

CHAPTER ONE

Deciding



MY NAME IS REBECCA and I was born into slavery in the spring of 1842 on a cotton plantation near Rock Hill, South Carolina. When I was twelve years old, I ran away with my ma Deborah and my pa Obadiah. The owner of the plantation, Grower Brown, was a hard man and all of us slaves were afraid of him. I worked in the kitchen while my pa and my ma worked in the fields. I have since travelled far from that life.

Grower Brown had a son named Master Jeff who was just as mean as his father, but his daughter, Miss Clarissa,

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was kind to me. Miss Clarissa and I, we were the same age so when Miss Clarissa's ma died giving birth to her, my ma was brought into the house to nurse her. We were like sisters but she was free and I was not.

As we grew up, we had to be careful around Miss Clarissa's father and brother. When they saw us playing together, they threatened to whip me and send me into the fields to work. Working the cotton was a hard job, and I was not very strong. Once, when Grower Brown said he would whip me, Miss Clarissa stood in front of me and told her father he would have to whip her, too. Grower Brown stared at his daughter, then cursed and sent me to work in the fields for the rest of the day. But he didn't whip me, thanks to Miss Clarissa, and the next day I was back working in the kitchen.

Grower Brown and Master Jeff both had terrible tempers, and they were cruel to the other slaves. Miss Clarissa told me that she would never let them hurt me, no matter how much they threatened, and I believed her, but I wondered whether she was strong enough to stand up to them. Miss Clarissa was my friend and I miss her. I hope someday we will be friends again, in a different world.

One day Grower Brown called a meeting of all the plantation owners in the county. I passed food and drink

to the men gathered on the veranda. As they drank whiskey and ate fried chicken, they talked about the problem of runaway slaves. Every few weeks, slaves ran away from Grower Brown's plantation and other plantations. Most of them were caught. The others disappeared and we never knew what happened to them. My pa said it was foolish to run away, foolish and dangerous.

Master Jeff stood on a chair and spoke in a loud voice, "My father and I have called you here because we have a problem. Every month we lose slaves from our plantations. When those runaways reach northern towns, they walk the streets and act as if they are free men. But they are not free men; they belong to us. They're our property, just like our pigs and horses. The Founding Fathers of the United States of America protected our right to own slaves. North of the Mason–Dixon Line, the federal marshals should be arresting runaways and returning them to us. That's the law. But we know that the marshals are not catching them. What's worse is that some white people in the free states of the North take runaways into their homes, feed them, hide them and smuggle them into Canada. The law says those abolitionists should be fined, but the federal government does nothing so we've got to do something!"

Grower Brown looked proudly at his son as the

growers raised their glasses and shouted, “Amen, Jeff. Amen.” Standing on that chair, Master Jeff stood taller than all the other growers, but Miss Clarissa stood in a corner, looking ashamed of her father and brother. She looked down at the floor as I moved among the growers, passing the fried chicken, filling their glasses with whiskey.

Master Jeff nodded to his father and continued, “Our runaway slaves are not being arrested because the abolitionists, those slave lovers, are pressuring the government to ignore the Fugitive Slave Act. But there is an answer—the Knights of the Golden Circle. Only the Knights are defending our right to own slaves, not only in the South but in Border States like Illinois and Ohio. They need our help; they need our money. They plan to form a secret army in the North, and when that army is organized, it will return our runaway slaves to us. To support that army, I ask you to join my father and me in forming a castle, a local branch of the Knights, right here in our county.”

For the second time, the growers cheered Master Jeff’s speech. They slapped him on the back and shouted, “You’re right, Jeff. We own our slaves and runaways should be returned to us.” They threw money into a big

wide-brimmed hat that Master Jeff passed from man to man. They asked Master Jeff to be the leader of the castle and he was quick to agree. He promised them that he would go to Cincinnati to meet with the leader of the Knights, a man named George W. Bickley, and he would give him the money they had raised.

After the growers left, I cleared the platters and washed the cups and dishes in the kitchen. Ada, the cook, packed up the leftover food. Miss Clarissa came in and stood beside me. She asked, "Rebecca, you know I don't like it when my father and brother whip slaves. I don't see any need to be so cruel. But I can't imagine this plantation without slaves to work the fields, can you? Can you imagine being free, Rebecca?"

I didn't know how to answer; I didn't know my own mind then. My pa and my ma were slaves, I was born into slavery and I thought my children would be slaves, too. I believed it was the way it had to be. But then I thought about Grower Brown's cruelty. He whipped slaves and worked them so hard that they fell to the ground. I wanted to believe there was a place where that would not happen. I kept drying the dishes and putting them away, but my mind was busy thinking about a world without slavery.

That night I told my ma and pa what I had heard at the meeting. I asked them, “Why aren’t runaways free, even in the North?”

My pa looked sad. He said, “In the northern states, a white man cannot buy, sell or own slaves, but runaways can be captured and sent back to their owners. It’s only if runaways get as far as Canada that they can’t be returned to their owners. But Canada is a long way north.”

“Master Jeff said white people in the North help runaways,” I said. “He said abolitionists hide runaways, feed them and smuggle them into Canada.”

My pa shook his head. “Rebecca, I have never met a white man I could trust. It’s hard for me to believe white people will help runaways if it might bring trouble to them. I’ve heard they can be fined or put in jail if they help runaway slaves.”

That night as I went to bed, my pa said, “We’re lucky to be together as a family. For some slaves, freedom is something they hunger for, but not me. I never want to be a runaway. Running is too dangerous.”

My ma agreed. “Yes, we’re lucky to be together. Your father and I get to watch you grow up, Rebecca, and I hope someday you’ll help Miss Clarissa raise her children.” My pa wrapped his arms around her.

As I fell asleep, I thought about Moses, a black woman who led runaways to freedom in Canada. People called her Moses because in the book of Exodus in the Bible, it was Moses who led his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses came to Grower Brown's plantation from time to time. If she came again, would any slaves follow her?

A few days later, I was stirring a pot of corn mush on the stove when Miss Clarissa came into the kitchen. Her eyes were red from crying, but when I asked her what was wrong, she said she couldn't tell me. I asked, "Why not?" She shook her head and I knew then that something bad was going to happen, and I figured it was going to happen to me or my family.

I begged her to tell me what was wrong and finally she broke down. "My pa is going to sell your father Obadiah down the river. A grower in the Mississippi Delta needs slaves to work on his rice plantation and he's offering a good price."

Miss Clarissa started to cry and soon I was crying, too. I wanted to run into the fields right away to tell my pa and ma what my friend had told me, but I had to stay in the kitchen and keep working. I had to wait for them to come in from the fields.

That night I told my parents what Miss Clarissa had said. My pa and ma were quiet, as if they didn't have the breath to speak. My pa sat on a stool, his back bent, his head in his hands. My ma stood by him and there was a long silence.

"Obadiah," my ma said, "what do you think we should do? Do you think we should run away?"

He shook his head. "No, I remember Old Foss. He ran away but Grower Brown found him and brought him back. Foss had been whipped so hard, he might as well have been dead. In the end, Grower Brown sold him down the river but I doubt Old Foss lived to see the plantation he was headed for."

My ma asked, "But what else can we do? If we don't run away, Rebecca and I will never see you again. Maybe we'll have to go with Moses, all of us. Maybe there's no other way."

My pa sat in silence for a long time. My ma put a hand on his shoulder and waited for him to speak. Finally he said, "No, it's too dangerous to run away. Master Jeff said there are people in the North who will help runaways, but in the South, we know that runaways are caught and whipped. You can't reach the North without passing through the South. I will go to the Mississippi Delta while