

"Git on up there girl," the man said and poked her in the small of her back with a long stick. It was the same kind of stick her Uncle Buck used to prod the plantation cattle into the holding pen on killin' day.

"You deaf or somethin'? Cause if ya are, your price is gonna go way down." He jabbed the stick at her again. She stumbled up the wooden steps to the large platform. Heavy iron shackles cut into the top of her feet.

She started to look at her surroundings but a gloved hand grabbed her arm and jerked her toward the center of the platform. She looked up at another man with a patch over his right eye. He grinned at her with a mouth full of rotten teeth. The smell of sweat, greased hair and stale cigar smoke assaulted her senses as she struggled to remain upright.

"Girl, you stand up straight and behave yourself," the man with the stick whispered in her ear. "Cause the price you're gonna fetch will make my day." She didn't fully understand the meaning behind his words but the tone of his voice sent a shiver down her spine.

"Look here, look here now," he yelled out to the crowd. "We got us a fine young girl up for bids. Gather round whilst I show y'all some of her outstanding qualities."

His black eyes pierced into her with a silent warning to behave. He pried her lips apart and forced her mouth open. His glove tasted like oil and dirt. "Good teeth."

He grabbed her bound wrists and pulled her arms up over her head. "Plenty of muscle." He touched her breast and she winced as he squeezed it. "She'd make a fine wet nurse."

His hand traveled downward. "Flat belly, wide hips. Good breeding stock fellas." He gave a little wink out toward the crowd. Several of the men let out hoots and hollers. His breath quivered as his hand lingered low on her belly.

"And best of all," he said with a wink, "she's only thirteen years of age and the Doc says she's fresh and unblemished."

A murmur of approval traveled through the crowd. She tried to focus on faces, but sweat and humiliation clouded her vision as she recalled the doctor examination moments earlier.

"Alright now, what's my opening bid for this fine girl?" Do I hear two fifty?"

"One hundred," a man yelled.

"A hundred? You must be jokin'. Or drunk." Laughter rippled through the crowd.

"Come on folks. Best of the day in the way of young girls, I guarantee it. She's from Mr. Brett Bodine's stock and most of you know it don't get much better than that. There may not be too many more opportunities for this kind of purchase what with those damn Yankees getting riled up north. At least until we can whip their asses." Scattered applause and more hoots and hollers arose from the group gathered in front of the platform.

"Now the noon day sun is startin' to beat down and I know everybody's got other things to tend to, so let's get serious here."

"Two hundred dollars," a voice cut through from the back of the crowd.

"Now that's more like it. Do I hear two fifty?"

Time stood still for her. Voices blended together and became a steady roar in her ears. She kept her eyes lowered like her momma taught her. She felt faint.

She'd heard whispers of this moment among the old folk. Whenever one of theirs was taken away, they would talk about it over the cook stoves and in the cotton fields. After dark fell, there was always the mournful wailing of a mother for her child or a wife for her husband.

Gone they said. Not dead, not with Blessed Jesus. Just gone.

At the time she didn't understand what they were talking about. Now the whispers came flooding back to her. The smells they described were the same ones she smelled now. The noise of the mighty white folk was in her ears. The horror of the unknown made her stomach churn.

The thud of the prodding stick against the wooden platform brought her back to the present.

"Eight hundred dollars to Mr. Griffith."

He shoved her toward the side of the platform. A large bellied white man grabbed the chain around her wrists and jerked her down the uneven steps. He wore clothes like their foreman Mr. Johnson; better clothes than slaves, but not as fine as the Family's. The look in this man's eyes was nothing like Mr. Johnson's. According to her momma, they were lucky to have such a good and fair foreman. He only used the whip when absolutely necessary. This man did not

look good or fair. And, she did not feel very lucky.

He pulled her along behind him to a wagon and tossed her into the back of it like a sack of grain. She landed hard on the wooden floorboard, jarring her whole body. He locked her wrist chain on an iron hook attached to the side wall. He disappeared without a word and she felt the wagon jerk forward as the horses started to plod their way along the dusty street. She watched the scenery change out the back of the wagon as they left the town square. She saw little white faces gawk and pointing fingers at her before mothers grabbed their hands and dragged them into shops. She closed her eyes and prayed for this nightmare to be over and to be back home, helping her momma in the kitchen.

She heard her momma's soft humming as she worked. And she remembered her explain life. "You know child, our people have three lives. The first one is where you are right now, just a small child. You watch and you listen and you learn. You learn when to speak and when not to; when to look someone in the eyes and when not to. You learn about hard work and simple pleasures and about your people and the Master's kin and how we're different.

The second life is all about survival. Survive the work, the heat, the cold, the hunger, the illness and the ever present threat of the whip. You do the best you can to have a life with family and community. You struggle to keep from going crazy as best you can. When you finally make it through that life, you are rewarded with the third life . . . the blessed life with sweet Jesus. A wonderful life of rest, free of chains and worry. You see child, death means freedom for us. The ones left behind, mourn and cry but there is great rejoicing, too; 'cause another one of ours made it home and they wait for us in a wonderful place called Heaven. Soon we'll all be together and these earthly troubles will be over."

As night fell, she looked up at the stars. They looked like the same stars she saw in the sky at home. She closed her eyes and began to say a little prayer, but she was interrupted when the wagon came to an abrupt halt. She could smell chitlins cookin' and cornpone fryin'. Maybe she was home. Her hope faded when the man unlocked her chain, removed the shackles and threw her to the ground. The fall knocked the breath out of her.

"Rebecca," he called out. "Here's a new one for ya."

An older woman walked toward them.

"Get her cleaned up and ready for work tomorrow. Don't know yet if she'll be a field hand or a house girl, but she better be ready or ya'all know what'll happen."

"Yes sir, Mr. Boggs. Yes sir."

A gentle arm helped her off the ground. Her breath returned in a big gulp and she started to whimper.

"Now, now little un, don't you cry in front of the man," the woman whispered in her ear.

She leaned against the woman as they walked toward the slave quarters and they entered the first shack. The cold dirt floor gave some relief to her sore feet. A couple of candles were the only light in the small room; the flickering flame cast shadows on the walls and into the corners. When her eyesight adjusted, she saw a pair of eyes staring at her from behind a rocker and another set of eyes peered from behind a basket of laundry. She saw pipe smoke swirling in the air above a gray haired man sitting on a blanket in the corner.

"Whata we got here, Rebecca?"

"She's a young'un the Massa bought this morn in Clarksdale."

"What's your name child?"

She remained silent and continued to lean on the woman for support.

"Let that be for now, Sam. She's plume tuckered out and scared out of her mind. She needs to rest."

Rebecca led her to a mat in the other corner and pried her hands away from her skirt. "Now, child, it gonna be alright, ya hear? We gonna take care of you. We be your kinfolk now."

She lay down and faced the wall. The tears came in a flood, floating her away to home and momma. A fitful sleep soon took over, full of nightmares and ghosts.

"Wake up child. Wake up now. We gotta get you cleaned up and presentable."

Morning starts early in the slave quarters. Field hands must be picking cotton and tending the fields by the time the sky turns pink. House servants must have the cook stove hot and breakfast started before the Family gets up.

"Massa Griffith is stayin' in town a few more days, so we don't know yet what your chores is gonna be. You'll help me in the kitchen today." Rebecca touched her on the shoulder. "You

ready to tell us your given name child?"

Her mouth opened but no words came out. She tried to swallow but her throat was dry from the night of tears.

"Jacob, get her a dipper of water. The child is parched."

A young boy, maybe five years old handed her a dipper of tepid water. She took it from him and he quickly hid behind Rebecca's skirt.

A toddler wobbled over to her and grabbed her leg. Rebecca reached down and pulled the child up to her breast to nurse.

"Jacob, get out from behind me. She ain't gonna bite. You need to get on out and gather eggs.

This girl needs to wash up and you don't need to be gawkin' at her."

"You found your voice yet child?"

She shook her head and took another sip of water.

"Well, I guess you needs a little more time. That's okay. Not much talkin' allowed in the Massa's house anyways. Let's get some cornpone in ya. Gotta keep your strength up. Then a good scrubbin' to get yesterday's mess off ya. If we're lucky, the Missus won't be comin' downstairs today and you can have more time to get your senses about ya."

She helped in the kitchen the way her momma taught her. She knew how to obey her elders and do what they said. She had a talent for kneading bread dough and Rebecca put her on that task right away. She didn't venture out from the kitchen, nor did she want to. There was a familiarity to the surroundings that made her feel somewhat more comfortable and safe.

On her second day they were taking their dinner break under the oak tree out back when she noticed somebody watching them from an upstairs window. She turned a questioning gaze to Rebecca.

"That be the Missus," she whispered to her. "She ain't right in the head.

"Who can blame her the way the Massa carries on," added Martha, the other woman who worked in the kitchen,

"She peaks out her window at us once in a while. Lives in her own little world away from the misery of this one." Rebecca shook her head and gave a little chuckle. "Maybe she got the right idea."

"Missus been up there a long time this spell," Martha said. "I gots me a bad feeling about it."

Both women turned and looked at her.

"You awful pretty and the Massa like em young."

"Don't scare the girl," Rebecca said and hugged her. Then holding her at arm's length she added, "Martha's got a point though. You best stay close to me and watch your back."

The women continued talking. She just heard bits and pieces as she continued to watch for the Missus to appear at the window again. They mentioned a war brewing and something about Northerners and Mr. Lincoln comin' to save them. And they talked about some sort of Underground Railroad. They wondered if Joseph made it to safety on that railroad, someplace called Missouri.

She couldn't sleep that night as Rebecca's warning echoed in her head. The heat in the small cabin was suffocating. She decided to go outside and get some fresh air.

She stepped out on the front porch and looked around. It didn't seem like anybody else was about. She walked around the corner of the cabin hoping to find a cool breeze. She was just a few feet from the porch when a large hand covered her mouth from behind and pulled her back until she felt the body of a man against her. The familiar smell of whiskey sifted through her nose.

"You keep your mouth shut," he whispered in her ear. "I paid good money for you and I've come to collect."

Fear raced through her veins and gave her enough strength to escape his grasp. She started to run but her nightgown tripped her up. She fell to the ground. He grabbed her again and twisted her around to face him. She didn't recognize him. Rebecca's words came flooding back. "Watch your back child."

He lifted her small body up by her neck till her feet were dangling off the ground. She grabbed his hands and struggled to keep breathing. She kicked her legs in a desperate attempt to free herself. One of her feet hit him in the groin and he released her as he fell to his knees in pain.

She ran away from the big house, from the slave quarters. Away from the safety of Rebecca, away from this second life. She was at the split rail fence that surrounded the property when

she heard the first bay of the hounds. Maybe she could make it to that railroad or to that place called Missouri. Maybe she could find Mr. Lincoln and he could help her. She remembered Pappa said the dogs could tear a run-a-way from limb to limb till there wasn't much to bury in the ground. Momma would tell him to hush, "The youngins don't need to hear such things. Talk like that makes nightmares."

She made it across the road before she heard the shouts of men and the hoof beats of horses. The force of the dog against her back knocked her down. His growl froze her to the ground. "Call off the dogs. I want to take care of this one myself."

He grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back until it snapped in two. She tried to scream but nothing came out. He flipped her over and kicked her legs apart.

"Please, no. Please, no" she begged.

He placed his hands around her small throat and squeezed. "Shut up and enjoy it."

She managed to whisper with her last breath. "Tell them my name was Bitsy."

As the pink of dawn came, word spread quickly that the little girl was gone. Silently they said prayers for her safe journey to the third life. Rebecca made bread moistened with tears and the Missus stayed upstairs the rest of the day.