

SUNFLOWER SISTERS

A Novel

MARTHA HALL KELLY



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Mary Woolsey

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

1859

NO ONE SUSPECTED THE BLOND BOY'S CARGO AS HE DROVE his crude pony cart through the streets of Charleston.

Mother, my younger sister Georgy, and I had come to South Carolina by the invitation of Pastor Cox at the African Free Church for a two-day stay. We'd stepped out the previous morning past the mansion houses and palmetto trees, the atmosphere so gentle and refined, to make our daily calls and leave Mother's ecru cards on the silver trays.

Mrs. Charles Woolsey, 8 Brevoort Place, New York City.

Certainly nothing forced itself unpleasantly on our attention, but every black face in the street or greeting us so kindly at a front door reminded us of the system of slavery so robust there and strengthened our resolve to continue the fight.

Upon our walk home from Sunday services, the scent of crape myrtle in the air, a boy driving a pony cart drew up beside us dressed in a clean white shirt and homespun trousers. His rear wheel in disrepair, it bumped with every rotation, keeping his rate of speed not much greater than ours.

"We find ourselves a bit lost," Mother called to the boy. "Can you guide us to the Charleston Hotel?"

"I'm going that way, ma'am. Will point you there."

I warmed to his southern accent, a good-natured boy, milk-skinned, twelve years old or so, yellow hair shining in the sun. That brought to mind my own towheaded daughters, left back at the hotel with our friend Mrs. Wolcott, who no doubt stood near the door waiting for my return. Though we'd been gone less than two hours I missed them terribly as well.

"Where do you live?" Mother asked the boy.

"Here and there." He set his face toward the sun. "You? Sound like a Virginian."

Mother smiled, happy when someone recognized her accent from her former home. "Indeed I am. Left there when I was a girl but suppose I still speak with a trace of it. Live in New York City now. We are here as the guests of Pastor Cox at the African church. Do you know him?"

"No, ma'am."

We walked along, the only sound the thump of the broken wheel.

"It was a lovely celebration of the Eucharist," Mother said. "Over three hundred celebrants."

He turned and smiled. "Bet you was the only white folks there."

"Yes. But we were welcomed quite enthusiastically."

"Once, my ma had me in church every Sunday. She's dead now."

The boy pulled a piece of bread from a tin lunch bucket at his feet, took one bite, turned and slipped the rest under the tarp.

"Do you attend school?" Mother asked.

"No, ma'am. No school'd take the likes of me."

"I doubt that very much," Georgy said.

My attention was drawn to the back bed of the cart and the slightest movement beneath the tarp there.

"Where are you headed?" I asked.

He pointed to a white building up ahead. "The mart. Go every Sunday. Make my rounds on Saturday, come here the next day, so my stock's fresh."

"Rounds where?"

"All over, ma'am. Pa's regulars. Hardly ever come empty-handed."

The boy rode toward a white building with high black gates at the entrance and we followed. It was a hulking place, the word *MART* shining in gilt above the entrance, a crimson flag flapping in the breeze.

The boy pointed at a roof off in the distance. "Your hotel's up the road a piece and hang a right."

"You've been terribly helpful," Mother said.

The boy rode to the iron gates and a stout, red-bearded man, bamboo cane in hand, swung open the gate door.

"Hey, boy," he said, rapping his cane on the wood of the cart. "You're supposed to come round back with these, not to the front door, for pity's sake."

"Pa needs me home."

The boy turned in his seat up front and flung back the tarp. There within lay three colored children of varying ages, each dressed only in the crudest cloth diaper. The oldest, perhaps nine months old, held on to the cart edge and pulled herself up to standing.

"My God," I said.

The child reached her arms up to me in the universal baby language of love and goodness and I lifted her from the cart. I held her close and breathed in her heavenly baby scent, of milk and soap and innocence. Someone had taken loving care of her.

Upon the cart floor two infants lay upon the crude boards, one not more than a few days old.

The boy handed the gatekeeper a folded paper.

"Where are their mothers?" I asked, shaken through. "They've not a blanket among them. When did they last eat?"

The gatekeeper read the paper and then stepped to the cart. "All girls? Supposed to be one boy?"

"Take it up with Pa," the boy said.

The gatekeeper bent over the cart and lifted out both infants. "One of 'em's runty."

The boy shrugged. "Just pick up what I'm told. That big one cried most the way here."

I held the girl closer and she settled her head upon my shoulder in a most tender way.

The gatekeeper handed the boy a folded stack of bills, which he tucked in his hip pocket, shook the reins, and started off.

The gatekeeper charged at me. “Don’t have time to coddle the likes of you. Hand it over.”

I stepped back. “I will not, sir.”

“You northern women? What a pain in my ass. You got one hundred dollars to buy her?”

I reached for the purse at my wrist. “I can write you an IOU this minute.”

As I reached aside, the man took his opportunity to wrench the child from my arms. She cried most piteously, reaching back, arms outstretched as the gatekeeper handed her to another filthy accomplice who carried her away at arm’s length.

We tried to follow, but the gatekeeper clanged the gate shut, and through the bars said, “No ladies allowed at the sale. This is rough trade here, not for delicate sensibilities,” and walked away into the crowd.

I wrapped one hand around an iron bar as I watched the children spirited back to a room beyond our view, one palm across my mouth to contain the horror of it all. What feeling human could hear those cries and not feel compassion to the quick? Three mothers sat somewhere in fresh agony without their precious girls.

I turned to Mother. “We spent all of yesterday calling on Charleston’s best. We must appeal to someone.”

Mother kept her gaze on the gathering crowd. “To *whom*? This is about money, Mary. These planters will never give up slavery willingly. We can only elect a president who will cut it off at its head.”

All too familiar with the concept of slavery, we’d attended Dr. Cheever’s lectures at the Cooper Institute, read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* many times over, and seen advertisements announcing slave sales in *The Charleston Courier* that morning. But nothing could have prepared us for seeing such a horrific spectacle in the flesh.

We examined the crowded market area with growing dread as the sale began, a low-ceilinged room, open to a rear yard where a brick building rose up, its barred windows crowded with dark faces. In the long room an auctioneer took his place upon a crude wooden platform, slapping his leather crop against his boot, the tense spirit of moneymaking in the air.

He seemed a ruffian, in his check trousers and shabby Panama hat, pulling at his tuft of yellow chin beard.

“Gentlemen, are you ready?” His voice echoed off the stone walls.

Groups of bidders clustered around the platform, gentlemanly looking men just such as we met every day at the hotel table, wearing their beaver top hats and beards of formal cut. Most held a cigar in one hand, the catalog printed with that day’s human stock in the other.

The objects of the sale stood, in every shade of complexion, backs against the walls, being roughly examined. Groups of mothers and children stood near us, the women in good calico dresses and clean white pinafores and headscarves, children bareheaded.

We craned our necks to see into an anteroom off the main chamber, where men questioned the women, prying open their mouths, lifting their skirts, and exposing their most private parts.

“I saw such a sale in Richmond as a girl. Many masters sell their own colored children, and their own children begot of those daughters.”

“And this is the nineteenth century,” Georgy said.

“Tonight, not a steamer or row of train cars will leave this cruel city without its own sad burden of these unhappy ones.”

Georgy linked arms with Mother. “We mustn’t get complacent and accept it simply because it’s the norm. Mrs. Wolcott knows the mayor. We must speak to him.”

Mother moved her gaze to the auctioneer. “The mayor most likely buys and sells his slaves from here. It’s all perfectly legal. Our urgings for freedom will fall on deaf ears and they will certainly have us carted off.”

“We must also do something, now,” I said. “Otherwise we condone it.”

“I agree, Mary,” Georgy said. “But it may take some stealth to do good here.”

The gatekeeper prodded two young boys and a slightly older girl up onto the platform. The girl stood poised and well mannered as she watched the crowd with a guarded expression, an arm around each boy, her hair wrapped in the same white cloth the older women wore. The boys stared out into the crowd, too young to hide the terrible fear in their eyes.

The auctioneer presented them, arm extended, with an open palm.

“Boys—Scipio, age ten, Clarence, twelve—and girl, Sukey, fourteen. Girl, good housemaid, clean back. The boys bound to be prime field hands.”

Just inside the gate stood a woman with an infant in her arms, another clinging to her skirts. She bowed her head and cried into one palm.

“Do you know those young ones?” Mother asked the woman, her voice low.

The woman wiped her eyes, cast a furtive glance toward the platform and then turned toward Mother. “My children, all,” she said, barely above a whisper. “There, missis, that’s mine on the stand now.”

Mother pulled her shawl closer. “Dear God.”

“That’s my two boys and my girl, Sukey. She’s not my blood, but I raised her. A good girl. Those boys love her fierce.”

The woman clutched her infant closer and looked about.

“You can speak with us, madam, without fear,” Mother said.

“I expect them to sell some off, but I just want to keep my two little ones here. They’re too young to be without a ma.”

“And your husband?” I asked.

“Sold. Months back.”

“Where to?” Mother asked.

“Don’t know, missis. It’s hard having the old man drifted away. But what can I do? My heart’s broke and that’s all.”

Buyers crowded the platform around Sukey and the boys.

“Take off her dress,” one called out.

“Should’ve checked her earlier,” the auctioneer said. “You know the rules.”

The auctioneer yanked the girl’s dress down off her shoulder and then grabbed her by the chin. “Smile, girl.”

Sukey forced a smile.

“And look at those dimples. She could be a fancy girl one day.”

The auctioneer lifted her hem to show her ankles and legs, but Sukey grabbed the skirt from his hand.

“What’s the matter with her eyes?” one bidder called out.

“She’s crying, that’s all,” the auctioneer said. “But she’s fine.”

“Sell the girl separate,” one bidder said. “Six hundred for her.”

“Sold—” the auctioneer called.

Sukey’s brothers locked their arms around her waist. The auctioneer pulled them from her and the boys cried and fought him with fists.

Through the bars, Georgy passed the woman Mother’s card, a twenty-dollar Liberty gold coin hidden beneath it. “Quickly. Take this.”

“Oh, no, miss.”

Georgy lowered the card down the iron rung of the gate, toward the woman’s hand. “Here. No one will see. It isn’t much, but it’s all we have at the moment. If you can make it to New York City, come to the address here on the card for help.”

The woman glanced about, then slipped both card and coin deep into her apron pocket. “Thank you, missis. Most kind. I’ll keep it hid.”

The gatekeeper approached and nudged the woman, babe in arms, and her young son toward the block.

She turned. “I’m called Alice,” she said, as he prodded them more urgently up the platform steps.

“I don’t know if she’ll ever be free to find Brevoort Place,” Mother said.

“It’s something at least,” I said.

Alice slowly mounted the steps with her two children and gathered them to her. The auctioneer gave his usual recitation, suggesting a separate price for Alice and her children, and the gavel quickly fell.

“Sold,” called the auctioneer. “One hundred dollars for James and the infant, Anthony. Alice, nine hundred dollars.”

Alice fell to her knees in front of the auctioneer, begging to keep her children.

Mother turned away in terrible temper, heading up Chalmers Street toward the hotel, and we followed, the misery of those sold still keen in our minds, Alice’s frantic wails echoing around us, her agony beyond sympathy.

I’d seen that look before on Mother. After Father died, leaving her with eight children to raise. When we cried as she moved us all to strange New York City.

The look that said, *We will change this terrible situation. Or die trying.*

Georgy

BREVOORT PLACE, NEW YORK CITY

APRIL 1861

UNCLE EDWARD DROPPED ME AT THE NEW YORK HOSPITAL, A massive, stone wedding cake of a place, an oasis of calm after our carriage fought its way down Broadway, the street teeming with frantic citizens mobilized by the prospect of impending war.

Hours earlier, the day had started as any other. I stood during breakfast in the dining room at our home at 8 Brevoort Place, a four-story brownstone-fronted town house on the east side of Manhattan, as my sister Jane fixed the fallen hem of my new dress, a black silk simply relieved in white.

Mother sat at the table, closest to the fire, clothed in her morning dress, directing Margaret, one of our two day maids, in her white servant's cap and apron, where the hot dishes should go. Only three of my six sisters, Abby, Jane, and Carry, were gathered there that day, with Mary and Hatty off traveling and Eliza at her country home.

Abby, the eldest, sat next to Mother, bent over her correspondence.

Jane, her next in age, crouched at my feet, intent on my fallen hem, her black sewing box with the mother-of-pearl flowers splayed open beside her on the carpet, a surgical kit of needles and threads, ten shades of white alone.

I smoothed back her red-blond hair, which waved down past her shoulders and always brought to mind Botticelli's Venus. "Do hurry, Jane."

She pulled at my skirt. "Stay still, Georgy, or I'll draw blood."

Our youngest sister, Carry, sat on Mother's other side, feeding our little white mongrel dog, Pico, scraps of doughnut.

"Frank Bacon will like that dress," Carry said.

I brushed a phantom speck off my skirt. "I'm not interested in Frank Bacon in the least."

Abby looked up from her letter. "You shun a perfectly good beau when others go without."

"Marry him yourself, then."

Color rose in Abby's cheeks and I instantly regretted those words. At thirty-three years old, Abigail had long since stopped waiting for our dear cousin Theodore Winthrop to propose; and at thirty-one, Jane no longer had any prospects either—her suitors had all married others or joined the military in preparation for war or drifted off to Europe. So it was generally believed Abby and Jane would never marry.

"He won't come around forever," Abby muttered.

"With that little beard of his cut so short, he looks like an Italian king," I said.

The trill of the doorbell sounded from the front of the house, sending our devoted Margaret, cap ribbons fluttering, out to answer it, as we froze like startled elk at the idea of a morning visitor invading our sacred space.

"At this hour?" Mother asked.

In seconds Uncle Edward bounded in, folded *New York Tribune* in one hand. Uncle was always welcome, a fine man whose name was repeated with praise by all who knew him, his only two faults a touch of vanity and a bit of a loose tongue. His bright appearance was so like Father's had been, his honest blue eyes full of charity and love. He even dressed as Father had, in quality cutaway coats, his pant legs nicely tailored, accentuating his well-rounded calves.

Mother nodded to him. "Oh, Edward, it's you. Do sit."

"I'm on my way to the club—can't stay long. What *news*. It's pandemonium out there. How can you all be so calm?"

“Have a cup of tea. Jane found sugar harvested in Haiti without the cruelty of slavery.”

“Certainly you’ve heard?” he asked, looking from one of us to the next.

Carry leaned in, her hair ribbon dangling close to the syrup on her griddle cakes. “Heard what, Uncle?”

“I know you’ve been following the events in South Carolina closely. . . .”

“Yes,” Abby said.

“Word just in from Charleston gives the profound impression—”

“Uncle, *please*,” Abby said.

“—that Fort Sumter has been fired upon.”

Carry jumped up as if stung. “We’re at war!”

“Confederates fired the first shot at four-thirty, before sunrise, upon the national flag. Major Anderson is withdrawing from the island. The citizens of Charleston stood on rooftops and cheered.”

Jane tied off her thread and tossed the little scissors into her sewing box with a clatter. “So the South is indeed seceding. It’s all so upsetting.”

“Which states will stay with the Union?” Mother asked.

“All the Northern states have sent dispatches to President Lincoln offering money and men. Maryland and Kentucky have yet to declare.”

Mother stood. “Margaret, bring the mahogany table down from my room. And the lint press. We will set up in the front parlor. There will be great need for bandages.”

Uncle Edward walked toward the rear hallway to the bedroom stairs. “Where’s your son? Still abed so late?”

Mother stepped into his path. “What do you need with Charley?”

“Well, he may want to enlist. There’s already a center up on Broadway. The Winthrop brothers will join, I’m sure.”

“His cousins are grown men, Edward. Charley is just twenty-one. You want to encourage your poor, dead brother’s only son?”

Uncle Edward tossed the newspaper onto the table and Carry snatched it up. “They’ve been calling for nurses all week in case of war. Recruiting this morning at the hospital.”

“Nurses? I’ve never heard—”

“We’re at *war*, Mother,” Abby said.

I stepped toward Uncle Edward. “I’m applying.”

Abby dropped her pen. “Goodness me, Georgy. A *nurse*? They make female convicts do that work. Ten days in jail and then it’s off to nurse at Bellevue.”

“This is different,” I said. “Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell is involved. I’ve read the notices in the paper all week. Preparing a brigade of trained nurses.”

“All nonsense,” Jane said.

I slid my gloves from the mantel and tried to avoid the sight of the ivory-handled fan, fanned out like a peacock’s tail, displayed there in the glass box Mother had made for it. The thank-you to Father and me for our actions that day on the beach.

I turned to face Carry. “It is all very proper. Overseen by a committee of esteemed doctors. And who will stop me, with none of you yet dressed?”

Uncle Edward touched my forearm. “Georgy, it is not a pastime for a refined young woman. Assisting crude soldiers with their bedpans—”

“I couldn’t care less about being refined, Uncle.”

Abby looked to Mother. “She’ll catch something dreadful.”

“I’m twenty-eight. I can manage myself, thank you. Besides, Eliza serves as a nurse up in Fishkill.”

Mother hurried to me and smoothed one hand down my back. “Eliza bandages the locals and hands out tonics. This is *war*, Georgy dear. Isn’t it best we stay together through this?”

I tried not to look at Mother’s careworn face or meet her steely gaze; she was always able to woo me with her kindness and platitudes. Jane Eliza Woolsey was a smart opponent, formidable in her tenderness and grace. “There are many other ways to contribute to the cause, here at home,” she said.

I smoothed two fingers down her powdered cheek. How could I tell her I’d go mad here on the sidelines, in this dear old house filled with reminders of Father, as the whole world marched off to war?

“I will not just sit here, Mother.”

Carry held up the newspaper. "There's a whole list of nursing qualifications in here and you have none of them."

I pulled on my bonnet with the pink rosebud face trimmings and tied the ribbons under my chin. "I've seen it."

Carry read from the paper. "*In order to earn the coveted blue ticket, candidates must possess the grace to submit to firm discipline—*"

Abby laughed. "May be challenging for someone Father called his wild child—"

—and the willingness to wear very plain regulation nursing costume."

"Certainly wear that French bonnet for the committee," Jane said. "It marks you as a fly-away for sure."

"Stay, dear," Mother said. She caressed the golden locket she wore on a chain around her neck, mourning jewelry she'd worn for Father, a jeweled spider embedded in the cover. "Think how those who've gone before us would be pleased by our war work safe here at home."

"I'll be perfectly safe, Mother."

"You can't walk to the hospital alone," Abby said.

I stepped toward the door. "Since I am his favorite, Uncle Edward will surely drop me on his way to the club, won't you, Uncle?"

Uncle Edward studied the floor and barely nodded.

"Father wouldn't have wanted this," Carry said.

Father. I stopped and turned to her. "How would you know what Father would have wanted, Carry? You were an infant when he died."

Carry looked down at her plate, and I caught a glimmer of a tear. I'd gone too far again.

I hurried to the door.

Abby pushed back her chair and stood. "Every Florence Nightingale in New York will be there, competing. And they'll only take a small number."

"One hundred, actually. And I'm bound to be first in line, thanks to the early hour."

Uncle Edward and I stepped down the hall, past the front parlor to the door.

“You need to be over thirty years old,” Carry called after me. “And quite plain. You’re not anywhere near ugly enough!”

I STEPPED INTO THE marble-columned hospital hall and found it nearly full with my fellow early risers. Women from all walks of life packed the chilly room, a lucky few seated on the oak benches, most standing, some with a child or two in tow. A woman dressed in a long gray cape, her doughy, round face remarkably like Mary Todd Lincoln’s, distributed applications and pencils.

“A line, please, ladies,” she called out over the crowd, exhaling a little white cloud as she spoke.

“Why is there no fire lit in here?” I asked.

“If we had male applicants, there would be.” She handed me a two-page application and a small pencil. “If you can complete this quickly, you may have a chance to get in right away—a candidate just dropped out, sick with fear about going before the doctors’ panel, poor thing. Wait down that hall to be called into the committee room.”

I glanced at the forms. “It says ‘Complete in ink.’”

She shrugged. “The committee hasn’t complained yet. And they’ve seen fifty applicants already today. Accepted twenty-three.”

I penciled in my name and address: *8 Brevoort Place, New York City*. Surely that would please the examining board, an esteemed address, near the famous Brevoort hotel. I stopped, pencil in midair. *Age*. Of course, I was well underage, two years in fact. What if I stretched the truth and wrote *30*? I left it blank.

The woman leaned closer. “Don’t say I told you, but they’re looking for head nurses—matronly sorts who won’t rouse the affections of the patients with fancy fashion and smiles.” She sent a pointed look toward my necklace. “Last lady who went in there wore earbobs and they cast her out quick as she got in.”

“This is a family piece I wear every day. I’ll take my chances.”

“And what about that bonnet? Not to overstep, but those flowers—”

I hurried toward the committee room as I ripped the tender French rosebuds off my bonnet and tucked them up my sleeve.

After waiting in the hallway for what felt like an eternity, I heard my name called and stepped in to stand before the board. There sat five men, most of them snow-haired and dressed in black suits, sitting broomstick straight behind two oak tables pushed together, a tented paper name tag before each.

I handed Dr. Harris the application.

“Good day, Miss . . . Woolsey, is it? Would you state your full name?”

“Georgeanna Muirson Woolsey.”

“And why, Miss Woolsey, would you like to join the ranks of the Women’s Central Association of Relief?”

“I wish to make an equal contribution to that of a soldier, sir.”

Two doctors to my far right exchanged glances.

“That may be impossible, Miss Woolsey,” Dr. Harris said. “Since you will not be on the battlefield.”

“I don’t know why I shouldn’t be, sir. It seems unfair they will be dying while I sit home.”

“Tell us your particulars, Miss Woolsey.”

“If you can tell me what particulars you are interested in.”

Two doctors examined what appeared to be a restaurant menu, while another cleaned out his pipe, tapping the bowl on his palm.

“Well, would you consider yourself a detail-oriented person?” Dr. Harris asked.

“Yes, Doctor.”

“How so, Miss Woolsey?”

“I wouldn’t, for example, ask an applicant to sign an application such as this in ink if only a pencil was provided.” The doctors shifted in their seats. “Or leave the great hall out there unheated when women and children wait there, some for hours.”

Dr. Compton laced his fingers and sat forward. He looked younger than the rest and wore a prominent brow, and a permanently pained expression. “An unheated hall will be nothing compared to some of the unpleasant conditions you would be expected to work in, Miss Woolsey.”

“Only martyrs tolerate hardship when simple solutions can be found, Dr. Compton. I do my best to solve problems.”

He leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. “It’s just a matter of time before you and your fellow nurses will be switching things over with your hoops, giving unlimited oranges to the men with dysentery, and making the sure surgeons mad.”

“I don’t wear a hoop, Dr. Compton.”

“And what of your education, Miss Woolsey?” Dr. Harris asked.

“As a child I attended Miss Murdock’s School in Boston, and then the Rutgers Female Institute here in Manhattan, and finished at the Misses Anables’ Young Ladies’ Seminary in Philadelphia, whereupon I traveled to India and Egypt with my younger sister Eliza.”

“Ah, a Grand Tour?” Dr. Harris asked.

“Men have done it for centuries. In my family women broaden our horizons as well.”

“Your school marks?” Dr. Compton asked.

“Quite good, Dr. Compton. On my commencement day our teacher Mr. Holan joked to Mother that if she did not remove her daughters from the school the trustees would not be able to afford to give any more medals.”

Several of the doctors twittered at that.

“Languages?” Dr. Harris asked.

“German, French, Latin, and Italian. I learn quickly and the thought of having a teacher like Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell is most stimulating, sir. The first woman to earn a medical degree in this country? It would be a tremendous honor to be in the same room with her. I’ve entertained the notion of opening a nursing school of my own some—”

Dr. Compton leaned in. “A school for female nurses?”

“Is that such a foreign concept?”

“And what of our dedicated male nurses? Should they go home and knit?”

“They can do as they like, Dr. Compton. Perhaps join their brothers in battle.”

“Were you raised with servants in the home?” Dr. Harris asked.

“Kate, the cook; Margaret, a maid; faithful William in the pantry is—”

Dr. Compton straightened his cuffs. “Must we hear the entire household staff list?”

“Mother employs help, but I’ve always been expected to perform domestic tasks.”

Dr. Harris sifted through his papers. “Nursing is hard work, especially for someone not used to adversity and so, well, *privileged*. Do you cry easily?”

“I don’t cry, Doctor. *Ever*, in fact.”

Dr. Benson raised an eyebrow.

“We are looking for women who are not averse to plainness of dress,” Dr. Compton said. “You know nurses are not allowed to wear jewelry of any kind.”

I glanced down at the bodice of my dress, to Father’s brass watch fob I wore as a necklace. “I wear this so often it is a part of me.”

Dr. Harris gathered the papers of my application and tapped them on the table. “I’m afraid we are done here, Miss Woolsey.”

I touched the fob. “I will not wear this while tending patients, gentlemen. It is my father’s watch fob. I’ve worn it every day since he died. I was very young when it happened. We lived in Boston at the time and he perished at sea commuting from New York to Boston on the steam packet *Lexington*.”

Dr. Harris set down his pen.

“It was a terribly cold night, the mercury at ten degrees below zero, and floating ice filled Long Island Sound. The alarm of fire was given as flames spread through the cotton bales in the ship’s cargo bay. Of the crew and one hundred forty-three passengers, only four survived. My father was not among them.”

The doctor at the far end of the table leaned in. “You have our deepest sympathies, Miss Woolsey.”

“The brass letters here on the fob represent the seven daughters he left behind—my sisters and me. My brother, Charles, was born soon after.”

Dr. Harris removed his glasses. “Your father never knew he had a son.”

“It’s not something that leaves one with a sense of privilege, I assure

you, Doctor. I've worked night and day since his death to help my mother, to shoulder the burdens of housekeeping and make her life easier."

Dr. Harris sat silent for a moment. "How does your family feel about you pursuing this line of work?"

"They vigorously oppose it, but their opinions have never stopped me before. In fact, nothing will stop me from dedicating everything to my country, sir, and if need be, giving my life to keep it united and free of the scourge of slavery. I think my father would applaud it."

The doctors sat silent until Dr. Harris came to life. "Miss Woolsey, I must ask you to give us a few moments of privacy while we deliberate."

I stepped out into the hallway and stood, my back against the cool stone wall, and reviewed my answers. Dr. Compton would certainly vote against me. I closed my eyes and could only see Abby's I-told-you-so face when I came home without my blue ticket.

After what felt like an age, Dr. Harris called me back into the examination room.

"Miss Woolsey, have you had the measles?"

"I have, Doctor."

He handed me my application. "In that case, Miss Georgeanna Muirson Woolsey, it is my honor, on behalf of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and this board, to award you a place in the first training program at the Women's Central Association of Relief for the purpose of providing the army with trained nurses. You have impressed us, almost unanimously, with your strong character and resolve, and it is our opinion you will be a credit to the association. May God protect you."

"Thank you, Doctors."

I took the application and left with haste, hoping they would not change their minds, and hurried out through the great hall, bumped and jostled as I stepped through the horde of women coming and going. I found a quiet place to unfold and read the application, signed with Dr. Harris's impressive signature and straight-pinned at the top with the famous blue ticket, upon which was written *student number 24*.

Before I refolded it, I noted the age space was still blank and, at long last, allowed myself a smile.

THEN BEGAN SERIOUS BUSINESS. I sprang out of bed each morning at five o'clock to report to the New York Hospital for fourteen days of classroom training and another ten of hospital rounds with Dr. Blackwell and others. I spent every minute of the doctor's classes rapt, taking in her stories of her own struggle to become a physician, and her painful details of how she lost her eyesight in one eye while treating an infant at a hospital in Paris.

"Learn from my mistake," she said. "Handle patient sanitary needs with the utmost vigilance."

I enjoyed memorizing bandaging technique, regimens of ward care, and vast classifications of medicines. Dr. Blackwell stood before all one hundred of us in a small amphitheater classroom, dark hair pulled back in a white snood, a passionate speaker. She had lost her father at a young age and was a staunch abolitionist, which made me feel even more connected to her.

Once the session adjourned, I stood with two of my fellow students outside the classroom.

"She is quite an engaging teacher," one said.

"I've never heard anyone so supportive of the female cause," I said. "Maybe she'd consider teaching one day at my nursing school."

"*Your* nursing school?" The two laughed and one pulled me closer. "It's one thing for Dr. Blackwell to teach us bandaging and bed making just for the war."

"Quite another to start a permanent school for female nurses," said the other. "Once the men return after the war, they won't appreciate you instructing ladies to take their jobs."

As the two hurried off to our next class, Dr. Blackwell emerged from the classroom and closed the door behind her. I tried, but could barely form a sentence in her presence.

"Don't listen to naysayers," she said as she locked the door. "You're head and shoulders above them, and those who discourage you do so to

justify their own lack of imagination and will never accomplish anything extraordinary.”

I tried to speak, but barely croaked, and the doctor continued.

She turned to face me. “When I first decided to pursue medicine, I was told that strong prejudice would exist, which I must either crush or be crushed by, and I offer the same advice to you, Miss Woolsey. Don’t be afraid. Train your army of lady nurses.”

She started off down the hall and called back over her shoulder, “And I would happily teach at that new school of yours someday.”

NEARLY A MONTH LATER, Dr. Blackwell’s words still ringing in my ears, I hurried toward the hospital for my last day of rounds that determined whether I received my graduation certificate. I quickened my step as thousands of flags suddenly came fluttering out of every window and door. The city was brilliant with excited crowds, the air full of the sound of incessant patriotic bands and the footfall of regiments.

I felt quite official in my new nurse’s costume. My family had come around enough to the idea of me as a nurse to help fit me out for hospital duty in a gray skirt, cropped jacket, white apron, and washable petticoat, which swished as I walked.

My practical training thus far had been a baptism by fire—I’d been thrown into an enormous ward with one other nurse associate, and put in charge of it all—but I was finally comfortable commanding a shift. Several of my fellow students had dropped out of the course or had been dismissed due to excessive squeamishness or unpleasant temper. Those of us left were competent to any very small emergency or simple fracture. I said a silent prayer as I walked that nothing would happen to derail my course completion.

I found one of our instructors, young Dr. Prentiss, just in time, as he began his rounds. He stood at the bedside of a gray-faced male patient who wore an adhesive plaster applied to the side of his neck.

“For your last day of instruction, I’ve chosen a particularly interesting

case. A gangrenous dog bite to the neck. The wound is suppurating and shows laudable pus, similar to those you may someday see on the battlefield. Let's begin." He glanced in my direction. "Nurse, basin."

I hurried to the sideboard, excited to prove myself capable of assisting with such a wound.

He called after me. "Never run, Nurse. Keep calm at all times. That will serve you well in the most chaotic of wards."

I walked back and handed the basin to the doctor. He held it to the man's neck and pulled back the plaster, releasing a putrid odor that caused my stomach to turn. I steadied myself against the bedpost.

"Would someone kindly provide Miss Woolsey a chair?" the doctor called out.

"I'm perfectly fine, Doctor," I said, though the room began to spin.

"Please yourself, Miss Woolsey," Dr. Prentiss said.

He turned back to the patient and began to probe deep into the wound, causing the patient to cry out in pain. I leaned toward the bedpost but could not reach it before my knees gave way and the world grew dark around me.

Jemma

PEELER PLANTATION, MARYLAND

MAY 1861

I RAN ABOUT THE FRONT PARLOR THAT MORNING, POKING THE turkey-feather duster up the picture frames and down the ivory keys of the big old piano nobody played, hoping the dust would stay in the air long enough for the wedding to happen, and keep Miss Anne-May happy as she could be. It was bad enough six new slaves from South Carolina were marrying in her house. If she saw dust on her piano, in the fanciest room in the place, she'd use her leather on me, no matter it was the Lord's day.

Sunday was my favorite day, when I got to leave the house and visit my kin at the cabin down the bottom of the hill, when Ma combed out my hair, my head in her lap, and Pa saved a funny story to act out just for me, and Sally Smith fixed me an ashcake with her quince jelly on top.

I squeezed my eyes tight shut and asked Jesus, "Please let this wedding go fast so I have time with Ma and Pa back in the cabin. And please send another girl my age with this group."

Sweet Clementine, last girl my age, was gone before I got a chance to know her, whipped by Anne-May so bad she ran away to the swamp, where LeBaron and his pattyroller boys finally found her, dead for days. They left her out behind the hog pen as a lesson to us, poor girl all puffed

up and bit all over by any swamp thing that flew or crawled, until Pa made one of his pine boxes and those that LeBaron let off work buried her.

But least she was free.

I waited for Anne-May, dressed by me that morning, but still putting on her finishing touches, meaning drinking a cordial glass of brandy she thought nobody knew about, while she stared at her new diamond ring.

I stood on my toes to fly the feathers along the gold mirror with the painting of ships and along the fireplace mantel to the flat-faced white china dogs that don't look like any dogs I've ever seen and the sky-blue flower vases painted with gold and half-naked ladies, so precious to Anne-May she never put any flowers in them.

I stood before Aunt Tandy Rose's portrait, her looking down on me, in her white bonnet and the usual sour face. I knew Tandy Rose best, since I was her eyes and especially her ears because toward the end she was deaf as a stump without the ear trumpet Pa made her.

Most folks had considered her a fine, churchgoing woman, who only reminded us slaves of our place every so often, under her strict rules. But she could be mean as any and sure took it to Carter before she sold him off. Took it to me now and then, too. Though she tired easy, being so old, she striped me once for reading her newspaper, which hurt like nothing I'd ever felt, since she could get up a proper crack with her little whip. My back felt on fire for days and I could only sleep on my belly, but it left me with the impression there must be something special in that paper to read.

We all prayed thanks she never let LeBaron whip any of us, except run-aways, since when he came there when I was little, he was famous for miles around for his rough way of breaking in new slaves and she didn't want him "killin' her investments."

Tandy Rose especially looked out for Ma. She was the old lady's out-and-out favorite, Ma bein' so pretty, plus nobody got Tandy Rose ready each Sunday like Ma, powdered and primped, hair done just so, and got her showered with compliments from the other ladies at church. 'Course all that changed once Anne-May came, since she was full-on jealous of anyone a hair prettier than her.

I ran the feathers down each windowpane, the lazy Patuxent River in

the distance, the water deep blue as the indigo dye squeezed from the tall plants that grew near the banks. We were well into spring, Aunt Tandy Rose's favorite time when she was alive. I got to sleep with Ma and Pa every night back when we belonged to Aunt Tandy Rose and thanked Jesus for that. Even after the bad thing happened to my little brother Toby, we still had each other.

Old Sally Smith the cook lived at Peeler her whole life and was cooking here already when Ma and Pa came to that house from Georgia, and Sally became like a mother to Ma. They even looked the same—heart-shaped face and wide-spaced pretty eyes, and Sally taught Ma all her remedy plants in her garden inside the high fence Pa made, nigh to the cabin.

Aunt Tandy Rose called Sally Smith her root doctor and loved Sally's garden where she grew herbs and fruit trees and a truck patch of yams and onions just for us. She had every remedy for what ailed anybody, like peach tree leaves for worms, stinky Devil's Dung for colds, and Everlasting Bone-set for her lung fevers and to ward off ghosts, even grew belladonna for Aunt Tandy Rose to rouge her cheeks with and poppies for her opium.

Sally was not so skinny as the rest of us, from years of standing at her iron stove, sinking her tasting spoon into crayfish bisque and turtle soup, but hers was a lap to soften even the worst day's ills and troubles, the clove and sugar baked right into her.

Both Ma and Pa were barely my age now when they married. Pa asked Aunt Tandy Rose's go-ahead and she got them married in the white people's church one Monday afternoon. Once I came along, with my twin sister, Patience, Aunt Tandy Rose taught us our letters, and did the same for little Toby when he arrived, so we could read to her from her favorite leather books and Bible once her eyes got bad.

I learned to write by taking down Sally Smith's grocery list, copying the names off tins and boxes in the pantry, since Sally had no use for learning her letters. *Preston and Merrill yeast powder* was first thing I wrote perfect. Then *Welch's Female Pills*, which Tandy Rose took with brandy. *Old Partner Kentucky Tobacco*, the leaf Fergus favored over his own. Seemed everything in that pantry claimed it was "Best in the world."

Tandy Rose turned a blind eye when she caught Patience and me read-

ing books from her library, which led LeBaron to come over and raise his voice to her, him on his horse and her out on her sittin' porch.

"I'll get the sheriff over here, you keep lettin' your coloreds break the law that way, Miss Tandy Rose. You don't want to be the downfall of our peculiar institution, do you now?" Then he muttered something about her bein' a Negro-spoiler.

Aunt Tandy Rose set down her ear trumpet, drew all eighty pounds of herself up, and tossed her glass of milk at him, which hit him in the back and dripped all down in his saddle. "You work for me, Mister Caruthers. I will do things *my* way. And no sheriff will say boo to me about it."

Aunt Tandy Rose taught me what Ma called my "White People Manners" so I could make her feel at home in the house when she had me fetch things. Words like, "Why certainly, Miss Peeler." "Let me get that for you right away, ma'am." "That will be but a moment, miss." And always with a sugary smile at the end, and a tip of the head.

And she let Patience and me go to Sabbath school, where they taught us slaves about the good book, for a few days before they shut it down. Went with some of the boys from Ambrosia Plantation next door, where my sister's lent out now and with my almost-sweetheart Carter, who got sold off two years ago. Tandy Rose even promised Pa up and down to free us when she went to the great beyond, and showed him the letter saying so.

But somehow that letter got lost once they laid Aunt Tandy Rose out on a mahogany plank right there in that very room, and just like that we belonged to her about-to-be-married niece, Miss Anne-May Wilson, who inherited the house and us. Pa said, *God don't always work to plan and we'll just find another way out*. But it still stuck like a rock in my craw that Tandy Rose took so long to free us and we were still somebody's property.

First difference we saw with our new mistress, Miss Anne-May, is she pretended most times like she didn't even see us. Then she put an end to my White People Manners and had me only say, "Yes, missis," when she tasked me.

Soon after came the new rules. She locked up the library, saying colored folks have no business reading nothing. At first I didn't learn her rules fast enough and she'd get out her cowhide, long as your arm, or

Anne-May's other favorite, a fresh hickory switch. Soon the backs of my dresses got shredded, the cotton stuck to the blood, and I did my work all day feeling like a hundred bees got me. Seems I made ten new dresses that first month. Kept the old ones, though, in my ragbag. Never know what you can do with things.

Then she got smart and made me shimmy out of my dress before she got to work on me in the pantry. No matter what they say, no one ever gets used to the deep, hot sting of a whip. Especially with Anne-May so proud of her special way, so long and hard she took to her bed after, and with vinegar poured on the cuts for extra hurt. Especially having never felt it like that before she came. Especially seeing my ma on her knees get it first time ever.

That made me want to kill Anne-May right there. Could tell Pa wanted that, too.

But we all knew the penalty in Maryland for a slave murdering somebody. The state constitution said the one doing the deed would have their right hand cut off, would be hanged in the usual manner, have their head severed from their body and divided in four quarters, and set in the most public place in the county where the act was committed.

But some days it still felt worth killing Anne-May anyway.

At the sound of wheels on gravel, I threw down my duster, hustled next door to the study, and looked out the window just as the two-horse wagon pulled up, with the seven new folks sitting in the back, all brown of complexion, with the usual looks of people scared of a new place, the overseer Caruthers up driving.

He was something to be scared of, LeBaron Caruthers, sitting out in his foul little cabin butted up next to the tobacco barn. Medium fat and dirty all over, especially his mind. From his perch on the wagon seat, he spied me through the window with his pig eyes, but I looked away.

I got my notebook fast, since Miss Anne-May had me write an account of each of the new ones for her, and if it's not perfect that's trouble. She didn't want us reading, but she was no good with a pen, so I had to write things down for her. She had me list each of the new folks' old names, their new name she chose (one Miss Anne-May liked better), a guess at their

age, who they'd be marrying, and "one characteristic feature to know them by." Three would live with us here at Peeler, the others over cross the county at Mister Watson's beet farm. It was nowhere near enough hands to get our usual tobacco crop in, but we prayed for more soon.

I'd already sewed their new name into the dress or shirt collar of the garment I made, what I'd guessed to be the right size, based on what I knew about each one. Though most of these were field hands and got the meanest, cheapest white homespun, I made each dress and loose shirt with care and put Canton felt inside the cuffs and collars, since it's a hard day, coming here to live with Anne-May. At least one part of it could be soft.

"Why can't they marry who they want?" I asked Sally one day as I stood sewing in the kitchen, since no colored folks were allowed to sit with the Watsons in the house. Sally Smith was making her cornbread kush, the onions sizzling in the lard making my belly grumble. More food Anne-May would not eat herself and just toss to the hogs.

Anne-May walked in as I asked, and for a second my blood raced when she started her hand toward the cowhide hooked at her waist, but I settled quick, knowing she'd never give it to me out in the open, in front of old Sally Smith. Sally's ancestors had lived at Peeler for over a century and she also had major sway with Mister Watson, since he liked her, you could tell, and no one could keep his belly full of his favorites like her.

But Anne-May just said, "Every time you open your mouth a stupid question comes out, Jemma. Not that I owe you an answer, but it's the way my mama did it in New Orleans. One weddin' upon arrival, so we can get it over with. Otherwise there's a party practically every *week*, for goodness' sake, and no work gets done and it costs good money to do these things, which is barely appreciated by you colored folks."

But of course the real reason she married everybody off first day was so they'd fasten up quick with each other and bring about a bunch of children she could work to the bone or sell off.

I reminded myself to tell the new ones there'd be hell to pay if they called themselves Wilson or Watson. "You are owned by me," Anne-May told me a hundred times, "but don't you dare take my name. You tell folks

your name is Jemma, owned by Miss Anne-May Wilson Watson, of Peeler Plantation, formerly of New Orleans, Louisiana.”

I stood straighter, pencil ready, as the first girl stepped down, name written in fat block letters pinned to her dress, *Cynthia*. Her new name, given by Anne-May, was Fidelity. Fidelity was nice, you could tell by her quick, shy smile and hair tied up on her head like five puffy little clouds. Her characteristic feature was a perfectly good, working body except for one hand missing, a smooth little stump there instead. I checked which one, the left, and made note of it. She turned and I saw another characteristic feature: a couple months’ worth of baby in her belly.

I penciled in another line. *Fidelity’s Baby*. I bit back a smile and crossed fingers I could take care of it like I had with little Toby.

Next to come down the wagon steps, after a shove from Overseer Caruthers, was her soon-to-be husband. The name pinned to his shirt was *Benjamin*. Now he’d be Charlemagne, on account of Anne-May’s love of all things royal and rich, but right off, we shortened it to Charl. He was skinny as Fidelity and looked as sad as Fidelity looked kind, holding himself like he’s cold all the time. Charl had two characteristic features: a scraggy little beard and ears big as oyster shells, and I put down 25 as age for both those two, a big guess, but better than nothing.

My chest thumped hard as number three stepped down, a girl about my size, maybe a little taller, *Sukey* pinned to her dress, who Miss Anne-May renamed Celeste, on account of it sounding like a Louisiana name. She had pretty almond-shaped eyes, good hair pulled back in a pink ribbon, and skin darker than mine, like an Ethiopian princess I saw in Aunt Tandy Rose’s book. I set down my list and stepped closer to the window as Ma and Pa and Sally Smith crowded around her, with big smiles. She smiled back at Ma, showing a pretty dimple in each cheek, and just like that, my pining for a friend disappeared and I hated that girl worse than anything.

Then Miss Anne-May floated down the front stairs all dainty, her hair in sausage curls that bounced around her face as she walked, that I’d set with an iron that morning. She wore a dress I finished for her the night

before, of amber and brown plaid silk, with a hoop the size of Chesapeake Bay.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said in her Southern way.

Instead of her usual cowhide whip at her skinny waist, she wore the little black riding crop, always part of her Sunday best. She held up her skirt to admire her own feet, stuffed into another pair of pretty, new boots from the dry-goods store in town, Smalls and Sons, the fanciest place, where she bought so much they delivered it here in a wheelbarrow. Ma said just plain old bonnets there cost more than Sally Smith ever made on her jelly.

Anne-May hurried out the study door to the wagon in the gravel turn-around, barely making it through the doorway, her hoopskirt so big. Once outside, she clapped her smooth, little hands. “All of you inside right away. Don’t you dare touch a thing, ’cept your clothing bundles, and after the ceremony get yourselves gone, down below.”

“Down below” was one of the things Anne-May had names for that made them sound better than they were. As if calling a ramshackle slave shack at the bottom of the hill next to the hogs “down below” made it any better.

As the rest of the new folks arrived, Anne-May’s husband, Fergus, who wouldn’t be called Master, but Mister Watson instead, came out of his library like a snail out of his shell, since he didn’t like people much. He was a homely man, with a face long as Abraham Lincoln’s and a beard with two white stripes down it like a skunk’s tail. I once heard Anne-May tell her sister she thought her husband had eyes like the frogs he studied, but he left us alone. He was always happier walking the bay, head down, looking for dead crabs and weeds to put in his leather pouch, so much he smelled like shore water, which is not so bad. Better than pea soup like Overseer Caruthers.

Once all seven of the new ones came down from the wagon, they walked into the study, looking all nervous, and I handed out their clothes to them, while Pa gave out the leather shoes he made so well, with the pegs drove in the wood soles.

I handed Fidelia her bundle, a pretty blue calico head rag on top, and she leaned in and whispered, “You eat good here?”

“Never enough but Sally sneaks us extra, best she can.”

“Summer and winter suits?”

“Both. Summer, each girl gets a sleep shirt, what Aunt Tandy Rose called a ‘shimmy.’ Just thin linsey, took me one minute to sew. And I think I got the size of your dress just right. And that’s me put felt inside the cuffs. Made the underthings, drawers and top, outta softest flour sacks we had and sewed a dress pocket just here. Everybody deserves a pocket, don’t you think?”

Up close I couldn’t help look at her smooth little stump. What happened to her hand? Chopped off in a cotton gin, most likely.

She hid her stump in her pocket and leaned close enough to kiss me. “Just so’s you know, I heard the overseer say war’s started. Mister Lincoln’s fixin’ to get us free.”

A thrill ran through me top to bottom and I looked to Ma. She looked around, as usual, makin’ sure she didn’t show one bit of emotion to give Anne-May an excuse to go after her. Chin up high, arms folded across her chest, Ma kept watch on us all, her blueberry-color cloth tied up extra special for the welcome day. Did she know about the war? She opened her eyes a little wider and sent me a look that says all this: *Yes, I know and it’s good news, but don’t get your hopes up and we’ll talk about it all down below*, because in one look Ma could say all that.

Next up came the new girl, Celeste. I shoved her bundle at her, happy the dress was probably too big.

“Age?”

“Sixteen, maybe, or thereabouts,” she said.

Anne-May stepped to the parlor doorway and called out, “Hurry now!”

“I’m sixteen, too,” I said. “But I know my birthday. May twelfth.”

Celeste smiled and stepped closer. “I always wanted a June birthday, but I don’t know when I was—”

All of a sudden, like a hawk on a squirrel, Anne-May came down on

Celeste and whacked her shoulder so hard with her crop she fell against me.

“I said *hurry*,” Anne-May said as she prodded Celeste with her crop toward the parlor. “Get in there. We can’t take all day for this.”

Celeste rubbed her shoulder, tears in her eyes, and I felt for her, even though she was stealing my spot in the family, but she had best get used to the ways of Miss Anne-May.

Once we got the new arrivals their clothes, Sally Smith arranged all six of the marrying new folks in twos. Since Anne-May said she would have *no jumping-over-the-broom nonsense in her parlor, which once hosted George Washington himself*, Fidelity and Charl stood with the other two couples, looking itchy, as Pa said a few words he knew from the Bible. The more I got used to them together, the more they seemed to fit, his arm around her waist like he was holding her up, and maybe he was.

Before Pa even finished talking, Anne-May clapped her hands again. “There. That’s done.”

LeBaron Caruthers walked to the front of the room, red-eyed from a spell of drinking the night before, the iron nails he pounded into the bottom of his boots jangling on the wood floors, mouse-brown hair long to his shoulders, greasy and limp as boiled laundry, and started in on his usual welcome address.

“Y’all get down below, now. You’ll hear the horn at the crack tomorrow and you best be up and ready. Here in Maryland we work in all weathers, dawn to dark. You’ll get your allowance first Friday of the month. Six pounds fatback, ten pounds cornmeal, and a quart of blackstrap.”

Fidelity’s eyes widened at that, molasses being the greatest of all human luxuries.

LeBaron kept at his list of rules, counting on his fingers. “And you need a pass from me, mind you, to hunt or fish. And we’ll have none of that at night. You can forget any talk of emancipation. You’re slaves for life. Remember that. The worst fire of hell will rain down on coloreds who impose grievous harm on their masters.”

Out of the blue he looked right at Charl. “What you say, boy?”

Charl looked at the floor. “Nothin’, suh.”

“I’ve got my eye on you. Way I reckon, it’s worth half a cent to kill a darkie and half a cent to bury one. You cross Miss Anne-May, I won’t think twice.”

Maybe sensing a fight, Ma stepped toward the door and Anne-May waved everybody off. Ma and Pa took to their heels and the rest followed, out the door and across the grass, down the hill to the cabin, and I mustered my courage and stepped to Miss Anne-May.

“I’m visiting town, Jemma,” she said.

“I can stay here and clean—”

Anne-May twisted back at me like a stuck snake. “You think I’m stupid?” She grabbed my arm and pinched it tight till it burned. “You just want to stay here and eat cake. Who’s the stupid one?”

I stared at the pattern of the rug, little diamonds.

“Who’s the stupid one, Jemma?”

“I am, missis.”

“That’s one thing you got right. After all, who started that fire in the barn?”

I held my belly like it was about to fall out. “I’ll go to town, missis.”

“Better believe you’ll go. And if I hear another word from your stupid mouth, you’ll get it bad—make Clementine’s passing look easy. Hear me? Now go get my gloves. You’ll come with us to town and do the cleanup when we return tonight.”

Holding my head high so no water’d run out of my eyes, I ran and snatched her best lace mitts from the box and helped her fingers find all the right holes and then slunk back to the window.

Rubbing my pinched arm, I watched the crowd of new folks walk off down the hill, Ma with her arm wrapped around the new girl, Pa leading them down with a big smile on his face, and I asked Jesus for any life but mine.