytellers. As a little girl, I would sit and listen to my elders' stories. As they talked, vivid images came to mind, and I would drift away, letting my imagination run wild as I pictured larger-than-life characters from another time. With the birth of my daughter, I took on the Proctor tradition of oral storytelling, passing down the folklores given to me by my family, and creating fairytales of my own, until one day I had a dream that inspired me to write.

Book 1 (War and Slavery) is the back story to my fairy tale. It takes you to a time before the main character's birth, a time of bloodshed and chaos, a time of war and hope, slavery and freedom. It explores the minds of various fictional characters, giving an inside view of depravity, heartache, bravery, and redemption—while highlighting the good, the bad, and the perverse while on the rocky and slippery road to understanding and hopefully enlightenment.

Book 2 (Resurrection) is an Intricately woven, four-part fairy tale that combines folklore, memories, and a heap of fiction, where one foot is firmly planted on the ground and another in the sky. It's a story of self-exploration beyond the confines of one mind, combining many stories into one conscious while simultaneously reaching into the past and moving forwards into the future.

While creating Book 2, I pulled inspiration from my imagination, dreams, and Griffin memories, to create chapters one through three. Chapters four through nine are loosely inspired by Proctor and Redondo folklore and history—which I melded into a work of fiction. I was lucky to be blessed with larger-than-life characters on both sides of my family, people who I admired and wanted to immortalize in the pages of my book, so I started with interviewing a few of those closest to me, creating a handful of characters loosely inspired by them.

While interviewing a few close relatives from both sides of my family, I found that a person can be of the same family, ex-

perience some of the same events, but their interpretation and feelings about those events can vary greatly, as a consequence, leaving some things that will never be agreed upon or resolved. In particular, siblings can have a completely different opinion of their environment, their childhood, and the people in it, which gave me a unique opportunity to see things through different perspectives, some of which I could not express.

I found, that over time the stories passed down from generation to generation become mixed with fact and fiction—becoming a kind of folklore, which could vary from fact—as folklore and folktales usually do. I was very fortunate that the Proctors and Redondos had many written accounts of their history. In particular, I found the writing of Margaret Redondo, George Proctor, and KK Proctor to be very insightful and informative in differentiating fact from fiction.

However, for book 2 of this project, I leaned more towards the spirit of folktales and memories passed down to me. I wanted the characters to be larger than life. I wanted them to resemble the magical characters I grew up hearing stories about on my father's and uncle's knee. The almost mythical Redondos, and the Wild West Proctors, most of whom I didn't know but dreamed about ever since I was a little girl.

My mother's side of the family (who I loosely based the Lions on) was a lot harder to research—seeing that there were few written accounts of their past. I relied almost solely on memories

shared with me by my mother regarding chapter thirteen, and her experiences in the civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama.

My cousin Pam's vibrant description of elders passed on was very helpful in creating the characters Ace, Caroline, and Clyde. The characters Ace and Caroline would have never been created without Pam.

I was able to reach a bit further back into the Griffin past through an assortment of clues that my Aunt Eartha (who also happens to be the matriarch of the family) researched and collected in a box. In this box was a collection of records and census reports. I then took all the information given to me regarding the Griffins, shook it together, and heavily sprinkled it with my imagination to form chapters one through three in book two (Resurrection).

Seeing that the Wests and Lions were loosely inspired by my maternal and paternal family, it was only logical that I created a main character with some characteristics and interests similar to my own, one I could understand, and who would fit perfectly in the novel, but let me make it very clear—this is a work of fiction. The majority of the characters in this book are purely fiction. Dolly, Levi, Abel, Cain, and Gaspard are also included in the list of fictional characters that were solely created by my imagination.

The Lions, Wests, and Domingos would have never been created in the pages of my book if I weren't inspired by the legends of relatives past and the folktales of relatives present, and I would

like to acknowledge the family members who inspired me to bring their characters to life.

I would like to thank my mother, father, Cousin Pam, Aunt Eartha, and Uncle Jim for sharing glimpses of the past with me. Thank you for allowing me to see the past through your eyes.

I would like to give a special thanks to my Aunt Roma. Your memories gave me a better understanding of the past, in particular, my grandfather. You helped me to see another side of the pyramid by showing me another perspective.

You encouraged me from the start of this project. You took more interest than anyone else in creating this book, spending hours on the phone with me, and giving me your honest opinion of each chapter. You were there every step of the journey. Your insight was and always will be of great value. I love, Aunt Roma. You are a bright light in my world, and you inspire me to be exactly who God made me to be.

I would also like to acknowledge Margaret Redondo, George Proctor, and KK Proctor. Thank you for keeping the Proctor and Redondo history alive through your writing.

And finally, I would like to thank my daughter. Thank you for being my motivation to be the best version of myself. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, and because of you, I am no longer afraid to stand in the storms.

GLOSSARY

Antebellum: The period before the American Civil War. (Antebellum literally means "before the war.")

Driver: A person who oversees the work of slaves and enforces discipline. On large plantations drivers worked as an assistant to the overseer. Usually the drivers were slaves themselves.

Gris-gris bag: An amulet in the form of a small filled bag. A gris-gris bag is sometimes carried for protection, luck, or to ward off evil.

Master: The title slaves used for their owner.

Mulatto: A person with one black and one white parent. The word mulatto may be derived from the Portuguese word for mule (offensive).

Octoroon: A person who is one-eighth black by descent, or seven parts white and one-part black. (An outdated term, considered offensive by many.)

Oligarchy: A small group of influential people who hold all the power over the masses.

Overseer: An overseer was usually employed by a plantation owner to oversee and maximize the work output of slaves.

Pecker: Slang for penis

Public woman: Female prostitute

Quadroon: A person who is one-quarter black and three-quarters white. (An outdated term, considered offensive by many.)

Seraph: A six-winged fiery angel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you ask three different people who I am, each one will give you a different answer. I believe that everyone has different phases, faces, and layers that are constantly changing and evolving, but the core of their being remains constant. But even in saying that, some of us have a rebirth. Some people are resurrected out of ash. I am one of those people.

Who am I? I'm a survivor, a beautiful introvert who refuses to conform to any mold. I'm a weaver of dreams, memories, folklore, imagination, and fairy dust. In my mind resides a plethora of images, thoughts, and emotions unbridled by realities-restraints. My pen and paintbrush are my instruments—a means of translating the magic inside of me into a tangible medium that others can understand. I create because it's who I am. It's really that simple.

Moving the fairy dust aside, there are no safe spaces in my stories; they are as raw and savagely beautiful as the world is. There are no perfect people in the pages of my books. In my stories, the broken are heroes, and the fallen are worthy of redemption. I don't admire perfect characters—the ones who have never fallen, struggled, or fought like hell to get back up. Perfection is a flaw, and our imperfections make us uniquely human.

Being a multiethnic person with an invisible illness, and a mother to a child with autism, has given me a unique perspec-

tive. It's part of my nature to show multiple points of view. At times, I focus more on the individual than the group, bringing to light the story less likely to be told.

Through my writing, I aim to show people of different ethnicities, nationalities, and beliefs. I aim to show people with invisible illnesses, mental illnesses, developmental disabilities, and various sexual orientations. I aim to show we are more alike than different, but at the same time, I want to honor individuality and make it clear that it's okay to be exactly who you are.

My goal is to tear down misconceptions and ideologies based on hatred, fear, or false beliefs while honoring individual rights, freedom of expression, and free speech to create a more inclusive world, a world where all cultures are celebrated and everyone's voice is valid. Black, white, brown, or yellow—we are all human, and we all have a unique story to tell.

(COMING 2021)

A TALE OF BLOOD
AND SUGAR

RESURRECTION

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A Tale of Blood and Sugar: Resurrection (Book 2) is a work of fiction. The Lions were loosely inspired by a handful of the Griffins, forming chapters 1-3. The West and Domingo characters were loosely inspired by a handful of the Proctors and a few Redondos of the past, forming chapters 4-9. The original names of the people who loosely inspired the West, Lion, and Domingo characters have been changed (chapters 1-9).

West, Lion, and Domingo characters may have some similarities to and characteristics of the people they were loosely inspired by, but they should not be confused with the actual people themselves. Many parts have been completely fictionalized including dialogue. For example, the real-life person who inspired me to create the character Tatiana West does not practice Day of the Dead, open portals, and has never had conversations about the whispering desert sand. The Griffin brothers and sisters never ran out into the field and made a promise. Once again, this is a work of fiction.

Although the main character may have some similarities to and characteristics of the author, she should not be confused with the author herself. The author lives in the real world, cannot time travel, and her experiences and opinions can greatly vary from the character Talia. This is a work of fiction and should be treated as such, as should the characters.

Scarlet, Travis, Stone, Leo, Bella, and Bear are also loosely inspired by real people. The characters Scarlet, Travis, Stone, Leo, Bella, and Bear may have some similarities to and characteristics of the people they were loosely inspired by, but they should not be confused with the actual people themselves. The characters are not real people. Many parts have been fictionalized, including dialogue.

This is a work of fiction. All names, historical figures, army regiments, political parties, organizations, businesses, industries, places, incidents, and events either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Unless otherwise indicated, any resemblance to actual events, locales, persons living or dead is purely a product of the author's imagination, and entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

THE LIONS

I took another step, which led to a thin dirt road in the middle of nowhere. Cotton fields surrounded me, the air was still, the skies were blue and absent of clouds. I wiped the sweat from my forehead as a dragonfly flew by. The faint buzzing of bees echoed in the background, and the rustling of branches gave way to a flock of small birds taking to the air like a black cloud, changing formation every few minutes and disappearing into the distance as a small wooden house appeared. It had a strange familiarity. It was my first time seeing it, but somehow, I felt like I had been there before.

A man the color of dark coal sat stern-faced in a rocking chair gazing into the fields. Mary sat on the other side of the small

porch, quietly rocking back and forth, neither of them uttering a word to each other. The expression on Mary's face spoke volumes as she pulled her long, straight black hair into a braid, placing the silver beaded Indian feather that her mother gave her behind her ear. Her hands trembled, and her heart quickened as she thought about her father.

“The Klan came in the middle of the night for us, torches blazing, hiding behind their hoods and dressed head to toe in white. My father, a white man who took a half-breed Indian for a wife, was worse than a nigger. To love us was an abomination, and to stand with us unforgivable. They warned him, but he didn't listen. He didn't abandon us; he chose love, and he paid the price for it. While we fled for our lives, he was hung from a tree. From that moment on, I hated the white man for what they had done to my father, and I decided to marry a man as black as night. I found that man and had many children with him, but my hope turned into despair and happiness into bitterness.” It was a well-known fact that Lions don't cry, so Mary held back the tears as she quietly walked inside.

Clyde sat unmoving; his fixed gaze seemed far away. Life hadn't been easy for him; he worked like a dog all his life. Some said the mean streak was embedded in him; others said it was acquired through trials and tribulations. Either way, he was a stern man, some say evil, but one thing rang true—he was a man surrounded by a shroud of mystery. You see, no one ever

knew him or Sarah's complete story. People didn't air their dirty laundry back then. Children were to be seen and not heard. They were taught to follow orders and never sass back. Children were sent outside when the adults talked, and anyone caught being nosey would receive a swift smack. The long-held belief, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," held firm in the Deep South. The elders never talked about the past. You would hear snippets of information on their death beds or hear their screams in the middle of the night. Whatever happened—maybe they felt it was best if it died with them.

Clyde's strong, callused, and worn hands tightly held a glass of water. He took a sip as a picture of his father Clarence entered his mind. Clarence was raised mostly by his Grandma Viola, Clyde's great-grandmother. His mother, brothers, and sisters all lived in the same house. It was normal to have several generations living under the same roof during those times; everyone pulled together just to make ends meet. Viola was the head of the house, a widow, as was Clarence's mom. Viola was a washerwoman. It was grueling work; her back was always in pain from carrying gallons of water from the pump and bending over scrubbing dirty clothes on the washboard all day. Her hands were in a constant state of duress, chapped and cracked. She worked long hours for very little money. She made her own soap from lye, starch, and wheat bran. Her washtub was a beer barrel cut in half.

Everyone that was able worked. Mama Pearl (Viola's daughter) was a cook. The women were strong and resourceful. They looked adversity in the face and made do with what they had. Times were hard; no one was spoiled, and everyone knew not to talk back to Big Ma Viola Lion. She loved her family, but the expression of love wasn't something the Lions were big on. They knew that life was hard, and they had to make sure that their children were strong enough to withstand the storm. Crying would accomplish nothing. They had a saying, "Lions don't cry." Clyde and Mary lived by those words, as did the rest of the Lion family.

As Clyde's thoughts continued, his mind traveled to darker places, his stern gaze turned into a scowl, and his jaw tightened as the thin drinking glass broke under the pressure of his right hand, causing small crystal clear streams of liquid to succumb to gravity, swallowed by the porous and splintered boards beneath his feet. A rooster crowed as he calmly looked down. Without so much as a flinch, his large, cracked fingers meticulously extracted the glass shards from his wounded hand.

Clyde was a goliath of a man, with intimidating strength and a stoic face. His aura exuded a deathly stillness but inside resided pain and fire, all wrapped up into a tight ball residing deep within his gut. With the silence of Mary's usually creaking rocking chair, Clyde noticed that she was gone, and slowly stood. A trail of blood dripped from his fingers as he walked

barefoot into the old worn-down little hut, the screen door squeaking as it closed behind him.

I stood in the middle of the road ten yards away, my white cotton dress drenched in sweat; my waist-length, curly hair frizzy from the humidity; and my feet covered in red dust. I heard the screams coming from the little house, followed by the pitter-patter of tiny feet and children fleeing. I ran as small branches scraped my legs, following the sound of a little girl sobbing deep in cotton fields. She sat crouched down amongst her brothers and sisters. Whispers exchanged between them, too low to understand. I stood in plain view unseen. One of the older sisters looked into the eyes of the little caramel, brown-eyed, curly-haired girl firmly saying, "Sadie Lu listen to me. I'm only going to tell you this once. Lions don't cry!" That day, they left the cotton field with a secret that they would all take to their graves. That little girl was my grandmother.

Chapter 2

ACE

Many years later, Ace Lion sat alone at an elegantly set table, dressed in a starched white button-up shirt, dress pants, and freshly polished black shoes, a lace napkin laid across his lap. A cigar rested in his left hand as he sipped red Kool-Aid from a crystal glass. Directly in front of him, a delectable plate of collard greens, sliced ham, and cornbread sat on a gold-trimmed, porcelain white plate.

His mouth salivated as he put a big dollop of butter on his cornbread, followed by a smidgen of honey. While taking a deep puff from his cigar, he thought of Ruby fire in her tight dress, followed by a large bite of ham. The caramelized brown sugar mixed with the buttery juices of ham, layering the inside of his mouth

in a sweet and savory coating that only a true Southerner would have the pleasure of knowing. While he chewed, his mind raced with excitement as he fantasized about all the naughty things he would do to Ms. Ruby. It was Friday, and he had a limited amount of time before his wife would get home, so he ate fast in anticipation of his secret afternoon delight.

At the exact moment his mother Mary set a piece of peach cobbler on the table, someone knocked on the front door. It was the sheriff. "Sadie Lu's at it again!" Ace's face contorted into a frown; all of his plans had instantaneously gone to hell! "God damn it, what has my sister done this time?" Red, oblivious to what was going on, continued studying in her room while her grandmother Mary cleaned off the table and put up the leftovers.

Sadie Lu was as fierce as she was beautiful! I can honestly say she wasn't the type of woman you wanted to mess with—even if she was in the wrong. To make matters more interesting, if you went against one of the Lion girls, you went against them all! Somehow brother Ace seemed like the only person in all of Selma, Alabama that could put their fire out, even if he occasionally had to chase them with a belt or put them over his knee and spank them like a child. I know they loved him because they would have taken anyone else's arm off!

Everyone went to Ace. He was one of the most talked-about men in town, and his skills went far beyond undertaking. The Lion girls were by far the most beautiful women in all of Selma. They were notorious in every way, as good as they were bad. The

women hated them, and the men were drawn to them like bees to honey! I don't think there was a man in town they couldn't have, and their brother Ace was never short on women! He was happily married to the sweetest, most loving woman in town. He loved her and treated her well, but he just wasn't built for monogamy. His wife never talked about his comings and goings. It was believed that she turned a blind eye to his affairs; either way, none of the other women in his life could hold a candle to her. Caroline was everything Ace ever wanted, but he just couldn't keep his eyes from wandering.

It was the night before Christmas and Red sat on a big brown couch, her back perfectly straight as she sat smack dab in the middle of two huge cushions. Her black and white patent leather shoes lightly tapped the wooden floor as her Auntie Caroline played the piano, and her grandmother Mary pulled the pound cake from the oven. A little Chihuahua named Bunny pranced around Mama Mary's feet, hoping for a bite of pound cake. Mary pushed thoughts of Clyde out of her mind. The gambling, the heartache, none of that mattered now; it was over, and she wished him well.

The sound of the piano stopped. Soon after, Auntie Caroline entered the kitchen and washed her hands in preparation to make her famous molasses candies. Red stood at the bookshelf. Her fingers slowly ran across the seams of each book as she tried to find one she hadn't read yet. Disappointed, she turned on the TV and plopped back on the couch, quickly adjusting her pos-

ture, crossing her legs, and wiping the wrinkles out of her skirt. She was determined not to let her charm school lessons go to waste. After all, she was practicing to be a lady.

Uncle Ace stood in the mirror as he moisturized his clean-shaven face, his perfectly manicured hands ran a comb through his curly black hair as he smiled, revealing perfectly white, straight teeth. The bathroom light reflected off his milk chocolate skin as he opened the medicine cabinet, pulling out his favorite cologne, spraying a bit on his chest before wrapping himself in a luxurious black robe and proceeding to his bedroom. His clothes hung meticulously; everything had its place, perfectly starched white shirts, followed by creased black dress pants. Black blazers with varnished buttons hung perfectly on wooden hangers. More than a dozen polished black shoes lined the bottom of his closet.

He was an undertaker by day, family man while at home, a lady's man at night, and an unofficial community leader on his own time. If something went on in the community—Uncle Ace knew about it, and if there was a problem, he fixed it. Ace was far more than an undertaker; he was a man of many faces, and called upon for many different things. He was an important man and always looked the part; everyone in Selma knew Ace. . . or knew of him.

On his way out of the house, he kissed his wife, said goodbye to his mother, and patted Red on the head. Ace made his rounds, first stopping at his sister Sadie Lu's house. He handed Victor, better known as Big Daddy, crates of fruit filled to the top with

apples, oranges, and peaches. Sadie Lu smiled, always happy to see her brother Ace. Her youngest daughters lay in bed, scared that Santa Claus would bypass their house if he caught them up, while the oldest, Nora Jean, rolled her eyes, knowing there was no such thing as Santa Claus.

After Ace left, Sadie Lu and Big Daddy stood in the middle of the living room, and she rested her head on his broad chest as she quietly sang, their feet moving back and forth to the sound of her voice. Victor gently interrupted her with the sweetest kiss, laying her on the couch and blowing out the candle, their bodies melting into each other on a cold Southern night.

Chapter 3

SCARLET

Big Ma and Victor woke up on the couch, bombarded by four girls jumping up and down, eager to open up their Christmas gifts. As I sat unseen, my mother, the youngest of the girls, twirled around and around, smiling, a pink frilly chiffon dress held tightly in her arms as she talked a mile a minute.

Ever since a child, my mother was very expressive. Her face showed expressions like a master pianist plays “Ronda alla Turca”. Scarlet was incapable of hiding her emotions, and her hands followed right along with her feelings, her fingers moving as if they had a mind of their own, pausing after sentences like a period, her pinky finger the most expressive of them all! To make

matters even more interesting, her ever so slight Southern accent, at times, broke into a full Southern twang, giving a round buttery tone that swirled, mixing with a sing-song rhythm that reminded me of a horse switching back and forth between a trot and gallop—completely skipping over the canter, almost giving the impression of two different people speaking. My mother was very pleasant to listen to, and when excited, comical to watch.

As Big Daddy handed my mother another gift, I heard her voice in my head reminding me of something she told me many years ago. Victor was a good man, basically the only father I'd ever known! Big Daddy, as we called him, had a pleasant voice and a charismatic personality. He was a big, tall, handsome, strong man with bronze skin, wavy black hair, and hazel eyes. He had a small gap in-between his two front teeth and a tiny mustache above his lip. He had big hands and big feet, a perfectly sculpted nose and a beautiful smile.

“Big Daddy worked in a stockyard, and Sadie Lu—my mother, but everyone in the family called her Big Ma—worked in a sewing factory. Both she and Big Daddy worked long hours. My sisters and I cooked dinner Monday through Thursday, and Big Ma usually brought fish or BBQ home on Friday night. Saturday was a day of enjoyment, and Big Ma or Big Dad would give each girl a bit of money. I would go out to eat or watch a movie at the theater.

“Gurrrl, let me tell ya, Big Ma was a hellfire and brimstone Baptist! Sunday was the Lord's day, and we were going to church

whether our hair was combed or not, so you knew to be ready! Anything less than your Sunday best was unacceptable! The women wore big fancy hats, gloves, and bright colors. Those walking suits, mm-mm-mmm! Church wasn't just a place to worship God and find a man. It was the backbone of the black community! The preachers were expressive and the singing would bring the house down. They would shout, they would shake, they would holler, they would speak in tongues, people would scream 'Praise the Lord' and faint! We were filled with so much of the Holy Ghost that we would leave the church crying and in tears. All we had was our religion; our faith was what brought us through. Church gave me a strong foundation; a lot of people walk around with a void because they don't know God!"

While wagging her index finger in my direction and placing one hand on her hip, my mother continued to speak, her eyes wide with emotion as she picked up momentum with each word. "Gurrrl, now small-town gossip was everywhere! Speaking of gossip, there was a cousin of yours who had six children. Never once did anyone see her with a man! Everyone talked about each other, and the Lion name was usually rolling out of their mouth! It was common for your neighbor to gossip behind your back and smile in your face! Small-town gossip was rampant, but everyone looked out for everyone else's kids. If you did something wrong, your mother was sure to hear about it.

"If Grandma Mary or someone else caught me someplace I wasn't supposed to be, they would tell my mother, and Big Ma

would whoop my ass in the middle of the street. She didn't care who was watching—wasn't no shame in her game! Big Ma didn't make false threats now ya hear. Her word was law, and if you broke the rules, you would get an ass whoopin'. Even Big Daddy would think twice before crossing her! All of Selma knew that the Lion girls had notorious tempers and a mean right hook!

“East Coast guys were a faster breed, different from the ones down South. The guys down South loved harder. It was a well-known fact that if you wanted a good man, ya got a country boy from down South! Now you didn't go messin' round with anyone else's man. Women would get in your ass about their man! The men didn't play now ya hear, they'd kill you over their woman! They loved hard during that time, but there sure was a lot of messin' around! Southerners weren't afraid to fight. We were used to hardships, and not easily swayed—come hell or high water we would be there for you. That was real love, not the love you see today!”

Taking a deep breath, Scarlet slowed down, briefly closing her eyes. “For many years I've longed for the South, the South cared about family and tradition! Family stuck together. You always had a place to stay. If there was no room, you had a blanket on the floor, and if you were hungry, there was always a pot of greens and beans on the stove. It wasn't like it is here. The teachers cared, they always pushed us saying, ‘An education is something that could never be taken away from you.’” She laughed, “If we didn't show up at school, the truant officer would come knockin' on

our door, and our teacher would come calling. The North had a coldness, and the people in California were just strange—you don't know no better being born and raised in Los Angeles, all this craziness and lack of community is normal to you. You learn about sex out here; you learn about family down South!" My mother sighed. "I wish you had been raised down South. Things would have been a lot different."

"We were poor, but I didn't know it, to be honest, no one would know it if they came to our house on Christmas! Christmas was a big deal; it was the time everyone went all out! Big Ma started cooking two days before Christmas. You'd wonder how one woman could do all that cooking on her own. Sadie Lu made so much food that it couldn't all fit in her little kitchen. There was a trail of food from the kitchen to the living room. Every table had food on it, sweet potato pie, fruitcake, chocolate cake, double-decker coconut cake, peach cobbler, yam pies, pecan pies, banana pudding, ham, turkey, macaroni and cheese, dressing, cranberry sauce, cornbread, bread, rolls, okra, black-eyed peas, collard greens, mustard greens, and ham hocks, all decorated the house!

"Some say that you could smell Sadie Lu's cooking, and hear her gospel music from a block away. Southerners knew how to cook, they knew how to eat, and they knew how to have a good time! No one was stuffy in Sadie Lu's house, they laughed till their bellies ached, and ate until their seams were about to burst!

After the festivities were over Sadie Lu rested and our work began. I hated cleaning up Big Ma's mess, but I loved her food!

"The house always had to be clean, but it had to be spotless before New Year, the cupboards full, and the first person who set foot in our house needed to be a good one, preferably a man. New Year's Day was supposed to be a perfect reflection of the things to come in the following year—knowing that, it was important to get everything right. Anything less could be inviting disaster in. It was tradition to eat black-eyed peas, greens, cornbread, and chitlins on New Year's Day. The black-eyed peas represented luck, and the small, unassuming cowpea helped save the South from starvation after Sherman's devastating march. The Northern army thought of the black-eyed pea as little more than pig food, so they left it thinking it had little value. The greens represent money and wealth. The cornbread represented gold. The pig represented a symbol of prosperity and luck.

"My family and many other black Southerners ate chitlins on New Year as a reminder of our past. I didn't stop to think about what that meant until years later. During slavery, slave owners kept the preferred cuts of hog meat. The least desirable parts—the intestines, feet, ears, snout, tail, neck bones, and et cetera were given to the slaves. We are no longer slaves, but each New Year, we remember where we came from by honoring the struggles of our ancestors and looking forward to our future. Some say the pig represents looking forward to the future because a pig is physically incapable of turning its head to look backwards."

While rolling her eyes and tapping her fingers on the counter, Scarlet laughed, soon after taking a bite of cornbread and continuing. “There’s a big misconception in some parts of the United States that Southerners are backwards, dimwitted, inbred, slow, fat, and lazy—that’s not true! The South is known for hospitality, manners, and family values. A man that gives a weak handshake isn’t considered a man, and a person who avoids eye contact is considered shifty. It’s expected that you say yes mam, no sir, hold doors open for your elders, and take off your hat when entering a home. For the most part, there were no dinner invitations—our door was always open to family and friends. It was a small community and we were accustomed to sharing. Southerners are proud of their heritage, and they ain’t afraid to fight! They can be your best friend or a huge pain in the ass. The Lions were a bit of both. Lion blood runs hot, and our roots run deep in Southern soil.”

During Scarlet’s time, the South was racially divided. As a general rule black and white did not mix or mingle, each side was suspicious of the other, and Jim Crow was the law of the land. Grandma Mary looked just like her father; people who didn’t know her would stare. They thought it odd that an old white lady would have little black kids holding her hands.

Unbeknownst to some, the Lions came in all different shades—from white to pitch black. In the Jim Crow era, that could be confusing for some, but things were changing, and a restlessness was building. They tired of the lynching’s, they grew

wearry of taking a seat in the back of the bus, of segregated lunch counters, separate water fountains. Using the back entrance was no longer acceptable, separate but equal, was not equal—they sought true equality! A change was brewing in the South long before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, before the freedom riders, before the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church and killing four girls, before Bloody Sunday!

The interesting thing about change is that it starts in the mind and is first heard as whisper. In a little town in Alabama called Selma, those whispers turned into a roar! The eyes of a nation watched as Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC decided to make Selma the focus of a black voter registration campaign. Activists of all nationalities poured in from all over the nation. Civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, John Lewis, and Hosea Williams came into town. My mother, still a high school student, was smack dab in the center of things. It was an exciting time, and she was determined to be part of that change. One Sunday morning, she sat in the church pew with her hands folded, listening to Martin Luther King speak, and tears fell from her eyes, and her heart fluttered with anticipation of the things to come. She marched and protested—defying Big Ma's command not to get involved; deep down, Sadie Lu longed for a change, but it was the South, and she knew the realities of what could happen to her daughter!

A few days later my mother walked out of school and marched. This time she was locked in the community center as a conse-

quence. The jails were so overflowed with protesters they had nowhere else to put them. The next morning, Big Ma picked Scarlet up from the community center and with her came the wrath of the devil! If she was living under her roof—she wasn't too old to beat. With each smack, Sadie Lu felt guilty. Deep down, she was proud of my mother, but intimidation was the only way she knew how to protect her. The ironic thing was when what would be known as Bloody Sunday came, it was not my mother, but Big Ma who stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The daughter of sharecroppers and the great-granddaughter of slaves—finally said enough, and stood up for what she believed in, the consequences be damned!

To BE CONTINUED!