



*Sunday March 24, 1861, just before sundown*

The buckets were placed next to her ankles as Sunday stood before her little creek, about to collect the water for July's bath. Thankfully, *Mr. Silas Duval*—nasty old wrinkled rascal who had already started worrying her about moving in with her—had been sent into another county for a few days, affording her the safety to escape for a few minutes to the stream she had named after herself years ago. The Sunday Stream.

*But how I'm go'n keep fending Silas off when he do get back?*

She quickly filled her buckets and turned back toward the grove of slippery elm where she'd left Mama's basket, full of herbs. Positioning it onto her head, she sensed another unwanted thought pushing its way past her lips into the advancing dusk.

"Wonder if Noah be needing some bark tea tonight for that sore throat of his?"

She wouldn't allow her mind to open the image of her

husband, dragged back to Duval Plantation by the posse that had volunteered to run him down.

“How dare that nigger try a trick like this,” one of them had yelled outside her cabin door, “and him already paid for by the speculator.”

Goodness. She tightened her grip around the bucket handles. Felt a rush of cool sweat along her ribcage. *Why you keep thinking 'bout Noah when you got July? Ain't this what chu wanted?*

“Don't know,” she answered herself aloud. Sunday lived for these Sabbath evening twilight escapes when most of the other slaves, including Noah before he left, sneaked away to be with their God and left her alone with her creek, the only place where she could savor the idea of what she loved almost as much as she loved July—drawing pictures.

She lowered her pails back to the ground along with Mama's perfectly weaved basket, then walked back to drink in her own image shimmering in the water. Sunday had never so much as held a looking glass in her hand. But since her parents' death, this quiet-spoken stream had consistently mirrored her, showing her a gradually evolving face with hints of the same purple as the rest of her body. An offshoot of the family of hateful hues which covered that tight belfry space all those years ago, hours after Mama and Papa were killed.

Hateful. Yet for fifteen summers, Sunday had been willing to put up with this shocking wrong-side-out color of her face just to see the changes and to let her mind fly free at the end of every Sabbath. She lifted her head to the few bold stars above the horizon. What distant sky, at this very moment, might hold captive another woman or man with the same bloodline that had laid upon Sunday's shoulders this wonderful burden to draw pictures? She smiled. One thing was for certain. No matter the origin of the desire to draw, her outward self was all Mama's.

*You the spit of your mama.* Not a speck of poor Papa's looks about her.

Thin arms spread like dragonfly wings, she backed away from the stream. Twirled around and around. Closed her eyes and painted herself in swaths of the bold yellows, reds, and oranges her brain had borrowed moments ago from the dying sun. She fashioned herself queen of her long-deceased mother's land, a painting tool of some kind in her hand. She slowed. Shrugged her shoulders as a string of giggles popped out like a rash.

"Queen, my foot. You too scared to even look toward the big house let alone be somebody's queen."

In truth, Sunday had mostly stripped her mind of such dizzying dreams—both the hand-clapping, foot-stomping hush-harbor religion that offered freedom in the by-and-by *and* that here-and-now kind of liberty freedom that Noah and the other slaves so craved. Until a week ago when Noah's probing words, "Don't you want to be free?" had found feeling in a nerve Sunday thought was dead. Why, oh why, did he have to haul off like that and mark up her carefully drawn picture of a world hopeless of respect for her and her kind?

She sighed into the stillness that swallowed up the cricket sounds. She rebalanced the basket of herbs onto her head as Mama had taught her and reached for her pails. Time she got back to the cabin before the path home turned as dark as her thinking. Further, she needed to get back to July whom she had loosely tied to the cabin's bench leg while he napped. Miss Tullie had offered many times to take him to worship with her on these Sunday evenings, but Sunday would never allow her child inside that world of empty hope that had landed her bare backside on a pink-white man's horse, when she was but a baby herself, and ultimately into a lonely purple belfry to "consider her ways."

A wayward thought chilled Sunday's blood. July might

wriggle loose from the cabin bench or ... *What if Silas come back early and find my baby by his self and ...*

“Naw, now. None of that ain’t happening.”

Shaken by this new downturn in her thinking, she pushed her bare feet up the slope and onto the path leading back to the row of slave cabins. Fear dogged her steps, urging her to scan the pathway she had traveled countless times. Snakes, anthills—most anything—could latch onto her feet—

“Ouch!”

Stubbing her toe against a root as familiar as July’s cry, she pitched forward—the basket tumbling to the path. Prized herbs and worrisome thoughts alike scattering to the wind. She fought to keep from losing her handle on the sloshing pails. Then felt a roughened hand lustily intrude upon her waist from behind.

“Take your hands off me!”

“Evening to ya, li’l pretty.”

Silas. Black slave driver and spy for the Duval Tobacco Plantation—his whip coiling against the band of his grimy pants—stepped around in front of her. “Help you with something?”

Sunday’s brain ticked off the possibilities of true help. Noah? Gone. Miss Tullie and every other slave on Duval’s plantation? Singing and shouting in a hush harbor miles away.

*Face it, girl.* She was alone in the woods with the nastiest vilest man between here and that big ocean to the east which she’d heard of but never would see.

*You done for.*

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*Dawn, the same day*

NOAH WATCHED as Gideon settled onto her side, her slender body curled into itself, her back to him signaling a demand for

privacy. Instantly she slept, last night's travel having been especially hard, blowing rain challenging their every step. A half hour earlier, he'd wondered out loud how she had known where they were headed without seeing the heavens. Munching on dried apples, she had slipped the now-familiar book from her pocket.

"Moses taught me," was all she answered. Where did she always find the strength to use the advancing daylight to read each morning before falling asleep?

*The same way you would if you knowed the meaning of one single mark on a piece of paper.*

Noah yawned. Stretched. So many things he wanted to know about this woman who refused to admit to any name other than that of Gideon from a Bible story. But now that the sun had bested last night's clouds, it was time for him, too, to sleep—though, he would take the time to study her a bit longer. She was so small, too tiny to be taking on something like this, yet she handled her assignment like a six-foot soldier. Intrigued by every inch of her, Noah had whispered her name before he knew it.

"Gideon."

As quickly as she'd fallen asleep, she was awake, pistol in hand. "Yes? What's the matter?"

Noah's insides shrank. What was he to say now? That he was studying her form while she slept?

"Nothing. Just wondering h-how you know when to say 'was' and when to say 'were.' What make you change up like that when you talking?"

Sunlight flecking her face as she lowered her weapon, she propped herself up on her elbow. Stared at him a long moment then smiled.

"Why, No-wuh, I didn't know you had an interest in grammar."

*Noah.* It was the first time she'd called him anything except sir, and the sound of it rang with a fresh exhilarating separate-ness he'd never felt before, as though the name was suddenly attached to a single person and not a piece of property. She pronounced it No-wuh, hitting both parts with equal strength.

"How many arms do you have, No-wuh?"

Noah's defenses flared. Did she think him completely stupid? "Two. Like most everybody else, I reckon."

"Yes. You have two arms which, by the way, you just counted."

Noah looked the other direction. In fact, when it came to ciphering, he *was* stupid. Wouldn't Gideon be shocked to know he could barely stumble to the number twenty? And that, only because he had listened for years to the counting of the barrels of tobacco for market each season.

"Truth is—"

She raised her hand to prevent him. "I know what you're thinking, but even counting to two counts." She laughed out loud at her own obviously unintended turn of phrase. "It's a start. And being able to know the difference between one and more than one is to know the difference between 'was' and 'were.' If you speak about one person or thing, you use 'was.' If you speak about two of more, you use 'were,' unless, of course, you're dealing with the word 'you.'"

He fell silent—his manhood a bit frayed by this unexpected schoolboy lesson. Intrigue aside, he didn't like feeling this exposed by a woman. Hadn't the Lord put women here to be cherished, protected, *taught*? The latter of which Sunday had never allowed him to do—not that he knew very much to teach.

But he'd never met a woman like Gideon. And at this moment, his longing to know was pushing past his pride.

"That easy, huh?"

"That easy."

A softness he'd not heard before had crept into her voice. She sat up straight, her unbound braids swaying with the quick movement. Suddenly, Noah wanted—needed—to run. To get away from this woman who overwhelmed his senses just by the toss of her hair. She juttred the tattered book in the air.

“I could teach you if you like—how to read and how to improve your speech.” She scooted to his tree. Placed a soft palm over his fisted hand. Forced him to look into her eyes.

“Don't you want to learn to read?”

*What ails you, Sunny? Don't you want to be free?*

His words to his wife—that black-or-white, yes-or-no answer he had demanded a week ago—slammed into him like a wagonload of rocks. Might Sunday have had something in her past that kept her on the fence? Just as the idea of being taught by a woman was halting him now? Body heat outstripping that of the climbing sun, Noah struggled to make sense of this odd pull-and-push he felt toward Gideon, somewhere between attraction and trepidation.

“I'm thinking maybe the answer to your question ain't that easy to come by.”

Yes, he wanted to read, almost as much as he wanted to breathe. But it wasn't quite so simple. He wanted knowledge, but he also wanted his pride. And the way Gideon was looking at him—the sultry way she called him No-wuh—it was mixing him up. Making him wonder if they were about to cross some kind of ungodly line.

“Gideon. I 'preciate what you trying to do, but I reckon I don't think we ought to—”

“Hush!” Noah could almost see Gideon's ears pricking up. “You hear that?”

Snatching her hand from atop his and resting it on her pistol, she switched into the terse fearless guide Noah had followed for days.

“I hear it.”

The sounds of baying hounds bloomed from the southeast, not quite as terrifying as Noah’s memory had stored them from years ago but strong enough to set his heart to racing. Gideon readied herself like a man of war.

“Here. Rub this asafetida on your feet.”

He did as he was told, the pungent odor nearly taking his breath away. While Gideon quickly picked up every scrap of evidence and covered where she had lain with a new layer of sodden leaves, he finished getting into what was left of his shoes. Noah looked up and balked. Gideon was headed back in the direction from which they had come.

“You sure you know what chu doing? You was just bringing us from that way.”

She spared him a moment’s glare, all softness from minutes ago gone from her face. “I’m sure. And the clause you want is ‘you were,’ not ‘you was.’ Now move.”

Noah fell to the path behind his guide. Now she’d really confused him with the “you was” lesson.

But whatever he had to swallow, for the short time he was with Gideon, he would learn all he could. Noah Duval was not going through the rest of his life being cut down simply because of the way he talked.

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“NAW, Silas. You can’t help me with nothing.” Sunday tried bypassing him, but Silas was too quick. “And if you here again to try to talk me into letting you sleep with me just ‘cause Noah ain’t here—”

He shook her, one strong whiplash until she wondered if her neck bones had cracked.

“‘Mr. Silas,’ to you, and you best to be shutting up. For a woman who never been much of a talker, you sure is



jabbering a lot since Noah left.” Silas’s eyes had turned deadly cold.

“I hates to be the one to bring this to you. But the overseer just laid it on me, so I’m bound to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Noah dead.”

A heaviness settled in Sunday’s legs, swirls of purple and deep blue sweeping away all the vibrancy of the sunset. She stooped to grip the handles of her pails and waited to see if her own heart was still beating or if she, too, had died.

“Now, just hold on there, li’l pretty. You done gone to trembling like—”

“Don’t chu ... Git cho hands off me.” She tried to breathe. Couldn’t. Instead, she struggled toward the ability to think things through. A psalm from her years with Miss Tullie came unbidden. “*What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee ...*”

No—no, no. No Bible verses. She must think for herself. Mustn’t let anybody decide for her. She would, in her own safe wisdom, not that of the hush harbor, think this through until she knew what to do. *When you most afraid, Sunday, you got to look way inside your own self.* She felt her lungs fill up again. Better. *All right, all right, then.* She relished the idea that her mind was surging with its own energy. *We cookin’ now.*

“You a lie, Silas. Noah might be caught somewhere, but he ain’t dead. I know he ain’t. Not in no one-week’s time. Not July’s papa. He too smart to—”

“Shot. Before he even made it to the middle of Virginie. Thought I’d catch you whilst you having your own li’l upside down church service out here and everybody else gone to the *north woods.*”

Sunday froze, his words tunneling into a sharp point. That’s where Mama Tullie ’nem’s group was meeting tonight. How did this devil know?

All these years, Silas had to have known there were meet-

ings. The slaves had been careful, though, all the time scheming to throw him off. But something about the way he'd hit down on the word "north" scrambled Sunday's confidence. *He bluffing.* If Silas ever found out exactly where the slaves were worshipping, he'd tell the overseer as fast as his next breath. Which is why the poor Jesus-worshippers were always changing their meeting places.

"You one fine looking woman, Sunday. And the way I figure, now that Noah been kil't, you go'n need some strong, man-type company."

"You ain't got enough man left in you to count."

"Got more'n that buzzard-picked man of yours."

Sunday sucked in another heaping of air, willing herself to ignore the image of July's father's beautiful body left to the palates of buzzards. She could no more believe Silas than ...

But what if it was true? It was possible, after all, if the Underground Railroad was the big fuzzy unproven idea she believed it to be. Noah could be dead. Picked to the bone like Silas said.

And if he was, she'd had a hand in it.

It had been a week since Noah had sealed their separation with a cold kiss against her forehead and vanished into the dark. Why now was the idea of harm coming to him causing her to hold her breath as though it were her last?

*You know you ain't never loved him. You just married him to get July.*

Her legs. Not only did they feel like two logs of green firewood, but now her very soul seemed dragging behind her. As though it had been snatched from the colorfully wrapped body she'd envisioned minutes ago near the stream and pinned to the hem of her shift.

"Move out of my way, Silas. I ain't go'n stand here no longer, listening to this mess."

"It was really the dogs took up where the bullet in Noah's

head left off. Made hash out of him. If you don't believe me, I can get the overseer out here."

Surely the false god of freedom that she had tried to truce with all these years wouldn't injure her this way a second time, first causing her mama to try to reason with that white man then leading Papa to believe he could argue with him. Then sucking her husband into the belief that there was somewhere called Canada.

"*So what chu complaining 'bout?*" An accusing voice using her own speech whispered to her. "*Ain't this just what you expected? Maybe hoped for just a little bit when Noah left—so you'd be proved right?*"

Not like this. She hadn't wanted to be "right" like this. Hadn't wanted July's father dead. She took a step backward. Felt the buckets tremble. Forced a glaring look. *Just go'n have to leave Mama's basket.*

"I ain't trying to see no overseer, and I don't want to see no more of you. Git away from me, Silas. Right now." Silas moved in closer.

"Don't say things you'll be sorry for, li'l pretty. I can make life hard for you and that young'un of yours, or I can make it easy. I might even could get you out of the fields for good if you'd be willing to let me warm your bed ever now and then."

"I'd rather bed with a copperhead."

"Any more of your sass and you might have to."

Water leapt from the wooden pails Noah had made for her—one of the many first-year-married gifts he'd handcrafted for her—as she flung the icy liquid in Silas's face. A face that crawled sideways in a vindictive smile.

"Fraid you done gone and crossed the line, li'l pretty. Can't nobody do that to old Silas and get away with it. Fact is, I'd show you right now how much man I got left if I didn't have to make a li'l appearance at that hush harbor."

Fear curled up inside her belly like a fat worm. For the first

time since she'd seen Silas do what he'd done to that baby so long ago, Sunday's dread of him pushed through full-grown. She heard herself scream as she flew down the path, leaving in her wake the basket and buckets, along with a half-sneer she'd not soon forget.