

CHAPTER 1

“Don’t be a slave to these people, ya hear? Be a slave to want, be a slave to need, but not to these people.”

That was the last thing my mother ever said to me, a seed I planted in my mind and would one day bring to fruition.

Momma said that I would have a purpose to fulfill in life; she knew it the day I was born. “The full moon was watchin’ that night,” she would say, “a hot, southern night. And although you were my first child, I wasn’t scared at all.”

I didn’t come into the world kicking or screaming. From what she tells me, I was born quietly without a tear in my eye—so quiet in fact that the doctor thought I was a stillborn. But Momma knew better; she said she could hear my heart beating like a great African war drum.

I remember it all, the rush of cold wind and warm fire, and my first breath of air. Most people don’t remember being born, but I remember the moment very well. I remember the sight of my mother’s face vividly. She was a handsome woman, young and fit at the tender age of eighteen. Her eyes were hardened but beautiful; a dark brown like the chestnut trees that grew on the plantation where we lived. Her skin was the color of cocoa beans plucked fresh from the equator. Her hair—which I used to wrap my fingers around as a child—was strong and tangled like twine. Her hands were fine and motherly, and the grin that she displayed when she smiled, I swear to you, was brighter than the sun. Her name was Essa; that’s what the master had named her.

She was a smart woman my mother. Though no one ever taught her how to read or write, she could tell what a word meant—regardless

of how big or small—just from the way it sounded and the context in which it was used. Knowing full well the words weren't given to her, she would secretly take them out of the mouth of the master and store them in her mind to be used later, at her discretion, to understand what the white folks were talking about, and to make sure that we were all safe.

She gave birth to me in Lawrence County, Alabama, on the Mills' Tobacco Plantation, back in 1849, where I joined the fifty other slaves that called that place home. Momma named me Jelani after her father. The name meant *Mighty*, as she would later tell me with a raised fist. How a name alone had any power in shaping someone's life was beyond me, but according to Momma that was not for us to decide. "Sometimes ya don't choose greatness," she would say, "it chooses you. And when it does, it requires a certain level of understandin', courage and a degree of blind hope."

I could never forget those words, not when she had expressed them with such passion. For anyone else it might have been a struggle keeping them in mind; after all, we lived in a time of slavery, where we all belonged to someone and nothing would ever truly belong to us. But even with that knowledge, I felt like I had everything I needed as a child.

I grew up in one of the long string of cabins that sat behind the big house where the Mills family lived. Our home was small and built out of rough boards; it had a floor of earth and two small windows, one cut out on either side to catch the breeze in the summer months. We had little in the way of furniture: just a few shelves, a table, two chairs, and a small bed which was made of straw, some old rags and one large blanket. The cracks in the walls were sealed with clay to keep the wind and rain out, and for the winter nights we had a chimney, which my father had built using sticks and mud. The hearth, where Momma lit the fires, soon became the soul of that little cabin. We'd sit around it and Momma would tell me all the stories that she had collected throughout her life. Her favorite story was how she met my daddy.

"We were both young and foolish," she would start off. "Maybe I was more foolish than him, but what kept us *tame* was our love. He was a field hand at the time, and I helped watch the youngins with my mother. He would leave me daisies every mornin' out on the porch and then wait for me down by the creek after the overseer rang the bell that let us know it was finishin' time."

She would smile every time she told that story. I could see the blush filling her dark cheeks, turning her chocolate complexion to a maroon. But as the story went on, and the more she thought about my father, the blush slowly faded away and sadness settled in.

You see, my father was allotted out to an awful man named Richard Moore, who owned several tobacco plantations out in Missouri. He was a severely cruel man, and I know that somewhere in hell they must've had a seat all primped and primed just for him. He would work his slaves extra hard in the summer months until they keeled over in the fields, due to sunstroke.

Even Master Mills didn't much care for Richard Moore. Oh, he was plenty polite when the man came around, but he had no respect for him. It was because Moore didn't have mercy for anybody, whites or blacks. I once heard him refer to a field of dead slaves as a bad crop and nothing more.

When Daddy found out that he was going to be sent off, he hugged Momma and me tight to his chest. I remember that day vaguely: the smell of his musk, the prickle of his beard and the deep sound of his voice. He was under the assumption he was going to return home someday. "I'll be back soon, so don't cha worry none," he told Momma and me.

But Mister Moore was so impressed by how hard Daddy worked that he took out a loan and bought him from Old Mills full out at the price of \$1,200. That was the price of a man in those days. Now you can call him black or you can call him a slave, but he was a man nonetheless.

I was only three at the time he went away. The things I remember the most about him were the two dimples that appeared in his cheek when he smiled, and the bright color of his eyes. He was the only black man that I had ever known who had green eyes—the very same eyes I now see in the mirror when I occasionally look.

Momma tells me he was a good man—soft spoken, but confident. "A man you'd be proud of," is how she'd put it. He was very skillful and even helped build the cabins when new slaves were brought onto the plantation. Although I don't remember him much, he sure did leave one mighty impression on the rest of the slaves.

Growing up all I ever heard was how strong he was, or how handsome, and how much I looked like him. I knew they were supposed to be compliments, but I found them hard to accept. I didn't

know how to feel pride for a man that I could barely remember.

“It’s so quiet now,” Momma would say. “Yo father loved recitin’ songs.” She’d close her eyes and start humming to herself as if she could hear his large voice still in the room. Her face would light up for a moment and then just as easily dim with the realization that he was gone.

She would try to hold back the tears, but I could always sense what she was feeling. And it didn’t stop there; at times it seemed that people’s emotions were seeping out through their pores like sweat. Unfortunately for me they weren’t as easy to wipe away. I would feel their pain, their sorrow, their despair; it became so heavy at times that I wept for them, but the tears didn’t really belong to me. They were only shared with me for a brief moment and then quickly returned back to their rightful owners.

When I told Momma about the special skills I had, she said it was a gift from God and that I had to keep it to myself, otherwise the devil would try to take it away from me. And when she said *the devil*, I knew she was talking about the white folks; I had heard other slaves call them ‘the devil’ a few times. So I did as Momma said and kept the secret to myself, but I couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about. At times it felt more like a curse than a gift. Most people had enough trouble dealing with their own emotions, let alone someone else’s.

And I remember how Momma’s emotions were always pulling at me the hardest. I would take a hold of her hand and ask, “Are ya happy, Momma?”

She would look at me with those warm, kind eyes and say, “Course, baby.”

The lie always came easy to her. Maybe she thought if she put on a smile, I couldn’t tell what she was feeling, but there was no hiding her hurt. I knew she was broken inside. She never wanted me to see her cry, as if she were forced to carry the burden alone. I’d hear her late at night, weeping away and talking to herself in a low murmur. She thought I couldn’t hear her, but I could. She would cry, then stop, and then cry again. This continued throughout the night. Occasionally, she would get up out of bed, light a candle and whisper a prayer. “Oh God, please bring him back to us safely. Amen.”

My lips repeated the word *Amen*, but never aloud. She tried so hard to keep it a secret, and as much as it killed me, I let her have it. But the more she kept her feelings to herself, the more I could tell she was

chipping away like a frail vase.

We soon got word that Daddy had died after trying to escape. The patrollers had tracked him down after two weeks and brought him back to the plantation. For his disobedience, Richard Moore, in a blinding rage, had right out whipped him to death.

That was the first time Momma didn't care who saw her pain. She curled up into a ball and buried her face behind her once beautiful hands, which the fields had now ruined, and wailed for hours on end.

We had a funeral for Daddy even though there was no body to bury. Moore didn't have the courtesy to send him back home. Momma sang the old song "Hark from the Tomb". She had overheard Mrs. Mills' church group singing it and talking about how it was sung at George Washington's funeral. Momma said, "If it was good enough for him then it was good enough for us slaves."

She let out the first verse and the rest of the congregation joined in.

*"Hark! from the tombs a doleful sound;
My ears, attend the cry;
Ye living men, come view the ground
Where you must shortly lie.*

*Princes, this clay must be your bed,
In spite of all your towers;
The tall, the wise, the rev'rend head
Must lie as low as ours!*

*Great God! is this our certain doom?
And are we still secure?
Still walking downward to our tomb,
And yet prepare no more?"*

I remember that day well. Momma squeezed my arm as I blindly stared at Daddy's grave. I didn't cry at all. Maybe seeing the man would've brought it out in me, but an empty grave was just a hole in the ground and I found myself feeling more sympathy for the old man who was left with the task of digging the hole than the empty box sitting in it.