



*Sunday night, March 17, 1861*

Noah squatted behind a tree near the placid stream Sunday had always claimed as her own. His throat hurt from a developing cold. His very earlobes seemed weighted. He was that tired—that heightened—straining to hear the wagon wheels which would change his life. He didn't doubt it would be a wagon because Mama Tullie, who'd been the one to alert him to this chance, had told him so ... well ... at the least, she'd said *maybe*, and he'd not known the no-nonsense, nearly blind old woman to be wrong about a whole lot of things. Still, she had emphasized, *maybe*.

*Maybe you go'n end up walking like you did the first time you run away.*

Suddenly yesterday's argument with Sunday—the certainty with which he had described the workings of the Railroad—struck him as puny. Far-fetched. Misgivings about the whole idea of a white “conductor” who cared about him swooped down like a starving buzzard pecking away at his entrails.

“What chu really know about these people, man?” Noah

had taken to whispering to himself in order to stay alert. “What white man have you ever knowed to do such a thing?”

He cracked his knuckles—a habit Sunny hated—nearly losing his balance. He shook his head. “Uh-uh. Too late to think like that.”

He righted himself. Shifted from one of the many cramped positions he’d held for hours. Wondered if he should stand up for a while and stretch. He settled on squatting as the wisest way to mask his height while remaining ready to flee at a moment’s notice. For the last twenty-four hours, Noah had waged war against sleep. Gut clenched the whole time. Brain constantly making the lap around the bloody memory of Handley Duval’s “Reclaiming” Noah’s thirteen-year-old self after he had run away and stayed gone for five years. He thumbed over one of his hacked-off fingers. Remembered the countless remaining scars.

“I ain’t going back to that reclaiming again. Rather be put up under the dirt first ... What the—”

He jumped at the scurrying sound of an animal he reckoned ought to be asleep somewhere this time of night. “Get hold of yourself, man. You ain’t no pitiful boy like you was back then.” After tonight, Duval would just be a rotten memory. “Nobody go’n ever make you do nothing again, save the Lord and yourself. That’s it. Steady now. Just try to keep your mind out of the ditch and on the middle of that road there. Ain’t this what you been praying for all your life?”

Truth told, that failed attempt at the age of eight—along with the shattered promise Noah had made to his five-year-old cousin Clayton to return for him—had become a double-barreled gun blasting Noah at each sunrise ever since. Where was Clayton now? Was he still alive, and did he even much remember Noah?

Bits of Noah had died over his failure to free Clayton until all that was left was a fistful of well-contained rage. Lord, how

he had needed to talk to someone about his little cousin. Speak to someone of the unspeakable.

“Why did I never tell Sunny?”

His eyelids drew down of their own volition, teasing him with the idea of a five-minute nap, only to fly open to another barrage of old thoughts. Memories dragged him back between the tobacco rows that night sixteen years ago in '45 when he made his first run for freedom. The wonder of finally escaping Handley Duval's whip. The ecstasy of fleeing. The hope that he would soon return for Clayton. Then the hunger that made him crazy after a few days of vicious insects and vengeful snakes and polluted water. The glare of a strange tall white man's lantern, scalding Noah's eyes—“*Wonder who he belongs to, honey?*” A religious man who, as it turned out, was kind enough, housing Noah for five years.

Until the Reclaiming from Massa Duval—a beating so raw that Noah reckoned himself to have joined Mama Tullie's heavenly angels in some kind of blue twilight. The utter humiliation of having his nakedness dragged back to the Duval plantation behind a horse. Then the scorching despair when the hope that little Clayton still waited for him was snuffed out.

Noah slapped away a mosquito. Shuddered. His large calloused hands clammy from the memory, his brain shouting new accusations of a second desertion.

*Is it true? Is that what I'm doing? Dumping Sunny and July?*

“Naw. Naw, t'aint. I ain't shaking off Sunday and July with the same kind of promise I made to Clayton. They could've come if they'd a mind to.” And why was he talking about them as though they were one? His son had no say in this.

Noah searched the heavens for the time. *Past midnight.* Sunday would have long since put July to bed after acting out one of her many made-up stories with their son on her lap. It was a sight he never tired of, so tender it made him weep from time to time.

Sweat ran between his shoulder blades at the thought of how much he would miss them—how many times he had already left them alone, pretending to seek God at the hush harbor, when what he was really after was news of someone’s successful run.

He swallowed down a determined yawn. Forced his eyeballs to search the woods once more. Had the conductor changed his mind? Noah hadn’t attended the meeting last night. Instead, he’d sat up all night with the child in his arms, trying to satisfy himself that July’s mysterious fever was gone. Thankfully, it hadn’t flared. Thigh muscles aching like a rotted tooth, he adjusted his squat once more. Had Mama Tullie somehow gotten wrong the meeting place? Doubt pressed into his chest like the hooves of a beast.

“Wonder what it’s go’n feel like to give yourself over to a strange white man when all your life you been fighting against doing just that?”

Something cold and firm—a metal pipe if he’d had to guess—pressed against the nape of his neck. He froze at the sound of a woman’s voice.

“Well, you ain’t apt to find out tonight, is you? Now, say the name.”

Relief rushed from Noah’s lungs at the voice he knew as well as his own. It had been a while since he’d heard it, but unless the last two days of sleepless nights had scuttled his brain more than he imagined, that voice belonged to—

“What’s the name, I say?”

He scrambled to remember the code name Mama Tullie had whispered to him hours earlier. It was a Bible name. That much he knew.

Midian? Simeon? Goshen? The barrel dug deeper into his neck, rescuing his flailing memory.

“Gideon.”

The woman said nothing. Simply continued to push the

gun against his neck. Must be trying to decide if he'd taken too long to answer. His dreams of freedom being rapidly sucked up by the threat of the barrel, Noah decided to take a chance.

"Miss Maggie?"

"What chu say?" The woman stepped around to face him, a look of surprise and a touch of fear showing up even in the darkness. She motioned toward him with the pistol's barrel. "Git to your feet, boy. How you know my name?" Noah willed his sore muscles to push him to his feet.

"I'd know your voice anywhere, Miss Maggie. Me and Clayton, we took enough biscuits from your hands when we was young'uns to feed Pharaoh's army." The renewed stretch of quiet unnerved Noah. Made him wonder if memory had failed him. A line of perfect white teeth pierced the darkness.

"Li'l Noah? That you? Aw, yeah, yeah! Ain't you a sight for the sore eye, though? And if the darkness ain't foolin' these old peepers, you done turned into some kinda good looker too."

A big soft squeeze followed, gun dangling from Miss Maggie's hand. Noah felt the heat of embarrassment. Sometimes—especially at a moment like this when a likely loaded gun hung around his neck while he was trying to escape a life-long hell like Duval's plantation—he wished women wouldn't take such notice.

"Uh, thank you ma'am."

"Reckon I ain't see'd you over a half-dozen times since Handley brung you back some years ago."

True. And thank God the quarters had been built a good ways down from the big house which Noah, until this moment, had thought Miss Maggie never left. After the horror of the Reclaiming, he rarely went near the place, not even for the celebrations allowed at Christmas and the Fourth of July. Not even to sample Miss Maggie's cooking. Sunday and July—the cabin and the whittling knife Handley Duval had dropped during the Reclaiming—that was enough plan-

tation life for Noah until he could make another try at freedom.

“I often wondered what become of li'l Clayton. Looked around one day and he was gone, just like when you took off. Everything about his leaving was hush-hush too. Everybody scared to mention it, same as with yours.”

Panic eclipsed the embarrassment of a moment ago. How would he go about voicing to this good woman why he had failed Clayton, without crushing the flimsy will he clung to in order to leave his wife and child? A twig snapped a few feet away erasing all thoughts of everything except survival. He shoved Miss Maggie behind him, one of his truncated fingers spitefully shooting back and forth with the memory of the Reclaiming.

“What’s the trouble here?”

Another woman? This one, Noah was sure he’d never heard. He angled toward the side of the tree, Miss Maggie sidestepping his unspoken directions. But the strange woman was already upon him—a stealthy litheness about her, the likes of which he had never witnessed. Slave? Indian? Slave *and* Indian? Even in the darkness, it was easy to see she was beautiful, but she sounded neither black nor red. The question came before he could stop it.

“Who you—?”

“Beg pardon, Miss Gideon.” Maggie interrupted, her answer directed toward the tiny woman, her hale voice reduced to sheepishness.

Gideon? He had thought that the code word. What kind of crazy name was that for a woman?

“When I saw it was Noah, here, I got kind of carried off by years gone by. Forgot for a minute how well you keep things on track.” She let loose a robust laugh. “I slipped this boy and his cousin more of Massa’s bread than Massa and his family could eat in a

year. She passed the pistol to the woman called Gideon. "Put your mind to ease 'bout this one. He ain't no colored spy trying to trip us up like old Silas been rumoring about and doing all these years." Noah took a step. Stumbled at the mention of Silas Duval's name. The stranger seemed not to notice as she questioned Miss Maggie.

"Where are the other passengers? I was led to believe there would be at least five."

"Don't know. Probably all this talk about secesh and war done scared 'em off. But that shouldn't keep y'all from being on your way." Miss Maggie chuckled. "Just keep this one fed good, and he be all right."

Say what? Follow a woman? One who sounded like she'd never even seen a slave before? Let alone rescued one. The story he'd heard once about somebody called Moses was one thing. This little pretty-pretty was something else. Noah's shoulders tightened. He would be shot before he let himself be sold again ... *but I ain't about to follow no li'l skinny woman either.* He backed up toward Sunny's stream thinking he would make a run for it across the creek if he had to. It wouldn't be the first time. He held up his hand.

"W-wait a minute. Where the real conductor at?"

"You're looking at her, sir. Now let's go."

The conductor. This little sapling-switch of a woman, who talked like she ought to have her own big house, was one of the conductors in this big undertaking called the Underground Railroad?

"You crazy? Go where? And where's that wagon we was promised?"

"I don't know anything about a wagon, but I can tell you this. With the war looming, the train probably won't be back soon. You have five minutes to make up your mind." She raised the pistol to hip level. "And if you decide to go, there'll be no turning back."

Noah said nothing. Being told what to do sounded too much like another form of slavery.

“I learned that principle from Moses. I find it works. I’ll shoot you myself before I allow you to turn back and jeopardize the chance for others.”

Noah stared at the woman, continuing to size her up as much as the night would allow. He turned his back to her—and Maggie, who’d gone stone cold quiet—and looked out into the darkness beyond the stream. He could probably carry this so-called conductor across his shoulder as easily as a tobacco sheaf. And she was supposed to protect *him*?

“Your time has expired, sir.”

Still holding the gun, the conductor spoke to Miss Maggie in low-pitched tones of instruction then gathered her into a quick embrace, Noah listening intently. *They’ve done this before.*

The woman turned and walked along the stream. So noiselessly until had Noah not caught a whiff of her tempting scent, he might have thought her a ghost. He could not have explained it if she had put the gun to his ear. But in that moment, he saw strength. He decided to trust this little whisper of a woman with his life, at least for a while. He had to leave this place, and he reckoned one reckless chance was as good as another. Somehow, he would get his family back. If not with this train, then another. He would not fail Sunny and July as he had Clayton. He fell in step behind a woman whose real name he didn’t even know yet. Turned to take a step back.

“Miss Maggie?”

“What is it, child?”

“Could you be watching for word from me, so’s you could let my wife—her name Sunday—know where I be settled?” The older woman flashed her unforgettable smile.

“I know Sunday, leastways I know her story.”

“And say bye to Mama Tullie for me.”

“Sir, we have miles to cover before the dawning is upon us.”



“Coming.”

Noah smiled into the darkness. *Man, I wish I could learn to talk like this here woman.* He hesitated. Glanced over his shoulder one last time.

Wonder what *was* his wife’s story—the whole story? Dread of something other than Handley Duval’s dogs struck him. He’d not pushed hard enough to find out.

*Now, there’s a fair chance you ain’t never go’n know.*