



Bob Rogers

Sesquicentennial Edition

First Dark

A Buffalo Soldier's Story

From the Author of *The Laced Chameleon*
With a Foreword by General (Ret) Lloyd "Fig" Newton



First Dark: A Buffalo Soldier's Story - Sesquicentennial Edition is an historically correct action novel that follows Isaac Rice, Tenth Cavalry, and the women who love him. His nineteenth century saga begins in Charleston, and reaches the desert Southwest, contributing to the story of how twenty-first century America came to be. Isaac touches and is touched by lives of diverse fictional characters plus a cast of impressive nonfictional people: political, military, religious, and entrepreneurs.

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Acclaim for Bob Rogers'

First Dark: A Buffalo Soldier's Story

The Gripping saga of Isaac Rice is a hero's journey. [Don't] be surprised if ***First Dark*** ends up as a popular movie. It's also a darn good read.

-- ***Baltimore Post-Examiner***

First Dark captivated me from page one as the novel became my time travel machine into another world. Protagonist, buffalo soldier Isaac Rice, is confronted by natural and man-made catastrophes that make the book a real page-turner. ***First Dark*** is a top-notch work of historical fiction.

-- Dr. Shelley Kirilenko, author of ***The Blue Kimono***

I thoroughly enjoyed ***First Dark***, a roller coaster thriller about the life of Isaac Rice, a former slave. The book is rich in historical detail and scenic descriptions that allow you to taste, feel, smell, see, and hear the events in the book.

-- Dave Miller, CEO,
American Red Cross National Testing Laboratory

First Dark is a powerful story of the underbelly of American history that has been carefully researched and written. It covers the horrors of bigotry from the points of view of several different characters and brings everything together at the end of the story. Characters are well-developed and believable, and the dialogue and description throughout the book are brilliant.

-- ***Readers' Favorite***

First Dark is a well researched work of historical fiction, set during and just after the Civil War. This engaging story centers on Isaac Rice, a run-away slave who eventually joins a Buffalo Soldier's unit of the U.S. Army in the West and intertwines his life and experiences with those of such diverse people as plantation owners, U.S. congressmen, army units operating behind enemy lines, hostile Indians and Mexican combatants. It accurately reflects the attitudes and prejudices of the times and presents both villains and heroes.

-- E.S. Tennent

FIRST DARK:

A BUFFALO SOLDIER'S STORY

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Printed on acid-free paper.

This book is a work of fiction based on actual events and the deeds of real people during the American Civil War, Indian Wars, America's Reconstruction period, and a nineteenth-century Mexican Revolution. The point of view characters and supporting cast who engage in dialog herein as well as the *USS Benjamin Franklin* are my inventions. The historic men and women referenced herein, along with organizations, places, events, other ships, geography, weapons, and the acts of war and kindness are all real.

Sesquicentennial Edition

Chapter 1: Isaac

Mark screamed, “Git down!”

Less than a second later, a bullet slammed into his chest. The bullet, a French-made minie ball, shattered a rib and ripped away the left ventricle from his heart before exiting through his back. Bone splinters pierced his aorta and left lung. The team of four mules Mark was driving bolted. The reins slipped from his fingers. Mark fell backward onto the burlap bags of rice in the cargo bed of the wagon. Birds replaced singing with screeching. In a rush of flapping wings and rustling green leaves, blue jays, robins, warblers and wrens fled.

With their opening volley, the ambushers had cut down two of the six Confederate soldiers escorting the Charleston-bound convoy of eight wagons loaded with rice, corn, and fodder. Mark drove the lead wagon. The convoy bore contributions to the war effort made by the owners of Tiffany and Jehossee plantations – the largest rice plantations on the Pon Pon River. The owners regularly allowed the use of their drivers, wagons, and mule teams to transport rations for Confederate troops and fodder for their animals.

When the first shot rang out, Mark’s last words were, “Git down!” It was then that Isaac dove, headfirst, from the wagon’s bench seat beside Mark to the gray-brown muddy roadway below. Isaac splashed into a puddle and rolled himself into the ditch beside the rutted dirt road. From there, he scrambled out of the murky ditch water and crawled into the woods.

The firing intensified. Isaac looked back to see the mules running away and Mark’s head rolling from side to side atop a sack of rice. In horror, he screamed, “Pa!” Amid the bullets whizzing overhead, he stood and turned to chase the runaway wagon. Abruptly, he felt himself pushed onto the wet leaves and undergrowth. Isaac had been grabbed from behind and forced down by a large black soldier wearing a thigh-length dark blue tunic and red trousers. In the soldier’s right hand was a long Enfield Pattern 1853 rifle-musket, the first Isaac had seen close up.

“Stay deh! Stay down!” The soldier spoke the same Gullah dialect as Isaac.

Isaac was bewildered. He nodded and obeyed. Peering through vines and a wild azalea bush covered with spent blossoms, Isaac could see that more black soldiers, led by two white soldiers, had stopped the runaway mule team. He could no longer see Mark. It was quiet again. Light rain continued falling. The smell of gunpowder and the blue smoke from the rifles still hung in the air.

About them, more blue and red-clad soldiers emerged speaking Gullah. The large soldier stood and spoke again. “Son, I’m so sorry we hit your pa. We meant oonah and him no harm.”

Still shaken, Isaac nodded and rose. “N-n-now, suh, can I go see about my pa?”

“Why, yes. I’ll go wid oonah.”

Stumbling along the road from Tiffany Plantation, Isaac could not keep his eyes off the black soldiers rounding up red-faced Confederate prisoners. The soldiers laughed and guffawed and reveled in their work. The soldier who grabbed Isaac now walked beside him. The rain had stopped and the morning sun broke through the fog and clouds. The warmth from the sun felt good through his wet shirt. His ever-present straw hat rested on his back, held in place by the cord around his neck. But the sun would not dry his shoes anytime soon. Because Isaac was apprenticed to the plantation blacksmith, he wore shoes – high-topped leather shoes with wooden soles.

* * *

Three bodies lay at their feet. Mark’s upper torso and head had already been wrapped in a piece of the tarp used to cover the rice and corn. His blood had soaked through the tarp where it covered his chest. The bodies of two Confederate soldiers were still uncovered.

Isaac sank to his knees beside his father’s body and wept. His tears were a flood – but silent. Isaac swayed from side to side while laying his hands on his father’s chest. The soldier with Isaac explained to his comrades that the dead black man was Isaac’s pa. He wore three chevrons on his sleeves. They stopped talking and

removed their caps. At length, the sergeant directed the soldiers to cut one mule out of a team and secure Mark's body across the beast's back for the trip back to the plantation.

Isaac turned to the sergeant. The man's stubble revealed several short silver hairs on his chin. Isaac stuttered. "S-s-suh, w-who oonah people?"

The soldier sucked in his middle and expanded his chest. "Oh, we're the 1st South Carolina Infantry Regiment of Volunteers (Colored). We're in the Union army."

"Where'd oonah come from?"

"Not far. Mostly we came from plantations on James Island and Johns Island."

"Eh, suh, I mean where'd oonah come from dis mornin'?"

"Oh-h-h. Yisdiddy, we came up from Port Royal by steamboat. Fus, we trabel on de Coosaw River and den up de Combahee. Followin' Missus Harriet's plan, we's been raiding plantations along de Combahee. We wuz marchin' on our way to the Pon Pon River when we heah your convoy a comin'. We planned to destroy the ferry connectin' the Jacksonboro-Charleston Road across the Pon Pon 'foe we head on back to Port Royal. Instead, looks lak we'd best be gittin' all dis heah booty back to our boats."

"Who Missus Harriet?"

"Boy, don't oonah know nothin'? Dat be Missus Harriet Tubman."

* * *

As they walked along the road to Tiffany, except for Luke, the men who had been drivers of the other seven wagons talked quietly, but excitedly, about having seen black Gullah-speaking men like themselves in Union army uniforms executing a perfect ambush – no matter that they were the victims. Most of the men were from Tiffany. The remainder came from Jehossee Plantation, just down the river. The men from Tiffany would take them back to Jehossee on a flatboat, passing under the cannons of the Confederate artillery battery atop Willton Bluff. Luke walked in silence beside Isaac, as

Isaac led the mule bearing his father's body at the head of the procession.

After a time, Isaac spoke. "Eh, Mister Luke, my pa didn't know when he was born. But I wanna 'member dis day. What day is dis?"

Luke cleared his throat. "Why, dis be Monday, the fourth day of May in de year ob our Lawd 1863."

"Mister Luke, in your trabels wid Massa, have you seed Port Royal?"

Luke was in charge of the livery at Tiffany. He occasionally spelled his master's regular carriage driver.

"Surely, I hab. Dat was 'fore de war started."

"How far is it from here?"

"Oh, it a fur piece from here if oonah go by de road or ober land true de woods. Dere be many swamps, streams, and wide ribbers to cross – wid snakes and 'gators, too. But tain't all dat fur by boat – maybe a day's trabel."

Isaac was silent for a long time. The sun was climbing toward midmorning and bringing with it a hot and humid low-country day. There were deep woods on both sides of the road. Along the ditches, five-starred wild roses and honeysuckle released their sweet scent. Gnats buzzed in swarms that looked like black columns surging to and fro in midair. Yellow flies circled and attacked with dazzling speed. Isaac slapped one as it bit into his arm. The mule shook its head, wiggled its ears, twitched its shoulder skin, and swished its tail trying to get rid of the flies.

Luke remained quiet until they reached the ornate brick and wrought iron gated entrance to Tiffany Plantation. They were still surrounded by deep woods of pines, palmettos, cedars, several varieties of oaks, and the odd wild magnolia – regal with shiny dark green leaves and large bright white blossoms. Giant cypress trees stood in low swampy places. Beyond the gate, the woods had been cleared away. Along each side of the road, evergreen live oaks stood like mighty sentinels. Each live oak was draped in Spanish moss that hung like generous tufts of gray hair from the gnarled branches. The live oaks were evenly spaced; between each tree, azaleas stood in front of rhododendrons. The blossoms on the azaleas were spent, but

a few rhododendrons still held the last of their lavender and white flowers. The foreground daffodil blossoms had long since died and their stems swayed to and fro in the gentle breeze.

A whitewashed rail fence separated the flowering bushes from small orchards of apple, plum, peach, fig, and pear trees, whose blossoms had already fallen. Soon, the trees would be loaded with tiny green fruit.

Isaac would usually cast an admiring glance at the new hinges on which the main gates were mounted since he had helped the blacksmith, Big Gus, forge those hinges. Today, Isaac didn't even look up.

Tiffany Plantation's rich land lay on both sides of the Pon Pon River, about six miles south of Jacksonboro in Colleton District, where the river was nearly one thousand feet wide. Three hundred twenty-three souls lived on the grounds of Tiffanys – three hundred ten of them enslaved. People and livestock had flourished here since 1741 when William James Tiffany, grandfather of the current owner, John Bartholomew Tiffany II, arrived from Barbados with a few slaves. The elder Tiffany soon learned that his Barbados sugar plantation slaves from West Africa were experts with rice crops. In 1863, rice was still, by far, the most important crop raised in Colleton District, and especially at Tiffany Plantation.

Luke cleared his throat again. He moved closer to Isaac and whispered, "Ni, Isaac, oonah know Mark wuz ma frien'. So I's gonna tell oonah lak mine own son. I seed de way oonah eyed dem soldiers back dere. I seed wanderlust in yo' eyes. I ain't gonna say dis but jes once. If oonah thinkin' 'bout runnin' tuh Port Royal, don't walk – ride. And, for Gwad's sake, don't talk 'bout when oonah goin' wid nobody – not even me."

Isaac stared at Luke in amazement. He asked himself, how'd he know? He felt warmth and kinship for this man who was no kin.

Isaac glanced over his shoulder at the men walking behind them and again made eye contact with Luke. "Yessuh." Isaac thought again about the colored soldiers taking up arms to help the Yankees win the war. "Mister Luke, I heard you tell Uncle Jacob dat Mister Lincoln's proclamation ain't gone be worth a hill a beans in Colleton

District ‘til the Secesh are defeated. Well, all de news oonah bring back fuh two years say de ‘Cesh are winnin’ most ever’ battle. Sounds to me lak de Yankees can use colored help. Ain’t we got a pony in dis heah race?”

“Son, oonah’s right on all counts. I ain’t sayin’ go or don’t go. I jes tellin’ oonah, though dangerous – berry dangerous – taint likely no white man gone cotch you goin’ by water.”

Isaac thought for a long minute. “Yessuh. I sees yo’ point.”

They didn’t speak again until Luke reached for the reins. “Oonah go on and tell yo’ ma. I’ma take Mark’s body on ober to Aunt Ella’s so she can lay’im out on her coolin’ board and get’im ready.”

“Yessuh. Thank you, Mister Luke.” Isaac handed the reins to Luke and went off to deliver the bad news to his mother, Eve.

Once he passed the big house, Isaac saw the reflection of the sun shimmering on the surface of the water that covered the neatly banked squares that made up Tiffany’s vast rice fields. Isaac turned west and followed the sound of voices coming from the provision crop fields. While the waters of the stretch flow covered the young rice crop, the workers were hoeing weeds from among the corn and vegetables planted the previous month during the time that the sprout flow waters covered the rice fields. When that happened, only the few trunk minders patrolled the rice fields. Isaac thought of his best friend, Caleb. He knew Caleb would be somewhere along the rice canal banks with Uncle Jacob learning from his mentor how to read the weather, the river, and the needs of the all-important rice plants. Isaac smiled as he recalled Caleb and Uncle Jacob playing their fiddles and harmonicas at jigs and campfires.

“Nigger, what the hell is you doin’ heah?” It was Jeb Foster. Isaac turned and met the gaze of the overseer’s oldest son. Deep in thought and grief, Isaac had not heard the approach of Jeb’s horse. “How cum you ain’t wid dem wagons dat left heah dis mornin’?”

Isaac’s reply was even and monotone. “We wuz bushwhacked by Yankee soldiers. My pa is dead. I’m on my way to tell my ma.”

“Yankee soldiers? Heah? Boy, you lying! Taint no Yankees ‘round heah.”

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Isaac ignored Jeb. “Dey kilt my pa. I’m on my way tuh find my ma.”

Jeb was four years older than Isaac. Both were a couple of inches under six feet. Though he was only sixteen, Isaac’s muscles and upper torso were the better developed of the two from swinging large hammers at the smithy. Isaac was ambidextrous and used a hammer or machete equally well with either hand.

Jeb scratched the few blond hairs on his chin. “Well, I don’t reckon you’d lie ‘bout yo’ pa being kilt. Yo’ ma’s down yonder on the low end of dis heah cornfield. I’ma let it go dis time on account o’ yo’ pa. Next time don’t forget tuh say, ‘suh.’”

Isaac bit his lower lip – hard. “Yessuh.”

* * *

Isaac found Eve hoeing in a row beside her best friend, Hannah. He took a deep breath, preparing to speak. Eve looked up and Isaac heard her usual cheerful greeting come from her smiling face. In an instant and before Isaac could speak, Eve’s smile vanished. Suddenly, she was unsteady on her feet. She waivered as if she had received a blow and leaned on her hoe. Eve searched his face. Her scorching gaze caused Isaac to cast his eyes down. “Isaac, what’s wrong? Why oonah here? Where’s Pa? What’s happened?”

Isaac reached with both arms to hug his mother. “Ma...”

Throwing the handle of her hoe to the ground, she backed away, holding up both hands – palms out. Eve shrieked. “No! Don’t oonah tell me dat! No! I no yeddy dat! No! Taint true!”

Isaac hugged Eve. At first, she pushed halfheartedly against his chest and then leaned on him. She began wailing in a loud voice with tears streaming down her face. Isaac’s tears were warm on his cheeks. He tried again to speak: “Ma...”

She shook her head. “Taint true! Taint true! Not my Mark!”

Hannah stepped over her row of young corn plants and joined Isaac in hugging her friend. Eve wailed and gasped for breath. She sagged and her weight was supported by Isaac and Hannah as they gently laid her between the rows of corn plants. They revived Eve with water from Hannah’s clay jug. On her feet again, Eve draped

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her arms around the shoulders of Isaac and Hannah. Both held Eve about her waist and walked her to the cabin she shared with Mark and her children.

* * *

Aunt Ella, the sick house minder, midwife, nurse, and undertaker, arrived shortly after Hannah made dinner. “Chile, what oonah want me to sing tonight?” Aunt Ella smoothed her silver hair, drawn back into a bun, and looked expectantly at her patient. Eve blinked and, after a moment of reflection, looked up from her pallet on the floor at Isaac. “Son, what do oonah tink ‘bout ‘I Wanna to be Ready’?”

“Ma, dat be fine. Pa always lak dat song.”

“Aunt Ella, please also sing ‘Lawd, Remember Me’ – speshly fuh me.”

“Why sho’, chile. I’ll git young Caleb to help me raise both o’ dese songs. Now oonah jes’ easy. Hannah will fetch anything oonah need and mind the girls.”

* * *

Isaac and Aunt Ella arrived at George’s carpentry workshop as Big Gus and Tom Foster approached. Inside there was the fresh smell of fresh-cut pine. Sawdust covered the worktables and the floor. Big Gus’s hand dwarfed the blue glass jar of nails he handed to George. He offered the same hand to Isaac. “Son, I was mighty sorry to heah dat oonah lost yo’ pa.”

Isaac blinked back tears. He watched his hand disappear into Big Gus’s. “Thank you, suh.”

Tom Foster was the head overseer. He did not offer his hand, but did mumble condolences. He turned to George. “You gonna be finished here by nightfall?”

“Yessuh. It’ll be ready, now dat I hab de right size o’nails fuh dese heah planks.” George rubbed a hand over the one completed side and frame of the coffin he was building for Mark’s body. George appeared to admire his handiwork. His skills were renowned in Colleton District and as far away as Charleston. He was often

loaned or hired out to other plantations for cabinetry and building projects.

Tom asked, "Aunt Ella, will the body be ready in time?"

"Yessuh, Mister Tom."

* * *

After supper, family and friends sat by the body into the night singing and praying until time for the funeral to begin in the slave section of the plantation cemetery. Some of the men held torches to light the way. A neighbor brought two ladderback chairs with woven grass string bottoms for Eve and Isaac. They were the only people seated during the funeral. Isaac's youngest sister, Mary, stood beside him. Deborah was patting her mother's shoulder. Most of the time, Eve leaned her head on Isaac's shoulder and continued shedding silent tears. Mark's coffin had already been nailed shut.

Aunt Ella and Caleb raised their voices together and led the community in song. Aunt Ella was sometimes accompanied by Caleb's harmonica. Isaac reckoned that there were more than two hundred members of the community present. Tom Foster spoke on behalf of the Tiffany family, since they had already moved to their Charleston townhouse to avoid the "fever season." Uncle Jacob repeated words from the Bible he had heard the visiting white Episcopal preacher recite. He ended with the 23 Psalm and a long prayer. "...and bress Eve and her chillums. Prop dem up on ebber' leanin' side. Hep dem make it true dese tryin' times.... Amen."

Following the internment, with Mark's head facing the east, members of the community took turns hugging Eve and Isaac while offering their private condolences. After a while, the people made their way back to their streets and cabins by torchlight.

When the final torch was extinguished, Bianca stepped from the shadows, grabbed Isaac's hand, and pulled him from the street. In a shadow again, she whispered, "I'll never forget what oonah did for me and my Andrew last year. Please let me know if there's anything I can do for oonah."

Slowly, she turned to face him, toe to toe. In the dim light of a quarter-moon, Isaac saw beauty in her eyes and lips. Her smile

revealed perfectly even teeth that he had not noticed in all the years since he first met her. She moved closer and laid her head on his chest. She put her arms around Isaac and pulled him tight against her body. He caught her scent and inhaled deeply. Isaac felt Bianca gently slide her thigh between his legs. She whispered, “Anything. *Anything* at all.”

Through his shirt and her white cotton dress, Isaac felt her rigid nipples against his midsection and the soft flesh of her shoulders under his hands. He experienced surprise, confusion, and the sensation of blood rushing to his loins. He knew she felt his erection. In a moment, Bianca was gone.

* * *

Wide-eyed, Isaac lay on his pallet in the attic of his mother’s cabin. He called the attic a loft; he had slept there since he was eleven years old. He lay awake, staring at the dark rafters above his head. Bianca’s scent remained in his nostrils and he could still feel her flesh in his hands. He thought of his brief friendship with Miriam – of the one kiss behind the smithy, her almost constant sickness with severe stomach and muscle pain, and finally her death at age fourteen. Isaac thought he would’ve ask his father about the feelings Bianca stirred – or, maybe, not. But he was sure he would not discuss it with Caleb. His mind drifted to the sight of Bianca’s beautifully proportioned body nearly naked as she was beaten by Jeb Foster while the community was forced to watch. His mind returned to the embrace. Isaac relived that embrace several more times. He fell asleep without answering his question of what he should say to Bianca.

* * *

Isaac smelled bacon. He bounded down the ladder from the loft. Eve had his breakfast of bacon and cornbread ready. He stepped outside and washed his face with cold water from the small wooden hoop basin on the shelf next to the door. He thought of how he used to wait for his pa to finish with the basin first. With the memory came an ache in the middle of his body. He thought, *just yesterday*,

Pa was right here beside me. The sun was not up yet, but in the early morning light Isaac knew his mother could see his tears. Eve walked over and put her arms around Isaac. She drew a deep breath. "Son, I know it hurts. It allus hurts when we lose a person we love."

In a low, but steady voice, Isaac replied, "Ma, thank oonah for your kind words."

"Your pa was a fine man. Oonah remind me so much of him...." She sniffed and sighed. "It's getting late. You bes' git on to wurk now."

"Ma, I can still hear his voice in my head...."

"I know. I know. But now it's time to git. Out you go." Isaac could see that Eve was fighting back tears. Blinking rapidly, she hugged him again. "Try to smile some today. Talk to Caleb and Uncle Jacob."

"Yessum."

Isaac was glad Caleb could not see him letting his mother hug him or observe him crying. He took the cornbread and bacon that Eve held out. He noticed right away that she had given him an extra piece of bacon. He smiled and dried his eyes.

As he turned to go, Eve said, "I know today is a sad day for you. But, Pa would say that a smile looks good on you."

Isaac was out the door when he shouted over his shoulder, "Bye, Ma!"

He didn't follow the street to the smithy. As usual, he was almost late. Isaac trotted along the worn path between the gardens that separated the back of the cabins on his street from the ones facing south. He was eating bacon from his right hand and cornbread from his left. There would be no time to lose when he arrived at the smithy. He would immediately start the fire in the furnace – which should have been started already. Big Gus wanted it hot by the time he arrived in the mornings. Isaac pushed the last of the bacon into his mouth as he reached the smithy's front door.

Flames were starting from yesterday's embers and the dry pine splinters Isaac had thrown into the furnace when he heard the horn blow first call for the field crews. Final call would be sounded in sixteen minutes and Big Gus and Tom Foster would appear in the

doorway. Isaac especially did not want to be yelled at this morning for not having the fire going on time. He had put the first logs on and was pumping the bellows furiously when Big Gus arrived. Tom Foster was not with him.

Big Gus stood in the doorway, blocking the daylight. He was half a foot over six feet and weighed almost three hundred pounds. He counted as two men in the tug-of-war games they had at harvest time celebration. Big Gus was also the blackest man Isaac had ever seen. His skin sometimes had a bluish glow. He stood there looking at Isaac for a long moment.

Finally, Big Gus spoke. "'Mornin', son. Com'ere."

It was then that Isaac noticed the leather lines in his right hand. He left the bellows saying, "Mornin', Mister Gus." He knew that sometimes Big Gus had been ordered by Tom Foster to flog an enslaved worker for some infraction of the rules. As he drew nearer, Isaac could see that the leather lines were attached to the bridle of a large bay horse standing quietly to the left of the door. Isaac exhaled. "Yessuh, Mister Gus?"

Big Gus reached out, put a big hand on Isaac's shoulder, and said, "Son, I'm still saddened by the loss of your pa. If I could, I would tell oonah to take the day off."

The gentleness in the man's voice surprised Isaac. He managed to say, "Thank you, suh."

Big Gus cleared his throat. "Isaac, I want oonah to start work on the replacement hinges for the corral gates and barn doors this mornin'. I'm goin' down to the main gate to measure the post hinges for new tie rods. Be back 'fore dinner time. Oonah be careful with dat fire." Big Gus took his leave.

It was unusual for Isaac to be in the smithy working alone. He was pleased that Big Gus had shown confidence in him. He thought; *wait 'til I tell Pa....* Isaac shook his head and said aloud, "Pa, it may take awhile to stop missin' you so much." The thought of his father brought back the ache deep inside. Isaac went about selecting pieces of iron and taking down tools from Big Gus's neat wall pegs for the hinge job. Today he just did not feel up to putting forth the effort and doing the good work that he knew would earn Big Gus's praise.

His fire was roaring and he was in his leather apron pounding out a hinge plate when in a glance he noticed his best friend, Caleb, with Tom Foster in the doorway trying to get his attention. This iron plate was glowing red and yellow and Isaac didn't want to stop now, so he pretended not to see them. It was only midmorning, but sweat covered his face and dripped from his chin. He continued to strike the hinge plate with mighty blows. His hammer and the anvil could be heard ringing far outside the smithy. He finished the plate and, with his long tongs, immersed it in the water trough.

While the plate made a loud hissing sound in the water and with steam rising, he looked up. Caleb was waving and calling his name. Isaac knew that neither Caleb Jenkins nor Tom Foster would come close while he was hammering because of flying bits of hot iron and the heat from his furnace. This was the only time he could make Foster wait.

Isaac shook his head and sweat flew from his face. He grinned and greeted them. "Mornin', Massa Foster. Mornin', Caleb."

Caleb said, "Mornin', Isaac."

Foster did not acknowledge the greeting, yet he would have expressed displeasure if he had not received one. Foster went directly to business. "Are you working on hinges for the barns?"

"Yessuh."

"Well, I want you to shut down here as quickly as you can. I need you over in Liberty Square to fix a trunk dock – a bolt on a pulley broke. I want you two boys to get over there real soon. I need that trunk holding water out of that square today without fail."

Foster continued, "Take a canoe with you and go by the front gate and tell Gus to come on back to the smithy. Then you two start out for Liberty Square. Take the tools you think you'll need. I'll meet you there."

Both said, "Yessuh."

* * *

When Foster was gone, Caleb turned to Isaac and said, "I'm real sorry about yo' pa. I know oonah miss him awful bad."

"Thanks, Caleb. I'll say the last thing I imagined was losing my pa to a Yankee bullet."

"Is it true? Mister Luke say dey be black Yankees from James Island."

Isaac looked toward the door to be sure Foster was not returning and said, "Yeah. And Johns Island too."

Caleb looked over his shoulder through the open doorway before asking in a low voice, "Dem Yankees need big help. Dey still gittin' dey asses kicked in evah big battle – 'cept maybe Shiloh. You still wanna join'em?"

Bianca flashed through Isaac's mind. He hesitated. Frowning, he spoke. "I think so. Oonah still goin' wid me?"

Caleb dropped his head and fidgeted. "Naw. I see bad signs. Oonah still wanna go?"

"Well, let's talk while we walk. I want to be sure no one hears what we say." Isaac began putting tools in the big wooden box under the worktable next to the anvil. Some, he hung on wall pegs. He put a bolt and the tools he thought he would need to fix the trunk dock pulley into a burlap bag.

"Okay, while oonah finish shuttin' down, I'll git a canoe."

"Git ol' Della, too, while oonah gittin'."

"What oonah want with dat ol' retired mule?" Caleb had taken a step toward the door, but now he stopped.

"Surely oonah didn't think I was gonna help carry dat canoe all de way to de front canal?"

"So tell me how's ol' Della gettin' back to the stable, or is oonah plannin' to take that dusty ol' mule in the canoe?"

"Caleb, jes write her a pass so the patty rollers won't bother her and she can come back by herself!"

Caleb let go with a loud guffaw. He was walking backward, laughing, and saying, "Yeah, like either one of us can read or write. You're as silly as yore Brer Rabbit..." when he tripped over a log stool and tumbled against the wall. Barrel hoops hanging from wooden pegs on the wall near the door fell on Caleb as he struggled to get up. One was around his neck. Isaac would have doubled over laughing at this scene last week. But today he felt sad and his head

felt strange – almost like having a band tied too tightly around his head just above his eyes. He went over and helped Caleb clean up the mess. Isaac managed to smile while Caleb repeated the hilarity about ol' Della, the rollers, Brer Rabbit, and the hoop around his neck.

They tied the canoe onto two skinny pine poles like a patient to a litter. With one end draped over Della's shoulders, they let her drag the ungainly apparatus. When the boys passed the kennel, they heard Foster's hounds snarling and barking.

"Caleb, dem dawgs allus remind me o' de time we walked past here and spotted dem patty rollers dragging Bianca and Andrew back here. Do oonah 'member?"

"I'll neber forget it. Dat wuz jus lak the time my ma and pa and me got caught tryin' tuh run in '51. They beat us and sold us 'way from de Jenkins Plantation on James Island."

* * *

The first time Jeb Foster had beaten a slave, he had done so while his father was away in Charleston. Bianca, who had assisted Caleb's mother in the kitchen house, and her husband, Andrew, had escaped from Tiffany in the spring of 1862. Isaac had learned later from Caleb's mother that the couple was convinced that the Confederates would win the war and had decided to go to Canada. Isaac had passed the corral with Caleb and discovered Bianca and Andrew stripped to their waists and on their knees, their wrists tied to the split-rail fence of the corral. Their arms were spread apart and tied so they could neither sit nor stand. The practice at Tiffany was to leave any enslaved person who had violated a rule tied to the corral fence until the end of the workday, when all the community was forced to watch punishment meted out.

From Isaac's workplace at the smithy across the street from the corral, he saw Aunt Ella twice give water to the couple during the day – an act that itself was an infraction of the rules. Aunt Ella knelt in the mud and dung beside Bianca, and then Andrew, giving each of them water from a brown clay jug. Isaac was afraid for Aunt Ella. She was beloved by the community and respected by the Tiffanys

and Tom Foster. Yet Isaac sensed that no such respect was held by Foster's sons for any black person.

* * *

When the community gathered, they were somber and quiet. While his younger brother sat his horse, Jeb Foster greeted those assembled with a warning. "Ni, I ain't no speechifyin' fella lak my pa. And I ain't usin' ma pa's whip. So I'ma let my lil' toy kitty cat heah do the talkin' for me." He held up his new cat o'nine tails. It was handsomely constructed from a hickory handle wrapped in leather that bound the stick to three ropes, unbraided into three strains each, with three small knots of leather tied to each strain. The whole cat was a bit over three feet long. At the sight, the crowd murmured. Jeb grinned. "Ni y'all watch what happens to niggers who run off."

Jeb turned and stood over Andrew. Jeb took a deep breath, drew back his cat, and swung it hard down against Andrew's bare back, drawing blood on contact. Andrew snapped his head up and gasped. He struggled against his bonds, his fingers making gripping motions. Though Bianca was not struck, she screamed, "No!"

Jeb turned and struck Bianca. "Shut up, you black bitch!"

Bianca screamed louder. He hit her again. Blood trickled down her back. Tears and mucus streamed from her face onto the mud.

Jeb struck Bianca again and again until he heard Andrew yell, "Stop it, damn you! Son of a dog, leave her be! I'll take her beatin'."

Jeb stopped. He snarled. "Well, you kin have yo' wish!"

Jeb turned and struck Andrew fast and hard. After a time, Andrew's body went limp. His head slumped so that his chin rested on his collarbone. Jeb did not stop.

Aunt Ella yelled. "Enough!"

Still standing over Andrew's bloody back, Jeb glared at Aunt Ella. His face was flushed and sweat ran down his brow and the top of his nose. "You wanna be next, ol' woman?"

Bianca pleaded through her tears. "Stop. Oh, please stop. Can't you see he's passed out?"

A BUFFALO SOLDIER'S STORY

Jeb's response was to lash Bianca across her back. One of the nine knotted tails of his cat reached around her back and ripped her left breast, barely missing her nipple. Blood dripped from her breast.

Several women in the crowd screamed. Isaac scampered over the corral fence and ran to Jeb. Isaac stopped when he was less than a foot in front of Jeb's face, hands akimbo. They were standing toe to toe. Neither Isaac nor Jeb said a word. A hush fell over the crowd. Isaac stood between Jeb and Bianca. Then, he folded his arms across his chest and watched Jeb's perplexed face. Jeb lowered his cat and took a step back. Isaac took a step forward, gazing into Jeb's eyes.

"Mister Foster, yo' pa woulda stopped already."

Jeb snapped his head around to see who had spoken and had to look up into Big Gus's eyes, two feet away. Big Gus continued. "Yo' pa would know better'n to damage Massa Tiffany's property like dat."

Aunt Ella was already cutting Andrew loose from his bonds.

Jeb's face was flushed from his exertion. Now it turned an even brighter pink. He walked away in a huff.

* * *

Aunt Ella sent Luke for the white Dr. Pritchard from Jacksonboro. In spite of Aunt Ella's and Dr. Pritchard's best care, Andrew's back festered, turned blacker by the day, while it produced more and more yellow pus. His fever never broke. Andrew died five days later. Dr. Pritchard said it was gangrene.

* * *

Isaac hid a smile as he savored the memory of his brief tender embrace with Bianca less than twelve hours before. He was surprised by the intensity of the memory. He could almost feel her flesh. Isaac asked Caleb, "How old is Bianca?"

"Ma say she be 'bout twenty-three. Accordin' to Ma, Bianca still refuses to take comp'ny – no matter, young man or old man. I've often wondered, what wuz oonah thinkin' when oonah jumped into dat corral? Evahbody thought oonah done lost yo' mind."

“I didn’t think. I jes jumped. I neber seed nobody beat anyone lak Jeb did dat day. I thought it was Jeb who’d lost *his* mind. If he beat me, I didn’t care if I died. Oonah ‘member, dat wuz only a few days after my sweet Miriam had died.”

They lapsed into silence, Isaac in his private thoughts about the consequences of running away from Tiffany – or any plantation. They walked at a brisk pace on opposite sides of Della's head without leading her. Caleb glanced at the sun. Isaac looked down at the shortening morning shadows. Isaac knew it was time to be well on their way to Liberty Square. He didn't want to be on Tom Foster's list today. He was sure Caleb didn't either. Isaac grimaced and shook his head as he remembered Bianca being struck again and again. He tried to remove from his mind the sight of blood flowing from her back and down her side from her injured left breast. He bit his lip and kicked the dirt.

They passed the smokehouse, the commissary, the guard station and bell stand, and the row of three overseers' houses before Caleb broke the silence. "Don't oonah think Bianca and Andrew getting' caught is a bad sign for runnin'?"

Isaac said, "Talkin' 'bout dem gave me a new idea. I'll tell you 'bout it after we pass the big house."

The street headed west and joined a large circular avenue directly in front of the big house. They smelled the roses as soon as they turned the corner. The inner circle was lined by a low hedge. The green leaves of the hedges contrasted with the brown pine needles that covered the ground in a neat circular row from the roots of the hedges out to about three feet by Isaac's guess. Caleb worked with Uncle Jacob to tend the vegetable gardens of the big house and the flowers in the front circle.

Isaac glanced over his shoulder toward the big house before saying, "So, here's my idea. Ni oonah can still go wid me."

Caleb cast his eyes down. "Naw, man. I best stay heah."

Isaac took a deep breath. "Well, I'm changin' up my plan. On a night wid no moon, I'll run to Jehossee and hide in the winnowing house."

"What? Oonah loco?"

Isaac thought Caleb's face showed stunned disbelief.

Della raised her head and quickened her pace when Caleb spoke loudly and sharply to Isaac.

"Listen. The reason so many of us get caught is because we didn't listen to our own Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox stories."

"Isaac, oonah good as dead. Naw, man. Please don't go."

Isaac ignored Caleb's protests. "First, like Brer Rabbit would do, I send them running in the wrong direction."

"Oonah don't look much like no Brer Rabbit to me."

"Think about how the rollers caught every runaway you've seen them drag back here."

"I don't have to think too far – jes to my own family."

"I know. And you were a little tyke. But think about it. Your family, and most of the others, did something the rollers expected you to do. All of you's took off through the woods goin' north or west. The rollers got on your trail with their dawgs. None of you's had any help. There was no place to rest, no any food to be had along the way. Once dem dawgs and rollers on dey hosses had the trail, it was only a matter of time 'fore dey caught you's."

"Okay. Oonah right. So what oonah get by runnin' to the Jehossee Plantation? It ain't but three miles away."

"De thing is, Jehossee is south of here. De rollers expect us to go north or west toward Beaufort. Second, I'll go by canoe after walkin' west to the canal that runs to the Ashpoo River. Third, I doubles back over de same ground draggin' brush. De dawgs won't know if I was goin' or comin'. Dawgs only know a scent trail. When dey git to the canal, dey'll take the dawgs up and down tryin' to find where I woulda come outta de water. Meanwhile, fourth, I'm in a canoe on another canal goin' south to Jehossee. What I get is a place to lay low 'til they stop lookin' and think I drowned or somethin'. Can't let nobody else in on the plan. Even the rollers and overseers can't make a body tell what he don't know." He thought, *including Bianca*.

"Whoa! Man, that's a great idea. They'd neber look for oonah dere. Oonah *is loco* – like Brer Rabbit!"

"When I get to be seventeen, I might be as smart as oonah and Della."

"Now don't be puttin' me in with dis dusty ol' mule jes 'cause we the same age. I got another idea for you – since you got me thinkin' like Brer Rabbit."

"So what's that, Brer Caleb?"

"Go with the ebb tide down the overflow canal past Liberty Square and into the Pon Pon. That way, oonah won't have to start so early and use all your strength gettin' there. Oonah can git seen by the overseers far past fus dak jes by bein' round and 'bout as usual. By the time oonah put in at Jehossee, it'll still be a long while before fus call. Ebb tide two nights from now is an hour or two past midnight. That will give oonah time to leave a canoe near the overflow canal."

"Okay. When it is time for me to run from Jehossee, I'll go at ebb tide in the night. Dat time I'll have much further to go."

Suddenly puzzled, Caleb asked, "Somethin' ain't right 'bout this. Where oonah thinkin' 'bout puttin' in at?"

"I think Port Royal Island. Dat's where Luke said the Yankees camped."

"Yeah, but that's not what's botherin' me. Oonah got to put in somewhere and rest. I 'member goin' down the Pon Pon to fish in the sound with Uncle Jacob a few years back and we stopped somewhere."

"I've been down there too. Everybody fished the sound back 'fore de war."

"Yeah, now Massa Tiffany and Massa Aiken 'fraid dem Yankees will snatch us." Caleb laughed softly, but Isaac only smiled. Caleb frowned, perplexed again, and continued, "No, there's some danger in this plan and it ain't the rollers. Your plan has 'em foxed."

"Well, what then, Brer Fox?"

"I can't get my hand on it. Maybe it'll hit me after we leave the gate. I don't want Big Gus to hear."

The massive black wrought iron main gate at Tiffany Plantation hung from gate posts made of brick. The posts were part of a brick wall. Isaac could not ever remember seeing the gates closed. A guard house made of brick was built into the west wall, but was used only when the Tiffanys held a large social event. It was then manned by servants and liverymen dressed like butlers in uniforms topped by

fine coats with tails and shiny buttons. The guard house was almost completely covered by green moss.

When William James Tiffany built this grand entrance, it was the talk of Colleton and Charleston Districts. Over the years, the elite of the South Carolina low country, visitors from Washington and Europe, and several governors regularly attended winter socials at the plantation. The walls were eight feet tall at the posts and sloped to four feet where they joined the whitewashed rail fences that ran beside the orchards. The walls, guard house, and gates were just south of the bridge over the front canal. Isaac thought this canal was a useless decoration, for it did not provide water for the rice fields like the maze of canals on the rest of Tiffany.

Big Gus was finishing his measurements early. As he put away his tools, he smiled and called to them, "When I saw the likes of oonah comin', I said, 'here comes trouble.'"

"Aw now, Mister Gus. Are we all that bad?" Isaac asked with a big grin. His grin suddenly faded. He was confused about the strange feeling he had each time he smiled while in the presence of his mother or Caleb or Big Gus. He thought he would feel sad every minute for a very long time after his pa was buried. He pushed the feeling aside and tried to smile.

Big Gus had started a chuckle and Caleb was laughing, but before anyone could say another word, they heard the thunder of distant hoofbeats and the sharp rattle of an empty buckboard moving rapidly toward them. They turned and saw two fine black horses in full gallop on the road from Jacksonboro. It was not a runaway. The driver was not trying to slow his charges, he was urging them onward. He was yelling and snapping his lines. The white foam from the mouths of both horses contrasted with their black coats, glossy with sweat.

Big Gus said, "Why, that's Luke. He's runnin' that rig like he's got a bee in his bonnet. Com'on boys, give'im room." Big Gus took his bay by the halter and led him and his two-wheeled work cart away from the gate. Isaac moved Della and the canoe aside.

Now they could hear Luke yelling to them, "Make way! Make way!"

Isaac thought Luke might not clear the turn just before the bridge. Isaac watched with widening eyes as Luke hit it without slowing. Luke and the horses leaned in unison into the turn. The buckboard's rear wheels skidded, throwing dirt up from the road. Luke's hat was bouncing on his shoulders in the breeze, pulling the cord taut that held it around his neck. Sweat glistened on his forehead. The rear of the little buckboard snapped back into line behind the horses and clattered across the wooden bridge over the canal and through the gate. Luke, the horses, and the rig soon disappeared down the avenue toward the big house in a cloud of dust.

Isaac looked wistfully down the avenue and said, "I wish I could drive like dat Mister Luke."

Caleb said, "I wouldn't drive *dat* fast 'less somethin' was powerful wrong."

"Well, boys, Luke only drives like that when he has news from Massa Tiffany."

Isaac and Caleb gave Foster's message to Big Gus while untying the canoe and securing Della's lines to the tailgate of Big Gus's cart for the trip back to the stable. They walked and half slid down the bank to the water beside the bridge. They took the oars out and were quickly under way toward Liberty Square. The decorative canal, adorned with ivy and white roses, took them past the cornfields that helped feed Tiffany's people, livestock, and, of late, Confederate troops in Charleston and Colleton Districts. They rowed steadily without talking and were soon making the turn into the overflow canal that held reserve water for Liberty and Independence squares and adjacent rice fields on the west bank of the Pon Pon River. Isaac imagined he saw his pa standing beside the canal waving to him.

They were quiet for a time. Isaac's mind drifted back to Bianca's embrace. Now he wanted to stay and see what might develop with her, not run. But he still wanted to join the Yankee army.

Suddenly, Caleb remembered what had bothered him about Isaac's runaway plan, "Hey, Isaac, I got it!"

Reluctantly, Isaac left the secret place in his mind. "Got what?"

"Listen to me. Dat thing that bothered me about your plan is dis: Leaving Jehossee on an ebb tide with miles to row – by yo'self –

across the mouths of both the Combahee and Bull rivers, you'd be very tired. By the time you reach the Coosaw River, the tide would be goin' out again. You'd have to row up the Coosaw *against* the current *and* the tide to Port Royal Island. You could be swept out tuh sea!"

Isaac sat up straight and stared at Caleb for a long moment. "Well I do declare. Oonah sounding more and more like ol' Brer Fox everyday. Look out Brer Rabbit! So, what should I do, Brer Fox?"

Caleb motioned for Isaac to stop talking. He continued his instructions. "Leave Jehossee two hours *before* tuh end of ebb tide. Go down the Pon Pon and drag yo' canoe over the shortcut through the narrow neck over tuh the Ashepoo and continue into the sound. By the time oonah git there, the tide will start comin' in again. Oonah will be able tuh cross the mouths of the Combahee and the Bull wid ease. Oonah should reach Port Royal Island by the next ebb tide."

"Whoa. Thanks. And I thought I had it all planned. My pa allus said, 'two heads better'n one any day'. Oonah a big help."

"If you ask me, I say, don't go. Dis still a dangerous plan."

Isaac reflected on those dangers. He concluded he would be safer with Bianca. His eyes narrowed and he pumped a fist into his palm. "I'm goin'! Mister Lincoln needs me."

Caleb raised an eyebrow and sighed. "Well, okay. I'll fetch the tide times from Uncle Jacob."

"Thanks, Brer Fox."

"Oonah welcome, Brer Rabbit."

Chapter 2: Bianca and the Ball

Bianca smiled and waved. Luke called out, “G’ mornin’!”

The horn for second call sounded. Isaac and Big Gus yelled their greetings and waved from the doorway of the smithy. She heard Big Gus’s booming voice above Isaac’s. “And a mighty good Thursday mornin’ to y’all!” In the distance, Bianca saw work crews, armed with hoes, on their way to the provisioning fields.

Luke’s fine black duo pulled his buckboard at a smart canter. Besides Bianca, his cargo included two wooden hoop barrels of catfish, still swimming in their home waters from the Pon Pon River, and a burlap bag of rice. Luke and his sons had caught the catfish the previous afternoon and left the barrels mounted on the buckboard overnight in the corral. Now, with Bianca in tow, Luke was well on his way to fulfilling instructions sent the day before by Mrs. Margaret Tinsley Tiffany from the family’s Charleston townhouse.

Bianca’s mind drifted. She could still picture Isaac as a young boy playing marbles or baseball with his friends. That memory competed with reliving his firm embrace from a few nights before. Bianca smiled at the realization that Isaac was a small boy, spending his days at the little children’s house, when she had her first menses. Remembering the small boy and now the boy-man were the two thoughts at the top of her mind when she spoke to Luke as they drove through the front gate. “You know, Mister Luke, I was born on Tiffany Plantation. This is only the second time I’ve been off the plantation. I don’t think Andrew could imagine that someday I would ride away in a buckboard.”

“Now, gal, looka heah. I hope oonah ain’t thinkin’ on runnin’ again heah t’day.” Luke’s frowning face showed he was serious.

“Oh, no suh, Mister Luke! I wouldn’t do dat and git oonah in trouble. Besides, I want to see Charleston, do dis work for Missus Aiken, and git on back home.”

Luke let out a sigh. “Well, okay. Den in dat case, I drives oonah a ‘round ‘bout way in the city for a look ‘fore we reach the townhouse.”

Bianca clasped her hands together. "Oh, thank you, Mister Luke! Dat will be wonderful! How old is Isaac?"

"Huh? I no yeddy."

"How old is Isaac?"

"Oh, dis year he be sixteen summers."

"Will oonah stay in Charleston until after the big Saturday night ball?"

"Yeah, I stay to run and fetch stuff. Den, Missus says I take oonah back to Tiffany de day atter de ball."

Bianca smiled as she reflected on how cleverly she had dropped her question about Isaac in the middle of a different conversational topic. She continued. "What do oonah think dey really want me to do?"

"Oh, chile, I don't know. My guess is dey want oonah to do more'n chop food and hep in de kitchen."

Bianca was puzzled. "Like what?"

"Oonah a comely lass. I guess oonah be servin' 'mongest the guests at de ball. Dat give the Tiffany family som' braggin' rights. Dem and the Aikens allus tryin' som' clever way to outdo one another." Luke added a small knowing laugh.

"Well, thanks, Mister Luke. But that can't be the reason Missus sent for me. Why, oonah said yesterday that an Aiken servant just gave birth and I'm to replace her."

"Yeah, dat be Dorcas. And Missus latched on dat chance to slip you in wid an offer o' catfish and rice to show off Tiffany hepin' out the Aiken family. O'course when oonah gets right down to it, the Aikens don't need no hep from nobody. But dat way Missus Margaret can show guests how close friends she be to Missus Harriet. Oh, I kin heah it now." Luke laughed and raised his voice into a falsetto. "In front o' dey friends, Missus Margaret say, 'Chile, you know dat cute little negress in the tasteful uniform over dere was trained at Tiffany.' Den Missus Harriet say, 'Oh, isn't she marvelous! And she so clever and moves wid sich grace.'"

Bianca doubled over laughing at Luke's imitation. Luke laughed and slapped his knee. The horse on the left flinched.

"Who is Missus Harriet?"

“Oh, dat be Gobernor Aiken’s wife.”

“How is Gobernor Aiken de governor when all ‘e do is sell de rice his Africans grow?”

“Chile, ‘e ain’t de governor no mo’. He was governor back in de middle ‘40s when oonah was a babe.”

“Well, how cum peoples still callin’im ‘governor?”

“Ni, I don’t know dat but dey do – even atter he served in de Congress o’ de New Nited States in de ‘50s.”

* * *

At Jacksonboro, they turned east on the Charleston-Savannah road. Within a mile, they crossed the Pon Pon River. Luke turned to Bianca. She inhaled. Bianca was sure she saw a twinkle in his eye, but was completely unprepared for what came next.

Luke smiled and pushed up the brim of his straw hat, exposing his salt and pepper hair. “Bianca, I think Isaac would be a right nice catch for oonah. And he’ll hab a trade too. Oonah know his pa wuz ma frien’. I’m sure, Isaac will make fine man too, jes lak ‘e pa. Ni y’all’s ages ain’t gonna matter much in a few years. Oonah might not do better’n him.”

Bianca’s jaw dropped. Now she realized that Luke had seen through her attempt to hide her interest in Isaac. She could think of nothing to say and she stared at Luke, unaware that her mouth was open.

* * *

Three horsemen urged their mounts up the steep slope from the ditch beside Bee’s Ferry Road. Water dripped from the lips of their horses. Once on the road, the men used their horses to block the way. Bianca cast an apprehensive glance at Luke, who looked unperturbed. One horseman pulled a Colt .44 revolver from his belt. Bianca felt foreboding enveloping her. Luke eased back on the reins and his black duo slowed.

The tall man made the first move. He held up his hand and signaled Luke to stop his rig. His long hair was the color of wheat straw. A curving scar extended from his left ear nearly to his

unshaven chin. He and his comrades sat their horses, evenly spaced across the road. They wore butternut colored trousers like many Confederate soldiers, but their shirts were of various colors. Bianca heard her heart thump loudly and rapidly. She glanced again at Luke and was amazed at his apparent calm.

The scar-faced man nudged his horse's sides with the heels of his boots. The large brown animal snorted and moved forward, then danced sideways as Luke brought his team to a stop.

The scar-faced man spoke. "Boy, whar you steal dem fine hosses?"

"G'monin', suh. Dese hosses b'longs to Massa John Tiffany. Dey a lil' skittish, but dey good hosses."

Bianca was relieved when the scar-faced man's eyes betrayed an instant glint of recognition at the mention of the Tiffany name. Still, she fidgeted with her interlaced fingers on her lap.

The leader waved his revolver toward the rear of the buckboard. "Well, you don't say. Mister Tiffany's rig, eh? How do I know you ain't haulin' a couple o' deserters in dem barrels?"

"Oh, no suh. Massa Tiffany won't 'llow nothin' lak dat. We's hauling fish."

"Keep'em covered, boys." The scar-faced man put away his revolver. "Nigger, lemme see yo' pass."

"Yessuh." Luke stood and reached slowly into his pocket, retrieved a pass, and handed it over. The scar-faced man glanced at the upside-down pass and rode to the back of the buckboard and lifted and reclosed the lid on one of the barrels.

"Boy, you seen any deserters 'long yo' way?"

"Oh, no suh."

"Say, dese hosses a lil' skittish, huh? Well, fellows, whata ya say we have a lil' fun for our trouble?"

Bianca pressed her lips together and held her breath.

One horseman grinned and put away his rifle. "Yeah, boss. Good idée." He and his comrade cleared the road as the scar-faced man raised his whip to strike Luke's horses.

"Er, suh. Please, suh, please don't...."

"Shutdap, nigger!"

He brought the whip down hard on the romp of the left horse in Luke's team. The startled animal reared and alarmed its set horse.

Luke yelled to Bianca. "Hold de seat wid one hand in front and de otter in back!"

Laughter from the three Confederate conscript hunters was ringing in her ears as she grabbed the buckboard seat and held on for dear life. Luke's team surged forward, and after three steps was in full gallop. Bianca heard a gunshot behind her. The two horses went even faster. With terror in her eyes, Bianca turned to Luke. "C-c-can you stop them?"

Luke looked over his shoulder. When he saw that they were not being chased, a smug smile crept across his face. Luke held the reins, but with slack. Then, to Bianca's complete surprise, Luke laughed. Bianca said nothing. She knew she could not be heard above the rattle of the buckboard moving so fast over the rutted dirt road. Luke spoke soothingly to his charges. He did not pull back on the reins, but moved them on the horses' backs like a gentle rub. Soon they dropped from a gallop to a canter. When the horses returned to their normal gait, Bianca felt exhausted. Slowly, she released her grip on the seat and relaxed her shoulders.

Bewildered, she asked, "What was so funny?"

"Dem 'script hunters neber know me and dese hosses regular run faster dan most any rig in dese parts." Apparently delighted with himself, Luke laughed again.

Hands akimbo, Bianca drew up her shoulders and smiled. "Oh no not the briar patch!"

They both doubled over laughing loud and long.

Bianca took a deep breath. She fanned herself with one hand. "Well, de whole matter nearly made me faint."

After a pause, she asked, "What about de pass? Dat bad man never gave it back. Is dere goin' to be trouble gettin' into Charleston?"

"Naw. I got me two mo' passes in my pocket. Massa and Mister Foster allus give me three since dis done happen b'fore."

Bianca sat shaking her head.

* * *

It was late morning when they arrived at Bee's Ferry. Luke showed his pass and paid the ferry operator. Standing aboard the ferry, Bianca stared at the river's brown water. It reminded her that she felt grimy from the dust kicked up by the galloping horses. It was a warm day and she had begun to perspire. The road dust clung to her exposed skin – her face and neck. She used her gloved hands to brush at her long-sleeved dress. She wished for some cool river water to dab away the grime.

After the crossing, she turned and found Luke checking the wheels and axles of the buckboard.

"Say, Mister Luke, what ribber is dis?"

"Why, dis be de Ashley. By the by, I need oonah to keep 'e ears open at dat ball."

Bianca's fear returned. "M-m-me? What oonah think I can find out?"

"I don't know 'xactly. But try to stay near de tree main mens. Dat be Gobernator Aiken, Massa Tiffany, and Gen'l Beauregard."

She had no idea how she could do what Luke suggested. "What do I listen fuh?"

"Member anything dey say 'bout de war."

Bianca smiled at the prospect of conspiring with Luke to spy. "Well, maybe I can do dis. B-b-but, I don't know.... What we do wid what I hear?"

"Dis week, me and Isaac met a cull'rd Yankee sergeant. De sergeant say he know dat famous Missus Harriet Tubman at Port Royal. I figure some way to git word o' what oonah heah to'em."

At the mention of Isaac's name, Bianca blushed. Her fear dissipated and her countenance brightened. Having no need to hear anything further, she blurted, "O'course, I'll listen for oonah and report all I heah."

"Ni dat's mighty fine. You best be careful, though, and not be caught eavesdroppin'."

"Yessuh, Mister Luke."

* * *

Luke detoured through several streets on his way to the Battery at the southern tip of the Charleston peninsula, pointing out along the way the homes, or former homes, of freed blacks of note. The first were the educators, Thomas S. Bonneau and his student, and later a famous educator himself, Daniel A. Payne. Luke spoke with admiration about men he called spiritual leaders, like Morris Brown and Richard Holloway, Jr. He mentioned Jacob Weston as an example of a free man of color who was a successful businessman. He said nothing about what enslaved blacks had to say about these men.

Driving north on Meeting Street from the Battery, they left behind the Friday afternoon hustle and bustle of downtown Charleston. As they approached the Manigault house on the east side of the street, Bianca pointed. "Dat is a beautiful hotel!"

Luke chuckled. "Dat house be de home of de Manigaults."

Bianca looked again at the house and shook her head in disbelief. "Oonah sho'?"

"Sho' 'nough."

As they passed, Bianca turned about in her seat for a better look at the rear of the Manigault house. Luke turned east on John Street and north again on Elizabeth. After a short distance, Luke stopped his rig and pointed out Wragg Square Park on his left and the Aiken mansion ahead on their right. At her first sight of the Aiken's three-story brick double house, Bianca gasped and held her hands, one over the other, against her collarbone. "Oonah mean dis huge house is jes fuh one lil' family – Gobernor Aiken, Missus Harriet, and one daughter?" She marveled at how the house sat high above the ground over a cellar with half windows and large wraparound piazzas on two sides at the first and second levels. The white columns and rail spindles of the piazzas gleamed in the bright sunlight, contrasting with the brick of the house and the greenery of the front garden and trees.

"Yeah. Jes dem three. And, a few years 'fore de war started, dey added another room biggen my house in de back to show off all de stuff dey done brung back from Europe." They sat for a moment comparing the Aiken and Manigault urban mansions, first to the

more modest Tiffany townhouse she saw a few minutes earlier and finally to the small cabins built for their families and friends at Tiffany Plantation. Bianca continued shaking her head as they drove past the main entrance of the Aiken house on Elizabeth Street. She thought the Tiffany's big house on the plantation was grand, but the urban homes of the Aikens, Manigaults, and others now caused her to feel bewildered and think, how can dese families become *dat* rich?

Luke turned east on Mary Street and stopped at two tall wooden gates mounted on taller brick columns. He pulled a chain that rang a bell in the livery. The livery building was a part of the outer wall on the Elizabeth Street side of the Aiken's urban plantation where its first level served as quarters for horses and coaches. In the upper level, coachmen and drivers lived in small dormitory rooms facing the garden and courtyard that were accessed by a narrow wooden spiral staircase. On one side of the second level, hay was stored for horses, which was dropped through chutes into feeding troughs below.

The gates opened and they were greeted by a coachman named Charles Jackson. Bianca saw before her a short avenue, brick paved between the kitchen house and the mansion and flanked by five magnificent magnolias with brilliant white blossoms. Brown-red chickens and white hens scratched about and pecked in the dirt of the courtyard. Between the magnolias and the Elizabeth Street wall stood two cows eating hay in a small brick shed. On the opposite wall were a brick chicken coop and a small spice and vegetable garden. Ahead on the left was a two-story masonry kitchen house. The kitchen was on the first level in the end closest to the main house, with a laundry sharing the remaining space. The Aiken's domestic enslaved families occupied the second level, living in one-room apartments, each equipped with a fireplace.

Standing at the livery, Bianca asked, "What are those rooms in the back corners of the wall?"

Charles and Luke laughed. Charles pointed to one. "Guess oonah neber seed a brick outhouse b'fore. Dat un be fuh men. De otter fuh 'oman."

Bianca flushed, though neither man could see. “Is there one for de Aikens?”

Both men guffawed. When Charles recovered enough to speak, he explained. “No, gal. De Massa’s family use chamber pots set inside fine m’hogany chairs dat hab a hole in de seat jes lak de outhouse.”

“Oh.”

* * *

Washed and refreshed on Friday morning, Bianca stood beside a long preparation table in the kitchen wearing a crisply starched servant’s dress. The cook was telling Bianca what she needed her to do as the stand-in chop chef when Ann, the head maid, entered from the courtyard in a huff. Bianca and the cook stopped talking and waited while Ann took a couple of deep breaths, her breasts heaving. The scowl on Ann’s middle-aged face made Bianca feel apprehensive. With her arms firmly folded, the older woman looked Bianca up and down as she had done when they first met.

Ann let her hands slip akimbo. Bianca felt Ann’s piercing eyes as she commanded, “Hold your arms up and turn about – slowly.”

Bianca hesitated, but did as she was told. To prevent Ann from seeing her hands tremble, Bianca squeezed her extended fingers together until no light shone between them. With her back to Ann, Bianca became aware that her forehead and buttocks felt warm, accompanied by a new flutter in her stomach. When she faced Ann’s stare again, she wished she could change her figure to fill a dress as wide as Ann’s.

Ann turned to the cook. “Well, there goes your chop chef. Missus wants to show off our new little ‘miss gal’ serving at the ball tomorrow night. What me and you decided don’t mean a thing.”

The cook shrugged and ambled toward the red brick and iron range built into the chimney at the corner of the kitchen. “Nothing we ever call ourselves ‘cidin’ never did, or ever will, matter. You know dat.” She cast a look over her shoulder at Ann. “Futhermo’, dis chile ain’t name no ‘miss gal.’ I’ma call her Bianca, lak I s’pose her ma does.”

Bianca turned toward the cook, but kept her place. She had the urge to run and hug the short plump cook. At once, the flutter in her stomach was gone. She took a deep breath. Bianca watched Ann drop her head and tap her foot several times. Ann gave a sigh and returned her hands akimbo. "All right, *Miss Bianca*. Let's git you ready. Before we go look the house over, here are a few rules you mus' neber violate in the Aiken household."

Bianca let her hands fall to the front of her dress and locked her fingers together. "Yessum."

"First, make yo' self invisible. Be there, but neber so much that Massa, his family, or his guests notice you're there. Be jes lak dem plants in dere."

"Yessum."

"Next, neber met the eyes of the men – especially the younguns. And, for Gawd's sake, if something drops, don't bend over; crouch down to pick it up, swayin' yo' knees to one side."

Bianca flushed and felt like a steak – medium rare. "Yessum."

Ann did not pause. "When dey see a body like your'n, some o'dem will drap somethin' jes to see you bend over and give'em a better look at yo' tits. And who knows whether dey might act later on notions dey take up while dey looking at yo' butt."

Bianca felt much warmer. She squirmed and put one foot on the other. She saw the cook cast a look, covered by a furrowed brow, at Ann. But Ann ignored the cook and continued her instructions.

* * *

From her position in the first parlor by the door to the piazza, Bianca watched guests arriving at the top of the marble stairs from the grand entrance on the Elizabeth Street side of the house. The butler announced the arrival of each guest. Every family name Luke had mentioned during their tour of the city and more were announced, some several times, including Alston, Ball, DeSaussure, Drayton, Grimball, Heyward, Huger, Jenkins, Laurens, Manigault, Middleton, Pringle, Ravenel, Rutledge, Tiffany, and Vanderhorst. There was a stir among the guests when applause erupted upon the arrival of General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, the hero of the

Battle of Bull Run, who had, five weeks prior, successfully defeated a Union attempt to capture Charleston.

Bianca was surprised by the youthful appearance of General Beauregard, splendid in a perfectly tailored gray tunic festooned with eighteen brass buttons arranged in two columns and a high priest-like collar bearing the stars of his rank. She smiled as she thought, *it won't be difficult to find him again.*

* * *

On a signal from Henrietta, the Aikens' daughter, the orchestra struck Robert Alexander Schumann's Piano Quintet in E flat major. A hush fell in the first parlor and all eyes followed Henrietta to the stairs from the living quarters on the third floor. Slowly descending the stair was her mother, Harriet. The assembled guests gasped, then applauded. Harriet wore a serene smile as she fairly floated from the stairs into the parlor. Diamonds on the front of her blue brocade gown were attached to silver threads woven into its fabric. Harriet's dress left her shoulders bare and was form-fitting down to her knees, so that it flattered her almost perfect figure. Below her knees were black mesh-covered slits on each side and a pleated train that trailed behind her. Light from twenty-four candles in the ornate candelabra suspended from the sixteen-foot ceiling was reflected in all directions by Harriet's diamonds. Gilded floor-to-ceiling mirrors flanking the ten-foot wide passage between the double parlors accented the effect by multiplying the light. Dark-haired Heart, as close relatives and friends called Harriet, moved through the adoring throng like a queen.

Bianca watched Heart's triumphant entry in silent awe from her perch beside a plant on the front wall almost as tall as she. "Dese folk are richer dan I thought. How dey git so much when most peoples haves so lil'?"

* * *

Circling the main party areas thrice meant Bianca served and looked after drinks of guests in the two large adjoining parlors, the first-level piazza, dining room, and library. The dining room table

had been extended to a length of more than twenty feet and covered with white linen. For the two hundred twenty guests, the table bore five hams, six turkeys, thirty ducks, grilled catfish, twelve quarts of shrimp, trays of deviled eggs, piles of fruit, bonbons, pies, and numerous cakes. There was no chicken in sight.

Bianca passed young women in long colorful dresses gossiping about the goings-on at the French School for Young Ladies while they stayed in range of hearing range of the young men in gray officers' uniforms. The older women were talking about their daughters and how bright their favorite maids and butlers were. They also discussed their membership status in the exclusive St. Cecilia Society for the benefit of anyone within earshot. The young men talked of war, the execution of a deserter by firing squad earlier in the week at Washington Race Course, and whispered about which pretty young thing would make a good lay.

On her third pass, Bianca saw that the same older men were still talking to Governor Aiken in the dining room. She supposed Luke would want to know what was said since the group included General Beauregard, John Tiffany, and Charles Manigault. She noted their drinks and the level in each glass and restocked her serving tray accordingly with identical glasses. She stood between the men and the silver service in the front corner of the room. Her chance to demonstrate why she should serve in this space came when Governor Aiken's cigar ashes were ripe to fall. She grabbed a small bowl. Bianca crouched down and darted forth. An instant later, she was by his side holding the bowl under his cigar. He appeared momentarily startled, then smiled through his white beard, dusted his cigar, and continued talking. Bianca listened to the men gathered around the governor as she discreetly swapped glass after glass for a fresh one half-full.

General Beauregard raised his chin and took a long drag on his cigar. "Governor, I still believe pragmatic minds in Ohio could be persuaded to come to our side."

Governor Aiken looked pensive and pulled at his long beard.

Charles Manigault raised his glass toward General Beauregard. "Gen'l, pragmatism has its place. But, for your plan to work, it seems

to me we need people in power in Ohio who are the opposite of the likes of Salmon Chase and that fella, Dennison, who replaced him.”

Bianca almost lost her concentration on making herself inconspicuous when she heard John Tiffany’s voice. “William, weren’t you and Chase in Congress at the same time?”

Governor Aiken released his beard. “Yes, John. I knew Salmon Chase quite well before he became governor. He and his lovely bride attended several of our socials in Washington. And further, my assessment is that it would take strong political action in favor of the Confederacy to get Ohio to secede. I agree with Charles. You know, of course, Chase and Dennison are now in Lincoln’s cabinet. Both are vehement abolitionists. This current governor up there is less so against our cause, but, mark my words, David Tod is no friend of the Confederacy.”

Tiffany stirred his drink with a finger. “Gen’l, I suppose you have the same strategy in mind for bringing Indiana and Missouri to our side. Is that right?”

General Beauregard cleared his throat. “The plan would be essentially the same. But, remember, successful military action can make changes in today’s political reality. Again, we will need to convince President Davis to, first, strengthen our western army. Second, we can then force Grant to reduce his forces surrounding Vicksburg to counter our moves into western Tennessee. Third, we destroy Grant’s army and hold the Mississippi River. That success practically closes Union trade on the Ohio and Missouri Rivers; plus, it re-opens Texas and Arkansas for us. Then, and only then, are we prepared to persuade these states to come to our side.”

Governor Aiken slowly shook his head, like he was in deep thought. “And where do we get the tens of thousands of soldiers needed to create a western army large enough to draw or drive Grant away from Vicksburg?”

“We must convince Davis to take them from the Army of the Potomac.”

With a look of disdain on his face, Manigault raised both hands, almost spilling his drink. Bianca started to move, but Manigault turned a palm toward her. “Who do you think can convince Davis to

take troops from Lee? Forget the political pragmatism that would follow your suggested military action. Let me tell you, no soldiers, then, no large western army. Therefore, there will be no defeat of Grant. We're back to where we started. Ohio and the rest remain in the Union."

The debate went on for almost another hour with no resolution. Dancing began. The group broke up when Margret Tiffany appeared and put a hand on John's arm. John patted her gloved hand. "My dear, may I have this dance?"

Bianca was sad. She believed General Beauregard could carry out his plan. After all, he had dealt the Union significant defeats over the past two years. If the Confederacy could force the Union to give up the fight....

Her thought was interrupted by a bright flash of blue-white light followed immediately by crashing thunder. Her mood turned as dark as the weather. Heavy rain fell for the rest of the night.

Chapter 3: Rachel

“Gal, I don’t wanna hear no mo’ ‘bout no damned snakes. You let the monkey git one o’ these plow hands and I’ll tan yore hide. Now you git on down to that spring and fetch some water up here by the time I git back from the house or else!” Griffin Bender was shaking the rolled whip in his hand at Rachel as he sat his horse in the freshly plowed field.

Rachel moved her eyes from her toes to Bender’s toes. “Yessuh.”

She loaded her yoke onto her shoulders with a wooden bucket dangling from each end. Rachel hurried over the uneven ground with her buckets swinging to and fro. Her braids hanging beneath her bonnet bounced on her shoulders. She knew Bender would make good on his promise to beat her – or have Wash do it. Rachel had disliked Bender the first time she saw him at the auction the year before. She disliked him even more today. Bender had been mustered out of the Confederate army because he was too old. He and his valet, Wash, were passing through Raleigh, the county seat of Smith County, Mississippi, when Bender stopped and bought Rachel, her sister, Rebecca, her father, John, Miss Mabel, a mule, and a wagon. Bender had John drive his daughters and Miss Mabel in the wagon and follow him east to his plantation, just west of Montrose in Jasper County.

The five-foot one-hundred-pound Rachel struggled. Her shoulders ached from carrying the yoke and buckets of water all day. Rachel imagined painting scenes to avoid the boredom of her mindless work. Her imaginary paintings made her dark brown face smile and her dimples show. Some of the paintings in her mind were detailed enough to show the vivid textures and patterns of the bark on trees.

Approaching the spring, Rachel was startled by the call of a bobwhite. The bird was under a plum bush between the big cottonwood trees that stood about ten paces from the creek. Somewhere in the distance, more softly, another bobwhite called. One by one, Rachel released the two buckets from her yoke and gently set them on the ground, hoping not to disturb the bird. She had

never been so close to a bobwhite. She wanted to hear it make its call again while she was nearby. She took a deep breath as she let her wooden yoke slide from her shoulders to the ground without a sound. Rachel surveyed the spring and the clear water flowing from it at the head of the small nameless creek. The timber rattlesnake she saw more than an hour ago on her last visit to the spring was nowhere to be found. She was afraid the viper would bite her bare feet. The bobwhite under the plum bush called again. Except for the call of the bobwhites, chirping of wrens, and the sound of water spilling over the stones surrounding the spring, all was quiet.

Rachel glanced up toward the big house; no one was stirring – especially Bender. She decided to take a minute and enjoy a look at the bright green leaves on the thin line of cottonwood and poplar trees that were left along both banks of the creek when the fields of the six-hundred acre Bender Plantation were cleared for crops. It was late afternoon and the midday breeze had stopped. The small puffy white clouds overhead hung motionless in the bright blue sky. Leaves on the trees around her were not yet full size and their youthful green was her favorite color. She picked a black-eyed susan and stuck it in her bonnet. Her brown eyes followed the tree line to the west, toward Otak Creek. She thought of Otak Creek as a river and always wondered why it was called a creek.

From where Rachel stood, the furrows curved around the rolling hills where her father was plowing. At her vantage point, John and his two-mule team were walking on the horizon. The land sloped gently down toward Otak Creek, which was beyond a marsh – hidden behind a grove of trees. High over the marsh, a lone vulture tipped its wings and made a wide, graceful turn toward her. She thought this would be a great scene to capture on canvas if she could paint as well as Isabelle Taylor painted. She would have to remember the scent of freshly plowed soil and the sound of the birds that went with the scene.

Only Rebecca and John knew Rachel's secret, one that had to be kept as long as they labored at the Bender Plantation. It was illegal for enslaved people to be taught to read and write in Mississippi. In their youth, Isabelle Taylor and Rachel had broken that taboo when

the two little girls played school together in the shade of a sprawling oak in front of the big house. The consummate teacher, young Isabelle had also let Rachel use her art supplies in their outdoor school.

Budding wildflowers and singing birds reminded Rachel of springs past when, as a little girl, she would follow her mother to the fields. She recalled that her mother never seemed to tire of answering her questions about the names of wildflowers, grasses, herbs, and trees they passed.

“Ma, where are you?” Rachel asked aloud and began dipping water from the spring with a green and yellow gourd to fill her buckets. She had asked the same question hundreds of times since the spring of ‘58. Now, five years later at age sixteen, she could still clearly picture the Taylor Plantation in Smith County on the Leaf River Valley where she last saw Edna, her mother.

* * *

In 1858, the planting of cotton seeds at Taylor Plantation had begun in April on the first day the sign was in the foot. That was the day the speculator came to the Taylor Plantation. He had arrived with a ragtag shuffle of slaves chained together by the neck – three women, seven men, and two boys about Rachel’s age at the time. The men’s hands were chained, but the hands of the women and boys were not. They all wore a crude iron collar with two loops, one in front and one in back, for the purpose of attaching the chains of two other slaves. A chain about four feet long connected each person’s collar to the next person. The first woman in the shuffle walked behind the speculator’s wagon. Everyone else followed in a line behind her.

The speculator, Bernard Moss, was a burly man, almost six feet tall. His blond and gray hair stuck out from under his derby. Every day, he wore a black suit with his pant legs tucked in the top of his black boots, and carried a pipe that always hung from the right corner of his mouth – sometimes lit, most times not. Rachel thought Moss looked like the Taylors’ undertaker.

Moss had his charges set up camp under the white oak trees next to the plantation cemetery. The camp was little more than a place to have a fire at night and morning to cook the three small chunks of salty bacon and half-dozen sweet potatoes he gave them from a locked box in the wagon twice a day. This was divided among twelve people. They slept close together in a circle of uncovered bodies around the fire each night trying to keep warm against the chill of the April night air. Moss slept in the Taylor's guest cottage.

On the Saturday afternoon Moss and his shuffle arrived, Rachel was cutting chunks of lye soap, made the previous fall, into bars on an old weather-beaten table in the yard just outside the back window of their cabin, when she overheard Miss Mabel through the window. The shutters on the glassless window were open to let in light and fresh air. Miss Mabel, who worked in the kitchen at the big house, told her mother, "Since old Marster Taylor passed on, the bank done sent mail askin' Missus Lillian to pay up their debts. I heard her myself say to lil' Miss Isabelle that young Marster George sent that speculator, Mister Moss, here."

Rachel's mother asked, "Do you 'spects Missus Lillian might auctions off some of us?"

Miss Mabel took a deep breath and let go with a long sigh before she said, "Edna, I's mighty 'fraid that's zackly what gone happen."

Edna gasped. When Rachel heard her mother gasp, she suddenly felt a cold shiver, though it was a warm spring day. Edna lowered her voice to a loud whisper, "Lawd, Mabel, you don't mean to tell me, I could lose my John or my babies?"

"Could be me, or you, or anybody. That young Marster George is pushin' Missus Lillian, tellin' her and Miss Isabelle that sellin' some of us is the only way to keep the place."

Rachel could not bear to hear more. She ran to the spot she always went when she was troubled. Rachel could not discuss this new trouble with her mother. Edna would want to know why she was eavesdropping on grownups' talk. Rachel sat at the base of her favorite tree, a giant walnut with limbs as large as a good size tree. The huge lower branches reminded her of massive arms, arms she imagined that could sweep her up and protect her. Here, Rachel sat as

the afternoon shadows turned slowly into dusk, pondering the incomprehensible thought of being sold and separated from everyone on the plantation where she had lived all her life. She started for home thinking, Missus Lillian just can't sell anyone away. It just wouldn't be right. How could any of us get along without each other?

It was first dark on that Saturday, the third day of Moss's visit, with just barely any light of day left, when Rachel met Miss Lucille and the people she was chained with at the cemetery campsite. On Rachel's way home from her walnut tree retreat, she decided to stop and visit the people in the shuffle. While Miss Lucille was eating her small piece of bacon and half a sweet potato, she answered Rachel's questions about where they came from and where they were going. No one else said anything to Rachel. They kept their eyes cast downward.

Lucille said, "Mister Moss bought me from my marster over in Columbus. He bought others of us here and there along the way from Columbus. He sold a passel of us near Philadelphia. There was jes five of us left when he finished up selling back in Philadelphia. Now he's buying up more to take with us to Natchez and on to New Orleans."

Rachel had heard enough. She ran home to the cabin she shared with her older sister, Rebecca, her mother, and her father, John. "Mama, did you see those poor people out by the graveyard? They walked here from far away, being bought and sold all along the way. And they ain't got hardly nothing to eat!" Rachel was still panting from running to report what she had observed at the cemetery campsite. "Can we give 'em some of our food?"

"Rai, is you done loss yo' mind? We can't give away no food. We ain't hardly got enough to feed ourselves," Rebecca snapped before her mother could respond.

Rachel felt the warmth in her mother's smile as Edna extended her arms to embrace her. Rachel did not want to say what she was really worried about – a family member being sold. She could not speak the unthinkable. Rachel ran the three steps between them and into Edna's outstretched arms. Edna held two wooden spoons in one hand and, in her other hand, a rag to grab a hot iron skillet from the

fireplace. Rachel felt the knuckles of Edna's fingers gently stroking the back of her head.

"Rai, honey, we don't have enough for us and them. I wish we did. I sho' do."

"Mama, isn't there something we can do to help them?"

"Child, you sho' 'nough got your heart in the right place," Edna told her daughter in a soft voice.

"They already look weak and puny from walkin' here from who knows where and on nothin' much to eat," said Rachel.

Rebecca demanded, "Rai, gal, can't you hear? We ain't got no food for them. You already knows Griffin Bender only gives us barely 'nough every Saturday to last us 'til the next Saturday."

Rachel let her arms fall from Edna's waist. She turned to her sister, and, with hands akimbo, said, "I ain't talking to you." Edna used the wooden spoons to turn the bacon in the skillet while she said, "Now, now, girls."

"Mama, can we give'm one piece of cornbread each day? If we...."

Rebecca cut her off. "What good is one piece of cornbread going to do? Which *one* of'em you gonna give it to?"

"Hush! Let me finish. Mama, do you think your friends, Miss Eva and Miss Mabel, could help?"

Edna put one hand to her chin and thought about Rachel's question. "Rai, that's a good idea. I'll ask Eva, Mabel, and each neighbor for a piece. If each house can give one piece.... Let's get our supper et. Call your pa."

"Thank you, Mama." Rachel hugged her mother. "I'll find Pa." As she ran for the door, Rachel made a face and stuck her tongue out at Rebecca. Rebecca stared back at her little sister with a look of disbelief.

After supper, Rachel and Rebecca gathered pieces of cornbread from their neighbors in a small hand woven basket and slipped into the camp of the speculator to feed his captives. Though they had already eaten their bacon and potatoes, they grabbed the pieces of fried cornbread offered by the sisters. Lucille urged all to eat quickly, lest the speculator discover they had been given more food and cut

their meager rations. Lucille and everyone in the shuffle said their thanks and watched as Rebecca led Rachel into the shadows and back toward the cabins.

When they were almost home, Rachel asked, "Ain't that Missus Lillian and that mean ol' Les Nelson in front of our cabin with Mama and Pa?"

Rachel hated Les for the time he beat her pa and made everybody watch. Les was hired as overseer when young George Taylor II went off to school at West Point. When George's father fell ill and they had an overseer who could not read or write, it became Rachel's task to record tools and supplies purchased and crops and livestock sold. Old man George would not allow Missus Lillian or Miss Isabelle into the fields and barns. George Taylor believed a gentleman planter's wife and daughter should live a life of leisure. He turned to Rachel when Isabelle revealed that she had played school and taught Rachel to read and figure. When his anger with Isabelle passed, Old Man Taylor had put Rachel to work with Les. Though Rachel disliked being with Les, even for an hour a day, they worked together each evening before supper to make the appropriate entries in a small journal as Marster George instructed. She returned the diary to Marster George each evening at the big house where he was spending more and more time in bed.

"It sho' is. At this time of night and it Sadday too. It can't mean anything good."

As they walked closer, they heard Edna say to Missus Lillian, "My girls are coming. Please don't mention anything to them. I will do it myself." Edna's voice sounded low and sad. Rachel saw that John had one arm around Edna's shoulders. It was not like their pa to hug Edna when the neighbors or the Taylors were around. Rachel and Rebecca exchanged glances.

* * *

Sunday morning was bright and sunny. Rachel had cried all night and the beautiful day did not lift her spirit. She sat on the rough wood floor of their cabin in front of Rebecca and watched their mother carefully fold two dresses and place them in a cloth sack that had a

shoulder cord attached to each end. Rebecca hugged Rachel and stared out the window into the brilliant sunlight. The only sounds in the cabin were Rachel's sobs and sniffing noises from John and Rebecca. Rachel watched as Edna prepared for a journey with no return.

The night before, John had called Rachel and Rebecca to come and sit with him and their ma. Rachel sensed a new tone of foreboding and despair. By the dim light from the small candle in the center of the cabin, they could see that Edna had been crying. Rachel and Rebecca held hands as they sat close together waiting for John to speak. He stood beside Edna and held her hand with his head completely bowed.

When he spoke, all he said was, "Lawd, give us strength."

Rachel knew for certain at that moment, that Edna had been sold. But she was unable to put words around her feelings, much less speak the awful truth. Slowly, her throat constricted and her palms became sweaty.

Edna moved from John and knelt in front of Rachel and Rebecca and put an arm around each of them. Rachel could feel the warmth of her mother's familiar hug, but she sensed cold along her spine and felt the muscles across her stomach tighten.

With her voice cracking, Edna whispered, "Missus Lillian done sold me to that speculator."

Rachel and Rebecca screamed. "No!" They sprang from their seats to their knees and held on to Edna as if they wanted to merge with her spirit.

Rachel denied what she knew to be true. She cried, "No, Mama, no! You must be mistaken."

Edna tried to answer and console her daughters, but Rachel could not hear her. Both continued to scream and shout, "No!" They held on tighter.

John came over, knelt with them, and put his arms around all of them. Rachel wished his strong arms could change things, and that his great physical strength could keep her mother in the cabin and on Taylor Plantation. But since she had seen Les beat him so badly last year that he was in bed for four days before he could walk again, she

knew he could not change anything. Rachel felt the searing pain of knowing her mother was leaving and the utter helplessness of not being able to help her. She felt deeper despair realizing John could do no more than she or Rebecca could.

Anger and sorrow swept over Rachel in waves. Her head felt as if it would burst. The pain was especially intense at her temples, just before her ears. When there were no more tears, she still cried and screamed. Suddenly, she wiggled free of the embrace of her family and tried to run to the open window. She fell and vomited on the floor and on her dress before she could take three steps. Rachel lay there panting and making a strange sound that resembled a frog's croak. She felt her stomach churn again and tried to crawl to the window. This time she made it before the bitter yellow bile passed through her mouth and nose. Though the sound seemed far away, she could hear Edna calling, "My baby! My baby!"

* * *

The cool wet cloth on her head made Rachel sit up with a start. Miss Mabel put a gentle hand on her back to support her. Rachel was embarrassed at first, but when she looked down; she discovered she was on her pallet and wearing a clean dress that was not hers. She heard Miss Eva singing softly beside her mother's pallet.

Miss Eva's singing was interrupted by Edna, "Rai, baby, you feelin' better? Are you all right?"

Rachel wanted to reply, "Yes." She thought this would make her mother less concerned. Instead new tears rolled down her cheeks and she said, "I ain't ever gone be all right again." Now Edna and Rebecca began crying again. By the light of one tiny candle on the table where they ate their meals, Rachel saw John sitting on the floor, his shoulders slumped, staring out the door into the dark night. Miss Eva and Rebecca were massaging Edna's shoulders and arms. Miss Mabel and Miss Eva stayed with them until the first light of dawn. Miss Mabel had to leave and start breakfast at the big house. She heard Miss Eva say more than once, "Lawd, I'm so glad dis is not a field day."

An hour after dawn, Les called out, “Edna, you come on out here, gal. Don’t you keep Mister Moss waiting. You hear me?”

“Yessuh.”

Edna turned to John and her daughters and said, “Ya’ll stay inside. I’ll say my good-byes here and be on my way. I don’t want y’all to ‘member me all chained up.”

Edna put the cord and cloth sack containing her two dresses over her left arm, then over her head and let it rest on her right shoulder. She adjusted it so the sack hung on her left hip, just below her waist. With silent tears streaming down her face, Edna hugged and kissed each of them.

Edna dried her tears on her sleeves. In a shaky, but clear voice, she said, “Bec, you and Rai do your best and look after your pa. See that he gets his rest and that he eats right. You look after yourselves and grow up to be good women. Life done dealt us a mighty heavy blow here today. But be strong and pray every day. We gits through this....” Edna’s voice trailed off. She cried no more, turned, and walked out the door and across the bare dirt of the front yard of their cabin that Rachel had swept the day before.

Rachel thought Edna meant to say, “We gits through this together.” Her reaction was to sob louder. Her breathing now came in spastic gulps. Her chest heaved with each breath and her tears and mucus wet the top of her dress. She watched Edna walk out the door and into the sunlight. Rachel’s legs felt weak and she sank to her knees. When she could no longer see Edna through the doorway, her crying and wailing grew even louder.

Before John or Rebecca could move to catch her, Rachel struggled to her feet and summoned the strength to bounce out the door calling, “Mama! Mama!” None of them had slept or had any breakfast. Rachel ran and stumbled along the path toward the cemetery as fast as her legs could carry her. Through her tears, she couldn’t see the cemetery very clearly, but realized Moss’s wagon was not there. Her panic grew as she glanced about. She was determined to see her mother one more time. From the corner of her eye, she noticed the wagon moving toward the big house. She held the front of her ankle-length dress up to her knees and ran in that

direction. With a burst of energy,, she felt a bit stronger and was able to run faster.

The shuffle was chained and walking behind Moss's wagon. With her blurred vision, Rachel could not see her mother's face but did recognize her dress and the bandanna she wore over her hair. She noticed that the shuffle was larger by several men and women the speculator had purchased at Taylor Plantation. Rachel ran on as fast as her legs could carry her toward her mother. John and Rebecca were still in pursuit. From the front of the big house, Miss Mabel, Les Nelson, and Isabelle Taylor were calling out to Rachel. Even if she had heard them, she would not have stopped running. By now, the wagon had turned onto the avenue in front of the big house and was headed for the main road.

Rachel decided to run through the garden of the big house and intercept the wagon and shuffle. She was leaping over the last rows of freshly planted turnips when she tripped and fell face first into the brown dirt, landing on her nose, mouth, and chest with a thud. Rachel screamed in agony. She ignored her pain, rolled over, and struggled to get to her feet, spitting grit and trying to catch her breath. Dirt clung to her face and the wet top of her dress. With her right foot, she stepped on the hem of her dress. It ripped at the waist and Rachel fell again. She crawled into the grass at the edge of the garden. With her braids and face already covered with dirt and blood dripping from her nose and bruised lips, she sank flat on her face again. She felt weak now, her hands and legs trembled, but still she tried to rise. Rachel raised her head slowly and looked again toward the shuffle. She could no longer make out individuals. The people in the shuffle appeared to be one mass of moving colors. Everything in her sight was spinning to the left and down. She was dizzy and nauseous. John and Rebecca caught up with , but she could barely hear them calling her name. The sound of their voices grew weaker and the bright sunlight grew dimmer as Rachel fainted and lay motionless at the side of the garden.

* * *

Jerome called out to Rachel's father. It was Jerome's voice that brought Rachel back from her memories of '58. She was on her knees, filling her second bucket with water from the spring. Jerome was carrying a set of leather traces in one hand and walking briskly over the newly plowed rows while looking back over his shoulder toward the big house.

The lengthening afternoon shadows were not long enough for Rachel. She judged that soon Griffin Bender would again ride his horse out to where the plowing was being done. That would give him time before dusk to inspect the progress made today and make plans for Saturday morning's work assignments. She knew she had to hurry with the water. Bender acted as overseer because most of the able-bodied white men in Jasper County were away serving in the Confederate army. By the time he would finish his inspection, it would be first dark and Rachel and all the hands could start for the barn with the mules and their tools.

It was only the last Friday in April 1863, but it felt more like mid-June to Rachel. She stood, pushed her bonnet back, and wiped her brow on the long sleeve of her dress. When she turned her back to the sun and hooked a heavy bucket of water onto each side of her yoke, Jerome had almost reached her father. Rachel could not remember seeing Jerome bring traces to the field before. Rachel bent her knees and placed the yoke across her shoulders. She stood again and the two buckets lifted smoothly from the ground without sloshing.

No matter what Jerome was doing, Rachel stopped paying attention to him and listened to the birds for any change in their singing while she glanced about for some snake that might be passing by. She stepped from the line of cottonwoods and poplars and onto the freshly plowed cotton field. The dirt was damp from yesterday's rain and felt pleasant and cool to her bare feet. She stepped from row to row with rhythm and a slight dip in her step to avoid spilling water from the buckets. Spilling water meant she would have to make more trips to the spring for the thirsty plow crews and other field hands. The drinking gourd hung from her yoke

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near her right shoulder. It swung back and forth in time with her steps as she made her way toward the crew.

Jerome was pretending to examine the traces on John's mules. But, clearly, he was there to tell John some hot news. Rachel was still twenty paces away when she heard John repeat the word, "Yankees."

Chapter 4: Bianca and Isaac

“Yoo, hoo. Mister Luke, I need help.” Bianca called out from the community garden across the street from the livery.

It was Saturday morning, a week since the big ball hosted by the Aikens in Charleston. After her return to Tiffany Plantation on Monday, Bianca had spent much of her time scheming and planning how to be alone with Isaac. Because Isaac had not responded or given her any sign since she had spoken to him the night of his father’s funeral, Bianca was apprehensive.

Luke crossed the street and found that Bianca had gathered four baskets of mustard greens for the kitchen at the big house. “G’ornin’, Miss Bianca. Looks like oonah got ‘e self a load here.”

“Yessuh. G’ornin’. I need to get ‘em to the kitchen house ‘fore the sun wilts ‘em. I think I picked ‘nough greens for the Fosters and the chillum’s house dinner on Monday. Please help me carry dem in one trip.” Without looking back, she lifted two baskets and set out. Walking slowly, she rehearsed again what she would say to Luke when he caught up.

“Okay. I’ll bring dese two baskets for oonah. Maybe next time, don’t pick so much when de sun so hot lak t’day. If oonah need mo’, come back.”

“Yessuh. Next time, I do lak oonah say.” Bianca’s throat began to constrict and her voice tightened. She cleared her throat in an effort to overcome her tremor. “Mister Luke, will oonah give a message to Isaac fuh me, please, suh?” She hurried on before Luke could answer. “Oonah know I can’t write, and I ‘spects Isaac can’t read. So I can’t send a note. I will trust oonah wid my secret. I respects you – a settled family man. I can’t think of a woman to ask for help without makin’ myself into juicy gossip. You already know I have ‘onorable intentions toward Isaac. But he so young, and I don’t wanna scare ‘im and make ‘im run from me. So, oonah see why I need help? Jes to carry dis one message, please, suh?”

* * *

At first dark, Bianca poured hot water on the yellow jasmine blossoms she had tossed into the bottom of her wooden laundry tub. She had gathered the fragrant vine flower from the edge of the woods and also used the plants to decorate her cabin. She emerged from her bath humming bars from Robert Schumann's Piano Quintet in Concert in E flat major and donned her one Sunday go-to-meeting dress. She paused and admired the off-white hand-embroidered lace sewn around the collar and cuffs of the ankle-length white dress. Bianca tilted her head as she remembered the first day she wore it her mother told her, "Oonah de purttest gal in Colleton Districk." For the first time since the loss of Andrew, Bianca felt beautiful.

Curfew sounded at ten. Bianca opened a shutter on her front window and looked about. The street was quiet. She saw no one. The only movement she saw was that of broken clouds and two calico cats.

Bianca's palms became sweaty and she began to pace. She tried to sing, but stopped when she realized she could not think of a song that fit her mood. Lost in thought, she absently twirled a braid of her hair between the fingers of her left hand. If Isaac received her message, he should arrive at any minute. What if Luke told Isaac after midnight instead of after curfew? What if the Fosters caught Isaac out after curfew? What if I cause him to be flogged? What if he decided to stay away?

With that, Bianca dropped wearily onto a chair and held her chin cupped with both hands, elbows on her knees. In a minute, she was standing again and determined to keep her spirits up. Bianca carved several shavings off a sassafras root and made tea. When she had taken one sip, there were three taps on a rear window shutter. She smiled; delighted that Luke had delivered her message down to the last detail. Bianca swallowed tea into her windpipe. She had a coughing spasm on her way to extinguish her one candle and open the shutter.

Isaac deftly climbed through the window and whispered, "Here I is."

Bianca coughed again while securing the shutter. "Let me light a candle and see who oonah is." She tried to laugh, but coughed again and again.

Isaac laughed. Then they laughed together and their laughter broke the tension.

With the candle relit from her fireplace, Bianca turned and reached for Isaac's hand. "Welcome to my home. I'm so glad oonah here." She coughed and pulled him toward a chair. She felt his sweaty palm tremble.

"Bianca, I'm happy to call on you. Thanks for invitin' me." Isaac stopped speaking for a moment and cast his eyes down. When he looked up again, his smile was gone. "Bianca. Bianca, yo' name is reel purtty – like music. Please forgive me if I say the wrong thing. I don't know much 'bout callin' on a 'oman."

Bianca thought that he looked ready to bolt. She saw fear in his searching eyes and. She smiled. "Thanks. Why, that's the most beautiful ting anyone done eber said 'bout my name." She gave his hand a little squeeze. Isaac's smile showed his teeth.

In a few minutes, they were quietly laughing and talking like old friends. They ate the fried chicken legs and pear preserve biscuits Bianca had prepared at the kitchen house and kept warm in a covered iron skillet at the edge of her fireplace. They drank sassafras tea from tin cups.

Isaac set his cup down and was suddenly quiet. Bianca thought, *am I scaring him?* Isaac formed a pyramid with his fingertips in front of his lips, elbows on his knees. "Bianca, I likes oonah jes fine. But I'ma hafta tell oonah somethin'."

Bianca shuddered and inhaled deeply. She drew her elbows to her sides and thought, *is this it? Is this where he up and leaves?*

"I don't want to tell oonah dis, but I feel bein' as we likes each other, you need to know. I'm sure oonah keep my secret."

Bianca's eyes were wide and she held her breath.

"Bianca, I'ma run t'night."

Bianca exhaled and turned away to blink back the tears welling in her eyes. She thought of General Beauregard's victories over the Yankees and his new plan to split the Union. After the ball, she had

told Luke that she believed the Confederacy would win the war. If the Yankees were forced to quit the fight, who knows what would happen to the coloreds who volunteered and joined their ranks. Immediately, Bianca realized that she may never see Isaac again. Then she decided now was not the time to talk of war.

Momentarily, she turned back to Isaac. Again, she thought she saw fear rise in his eyes. She reached out and held one of his hands in both of hers. She caressed the back of his hand, turned it over, and traced the prominent lines in his palm with a fingertip. Neither spoke.

Presently, Isaac broke their silence. He fingered the lace at her cuff for a time and said, "This is almost as purtty as oonah."

Bianca felt beautiful, beamed, and landed a playful slap on Isaac's wrist. "Sweet mout! Sound lak oonah know jes what ta say ta his 'oman."

Upon hearing the words, "his 'oman," Isaac thought, *uh-oh, what do I do nigh?* His heart rate quickened and his body felt warmer. Now, with wide eyes, he was speechless again.

With a playful sideways glance, Bianca continued, "Oonah sho' dis heah yo' fus call?"

They laughed together as she moved from her chair and sat on his lap, one arm around his waist. Slowly, he embraced her. Bianca rested her head on his shoulder. They sat wordless for a time. And then she held his face, kissed his cheeks, and then pecked his lips with hers. Bianca stood, took his hand, and led Isaac across the one-room cabin to her pallet.



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