

Jane Petrlik Smolik
Currents



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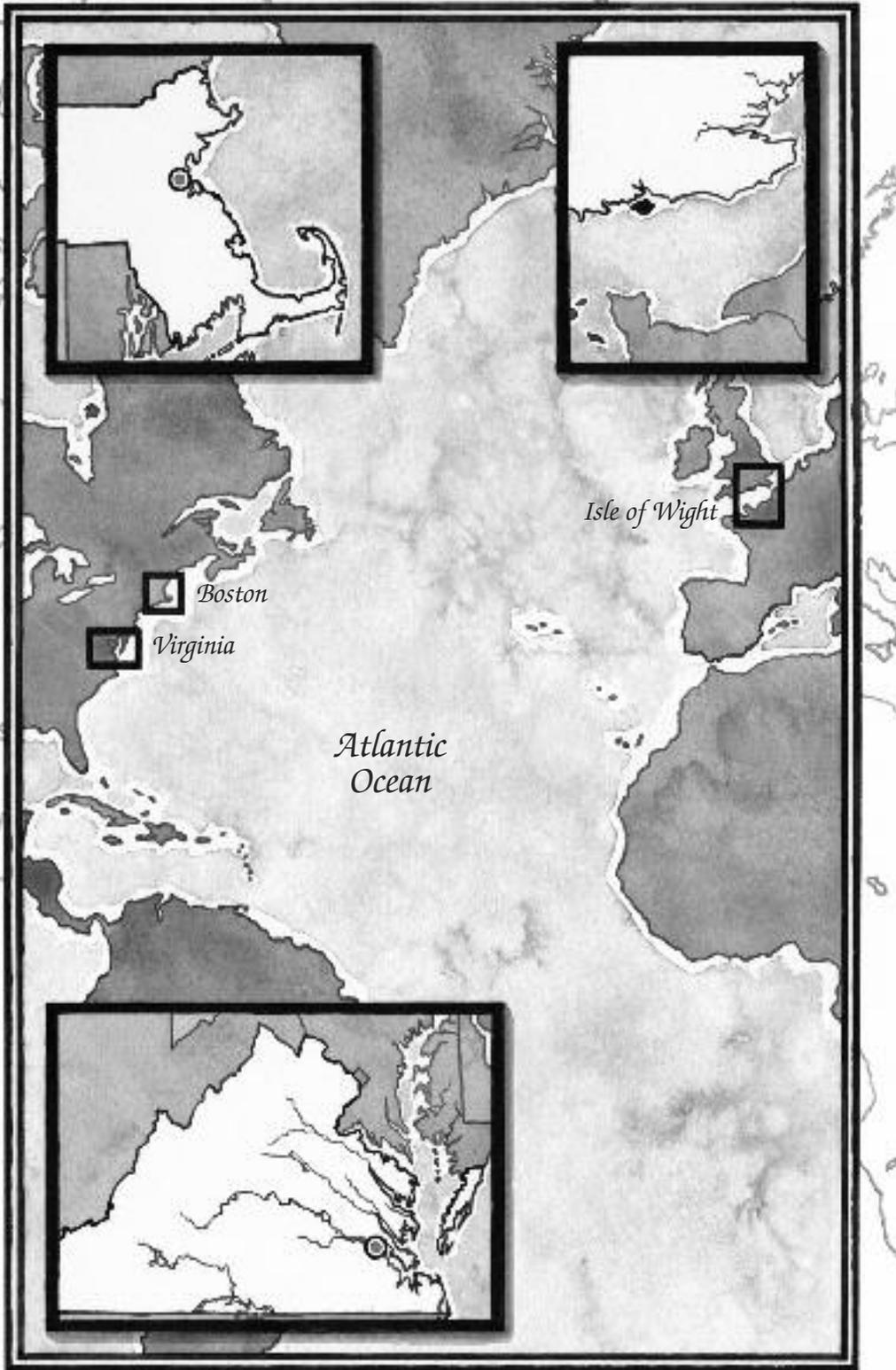
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To Karen Boss,
for helping me bloom



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BONES

Folks along the James River swore it was because of the tobacco-plant flowers. Queenie, the cook, was certain it was due to all the roses that grew in Old Mistress's gardens. Whatever the reason, the honey that came from Stillwater Plantation's hives was considered the finest in all of Virginia. Friends and neighbors looked forward to a jar at Christmas and on special occasions.

Every other month, Bones covered herself up in the special bee suit that Queenie had made for her and carefully carried her bee-smoker pan to the hives. She slowly filled wide-mouthed bottles with the golden

nectar. Every now and again Queenie would slip a jar of the sweet treat to Bones, who would take it home to Granny and Mama.

Bones would always sneak the empty bottle back to the kitchens. Except for the one she saved—that one she kept just for herself.



Chapter One

VIRGINIA, AUTUMN 1854

Bones was too young to remember the day her pappy had been sold off to another plantation, but she remembered everything about how she learned she was the personal property of another human being.

“Took you so long to sweep the kitchen, you need somethin’ else to eat to keep you goin’,” fussed Queenie, the cook, as she placed an extra piece of cornbread in front of Bones. The little girl ate it carefully, so as not to drop crumbs on the corncob doll hanging from her neck by a rawhide string.

“You’d better go now and wake up Miss Liza. I suspect you be doin’ all sorts of things today. Looks like the sun’s gonna be shinin’. And stop jiggin’ that foot of yours, or Old Mistress tie you up in a chair again!”

Queenie had been the head cook since Master Brewster bought her years ago and brought her to Stillwater Plantation. She had been born on the Smiths’ farm a few miles down the river and had learned as a

child to prepare tasty pork, chicken, pies, and fresh greens. Master Colonel Sam Smith sold her for one thousand dollars to the Brewsters solely on her reputation in the kitchen. They sold her on the condition that her new family promised not to beat her, and if she ever acted so badly that she had to have a whupping, her new master would bring her back and drop her off in the yard where he got her.

Every morning when Bones appeared in the kitchen, Queenie was cleaning Master's boots, shoes, and sword, and making his coffee before starting breakfast.

Staring out the Brewsters' kitchen window, Bones had a clear view past the big house and the kitchen gardens to the rows of unpainted cabins. She lived in one of them with her granny and her mother, Grace. Theirs was the farthest one away, and from their door, a weedy dirt path led straight to the fields that sloped gracefully down to the James River. Granny and Mama were field hands, and left every morning before dawn to work the long rows of tobacco, corn, wheat, and cotton. Each cabin had its own garden patch in the back where the slaves were allowed to grow extra food. At night or on Sunday afternoons, they could tend their own rows of cabbage, lima beans, onions, potatoes, black-eyed peas, and collards. If one person had too many collards

one week, they would trade with someone who had too many lima beans.

Stillwater was one of a handful of old plantations that sprawled out along Virginia's lower James River. Built with bricks that had been fired on the property and shaded by wide porches framing three sides, it sat at the end of a gravel drive lined with oak trees and mountain laurel. The back porch, which overlooked the river, stretched across the entire length of the house and was held up by eight fluted white pillars. Lounge chairs, tables, and settees were placed neatly about, and magnolias planted around the house brushed against the roof and spilled their fragrance into the soft Virginia air. In the front yard, carefully clipped boxwood hedges surrounded three levels of terraced gardens, built to show off the Mistress's rosebushes.

During the sweltering summers, the river created a welcome breeze through the house. Deep forests at the back of the property provided some of the wood to keep the stoves and fireplaces burning all winter, and the acres of fields kept the slaves busy planting and picking crops. Nine hundred peach trees were planted in a single row like a living fence around one of the backfields. Peach trees grew like weeds in the fertile soil, and field hands cut down one hundred

trees a year to use as firewood. In the spring, one hundred new saplings were planted to replace the ones that had been cut.

Master Brewster strolled into the kitchen house and let the door slap shut behind him, tilting his head up to breathe in the sweet fragrance of molasses and chopped peaches.

“Have you woken up Mistress Liza yet?” he asked Bones. His sturdy frame filled the doorway, and his riding boots clacked on the freshly swept floor. As on most large plantations, the kitchen house was a separate building located off to the side to keep the main house cooler and reduce the risk of fires.

“No, Masta,” Queenie said, sweet as the shoofly pie she’d begun to assemble. “Bones just goin’ up now.”

Master Brewster shook the sweat off his large straw hat and leaned down to tug at the girl’s braids. Mama fixed them every day to cover her ears that seemed to sprout straight out from her head. But it never worked. Granny said those ears made her special because she could hear extra good.

“And what is this?” He pointed at the old corncob wrapped in a handkerchief hanging from her neck.

“My baby doll,” Bones answered.

“Ah! Yes, now I see that.” He looked at the plain

corncob, with no face or clothes. “And does your baby doll have a name?”

“Lovely. Her name’s Lovely.”

“Well, that’s a mighty fine name for her,” he said with a chuckle. “Is this another baby doll?” he asked, pointing to the peach pit that she rubbed between her fingers.

“No, this here’s a heart.” She smiled up at him. “My pappy carved it for me and give it to me when I was born. I like how it feels.”

“Aha. I see. Well, now you make sure Miss Liza does her reading today,” Master instructed. “She can’t just play with the animals, pick flowers, and daydream.”

Bones carefully balanced the breakfast tray the cook had prepared for her young mistress and walked slowly out the back door, calling out behind her, “Oh yes, I will, Masta Brewster. Don’ you worry ’bout that.” The s-sound in “Brewster” whistled through the gap between her two front teeth. She went down the short path to the big house and up the back staircase, the one the slaves used. Carrying her mistress’s breakfast tray upstairs was the first duty of the day, and sprinkling her bedsheets with refreshing lilac-scented cologne was the last duty at night.



Chapter Two

For the most part, Bones didn't mind her life as Miss Liza's companion. It was certainly much easier being a house slave than a field slave. She had been brought up to the big house when she was five to keep Miss Liza company, and in the six years that followed, the girls had spent countless hours exploring the plantation and playing games. Liza's sister, Jane, was fifteen years old and found plenty of companionship with twin sisters her age who lived on a farm down the road. There was just enough difference in the Brewster girls' ages that Liza needed a playmate of her own. The younger of the Brewster daughters loved to play in the fields and run with the dogs down by the river and on the edge of the woods. She and Bones would gather up pinecones, twigs, fluffy mosses, and little pebbles and build castles with stick bridges and roads that they dug through the soft dirt.

In the afternoons, when the heat drove them back into the big shuttered house, Bones would go to the

kitchen and fetch Liza a cold glass of fruity iced tea. Liza always insisted that Queenie make a glass for Bones, too. Then Bones would sit and wave a tasseled fan back and forth over her little mistress while Liza sat with her spelling books and blocks and studied her reading and writing. This was usually done with a great deal of sighing and fiddling, as Liza was not fond of studying. Hanging on Liza's wall was a large, colorful map of the United States of America. Master had stuck a red pin onto the spot to mark the location of Stillwater Plantation, and Liza enjoyed having Bones play student to her geography teacher.

Virginia.

Virginia looked like an old snail trying to slither away from a hungry fox. Liza had taught Bones which way on the map was north, south, east, and west. Just south of Virginia was North Carolina. Long and thin with a tail pointing out west—sneaking into Tennessee. Below that, South Carolina, and then Georgia and Florida.

Bones kept to herself why she was so interested. She reckoned her pappy was in one of those lands, and she planned on finding out where. Her mama and granny didn't know where he'd been sold, but she figured it couldn't be north of here. The Northern states

didn't take to slaveholding. If the whispers in the fields were right, the North was going to set all the slaves free or else. She needed to be ready either way. The more she learned about mapping, the better prepared she'd be to find her pappy and reunite him with Mama and Granny. It was going to be a fine day when they were a family again. She had had her plan in place for almost a year now, ever since Liza had begun teaching her the mysteries of the map.

"What do all those lines goin' every which ways mean?" Bones had asked one day, pointing to the letters on some blocks.

"They are the letters of the alphabet, Bones. You've heard Daddy talk about the ABCs. Well, those are the first three letters of the alphabet. See? Here they are. This is an A. The first letter," Liza had said.

Bones had run her finger up one side, slowly down the other and then connected the two in the middle.

"That's an A?" she had asked, eyes wide.

"That is an A. It sure is. And this is a B. The first letter of your name begins with the letter B," Liza had explained.

"These the same lines that's on the map?" she had asked.

"The very same." Liza had drawn two slanted lines

connected at their base. "That's a V. Just like the first letter of Virginia. See here on the map. I taught you where Virginia is."

Bones had looked at her like she had spoken a miracle. It had long ago occurred to Liza that it was more fun playing teacher than simply studying boring books, and in Bones she had an eager student. So afternoons that summer Bones spent learning how to read and write the alphabet, and how to read simple books made up mostly of two-syllable words. She knew that learning how to read the words on the map, instead of just learning the shapes of the states, could only help her with her plan.



Chapter Three

Bones figured that when the Lord was passing out kindness in the Brewster family, he used it all up on Master and his two daughters, because he sure didn't have any left for Master's wife, Old Mistress Polly.

"Musta been a terrible day the day she was born," Granny always sputtered, slowly shaking her head back and forth. "Musta been a dark storm or somethin'." Granny was wiry and thin from working the fields, her hair pure white, and Mama often wondered aloud if the Brewsters were ever going to bring Granny in to work in the big house. Bones worried that they were just going to keep her working in the fields till she dropped dead one day over a tobacco plant.

Old Mistress Polly's disposition was as sour as a briny pickle. While her husband was tall and graceful, she was small and plump, with narrow, gray-green eyes that rested inside little slits under her short forehead.

Sometimes the house slaves would look up to see

her shadowy figure on the wall. They knew she was lurking around the corner, waiting to catch them not doing their chores so she could lurch out with her hickory stick and smack their hands. Many of them took to calling her Wolf Woman behind her back because of her slanty, gray-eyed stare, and everyone tried to stay out of her way to avoid her fits of ill humor. The Brewster sisters never talked back to their mother, and like everyone else, they preferred the company of their father.

It was a quiet autumn afternoon, and a river breeze pushed through the shutters' open latticework. Liza and Bones were excited. The newest edition of *Merry's Museum Magazine* had arrived that morning. Liza had explained to Bones that it was the most popular magazine among children everywhere. It was filled with stories for children about people having daring adventures. Liza's favorite section every month was the puzzles and letters from children to Uncle Merry, but Bones was mesmerized by the stories about foreign lands and the exotic animals that lived there.

"Finish writing the sentences I've given you, and you may look through my new *Merry's*," Liza instructed Bones.

Bones flew through her assigned work, wondering

all the while to herself: *What magic is in this month's magazine?*

She wasn't disappointed. There was a black-and-white engraving of waterfalls in New York, and one of a Christmas tree with little white children dressed in fancy clothes sitting under its branches hung with glowing candles, candies, and small toys.

Bones's heart nearly pounded through her chest when she turned a page and read a title: "Africa: Dr. Livingstone's Journeys and Researches in South Africa." An illustration on the opposite page showed a canoe with seven or eight men being thrown into the dangerous waters, their arms flailing as a monster beast rose from the water. The words beneath the picture read: *Boat capsized by a hippopotamus robbed of her young.*

"Miss Liza? What is this word?" Bones pointed at *capsized*.

"'Capsized,' Bones. It means to overturn in the water."

"Oh my," Bones whispered.

It got better. The next story she found was titled "Africa and Its Wonders."

Lord, if she could only show this to Granny.

"The trees which adorn the banks of the Zonga are

magnificent,'" she read, hesitating to sound out the last word. "Miss Liza, Africa—she's a powerful, beautiful place," Bones finally announced.

Liza laughed. "Yes, I suppose it is." She suddenly tilted her head toward the bedroom door when she heard the hall floor creak.

Bones quickly put aside her writing paper when she heard familiar steps stealing down the hallway outside Liza's bedroom. By the time the door thrust open and Old Mistress Polly burst into the room, Bones had already picked up her fan and was busy shooing flies away from Liza's face.

Old Mistress's left eyebrow flew up. "How is the reading coming along?"

"Very well," Liza replied. But worry lines pinched her forehead, and she fiddled over her book as her mother's glare bored through her.

Old Mistress's eyes swept the room, landing on Bones's writing pad. When she walked over and picked it up, Bones broke out in a sweat, and her fan began to shake.

"What is this?" Old Mistress asked, her breath warm on the back of Bones's neck.

Before she could answer, Liza spoke up. "Some old papers of mine."

The Wolf Woman squinted harder at Bones's child-like letters, so different from Liza's more graceful, swooping words and curly letters.

Bones looked down and saw her spelling book and the map on which she had printed the states and each state's capital poking out from under her skirt. Mistress suddenly yanked the little black girl up by her arm and snatched the papers from beneath her. Bones's beginning letters were carefully scrawled on page after page next to Liza's.

She did not fully understand why, but she knew in that moment that she was in fearsome trouble. She picked up her fan again and began furiously waving it next to Liza. In mid-swoop, Mistress ripped it away and began swatting her on the head with it.

"Mama!" Liza protested.

"Are you teaching this Negra to read and write?" She turned her crimson-faced anger on her own daughter. "Answer me!"

"I am practicing to become a teacher." Liza stood up as tall as she could and faced her mother square on.

With one quick swipe, Old Mistress Polly struck her own daughter in the face with the fan.

"You do *not* teach Negras to read or to write! It gives them a bad attitude and makes them dangerous,

Liza!" Old Mistress Polly wailed. "And it is against the law."

Sweat dampened her dress under her arms, and her veins pulsed against her temples. Leaning down close to Bones's face, she delivered a good hard slap to be sure Bones was paying attention.

"If I ever find you touching one of these letter blocks or near a book again, I'll have you sold to another plantation, and you'll never see your mother or granny again. You hear me, gal? We sold your father, and we'll sell you, too. You are a slave. Do you know what that means, Bones? You are our property. We own you. You belong to us just like our cows and our chickens and our horses and our tobacco fields. And if we are not happy with those things, we get rid of them. And if we are not happy with you, we will get rid of you. Do you understand what I am saying?" Old Mistress's face was the color of a plum, and her hands were trembling when she finished.

Bones nodded furiously, her hands in tight fists by her sides.

"You're lucky I don't have you skinned. Go back to your cabin. Now!" Old Mistress ordered. "Someone will be there shortly to give you a whippin'."

Bones's feet would not move.

“Run, you little black beast!” Old Mistress snapped. Her hand came down with a slap on the back of Bones’s head as the girl finally flew out the door and down the back steps.



Chapter Four

Bones went back to her cabin to wait. No one was back from the fields yet. She quickly took Lovely from around her neck. She dropped her carved peach-pit heart into the wide-mouthed bottle that she used to store it in and hid both the treasures under the sleeping pallet to protect them. She had seen Ben, the hulking black overseer, flog grown men and women, but she had never seen a child whipped. Ben lived alone in a cabin on the other side of the plantation. The Brewsters didn’t want him living near them, and it would have been too dangerous for him to live among the slaves’ quarters. The other slaves hated him. He showed no hesitation to use his whip on his own people when ordered to. It was not unusual, after a visit from Ben, for a slave to find his kettle or blanket missing. Fortunately, Master Brewster only used beatings as a last resort, so they were delivered few and far between.

Bones heard the sound of Ben’s boots dragging in

the dust. He stopped in front of her cabin, and Bones dropped to her knees, her heart pounding in her ears.

Ben stood just outside the closed door, slowly slapping what Bones imagined was his whip against the side of his leg. She smelled cigar smoke drifting through the walls, and the smell turned her stomach. She heard him sniff and clear the phlegm from his throat. He spit into the dirt next to the cabin.

When the door flew open, Bones saw that Ben carried a bunch of hickory sprouts tied together instead of the big leather strap he used on the grown-ups. He also held a bucket that reeked of vinegar.

Her heart fired inside her chest, and she stared at the floor. The air was so quiet she could almost hear his gaze slowly travel around the cabin, looking for some little trinket he might want. Her eyes squeezed shut, and she listened as his feet shuffled around the room, stopping here and there. He paused in front of the fireplace, cleared the phlegm from his throat again, and spit it into the embers from the morning's fire, where it sizzled and hissed. He circled her, whistling softly, and then stopped. His eyes slid around, finally settling on Bones trembling on the floor, and he let out a long sigh, as though he was bored by this puny little chore in front of him.

"Pulls your shirt up, gal," he drawled, looming above her. He smelled of sweat, tobacco, and liquor.

"Please," she whimpered, clasping her knees tight.

"I said, pulls your shirt up. Gals that don't hear so good gets it worse," he ordered.

She was afraid she would faint, but she slipped her shirt up to her shoulders. Her ribs protruded like a bird's bones from her narrow back, and her skin felt clammy.

He pulled the handmade whip back and snapped it hard against her back, and she screamed when it bit into her flesh. She hunched her shoulders, and her hands flew up and covered her ears. The hickory sprouts snapped hard across her back again. She shrieked and fell facedown on the floor.

"Oh, pray. Oh, pray." She groaned and tried to crawl under a chair. But Ben grabbed a fistful of her hair and dragged her back.

"Don't try and go nowhere, gal," he growled.

Pulling her knees up underneath her, she tucked her head down when the whip cracked a third time. She bit her tongue, and blood mixed with drool oozed out from the space between her front teeth.

"Oh, please, please, no more, sir," she wailed, words and blood both spitting out of her mouth.

Ben picked up the bucket and snorted. “Gots a little salt and vinegar here for you.” He swung the pail back and threw it in her face. “Mistress says to never use them eyes to look at nothin’ you not supposed to again.”

“I won’t, oh no, no, please!” she screamed, shaking her head wildly, and squeezing her burning eyes shut. “Have mercy on me.” Bones shuddered.

“Girl,” he snickered, “don’t expect there’s no mercy for you in this world.”

With that, he picked up his instruments of torture and calmly walked out of the cabin, Granny’s pipe tucked in his side pocket. He left his victim alone in a little wet heap on the floor. For weeks after, the smell of cigar smoke made Bones gag.



The angry purple welts across her back and red, swollen eyes lasted for two weeks. Bones swept and washed the kitchen and porch floors and performed her duties anyway. Mama and Granny were as angry as wet bees with Old Mistress Polly, but knew to keep their fury to themselves. They applied cool homemade salves to Bones’s back and face every morning.

Lying in her bed at night, Bones went over and

over the map in her mind, being certain not to forget any details. When she found out what state her pappy had been sold to, she would know how to get there—which direction to go. In the darkness, she traced each letter of the alphabet on the inside of her arm with her finger, imagining each state and its place on the map.

V-I-R-G-I-N-I-A.

South of Virginia, shaped like one of the boots that Master wore when he rode his horses: L-O-U-I-S-I-A-N-A.

South Carolina—shaped like a wedge of Queenie’s shoofly pie. *They cannot beat the learnin’ out of me*, Bones thought defiantly. *South Carolina, Georgia, Florida . . .*

“She get hers,” Granny would fume about Old Mistress. “God seen it all and marked it down. She nothin’ but an old, rich devil.”

At first, Bones was certain that Liza would come find her, but as the days went on, the truth in Mistress’s words settled on her. They were not friends. The Brewsters owned her. In Bones’s heart, though, she still believed there was something more than that between her and Liza.

During those two weeks, she slept naked on her

stomach until her wounds closed up. The stinging cuts were eventually replaced with three jagged scars shaped like lightning strikes that ran across her back.



Chapter Five

The wind seeped through the gaps in the cabin walls all through the night, reminding the women that cold weather was coming. They would patch them up with mud before the air got colder. Master would appear one day soon with shoes for all his slaves, as he did every year. They felt lucky in this way. Many plantation owners let their slaves go barefoot all year. Frostbite was common.

The sound of the wind made it hard for Bones to sleep, and Granny's nose made a whistling sound when she snored. The old woman and the wind took turns. The wind would rise up and heave through the old cabin. Just when it would stop, Granny's nose would start up again and let go a long snorty whistle. This went on most of the night. The wind, Granny's nose, the wind, Granny's nose.

"You need to forgets about that readin', Bones. It can only be trouble for you," Mama said as they lay in the darkness. Bones slept in the middle between her

granny and her mother on sacks stuffed with straw. Lovely, wrapped in her handkerchief, slept tucked under her arm.

“I can’t, Mama. Once you knows it, it sticks there. I can’t help it. And Miss Liza didn’t mean to get me in trouble.”

“I know that,” Mama said. “But you old enough now to know that slaves are sold off for knowin’ how to read. Sometimes they even killed. You need to wash that learnin’ outta you brain. Please listen to me now.”

“Mama?” She hesitated. “Why they sell my pappy?”

Her mother rolled onto her back and rested her face on the edge of the rough sack, pieces of her hair escaping from the bun tied up on top of her head. She had soft, wide brown eyes, but hard work had beaten her face so she looked older than her twenty-seven years. Still, as her mother lay there with a little sliver of moonlight coming through the cabin and resting just so across her face, Bones could imagine what her long-lost pappy must have seen in her. Bones had the same soft round eyes as her mother, but Mama’s had grown squinty from working in the sun for so many years.

“The crops was poor that year,” Mama finally said. “Didn’t need so many men. Masta up and sold him and two more men. Just took him one mornin’, and I ain’t

never seen him again. Mm-hmm. He was a handsome man, he was—tall and broad shouldered.”

“Why they call him Fortune?” Bones asked. “That’s a funny name.”

“They called him Fortune because he was good with wood making, and they could sell the chests and bureaus he made for a lot of money,” Mama said. “Twice a year Masta Brewster took his chests down to Richmond. Anyway, he was stubborn like a mule. Didn’t want to belong to no man and kept trying to run off. They would have killed him or chopped off his hand, except then he wouldn’t have been able to make furniture for them no more. So they took an ax and chopped off his left ear instead. That stopped him runnin’,” Mama said.

“He didn’t run again, Mama?” Bones asked.

“No. He just do what they say and come home every night to me and you and Granny. Then one day they call him and two others up to the big house, and I never see him again. Never even let him say good-bye.”

“Tell me again about the day I was born. When Pappy give me his heart.” Bones rubbed her little carved heart between her fingers.

“Well,” her mama began, sounding too tired to talk. “You come right out, and your pappy say how

beautiful you are. He thinks you the most beautiful baby on the whole plantation. And then he pulls a little peach pit out of his pocket that he's carved into the shape of a heart. That man could make anything. And he'd carved tiny vines and a flower all over that heart, and he put it in your little hand."

"And what did I do then, Mama?" Bones asked.

"You closed your tiny fingers around it. We couldn't believe it! And then Fortune say, 'Now my baby girl will always know she gots her pappy's heart in her hand.'"

"I just love that story, Mama." Bones sighed. "Where do you think my pappy is? You ever hear anything—anything at all?"

"No. But somewhere far away. Maybe Mississippi, I hear, or someplace called Alabama." She covered her eyes with her small hands as if to wipe out his memory. "Lord, I loved that man. And they just up and sold him—sold my Fortune," Mama said.

"Just like he was any old thing," Bones said softly.

"You go to sleep now," Mama said. "Roosters be crowin' good mornin' to us before you know it."

"I will, Mama," she whispered, trying to remember how many s's were in Mississippi—the state shaped like a piece of bread with a bite taken out of it.

She pulled her little nightshirt up over her eyes, snuggled Lovely close to her heart, and thought, *Snug in my little cabin, but still with my sorrows, worth no more than a cow, or a horse, or a dog.*



Chapter Six

“Old Mistress wants all the silver polished so you can see yourself in it,” Queenie instructed as she finished mixing up the paste. “I’m gonna be checkin’ on you ’cause *she* gonna be checkin’ on me!”

Bones wrinkled her nose. “It smells funny,” she said.

“That’s why you not gonna be polishin’ in my kitchen house,” Queenie said.

She led Bones outside to the picnic table next to the big house. Queenie often sat there on sweltering days and chopped green beans and carrots, or diced potatoes and onions.

Today she had spread old newspapers on top and had more than two dozen pieces of Old Mistress’s silver laid out.

“Get to work, gal,” Queenie ordered. “And don’t miss any little corners or edges!”

Bones sat down on the bench and began polishing a water pitcher in neat little circles with the creamy white paste. The smooth surfaces were easy. It was the decorative areas—the vines and twining roses—that

took the longest. They reminded her of the little leaves and vines her pappy had carved into her peach pit. That made her smile. She dug her fingernail into the little crevices to work out the tarnish. When she finished the pitcher she held it up and looked at her reflection. *Pretty cute*, she thought. She stuck her tongue through the space between her two front teeth. Mama said that when Bones got older that space would close up. Mama said she had that same space when she was a child, and by the time she was grown it was gone. Bones would like it if her ears didn’t stick out from her head quite so much, but she figured she was stuck with them for good.

She moved the water pitcher over slightly to one side, exposing the newspaper underneath. She looked around carefully before lowering her eyes to read the paper. There was an article about an upcoming Thanksgiving Ball in Richmond. *Well, well*, Bones thought. Another stated that Mrs. So & So had ladies over for a luncheon. Nothing all that interesting, but it still felt good to be able to read, and to know that the learning had stuck good in her head.

Bones looked down at her hands, white now from the polishing paste, and said out loud, “Well, I declare, I think they look prettier black!”

She was interrupted when the window above where

she was working slid open, and she heard Liza say, “I need you to help me with my sewing, Jane. I can’t get the hem on my doll’s dress to hang straight.”

Bones scanned the yard to be sure there was no one around her, and then she tiptoed over and stood under the open window. She couldn’t see the girls but she recognized the next voice as Liza’s older sister, Jane.

“Give me your sewing basket and thread your needle. It’s just a matter of practice. I’ll show you,” Jane said. “And I understand you will have plenty of time indoors to practice. Mama says that she is horrified at the direction your character has taken, and you will be spending more time indoors practicing more ladylike pursuits.”

“So she says.” Liza groaned.

Bones leaned against the house where she could better hear the conversation.

“What could you have been thinking, Liza, teachin’ that little Negra gal to read and write?” Jane said.

“I’ve decided that I am going to be a teacher when I’m grown. I was practicing on Bones. Mama didn’t have to have her beaten,” Liza said. “It was my idea to teach her. I was watching from my bedroom window when Ben went down to Bones’s cabin, and I heard her screams all the way up here. It was so terrible!”

“Regardless,” Jane said. “The little blackie needed to learn her place.”

“I miss playing with her. You have the Anderson twins,” Liza sputtered. “All I have is you!”

“Well!” Jane said, bristling. “I beg your pardon?”

“I mean that you like to just read and sew, and I want to go out and run in the fields and play with the dogs,” Liza explained.

“You’ll never catch a man if you keep carrying on that way,” Jane said. “No one will want a wife who acts like a wild little boy!”

“I don’t want to catch a man!” Liza insisted. “I want to be a teacher.”

“Oh, Lord, Liza Anne Brewster,” Jane said. “You go ahead and teach, then, but I’m going to be the lady of a plantation just like Stillwater someday. You’ll be some raggedy poor old teacher—probably a spinster at the rate you’re carrying on. But don’t worry, you can come visit me, and I’ll give you my hand-me-downs.”

At least she misses me, too, Bones thought, crouched against the wall in her hiding spot.



Chapter Seven

Most Sundays the slaves were given the afternoon off. One Sunday in late September, Master Brewster pulled up on his black horse hauling a wooden cart. Bones sucked in her breath when she saw Miss Liza was with him, sitting high atop her own horse, her pale blonde hair tied up in pretty braids.

Master rang a big bell that was attached to the wagon, and his voice boomed across the slave yard. “Boots or shoes for everyone!”

Doors opened up and down the long row of cabins, and women came out with babies on their hips, even though there were no shoes for babies. Men who were fishing down at the river put down their poles and came up to stand in line. No one wanted to miss a chance for a pair of shoes.

Bones stood mesmerized in her doorway, Lovely swinging from her neck. She looked up at Miss Liza, her legs swung primly sidesaddle. She hadn’t been allowed to play with or even talk to her since they had been caught by Old Mistress with the books. It was

odd to see her here in the slave quarters, in the middle of Bones’s world.

“Agnes May, are you coming, gal?” Master looked directly at Bones.

She stared blankly back. She turned her head and looked behind her, but there was no one there. Who was he talking to?

“I’m speaking to you. Bones?” he said.

She stepped out and got in line.

What did he call me? she asked herself.

Miss Liza slid delicately off the horse and walked straight up to her. “Agnes May. That’s the name you were born with, silly. Bones is your nickname.”

Just like that. Not a word to each other in weeks, since she’d had the beating of her life, and up Liza comes, as if nothing but time had come between them. And Bones had never before heard this name—Agnes May.

“You can come up to the house some day after the crops are in, and we’ll play with my dolls,” Miss Liza said. “Mama says we can. You can bring Lovely, too.” She took Bones’s hand and placed two little black buttons in her palm. “These are for Lovely. Now she can have some eyes. Just press them onto her face.”

Agnes May “Bones” Brewster smiled a little and said, “Thank you, Miss, I’m grateful.” Liza smiled a

little, too, spun on her dainty slipper, and hopped back up on her horse.

That night, Bones sat next to Granny on the cabin door stoop while Granny puffed away on the new corn cob pipe she had made to replace the one Ben had stolen. They liked to sit together in the quiet just before bed to relax and watch the stars flitter in the sky.

Granny had pulled off her shoes and dusted fresh herbs in them. Bones thought she always walked as though she had a stone in her shoe, but Granny said it was rheumatism that made her limp. Every week she placed fresh sprinkles of red pepper in her shoes, and on nights when her rheumatism really bothered her, she would drink a boiled tea made from the same dark flakes. This was just one of Granny's remedies. She said you could get most everything a body needed from the fields and the woods. But Bones noticed that as she got older, Granny's limp only got worse, especially when the weather was damp.

Crouched in front of the cabin next to theirs was a tall, lanky boy a couple of years older than Bones. He was singing and picking softly on a banjo he'd carved from a gourd. "*Rabbit in the briar patch, squirrel in the tree, wish I could go huntin', but I ain't free.*"

"Franklin, how you learned to play and sing so good?" Bones called over.

"My pappy teach me before he sold," he said, smiling sweetly at her.

"You pappy teach you good, Franklin. I don't know if my pappy could play music, but he could sure make furniture that was as beautiful as a song. Mama said he carved birds and flowers and fruit into the wood—fit for a queen!"

"Um-hmm," Granny agreed. "That man could turn an old pine knot into a rose with just a little old jackknife."

Bones opened up her hand and showed Franklin her carved heart.

"What is that?" he asked.

"It's a peach pit! My pappy carved it special for me." Bones smiled. "And it's my pappy's heart that he give to me when I was born."

"Well, now," Franklin said. "You are sure right 'bout that. It is beautiful."

Bones loved this time of day, sitting with Granny. Sometimes the old woman would break her silence, telling stories about their ancestors and tales of Africa. She said her grandpappy had been a king in Africa where their people came from. When she got to puffing away on her pipe, she'd get all wound up and spout out wondrous tales of magical lions or tortoises and the awful tricks they would play on people.

“How old is you, Granny?” Bones sat close to her wiry, little grandmother and picked at some pecans. “You gots a name besides Granny?” She had more important things on her mind tonight than stories of ancestors and talking animals.

“I don’t know exactly how old I is, but I knows my name,” Granny answered. “It’s Lucy. Yes’sa. My mammy and pappy was borned in Africa, that’s what they told me. I was born on the Carter Plantation up-river, and when they sold me here, Mistress Carter said to be sure to tell ’em you’s borned Lucy Carter. Then they be sure to put you down in their slave book. But when they sell me to the Brewsters, they say they put my name in the book as Lucy Brewster. That because you take the last name of the folks who owns you.

“Lawd, ole Masta Carter, he own so many Negras he didn’t know his own slaves when he seen them. He stops them on the road and say, ‘Whose Negras are you?’ They’d say, ‘We’s Masta Carter’s Negras.’

“He’d say, ‘I am Masta Carter.’ And he’d drive on.” She slapped her leg and laughed. “But Missis Carter was good to us Negras. And they didn’t whip us like some owners did. But they done sold us if they don’t need us. Your mama and me, we so happy when you become a house Negra—because house Negras get

plenty to eat. Like ham and extra corn bread. That’s why Queenie so fat! Lord. That woman think the sun come up just to hear her crow.”

Granny’s nose wrinkled up like she smelled something funny, and she spit a long stream of dark tobacco out the corner of her mouth and off to the side of the cabin. Granny didn’t take much liking to Queenie. She said she put on airs because she worked in the big house.

The old woman kept staring up at the sky. “Look like God just took a fistful a stars and throwed them up into heaven,” she said.

There was a long pause, and then Bones, her eyes big, whispered, “Did you see it, Granny? Did you see your name in that book?”

The old woman hooted with laughter. “Lawd no! I can’t read. But they told me so. All plantations got slave books. That’s how they keep track of all the Negras they own and all them that dies.”

“You scared of dying, Granny?” Bones asked.

“Oh, no, child. I figured out the secret to bein’ happy here on earth, and I figure the Lawd will show me the way when I go home to him.”

“What’s the secret?” Bones asked.

“Well, nothing would beat being free. That’s the

first thing. But whether or not you's free, I figure happiness is three things—someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to.”

“What you got to look forward to, Granny?”

“Why heavens, child! Someday I's going to heaven and there ain't nothin' Old Mistress or anyone else can do to keep me from going.”



Chapter Eight

That night, Granny, Mama, and Bones lay together tight as a fist against the early autumn's growing night chill. The field hands would be working seven days a week from now on to bring in the harvest. Bones would be sent to the fields for a while, too. Every man and woman that could be spared was set to splitting and stacking peach-tree wood for the next year. This winter they would use up all the stacks that had been drying since last year. The wood they cut now would dry and be used the following winter. Long, neatly stacked woodpiles were set outside the big house, and a separate one stood behind the slave quarters for their fireplaces. Master Brewster's father had made sure when each cabin was built it had a chimney made of sticks, mud, and stones. When the winter set in, the slaves could have a few pieces of peach wood every day so that even if their cabins were never quite warm, they weren't freezing. Bones knew that you had to plan seasons ahead when you lived off the land.

Wild turkeys had taken to roosting in the trees out-

side their cabin, and they gobbled themselves to sleep every night. Granny's chest rose and sank silently, too exhausted from the day's work to snore.

"Mama?" Bones whispered. "I named my baby doll Lovely because white folks use that word when they talk about somethin' beautiful." She thought the word left a soft tinkling sound in the air after it left people's lips.

"Why you call me by a funny name like Bones if that's not the name I was born with?" she asked into the darkness.

"Lawd child, why you always set to thinkin' at night when my head is so tired?"

"Why, Mama?" she demanded.

"Old Mistress Polly call you that when she first see you. You was long—skinny legs and arms like a spider. She say you not a nice, fat little baby like her babies. You just all bones. 'That's what we'll call her,' she say, 'Bones,'" Mama explained. "She has the say about names. Used to be a slave named Melissa here for a time. She had a nice little baby boy, and she named him Henry. Old Mistress Polly come to see him soon after he was born, and she laughed and said, 'That little colored baby isn't Henry!' She say his name is going to be Shoofly. Can you imagine that? Old Mistress heard Melissa call her baby Henry once after that, and she

slapped her face. Poor little baby was Shoofly after that. You learn quick not to argue with Old Mistress. They sell Shoofly the year after they sold his mama.

"That's why you been Bones ever since. It don't matter what anyone calls you. They just words that disappear in the air soon as they said. They have nothin' to do with who you are. Your mama knows just who you are," she said. A soft smile spread across her face. "Don't ever go against Old Mistress wishes again, Bones."

"I don't like that Old Mistress Polly," Bones whispered.

"I know," Mama whispered back. "But is a dangerous thing not to like her. So don't never say that again."

They had almost drifted off when there was a shuffling noise outside the cabin.

"Mama? You hear that?" Bones asked, sitting up.

"Hush, child. That nothin'," Mama answered. "Lie back down."

But Bones slipped off the bed, sure that she heard Franklin's cabin door creak open.

"Maybe they has to go relieve themselves," Mama whispered.

"I hear voices, Mama. I hear a man's voice." Bones cocked her head and pressed her ear tight to the wall. The only people who lived in that cabin were Franklin,

his three little sisters, his mama, Becky, and his granny. No man lived there since they had sold his pappy.

Clutching Lovely in her hand, Bones opened the door just a crack.

“Get back here, you hear me?” her mother snapped. “You gonna rile up the dogs.”

She leaped out of bed and went over to kneel next to Bones in the darkness.

“It’s Will,” Mama whispered, clearly exasperated. “Franklin’s pappy. Becky’s husband.”

“What? But he been sold a few years back.” Bones blinked in the darkness.

“I know. He sold couple miles down the river to Colonel Sam Smith, the same Colonel Smith who used to own Queenie. But he sneaks back about every month on a Sunday. They got that day off, just like us. He sneaks up the river to see Becky and their young ones. He waits in the woods. If he hears Franklin playin’ the banjo, that means it’s safe for him to come that night. If Franklin don’t play the banjo, it means it’s too dangerous, and he don’t come—he go on back to the Smiths’. He be leavin’ early in the mornin’ afore the turkeys and the roosters wake up.”

“What about the dogs? Why don’t they bark?” Bones asked.

“He brings two slabs of meat wrapped up in stinkweed that he picks from the riverbank. That way the dogs can’t smell it till he gets close. When he unwraps it, they done rather have that meat than chase after Will. And when he leaves in the morning, he unwraps the second piece and the same thing.” Mama laughed a little. “If them dogs ever run into Will, Masta be wonderin’ why they run up and kiss and love on him like he they long-lost friend. Ha!”

Bones was too astonished to speak.

“You must never ever tell nobody, Bones. They kill Will if they find him. You understand?” There was no mistaking the seriousness in Mama’s voice.

Bones thought of the whip and the salt and vinegar and said, “I understand, Mama.”

Mama smiled through the darkness. “Can always tell when he come, ’cause he brings her flowers that he picks along the way. Next day, Becky’s got them in her water cup.”

“Did my pappy ever bring you flowers, Mama?”

The smile slid off Mama’s face. “Sometimes. Been so long now I can hardly remember. They sold your pappy so far away he can’t bring me nothin’ now. Don’t have any idea where in God’s old world he be. Don’t even know if he’s still alive.”

“I’m fixin’ to find him for you when I’m a little older, Mama,” Bones confided.

“Don’t talk so foolish!” her mother scowled. “That kind of talk will get you in a heap of trouble.”

“Well, then, you hafta wait to see him in heaven, Mama,” Bones said.

“Maybe so, child, maybe so.” They went back to bed.

Bones crept out just before dawn to peek at the cabin next door and secretly watch until Will snuck out into the dim light. Hidden against the back of the cabin, Becky wrapped her arms around him and kissed his face and his neck and his chest. Franklin slipped his long, lanky arms around his father’s waist and buried his head in his thick shoulder while his three little sisters clung on Will like newborn puppies. Bones had never witnessed such a complete family wrapped in so much tenderness.

Finally, Will pulled away, unwrapped the meat, and tossed it at the waiting dogs before disappearing into the still dark woods.



“My Will says the Northern states gonna fight for sure if the Southern states don’t set us Negras free,” Becky said the next day. Will had become the slaves’ lifeline to the outside world. He was a house slave at

the Smiths’ plantation, serving in their dining room, which made him privy to dinner conversations. The Smiths entertained a great deal, and talk of trouble with the North was the topic of every dinner conversation with visitors lately. Bones now knew that Will relayed bits of information to his wife whenever he visited her, and she in turn passed it on to the rest of Master Brewster’s slaves.

Becky spoke under her breath as she and Mama pulled their hoes up a long garden row. She whispered so Bones, helping in the fields today, wouldn’t hear.

“It’s all right, Bones saw Will comin’ and goin’ last night,” Mama said.

Becky stopped short and looked fearfully from Bones to Mama.

“Don’t worry, Becky,” Mama said. “She knows not to tell. She won’t tell no one at all. Will you, Bones?”

“I swear.” Bones nodded vigorously. “Don’t want nothin’ to happen to Franklin’s pappy like what happened to mine.”

But Becky still looked nervous. “You ever say anything, Bones, I swear—”

“I won’t!” Bones promised. “I promise! I never say nothin’. Ever.”

Becky nodded, but she still glared at Bones as if she would thrash her if she ever broke her promise.

She turned back to Mama and finished her story in a low voice. "Will says settin' slaves free is all folks who come visitin' from the North talk about."

Mama made a face. "No white man I ever know gonna fight for no Negras. Humph."

Bones was silent, but she was taking in every word.

"It's true, Grace. He says it's true," Becky insisted. "They gonna set us free. Only reason we don't hear talk abouts it around here is cause that old Wolf Woman makes sure none of us around when they talkin' about anything. When they serve meals here, they have to scamper right out of the dinin' room. No waitin' around where we might hear somethin' said."

"My Will, he stands around the dinin' table at the Smiths'. He hears all the white folks' dinner talkin'. He says that's all the white folks care about these days. The North stirrin' up talk of a war if the South don't set us Negras free."

"What does that mean? Free. I ain't never been free," Mama hissed. "Don't know what that look like."

"Well, I guess I don't know either. But we's learned a lotta hard things in our life, Grace." She smiled slyly. "So I guess we could learn how to be free."



Chapter Nine

A low rumble of thunder rolled down the river. The air smelled of coming rain.

"Move along," Ben shouted as the last of the slaves dragged themselves up the dusty path from the fields to their cabins. Granny and Mama walked side by side, their hoes slung over their shoulders, their faces seamed with dirt from the fields. Bones lagged behind, swinging the wooden water bucket, still half full so they would have water that night.

House slaves in black jackets were taking in the glass lanterns from the porch tables so they wouldn't blow over if the wind kicked up. Off to the side of the house, a washerwoman took down the last of the dry sheets from the lines, snapping each one in the air before folding it into her basket.

Mama spied Old Mistress Polly first, and her eyes narrowed. Old Mistress was hurrying down the tree-lined path toward the big house with Queenie by her side, issuing orders while waving her hands in the air.

They were coming from the direction of the smokehouse, where several months' worth of salted pork, beef cuts, and ham hung from the ceiling beams. Bones figured she must have been giving the cook instructions about the coming week's meals. It was the first time Mama had seen Old Mistress since she had ordered Ben to beat Bones. The hair stood up on Bones's neck. *Please Mama, she thought. Just keep moving and don't look at her, or it'll be nothin' but trouble.*

All the slaves knew better than to look Old Mistress in the eye. Heads bent, they stared down at the ground and straggled along in silence. Bones peeked at her out of the corner of her eye, but then quickly stared down at the ground in front of her. Just ahead she saw Mama's head turn toward Old Mistress. *Don't look, Mama. Bones wanted to scream. Don't look at her!*

"And a nice ham for Sunday dinner. Do you have all that?" Old Mistress asked.

"Yes'm," Queenie replied, wagging her head.

Old Mistress seemed to notice the slow-moving group for the first time. She stopped short when she recognized Mama, and her wolf-gray eyes suddenly focused carefully on the other woman's face. Mama, expressionless, bent her head back down and stared straight at the ground. Bones could feel her heart beating through her shirt. Wolf Woman was intent on

trying to read if there was any sign of danger lurking in Mama's face, and she leaned forward a bit too carelessly. The toe of her leather-buttoned boot turned under and caught the hoop of her skirt. She did a little hop to try to save herself, to no avail. Her arms swooped about like a bird. She fell forward, caught herself, rocked backward, and spun around once before she finally fell. Her petticoats flew up over her head, and she landed on her elbows.

"Oh missus, oh my Lawd!" Queenie bent down and tried to scoop her up. Ben rushed over and helped. But even before she righted herself, Old Mistress's head spun around and caught Mama's eye as the slightest smile quickly vanished—undetected—from the slave's lips.

Ben and Queenie made a mighty fuss over their mistress, brushing her off and escorting her back into the house. But Old Mistress didn't say a word, and never took her eyes off Mama, following her with a squinty gaze until Mama disappeared into the slave quarters.

Once inside their cabin, Bones, still shaking, threw herself against the cabin door while Granny turned to Mama. She wagged her head and hissed, "Lucky she didn't sees you grinnin', or you'd be sleepin' in the boneyard tonight!"



Chapter Ten

“I can’t spare any men to cart off your chairs, Polly,” Master Brewster said as he tossed his breakfast napkin on the table. “You know that we need every hand we have to bring in the crops and chop wood this time of year.”

Bones rushed to quietly sweep the crumbs that fell from his napkin onto the rug.

“Jack,” Old Mistress fussed to her husband. “Nellie Hale said if we drop the two chairs off at her house she would have her shop fix them. The rungs are snapped out, and the seats are about to give way. We have Thanksgiving dinner coming up, and I don’t want any of our guests to crash to the dining room floor because we don’t have our chairs in proper condition.”

Bones kept quiet, but she could see someone was going to have to take the chairs to the Hales’ or there would be no peace at Stillwater.

“Have Mabel go, then—she knows the way,” Master Brewster said. “I cannot spare one man.”

“I suppose I could do that. She can wash the win-

dows another day,” Mistress said. She turned suddenly and looked down at Bones before swatting her on the back of the head.

“Lord, stop that wiggling, child!” Bones wasn’t sure if she should apologize to her mistress or keep still. She decided to keep quiet. The other slaves had taught her that silence was usually best.

“The girl is driving me out of my mind around the house, always wiggling and twisting her feet and hands,” Old Mistress carried on. “I tied her to a chair a few times, but it didn’t do a lick of good.” Mistress smiled at the thought. “Have Mabel take Bones with her to help, and get the child out of my house for a few hours. And Jack, please make sure you write passes for both Mabel and Bones before you go out in the fields. With all this fuss up North, more and more Negras are being stopped and checked. Just last week, two of the Johnson slaves were in town without passes and were thrown in jail till Frank Johnson went on down and got them out.”

“I know, I know,” Master Brewster muttered as he disappeared into his study to write the passes.



An hour later, Mabel sat up tall on the bench seat of the wagon, the two dining room chairs carefully

wrapped in old blankets and resting on straw in the back. Her bony fingers, swollen with rheumatism, had a tight grip on the reins.

“You ever been to the Hale farm?” Mabel asked, trying to make a little conversation with Bones as the wagon bumped along the dirt road.

Bones laughed. “I never been off Stillwater in all my life.”

“Most the slaves haven’t. Ha.” Bones knew Mabel was proud that she had often been sent on errands off the plantation. “It’s not a long way,” she said. “We’ll be there and back again before lunch.”

“Is we headed north?” Bones asked.

Mabel glanced at her from the corner of her eye. “Why you want to know such a thing, gal?” Bones just shrugged her shoulders, and they drove the rest of the way without talking. Old Mabel filled the time singing some of her favorite hymns, and Bones chimed in whenever she knew the words.

The Hales’ home wasn’t nearly as grand as Stillwater, but it sat up high on a hill above the river, with long fields rolling down to the water’s edge. Bones counted about half a dozen slaves with their backs bent, working in the fields.

Hound dogs ran out from behind the barn and

jumped up and down around the wagon, howling and barking at the intruders.

“Shoo! Get away from here,” Mabel hissed. “Where’s Mrs. Hale? Old Mistress Polly *told* her we’s comin’ sometime soon. I don’t like dogs ever since I was bit as a child.”

The door swung open and a tall, lean woman with blonde hair tied up in a bun stepped out on the porch. “Well, Mabel. I do declare you have brought the chairs and a little helper,” Mrs. Hale said.

“Yes, ma’am. I has the chairs wrapped up safe in the back, and this here is Bones,” Mabel said. “And my mistress sent over five jars of peach preserves for you all.”

“Well, well, then. Queenie’s peach preserves! Doesn’t get any finer than that!” Mrs. Hale stepped down from the front stairs and sent the dogs scurrying around to the back side of the house with a sharp command. “Why don’t you bring the jars of Queenie’s preserves inside, and I’ll have my girl Cleo fix you and your girl a glass of lemonade. Then you can be back on your way.”

She stopped a moment. “You got your passes?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Mabel answered.

“Good, good. Did anyone stop you on the way over?” Mrs. Hale looked directly at Mabel.

“No. No, I think they used to seeing old Mabel out in the cart,” she explained. “And they know I’m doing errands for my mistress.”

“I do believe you are right, Mabel. Well, go around the back way to the kitchen and have my girl give you a glass of lemonade to share with this one,” she motioned to Bones.

“Noah.” She waved at a thin, bent slave standing behind her. “Carry the two chairs down to the shop to be repaired. This little Bones child can help you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Bones jumped off the wagon and swung the back open to help with the chairs. If she did just as she was told, she might be able to accompany Mabel on other errands. She had been careful on the way over to commit the route to memory.

Noah picked up one chair, and Bones carefully carried the other as she followed him down the hill to the big barn.



Chapter Eleven

“Why they call you Bones?” Noah asked.

“Well, my name is really Agnes. You may call me that, please. Bones is just my nickel name.”

“Ah.” He laughed. “Nickname, I think you mean.”

The barn was two stories high, with six stalls for the horses along one side. On the opposite wall were laths and sawhorses and neat piles of different-sized wood planks.

“Gots some chairs that need fixin’,” Noah said to a tall black man bent over a table with his hammer. Two little boys fussed at his feet, playing with scraps of discarded wood.

“Pappy, can we help with the fixin’?” the younger of the two asked.

The man laughed and shook his head. “Not this year. Some year when you’s older, son.”

He took the first chair from Bones and the second from Noah, who wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Much obliged, Fortune. I don’t have the wind that I used to have,” Noah said.

Bones's feet suddenly felt stuck to the barn floor as if they were nailed there.

She stared—thunderstruck—until the tall man who Noah had just called Fortune turned his head to look at her, and she saw the long, lumpy scar where his left ear had once been.

“What you lookin’ at, girl?” he said, smiling. But Bones couldn’t speak.

“Pappy. Pappy, why can’t we help?” the youngest boy asked Fortune.

“No. Go out in the fields and take some water to your mama. She be lookin’ for you about now,” he said. “Shoo. Go on now.”

“I’ll take them out, Fortune.” Noah sighed as he led the two little boys out of the barn.

“Can I do somethin’ else for you?” he asked Bones. She still stood there, her mouth open and hands trembling by her sides.

“You are Fortune?” she whispered. She didn’t recognize the voice that came out of her mouth, it was so strained and shaky.

“That’s what they call me. Why? Who are you?”

She forgot her own name for a moment. Finally she whispered again. “Bones. Agnes May. I am Agnes May Brewster, and I have been lookin’ for you.”

He fell backwards against the sawhorse and stared back at her.

“Oh, my Lord,” he said. She noticed that his one remaining ear stuck off the side of his head, same way hers did.

Feeling a little stronger, she shook her head from side to side and said softly, “That all you got to say, Pappy? I been plannin’ and schemin’ to find you almost my whole life. Mama and Granny has missed you somethin’ awful. And all this time. All this time you was right down the road.”

“Bones,” he uttered, looking down at his big hands.

“Agnes. Call me Agnes. Why you never come to see us?” she asked.

“I got caught running so many times. I run again, Bones, and—”

“Agnes!” she exclaimed, feeling stronger still.

“Agnes. I run again, and they kill me the next time.” He turned his head so she could see more clearly where they had taken an ax to his left ear.

“What about my mama?” Bones asked.

He looked up. “How is she? She have another man?”

“No. Still waiting for you, which is more than I can say for you. You got another woman, I see. You got two children?”

“I gots three children now. Just had another baby last month.” He spoke the words so low she wasn’t sure she heard them right.

Tears welled up in Bones’s eyes and ran down her face. But she didn’t make a whimper.

“Don’t tell your mama,” he said, after a long pause. “Let her think I’m in Alabami or someplace far away.”

Bones looked around at the half-finished pieces of furniture. A dresser with intricate carvings of flying birds on the drawers. A mirror at least six feet tall carved with looping ribbons and roses waiting for a second coat of gold leaf. *Sure never seen anything more beautiful*, she thought.

She reached in her pocket and pulled out her carved peach-pit heart and held it out for him to see, staring hopefully up into his face.

“What’s that?” he asked. “Whatcha got there?”

She didn’t answer.

“Is that a peach pit? Huh. That one looks real fine. Whoever did that is good with a carvin’ knife. It’s kind of shaped like an apple. Is it supposed to be an apple?”

“It’s a heart,” she said softly, her bottom lip trembling. “Mama said you made it for me the day I was born.”

“I did?” He looked at the carving like he’d never seen it before. “Well, if I did that, I sure did a fine job.”

It took everything she had not to throw herself into his arms. But she had already lost so much today. She was afraid that if she let go, she wouldn’t be able to stop everything inside of her from just spilling out and even after it was all gone—it wouldn’t change a darn thing.

Mabel’s voice soared through the silence, calling her name. “Bones! It’s time to go. Get on up here now.”

Bones’s mouth was as dry as a cracker, but she managed to say, “Alls the places in the world I dreamed you’d be, *alls the places*—but I never dreamed you be right down the road.”

“I’m sorry, Agnes,” he said. “You a beautiful little girl—look just like your mama. I’m just so sorry how it all come about.”

She couldn’t answer him. After all this time, there was just nothing else she could think to say. So she turned around, left the barn, and crawled into the back of the wagon.

“Sit up here and keeps me company, Bones, if you want.” Mabel offered, slurping down the last sip of lemonade.

When Bones didn’t respond, she muttered, “Suit yourself.”

Bones lay in the back of the wagon, her head

propped up on a small bale facing the Hale farm. She stared as it grew smaller and smaller until it disappeared within the horizon. Usually, her hands or feet twitched or fidgeted, but every bit of her energy was focused on thinking about what she would do now. She was as still as the pieces of straw that she lay on. Did he know that he was only a few miles from Stillwater? Had he known that? If he did, would he have come to them like Franklin's pappy? Did he still love her mother? Had he jumped the broom with this new woman? Had he ever loved Bones—longed for her the way she longed for him?

This was the end of something, she knew, and it made her heart ache. Granny told her that happiness depended on three things: someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. Bones had Granny and Mama to love. Every slave had more than enough to do. *I'll have to find something else to look forward to now*, she thought.

The wagon rattled up Stillwater's drive just about noontime, and Mabel dropped Bones off by the backfields.

"Old Mistress say to drop you off when we get back so you can carry water to the field hands." She shook her head. "Can't says you been much company, girl."



"You enjoy your ridin' this morning?" Mama came up beside Bones, her face creased with dirt and sweat and a broad grin spread across her face. "You all right? Look like you saw a ghost instead of enjoying a mornin' off work."

"I'm fine Mama, just old Mabel's driving was so jerky it make my stomach sick. I'm fine now. I'll get some water when I go to the river and be just fine," Bones said, slinging the empty water jugs over her shoulders and running down to the riverbank.

The cool water filled up the clay vessels that hung at each end of the rawhide string around her neck. She thought about what would happen to her if she fell into the river and let it carry her on downstream. Baltimore, she remembered from the maps she'd studied in Liza's room. She would float right on down the James River to Baltimore and then on out to sea. *Nothing holding me here now*, she thought, *except Mama and Granny*.

That night she dropped her carved heart in its bottle under the bed pallet and crawled on top to think things through. She'd just have to adjust her plans. No need to be figuring out the southern states anymore. But all her learning wouldn't be for nothing.

She had a new destination in mind now. Someday. Maybe she'd go when she was a few years older. She'd start readjusting her plans now.

North.

Someday that's where she'd head. North.



Chapter Twelve

“Finish dustin’ everything in the dinin’ room and then do the same in Masta’s study,” Queenie ordered. “But don’ go movin’ anything from its place, you hear?” She tucked a stray hair under her freshly ironed bandana turban. Bones noticed that while Queenie was always trying to tame her unruly hair, it had a mind of its own. Little pieces sprung out the sides or top of her head no matter how tightly she pulled it into a bun or how much she tried to vanquish them beneath her turban. Now that her hair was turning gray, her efforts seemed even more fruitless.

“I hear,” sighed Bones, tucking a few rags, beeswax, and a bottle of linseed oil in the pockets of her apron. “Queenie, how old is you?” she asked suddenly. “And is that the name you borned with?”

“Why, I don’ know how old I is. But I knows my mammy was Nellie and my pappy was John, and I was born in the summer. They gives me the name Queenie. I got five sisters and five brothers, but I

don't know where any of them is. They got sold off before me. I don't know I been sold till Masta call me to the big house and tell me. I belong to Masta Brewster from then on."

She gave the young girl a gentle push. "Humph. It a funny thing, but the jaws is the only part of the body that likes to work. Better get to you chores or you be sold off 'cause you nothin' but a lazybones. I got my cookin' to do here." Queenie carefully shaved pieces from a block of sugar, placing them into a wooden pestle and grinding the sweet slivers to a fine consistency with her mortar. There would be a tart for dessert tonight—filled with figs glistening under a coating of honey, fresh from the plantation's hives.

"Be extra careful around the glass bowls and dishes," Queenie called out. "You drop and break somethin' and Old Mistress—she'll whip you again." Bones, with Lovely swinging from her neck, let the kitchen-house door flap shut behind her.

She worked quickly, inhaling the faint honey smell of the beeswax as she swirled it in round, shiny circles on the dark wood furniture. She moved each of the tall glass hurricane lamps, dusting and polishing under each as she went along.

After finishing the dining room, she carefully moved

books in the study, dusting each one before putting them back exactly where they came from. She couldn't help it—her eyes read the words on the front of each book. But she was careful not to look as if she was reading them, in case old Wolf Woman was lurking around the corner. She was almost finished when she picked up a small red leather volume to dust it. The title written across the front of the book in large black letters caught her eye.

Slave Birth Records, Brewster Plantation

Bones wasn't sure what the word *records* meant, but her fingers froze around the book. Slave birth. She stood motionless, listening for any sound of the Wolf Woman before slowly turning around. She was alone. She placed the book on the table so if she was caught she could quickly close the cover and act as though she were simply dusting. She couldn't read the first page when she opened the worn leather cover. It was written in the curly letters that Miss Liza had told her were called cursive. Turning the pages, she discovered neatly printed entries for every slave that had been bought or born or died at Stillwater Plantation. A page was allotted to each slave in order to record their

name, birth date, if and when they had been sold, and the date of their death.

She closed the book and pretended to dust under the table. Had she heard breathing in the hall outside the room? She turned and looked but saw no one and went back to the little book. Flipping the pages as silently as a thief, she came at last to her name. AGNES MAY BREWSTER. She stared gap-mouthed, tracing the letters with her finger, her name fairly blooming off the page.

Agnes May Brewster
Born: July 1843. Colored slave.

That was all. She closed the book and furiously dusted and waxed around the room a second time, always keeping her ears open. Finally, she picked up the little red book again and quickly found her page. Her fingers trembled as she slowly, quietly, and inch-by-inch tore the page away from the spine, folded it in half, and tucked it deep inside her apron pocket. She placed the book back where it belonged and walked quickly out the back door and down the path to the kitchen house, her heart hammering in her ears.

“You finally done, Bones?” Queenie asked as the

girl neatly replaced the linseed oil and dusting rags in the kitchen’s cleaning cupboard.

“Yes’m. I’m goin’ home now for a minute before I go back down to the fields. Don’ feel so good. Linseed-oil vapors got to my head.” She shoved her hands in her pockets so Queenie wouldn’t notice them trembling.

She ran back to the cabin and took the bottle that held her carved heart out from under the sleeping pallet. She read the page with her name one more time, then quickly rolled it up, stuffed it inside the bottle alongside the carved heart, and corked it. She took a candle from beside the fireplace, lit it, and held it over the cork, letting the wax drip down and seal the stopper around the bottle’s neck. Outside, she looked around to be certain she wasn’t being watched and crawled underneath the cabin to hide the bottle next to a rock.

The danger of her impetuous act weighed on her more and more as the day went on. Granny and Mama were still working in the fields when she got back to the cabin that evening.

That night it rained hard, the drops making *ping-ping* sounds as they found their way through a small hole in the roof and hit the metal pot that Granny kept by the door. *Thank goodness I sealed the top of*

the bottle with wax, Bones thought. What if the rain started a river of mud that ran under the cabin and flushed the bottle out from behind the rock and into the open where someone might find it in the morning? What if some animals dug it out? Bones lay in her space on the straw pallet between the two older women, her mind racing with unruly thoughts of the punishment that was sure to come if her crime were discovered. And this time she knew she would not be alone in the punishment. It was unbearable to think what Old Mistress would do to Granny and Mama.

“Why you so jittery? You thrashin’ so much I can’t sleep,” Granny complained, punching down the straw under her head into a more comfortable shape.

“I’m not,” she protested, faking weariness and squeezing her eyes shut. Where could she move the bottle so it would be safe? She considered the woods. But the forests in these parts were infested with panthers and bears, and she had seen bears walking like a man out of Master’s fields, carrying ears of corn in their arms. The only time anyone went into the woods, they were on horseback or armed with axes to chop down trees for firewood. For every spot she thought of, she could imagine the Wolf Woman sneaking up on her like a whisper, discovering her, and the

whupping and salty vinegar that would follow. She had been warned, and next time it would be worse. She might even be sold. Taken away from her Mama. She wondered if her pappy knew when they called him and the other men up to the big house that they were going to sell him that day or if he thought it was a day like any other. Did he think he was going up to trim Old Mistress’s hedges or paint the front door? Did he wonder when they shackled him to the other two slaves and threw him in the back of the wagon how his wife would feel?

Bones would rather die than be sold. Agnes May would rather die.



Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, Bones awoke to the sound of the turkeys plopping down from the trees. She quickly slid out of bed and out the door, and walked around the cabin. There was no bottle lying on the ground in the open. She blew out a deep breath and went back inside.

“You walkin’ in your sleep, Bones?” Mama asked, rubbing her own eyes. “What were you doing?”

Bones let out a quick laugh and lied. “No, I’m not walkin’ in my sleep. I just thought I heard Queenie comin’ with breakfast.”

“I told you the Lawd gave you those big ears so you could hear extra good!” Granny said, gleefully. “Listen now. You hear that? That’s Queenie’s wagon coming now. Bones heard it before anyone else.”

The roosters carefully picked their way across the dirt yard, stopping occasionally to crow and yank an unlucky worm from its hiding spot in the damp ground. Doors creaked up and down the rows of slave quarters as people came out for breakfast, carrying

their mussel-shell scoops. Queenie’s horse-drawn wagon rattled down the muddy road carrying the big pots filled with corn bread porridge and molasses laced with whatever meat was left over from the Brewsters’ dinner the night before. She stood and scooped heaping servings onto each wooden tray, her beefy black arms still coated with a dusting of fine white flour from the biscuits she’d made earlier for Master’s breakfast.

A half hour later, the trays were returned to the wagon, and Queenie prepared to drive back to the kitchen. The slaves headed off to the morning’s work, and the sun began to rise up over the river.

“Bones, Masta wants you to carry water to the field hands again today,” Queenie said. “They be workin’ extra to get in the harvest. Need every hand they can get in the field.” She stared down at the child, her chin rolls bunching up like an accordion. The cook hoisted her broad hips up onto the wagon’s seat with a groan. She practically blotted out the sun as she waved for the little girl to follow her back to the kitchen house to clean the breakfast dishes and start preparing for lunch.

“You can brings that little corncob baby doll with you. Too bad she can’t carry water, too.” Queenie laughed at her little joke.

Bones nodded, chasing behind the wagon up to the pump house to fetch the water gourds. Just outside the kitchen door, Master's dogs lazed by the back steps, waiting to be called to run with the horses. They ate the same meals as the slaves, only the dogs were served first. Bones wrapped the strap around the back of her neck and the two gourds hung down on either side of her chest. She headed down to the river to begin her water brigade, which would go on all day again today: Fill the gourds, go to the fields. When a man or woman raised their hand, she would rush to give them water. When the gourds were almost empty, she would head back down to the riverbank to refill them.

The safest place to collect water from the James River was a small finger of land dotted with scrub pine and dwarf oak that dangled out into the river just below the fields. Currents swirled in a shallow pool on the inside crook of the finger, so a person could easily catch the water here without slipping into the faster-moving river and risk being carried downstream.

Bones's body was in the fields that day, but her mind was drained of all thoughts save for the bottle hidden under the cabin. There was only one name on that page in the bottle—AGNES MAY BREWSTER. There would be no mistaking who had torn it from its

place. And she could not bring herself to destroy it. She was someone. It said so on that paper. She was more than just someone's little old belonging. She would have to get it off the plantation. As she crouched down, filling the gourds with the cool river water, she hatched her plan.

The dinner bell rang that evening, long after the sun had gone down. Some of the men were still straggling back from the fields, their shirts drenched in sweat, as Queenie's wagon rattled up with huge pots of dinner. The smell of salt meat, cabbage, potatoes, and shortbread drifted above her creaky wagon. Pulling her mussel shell out of its place in her cabin, Bones was the first in line.

"Well, well. You must be hungry from runnin' back and forth between the river and the fields. Lots harder than fannin' flies away from Miss Liza," Queenie teased.

Bones ignored her. She ate the scoop of food and returned the wooden tray to the wagon.

"Don' be actin' like you can't hear me. With them big ole floppy ears the Lawd gave you, I knows you hears everything." Queenie clucked her tongue. "Get a good night sleep. Need you to carry water again tomorrow, Bones."

“It’s AGNES,” the little girl shot back.

“What you say?” Looking down, Queenie laughed at the little girl’s fierceness.

“I said, it’s Agnes. My name is AGNES!” Bones was practically shouting.

Queenie laughed like this declaration was the funniest thing she had heard all week, rolled her eyes, and sniffed. “Well, yes’m. If that’s what you say.”

“Agnes May,” said Bones hotly under her breath. “I am Agnes May. I am a someone.”



Chapter Fourteen

Thankfully the wild turkeys were as tired as everyone else that night, and they stopped gobbling early. Lying between Mama and Granny, Bones listened until she was sure Granny’s snoring and Mama’s gentle seesaw breathing meant they were fast asleep. She needed to be sure. She had been too nervous to chew her supper well, and now it stuck in her chest like a stone.

She took Lovely, with her black button eyes gleaming, off her neck and left the doll tucked safely between Mama and Granny. She slipped off the sleeping pallet from the end so as not to wake the women, and peered out the door, looking up the row of slaves’ quarters. She was grateful tonight that theirs was the last cabin, closest to the fields and the river. The primitive door sagged against the floor when opened wide, so she took care to open it only partially, and she squeezed out the narrow opening. Barefoot, she tip-toed around back and crawled, snakelike, under the

cabin. She moved slowly, crouching, with her hands in front of her, feeling along. In the blackness of the night, her fingers finally wrapped around the neck of the bottle. She sucked in her breath.

The moon was growing bigger every night now. Soon it would be a full harvest moon, but tonight it showed only half of itself behind shifting clouds in the inky stillness. She didn't dare run at full speed for fear that she would fall and the bottle would break. With light, sure steps, Bones hurried down the path alongside the now-quiet fields, past a pile of peach-tree wood waiting to be stacked the next day. She hesitated. For an instant, she thought she saw something move by the woodpile, and she strained her eyes. Nothing. She tried to keep her mind off the eerie night noises coming from the forest. A bear would be nothing compared to Old Mistress Polly if she were caught. A lantern glowed on the back porch of the big house like it did every night. It helped to keep prowling animals away. No one in the big house was awake as she slouched along, undetected under the big sky. If someone were restless and awoke and stepped onto the porch and saw her out in the middle of the night, there would be no explaining.

Reaching the edge of the river, Bones crouched

down and crept out onto the same finger of land where she had gathered up water for the field slaves earlier in the day. The moon shot glittery streaks, radiating along the surface of the James River. She remembered the map of Virginia on Liza's wall and imagined the river's cool, deep waters rolling along for miles before emptying into the Chesapeake Bay and then pouring out into the Atlantic Ocean. It seemed to her a fine place to set her name free. She allowed herself a long moment to imagine where it might go. Her name and her heart. If only she could squeeze herself and her Mama and Granny into the bottle—they could all float away. *They can own me and beat me and sell me, but a part of me will forever be free*, she thought, the thrill of the idea racing through her. *I'll live forever knowing that.*

Kneeling low to the water, she carefully tossed the bottle out into the stronger currents where it was immediately picked up. It bobbed for a moment before being swallowed up in the blackness, rushing away under the moon to begin its magical journey.