Chapter One

*Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, 1817*

Susannah tried not to fidget while Mama Jess fastened the buttons down the back of her first grown-up gown. She had been excited about this evening, eager for it to conclude with her grand harp recital. But her dreams faded as she gazed at her image in the long mirror over the dressing table. The low-cut bosom of her lovely dress revealed the truth. She was thirteen and a gangly, redheaded beanpole. Crossing her fingers inside the gauzy yellow folds of her skirt, she breathed a promise to play the harp so beautifully that it would quell her parents’ disappointment. Make them glad she was not a fluttering butterfly, eager to be plucked by some hard-breathing young man.

Mama Jess kept humming a soothing sound that usually quieted Susannah’s jitters, but they both jumped when her mother swept into the room, regal as a queen. She anchored her cane, spread her skirt along the edge of the bed, and settled into its billowy silk. “Thank goodness, Jess, she’s *finally* filling out; stopped that unwieldy sprouting.”

Susannah’s hands flew to her chest, then relaxed under Mama Jess’s gentle shoulder caress. Until last night, she had thought her parents were hosting the party for the neighbors to celebrate her talent before she returned for another long year at Ursuline Academy. But she overheard her father saying that all the harp expenses would pay off when one of the big planters realized Susannah would make a fine trophy for their parlor. She had no intention of becoming a fancy broodmare. Taking a deep breath to quiet her mind, she relaxed to Mama Jess’s touch, soft as down as her black hands began brushing and twisting long strands of Susannah’s hair into graceful waves framing her face.

Her mother sighed, “Well, at least she has my red hair and slender frame. Jess, do her hair the way you styled mine.” Her mother patted her elaborate chignon as though Mama Jess needed a reminder.

“Yes, um,” Mama Jess’s beautifully sculpted face reflected in the mirror next to Susannah’s. “She’s got your green eyes, too. And pretty as a picture.”

Her mother’s face glowed as she looked up at her daughter, “Just lovely. Now, we must hurry. Our guests are expecting us.”

Clutching her mother’s hand as they descended the broad front steps, Susannah scanned the crowd. Ladies surged toward her smiling, and men huddled down by the river where her father had set whiskey barrels. Were they looking her over as her father had said, deciding if she would be a fine catch for their sons?

Passed between heaving bosoms powdered in lavender and rosemary, Susannah remembered her mother’s chiding not to slump and to lift her skirt. “My, how she’s grown,” echoed like a stage whisper. Susannah raised her chin and smiled as though discussing her height were observations of some distant artifact. Tonight, she would prove herself a graceful harpist, ready for the grand stages in New Orleans, not suited to marrying a local farmer.

Straining to see over the cluster of ladies sipping tiny glasses of sherry, Susannah sucked in a breath of delight at spotting Philippe dressed in his black suit holding high a tray of drinks as he glided like a black swan among a gaggle of geese. Breaking loose from her mother’s grip, she inched toward her secret love and reached for a glass.

“You’ll get in trouble for drinking that,” Philippe mumbled as he turned away to serve two women.

Susannah held the sweet liquid to her lips and whispered, “Swim tonight?”

Philippe cut his eyes toward her, “Have a good evening.”

Warmed by the giddy taste of sherry and memories of all the forbidden dips in the river with Philippe, Susannah headed toward the little knot of childhood friends watching from a distance. The girls used to come to classes with Susannah’s tutor. Then her father sent the tutor packing, hustled Susannah off to boarding school, and her friends disappeared. Her mother kept saying that absence makes the heart grow founder. She was wrong. Her classmates formed a new circle without her. Tonight, she would show what all the years of studying the harp had accomplished. Cheered to see they had come, she hoped they would notice her drink as she ambled past tables covered in white clothes and red roses that made her think of casket sprays.

Priscilla, already fourteen and the leader in Susannah’s absence, tossed her blonde curls and called out, “You look like your mother with your hair all piled up.”

Susannah rolled her eyes and patted her hair, pulled high and woven with yellow ribbons. “It’s so tight, my ears hurt. I can’t wait for my braids.” The giggles melted the tension, and they fell into a barrage of questions about New Orleans.

Encouraged by her attentive audience, Susannah motioned with her glass for them to follow. “Let’s get away from the snooping adults. You’ll never believe how we sneak away from the sisters to explore *Vieux Carré*.”

She led them toward the river where the slaves had been roasting the steer since before dawn. Ignoring the warnings of the men arranging beef on platters and the hot flush of heat on her cheek, Susannah reached across the coals to grab a small tray of meat for her entourage. Her toes felt the warmth of the fire through the pretty satin slippers, a brief discomfort. Taking a quick step away, she extended the tray to Priscilla, whose eyes bulged like blue marbles as she backed away. “You’re on fire!”

Laughing, Susannah called out to the startled girls, “I forgot to lift my skirt!”

Her throat closed in rising panic as her gaze fell on sparks flickering along the hem, dancing fingers of flame crawling up her skirt. She spun around, dropping her glass and feeding the hungry fire. The tray slipped from her fingers, tumbling meat into white hot coals. Her arms rose, flaying at the haze of suffocating smoke. Her breath heaved in labored gasps, and the earth began to tilt.

A blow slammed her hard against the grass, suffocating, pressing heavy, rolling her over, beating her back. Hands sat her up, swiped across her face, and slapped her hair. A voice pleaded, “Anna! Anna!”

Anna? Only Philippe called her Anna. Calmed by the soothing sound of his voice, she relaxed against him, but her eyes refused to open, and she gasped for breath between racking coughs.

A harsh voice barked, “What you doing, boy? Get off her!”

Philippe’s urgent touch vanished, leaving her recoiling against rough hands seizing her arm, jerking her upright, shaking her as if she had misbehaved. Gasping for air amid whiskey breaths, she searched for Philippe within the wall of soured, sweat-soaked shirts bumping against her, pounding her back.

Suddenly, the circle opened, and her mother’s hands––soft and eager––soothed her face and stroked her hair. “You’re alive! Oh, my precious, I thought I’d lost you. Are you burned?”

Susannah tried to speak as her mother’s fingers traced her cheeks. “Curls around your face are singed, only singed, sweetheart.” Her mother pulled, tugging her away from the men and toward the house.

Struggling to free herself, to walk upright against her mother’s determined grasp, Susannah searched for Philippe among the crowd pressing against her as they climbed the hill.

“Thank God I made you wear that coarse petticoat! It saved your life, held fire away from your limbs.”

Susannah couldn’t form words to argue that Philippe, not the petticoat, had saved her. Still dazed when they reached her bedroom and compliant as a ragdoll, she stared at the brown shreds that had lain in soft, yellow pleats.

Mama Jess eased the scorched clothing from Susannah’s trembling frame. Her long black fingers stroked Susannah’s cheeks and unfastened the disheveled mound of hair. “Lemme wash that soot off you face.”

Her mother, no longer fretting about what almost happened, began sobbing in great bursts. “Take care of her, Jess” She sank to the bed. “I must lie down.”

Mama Jess pulled a sea blue dress from the wardrobe and gently slipped it over Susannah’s head.

Leaning against the softness of Mama Jess’s chest, Susannah whispered, “Philippe saved me.”

“I saw.”

“He always looks out for me,” Susannah relaxed against Mama Jess.

“Been doin’ that since you were born on his fourth birthday. I was busy helping your mama get you here.”

Mama Jess’s beautiful face always looked radiant when she told the story. Susannah never interrupted to say that she knew it by heart. “Soon as I cleaned you up, Philippe went to fanning you with a palmetto branch to keep off the flies.”

They were startled by pounding on the bedroom door. “Jess, come quick! Your boy’s burnt bad.”

Jolted alert by a cold wave of fear, Susannah ran after Jess, ignoring her mother’s demands to cover her hair. When they reached the river, she shoved her way forward, wanting to scream at the laughing men clustered around Phillipe.

“You see that nigger dancing on one leg, pulling at that fancy boot? Shiny enough on top to see himself. Hiding a big hole right in the bottom. Musta got a chunk of coal stuck in there.”

Susannah clenched her fists until her fingers ached.

The men fell silent when Mama Jess knelt beside her son, who hunched over, rocking without making a sound. She nodded at Jacob Mobley like she was in charge. “Get him to my quarters.”

When the men laid Philippe on the cot in the basement, the dull look in his eye alarmed Susannah. Sweat ran along his cheek, dripping on his starched white collar. Maybe it was a tear. A familiar soothing sound, like a hum, came from deep in Mama Jess’s throat while she smeared honey on his foot seared in raw blisters.

Susannah wanted to wipe the beads of sweat from his face and tell him she knew he had saved her. Instead, she hugged her arms around herself and barely noticed when her mother wrapped a mantilla over her head.

Her father ignored Philippe and talked to men huddled in Mama Jess’s basement room until he noticed Susannah. “What you doing down here?” He shot an angry look at her mother, “Louisa, you’re supposed to be cleaning her up.” Without glancing at Philippe, he barked, “The boys are setting up for the recital in an hour.”

Susannah jerked her arm away as her mother pulled her up the back stairs. “Not one soul thanked him.”

“Philippe doesn’t expect thanks, sweetheart. He’s accustomed to caring for you. Why from your birth––“

“I know the story. Philipp’s always been there for me.” Susannah flung open her bedroom door.

“What does that mean, young lady? You be careful how you talk about the coloreds.”

Susannah caught herself. “Well, he taught me how to ride.” She handed her brush to her mother, who never dreamed that Susannah had shared every school lesson with Philippe after the tutor left. Indeed, she did not know about all the books for him that Susannah had smuggled home from boarding school. And she certainly didn’t know all the time they spent together, swimming, racing their horses, and picking berries.

“That’s different. Your father *told* him to teach you to ride. The boy’s a natural with horses.” Her mother brushed dreamily on Susannah’s long hair. “I hated to see that gorgeous gown burned to shreds. Too bad this church dress doesn’t have flowing sleeves like the other one. It would have created a lovely image as your arms extend along the harp strings.”

*Change the subject all you want. You will never know that I am closer to Phillipe than anyone in this world. And I am not for sale to these local men.*

\* \* \*

Descending the stairs to the parlor with her mother, Susannah looked at the hot, tired faces of their neighbors, whom she imagined had come to Mobley Plantation as a courtesy to listen to Jacob and Louisa’s daughter play her fancy harp. Before Philippe got burned, she wanted to impress them. Now, she would play for Philippe.

The seats in the parlor were filled except for her parents’ chairs sitting before the hearth bursting with magnolia blossoms. French doors opened wide to accommodate guests spread onto the veranda and around to the front porch. The youngest of Mama Jess’s sons, scrubbed clean of field dirt, wore black trousers and white shirts, and stood on stools on the veranda and around the edge of the downstairs rooms, slowly waving palmetto branches. Susannah’s harp, which her father had ordered from London when she showed promise, towered above the little harp chair, a birthday gift from her mother. Without looking at him, she accepted her father’s hand and stepped on the carpeted stage the slaves had built.

Her mother perched on the edge of her chair like a racehorse trembling with anticipation. Susannah averted her eyes and sat quietly before her instrument. Waiting until the only sound was the swishing of palmettos, she closed her eyes to hum the most challenging part of her piece. Placing her hands on the soundboard, she pulled it between her knees. *For you, brave Philippe.* Herfingers took command of the strings, rolling chords of Sophia Dussek’s *Sonata.* Oblivious to the surprised faces, she threw herself into *Andantino’s* rollicking tempo. She ended with *Rondo: Allegro,* playful chords that Philippe always applauded as he stood on the lawn below the parlor windows. This time he was listening from the basement.

Chapter Two

As the days passed, Susannah waited each morning until her father left for the fields before slipping down the back stairs to Mama Jess’s quarters. She drew fresh water and pulled a morning glory from the latticework next to the kitchen, then tiptoed to Philippe’s bedside and tucked it under his pillow. She always caressed his shoulder and whispered, “I know you saved me.” Waiting for a response to her touch, she imagined him reaching to embrace her.

When the dull look of pain stopped clouding his eyes and his lips parted in a weak smile, she bent close and whispered, “Did you hear me speaking to you every day?

“Heard your voice and *Rondo.”*

“I played it for you.”

“Aw, Anna, you’re gonna get in trouble coming down here.”

“Stop being a worrywart. They never notice. Besides, I’ve brought a copy of *Arabian Nights*. “I’m going to read to you. Like Scheherazade, I’ll stop at the good part, so you’ll want me back tomorrow.”

He grinned and fumbled to pull his shirt closed over his muscled chest.

She sat on the edge of the cot. “Pretend it’s like when you corralled all the kids so I could be the teacher. You made them sit still and learn their ABCs and numbers.”

His smile faded, and he looked away. “Every year, our school grew smaller as my brothers got sent to the fields.”

Susannah pressed the book against her chest. “But you never quit. Even after Father sold Sarah to that planter down in Alexandria, you still devoured my books.”

He laughed softly, “Still do. I watch every year for the stolen school books you tuck in Mama’s Christmas gift.”

Susannah giggled and, without thinking, squeezed his arm. Startled by his quick withdrawal, she stammered, “I better get to reading before Mother comes looking.” She focused her attention on *Scheherazade and the Arabian Nights*, but after she returned to her room, Susannah couldn’t stop thinking of the feel of Philippe’s arm. She had not felt his body in that way before. They had always been best friends, and he was her secret beau, but they never shared private things, like why Philippe was her father’s favorite. Why his brothers and his sister Sarah had milk chocolate skin, but Philippe’s was ebony black. All the other boys got sent to the fields and moved into the quarters with the other workers. Philippe lived in a shed room at the rear of the horse barn. How many times had she sneaked to the barn with a new book and settled with him to read by candlelight?

Boarding school had been lonely without Philippe to share her lessons, and summers were often worse when her father took him on long treks to buy wild horses from the Comanches. Her father often said that the boy absorbed the Indian dialects like a sponge and could haggle the best trade like he was one of them. He gentled the mustangs from Comancheria into work animals before they got home.

Fearing Philippe would insist she shouldn’t be coming down to see him, she kept their visits to reading and laughter until the morning her father appeared on the stairs. “What the hell? You’re not supposed to be down here.” He grabbed the book. “You’re reading to him!”

Susannah glared at her father. “He saved me! Don’t you even care?” She tried to retrieve her book. “He deserves better from you.”

Philippe’s eyes pleaded with her to hush her protests.

Her father’s face turned to outrage. “I’ll tell you what. Next week, while you’re on Boss Martin’s keelboat getting treated like a princess all the way back to New Orleans, Philippe’s gonna take a little trip with me.” He tossed the book on the cot. “To Comancheria. Gonna do some horse trading.”

“He ain’t ready.” Mama Jess loomed in the back door, holding the handle of a copper pot in one hand. “That foot’s healing real nice. Months in that hell hole could kill him.”

“Get him well, then.” Jacob Mobley turned on Susannah. “Don’t let me catch you down here again.” He brought his face close to hers and said, “Maybe you forgot I sold Sarah because you kept hanging around the kitchen, pretending to cook.”

She stood in rigid silence, remembering that painful time. Sarah had taught Susannah how to make extra-rich gravy and creamy desserts. When she got sold away, Susannah had grieved for weeks and finally crawled onto Mama Jess’s lap, wetting her smoky-smelling bosoms with tears. “Why don’t you ever cry? Sarah’s your only daughter.”

Mama Jess had stroked the sweaty mat of hair away from Susannah’s face. “Tears soften the hard place in your heart. That hard place keeps you tough when there ain’t nothing you can do but take it.”

Susannah had tried to find that hard place to stop her tears, but all she felt was hurt.

Unable to imagine losing Philippe too, Susannah was extra careful not to let her father catch them together. On the morning her father planned to leave for Comancheria, she entered the kitchen blazing hot with breakfast preparation and steaming with tension. Mama Jess shot threatening looks at her father, who glared at Philippe like he might be a snake in the weeds. Mama Jess was saying, “He better not come back here sick. Or dead.”

As Susannah stepped in the door, Mama Jess nodded in her direction and barked, “Good morning, Miss Susannah.”

Alarmed at seeing Philippe, Susannah said, “Is Philippe going?”

Her father snorted, “Damn right, he’s going. He’s hobbled around on those stick crutches long enough. A few days in the saddle will keep him off that foot. Be good as new by the time we meet the Comanches.”

“You heard me.” Mama Jess bent over the hearth to swing a grill off the coals and scoop biscuits into a bowl. A drop of sweat sizzled on the cast iron.

Susannah watched her father hitch his britches and head up the stairs. Mama Jess was the only colored on the place who sassed her father. And she got by with it. Even better than Susannah.

She stepped close to Philippe and whispered, “I slipped a copy of ‘A Hymn to the Moon’ in your valise.”

“I’ll read it by moonlight and think of you.”

If only he were white, she could kiss him.

Susannah tossed all night, not thinking of her departure but wondering how it would feel to kiss Philippe.

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After pushing aside her breakfast, Susannah hugged her mother goodbye and ambled to the river dock well behind Mama Jess, who carried two hatboxes and an oversized parasol. The tough boatmen who would pole the long keelboat to New Orleans welcomed her aboard.

“Happy to see you again, Miss Susannah.” Boss Martin reached a gnarly hand to steady her along the plank and into the vessel sitting low in the water. Miss Zephyr stood atop the flat-roofed cabin; her fleshy arms out-stretched in a welcoming gesture.

The men squeezed her trunks and the crate holding her harp into the cabin where she would sleep with Miss Zephyr. Susannah raised her parasol and climbed to the roof, where she would remain out of the way of the boatmen walking the running boards at the edge of the craft.

Each boatman anchored a powerful shoulder into a crutch at the top of his long pole and set its iron shoe into the riverbed. They walked from bow to stern, propelling the keelboat with enough speed to produce a breeze that cooled the sweat trickling from beneath Susannah’s bonnet.

Throughout the trip, her thoughts trailed after Philippe. Did his foot fester from riding long hours, day after day? Would her father even pay attention if it did?

Although her father employed several boat captains, Boss Martin was the only one who transported Susannah to New Orleans. He and Miss Zephyr always hired a carriage and escorted her to the door of Ursuline Academy.

When she arrived that year, the school was the same––girls giggling, whispering about their latest beau. It was their stories about the beautiful quadroons that roused Susannah’s interest. Those ladies had black blood but skin so fair they could pass. They lived in the quadroon quarter of *Vieux Carré* as *placées* of wealthy white men.

Susannah asked, “Do white ladies have *placées?”*

“Goodness, no!”

Although there was little hope she could ever marry Philippe, someday he might be her escort, protecting her on travels to the concert halls of New York or even Europe. She clung to her private dream, playing the harp for long hours, inspired by the secret of her love.

The Martins, who delivered mail with each trip, always brought Christmas gifts from the family. Susannah packed her English book for Philippe in the package she sent home for Mama Jess. Then she told Sister Mary Catherine that the book fell in a nasty ditch when she tripped on a tree root.

Throughout the year, she imagined slipping to Philippe’s room, curling next to him as they read poetry and stories from her smuggled books.

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At the end of the school year, it took four weeks without a breath of air to fill the sails for the boatmen to labor the keelboat up the river. When they finally bumped against the home dock, her chest hurt with disappointment. Philippe had not come with a wagon to deliver her harp and trunks to the house. Instead, Samson, his younger brother, stretched his coffee-milk face into a beaming smile as he backed the team up to the keelboat. “We still lookin’ for your pa and Philippe. Been gone with them Comanches this live-long year.”

Susannah raced up the hill and met her mother on the porch. “Why didn’t you let me know they haven’t returned? They’re never gone this long.”

Her mother tried to hug her. “You couldn’t do a thing about it. I saw no reason to worry you.”

Susannah rushed to Mama Jess, whose beautiful black eyes had sunk into deep hollows. “Expecting them ever day. If they got a big haul of mustangs, maybe it took a long time to settle them down.”

Susannah squeezed Jess’s hands. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

Jess turned her face away. “Watching’s all I can do.”

For days Susannah listened for the thundering sound of the animals stirring dust and the constant horses’ whinny and hee-haw of the mules. She caught Mama Jess turning her eyes to the road several times, even as she lifted a cauldron of stew off the hearth or hung wash on the back lines.

Susannah was in the parlor playing the harp when the herd arrived. She raced down the back stairs and out the door before halting in horror.

Her father jerked his head toward a horse dragging a leather cradle slung between long poles. “Gangrene. Had to cut off his toes.”

The guttural sound coming from Mama Jess stirred Susannah into motion. She ran to him, her cry catching in her throat. The flesh pulled tight across his face, and dust caked white in the hollows of his cheeks. His eyes fluttered; his tongue slid over parched lips. “Water?”

“I’ll get it!” Susannah fled to keep him from seeing her tears.

Samson and the other brothers rushed from the cotton field, still carrying their hoes. The solemn cadre moved his frail body to Mama Jess’s quarters, stood back while she washed him, and examined the wrapping on his foot.

Philippe’s voice sounded as gravelly as an old man. “It’s a poultice of yarrow leaves. Stops bleeding.”

Jacob Mobley loomed in the doorway. “Got hisself a wife in the bargain. Nursed him real good.”

“Wife?” Susannah whispered, the word echoing into the dead silence of the massive basement room.

“No!” Philippe raised one hand. “She’s a little girl.”

“Don’t matter. Chief said so.” Her father swaggered into the circle staring down at Philippe. “Gave him a slug of their whiskey and stuffed a bone between his teeth. When that Comanche hatchet come down on his toes, he bit the bone in half. Never made a sound. Passed out.”

“You let them do that?” Mama Jess inched toward Jacob, a black panther about to set upon her prey.

“Hold it!” He threw up both hands. “It was gangrene. Had to be done. Indians took good care of him. Like he was one of them spirit people.”

*Wife*! Susannah slipped through the circle of sweating bodies and climbed the stairs to her room. She fell across her bed, letting tears soak into her pillow. When her mother came in, Susannah pretended to be asleep.

Her mother sat on the bed and stroked Susannah’s hair away from her face. “Indians and slaves don’t think about marriage like we do, precious. Philippe’s eighteen now, and it doesn’t matter to the Comanches that he’s black as coal. We love Philippe. He and Mama Jess will do anything for us. But, they love differently from the way we love.”

*What do you know? You and Father don’t even sleep together.* She lay still as a stone until her mother left the room.

Chapter Three

Susannah did not return to Mama Jess’s basement quarters. Instead, she spent hours in the parlor practicing the harp, her fingers caressing the strings. Philippe could hear it, of course. The music drifted throughout the house. If he listened, he would know she was grieving.

One evening near dusk, as Mama Jess was hauling trays upstairs for dinner, Philippe moved slowly on his crutches to a spot below the side porch. Susannah continued playing, ignoring him standing there gazing up at her. A pebble hit one of the wide-open French doors, and she pretended to be startled before looking down. He waved and motioned for her to come out.

*Move slowly. Don’t appear to hurry.* Susannah stood at the railing and let her hair, pulled back and tied with a green ribbon, fall over one shoulder.

“Your music is healing.” He looked better, not so thin. “I’d like to visit with you when you have time.”

Her heart trembled. She wanted to rush down the stairs. “We’re about to have dinner. Perhaps after?”

He waved one crutch. “I’ll see you at the bottom of the front steps.”

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While she nibbled at the chicken and pushed the fresh sliced tomatoes around her plate, her father expounded on the sales he’d already made to farmers across north Louisiana and into Mississippi. His busy day meant an early bedtime. Tonight, she would not have to play for him.

After her father headed to bed, her mother frowned. “You aren’t coming upstairs?”

“I want to sit on the porch. There’s a little breeze.” She kissed the rouged cheek and watched with growing impatience as her mother slowly mounted the stairs using her cane for support.

Stars, thick across the sky, sparkled like a million candles, lighting the stairs and Philippe standing below. “I’ve missed you, Anna.”

“Really? I thought after being married, you’d have forgotten me.”

“It’s not like that. She still plays with dolls.” He waited for Susannah to sit on the step and motion for him to join her. “It’s a Comanche custom. They wanted to honor me.”

“Then, you won’t stay married?”

Philippe shook his head and leaned forward, resting elbows on his knees. “It’s touchy. The Comanches expect me to appreciate the gift. So long as we stay friends, she won’t complain. I promised to teach her English. And to read. She has no interest in being married.”

“Not for now.” Susannah couldn’t look at him. “Girls become women. Then friendship turns to love.”

“I know.” His voice sounded husky. “Boys do the same. Even when it’s forbidden.”

She laid her hand on his shoulder. “I’ve missed you.”

He flinched like she’d touched a sore spot. “Since the fire last year, I’ve had time to think. I’ve become a man, Anna, and my feelings are getting strong.” He pulled her hand between his palms. “I’m not an Indian. But I’m not a white man. So, I can’t have the wife I want.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “Say it, Philippe. Say you want me for your wife.”

He crushed her against him and then blew a silent breath as he pulled away. “It would destroy you, Anna. I won’t do that. I needed to talk to you, tell you how I feel.” He stood. “We must stop meeting. I’m not strong enough to resist taking you.”

She rose and gripped his arm. “What am *I* supposed to do?”

He lifted her hand to his lips. “Go back to school in September. Meet a white man who will love you and marry you.”

“And you’ll go back to your Indian wife?”

“No. I don’t fit in that world, either. Someday, you’ll have your own family. Maybe, then I’ll find a black woman. Learn to love her.” His voice broke. He shook his head. “I’ve got to go.”

She watched him move down the hill and disappear into the darkness. She threw herself onto the steps and beat her fists against the peeling paint until her frustration subsided, and a plan took shape. Hurrying to her room, she lit a candle and pulled her sewing basket from under the bed, where it had collected a layer of dust. She carefully combed her thick shock of dark red hair that her mother insisted must be brushed every day. When her mother was not feeling well, she assigned the task to Mama Jess.

Susannah’s hands shook as she wove each section into a tight, thick plait. She secured the braid with a dark green ribbon, one that Philippe had said matched her eyes. Using the scissors, she made a smooth cut just below her shoulders.

Her often tangled, windblown hair stretched in a smooth braid across her knees. Perhaps it belonged to someone else––her childhood self. It felt heavy as she carried it downstairs and out the front door.

Hidden in the darkness beneath the oak and pecan trees, she circled behind the stables and peered into the dim orange light seeping through cracks in the door. Philippe lay on his cot with a book propped on his chest. She pushed the door open.

“Anna!” His body formed a silhouette in the doorway as he moved toward her.

“I want to give you this.” She extended the hair like an offering.

Philippe winced as he looked at the braid. “Anna, you shouldn’t . . .” He spoke in a whisper as he moved the plait into the candlelight. “It’s beautiful.” Pulling it to his chest, he said, “You’re making trouble for yourself. You know how your mother––”

“I don’t care.” She threw herself against him. “I love you, Philippe. I want you to have part of me.”

He stroked her back. “I’ll cherish this, but we can’t be together. My body wants you too much.” He lifted her chin and kissed her quickly, then guided her out of the cabin and closed the door.

Sobbing, she stumbled up the hill, tripping on tree roots before she collapsed on the stairs. When she crawled into bed, dried tears crusted her face.

\* \* \*

The following day, sunlight hurt her eyes; her gown clung to her, wet with sweat.

Mama Jess stood beside the bed, shaking her head. “I come to see if you died. Half the day’s gone.” She sank to the bed. “Ohhh, what happened to you?” Her long fingers caressed the matted curls as she folded Susannah into her arms.

Bursting into tears, Susannah buried her face in the comfort of Jess’s bosom. “Philippe says he can’t be around me anymore.”

“Aw, sweet girl, that’s hurtin’ talk.” Mama Jess rocked her like a colicky baby. “That boy knows it ain’t right for you. Makes no difference what you want. Best, you get yourself dressed. Come down to some breakfast.”

Jess’s face looked cut with deep lines. Susannah touched the woman’s cheek. “You’ve been worrying, Mama?”

Brushing Susannah’s hand away like it was a bothersome fly, she said, “Lemme shape up them chopped-off ends.”

Susannah settled at her dressing table, soothed by Mama Jess’s brush strokes. Her strong fingers, massaging in the pomade, brought fresh tears. “I want to eat downstairs with you.”

“Sure you can. I’ll be ironing this morning.”

Susannah stood, looked at her reflection in the mirror, and ran her hand over the soft, thick waves. “You’ve always been the one who made me look and feel better. What do you think about me telling Mother that I burned my braid? Otherwise, she’ll want to keep it for a prize.”

“Yes’m. You mama loved that hair,” Jess mumbled as she led the way to her basement quarters.

Susannah settled at the little table like so many times in the past. She stirred cinnamon in her oatmeal while Mama Jess tossed off her apron. Her faded cotton dress billowed open like a parasol. She always ironed in front of the open doorway to capture a stray breeze, ignoring the outline of her body showing through her skirt. Susannah smiled, enjoying the familiar sound of the iron plunking on her dresses.

“You best eat before it gets cold.” Mama Jess checked the iron for heat by spitting on her finger, quickly touching the iron and listening for the sizzle. “Gotta take tea up to your mama.”

Susannah ignored the comment and stared into her oatmeal. “It’s not right that people who grew up playing together must be separated.”

“Some things just be. Ain’t nothing gonna change it. Woman’s ain’t free. White ones is slaved to their pa’s; then they get slaved to their mans. Niggers is slaved to everbody.” Mama Jess went to the kitchen to swap the iron for one on the coals. Returning with a tea kettle in one hand, she filled a fancy little teapot and set a dainty cup and saucer and silver tea strainer on a tray with a napkin.

Holding the tray, Mama Jess turned soft black eyes on Susannah. “Time’s come, Missy. Now take this up to your mama. She ain’t so good this morning. Be gentle now.”

Susannah nodded, left her oatmeal barely touched, and started up the stairs. *Be gentle.* She had always wanted to throw her arms around her mother, but she seemed fragile as fine crystal that might break in Susannah’s fumbling hands. Balancing the tray, she watched the tiny cup rattle against its saucer; the strainer slipped over, adding to the clatter. The tea service felt heavy and tilted as the contents moved like something alive. She could see her mother through the open door, pulling herself up in the bed. She removed her lacy nightcap and smoothed hair almost as dark as Susannah’s, letting it tumble long and silky over one shoulder.

“I heard you coming. Knew it was my beautiful daughter since no one else creates such a ruckus.”

Susannah stood in the doorway, not moving except for the shaking tray.

Her mother’s cry pierced the air like the call of a crow. “You’re ruined!”

Startled by the horror on her mother’s face, Susannah reeled backward against the doorframe, causing the tea service to scatter across the floor. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she gasped, staring at the clutter of glass and water seeping into her mother’s special braided rug.

“What have you done?”

Susannah shook her head, stunned to silence by her mother’s outburst. The sudden appearance of Mama Jess felt like a balm as the slave woman moved to the bedside and stroked her mother’s tear-streaked cheeks.

Watching her mother, swaddled like a baby in Mama Jess’s arms, turned Susannah’s world upside down. She had expected anger, not a collapse. Bending, her mind reeling in confusion, she began gathering the broken dishes, using the napkin to press water out of the rug.

Mama Jess mixed up laudanum, then made cooing sounds while she settled her mother against a mound of pillows.

“Best leave her be,” Mama Jess whispered. Her mother slipped into sleep as if nothing had happened. Susannah meant to tell her that short hair was the fashion, but it didn’t matter now. She would soon return to school, and her mother wouldn’t have to look at her for another year.

Chapter Four

Three Years Later, April 1821

Susannah stood at the boat’s railing, heart pounding like it might thump out of her chest as she watched Philippe back the wagon to load her harp and trunk. Rolled-up cuffs exposed his muscled forearms, and a freshly ironed shirt stretched tight across his shoulders. Each year when she returned, he had grown more muscular, handsome, and untouchable as he kept his distance, hardly looking in her direction. She had tried to forget him, passing the long summer days teaching harp lessons to the LeBlanc sisters. The girls came from town, and Susannah often encouraged them to stay beyond their lessons to fill her lonesome afternoons. Now that steamboats had started making the trip upriver to Natchitoches, she booked passage home for Easter. She intended to find out if he still loved her. Or, had he taken up with his Indian wife? Mama Jess said he devoured the books Susannah sent to him. She refused to entertain thoughts of his love being only for the books.

When she stepped off the gangplank, she tossed her head, allowing her hair, tied with a green ribbon, to slip over one shoulder. She hoped it reminded Philippe of the braid she had given him all those years ago. Instead, she heard him mumble, “Welcome back, Anna,” as he pulled away in the wagon.

Stunned, she stood in rigid silence, staring after him driving off the docks and up the levee.

Rutherford, the overseer of the field hands, loomed before her, blocking her view of Philippe. Bending near, he said, “Philippe be along directly. He be pickin’ up medicine for a sick mare.” The giant man could pass for white except for squeezing into a faded shirt and pants that belonged on a much smaller body. “I be taking you along home.” He cupped his hands to assist her onto the seat.

When the carriage reached the top of the levee and turned onto Waters Street, she heard her name shouted over the clatter of wagons on the brick paving. Looking up, she saw the LeBlanc girls waving from their townhouse balcony, squealing, “We saw your harp unloaded. May we come at two tomorrow?”

Susannah raised her parasol in greeting and nodded to confirm the engagement. Then, unmoved by the eager pair wanting a harp session, she fell into silence, crushed by disappointment. When the carriage rounded the side of the house, and she saw her mother waiting on the front porch, Susannah leaped from the buggy and bound up the steps. Cocooned in her mother’s tight hug, breathing in the familiar whiff of lavender, Susannah burst into sobs.

Her mother’s soft fingers stroked her face. “It’s not a fever, sweet girl. You’re exhausted from such a hurried-up trip.” Pulling a lacy handkerchief from her pocket, she dabbed Susannah’s burning cheeks and led her into the house. “Let’s sit in the parlor. Jess will bring tea and cookies.”

She clutched her mother’s handkerchief and slumped on the settee where the wide-open French doors offered a cool spring breeze and a view of the stables.

“Tell me about the steamboat. I would love to make that trip and sleep on a real ship.”

“It’s better than sharing the bed with Miss Zephyr on that keelboat.” Susannah tried to describe the steamboat, but when Philippe did not arrive with Rutherford and one of the young boys to uncrate her harp, she burst into fresh tears.

Her mother sighed. “Maybe it’ll cheer you up to know I invited a few friends for dinner and a harp concert. I even told Effie LeBlanc that despite being an adult evening, I knew her daughters would love to hear you play.”

“Well, it doesn’t cheer me at all.” Turning away from her mother’s startled look, she fled to her room and spent the rest of the day claiming to need sleep. Roused by a new plan the next morning, she slipped to the kitchen, intending for Mama Jess to have Philippe bring her carriage. Perhaps he would drive her into town. Her spirits fell when she found Rutherford in the kitchen with his mother, ol’ Sally. He stooped to arrange a shawl over her hunched shoulders and settle her next to the blazing hearth. “Mama’s a little peaked this morning. Can I hep you, Missy?”

“I … wanted Philippe to hitch my buggy for a mid-morning drive.” She took Sally’s gnarly hand and watched her lips spread into a toothless grin. “Rutherford do it.”

Susannah sighed, reached to stroke thin strands of white hair, and looked into Sally’s watery blue eyes. “I’ll stay with Miss Sally, Rutherford, while you bring my buggy.” Susannah held the hand, stiff as cold leather, and wondered how many of ol’ Sally’s sons worked in the fields. She had been born on the plantation and came as part of the sale when Susannah’s father bought the place. Mama Jess always said ol’ Sally only helped in the kitchen, made beds, and emptied chamber pots because she got wore plum out having babies quick as a rabbit.

When Rutherford returned, Susannah said, “I’m sorry to pull you away from your work. I thought Philippe could help.”

Rutherford’s piercing blue eyes shifted to adjusting Rose’s halter. “He’s mighty busy here of late.”

“I noticed,” Susannah whispered as she took the reins and clicked Rose forward.

The little mare trotted along the road while Susannah scanned the figures bending to plant the long rows of cotton. Their deep voices blended in a song so soft it could be a funeral hymn. Disappointed that she didn’t spot Philippe’s black body among all the fair ones, she drove aimlessly through town, checking the stores and along the docks, before returning home to wait for the LeBlanc sisters. Both girls were so diligent with their practice that Susannah agreed to teach daily lessons in June when she graduated and returned home for good.

After the girls left, Susannah settled on the front porch to avoid her mother’s preparation for that evening’s dinner party. Watching a riverboat churn the water into white foam, she told herself to accept that dreams of having Philippe’s love had been a schoolgirl fantasy. She would return to Ursuline for two more months. What came next? Teach harp to the LeBlanc girls? Her childish plans of becoming a renowned soloist playing Handel’s Harp Concerto before an adoring audience were as farfetched as being loved by a brilliant and handsome freedman. She was still the gangly daughter of a country farmer.

\* \* \*

Susannah dressed in a silk gown hoping its softness would soothe her during the long evening. She entered the parlor, and over the heads of people she had known all her life, she spotted Philippe balancing a tray of wine. Of course, Philippe always served. Still, her body tensed in surprise. As though sensing her presence, he lifted his gaze, then nodded to a woman reaching for a glass.

“Come, dear. You mustn’t stand there like a statue.” She submitted to her mother’s lead across the room. “Smile, for goodness sake.” Still clutching Susannah’s hand, she called, “Ah, Sophia. Susannah told me they’ve opened a German opera house in New Orleans.”

“How wonderful. Perhaps Mister Wagner will tear himself away long enough to take me.”

Susannah forced a smile. “You’ll enjoy it. They translate French and Italian operas into German.”

Miss Sophia clapped her hands in delight. “*Ach*, to hear the words from the old country. I must tell Hermann this minute.” She whirled away, and Susannah turned to face Philippe extending the wine tray.

Without taking her eyes from his, she reached for a glass with both hands to steady her fingers. He murmured her name as he turned away, but not before she saw something like a ring on his little finger.

During dinner, while Philippe served, Susannah tried to see the ring, but her mother was looking each time she lifted her eyes.

Mistress Moreau raised her voice above the chatter, “Susannah, did you know my Priscilla’s getting married?”

Pulling her gaze from Philippe, Susannah noticed her mother’s slight frown. “How wonderful. I’m glad to hear the good news.”

The woman placed her fingertips on her lips, feigning the pose of a shy child, “I feared she’d be the last of you girls.”

*Smile sweetly.* “No, ma’am. It appears I’m the last!”

“Huh!” Priscilla’s father wiped at the fish oil on his chin. “I’d a thought with all them concerts and circuses in New Orleans, you’d snag one of them rich plantation sons from up the River Road.”

“No!” Her mother’s voice had lost its usual softness. “The sisters at Ursuline are very protective of our daughters.”

Thanks to her mother, the conversation moved from the cost of marrying off daughters to cotton planting and crop estimates if rain came at the right time.

Susannah was relieved to fulfill her part of the evening by taking her seat before her harp on the little raised platform Philippe and the younger boys set up in the parlor.

Turning slightly to see Philippe clearing the dining room, she spoke so he could hear. “I am sharing something playful to remind me of the fun times during my childhood. I present Handel’s Harp Concerto.” Why was her face burning? She’d played many times for Philippe. He had never made her nervous. Knowing he loved listening had always been calming. She bowed her head and pressed her palms into both legs before placing her hands on the soundboard and taking a deep breath. She began caressing the strings and was soon captured by the joy of the music until the sight of Philippe standing so still in the dining room sent a jolt through her body. Her fingers slipped, missed two strings before she recovered, and continued with an adequate performance. The applause should have pleased her, but she longed for the evening to end as she stole one last look at Philippe and stepped from the raised platform into her mother’s tight hug.

After the slow good-nights, Susannah went upstairs, listening for her parents to go to their separate rooms and the help to finish in the kitchen. Moonlight made it easy to see Philippe limp slowly across the lawn and disappear around the back of the barn. Trembling with pent-up fear and longing, she wrapped a shawl around her filmy nightgown and ran barefoot beneath the shadow of the trees. As she approached, a ray of candlelight showed around the sagging door. A long shelf above his bed held a line of books. He was stripped to his drawers and lying on his cot when she pushed open the door.

He bolted to his feet. “Anna!”

She stepped into the dim light and dropped her shawl. “I had to see you; know why you’ve been hiding.”

“This isn’t right, Anna.” I can’t see you without touching you.”

“Well, you see me now.” She fell against him, relishing the pressure of his hands on her back, caressing her hair. “Your ring? What does it mean?”

With his lips on her neck, he whispered, “That I will love you forever.” He pulled her toward the candle and slipped the ring from his finger. She saw that it was an intricate weave of red hair––her hair!

“It took a long time before I learned to shape your hair into those little knots. It felt like I was touching you.” He held her hand against his lips. “I dreamed of giving it to you.” He slipped it on her middle finger.

“It’s so beautiful. But, you won’t have a memory if I take it.”

“The rest of your braid’s wrapped in my pillowcase where I lay my head every night. There’s plenty for a matching ring.”

She tiptoed, whispering against his mouth. “Let’s run away.”

He pulled back. “I can’t do that to you.”

“I’m doing it to *you.* Don’t send me away.” She held tight against him, searching his body, her fingertips venturing into the waist of his drawers.

\* \* \*

The candle had burned down when he helped her into her gown and wrapped the shawl around her shoulders. “I fear you will be sorry in the cold light of morning.”

“Hush!” She pulled him close. “I’ll never be sorry for loving you.”

When daylight came, she was still awake, clutching the ring against her chest, reliving every moment, every word between them.

She was startled by Mama Jess’s knock on the door.

“Miss Louisa’s going down to breakfast. Wants you to come.”

Susannah scrambled out of bed, alive in all the places Philippe had touched. It would be hard to listen to her mother recounting memories of her dinner party. If only they could talk about Philippe.

Her mother looked radiant. Mama Jess had brushed her hair until it lay in deep red waves across her shoulders. The dinner had lifted her spirits.

“Your father’s already gone. Let’s sit on the veranda for breakfast.” She hardly leaned on her cane as she led the way into the crisp springtime air.

When Susannah lifted her cup to her lips, her mother cooed, “What’s this?” She reached for Susannah’s hand. “Who created this piece of art?”

Susannah had planned what to say, but when the question came so quickly, she stammered, “A . . . school friend.”

“Oh, my goodness.” Her mother’s green eyes grew bright, questioning. “I must meet her.”

“She died. Last month.”

“Ohhh, what a shame. Such talent. What was her name?”

“Winifred.” Susannah had picked the name of a sweet little colored girl, one of the freed slaves the school accepted as part of their plan to blend cultures. It seemed a good choice, someone her mother would never know. Unable to look into the eager eyes, Susannah gazed toward the stables. Perhaps Philippe would be out with the horses.

“How thoughtless of me to open a fresh wound. I noticed your sadness last night. I thought it was because of graduation, leaving your school friends. I didn’t dream you had lost someone special.”

“Very special.” Susannah stood. “If you’ll excuse me. I must finish some schoolwork before the LeBlanc girls come this afternoon.”

“Oh, yes, that’s probably best. I hardly slept last night from all the excitement over your performance.” Her mother reached for her hand, “You made a grand impression, my dear.”

“I’m glad you weren’t disappointed,” Susannah ignored her mother’s startled expression and headed for the stairs, relieved that her ring story had convinced her mother.

Curling into a chair overlooking the stables, she watched for Philippe and planned how quickly she could get away after dinner. She wanted their last night before she had to leave to be as long as possible. She had pushed away any thought of their love presenting a problem.

\* \* \*

Susannah was delighted when both parents appeared fatigued and ready to retire soon after dinner. She asked Mama Jess to bring laudanum for her mother, then went to her room to wait for the house to settle.

The moon had slipped behind a thick bank of clouds as she picked her way in the dark toward her waiting lover. She pushed open his door and fell into his arms.

Groaning, he said, “You make me crazy.”

Just before dawn, they lay spent, wrapped together on the narrow cot. Philippe sucked in a deep breath. “The birds are waking. I can’t think straight around you, but I’m clear enough to know you better get to your room before you’re missed.”

“When I return in June, we must get away. You know the road to Texas. Perhaps we can stowaway on a Mexican wagon train. I could pretend you’re my slave, taking me to Béxar to meet some Spanish official.”

“I’ll check on those Mexican freighters. Maybe there’s a way.” He bent and kissed her throat. “When I drive you to the ship this afternoon, I’ll act proper, but thinking otherwise.”

\* \* \*

Spring in New Orleans burst with blossoms filling the air with an aroma that hugged Susannah with thoughts of Philippe. Into May, her body felt too stimulated to settle into its usual rhythm, but as the month passed, she grew certain of the change. She had been sure they were safe. Philippe had insisted on moving away even as her eagerness kept pulling him into her. There could be no more delays. They must plan. As the days dragged on, she could think of nothing else. Playing the harp, as she had done in the past, felt ridiculous. What could she possibly do with a harp?

Chapter Five

June 1821

Susannah inched down the crowded gangplank, searching for a glimpse of Philippe in the cloud of dust stirred by wagons and mules milling in restless confusion on the Natchitoches dock. When she spotted Samson in her father’s wagon, her chest ached with disappointment. Why would Philippe send his younger brother? Had he changed his mind? Was he going to avoid her again? She lowered her head to hide hot tears behind the brim of her bonnet and almost shouted when she saw him standing at the foot of the gangplank. His eyes––black and steady––came ever closer as the crowd surged forward, bumping her into him as she stepped onto the pier.

“Anna,” he whispered, touching for an instant. “I’ll take your valise.” His hand felt warm against hers. “Got here early to get the buggy up close,” he held the reins while Rose’s warm breath against her cheek brought a rush of delight. “I missed you, dear girl. We’ll have some good rides every day.” She leaned against Rose’s neck, “We’ll find a way to make it all work.”

When Philippe cupped his hands to boost her into the buggy, she was startled by how thin and drawn he appeared.

As she eased herself slowly to the carriage seat, her fingers pressed into his shoulders, and she whispered, “What’s wrong?”

“We can talk on the road,” Philippe mumbled, then positioned the hood to shade her from the hot afternoon sun. He looked as stiff as his well-pressed shirt and pants while maneuvering the buggy through the crowd and up the hill to the familiar bustle of Waters Street. She heard their shouts and knew to look up to the balcony where the girls were waving. She smiled at their eagerness and raised two fingers to confirm the time. Susannah folded her hands together, absently stroking her ring until Philippe turned onto the road toward the Mobley plantation. “What’s happened?”

His eyes rimmed red. “There’s trouble.”

She laid her hand on his leg and leaned against him.

“No, Anna. Someone may be watching.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Mister’s on a tear.” Philippe shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut like he was trying to erase what he had just said. “Started when Miss Sally died. She just slipped away one night.”

“Oh, poor Rutherford. He adored his mama. And took such good care of her.”

“Appears that’s the only reason he stayed around. Soon as we buried her, Rutherford took off.”

Susannah gasped, “Ran away?”

Philippe nodded and choked. Wiping at his eye, he spoke through gritted teeth, “The dogs caught him.”

Susannah clutched her throat. “Oh, my God! Did they hurt him?” She knew the answer before she finished the sentence and buried her face in her hands. “Oh, Philippe, couldn’t they stop them?”

Philippe let Rose slow to a walk and hunched over the reins, slowly shaking his head. “Nobody tried.”

“I can’t believe Rutherford’s brothers would let the dogs have their way. What about *your* brothers? Couldn’t anyone help?”

“Mister held them back. Wanted them to see what happens to runaways.”

Susannah choked, “He wouldn’t let them help?”

Philippe stared straight ahead, clenching his jaw, his eyes narrowed. “Nope.”

Susannah could see dogs ripping into flesh; Rutherford fighting, begging for help. She gagged at the taste of bile filling her mouth and leaned over to vomit her breakfast in a great gushing eruption.

“Anna!” Philippe clutched her waist while she heaved. “I’m so sorry.” He pulled a rag from his pocket, stroked sweat from her face, and wiped her lips. “I don’t have water.”

“No. No. It’s the first time I’ve done that.” She smiled and pulled his hand to her lips.

“What are you saying?”

She burst into tears. “I didn’t intend to tell you this way.”

“Oh, Lordy.” He shook his head. “What have I done to you?”

“You’ve loved me, Philippe. Our love is taking shape in me.”

His breath came in bursts, and he stroked her face. “I’ve destroyed you, Anna.”

“No, no! We’ll figure it out. But, what about Father? Could he know about us?”

“Naw. It’s a curfew. He’s watching all the hands. Thinks we might run off. Gotta be in quarters by dark.” Philippe’s face softened to a mask of sorrow as he turned toward her. “Hired a couple of men. They’ve got eyes in the back of their heads. Roam like coyotes.” He chuckled, “Mister doesn’t know the dumb bastards are drunk by dark. Pass out in no time.”

“So, we could still slip away? Perhaps Texas. The Spanish are against slavery. Did you look for a way to hide on one of those Mexican caravans?”

Philippe eased his grip on the reins and let Rose begin a slow walk. “I’ve talked to the freighters. Texas isn’t welcoming. Mexicans are fighting for independence, and Spanish soldiers are killing the rebels. I knew about the slaughter. I’ve seen it on our way to Comancheria.”

“How about New Orleans? Free men of color are everywhere in the city…”

He cut his eyes toward her. “You plan to take one of Mister’s keelboats?”

“Philippe!” She wanted to shake him. “We’ve got to think of something.” As they neared the cotton fields spread on both sides of the road, she was stunned by the quiet. The boys were hoeing, yet without the low rumble of their songs, the place felt like a graveyard. Two men cradling long guns across their saddle horns rode frisky, twitching horses along the rows. She shuddered and then spotted the white house through the trees. She took deep breaths and said, “Let me out at the back. I want to see Mama Jess.”

He touched her hand. “I want to raise our child.” He jumped to the ground and moved the boarding stool up close to the carriage. She stepped down, and he clutched her hand in both of his.

“Look at you! Home at last.” Mama Jess hurried out the kitchen door, wiping her hands on her big white apron.

Susannah burst into tears and threw her arms around the warm heaving body. “I’ve missed you so much, Mama.”

“Now, now, you’re safe at home. Lookin’ a little peaked. Why don’t you go see your mama? Plenty time for a nap ’fore we get dinner.”

“Is Mother sick?” Susannah noticed the strained look in Mama Jess’s eyes.

“Just taken to her bed for a few days. I’m about to take up another dose of laudanum. Calls it her rest medicine.”

“Philippe told me about Rutherford. Is that what put her to bed?”

“Might be. It’s a hard time, Missy. Best you go see her ’fore takin’ yourself a nap.”

Susannah lifted her skirts and mounted the steep back stairs. She needed her mother’s support when it came time to tell her father. She stopped in the doorway of the airy back room where her mother’s giant four-poster sat before windows opened across the back of the house. Propped up on pillows edged with delicate tatting, red hair brushed to a fine sheen, her mother appeared to be asleep. Or dead. Susannah moved closer, causing a board beneath the hooked rug to creak.

“Where’s my laudanum?” Her mother did not open her eyes; her long thin fingers lay like claws across her breasts.

“No laudanum for now.” Susannah said as she eased onto the side of the bed.

“Susannah! At last.” She lifted both arms, opening the sleeves of her gown like wings of a giant moth, folding Susannah in a lavender hug. She looked over the top of Susannah’s head. “Jess, you forgot to remind me this was the day.”

Susannah sat up and glanced back at Mama Jess, holding a glass of the swirling liquid. “Mama Jess isn’t going to give you more laudanum. I want you to have dinner with Father and me.”

Her mother looked away and lifted a rigid jaw. “I can barely look at that man. You hear what he did?”

“Some of it. Why don’t you tell me.” Susannah dug her nails into her palms to remain calm, not upsetting her mother.

“He bragged, Susannah. He bragged about how he held them off with his rifle. He wanted the boys to watch dogs tearing Rutherford apart.” Her mother’s voice broke. “If only Rutherford hadn’t run. We’ve been good to him, Susannah. Like we’ve been to all our slaves.”

“Maybe that’s it. Perhaps he wanted to be free.”

Her mother blinked and cocked her head like a confused bird. “Free? That would ruin us. We’ve got to have hands. How else would we manage this place?”

“I don’t have answers.” Suddenly sick to her stomach, Susannah stood and reached for Mama Jess’s arm. Leaning against the powerful shoulder for support, she left the room.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” her mother called in a cheery voice.

\* \* \*

Susannah waited to go down to dinner until her parents were seated, glaring at each other from opposite ends of the table. Mama Jess started serving with a platter of crispy fried fish and turned to the sideboard for the vegetables and bread.

“You enjoy that expensive riverboat ride?” Her father stuck a large piece of fish in his mouth and chased it with a chunk of bread.

She remained silent, watched the grease slide onto his chin and remembered how much that irritated her mother. Did he eat like a pig for spite?

“Suppose you heard about all the to-do around here? That damn Rutherford cost me a fortune to hire patrols.”

“Why are you doing it? The boys aren’t going to run off. There’s no place to go.” She watched him lift his eyes and did not let herself blink as she stared back.

“Figure I scared the shit out of ’em. Niggers saw what’d happen if they high tail it out of here. Patrol’s an added warning. Probably send ‘em packing in a day or so.”

Susannah relaxed and glanced at her mother, sitting straight and still, not touching her food. If the patrol was gone and her mother helped, they could get way down the road toward Texas or even up to Arkansas before her father knew they were gone.

“Are you going to play for us this evening?” Her mother’s voice sounded weak, pleading in tone.

“Naw! Wait ‘til tomorrow. I gotta check on that patrol. Something tells me they’ve been laying off after I go to bed. Catch the bastards slacking; I’ll fire their asses.”

Her mother stood. “I’m going to bed. Tell Jess to bring my laudanum.”

“Sure will, Louisa. We’ll tell her to knock you out so you don’t have to know what’s happening.”

Susannah wanted to scream at her mother to stand up to him. Show him that he was wrong. But he was right. Laudanum was her mother’s companion in times of trouble. And trouble occurred way too often.

\* \* \*

Susannah sat by the window in her darkened bedroom, watching candlelight go out and the quarters become eerily silent. It wasn’t long before two men, their voices carrying in the darkness, walked toward the river. When they disappeared under low branches, she slipped downstairs to the front porch, where she could see the shape of them undressing and jumping into the river for an evening bath. She tried to maintain patience waiting for them to return to their tent near the slave quarters. Instead, they sprawled on the riverbank and grew louder as they passed a bottle between them.

Were they so drunk that she could slip past in the shadows? She eased down the steps and was startled into a cold sweat when her father stalked like a panther across the lawn, a rifle slung over his shoulder.

“You boys enjoy yourselves? Hope to hell you have since it’s done over.”

The men scrambled to their feet, whining excuses.

“Get your sorry asses outta here.” Her father trailed the staggering pair back up the hill and held his rifle on them while they struggled to saddle their horses.

After they rode away, Susannah waited on the porch until she heard her father’s bedroom door slam so hard it shook the house.

Moving within the shadows, she slipped to Philippe’s door. He had stripped to his drawers and lay on his bed reading by the light of a candle stub. When she pushed open the door, he jumped to his feet, grabbing her into his arms. “You’re gambling to come here.”

“Did you hear him chase off the patrol?”

Philippe laughed, “We all heard!”

“I want to sleep the whole night with you.” She pressed against the hardness of his body and pulled at the waist of his drawers. “Don’t turn me away.”

Chapter Six

Susannah slipped back to her bed before daybreak and lay in the dark, her body alive with the memory of Philippe’s hands exploring, making her ache with pleasure. Sleep refused to help her pass the long hours looming like an eternity before she could be with him again. Fingering her ring and hugging the pillow against her breasts, she listened to birds stirring, welcoming the creeping light with songs of love.

In a quick reaction to the tap on her door, Susannah pulled up the sheet to cover her body, transformed into a new secret self. Mama Jess held a candle, a conspiratorial grin spreading across her face. “You mama’s at breakfast waiting on you. She ain’t taking laudanum!”

Susannah laughed, “Then we better keep her happy.”

Mama Jess moved to the wardrobe, pulled out a soft summer robe, and appeared oblivious to the scent of love on Susannah’s body that she took in with every breath. “Lemme brush the tangles outta your hair.”

*Tangles! Don’t ask how I made such a mess of my hair.* “I’ve missed you, Mama.”

“We’re awful glad you’re home. Mighty lonesome when you go off.”

Susannah grinned, “You said ‘we.’ Did everybody miss me?”

“Ever single soul. Now, you get on down to your mama. She missed you most of all.”

Susannah reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped short, surprised to see her father still at the table.

He stood. “You gonna come to breakfast like that?”

“I’ll dress before lunch.”

“I got business in town. Be in about four. Then you can play for me and your mother.” He walked toward the door casting a sideways glance at her mother, still wearing her robe. Over his shoulder, he said, “I hope you can bring yourself to dress, Louisa. Be nice to see you looking half decent.”

Her mother gazed straight ahead as though she enjoyed a view beyond the open French doors. She motioned to the chair next to her. “Ignore him, and he’ll go away.”

“Why do you let him talk to you like that?”

“It’s useless. Like spitting into the wind.” She bent close and hissed, “It blows back on you.”

Susannah didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “I shouldn’t play just yet. I’ve been so busy with classes that I’m a little rusty.” She didn’t care what gave him the nutty notion for her to play in the afternoon. Skipping the usual after-dinner concert meant more time with Philippe.

“Practice this morning,” her mother said. “Then the LeBlanc sisters will warm you up, and I’ll enjoy two concerts in one day.”

*Anything to keep you off laudanum.* Susannah squeezed her mother’s hand.

\* \* \*

After a long bath, Susannah combed out her wet hair and was pleased to find her mother seated before her needlepoint frame in the parlor. Warmed by the prospect of her mother’s renewed energy, Susannah pulled her harp next to the French doors to let the breeze dry her hair. She kept glancing toward the stables as she played, hoping to glimpse Philippe. When she spotted him showing mules to some men who were with her father, she barely suppressed a giggle as she swung into one of Philippe’s favorites, “Handel’s Harp Concerto.” Tonight, they would laugh about her sending a love message.

She had switched to a series of practice chords when she was startled to see her father entering the parlor with three men who made the room smell like animal dung.

“Susannah, this is Mister Hezekiah James. Him and these other two wanted to hear you play.” Her father stood over her like she was his prize show horse. “She teaches harp playing for money.”

“Excuse us, ma’am. I enjoyed hearing a harp in New Orleans. I’ve been listening to the pretty sound of your playing. I was hoping you’d do me, do us, the honor.” He removed his hat, freeing unruly coils of sand-colored hair that made her think of a long-handled mop.

“Of course.” She glared at her father. “Perhaps you’ll find chairs for the gentlemen?”

“Huh? Sure. Pull up those chairs from the table.”

Susannah kept her eyes averted, hands on both knees waiting for the scramble to end and the big men to perch on her mother’s dainty embroidered cushions. When they finally grew quiet, she looked at the motley crew. “I shall play a ‘Harp Sonata in C Minor.’”

“Naw! Not one of those long things.” Her father stood up and appeared to dog paddle with his arms. “Do that rolling sound.”

“*Glissandos*.” Susannah looked at him until he nodded and sat down.

He had no idea that *glissandos* were for beginners, the simplest thing without ever having to play a note. She relieved her irritation by digging her fingers into the strings and stroking with force up and down to create the rolling musical sound that satisfied her father’s tin ear.

The mop head bent from his waist and appeared mesmerized while the other two wriggled, worm-like until she stopped. Then they clapped like they were glad it was over. “Made me think of the sun bursting through clouds, ma’am.” The big man pushed back his unruly hair and bowed again. “Appreciate you honoring us.”

*The sun bursting through clouds.* She couldn’t resist a smile. “You’re welcome, Mister–”

“James. Hezekiah James.” He kept standing there, a silly smile on his face.

“That’s enough. We got business.” Her father’s loud voice released the mop head from his catatonic gaze.

She turned away, amused by a fumbling man who noticed the sun bursting through clouds.

\* \* \*

Susannah had barely finished the lessons with the LeBlanc sisters when her father returned and flopped in his chair, ready for his entertainment. Seated at her harp, she closed her eyes, determined to ignore the gnawing question of why he was so intent on her playing now. Relaxing as her fingers caressed the strings, the music flowed and blended with the love growing in her body. As she began the rolling *glissando* to please her father, her thoughts wandered to the feel of Philippe’s fingers smoothing a lock of hair back from her face as if to lift the curtain on their future. He had whispered, “It won’t be as simple as you think.”

The memory jolted her back to their sun-drenched parlor, surprised that she missed the quick pedal change. Her mother caught the error. A fleeting smile passed between them before her mother returned to her needlepoint.

Distracted by her father’s incessant pounding of his fist on the arm of his chair, she lost concentration and missed another chord. Her hands dropped to her sides. “I’m sorry, I need to practice that part.” Twisting her ring, a habit she barely noticed, she stroked protectively across her middle.

Jacob Mobley stood, scuffing muddy boots across the needlepoint footstool. Her mother winced, then stabbed her embroidery needle through the canvas.

Ignoring his wife’s concern for her beautiful work, Jacob paced the parlor, printing the patterned rug with mud. “That harp playing’s a pretty thing, but times have changed. Country’s not coming back from the financial crisis. Planters aren’t buying work animals anymore. Now that you graduated, I’m done paying the nuns to teach you all that culture.” He halted at the mantel, massaging a calloused hand over its rich oak grains like he was mapping his next move. “Made my last trip to Texas horse-trading with the damn Comanches.”

Susannah caught a tiny frown creasing her mother’s brow before returning to her world of needlework. Did she know what he intended to say?

Jacob stuck out his stubbled chin; one eyebrow shot up. “About time you grew up.” He leaned so close she could hear air whisking over the hairs in his nose. “Remember Hezekiah James? That fella this morning?”

“Of course. He kept leaning toward me. Had hair like a mop.”

“Figured you’d remember, being he’s one of the few men who’s taller than you.”

Her mother clutched the embroidery frame and slammed its little legs against the floor as though trying to smash his hateful words.

Her father swatted at the distraction and towered over Susannah. “We’re damn lucky. Hezekiah’s buying nine mules and three of my best mustangs.” He waited a moment in the silence and then added, “He asked to marry you.”

Susannah clutched her belly, her mind swirling in confusion. Marriage? The muscles in her neck constricted, strangling her effort to scream. “No!” erupted like a gurgle. Rage drove her to her feet, her body lurching at her father in wild trusts that made her stagger. Grabbing the harp’s cool shoulder, she hissed through clenched teeth, “You’re selling me with the horses?”

“Don’t get sassy!” He drew himself up, the bulk of his weathered frame a contrast to her long, lean figure.

Her body vibrated with rage, making her voice quiver like the tremor of a bell. “Will I pull a plow? Or am I fancy enough for a carriage?”

“You sound crazy, sucked in by all that New Orleans schooling. Shows, *I* need to decide what’s best for you.”

“Best for me!” she shrieked. “All you know about that oaf is he can pay for mustangs.”

“Naw! Listen here, girl. I been talking to him all week. He’s got plenty from selling land and probably got a stake after his old man died. He’s outfitting for Texas. He’s a catch, Susannah. Your best bet.” His eyes cut to her mother, whose lips formed a rigid line. “Be grateful someone wants a woman taller than most men.”

Susannah’s mind raced, and her heart thumped so hard she feared it would burst from her chest. They were out of time. He was sending her off to Texas. She would lose Philippe. Fury at the depravity of being sold made her nostrils flare, and in a slow, deliberate tone, she said, “Perhaps you will inform Mister James there is a bonus. I’m carrying a child.” She watched her father’s nostrils flare and his eyes bulge.

“Whore!” The word and his slap sounded like a clap of thunder as she flew backward, knocking over the harp chair. The parlor spun upside down as she sprawled across the rug. Slowly, her hand moved to the sting closing one eye, and her tongue touched the rusty taste of blood at the corner of her mouth. She crawled to her knees and then scrambled to her feet.

The needlepoint frame had scattered, and her mother stood clutching her cane, one hand pressing her chest, fixed in place, powerless to defend her child.

Jacob lurched for Susannah, grabbing one arm. “Who did it?” His tobacco-stained hand drew back like a club.

Susannah stared at the raised arm, her mind scrambling for answers. He would send the dogs; their angry yaps would not stop until they leaped for Philippe’s throat. Bile flooded her mouth, and she sucked it down, knowing that her father would force her to watch the flesh being ripped from Philippe’s bones.

“Rutherford!” The name erupted in a scream. Stunned, both hands flew to her mouth, horrified at what she had done––shamed a decent man. She watched her father’s face alter from shock to twisted rage. He believed her! He was willing to accept that his trusted slave would rape his daughter.

“That’s why he ran! Never dreamed he’d defile you. Why didn’t you tell me?” He raised his arm. Then, as if waking for the first time, he lowered his hand and looked at it. “I’d have made him pay.” His voice shook.

*Why can’t I cry? Bolster my story.* “I . . .I wanted to forget. With him dead, I thought it was over. I just realized––”

“I’d have skinned him alive.” The fire in his belly was building again. “Dragged his sorry black ass all over this parish.” His breath came in gasps, and his lip curled, exposing decayed teeth. “No nigger would ever look at another white woman after I finished with him.”

“Your dogs mauled him to death. Isn’t that enough?” Susannah tried to steady the tremble surging through her body as she picked up the chair that had been a birthday gift from her mother. She ran her fingers across the shape of a harp carved into the back, trying to feel its comfort. Her father had swallowed her story for now, but his rage was not satisfied. A single dead slave would not be enough.

She had to see Philippe. They must act fast before their life whirled out of control.

Her breath stopped when he stepped into the room ––carrying the afternoon tea tray––as if he knew she needed him. He had come from the horse barns, clean as ever. Even with the pronounced limp, he posed a regal figure. “Mama Jess asked me to serve. She’s feeling poorly.” His eyes riveted on Susannah’s face and flashed in anger. “You need cool rags and ajuga for your eye, Miss Anna?”

The parlor froze into silence. Susannah saw her father’s brow crease ever so slightly, and she wondered if there was a ray of decency in the man. Was he embarrassed for his favorite slave to know he would stoop to beating his daughter?

She jumped when her father shouted, “What do you know about Rutherford?”

Philippe shook his head and leaned toward her father, confused.

“What he done to my daughter?”

Philippe’s jaw dropped, and his eyes, wide with horror, moved slowly from her father to Susannah standing naked to the truth of what she had done. “It’s not true.” His words were barely audible.

“She admitted it. Kept it a damned secret all this time.” Her father ground his teeth. “If I’d a known. I’d a cut the hide right off his body.”

“Philippe, get the ajuga. Take it to Miss Susannah’s room.” Her mother had found her voice––loud and firm––cutting through the tension.

“Ain’t proper him going up there.”

“Hush, Jacob!” Her mother had set her jaw and raised her cane like a club. “The child needs attention, and I can’t climb those stairs right now.”

*She defended me.* Susannah watched in amazement as her mother knelt and began gathering the mosaic sprawl of embroidery thread spread across the rug.

Her father stood in the middle of the floor, looking stunned. Arms dangling at his side like a helpless bully, he gazed about, lips moving without making a sound. His command returned and he broke the intense silence with a snort. “Make it quick. Come to the barns when you finish. I need help sorting out the mules that James fella aims to pick up tomorrow.”

Philippe said, “I’ll get the ajuga.” He turned slowly, his back hunched, his head down, and followed her father to the basement. She wanted to call him, but her mother was there, clawing up handfuls of her thread and listening to every word.

Chapter Seven

Susannah climbed the stairs, her face burning from her father’s slap and her mouth still tasting of blood. She fell on her bed, suffocating in despair at her stupidity––as cruel as her father. She had allowed her fury to take control of her reasoning and placed the person she loved most in the world in mortal danger. Her father would not be satisfied with one dead man. He would need to personally torture someone. Philippe could pay with his life. She was a heedless fool––selfish in her desires.

She heard Philippe’s uneven step as he moved along the hall. Then, the tap on the door, and he was there.

“I never thought he’d do this to you.” He bent over her bed, holding the ajuga compress to her face. “You told him about the baby?”

She sat up, wrapping her arms around him. “He’s selling me, Philippe. I got so angry that I blurted it out.” She leaned back and held his face between her palms. “And I blamed Rutherford.”

“Aww, Susannah.” He shook his head like he couldn’t believe what she’d said.

She pulled him to her. “I didn’t plan it. Please don’t turn away.” Tears stung the cut on her cheek as she told him of her father’s plan to pawn her off. “The man who was here today. He’s headed to Texas for one of those Spanish land grants, and he wants a wife so he can––”

“Don’t say it.” Philippe covered her mouth with his fingertips and pressed his lips against her cheek.

“Realizing that he slapped his daughter may slow him down, but he’ll look for black skin to punish. You’re the handiest.”

“I’ve asked for it.” Philippe sounded resigned.

“Listen to me, Philippe. No telling what Father is capable of when he figures out what has happened between us. Wagons are flooding into Natchitoches, getting outfitted for Texas. If you go now, you can get ahead of them, pass as a French gentleman from Louisiana.”

“We’ll figure a way.” His voice choked. “I can’t leave you like this.”

She closed her eyes, warming to the feel of his body pressing against her, longing to hold him there. “If you stay, our baby will be the orphan of a murdered man. I want him to grow up knowing his father is a man of the world.”

“I’m a slave, Anna. A stupid slave who took you even when I knew better––”

“No.” She clasped his shoulders with both hands. “You absorb languages like a sponge. You know so much––more than most who’ve gone to school.”

“You made it possible.”

“Take the best of the mustangs; travel like a gentleman in your black serving suit.” She went to her wardrobe and pulled out her Persian cloth satchel. “This will make a good impression––a man of means.”

“Your mother made that––”

They both froze, listening to her mother’s step––*plunk, slide, plunk, slide* as she anchored her cane and came slowly along the hall. She opened the door––her face wet with tears, then brightened when she saw the satchel. “That makes a fine statement. It will hold a change of clothes and a full complement of herbs and dried fruit. Mama Jess knows what food will last the longest.”

Susannah stared at her mother in disbelief and then fell against her. “You know?”

She squeezed her daughter in a fierce embrace and then pulled back. “Of course, I know. Who else? I’ve seen it for a long time.” Her smile did not cover the deep sadness in her eyes. “You’ve made it very dangerous.” Her eyes trailed to Philippe. “You must leave immediately. My husband’s still in shock. Right now, he’s conjuring up how to tell Hezekiah James. He’ll be after a scapegoat once he gets it all sorted. You’ve got to get to the Spanish in Texas before he takes to the whip.” A faint smile softened her face. “I’ll ask him to send you to New Orleans for Sister Xavier’s potions for my pain. He’ll have you take his keelboat anchored at the dock; he’s too tight to pay the price of a steamer. It’ll be weeks before he expects you back. When he hones in on your absence, he’ll go on the chase clear to the mouth of the Mississippi. By then, you’ll be safe in San Antonio de Béxar.”

Susannah felt a fresh wave of hope. “That’s the answer! Tell Father I will stay with Sister Mary Catherine in New Orleans. Ask her to care for me until the baby is born. He’ll never suspect that I’ve run with Philippe. We’ll travel by night, hide in the woods during the day.”

“Stop it!” Her mother’s face blazed, her lips thinning into a hard line. “A redheaded woman and a Negro, even a man as cultured as Philippe, will attract the hounds of hatred. Stop thinking like a child! Use your head, Susannah! You’ve had a chance for love––that’s more than most women can claim. Remember it, and be glad.” She turned to the door and whispered, “Say your goodbyes. Prepare to leave tonight, Philippe.” The door closed softly behind her.

Philippe stroked Susannah’s back as she clung to him, pleading, “I’ll keep my hair covered, pull my shawl over my face.”

“She’s right, Anna. My black flesh blends with the night, but we can’t hide you. I’ve already ruined your life. Please don’t ask me to risk getting you killed.” His lips brushed away her tears, and he lifted her chin, “I’ll keep your braid and make me a ring like yours to wear forever.”

\* \* \*

Susannah didn’t go down for supper. She squatted at the top of the stairs and listened as Philippe served and her father ranted about Louisa’s damn pain. “I need Philippe to get those mustangs broke in.”

“They’re finished, sir.”

“How many got broke?”

“Twenty-two. Two aren’t worth it.” Philippe’s voice sounded strong, steady.

“We brought in twenty-five. What happened to the last one?”

“Mare that walled her eyes and kept whinnying? Jumped the corral fence. Gone like a streak before the boys could catch her.”

“She’d have made a good breeder. ‘If you boys paid for a loss, I bet you’d see them crazy mares don’t run off.”

Susannah held her breath, counting the seconds while the downstairs stayed completely quiet. She imagined Philippe looking steadily at her father. Philippe was like Mama Jess. He never got whipped. Finally, she heard her father snort in disgust. He was already at the bottom of the stairs.

“Get yourself ready. It’s a full moon. Boss Martin’s taking a buyer and his mules to Alexandria tonight. Go along to New Orleans, then high-tail it back.”

Susannah retreated to her room and waited for her father to reach the rear of the house and slam his bedroom door. Finally, the sound of her mother’s cane thumping to her room off the sunporch signaled an end to the evening.

Feeling her way down the stairs, Susannah eased across the front porch. The evening breeze brushed against her swollen cheek as she lifted her skirt and darted beneath the sprawling oak branches. Shoving open the big barn door, she gasped at the sight of moonlight streaking through the loft opening, casting an iridescent sheen on Philippe tightening the girth on the horse.

“Anna” Her name sounded like a sigh as he grabbed her. He kissed her face and said, “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I keep thinking I could go with you. Hide in the woods during the day. Travel at night.”

“Aw, Anna. Your mother’s right. Together we can’t pass. Here or anywhere. I’m too black.” He smoothed his hands along her shoulders and down her arms. “I’m heading around the old Fort Claiborne site. Be on the road to Texas before you crawl into your bed.” He kissed her once more, long and hard. Then his hand caressed the tiny bulge at her middle. “Take care of our little Anna.”

She clamped her hand over his to hold him against their baby. “You think it’s a girl?”

“I know it is. And she’s beautiful like her mama.” He knelt and pressed his face into her belly. “I’ll be thinking of you both every day.” He rose. “I’ve got to go. Else I can’t.” In one smooth motion, he swung onto the back of the fresh-broke mare that was said to have run away. After easing the twitchy horse through the open door, he rode in a slow trot, staying under the shadow of the oaks. On the far side of the cotton field, he stopped. His arm rose in a last farewell.

She clamped both hands over her mouth, muffling a keening cry. Startled by voices down by the river, she whirled about. Boss Martin was hustling two balky mules onto the keelboat in the light of a lantern. When she turned back, the night had swallowed Philippe.

Susannah circled her fingers over her ring and around their baby girl as she walked up the hill toward the white house, veiled in moss-laden trees. She counted the twelve steps to the first-floor porch as she and Philippe did when they played hide and seek. Movement through the side panel of the front door caught her attention. She sank to her knees on the step to watch a figure descend the stairs into the parlor. It was her father’s awkward bearing, outlined by the white of his drawers. He circled the newel post on the first floor, leading to the stairs and Mama Jess’s basement room.

Chapter Eight

Jess lay in the dark, her arms wrapped over her chest for comfort, allowing her mind to follow her son––her only true child––as the stolen horse carried him away. Forever. Philippe was her love child of all the babies she had birthed or wet-nursed. She cared for the others as best she could, but they were born for stock. Unless Jacob had another one of his fits, like when he sold off Sarah, Jess would have the comfort of her other sons staying on the place to slave for the old master.

Hard as she tried to toughen her insides, her chest hurt when she thought of lively little Sarah bouncing around the kitchen, patiently showing Miss Susannah how to make white gravy just so and how much ham hock went into the beans. Then Jacob caught his fine daughter sweating in the kitchen. He slapped Sarah only once before Miss Susannah threatened him with the rolling pin. It was pure spite that made him sell that baby girl.

Miss Susannah cried for days until Jess told her how to harden her heart. It wasn’t true, but it settled the girl down. After that, both misses moved through the house like far-off storm clouds, threatening destruction that never came. They paid Jacob back by putting an end to thick, creamy desserts. Each time he complained about heavy pie dough or lumpy pudding, the ladies of the house reminded him that Sarah was the one who made the good desserts. They appeared to relish his disappointment as much as Jess, who saw it as one more way to thwart him.

Jess knew how to wield her real power. In her feisty days, when she learned how to bring a white man to his knees for more, she wrangled a bargain for Philippe.

Jacob always sold off older slaves when a young one got big enough to take his place. When he sold her man, Haskell, Jess aimed to get the best for their beautiful black son. With her real love gone, she had no more feelings for her body. In exchange for his good times, Jacob allowed Philippe to live in the big house, watch after Miss Susannah, and learn how the lady of the house liked her table done just so.

Jacob took a liking to Philippe after the boy showed a knack for horses. It won him a secure place but carried him off for months, trading with the treacherous Comanches for wild mustangs.

When she heard him coming, Jess turned to the wall and wiped her face on the sheet. She figured he’d be all worked up thinking about how Miss Susannah got raped; get his imagination going on how hard Rutherford rode that child. Jess figured to be in for a time of it.

“You asleep?” He sounded breathless. Coming down the stairs was getting too much for the old man.

She rolled over and saw him pulling down his drawers. He was on her before she took another breath, jabbing at her and talking about that harp between Miss Susannah’s legs, and then he got to talking about the rape. The more he ranted, the harder he pounded her. “Give me action,” he growled. “Fight me. Don’t lay there limp.”

She smiled and clawed his back, fighting him until he finally lay spent. Shoving him off, she got up. “I’m heatin’ some water. Clean myself up.” She stepped out the door to the kitchen.

“Pour me a tub,” he called. “My back’s raw. You didn’t have to bring the blood.”

She lit a candle and washed herself while heating enough water to fill a tub. She watched the slack muscles on Jacob’s scrawny legs as he shuffled across the brick walk into the kitchen. She smiled at the bloody claw marks on his pasty-white back. “So, you planning a wedding for Miss Susannah?”

“Yeah. Got to make it nice. Get them two off to Texas before she gets so big that all the parish sees it plain.”

“Miss Louisa doing all right?”

“Hell, yes. Louisa limps around, always sickly. That woman’s cold as marble. Takes her laudanum and don’t bat an eye at nothing. First thing she said was that girl was gonna have a grand wedding. Not a word about the shame. Not a damn thought about how short-handed we are. First, Sally ups and dies, makes you slow getting stuff done. Then that damn son of hers runs off. I’d never have let the dogs do their business if I’d known what Rutherford was running from.”

*Rutherford didn’t have nobody to protect once his mama was gone. Probably up in heaven, smiling to himself, thinking how hard it’d be on ol’ Jacob with nobody left to boss the field hands.* She watched Jacob scrub his sagging flesh and turned away.

“Hated to send Philippe to New Orleans. He’s the best hand we’ve got for a party. He knows all the ways Louisa wants things. Does stuff real nice.”

“Hmm.” She knew Jacob Mobley had just thanked her for his evening. She wondered if he ever thanked Sally.

“Wish them other boys of yours was half as energetic as Philippe.”

“They half yours, Jacob Mobley.”

“I don’t like that talk. You know that.”

“Yep. I surely know it.” She stood back while he dried and put on clean drawers she had folded with the wash.

As she followed him out of the kitchen, her fingers stroked the handle of the knife she kept tucked inside the raw wood of the door facing. She took it after hog killing last fall before they locked the butcher box.

When he climbed the stairs, she pulled the stinking sheets off her corn shuck mattress and lay on the raw ticking. “Ride, Philippe. Ride to faraway Texas, my son.”

Chapter Nine

After a troubled night, aching for Philippe and haunted by the image of her father going to the basement in his drawers, Susannah felt hollowed out, emptied of feelings. She sat at the table studying her family’s breakfast ritual. Mama Jess seemed invisible to her father as she set the plate of eggs and ham before him. Her body and face reflected stillness, a graceful calm, as though nothing was unusual. What was going on? Susannah wanted to scream out in confusion––was this the same Mama Jess she had loved, who had always been there for her, or someone else altogether?

When Mama Jess turned to go down to the kitchen, she laid a hand on Louisa’s shoulder, a caress that Susannah often felt. Could it be true that her father had only been looking for something to eat last night?

He raised his coffee cup and glanced at Susannah and then at her mother, who slumped like a wilted flower over her untouched food. “Mister Hezekiah James is staying at a boarding house in town. He’s coming out this morning. You should invite him to a picnic lunch down by the river.”

Susannah gagged on a bite of egg and let her fork clatter to her plate. “So, you’ve already sold me!”

Her father sprang from his chair. “You’re lucky I found you a man.” As he walked from the room, he shouted, “Be ready at eleven.”

\* \* \*

At precisely the hour, Hezekiah James arrived astride a well-brushed roan. From her bedroom window, Susannah watched––a slow dismount––sure of himself, or dreading the walk up to the front door? He bent to stroke the head of a straw-colored dog––hair like his master’s––that settled himself beside the horse like a pair. Maybe she should give him a chance if the wiry hound cared enough to follow him all the way from town. Perhaps he was better than living in this house with her father. The image of last night kept returning like a nightmare.

As she descended the stairs, her mother––leaning on her cane next to the man––offered Susannah a pleading smile. “You remember Mister James?”

Susannah extended her hand and looked the big, fair-skinned man in the eye. He had cleaned himself up and gotten a haircut. She wondered if he needed a hat in the sun. “Yesterday.”

He bent toward her. “I am still impressed. Not only do you play, you teach as well.”

*He’s staring, like before.* “Aw, but the girls are young. The harp is all romance at that age.”

“How long have you been teaching?”

“I started with the LeBlanc sisters during summer breaks. Since I graduated, they will be coming for lessons every afternoon.”

“Then I won’t stay long. Keep you from your pupils.”

*Good.* “Father tells me you bought some of his horses and mules. Would you like to walk around the place, see the barns . . .and the riverfront?” She did not intend to play for him.

“I’ve seen the barns but would enjoy a stroll along the river.”

Her mother’s voice rose in delight., “I’ll have Jess make up a picnic.”

Susannah reached for a flared-brim bonnet hanging on the hall stand. Gazing in the mirror, she secured it––red curls framing her face––hair tied back in a loose bun. She felt the tug of her mother’s hand.

“Why don’t you wear one of the lovely new hats you brought back from New Orleans?”

“This one will do.”

“It’s pretty,” Hezekiah said. “The green makes her eyes look like emeralds.” He shrugged his big shoulders and blushed like a girl. “I mean . . . it should protect her very well.”

Ignoring her mother, Susannah took his arm. “Thank you, sir. Let’s be on our way.” She was glad she’d picked that sunhat. She could observe him from beneath the brim.

He stopped at the top of the porch stairs and gazed at the lawn sloping down to the river. “I hope one day to own a place as beautiful as this.”

The dog, who had not taken his eyes off his master, wedged between them the instant they reached the bottom step. “Please excuse Bramble.” The snap of his fingers moved the hound to Hezekiah’s opposite knee.

“Bramble?”

“I almost called him Runt, but he stuck to me like a bramble bush from the day I picked him out of the brood.”

Susannah watched the dog pacing next to his master. “I see the devotion, but why did you pick the weakest pup?”

Hezekiah looked up into the pecan trees as though the answer lay among the leaves. “Neighbor had hard times. Gave me a good deal on two sturdy women and a yearling calf. Figured the least I could do was take the scrawny pup off his hands.”

She suppressed the urge to ask how many slaves he owned. “Father said you’re headed to Texas. He didn’t say where you’re from.”

“Tennessee. I volunteered with Old Hickory.” He cut sober brown eyes toward her. “That would be General Andrew Jackson––”

“So, you fought in the Battle of New Orleans?”

His face came alive with pride. “You know of the battle?”

“Of course. Our sisters at Ursuline Academy nursed the wounded, and we prayed all night for your safety. General Jackson sent a letter thanking us for our heavenly intercession.”

He reached for her hand and whispered, “You were there?”

“It was my first year––”

“I never dreamed . . .. You’re so brave.”

She waved her hand away from his. “Mister James, I was a child. I had no choice. I couldn’t even get home for Christmas. But, what brought you to Natchitoches?”

“After the war, my pa died. So, I bought land south of Natchez, studied the law at night, and had some good crops. Financial collapse forced me to look for better climes. When newspapers wrote that Moses Austin was getting Spanish land grants in Texas, I figured it was my chance. I have a hard-working bunch of Negroes and ideas for building a town.”

“A town?” She bit her tongue to keep from laughing. “That’s a big ambition!”

He didn’t appear disquieted by her comment. Instead, he looked off down the river, flowing dark and easy into the forest beyond the bend. “Yep. I got plans.” He turned toward her. “All I need is a good wife.” He hesitated like he expected her to respond.

She stood perfectly still, not wanting to give him any encouragement. Hezekiah James was not her choice. She would surely not be *his* once he knew about the baby.

“I mean. I mean, didn’t your father tell you I asked permission for you to be the one?”

“What one?”

His shoulders sagged. “The one I marry.” He slowly shook his head. “You didn’t know I asked to marry you?”

“I knew my father sold you nine mules and three mustangs.” She felt her resolve slipping and tried holding his eyes with a steady gaze. “I understand that I was part of the sale.”

“Ho!” Hezekiah James bent in the middle like he’d been kicked by one of the mules. “I never meant. I never paid.” He pulled himself up. “Miss Susannah, I admired you first thing. I saw you were smart and strong. Qualities.” He squinted, calculated a bit, and finally burst out, “And you’re pretty.”

“An excellent acquisition. You should be commended.” She fought tears and shook her head to compose herself. Her voice broke, “What you and my father haven’t considered is that I might not *want* to marry you.” Trying not to yell in frustration, she struggled to keep her tough façade from dissolving before him. She must get away. Whirling about, she ran toward the river, willing it to suck her under, take her away from her father, his white drawers, and this man who bought her with the mules.

“Wait!” Hezekiah’s bellow startled the nesting birds in the pecan tree. They began driving at her in swarms, fluttering about her bonnet, whisking near her face.

Crouching against the onslaught, arms over her head, she was stunned by the memory of running with Philippe from a similar attack. He had laughed, saying mockingbirds were just protecting their babies. She froze. Protecting their babies!

Slowly, she realized that Hezekiah hovered over her, his big arms extended, shielding her from the birds. He was whispering, “They won’t hurt you.”

Shaking with sickening awareness of what she had contemplated, Susannah stumbled down the hill, staring at the river moving fast, swollen with flood debris, daring her to carry her baby Anna to its depth. Feeling whipped, she reached for the old rope swing where Philippe used to push her so high that her toes kicked loose the green pecans. Wiping at determined tears with the back of her hand, she tried to think clearly. Hezekiah James was a sensible option to care for this child growing by the day. What other choice did she have? She turned and saw Jess coming down the hill to hand him a picnic basket.

He looked forlorn, ignoring the birds fluttering about his head. One hand lay on his dog; the other held their lunch. Susannah pulled a deep breath into her aching chest and waved a welcome.

He and the dog eased slowly, making a careful approach. “I’m sorry, Miss Susannah. If I may start over, I would like to ask *you* to marry me.”

“Thank you, Mister James.”

“If you’re accepting, would you mind if we use our Christian names? I wish you’d call me Hezekiah. And may I call you Susannah?”

*Forgive me, Philippe.* “Yes, Hezekiah.” She looked at the dog sitting at attention. Brought to heel flashed through her mind as the dam of tears broke. Hezekiah’s big arm lifted her from the swing, wrapped around her shoulders, and cradled her as they walked slowly along the river. When he offered his smooth ironed handkerchief, she realized they’d reached the thick woods edging her father’s property.

“That fallen log looks like a good spot for a picnic.” He pointed to the trunk of an old oak extending over the river.

The frayed rope still dangled over the water where she and Philippe used to swing out and drop into its exhilarating cold. Sitting on the tree trunk, running her hand over the rough bark where Philippe’s bare feet had stood, reminded her of the first time they met here. Philippe warned her they shouldn’t be off by themselves, but she insisted that her mother was too sick and her father too busy to know. She had leaped into the water just to show her independence. It became a summer ritual, even after she began at Ursuline.

\* \* \*

The week became a blur of sleepless nights, imagining Philippe riding cautiously along darkened roads. Each day she tried to ignore her mother’s plans for the wedding that felt like it was for someone else. Hezekiah’s daily appearances brought the cold reality of his permanent presence. On the second morning, he asked Susannah to take him on a parish tour. Her mother practically leaped from her chair. “You must take my carriage.” She cast a guilty eye at Susannah. “That is if you’d care to––”

“That sounds perfect.” Hezekiah appeared oblivious to any question of Susannah’s desire to ride off with him. “I brought some pralines from the bakery in town.”

Her mother headed toward the basement stairs. “I’ll have Jess pour a jug of tea.” She turned, her eyes glassy with pleasure. “I forgot. Since all the hands are in the field with my husband, you’ll have to harness the buggy, Mister Hezekiah.”

“My pleasure, Miss Louisa. You’ll find I’m extremely careful.”

“Hmm. I’m sure.” Susannah mumbled, then pulled the same green bonnet off the hook, ignoring her mother’s heavy sigh. Hezekiah followed her down the backstairs and out past the kitchen.

Both mares––Louisa’s and Susannah’s––trotted up to the fence, each nuzzling her extended hands for a lump of sugar. “They’re sisters––always ready to go. You’ll have no trouble getting Daisy’s cooperation. But Rose is going to be jealous.” Susannah leaned her face against her mare’s chestnut neck.

Hezekiah’s big hand stroked Daisy’s mane. “I can imagine you having a horse and carriage someday.”

“I’m partway there. Father said I can take Rose.”

“My goodness, that’s generous! Can ride a horse all that way?”

Susannah stroked her mare’s neck and whispered against her bobbing head. “Of course. Rose and I love to ride for hours.”

Although it proved unnecessary, Susannah held the reins and soothed the mare while Hezekiah hitched her to the buggy. Before he could cup his hands to assist, she lifted her skirt, poked her slipper into a spoke, and hoisted herself onto the buggy seat—another chance to avoid his touch.

“You be the guide.” He positioned the hood to shade her from the brilliant morning sun.

“Let’s go south to Isle Brevelle. You can meet our neighbors at the Yucca Plantation. I always loved their parties. Two men in a skiff used to go up and down the river blowing on a conch shell, shouting out the invitation.”

He leaned close, gently bumping his shoulder against hers. “Is that how your family will announce our wedding?”

Susannah chuckled, then sobered, aware it was the first time she’d let him see her laugh. “It does sound primitive. Mother has almost completed the invitations. They’ll be delivered tomorrow.”

“Did you write some of them?” His voice was low, eyes probing.

“She wanted to do it all.” That was not true, of course. Susannah had told her mother twice that she didn’t want any part of it. Her looked away from him to the perfect rows of white cotton blossoms disappearing over a rise that met a sky unspoiled by clouds. Surely he’ll back out of the marriage when he hears about the baby. Make it possible for her and Anna to live among *gens de couleur libre*.

“A penny for your thoughts.” He had let Daisy slow to a gentle walk and regarded Susannah as if he were reading her mind.

“I was thinking about the people who live here. They are free men of color, descended from a slave everyone called Coincoin. Her name was Marie Thérèze, the woman who built Yucca Plantation.”

“She was a slave?” He bent toward her, astonishment coloring his face.

“She was a wealthy Frenchman’s concubine. Over twenty-five years, she bore his ten children. Then he gave her some of this land and married a white woman.”

“All that time, and he never married her.” He slowly shook his head as though pondering.

“Under *Code Noir,* a white man cannot marry a Negress.” No one ever imagined a white woman marrying a black man. She kept her eyes averted, avoiding the perfect opening to tell him about her baby.

They rounded a bend in the road, and he whistled a breath of surprise. “Look at this place.”

Flowers, clustered like a wedding bouquet, surrounded a two-story house with a roof sloped so low that it resembled a mushroom.

“After the Frenchman freed Marie Thérèze, she bought more land and slaves. Now her children and grandchildren are wealthy. Her son jails unruly hands in that Africa House.”

Hezekiah drew the buggy to a halt and stared at the scene before them. “I’ve never whipped one of my slaves. Never considered putting one in jail.”

“Father whips. Always when I don’t see. How do you discipline?”

“Most of them came to me young. Before they got minds of their own, I suppose.”

“Six of ours are brothers––young mulattoes.” She thought again of her father in his drawers. “Four others are older.” Her heart raced like she’d been running. “The oldest, Rutherford––”

“Greetings, Miss Susannah!” Penelope Metoyer called, extending her arms as she appeared to glide down the path from the big house. Her coffee-cream skin beneath the magenta *tignon* made her look regal. She was one of Marie Thérèze’s granddaughters, who had been Susannah’s playmate when they attended the parties.

After introductions, Hezekiah picked up the conversation and made the brief visit a pleasant encounter. She was surprised to see how comfortable he was socializing with a person of color. Perhaps this was a sign of how he would react to Baby Anna.

As they drove away, Penelope called, “We’re excited about the wedding. I’ll admit to a little disappointment. We planned to ask if you’d come to Yucca for about three days each week. Our daughters have been begging for harp lessons. Still, I’m glad for you.”

“Lessons?” Susannah felt paralyzed. She could do that. She and Anna could move here and survive. “That sounds like a perfect arrangement.” She felt Hezekiah’s movement next to her. “Of course, we’ll leave for Texas right after the wedding.”

Penelope laughed, “Just the same. We’ll bring a gift to help you remember Yucca.”

“Gift?” Hezekiah whispered out of the corner of his mouth. “I didn’t think about gifts. I hope it’s small. The wagons are packed solid.”

*Packed solid?* She felt blazing hot as the carriage moved from the cool canopy of cypress trees into the glaring sun, jolting her out of the last few contented moments. Her mouth became so dry she could barely speak. “You *have* saved space for my harp?”

His face revealed the answer before he stuttered, “I . . .I thought you understood. We’re going to a wilderness. My boys must build our cabin and all their quarters before winter.”

She pulled her hand away from his attempt to touch her. “So, there’s no space?”

He removed his broad-brimmed planter hat, ran his hand over the sweat on his face, and pushed back wet ringlets clinging to his scalp. “Susannah, we’ll live in one room with a dirt floor until the slaves finish their quarters.” He gazed at her like he was trying to see inside. “You understand my men must have a place to live? I can’t be successful without healthy slaves.”

She nodded and tried to imagine cooking, sleeping, and caring for Anna in a cabin with no floor.

“Susannah, if I am to build a life for us, I need those slaves. It takes one good worker to cultivate eight to ten acres. I own four men and two women. And me. That’s it.”

“Once we’re married, I’ll make seven.” She watched him slap his hat back on.

He snapped the reins just enough to hurry the mare along. “I hoped you’d be my partner.”

*Partner?* Her nostrils flared as she tried to breathe. It was now or never. She had to end this––stop waiting for her father. “You need to know something before we go further.” She had his attention. His eyes riveted on her face. She wound her fingers together so tight they ached. “I am with child.” She trembled, then took another breath, “It was one of Father’s slaves. The dogs got him when he ran off.” Shame forced her to look away.

The gush of air escaping him caused her to turn back. Bent over his middle, he stared at her, batting his eyes like he couldn’t focus. It took forever before he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

The heat made her flesh burn, suffocating. She said, “In my father’s defense, he didn’t know when he made the arrangements.” A hint of truth.

Hezekiah kept shaking his head and looking at her middle as though the baby would appear at any moment. “It’s taken a lot of courage for you to endure so much.”

“I don’t feel brave, Mister James.”

“We’ll figure this out.” He looked off down the road––a man in deep thought––his head bobbing with the slow cadence of the mare.

*Perhaps he’s mulling over how to call off the wedding.* Washed with relief that he finally knew, Susannah relaxed and gazed through half-closed eyes at the shimmering heat dancing on the dusty road.

A sweaty palm on her arm jolted her back to the present. “Susannah, I don’t mean to cause more pain, but can you tell me if he was a light-skinned Negro?”

She pulled away from his touch. “Why do you ask?”

“Mixed children of light-skinned parents often pass. Like Penelope at Yucca Plantation. If no one knew, she would be accepted among whites.” When Susannah did not respond, he added, “Like Jess’s sons. They had a white father. I mean, with Jess so black, she must have had a white . . . husband.”

Susannah had only eaten one praline and sipped some tea, but she felt like vomiting to rid herself of the image that would not go away. She eased her hand over the baby. Clenching her jaw and staring straight ahead, Susannah said, “His skin is black. Black as ebony.”

“Oh!” Hezekiah sounded disappointed. “Well, don’t worry. We’ll manage.”

“That’s all? You’re still planning to go through with the marriage?”

“Why, Susannah! I would never abandon you.”

She could not look at him despite knowing he had turned toward her. Finally sighing, she said, “What else do you want to know?”

“Well, I’m wondering when you will have the birth?”

*The birth?* “Mid-January.”

“That’s good. We’ll be established by then. I mean, the cabin built and fields cleared for planting.”

She watched him frown and nod. *Is he mapping some kind of plan?*

\* \* \*

The following afternoon, Susannah stood on the little stool in her mother’s sewing room while the dressmaker ran her hands up and down the fabric of the wedding dress. Ignoring the woman’s little mumbling sounds of satisfaction over her masterpiece, Susannah gazed out the broad bank of windows, focusing on the spot where Philippe had raised his arm in farewell. Fondling the ring, she longed to feel him pressed against her.

Pulling back, the dressmaker motioned for Susannah to step down. “You got a firm body. Not gonna have no trouble making lots of babies.”

“Hear that, Mother? You’ll need to come often to help born your grandchildren.” Susannah meant the part about Louisa coming often. She had missed her mother every day she was at boarding school. And Texas was permanent. She’d be going off with Hezekiah James, a stranger.

If her mother heard the comments, she didn’t lift her head. Her fingers flew as the bone shuttle knotted fine thread into delicate loops of tatting intended to edge the low-cut neck of the embroidered muslin wedding dress. The bodice, gathered under her breasts, concealed the thickening that increased every day.

Susannah saw the withered old dressmaker to the door, watched her hitch her bundle of patterns and scraps under her arm, and start the walk to Natchitoches.

She found her mother reclining on her chaise longue, clutching the dress against her cheek. “If they have parties in the Texas wilderness, this will be lovely.”

Susannah settled next to her mother and clasped her hands. “My dresses can last to the end if we open all the seams.”

“You must make friends with the women on that wagon train. Hope they settle nearby. They will help you through the birth. Not Hezekiah.”

Chapter Ten

Mama Jess kept a sad eye on Susannah as she paled to white as a bedsheet––all the spark gone. The fine wedding dress was an insult to the truth. No woman ever went off to a wilderness and came back whole again. Jess was glad Philippe didn’t have to see any of it.

The night that wrung the strength out of Jess came just before the wedding. Hezekiah hung around every day, so the big splash for the supper seemed like a waste of time since he was the only guest. Still, Jess wore the black dress and white apron saved for the big dinner parties.

Miss Louisa’s spirits had picked up, and she appeared to be the gay hostess, chattering from the minute Hezekiah arrived. They had just started eating when she said, “Mister Hezekiah, did Susannah tell you about that beautiful ring she wears?”

Jess watched Susannah’s face flush red, the only life she had shown all evening.

“I noticed. Matches her hair.” Jess thought he looked sheepish, like he’d been glancing where he ought not.

Susannah looked disgusted at her mother and extended her hand across the table.

Not noticing a thing about her daughter’s expression, Louisa gushed, “Such a shame, the friend who made it passed before we could meet her.”

Hezekiah studied the ring while Susannah remained silent; her eyelids lowered.

All talk stopped; the clatter of forks on the plates was the only sound coming from the dining room. Hezekiah broke the silence by clearing his throat, “Did you hear that Mister Stephen Austin’s sidewheeler landed this morning?

“You don’t say?” Jacob stabbed his venison steak. “Have to get into town and make his acquaintance.”

“It’s a sad story. Stephen planned to meet his pa, ol’ Moses, and head to San Antonio to make the Spanish land deal official. Word came that Moses died. A real shock to Stephen.”

Jess watched Susannah come to life. “Then, you’ll delay the trip?”

“Naw! Our folks signed up in Tennessee. Soon as we get outfitted, we’re heading for Texas.”

Susannah’s shoulders slumped, and she barely picked at her food. When the meal ended, the ladies retired for the evening, and Jess went to the kitchen for whiskey, which Jacob always served his gentlemen friends after supper.

Carrying the tray onto the front gallery where the men had settled with cigars, Jess stopped short when Hezekiah said, “She told me, sir.” His words sounded sharp.

Jacob appeared not to hear. “Raped. Dogs got to him before I did.”

“Sir, it’s unnecessary––”

“Shamed our family. But, you ain’t got to raise a little pickaninny. Susannah, neither.” Jacob looked up, and the lantern showed him looking away from her.

Jess squeezed her eyes shut and prayed that blaming poor Rutherford would not be in vain. Maybe give Philippe time to reach freedom.

She moved back into the house and busied herself dusting off the parlor where their voices came through.

“Be assured, sir. I’ll protect Miss Susannah. Not sure what course I’ll take. Time will tell.”

“Good. In that case, I got a couple of fine stallions I’ll send along.”

“Aw, well. Appreciate it, sir.”

*How does that man aim to take care of our baby girl?* Jess returned to her duties––silently clearing away the table and hauling the dishes down to the kitchen. Before long, the hoof-pounding of Hezekiah’s horse sounded like he was moving fast as a scalded dog.

\* \* \*

Company arrived for the wedding in late afternoon. Rafts loaded with people from Yucca Plantation clogged the riverfront. Planter families from down to Alexandria docked large keelboats. Folks came in carriages, wagons, and on horseback. They brought gifts Susannah would need in Texas––barrels of salt, flour, and coffee. There were hogsheads of molasses and candle molds. Several came with muscadine jelly, pillowcases edged in tatting, white linen sheets, and a goose down featherbed with a drake and hen to make more feathers. The Yucca folk had a sack of flower seeds from gardens at the old Coincoin Plantation.

Hezekiah brought an empty wagon and the dog trailed him from town. He kept to his master’s heels like a shadow. On command, he sat down to watch and did not move from his post. Meantime, Hezekiah worked up a sweat, loading all the gifts. Finally, he went to the barn and got some of the boys to bring him a pan of water for washing up before the priest arrived.

Jess made a fist and held it tight against her mouth as Susannah floated like a ghost down the stairs to the folks gathered in the parlor. Jess noticed that Hezekiah was as pale as the bride. When he gave her a little gold band that had belonged to his mama, his hands shook so hard he’d have dropped it if Susannah hadn’t slipped it on her finger. Jess relaxed a little when she saw that the ring wasn’t too small. For such a tall girl, Susannah’s hands had stayed small. After a few years in Texas, they’d be calloused like a man.

The big spit, roasting one of Jacob’s finest calves, drew some of the crowd outside, and the barrel of whiskey under one of the pecan trees attracted the men. When the time came to eat, Jess ran up and down the back steps and out to the kitchen to make sure the extra hired help kept the food hot. Philippe would have looked so handsome wearing his black suit and carrying the trays about the parlor and out to the folks cooling on the gallery.

Soon after supper, Jess got Susannah’s bedroom ready for the bride and groom with smooth-ironed sheets and fresh-cut roses from the garden. Smoothing her hand across the bed, Jess squeezed her eyes shut, remembering the tug of suckling both her and Sarah at the same time. After the hard birth, Louisa was so poorly that Jess feared she’d not make it. Now, she looked almost as peaked, with her only child going off for good.

Jess rubbed her big hands across her face and stood by the window to listen to Ezra LeBlanc and his wife, Effie, playing fiddles. When the sisters took up the harp with waltz music, Jess eased down the stairs to watch the bride and groom gliding across the parlor.

The sweating crowd didn’t take long to move outside to livelier tunes the LeBlancs whipped out. Jess watched Susannah moving through the crowd, the sheer veil thrown back, exposing soft rolls of red hair. Jess knew it was best that Philippe was gone and did not have to think about her climbing the stairs to her bedroom with that man.

Chapter Eleven

The wedding dress her mother imagined would be perfect for Texas soirees grew limp with sweat, and the hem absorbed a three-inch border of dirt. Yet the party continued. Susannah and Hezekiah moved from the elegant waltz in the parlor to the yard, where they danced the *quadrille*. As they twirled, she observed that her husband was light of foot and graceful as the finest stallion. Actually, his perfect Roman nose with a tiny bump on the bridge, combined with the confident tilt of his chin, made him quite handsome. The music and several shots of whiskey stirred him to laughter as he pulled her into the lively dance*.*

For a while, it was fun to forget what was being celebrated. Susannah let the music and the good wishes mask her anxiety for what lay ahead. As the evening wore on, fatigue began clawing at every step. She dreaded the customary joining of hands and smiling demurely while Hezekiah announced to the laughing crowd that he was retiring for the evening with his bride.

When the time finally arrived, his hand felt as cold as hers. He offered a charming *adieu* as they stood on the front porch looking at guests clustered beneath lanterns strung among the trees all the way to the river. The cheering and applause followed them, even as he closed the door to her bedroom.

She stepped close enough to the windows to see the guests return to dancing and drinking. Light from the lanterns revealed Hezekiah's form as he sat on her bed, pulling at his tie.

"Susannah, I want to assure you that I will not defile that life you are carrying. It will remain our secret that I sleep on the floor until you are free of your burden."

*Burden? You are a bigger burden than she ever will be.* Her gaze fell on the turned-back sheets and the lacy nightgown spread across the foot of the bed.

He stood quickly as though her glance had caught him in an indiscretion. Moving to the window, he mumbled, "I'll turn my back."

"Thank you." Trembling with relief at escaping him pressing into her, she fumbled with the buttons trailing down the back of the dress. If only she could call for Mama Jess. She had whispered for Susannah to toss her soiled clothing into the hall to have it washed. Keeping an eye on Hezekiah, who never turned from the window, Susannah finally undressed and slipped beneath the sheet. It appeared she'd have to tell him to turn, or else he'd stand there all night. "You take the pillows. I don't use them."

He mumbled thanks and tossed the pillows on the floor. In the light from the bonfire and lanterns, Susannah watched him strip to his drawers and stretch out on the rag rug her mother had made.

She lay on her back, her hand caressing Philippe's ring as she had done every night for the past three weeks, imagining how far he had traveled. But this night, she was married to another man who pretended to be asleep at the foot of her bed. Her hands fanned across her belly, protecting the baby that her husband called a burden.

The light faded as the lanterns dimmed, and the bonfire burned itself out. A slight breeze tickled her hair, still damp with sweat. Guests drifted down to their boats and clambered into clattering wagons, taking their laughter with them. The house made tired creaking sounds as she listened to the soft snore of the man she would leave with in the morning.

\* \* \*

Susannah roused to see the dark outline of Hezekiah stepping into his trousers. "Is it time?"

"I'm going into town to see that the wagons are ready. If you ride in by daylight, we can get a good start. Get halfway to the Sabine by nightfall."

She crawled out of bed, pulling her flimsy gown close. "I'll get your breakfast."

"No need. I smell biscuits." He was out the door before she said another word.

She reached into the wardrobe, empty except for the apple-green riding habit that would drape down the side of her horse and cover her boots. Her mother had insisted she'd need it for long days on her perky little mare. No amount of argument convinced her mother that the draping skirt would be in the way and drag through the mud. She planned to trim it after the first day. By the time she closed her trunk and got downstairs, Hezekiah was gone.

Her father pushed his coffee away and stood. "I'll load your trunk in your mother's carriage, but I got work to do. With that damn Rutherford gone, them boys been playing off. Cotton's growed up in weeds."

Her mother stood, anchored her cane, and glared at her husband. "Seems you could spare a couple of hours to see Susannah and Hezekiah on their way."

"Well, I can't." He glanced sideways at Susannah. "I'll get somebody to saddle Rose and hitch your mother's carriage. Move them up to the house."

Susannah listened to him clunk down to the basement and slam out the back door.

When she could think of nothing left to do, Susannah followed her mother to the kitchen. Mama Jess turned from a dishpan, dried her hands on her apron, and grabbed Susannah in a tight hug. "Ain't nothing going to be the same around here, Missy. You go on now and make yourself a good life." She whispered, "Keep that baby safe. Philippe's praying for it."

Susannah choked back tears and kissed the smooth black cheek. She took Jess's hand and placed it on her stomach. "I'll make a good life for us." Then she turned and hurried out to her mare––saddled and waiting at the back door.

She stopped short at the sight of all ten slaves lined up like stairsteps–six powerful sons of Mama Jess and four of Sally's boys. She had never seen them standing alongside each other, and it struck her that each one had skin the color of coffee milk. Samson, Mama Jess's oldest now, stepped forward, coupling his hands into a stirrup. Gazing at the smiling faces, she struggled to form words of goodbye to the slaves that her father worked from daylight to dark. Why had he allowed Philippe, the only one whose skin was a rich black, to serve in the house and to ride with him into Comancheria? Was Philippe more intelligent and more talented than his brothers? Her hand caressed their baby as she turned her horse toward town.

The road, dusty from the wedding traffic, formed a pale ribbon through the trees. Susannah looked back at the darkened bulk of the house, punctuated by the faint glow from Mama Jess's kitchen candle. Still damp with dew, the air felt cool against her face and held the familiar woody smell of early morning breakfast fires.

She squeezed her eyes shut to tamp down a rush of sorrow and rode into the woods alongside her mother's carriage. Over the sound of Rose's soft, clopping steps and the grinding of Louisa's buggy wheels came a bird's tweet on one side of the road and the quick response from the other––a blooming romance.

Louisa suddenly dropped the reins, crumpled forward, and covered her face with both hands. Susannah moved from her horse into the buggy, folding her mother into her arms.

Louisa clung to her daughter. "I didn't want to behave like this. I was determined to send you off with a smile."

Susannah rocked her mother and cried silent tears against her bonnet. "I'm sorry I caused all this misery."

"Make a good life, my love. You'll be away from all that's familiar. Stand up for yourself. Don't hunker."

Susannah nodded and didn't need to ask for an explanation. Her mother had come to Natchitoches Parish as a bride. Then life whipped her.

"I may have your red hair, but I've got a streak of Father's meanness."

Louisa laughed and squeezed Susannah in a fierce hug. "Yes, and that will be a blessing."

Before they reached town, the rumbling sound of wagons and the melodious rhythm of Spanish grew louder. Susannah ponied her mare alongside the buggy and maneuvered around a line of mules, oxen, and giant *carretas* clogging the road. Lanterns lit the din of dust and shouting.

"What's all this bedlam?" Louisa wrapped her arms over her middle as though protecting her person.

"They're Mexican traders from Texas. They're always here when my steamboat docks. I've heard they trade in bars of silver." Watching the surprise on her mother's face made Susannah feel worldly. After all, she'd seen the sprawling docks in New Orleans. "That smell is dried buffalo skins and tongue. Mexicans load onto one ship, then move to another to take on silks, woolens, lots of whiskey, and guns."

"I didn't realize Natchitoches was so busy."

"Since steamships began coming upriver, it's gotten busier. They carry a lot more than Father's little keelboats."

Louisa nodded, and her eyes trailed off toward a brilliantly painted Mexican cart with a fierce-looking cock chained by one leg to the seat.

Susannah spotted Hezekiah's big floppy hat as he paced among his wagons, giving instructions, tightening what didn't suit him––obviously in a snit, itching to get moving. Bramble stayed alongside his master, accepting the occasional pat on the head. A young black couple trailed Hezekiah, and each time he stopped, one or the other pulled at him for attention.

Hezekiah glared down at the pair. "That's the last of it. I can't afford her." He turned to Susannah. "We're ready to pull out."

She looked at the Negress, barely a woman, sobbing against the young man's chest. *I should have begged for Philippe like that.* She hurried from the carriage and touched Hezekiah's sleeve as he started away. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." Hezekiah stuffed his hands in his pockets and grimaced. "Well, I'm breaking up a love affair. She's one of Ezra LeBlanc's house girls. The wife's favorite. He wants seven hundred––outrageous."

She could feel the pain tearing at both of the slaves. "So, you're leaving without her?"

Hezekiah's frown drew his brows into a scowl. "Can't you see? I have no choice."

"He'll be a better worker if he has her."'

"Susannah. Let's get it straight right now. I know what I can afford. The girl is not it."

*Get it straight right now? Don't hunker.* She pulled back her shoulders. "Then, I'll buy her."

"What?" He took off his big hat and slapped it against his leg. "Come on, Susannah." He looked around and lowered his voice to a whisper. "You don't have any money. And we don't have any more time to haggle over a couple of love-sick slaves."

"Love-sick? We could use some people who love each other*.*" She watched him take in her words, fighting to calm himself. Then, before he could speak, she said,"I have a fine harp. Remember? I can't take it with me, so why not let the LeBlanc sisters enjoy it?"

"You'd trade that beautiful harp for a slave girl?" Hezekiah raked his hand through his hair and bent toward her like he did when he watched her play the harp that first time.

She lifted her chin. "Yes."

He blew out a breath of disgust. "Do it fast. We're ready to go."

Susannah turned, shoved her boot onto the carriage spoke to lift herself into the saddle, and caught the pleased expression on her mother's face. She rode into town alongside the line of swearing, sweating Mexicans jockeying to get their wagons up to the waiting ship.

Her resolve waned as she approached the LeBlanc's imposing townhouse fronted by thick columns stretching to the second-floor balcony. She'd been here a few times with her parents for evening events, but in the dim lantern light, it looked imposing, towering above a row of businesses facing the river. Gritting her teeth, she prayed that Mister LeBlanc would be downstairs in his commission office, not at one of his warehouses lining the dock.

She tied Rose to a hitching post and rapped the brass knocker against the door to the carriageway. After some scurrying in the courtyard, the door flew open to Mister Ezra LeBlanc, wearing a robe and boots. She stared, her voice failing her.

"Well, well! Effie, it's our bride," he shouted. "I thought you'd be on your way by now. Come in here." He took her arm and guided her along the brick carriageway, past the flourishing inner garden of towering red hibiscus and baskets bulging with ferns.

She stammered, “I . . .I can't stay. I've come to see. . .if you will trade your slave girl. For my harp." Her heart pounded faster as she watched him draw back. "I can't take it with me."

"Papa! What did she say?" Both girls were screaming and running down the stairs. "Oh, Papa! Please!"

"It's your *maman.* She loves Lizzie." He looked down at his robe. "I need to get down to my warehouses. Lizzie ran out of here in the middle of the night. Still gone at breakfast. Not worth a damn to your *maman* today."

"Oh, *Maman*, please!" Both girls turned on their mother as she came from the back, flour streaking the front of her apron, hair in disarray.

"Did you find Lizzie? I'm trying to get breakfast stirred up. You need to shoot that lazy girl."

"Don't shoot her, *Maman*. Trade her for Miss Susannah's harp. Please, *Maman*––"

"Trade?" Their mother stared at Susannah and slowly shook her head. "Lizzie's the best cook I've ever had." Then, she shrugged and snorted, "Except this morning. Is she off with that boy again?"

Witnessing the upheaval in the LeBlanc family settled Susannah's breathing. "Your daughters are blessed with your musical gift. I'll grieve less if my harp's in talented hands." She watched the crease in Ezra LeBlanc's brow and added. "Frankly, if we keep the two slaves apart, I think we'll both face runaway problems."

Ezra LeBlanc nodded, turning sharp eyes on his bouncing daughters. "Until I find your *maman* acook, you'll have to help––"

"Oh, yes, Papa. We'll start this morning."

He pulled glasses from his pocket. "I'll draw up the papers for your father. If you'll tell him to expect my man to come with a wagon later in the day."

"This morning!" both girls squealed.

Ezra LeBlanc smiled and bowed like a man who had negotiated a grand bargain.

Susannah rode away, smiling––a woman who understood the value of love.

\* \* \*

She didn't wait for Hezekiah to argue as she cantered through the line of wagons and called out the good news. Seeing Lizzie falling into her lover's arms made Susannah's throat swell. She heard Hezekiah shout, "You two get to work!"

"Yes, suh!" Their voices boomed as one.

*Would we have been that happy?* She didn't try to choke back the sobs as she clicked Rose into a trot.

The rising sun cut long slices of light through the trees. Before she reached home, she wiped tears on her sleeve. The boys were scattered across the cotton field, bent over hoes. But her father was not among them.

When she called out to them, they acted strange, standing stone-still and to the man, claiming not to know where to find her father. "Tell him Mister LeBlanc's man is coming for my harp."

"Yes, ma'am," Samson yelled way too loud as he raced across the field, jumping the blooming plants. Grabbing the mare's bridle, he kept shouting as if Susannah were deaf, "Better walk, cool her down. Them LeBlanc girls play pretty, but not as pretty as you."

Getting irritated with the delay, Susannah dismounted. "I'll tell Mama Jess."

"Why don't we give Rose a little drink. She's lookin' hot."

Susannah pushed past. "Thanks, Samson. I'll write a note to Father."

She grabbed the back door as her father bounced on one leg to pull up his trousers. Frozen, she stared at his white drawers as he fumbled to fasten his pants. The basement felt hot; the smell of mold blended with sweat suffocated her and clawed at her throat as she gasped to regain her senses. Mama Jess clutching a wrinkled sheet against her chest, half rose from the bed as if to come to her.

Susannah shielded herself with an extended palm.

"What the hell you doing back here?" Jacob Mobley, still barefoot, inched toward her.

"Don't use that superior tone with me." The sound of her voice echoed back with the pent-up fury of betrayal. Clutching her shoulders with both hands for support, she said, "I've traded my harp to Ezra LeBlanc." She shook like a willow in a windstorm, fearing she might rip apart before she could get away. In a final burst of fury, she added, "Your son Samson tried to warn you that I was back. Tell him and your other sons to get the harp crated."

She looked at Mama Jess, who had not moved. "It never occurred to me that you were producing the slaves for his plantation. He owes you a great deal."

Ignoring her father's growling reproach, Susannah staggered out the door, blinded by tears. She brushed aside Samson's hands cupped for a mounting assist and grabbed the pommel with rage-fueled energy that propelled her into the saddle. Driving her heel into the mare's side, she beat the startled animal into a hard run.

PART TWO

Chapter Twelve

*The Trail West*

Susannah stared in dismay at her clenched fist gripping the quirt. She had whipped Rose into a lather, forcing the dear mare to race toward town. *Have I turned into my father?* Revolted, she flung the whip into the weeds edging the road, and stretched across Rose’s sweating neck, stroking the animal’s mane. “I’m so sorry, my love. It’s over. I promise.”

She found her mother’s carriage parked away from the line of Mexican wagons waiting to unload. The caravan families were gone, and Hezekiah paced alongside his canvas-covered wagons lined up like a row of nuns cloaked in great white hoods.

She crawled into her mother’s buggy and pulled her into a tight hug. “If you ever want to get away, have one of the boys bring you. I’ll send word where to find me as soon as we settle.”

Her mother shook her head, all smiles. “Don’t worry, sweet girl. I have Jess to keep me company.”

“I know.” She turned away, unable to continue looking into those shiny emerald eyes. Surely her mother knew, or was she glad for Jess to relieve her? Susannah lifted herself from the buggy onto her saddle and nodded to Hezekiah.

He rode over, signaling toward a sinister-looking man, older than the others, whose thick black beard obscured most of his face. “Best you ride alongside Mason’s rear wagon. Anything happens while I’m upfront, he’s armed.”

Mason lifted his floppy felt hat, exposing a streak of fair skin above frizzy eyebrows. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.” His black eyes softened, crinkled at the edges when he smiled.

Susannah relaxed, comforted by the warmth of his expression and the old musket sheathed in a leather pouch beside his bench.

“We’re an hour behind.” Hezekiah turned his head and shouted, “Let’s move!”

The command jolted the line of wagons into motion, causing Susannah to clutch at the reins and whisper. “This is it. I’m leaving.” Before the road turned away from town and headed into a pine forest, Susannah looked back.

Louisa raised a gloved hand.

Gripped by a sense of dread, Susannah swallowed hard to quiet a whimper that made her shudder as she followed the wagons into a dark tunnel of trees. Chickens squawked under one canvas. Buckets swung beneath carriages, and pans dangling along the sides clanged together. Milk cows and extra horses tethered between the wagons added waste to the droppings already fouling the road. Mason’s lively little yearling bull tied to his wagon brought up the rear of their menagerie.

Her spirits lifted watching Percy and Lizzie laugh and talk as they prodded the hogs. Percy carried a squirming piglet under one arm and helped Lizzie nettle the boar and sow to keep them from wandering away.

They had not gone far when Hezekiah rode back, pulled off his hat, and offered a sheepish grin. “You were right. Those two pitched in soon as they heard you made the trade.” His face softened. “Also, you look like a pretty lady with your riding skirt stretched across that red mare.

*At least he’s not like Father*. Swallowing the knot that clogged her throat, she said, “Thank you, sir,” and pulled down the brim of her bonnet to hide her inner turmoil.

“Ho!” Hezekiah tapped his horse into a trot and called out, “We’re not slowing down until we catch that wagon train. Keep your eyes open. Indians and thieves prey on small groups.”

They moved deeper into the towering forest, and despite the shouts of drivers and squeaking wagon wheels mounting roots or plunging into ruts, the refreshing scent of pines subdued the barnyard smell. Relaxing into the mare’s cushioned step over thick pine needles, Susannah caressed Philippe’s ring and imagined his presence on this road only three weeks before.

\* \* \*

Lizzie appeared to have a slight limp when they first set out, but it became pronounced as she hustled after the hogs. When Percy led her to a log and removed her shoe, Susannah called, “What’s wrong?”

“Got poked with a wire.” Percy stroked her foot. “It’s festering.”

“She can’t walk barefoot.” Susannah patted her mare’s broad rump. “Lift her up behind me.”

Percy squinted for an instant as though not believing his ears. Then he carried the slight girl like she was a precious jewel. “You mighty kind, missus. We sure be obliged.”

“Rose won’t know she’s back there.” She clasped Lizzie’s arms around her waist. “Hold on tight. Sometimes Rose gets a little prancy.”

The trail ground forward, and Susannah enjoyed Lizzie’s childlike giggles as they watched Percy clutching the piglet in one arm and slapping the rears of the contrary hogs to keep them moving.

Lizzie turned back and whispered, “Hear that? Ol’ Mason’s plunking on his banjo.”

Mason had secured his reins on the brake handle and gazed off toward the trees as he picked a lively little tune on a worn-looking banjo.

Susannah rode beside his wagon for a better view of the banjo’s open back, which explained such a mellow tone. “I don’t know the song, but it’s lifting our spirits,” she said. “Your mules, my Rose, and even your little yearling has perked up.”

Mason chuckled. “Works ever time.”

She wanted to ask how he acquired the instrument, but he kept playing until they halted at a creek running fast. The men gathered near the crumbling bank where the current chewed into ruts left by earlier caravans. “It’ll work if we angle the mules upstream. Take water pressure off the wagons,” Mason said.

Hezekiah cocked his head at his men. “It’s gonna take a while. Think you can do that?”

“You bet!” The chorus of quick responses reminded Susannah of boys determined to show manly skills. The first driver plunged his mules headlong into the water. The others, yelping with excitement tinged with a bit of fear, splashed into the current to guide the wagon to the far side.

Percy took off his hat, held it over his chest like a shield, and gazed up at Hezekiah, who had remounted without taking his eyes off the operation. “You s’pose we could use your madstone?” When Hezekiah’s gaze fell on him, Percy pointed toward Lizzie and stammered, “Bein’s… it’ll take a spell to cross?”

Frowning, Hezekiah glared down at Percy as the boy followed alongside the mare. “What’s Lizzie doing on the missus horse?”

“Stepped on a wire,” Percy sounded breathless like he’d been running.

Hezekiah leaned from the saddle and lifted Lizzie’s foot. “Hmm. It’s a pussy mess. I’ll boil it tonight.”

“How…how ’bout me building a fire while the wagons cross?” Percy continued to clutch his hat over his chest.

Hezekiah scowled, “Get it done.” He turned back to the creek where the second wagon had started to labor through axle-high water.

Percy carried Lizzie to a log and began gathering small limbs and kindling. Bramble settled beside the girl, who hugged the dog like a child needing comfort.

Susannah dismounted to watch Mason sprinkle a bit of gunpowder over the kindling and Percy strike a flint rock to spark a flame. Without a word of explanation, Mason began milking one of the cows. The bucket of milk was boiling when Hezekiah returned and pulled a pouch on a leather strap from around his neck. He withdrew a shiny, pocked stone the size of an egg and placed it in the milk.

The men came from the creek, removed their hats, and stood in silent, reverent attention like the New Orleans crowds that watched voodoo women perform spiritual tricks. But Hezekiah was a white man.

His voice shook the silence, “It’s soft. I need a rag to tie it on.”

Startled to attention, Susannah called, “Take my skirt.” Using her teeth, she began a tear and then ripped off the train. The shortened garment exposed her boots.

Hezekiah barely acknowledged the exchange as he molded the softened stone to the bottom of Lizzie’s foot. The girl flinched from the heat, then submitted without question to the burn.

“Should be dry by supper. We’ll apply it again.” He stood and glanced at Susannah. “I’ll explain after we cross the creek.” Without waiting for her response, he turned to Mason, “She can’t be walking.”

“Shore,” Mason said. “She can ride with me.”

Feeling like an outsider intruding on a private ritual, Susannah mounted Rose and watched Percy carry the girl to Mason’s wagon. He folded the extra material from Susannah’s skirt to form a cushion on the dashboard.

By the time they started moving, the sun had climbed high above the trees, stilling the air. Susannah looked ahead, anticipating a break in the forest where a breath of wind might soothe her sunburned face.

Later, Hezekiah rode toward her, his cheeks were red, looked on fire. He pulled off his hat and fanned himself. “The madstone’s said to heal wounds. Been in my family for years, handed down from father to son. This one comes from the stomach of an albino deer. Much more potent than from a brown deer.”

Susannah realized he was dead serious. Not a time to call it voodoo. “Do you use it often?”

“Depends. The person must ask. I can’t be paid. And I can’t ever sell it.” He smiled and cut his eyes sideways at her. “I’ll pass it down to my first son.”

Stunned, she whispered, “*Your* son? Not this child?”

He shook his head, the corners of his mouth turned down. “Gotta be a natural son.”

Susannah stared at her husband, who appeared unaware that he had just denied claim to her baby.

He went on, “The stone pulls out poison. You know the wound’s on the mend when the madstone won’t stick.”

*I’ll believe it when I see it.* Hezekiah’s dismissal of her baby left her feeling alone. She felt a twinge of longing when she looked back at the girl, asleep against Mason’s shoulder. Percy was wet with sweat, struggling to stay close to his lover while controlling the hogs.

Susannah moved her hand over the flutter in her stomach. At least, Hezekiah had shown compassion toward two slaves. Surely a baby, even one with dark skin, would win him over. She had to count on that if she was going to endure this dogged quest for Texas.

\* \* \*

Late in the day, the lead wagon crested a low hill, and the driver shouted, “That’s them!” Mules and drivers perked up on the descent into the valley as the sun washed a blazing orange over the distant treetops. Below, the campfire’s welcoming glow reflected off the circle of white canvas-covered wagons.

“Come meet these folks,” Hezekiah called to Susannah as they rode up to more than a dozen wagons clustered around people and livestock.

Men, women, and children––moved into the firelight, smiling weary welcomes. A man held Rose’s bridle. “Watched for you folks all day, hoping you’d catch up’ fore dark.”

“Anxious for you to meet my lady.” Hezekiah dismounted and smiled at Susannah as he lifted her from the saddle.

Surprised by how well her husband knew each person, including the children, Susannah relaxed into his protective clasp of her arm as he guided her through the introductions. After meeting only a few women, who ducked their heads and offered tiny curtseys, she wondered if she looked that different. Dirt caked her face, and the hem of her riding habit was frayed, but their dresses were plain homespun, pulled to the waist by big bib aprons, similar to what Mama Jess wore to do the wash. Finally, she faced a woman about half her height, dressed in all black. Susannah thought of funeral clothing—a good choice for Texas.

The woman’s tiny black eyes, close together as a weasel, gazed up at Susannah. She extended a small hand that felt rough as a corncob. “I’m Mary Crankston, and over there’s my husband, Mister Crankston... that’s Joseph Crankston.”

He also wore black. *Mary and Joseph*. “I am Susannah, wife of Hezekiah…Mister James.”

The little woman took Susannah’s arm, guiding her to two rocking chairs near the fire. “Mister Crankston’s wagons are the lead, you know. He scouted the trip out here last year.” Her upturned nose and round cheeks crinkled into a smile.

“We’re fortunate he knows the way.” Susannah couldn’t think of anything else to say.

After Mary Crankston arranged her stout form in the rocker, her black slippers dangled several inches from the ground. “So, you traded your harp for a slave?”

*So that was it. A grand lady who played the harp.* “We need a cook more than I need the harp.” A lie might improve her image.

“Oh, she cooks?” Mary Crankston’s eyebrows shot up.

“Best in Natchitoches.” Susannah hoped it was true.

“My, my! Most of these families don’t have slaves. Perhaps she’ll be our main cook.”

“She’s injured her foot. If you’ll excuse me, I need to see about supper.” Susannah didn’t wait for a response and felt relieved to see Hezekiah’s two women roasting fresh corn and searing slabs of ham in a spider-leg cast iron pot.

After supper, the Crankstons sat in their rocking chairs––positions of authority––while the men and a few women gathered near the fire to hear plans for the next day’s journey to Gaines Ferry on the Sabine. Susannah sat on the ground beside Hezekiah.

A man said, “They tell me you can spot that Gaines fella a mile away. He’s tall, got red hair and a red face.”

*A tall redhead.* She wrapped her arms around her knees, aware that he could be describing her. No bonnet was large enough to protect her scorched face.

“He’s a tough one, all right.” Joseph Crankston said. “Led that Gutiérrez-Magee Expedition to free Texas from Spain. About got massacred down south of Béxar. Spanish took revenge all the way to Nacogdoches, where they tore up the town and killed plenty.” Lighting a cigar, Crankston leaned back in his rocker, relishing his place before the rapt audience. “Yep, Gaines settled down. Bought this old ferry and built an inn, a mercantile store, and a tavern on the Texas side of the river.”

“So, tomorrow night, we’ll see Texas?” someone said.

“Depends on how fast we move out in the morning.” Joseph Crankston’s eyes drifted toward Susannah, who felt the nudge of her husband’s shoulder. She wondered if Hezekiah meant the bump as support or as a reminder that she had caused the delay.

The group drifted toward their wagons, and Percy appeared out of the shadows with a bucket of milk. Hezekiah took the pail and set it over the fire. Susannah watched for reactions when he removed the dry madstone from Lizzie’s bandaged foot.

“Will you look at that!” A man’s voice got the crowd’s attention.

Hezekiah bent over the boiling madstone, ignoring the mutterings as people gathered to watch. He lifted the softened rock from the milk and rebandaged Lizzie’s foot. “We’ll check it in the morning.”

“You doctor white folks same as you’re doctoring that black?”

“Anyone who asks.”

“What’s it do?”

“Pulls out poison. It doesn’t always. Mostly it works.”

“Can’t see wasting all that time on a nigger. And look how close they’ve got them wagons. Crowded in like white folks.”

“Trouble comes, they’ll be the first to save your hide.” Hezekiah ignored the other derisive remarks and answered a few more questions before he motioned to Susannah. “Your trunk and our bedrolls are in that wagon behind the Crankstons.”

When they reached the rear of their wagon, Susannah whispered, “I wouldn’t have thought they’d resent using that madstone on Lizzie.”

“Wait until one of them cuts a finger on a rusty knife. They’ll come around.” He pointed toward the slave wagons circled along the perimeter. “My boys do their part on guard duty.”

Mason rounded the back of the wagon, and without a hat, his forehead was as pale as a white man’s. “Be glad to see you show them folks in the morning, Hez.”

“I agree with Mason,” Susannah said. “Let them eat a few words for breakfast.”

Hezekiah bent close. “Glad you’re in my corner.”

*I’m not that much in your corner.* Susannah reached for her bedroll.

“Watch out for the grease bucket.” Hezekiah pushed aside the rope dangling a crude wood container from the wagon’s rear. “It’s good for greasing axles, but keep it off your clothes.”

Susannah shuddered at the thought of adding grease to her sweat-soaked riding habit and stooped to crawl under the wagon. “Are all those buckets full of grease?”

“Naw. A few hold milk. Women milk in the morning, let the buckets sway all day, and we have butter by night.”

“I suppose it’s better than churning.” She gazed about, realizing the space under the wagon wasn’t as wide as her bed at home and only a little longer.

Hezekiah tugged off his boots, and coins jangled as he loosened his trousers to pull a thick belt from around his waist. “Anything happens to me, you know where to find money.”

She had noticed his thick middle, like a lot of the men. Could they all be wearing belts stuffed with silver? “That must be heavy all day.”

“Heavier, the better. Tells me I’m not broke yet.” He stretched out with his head at the end of the wagon. Then he raised on one elbow. “My socks smell soured, right there in your face. If I move up beside you, I’ll keep my distance.”

She turned her head away from the rancid odor and suppressed a giggle. “I see what you mean.”

He sat up cross-legged, his hand stroking Bramble, who had eased in beside his master. When Hezekiah snapped his fingers, the dog settled at the end of the wagon.

*Mama Jess would have a fit if she knew that mongrel was under this wagon.* “I’ve never slept with a dog.”

“He’d sleep between us if I’d let him. His hairy body feels good against my back on mighty cold nights.” Hezekiah stretched out and leaned close to whisper, “Sorry, I can’t sleep somewhere else. Besides it looking odd, this is the only wagon not in use. My slaves need protection from the elements. Care for them, same as the mules and all the equipment.”

“You count your slaves the same as your equipment?” She couldn’t see his face in the darkness.

“I own them. Obligates me to care for them.”

“Did you give Mason that old banjo?”

“Figured I owed him. I grew up hogging the thing. Used to make him do my chores to get his turn.” Hezekiah laughed softly, “We’ve had a lotta good times seeing who could out-fiddle the other.”

“I’d like to see you two have a fiddling contest.”

“It’s nothing like watching you play the harp. Your hands look like white doves, moving so nimble, soaring, and striking before settling down real easy.”

*So that’s why he stared so intently.* Waiting to calm the urge to cry, she whispered, “I miss it. The sisters at school kept saying women don’t perform in grand halls. They are supposed to serve as wives and mothers.” She pulled in a long breath. “So here I am. A wife and going to be a mother.”

Hezekiah touched her shoulder. “Truth is, I couldn’t keep that banjo when you gave up your harp.”

“Thank you for telling me.” She rolled away from his touch to keep him from seeing tears wetting her cheeks.

As though he had not a care in the world, he yawned and mumbled, “I’ll sleep a couple of hours before my turn at watch.” His deep breathing came almost instantly.

Would her life ever make sense? She loved a slave and was married to another man. She’d never dreamed of sleeping in her clothing or under a wagon. Folding her arms to touch Philippe’s ring and cradle her baby, she imagined him beside her. Voices faded, and the pulsing sound of crickets took over the night.

\* \* \*

The crash of thunder jolted Susannah awake. The wagon creaked and swayed against gusts of wind blowing leaves and pellets of rain against her face. She pulled her bedroll over her head, and a flash of lightning showed Hezekiah and Bramble––soaking wet––crawling under the wagon. “Has it been raining long?”

“Just hit. My relief’s standing out in this downpour. I aim to sleep another hour.”

“The coolness feels good.”

“Enjoy it. Tomorrow, we’ll swelter while mosquitoes feast.”

Peeking from inside her bedroll, she watched lightning flashes turn the camp to ghostly grays. It felt like only moments before she woke, imbued with a feeling of contentment, until she realized Hezekiah’s arm encircled her. She pulled away.

“Sorry,” he mumbled before releasing her.

Hezekiah was not her choice. She did not intend to succumb to a man who had bought her.

Activity around the wagons roused Susannah. Determined not to delay their departure, she smoothed her hair under her bonnet and stuffed her bedroll into the wagon. Eggs boiled in a big pot, and Mason distributed loaves of bread from a barrel.

Hezekiah walked among his men, slurping coffee from a tin cup and chewing on a piece of bread. “Line up behind the Crankstons. I don’t intend to follow in a mile of mud and mule dung. Take boiled eggs for your pockets. Watch for berries and wild onions along the way.”

He bent over the pail of boiling milk and removed the madstone. When it would not adhere to Lizzie’s foot, he stood and smiled, his chest swelling. “Keep that foot clean and ride with Mason another day. Tomorrow you’ll be ready to chase hogs and feed the chickens.”

“Thank you, Mister. I be dancing a jig!”

“Ha! Do it tomorrow.” He raised his voice. “Let’s move!”

“Well, I never,” someone said, and the chatter started, “That nigger’s foot looks well. You suppose it really was festering?”

“Funny he never did any of that madstone business all the way from Tennessee.”

“Next time someone gets cut, we’ll give that rock a test.”

Susannah felt torn––unsure if she believed in the madstone but somehow wanted Hezekiah to be vindicated.

The rain had created a quagmire, pulling at the wagon wheels, causing a treacherous descent to the creek. When Mary’s mules balked, she gripped the reins and reared back like a freighter. With her little black slipper jabbed against the dashboard, her voice was loud and coarse, shouting commands to her team. They lurched down the muddy bank and into the creek, flush with last night’s rain.

When Rose trotted up the slope on the far side, Mary Crankston waited, fists on her hips.

Susannah dismounted and called to Mary, “I’m impressed at how well you handle your team.” She watched Mary’s hands flutter to her chest. If she intended to look delicate, her mule handling had spoiled her image.

“Oh, my dear, I’ve been forced to learn so much on this trip.” She stepped close and whispered, “I know it’s hard. You being just married.” She squeezed her shoulders toward her ears like she was about to divulge a secret. “I heard Mister Hezekiah say his old dog had kept him warm in winter.” Her lips pursed. “I’m sure he’s happy to have you instead.”

Susannah felt her face burning. “I didn’t realize we were speaking so loudly––”

“My goodness, no. Your wagon’s right behind ours.”

*And you were straining to hear.* “Rest assured, Miss Mary, my husband and I will not eavesdrop on you and Mister Joseph.”

“Oh!” she giggled. “You’re a sweet thing.”

Chapter Thirteen

*Texas*

Anticipation infused the train with new energy. Even the mules seemed to pick up speed as they moved closer to the Sabine River and Texas, where a new life waited. Late in the day, after endless hours of tugging the brim of her bonnet ever lower over her face as a shield from the glaring sun, Susannah felt as gleeful as the Crankston’s slave, driving the lead wagon as he cried out, “Yonder it is!” Each driver echoed the elation as they mounted the bluff overlooking the settlement spread along the Sabine, not more than fifty feet across.

The ferry that Joseph Crankston had described with such grandiosity was little more than a barge––planks strapped across logs with a railing along each side. Gaines, the red-headed ferryman, was propelling it across the river by pulling a thick rope anchored to trees on each side of the stream.

The ferry, carrying a freight wagon and four mules, inched toward them. After the teamster shouted the animals up the muddy riverbank, he gazed down at Joseph Crankston, Hezekiah, and several others who gathered beside the newcomer’s wagon. “Got me a load of coarse-hair furs––elk, deer, bison, and a piddling bit of fine hairs––beaver, otter, and marten.” The teamster spoke around a cigar butt clenched between his teeth. “You folks interested in a little trading?”

One man said, “You don’t look like a hunter. How’d you find them animals in all this heat?”

“Indians.” The freighter, obviously uneasy with the question, began rubbing both hands over his knees.

“What’d you give for them furs?” The voice sounded so angry that Susannah moved closer to some women who had wrapped arms around their children.

“Few rifles and Du Pont gunpowder.”

“Thanks be to you,” a man yelled, “DuPont makes them Indians real accurate shooting at us.”

Someone shouted, “You a damn Indian lover?”

Hezekiah’s drivers, who had been busy unhitching the mules, stopped and watched. They remained motionless as the voices grew louder.

“Them guns you traded encourage the thieving Comanches to raid *Béxar.* Plundering all them Spanish ranches. Next thing ya know, they’ll be after us.”

The freighter moved his hand to his rifle. “Man’s gotta make it. Got a wife and kids in Natchitoches.”

“Expect you better get along to see them,” Hezekiah said. “You wearing out your welcome.”

Hezekiah’s harsh tone unnerved Susannah. After all, her father traded with Indians.

*“Adieu*!” The teamster snapped the reins as his wagon, along with the tension, disappeared into the forest.

All eyes turned to Gaines––propped against the railing of his ferry, spitting tobacco juice into the river. “You ’bout ready?” Gaines loosened his guide rope.

“Naw. It’s too late. We aim to cross first thing tomorrow,” Joseph Crankston said.

“What you mean? I got lanterns on this thing. Tavern’s open.”

“That’s a problem. We don’t allow no drinking. Leads to trouble.” Crankston’s voice sounded shaky.

“Listen. I come across to get you.”

Hezekiah stepped up beside Crankston. “Naw, you brought that teamster over. You heard the man. We’re waiting until morning.”

*Is he looking for a fight?* Susannah couldn’t understand what was rankling all the men. And Hezekiah was nosing into everything!

“Price goes up at daybreak.” Gaines spat tobacco juice and wiped his sleeve across his mouth. “Anybody wanna take advantage?”

“What’s it cost right now?” Obie Washington swaggered forward, rolling his sleeves above his forearms like he wanted to fight. He was a portly man with a lumpy red nose Susannah had avoided because he smelled of whiskey and constantly yelled at his slave.

“One dollar a wagon tonight. Two, tomorrow.” Gaines looked over the crowd. “Fifteen cents for horse and rider tonight; two bits in the morning. For animals, it’s four cents tonight, six tomorrow.”

Obie started to his wagon. “Ain’t no reason to hang around. Apply the savings to a little refreshment.”

Crankston looked around nervously. “We agreed, we agreed in Natchitoches on a sober train.”

“Sure did,” came from several voices.

“Ain’t so strict in Texas.” Obie tossed his head at his slave, and they each climbed on a wagon for the trip across the Sabine.

Obie’s departure seemed to release the pressure as the group turned away, shoulders slumping in exhaustion. Susannah needed answers. She whispered when they reached their wagon, “Do men trade rifles and ammunition to the Comanches for their stolen horses?”

“Yep. It’s big business.” Hezekiah didn’t look at her, busied himself, pulling out their bedrolls and tossing them under the wagon.

She rubbed at her arms, prickling from the chilling news. “So, that’s what Father’s been doing?” Philippe had been part of it all, even got an Indian wife.

Hezekiah leaned close, shaking his head as if he didn’t understand. “Susannah, didn’t you know every work animal we have probably came from Comanches?”

“Well, if *we* trade with Comanches, why’s it wrong for that freighter?”

“It’s touchy.” Hezekiah rubbed his forehead like he didn’t want to continue the conversation. “We need mules and horses for survival. Planters across Louisiana and clear to Tennessee have been desperate for work animals––pull plows, turn the cotton gins.” He jerked off his boots and fumbled to unfasten his money belt. Sighing deeply, he said, “It’s one thing to trade with those thieving devils, but it sticks in a man’s craw when they trade with DuPont gunpowder. DuPont’s way better than what Kentucky factories produce.”

She wondered what kind of gunpowder her father and Philippe traded. “What kind do you have?”

“Kentucky.” He stretched out. “But, Mason’s a crack shot. And I’m not bad with my Springfield musket.”

“So, how far can you shoot?” The glow from the campfire revealed his smile emerging from behind the beard that had begun to darken his face.

“Three hundred yards. If I’m lucky.”

She lay back on her bedroll, still dissatisfied with the narrow parsing of what is right and wrong. “Guess I should feel safe.”

“I’ll take care of you, Susannah.” His voice was soft and close to her ear.

“I know.” She turned away. Still not satisfied, she turned back. “Men who trade with Indians aren’t highly regarded, are they?”

“Aw, it’s a dirty business. Encourages Comanches to steal the stock and burn out the ranches around *Béxar*. On the other hand, planters like me benefit, so we don’t quibble.”

He patted her arm, and for a moment, it felt reassuring. When his hand lingered, she turned away, pulling the ring to her lips. What choice did Philippe have? Unlike Hezekiah, who wanted land, a town, and power, Philippe only wanted freedom. How could she blame him for maneuvering to be her father’s prize slave––no field work, private quarters in the stable, and riding one of the finest horses? Yet, would Philippe admit doing whatever it took to be free, at least make life easier for himself? No! Her stomach churned acid. Swallowing the bile, she curled into a knot. She would not believe Philippe had any part in the sordid business.

She had finally found a comfortable position on the unforgiving ground when a commotion on the outskirts of the camp drew her attention to Hezekiah’s boys gathered around a lamp hanging on the rear of a wagon.

“It’s Mason greasing the axles,” Hezekiah mumbled.

“It’s so late.”

“Gotta be done to avoid a breakdown. They do it after being in water up to the axles.”

“Will he grease our wheels?”

“In a day or so, he’ll get to it. We’ve got our trunks, wedding gifts, my old bedstead, and food for the trip. The other wagons are heavier. They carry seeds, plows, and equipment for clearing and planting. Mason’s hauling his tools and what we’ll need to build the cabins.”

*Here’s my chance.* “He’s not like the others.”

“About the smartest man I know. Fixes anything. Figures it out even if he’s never seen it before.” Hezekiah lay on his back, shaking his head. “Never understood my pa. I had to sneak around to teach Mason to read. Pa said if he could read, he’d be smarter than him.” Hezekiah scoffed a throaty chuckle. “Plain as day, Mason was already smarter.”

“I used to play school with our slaves before they got old enough for the fields.”

“Mason wasn’t playing at learning. He was dead serious. He’s about eight years older than me. Taught me everything I know about farming.” Hezekiah rolled to face Susannah. “You notice his light skin? I believe there’s something about mixing white blood with black that makes them smarter than either one.”

The flesh on her arms grew cold. “You think he had a white parent?”

“Way Pa acted toward him, I figure he was the culprit.”

Her heart thundered against her chest. “Your brother, then?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.” In the glow of the fire, Hezekiah appeared unperturbed, like it was nothing.

“You keep him a slave?” She swallowed a sour tinge of shame as she thought of Samson and Sarah and the other fair-skinned slaves at home––her father’s children. She had no right to question Hezekiah.

“I treat him well. Look around at the freedmen. They’re half-starved. It doesn’t matter that some of them are more capable than us.”

Susannah pushed aside the urge to tell him about Philippe––his memory, his mastery of everything he read. If she started, she would never stop.

\* \* \*

By first light, they started lurching down the steep slope to the ferry. Gaines was not in sight. The pilot was a scrawny man, twisted with arthritis––hardly strong enough to handle a barge this size. It looked unstable, nothing like Boss Martin’s keelboat. Susannah cast a wary eye at the wagons maneuvering onto the mud-caked planks. When Hezekiah motioned for her to cross with Mason’s wagon, she stepped onto the rocking vessel trying not to look as nervous as her twitching mare. Gripping the back of the wagon, she stared at the river sloshing barely six inches below the ferry’s wooden sides. Too much weight tilted in the wrong place would tip them into the water.

When the barge bumped into the far bank, Susannah––limp with relief––mounted her mare and bent to hug the animal’s withers as they scrambled up to the road.

Mary had pulled her wagon off to the side. Pointing, she said, “You notice Obie’s slave girls are cooking, and his wife isn’t even leaving the wagon.”

Susannah struggled to catch her breath, determined not to mention the frightful river crossing. “I didn’t realize he had a wife.” She tried not to stare at the frail woman propped inside the canvass that must be sweltering in the morning heat.

Mary’s nostrils flared slightly, and she lowered her eyelids, feigning distaste for what she was about to disclose. “Expecting. Not doing so good, I fear. He should have let her sleep in the Gaines House. It’s that two-story log building on the hill with glass windows. I wish we could’ve stayed there. I haven’t slept in a bed since we left Tennessee.” She wriggled her shoulders and cut her little black eyes at Susannah. “I’m sure you feel the same.”

Despite having gone to sleep determined to keep her distance, Susannah had exposed herself to Hezekiah again, snuggled against him with his arm pulling her close. Hoping to move Mary away from the subject of sleeping arrangement, Susannah looked up the hill, “That’s the first house we’ve seen since we left Natchitoches.”

“Mister Crankston says it’s wilderness all the way to Nacogdoches except for a few squatter shacks.”

By midday, the road changed from brown dirt to a ribbon of red clay. Susannah walked a bit to give Rose a break, but her boots grew tighter with each step. Looking back, she wondered how several children and slaves were managing to walk day after day. Each morning, everyone seemed light of foot. The children even raced back and forth along the line. As the day wore on, black and white hel the same vacant stare like they moved without thought of where they were or where they were going. When Hezekiah rode toward her, she said, “Why don’t I let the children, who are walking, take turns riding with me?”

Hezekiah shook his head. “I offered the first day for them to ride with my men. Parents don’t want kids sitting on the bench with a slave.” He shrugged, “And they won’t let the slaves ride because they want them nearby to help.”

“Seems if they aren’t exhausted, they’d be better workers.”

“That’s what I mean by taking care of your hands. Treat ’em well if you want good results. Speaking of caring for folks, Crankston says there’s a creek up ahead. We’ll post guards so bathers can go upstream in groups. It’s a chance to wash off this red dirt.”

*In groups?* She had never bathed in a group. And exposing her naked body to the sun would cook her.

She hoisted herself back in the saddle and noticed dust from the iron-rich earth covering everything, casting a rusty tint on the canvas wagon bonnets and coloring her skirt. Maybe her face too. She tasted grit. Hezekiah didn’t say a word about her appearance. Surely, he noticed.

When they reached the creek, Susannah was surprised at the carefree way the women and the children who had been walking, ran laughing toward the water and disappeared around a bend of overhanging trees. Apparently, these people were accustomed to stripping in public. Turning to avoid seeing the rowdy abandon, she guided Rose into the water. Mary Crankston had already parked on the far side and called for Susannah to hurry.

She climbed into their wagon to open her trunk and stopped at the sight of her wedding dress carefully folded on top. Mama Jess had scrubbed the dirt from the hem and ironed it as good as new. Clenching her teeth to keep from crying, she grabbed one of the small pieces of Jess’s lye soap and pulled out clean drawers and a lightweight calico of soft yellow. Before lowering the lid, her fingers curled around a pale blue knit blanket––her baby’s first gift. Knitting needles and a ball of yellow yarn lay tucked beneath the treasure—her mother’s final farewell. “Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll think of you while I knit my baby’s bunting.”

Before shutting her trunk, Susannah slipped off Philippe’s ring and tucked it into the tatting on her wedding dress.

Stepping with care down the clay bank, she saw women ahead, splashing and laughing. But where had they placed clean clothing? Drawing near, she realized they were bathing and washing the clothes on their backs.

“Come on in! The bottom’s smooth, and the water feels wonderful.” Mary’s head bobbed in the middle of her big black skirt ballooned across the surface.

Susannah tossed her clean dress and boots up on the bank and vowed to change at the first opportunity. Pulling the combs to free her hair, she waded into the water, gasping at the inviting coolness creeping up her legs. Stepping deeper, she ducked under, relishing the chill washing over her, massaging her aching muscles as she scrubbed sweat and dust from her face and scalp. Her body broke the surface, refreshed by the cleansing dip. With buoyed spirits, she joined in the sheer pleasure of laughter.

Too soon, the guards announced time to give the men a turn. Susannah climbed to the bank, wondering what her mother and Mama Jess and, indeed the nuns at school would think about her enjoying the feel of her wet skirt clinging to her legs as she combed out her hair.

While waiting for the men to bathe, she led Rose to wade in the stream, and from that vantage, she saw Hezekiah stepping out of the creek. His pants clung close to his body. She looked away.

Chapter Fourteen

Susannah had relaxed into the saddle and was enjoying the squirrels leaping among the lush pine branches when she was startled by the road’s sharp turn and the forest opening to raw earth and weed-infested garden plots. Children and women stared hollow-eyed from open doorways of a cluster of log cabins not much larger than corncribs.

Hezekiah and Joseph rode into the central yard and visited with the families for only a few minutes. Then, looking stone-faced, they returned to the waiting caravan. Without a word of explanation, Joseph signaled the wagons forward.

Hezekiah came toward her with a reassuring smile and spoke in a lowered voice. “They’re squatters. Joseph says some have been here for years. Nobody’s chased them off.”

Susannah glanced back at the dreary scene. “Is that what we’ll be? Squatters?”

“Nope. I intend to petition for a land title as soon as we get to Nacogdoches.” He moved down the line without allowing Susannah to ask how he planned to get permission to settle when those people had not.

Her concern increased when they rode into Nacogdoches, where abandoned, weed-infested cabins looked like the town had not recovered from the Spanish attack so many years ago. She counted a scattering of occupied houses, mostly unkept log structures and a little church with no glass in its windows. People milled in the street outside a two-story building made of rusty-looking iron rocks.

Hezekiah pulled his horse alongside Susannah while they listened to the agitated Spanish buzz. She whispered, “They’re saying Mexico has won independence from Spain!”

“Sounds like it,” Hezekiah nodded toward Joseph, who had dismounted and shook hands with a couple of men. “Let’s see what he finds out.”

In a few minutes, Joseph rode back to Hezekiah. “Don’t look like we’ll be signing the Spanish loyalty oath. If the gossip’s true, we’ll be answering to Mexico.”

“Let’s get everybody settled at the campsite, then figure what to do,” Hezekiah said.

Susannah leaned forward in the saddle to ask if he still expected a land grant, but he rode away before she could speak.

By the time they circled the wagons on the far side of town, the hushed conversations confirmed Susannah’s worry. “If Mexico won independence, where does that put us? Spain offered 640 acres. Will the Mexicans agree?”

“It’s probably a big rumor,” Joseph argued as he paced through the crowd, rubbing his hands together, apparently concerned that his venture was falling apart. He raised his voice above the clamor. “Me and Hezekiah gotta do some investigating. Go back to the Stone House and find some authority. See someone who knows more than those yahoos clamoring in the street.”

As the two men rode away, Susannah felt torn––wanting to demand that Hezekiah give up his wild dream and take her home. Yet, she felt a strange pride that he had become so respected among the men left behind in camp that they got busy repairing wagons and greasing wheels, appearing to trust their leaders.

Hoping to pass the day without worry, Susannah joined the women foraging along the weedy creek bank for wild garlic and onions. When they moved away from the camp, she relaxed amid their chatter about cooking, gardening, and babies––topics she knew nothing about. As the day wore on, she finally realized that all she wanted was assurance that they would not be squatters.

\* \* \*

It was well after dark when Hezekiah and Joseph returned. Light from the dying embers on the campfire exposed dark lines carved into their faces. Joseph looked stooped and exhausted, probably resigned to losing his followers, fearing they would want their money back. “Got it from the horse’s mouth. After eleven years of war, the Mexicans have won. Nothing’s signed yet, but it’s over.”

Hezekiah looked resolute, raising his bearded jaw and looking out over the faces. “Since there’s no loyalty oath and no guarantee of a land title, your best bet is a petition letter.” His brown eyes, which seemed to get darker with emotion, scanned the crowd for several moments––letting his words sink in. Then he drew himself up and said, “I wrote my petition. But I’m not waiting for an answer. I’m going on––marking off 640 acres as planned. Carving out my farm. If you want to go with me and the missus, we’ll wait around tomorrow for you to deposit your letter. We’re leaving at first light the day after.” He turned, accepted a bowl of stew from Susannah, and then called out over his shoulder. “Anyone needs help with your letter, come to my wagon.”

The buzz of voices whispering among themselves sounded like honey bees. Finally, a hungry-looking man, backed by a thin wife and four children with red, watery eyes, spoke above the noise. “This here’s probably our best chance to stake a claim. Hezekiah’s got the protection. Them slaves been helping out, and they got plenty of supplies. Be foolish to get separated.”

One at a time, they agreed, and soon it was clear they were going to the promised land. Hezekiah hauled out Susannah’s trunk to serve as a desk, and men lined up for help writing petition letters.

He had barely started with the first letter when Obie Washington bellowed, “Fore we get ourselves all tied up with these letters, we gotta be sure we’re not fomenting a slave insurrection.”

Everyone stopped talking. Even the children waited, staring at Obie. He hitched up his britches and said, “Well, what I mean is, Hezekiah lets them niggers carry that old musket on patrol duty. I been worrying about our women and children.” Obie blinked his mealy little eyes and gazed about the crowd as if waiting for a response.

Hezekiah raised his voice without lifting his head from his pen, “My boys have been there every time you needed them, Obie. Helped you cross creeks, lifted your wagons out of ruts. Trouble comes, you can bet they’ll save your ass as sure as their own.”

“Jest thinking we oughta pay attention,” Obie mumbled as everyone turned and walked away. He shrugged as if realizing he’d lost the battle and stepped into line behind the others.

Susannah stretched out on her bedroll listening to Hezekiah patiently help men compose their letters. For some, like Obie, Hezekiah wrote the entire thing. When he finally crawled under the wagon, Susannah whispered, “I’m proud you could help.” She snickered, “Even ol’ Obie, who smells like a keg of whiskey, had to ask for help. Maybe, now, he’ll shut up about your slaves.”

Hezekiah leaned close. “Doesn’t matter what that drunk says. I trust my slaves.”

“You think they’re happy with their lot?” She felt him tense and knew she had opened a can of worms.

“I treat ’em well. What else could they want?”

She stared into the darkness. “I wonder, sometimes. Maybe they want to live like us.”

“Susannah! Is your condition making you think like a black woman?”

*Black woman?* My *condition*? “Hezekiah James, It’s *not* a black woman’s condition.”

He sighed, “Let’s not quibble over a couple of words.” Turning his back, he snapped his fingers for Bramble to move to the foot of the wagon.

He might command his dog, but he would not command her. Infuriated by his overbearing confidence, she stared into the night, unable to sleep, listening to the chilling howl of wolves moving ever closer. Except for the guards stationed around the camp, everyone seemed to be sleeping without a care. Hezekiah might know how to manipulate them into following him, but she doubted he understood his slaves. Indeed, he had no idea what men like Philippe wanted. She knew, and it made her gut ache.

\* \* \*

After presenting their land petitions in Nacogdoches, the wagon train continued west with renewed hope until one morning, when they were preparing to break camp, several Indians loomed out of the forest. Susannah’s dismay at their near nakedness turned into terror when the slaves jumped to attention––alert as soldiers. Bramble’s hackles stood up, and he growled until Hezekiah snapped his fingers.

She felt the warmth of Hezekiah’s hand over hers and realized that she had clutched his arm and leaned into the security of his shoulder. “It’s fine,” he whispered. “Probably decided to trade when they realized our guards won’t let them steal the horses.”

The Indians and all the camp stood ramrod still until Hezekiah bowed and said, “Welcome.”

A young man, perhaps a warrior, spread his arms and then pointed to his chest, “Tonkawa.” Despite their solemn expressions, they looked festive, adorned in feathered necklaces and earrings of bone and shell. From her sheltered position against Hezekiah, Susannah gazed at the bare, muscle-hardened chests and the short breechcloth coverings.

Hezekiah pointed to one of the big iron skillets holding their lunch biscuits. “As a friendly gesture, let’s serve them bread and our ladies’ tasty jam.”

When the Indians understood the invitation, the forest unleashed a throng of naked children and tattooed women, unclothed except for short skirts made of skins. Their bodies were decorated with black circles painted around their mouths and their breasts.

After the Tonkawa finished the last crumb, Joseph pointed to a boy’s leg, swollen with carbuncles. “Hezekiah, could your madstone help that kid?” The child leaned against a woman whose eyes moved in a steady gaze over the settlers.

Susannah clasped her hands to keep from grasping for Hezekiah when he stepped forward and bent to examine the boy. Every Tonkawa leaned forward. Did they sense a threat or a healer? The whites stiffened and stepped back.

“If you want, I’ll be glad to help.” Hezekiah looked at ease speaking to the woman. Susannah wondered if he were really that confident.

The boy’s mother stretched out his leg, the noble tilt of her head showing no emotion.

When Hezekiah withdrew the madstone from its pouch, the Indians emitted a grunting sound, their fists clenched. Susannah’s heart raced. Were they afraid of it? Would they kill him and take it?

Ignoring the threatening stance, Hezekiah stirred the embers on their dying fire and set the milk to boil. When he placed the madstone against the swollen sore, the child barely flinched, apparently accustomed to accepting whatever adults inflicted. After securing the bandage, Hezekiah carried the boy to Mason, who settled the child on the bench beside him. The mother took her position alongside the wagon.

Susannah couldn’t take her eyes off the woman. Something about her demeanor––shoulders back, chin up, and nostrils flaring––made her appear invincible. Then from the cluster of powerful bodies, a chubby young man took his place next to the woman. Her air of authority never diminished as she strode alongside Mason’s wagon, grasping the pudgy fellow’s hand.

Susannah heard Obie Washington bellow, “So, you’re letting them savages come along with us?”

“Never heard of such,” said another man.

Hezekiah called out, “May need them if we meet Comanches.”

“We’ll see,” someone muttered.

“I’m watching my stock,” another man said.

Despite the grumblings, everyone swung into line to begin the march. The caravan slogged through bogs where mosquitos swarmed in droves. The Tonkawas scooped the smelly mud and smeared it on their bodies. The whites slapped themselves and kept moving. Finally, Hezekiah dismounted, filled a bucket with mud, and began passing it to each of his men. He shook his head when he reached Susannah, and his eyes softened. “I hate for you to cover that beautiful face.” He held out the bucket. “But I think you should.”

She gagged at the stench of rotten eggs.

“Breathe through your mouth!” His brow pinched as he watched her smear the slime over her face and hands. “Breathe through your mouth, sweetheart.”

*Sweetheart? Not your sweetheart!* She gagged again and pursed her lips to breathe. She had not been sick like women talked about, and she didn’t intend to start.

The mosquitoes stopped biting, but they hovered––a steady hum under her hat, waiting to attack. When they finally reached higher ground, where a shallow creek ran through the trees, the whites rushed to the bank to scrub away the hardened crust. The Tonkawas appeared oblivious to the dried coating covering their bodies.

Kneeling beside the water, Susannah looked at her hands––red and raw. She could only imagine the condition of her face.

Travel slowed as mules leaned hard into their collars to pull the wagons through deep, sandy soil. Taking advantage of the slow pace, the Indians moved in and out of the trees, returning with rabbits, squirrels, and even a string of catfish. Susannah watched in awe as the women kept up the steady pace while skinning, gutting, filleting, and then tossing the meat into baskets on their backs. They laid a blanket under a mulberry tree and shook the branches. Scooping up luscious red berries, they offered them first to Hezekiah and his slaves, then distributed them along the line.

When a wagon lodged on a tree root or a rock, the Indians scrambled to lift the cumbersome vehicle, appearing in every way to show they were part of the wagon train. But when the day finally ended in a pine forest next to the Angelina River, they made no effort to wash themselves in the swiftly flowing water. Instead, the men sat along the bank, still as rocks, obviously waiting for the madstone’s magic.

Indians and whites crowded around the pan of boiling milk as Hezekiah unwrapped the child’s leg. Susannah didn’t realize she was holding her breath until she joined a chorus of sighs upon seeing the significantly reduced carbuncle. It had drained a putrid stench of pus. “It’s pulling out the poison,” Hezekiah said before he wiped the sore and replaced the freshly boiled madstone. “We’ll check again in the morning.”

Tonkawa women brought Hezekiah a large green leaf filled with pungent-smelling fried fish. He took one bite, proclaimed it tasty, and ate every morsel. After Hezekiah’s approval, the women kept up a steady pace serving berries and the heavily-seasoned game they had caught throughout the day.

Later, when they crawled under their wagon, Hezekiah said, “We may have to deal with Tonkawas for the duration. At least tonight, they kept some of our tired women from having to cook.”

“It’s because of you and that madstone. They’re repaying us.”

He held her in a steady gaze. “Nice to hear that from you.”

“Well, it’s true.” She lowered her head to avoid looking into his eyes and stretched out on her space.

\* \* \*

Susannah was already combing her hair when Hezekiah woke. “I’m eager to see how that carbuncle looks,” she said.

“Me too.” He patted her shoulder and was outside before she could react.

She watched him going among the wagons, seeing that his slaves were preparing to depart. He nodded at the Tonkawas moving into the firelight with the boy. Susannah dropped her combs and joined the gathering crowd near the fire. No one spoke, but the air simmered with anticipation. It had to work––for all of them.

Susannah felt a wave of nausea as Hezekiah carefully removed the bandage. Her hand flew to her lip and wiped cold sweat when she saw the madstone was dry. The diminished carbuncle had given up three hard cores. Swallowing, she reached to steady herself against a nearby pine tree.

Hezekiah wiped the wound and secured the bandage. Smiling into the child’s serious black eyes, he spoke as if the Indian understood his words. “It’s well. Keep it wrapped and clean a few more days.” He looked up, the beginning of a smile signaling a successful conclusion.

Murmurs of approval erupted. He was a hero. His slaves danced in place, slapping backs and laughing. Their man had proven his, and by ownership, their worth.

The Tonkawas served bird eggs, berries, and fish fresh from the river. When breakfast ended, the boy’s mother moved into the circle and bowed as she extended beaded buckskin moccasins for Hezekiah and Susannah. The woman knelt to help Hezekiah, then Susannah remove their boots and slip on the soft, finely sewn Tonkawa shoes.

Standing together, Susannah realized they had clasped hands to admire their gifts.

“Don’t know when my feet have felt so good,” Hezekiah said as he bumped shoulders and grinned at Susannah.

Rattled by this public display of their union, she bowed low in appreciation. The exquisite moccasins below the frayed hem of her riding habit, which she had worn since leaving home, shook her with the awareness that nothing of her past survived. Hezekiah was all she knew in this strange world. Still gripping his hand, she looked into her husband’s smiling eyes.

Susannah moved in a fog of confusion as the crowd dispersed and began loading for the trip across the Angelina River. She returned to the wagon, her fingers trembling as she fumbled with her combs and twisted her hair into a knot under her hat.

Hezekiah followed and said as he passed, “Your hair all combed out makes me think of blazing red sumac leaves in the fall.”

She smiled and watched him mount his horse. His eyes rested on her for a minute too long. Was he trying to capture her?

Brushing aside the image of his straight back swaying as he rode away, Susannah focused on the Tonkawas, watching to see if they stayed or moved on. When she reached the high bank on the far side of the river, they were gone.

When they retired to their wagon that night, a buffalo skin lay across their bedrolls. Hezekiah lifted the heavy, finely tanned hide. “From the looks of this gift, I’d say that mother and her boy are high-ups in that tribe.

“You saved him. Probably saved us.”

He studied her face. “Were you afraid?”

“Maybe a little.”

\* \* \*

They had barely finished supper when howling came from the Neches River. They found Preston Chambers slumped amid the weeds, holding his foot and gasping for breath. “Water moccasin got me. Get that madstone. I’ll die before morning.”

Susannah had barely noticed Preston Chambers and his wife, who never lifted her head to speak. She thought it odd that they drove only one wagon. With so few supplies, Susannah had wondered how they planned to stake a claim and lay out a crop. Yet, here he was with a terrible snake bite and few prospects. The men tied off the wound and carried him to the camp, where Hezekiah was already boiling the madstone.

“Not sure it can pull out all that venom,” Hezekiah said. “Keep his foot down and keep him quiet. Agitation spreads the poison.”

Applying the hot stone on his rapidly swelling ankle calmed the man. He kept rubbing both hands through greasy black hair. “I think it’s working. I got faith in that stone.”

After volunteers lined up to stay with Chambers and handle guard duty, Hezekiah stretched out beside Susannah. “He’ll live if he’s strong enough to fight off that snake bite. Unfortunately, that madstone doesn’t perform miracles.”

“I thought you believed in its magic.”

“Aw. You ought to know I’ve got better sense than that. It’s good at pulling poison, but Cottonmouths are serious business.”

“Then why do you encourage belief in it?”

He turned toward her, his hand moving to her shoulder. “I help when I can. It’s a way to lead. If we’re going to build a town, we need folks to believe in us.”

“Seems they ought to believe in *you*, not some rock.”

He pulled his hand away. “We’ll see.”

Doubts gnawed at her. Was he using that stone to get power? She stared at the silent camp that slept peacefully, trusting in this man. Was he deceiving them for his own purposes?

After a few minutes, he touched her again. “I’m sorry if I disappointed you, Susannah.”

She didn’t respond.

\* \* \*

Hours of bone-weary riding blended one day into the next. The madstone did not cure Preston Chambers; it dried up after every application. Despite thrashing in pain and experiencing partial paralysis in that leg, he insisted on keeping the madstone tied to his ankle. Late one night, when Hezekiah finally came to the wagon, he lay down on his back, massaging his face with both hands. “I just applied the madstone for the fourteenth time. Not one soul came to check on the poor man.” He turned toward Susannah. “Nobody wants to admit it failed.”

An aching sadness settled in her chest. “Yet, they still think it’s magic?”

“Blind faith does that. So long as they ignore poor ol’ Preston, they don’t have to see the truth. Just keep believing in magic.”

Before she caught herself, Susannah laid her hand on Hezekiah’s shoulder. “Are you sorry you ever showed them the madstone?”

“Aw!” It sounded like a groan. “Sometimes it helps.” He pulled her hand to his chest. “At least you’re not calling me a fool.”

Soon, she realized he had fallen asleep, still clutching her hand.

\* \* \*

Lonely stands of post oak offered only occasional canopies of shade as they pushed to reach the Trinity River by nightfall. Slowed by the road that was little more than a rutted trace cut between shoulder-high prairie grass, the wagons had to be pushed and lifted over the furrowed ground.

Susannah had been watching the trail, fearing Rose might step into a hidden hole when shouts caused her to whirl about and see slaves heaving themselves against a wagon listing to one side. The sharp crack of snapping bows tore loose the bonnet, thrusting barrels, buckets, and Preston Chambers onto the ground. The sweating black bodies righted the wagon and scrambled to gather the scattered belongings.

Preston Chambers’ wife, whose eyes were sunk and dark as her matted hair, clung to the reins, finally steadying the frightened mules. Then––quick as a startled bird––she scrambled from the wagon, ignoring her husband, who was sprawled in the grass holding his leg. She grabbed bowls, scooping them into her dingy skirt. Glancing at Susannah, who had dismounted to help, she said, “My grandma made these. Cut from maple tree burls.”

Susannah picked up all sizes of bowls, each one a finely smoothed piece of art. “They’re elegant. You must be so proud.”

A faint smile softened the lines in her face. “I’m Ruby. Bowls are all I have left.”

“I’ll help you pack.”

Ruby surveyed the clutter around her. “I wrap them in clothing.”

Preston Chambers sat among the debris, holding his leg like a man grievously mistreated. “Can’t I depend on you to keep the damn wagon upright?”

Ruby appeared not to hear as she bent over a barrel, methodically layering the bowls within a pair of drawers, a faded wash dress, and a homespun sheet.

Susannah wanted to tell the girl not to hunker, but as she watched the woman organize the load, she realized that the bowls gave Ruby a place in the world that her husband could not diminish.

That night, Hezekiah returned from the Chambers’ wagon grinning. “I believe Missus Chambers has put her foot down. There will be no more knotting the madstone around her husband’s ankle. He may be half-crippled, but henceforth, he’ll be driving the wagon.”

Susannah giggled. “I believe the dear girl has stopped hunkering.”

When Hezekiah burst into laughter, she realized they were sharing a private moment, and it felt good not to be so alone in this God-forsaken country.

Chapter Fifteen

September 1821

Late one evening, as folks began drifting toward their wagons, Obie Washington stormed up to Hezekiah. “Keep them boys away from my women! Your bucks been showin’ off. Jumping around to help when it ain’t necessary.” Obie’s big nose grew redder as he shouted. “My wife’s poorly. Them girls supposed to be tending her if she needs something, not off foolin’.”

“It’s not my doings,” Hezekiah shot back. “They come around at night when my boys are working. If you don’t like it, keep your women on your side of the camp.”

After they went to bed, Hezekiah told Susannah that the two women he bought before leaving Tennessee had taken up with Mason and Albert, which left two young ones unattached. “You were right to let Percy and Lizzie get together. But I can’t be buying women from Obie just to satisfy a couple of horny slaves.”

Susannah peered into the dark. “They’re here now while your boys are greasing axles.”

He waved his hand in dismissal. “Yep. That’s another bone of contention. Obie refuses to grease his axles. Everybody else does it, but not contrary Obie.”

She lay back. “Sometimes, the sound of squeaking wheels is louder than the cursing and the cracking whips.”

“I’ll be glad to get you settled. No sense in you hearing all this rough talk.”

Susannah smiled in the dark, comforted by his words, yet she kept hearing Obie call the men bucks––like they were animals, and no one uttered a word of complaint. Would people have called Philippe a buck when they reached Béxar? The Spanish and the Mexicans abhorred slavery, but how would they have reacted to a black man and a redheaded woman raising their child? She must stop torturing herself about a life she would never know.

\* \* \*

The road was especially rough the next day, forcing the train to stop and lift wagons over rocks and out of deep ruts. People near the rear of the line began shouting that a wheel had broken on the wagon carrying Obie’s wife. Susannah rode her mare near enough to see that Obie had taken a whip to his slave. “I been telling you to grease that axel.”

The man danced away, throwing up his arm, dodging the blows. “Can’t lift it by myself.”

“Bastard.” Susannah heard the whispered growl as Mason strode past. Then he bellowed, “Stop hitting him. I can fix it.”

“And I’ll fix you!” Obie’s arm came up with the whip.

Hezekiah swung his mare in front of Mason. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Obie’s arm went slack. “You interfering with my slaves again?”

“My man offered to fix your wheel. We’ve got an extra. It’ll fit over your axle while yours gets repaired.”

Obie sputtered a minute. “Well, then, let your nigger do it.”

“He charges a dollar,” Hezekiah said.

“What you mean? He’s a slave.”

“Yep. He’s my slave. He doesn’t work for you.”

Obie looked around for support, but those nearby shuffled their feet, looked at the ground, and remained silent.

“We’re not hanging around. Either borrow my wheel and pay Mason to fix yours, or we’ll move along without you.”

“You’d leave me again? Like back at Gaines?” Obie turned to Joseph Crankston. “You’re wagon master. You going to let him boss like that?”

Crankston shrugged. “Believe so.”

Susannah felt the tension mounting. Slaveholders hired out their hands, but she’d never heard of letting them earn their own money. Hezekiah was flirting with danger.

Within a couple of sun-scorched hours, Mason and the boys had mounted the extra wheel, and they were moving again.

Mason became an evening curiosity as he broke down the wheel, took off its iron rim, and greased the neglected axle. He sawed and chiseled wooden rim sections and carved new spokes. For a couple of days, when the road was not too rough, instead of playing the banjo, he lashed the reins to the wagon brake and carved another spoke.

When it came time to reassemble the parts, a crowd gathered to watch him pound the wooden pieces together.

Susannah walked up to Hezekiah standing near the rear of the crowd. He slipped an arm over her shoulder and gave her a sideways grin.

She clenched her teeth. Hoping. It felt like their future hinged on Mason knowing what he was doing. For days intense arguments centered on Mason’s ability to repair the wheel and whether it was right for a slave to get paid.

Mutterings grew loud as speculation increased that he’d never get the wheel back together. Ignoring the chatter, Mason heated the rim in a blazing fire until it was red hot. Two men, their muscles bulging, used tongs to stretch the iron circle over the reassembled wooden parts of the wheel. As they labored, Susannah felt the growing unease in what could become a mob. The chiding chatter, the slurs about Mason’s light skin. Comments about manhood and the size of his hands.

Finally, the men pried the rim over the wood wheel, and comments gave way to surprised gasps.

“Look at that,” someone said. “The thing’s gonna fit.”

“Got to admit, he’s a blacksmith.”

“Maybe a wheelwright.”

The wheel sizzled and steam rose in billows as Mason poured water to cool the rim and tighten it into place.

“Hey, Hezekiah. You teach that nigger how to do that?”

“He taught me.” Hezekiah squeezed Susannah’s shoulder, and she realized she’d been leaning against him.

Mason looked up, sweat soaking his shirt. “Iron strips gotta cool. Goes back on tomorrow night.” He grasped the wheel by its spokes and raised it like a trophy.

The next evening, everyone gathered to watch Mason and his men jack up Obie’s wagon and change out the wheels. The task complete, Mason turned and held out his hand for payment.

“Well, let’s see here.” Obie moved about, gazing at the wheel like a man of authority. “Don’t get all uppity. I aim to try it out.”

“It’s done. Pay him.” Hezekiah’s voice came from the back of the circle, but there was no confusion about who spoke.

After uneasy mutterings and shuffling, Obie glared from one man to the next, finally digging into the pocket of his drooping britches held up by a coil of rope. He tossed a coin, which Mason snared in midair.

“Obliged.” Mason glanced at the Spanish dollar in his palm, then turned away as he stuffed his pay into his overalls. The dollar jingling against another coin in Mason’s pocket made the only sound as the slave circled the men standing in his path.

\* \* \*

Early one morning, Obie Washington appeared, waving his musket toward Hezekiah. “My goddam nigger’s gone.”

“Put your gun down. We’ll ask around.” Hezekiah opened his arms, the gesture taking in everyone, including the boys hitching the wagons.

“He took my hatchet. Probably plenty more. How about your dog? You think he can chase him down?”

Bramble pushed against Hezekiah’s leg like he might be in trouble. Stroking the dog, Hezekiah shook his head. “This hound doesn’t even hunt rabbits. Unless you know which way he went, I don’t see much sense in taking out after him.”

“He’s hightailing it back to Tennessee. Got a woman and a bunch of kids. Gave me all kinds of grief when I sold ’em. Couldn’t get it through his thick skull that they didn’t pay their way.”

Joseph Crankston found his voice. “Obie, we’re not chasing a runaway slave back over what we’ve just slogged through. You can go looking, but we ain’t waiting.”

Several people clapped, and that seemed to be the end of it. Obie stomped to his wagons, cursing God and everyone who didn’t get out of his way.

For the rest of the day, Susannah’s thoughts drifted to a world where no one was forced to leave the people they loved. She would be with Philippe, waiting for their baby to be born. Mama Jess would still have her sweet Sarah helping her in the kitchen. Obie’s slave would be with his woman and little kids. Even Rutherford would be happy where he wanted to go, not ravaged to death by her father’s dogs. Susannah glanced back at Mason, his reins tied to the wagon post while he picked a melancholy tune on his banjo. She was glad he had taken up with one of Hezekiah’s women. She hoped they were happy.

Near sundown, she heard yelling from the back of the train. “Riders coming. Fast!”

Hezekiah and several of the men pulled out their rifles and rode back toward the rear of the line just as three horses came into clear view––two riders and a body across the third horse.

“By God, you got my nigger!” Obie leaped from his wagon and hustled toward the men.

“We figured him a runaway. Tried our best to take him in. Fought like a wildcat. Finally had to put him down.” The man spoke through wads of tobacco overflowing from the corners of his mouth. He cocked his head in the direction of the body. “Thought you probably had a reward––dead or alive. How much you gonna add to this dollar we found in his pocket?” He leaned forward, hungry for some encouragement.

“Ha!” Obie caught fire. “A silver dollar, huh? Now where you suppose he got that?” He whirled, began running toward Mason’s wagon. “I lost me a nigger, but there’s another one gonna answer for it.”

Hezekiah spurred his mare into a little trot and moved in front of Obie, but not before men began repeating that Mason needed to answer some questions.

Mason stood beside his wagon, the musket resting in the pouch beside him. His face looked slack.

“I wanna see that Spanish dollar I gave him.” Obie glanced at Hezekiah, who had dismounted next to Mason. “We got a right to know if he’s helping slaves run off.”

A general mummer of agreement passed through the crowd as they pressed closer.

“I don’t help slaves run.” Mason’s voice was soft, gentle, or maybe tired.

“Then show us. Or we’ll look for ourselves.” Obie inched toward Mason.

For a long minute, Mason stared. His eyes did not blink. Finally, he moved his hand into his pocket and opened his palm, displaying a dollar. He stood perfectly still, his hand outstretched while men strained to look.

One by one, then in twos and threes, they returned to their wagons. The only sound was the clang of the traces as the mules twitched, nodding their heads toward the setting sun.

Mason dropped the money into his pocket, but Susannah did not hear the rattle of the coins as he climbed onto his wagon bench.

PART THREE

*The Mighty Brazos River*

Chapter Sixteen

Susannah was roused from sleep by Hezekiah jerking on his boots. She leaned on her elbow, wanting nothing more than to lie still for an entire day.

He fastened his money belt and spoke in excited gasps, “We oughta get there today.”

“Dear Lord, I hope so,” she mumbled under her breath as her husband crawled from under their wagon. The encampment was coming alive with a dogged intensity that had been increasing by the day. They had been rising earlier and traveling into the sun until it gave up its last blazing glare. It was as though every person in the caravan felt goaded to claim land before the new Mexican government changed the grant program. Susannah wanted to end the incessant journey toward someplace that seemed more out of reach with each passing day.

Joseph Crankston hustled among the wagons saying over and over, “Stuff your pockets with biscuits and jerky. Ain’t stopping ’til we see the Brazos.” As the day dragged on, he stayed true to his word; even when someone ran into the woods for necessity, the wagons lumbered slowly forward.

It was mid-afternoon when they stood on a high bluff staring down at the mighty Brazos River, a narrow stream the color of red mud. The crowd remained strangely silent. Almost reverent.

Susannah leaned against her mare’s neck and felt like weeping. Had it ended? Could they finally stop? Could they finally sleep in a bed?

A ferryman dangled bare feet off a flat wooden raft arched high on the smooth rock bank. He introduced himself as Eli Fulton, cousin of the late Robert Fulton of steamboat fame. “Jest you wait for them fall rains. You’ll see this booger swoll up like an ocean. I’d like to take you across. Truth be told, you can wade over.”

Hezekiah nodded to the ferryman’s wife frying a mess of fish, then walked down the bank to speak to the man. “We want to spread out downriver. Lay claim to land along this east side.”

“Well, yonder’s an old Indian trail, barely wide enough for single-file.” The ferryman pointed to a path running parallel to the river. It disappeared into a live oak forest thick with black-jack trees and berry vines stretched like latticework between branches. “Trail goes solid for miles. I been here a month, exploring and watching them Mexicans splash across.”

Hezekiah looked toward the trailhead. Some of the men were already chopping trees to widen the entrance. “Won’t take much to carve a road through there.”

Families scurried to set up camp. Eager as beavers, Susannah thought.

Joseph Crankston raised his voice to call them together. “I figure we got to draw lots for each family’s placement along the river.

“Draw lots?” a man shouted. “Like in the Bible? You claiming it’s the good Lord’s will?”

Crankston dismissed the comment with a backhanded swat. “Ain’t nothing like the Bible. Jest a way to divvy up the land. When it’s done, I’ll use my surveying tools to mark off the front of each grant.” He waited a minute while everyone shuffled around, mumbling about the Bible and how this was different. Then he raised his voice again. “Since this was Spanish land, I’ll follow how they did it along the Rio Grande. Ever claim gets a half-mile fronting the river. Spanish called them *porciones.* The rest of your land will stretch back from the water.”

Without giving anyone time to argue, Crankston pulled a little table up to his rocking chair and tossed open a sack of smooth stones. “Me and the missus been collecting these rocks and marking them with Roman numbers.” He turned over each one to reveal the inked figures.

Susannah’s heart fluttered as she searched the milling crowd for her husband. His dreams of building a town hung on a game of chance. He appeared deep in discussion with someone still fretting about drawing lots. Men pushed forward, thrusting hands into the sack with such vigor that dust scattered across the table.

Obie whooped and slapped his hat against his leg, “Lookie here! I got number one. Prime spot. Right here at the crossing. Have me a tavern fine as ol’ Gaines.” He looked at the ferryman still slumped on his barge. “You, my good fella, might get a bonus for bringing folks across.”

The ferryman turned his head and spat tobacco juice in the river.

As the drawing went on, Susannah moved close to Hezekiah, whose jaw clenched with each number drawn. When he reached for his stone, he opened his big fist for Susannah to see the black X. “End of the line.”

She squeezed his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Hezekiah lifted his gaze to the narrow strip of river moving listlessly out of sight around a bend. “Not going to have a town, for sure.”

They watched Obie prance along the edge of his grant, then Hezekiah spewed a resigned breath. “Let him settle down. Then I’ll make an offer. Sell out to me and hightail it back to wherever he came from.”

“You think he’ll sell?”

“Naw. He’s a fool not to. Can’t stay sober long enough to run anything. He’ll drink his tavern dry if he ever gets it built.” Hezekiah rubbed his hand over his stubbly beard. “Meantime, Mason and I’ll help Joseph. My men can work on opening the road.”

Preston and Ruby Chambers drew the site nearest Hezekiah and Susannah. The Crankstons got the next plot.

Everyone scattered, stepping quickly as though their reward loomed within the thick forest.

Ruby Chambers, who had remained withdrawn, approached with one of her beautiful bowls. “I’ll trade this for a good ax. Beings our land’s almost as far down river as yours, we’ll never get there if I rely on Preston.” She looked toward the thick trees and mumbled, “His leg and all––”

“We’ll *loan* you an ax,” Hezekiah said. “Bring it back when you’re done and living next to us.”

“We’re not beggars––”

“Price is the return of a sharp ax,” Hezekiah said as he walked away.

Susannah felt proud of Hezekiah, and she wanted to hug the woman. A soul trying to manage despite a no-good husband. “I’m glad we’re neighbors.” She took Ruby’s hand. “Let’s look for an ax.”

Mason came from behind a wagon and removed his floppy felt hat. “I know where Hez packed them axes. Got three wagons of tools––cabin building and field laying.” He tossed back a tarpaulin to expose an orderly lineup of every size and shape of saws and axes.

Pointing at a good-size wooden box with a handle. Susannah asked what it was.

“Small-size cotton gin. Belonged to Hez’s pa. Nights after we come in, we cranked many a pound of cotton through that thing.”

“My goodness, Hezekiah has enough equipment to open a store,” Susannah said.

“Yes’um. My sentiments.” Mason hefted an ax. “See if this one fits your strength.”

Ruby clutched the handle and grinned, her black eyes snapping with new life. “I believe it does.” Head held high, a woman in command, she headed toward the settlers hacking away at the trail.

While Susannah scooped beans from a barrel and set them to slow cook for supper, she watched Joseph unloading a Jacob staff, box compass, and surveyor chain.

He called to Obie, “I’m marking your initials on this old cottonwood. It’s the edge of your property line. “From here, we’ll draw a near straight line along the river for a half-mile. Come along to see where your land stops.”

Susannah’s hopes of quickly reaching their homesite faded as Hezekiah disappeared into the forest, hacking away brush. Mason and Joseph followed, stretching the chain to start measuring the distance along the riverfront.

It was painfully clear their land lay days away.

When Obie returned, his eager neighbors had already cut the trail through his property. After one of the slave women moved his wife’s wagon into the clearing, he climbed onto his wagon bench, placed his marked stone beside him, lit a cigar, and gazed over his piece of forest. That was his perch at dawn the following morning when the others moved deep into the woods to continue opening the trail.

Susannah had kept a nervous eye on Hezekiah. His dream of laying out a town might turn on making a deal with a man who hated him.

Obie feigned surprise when Hezekiah ambled over like he was on a Sunday walk, “You looking at the prospects for that tavern?”

“Yep, that’s a fact. Figure it’s a prime spot.”

“You’d be right about that. Plenty folks are gonna pour in here looking for an investment.” Hezekiah leaned against the rough trunk of an anacua tree and plopped a few of its little orange berries into his mouth. “You thought about what you can get for this land?”

“Ha. It’d be a pretty penny.”

Hezekiah nodded and kept munching the berries. “I figure a half-dollar an acre would set you up in a tavern in Natchitoches. Get your wife some medical help.”

“Naw. That woman don’t need no doctor. She needs to produce a kid. All this laying up and losing kids is getting right smart old.” He sucked on his cigar and waited for Hezekiah’s next move.

“A dollar an acre would get you a tavern and enough to stock it with whiskey.”

Obie leaned down, grinned, then shook his head. “You got me figured for dumb. I know riverfront land in the U.S. sells for upwards of fifty-dollar an acre.”

“That’s why you left. Came looking for cheap land. You got it right here.” Hezekiah tossed the rest of his berries toward the river. “That’s my best offer. Think it over.”

Obie laughed so hard that his wagon rocked. “I’d bust a gut before I sold you a cup of my dirt.”

Susannah fought tears all day, and even after going to bed, she still could not forget the image of Hezekiah turning away and disappearing along the survey line to catch up with Joseph and Mason. Whipped.

\* \* \*

That night, Hezekiah tossed, keeping them both awake. Finally, he raised on his elbow. Light from the dying campfire showed circles under his eyes, almost as dark as his beard. “Sometimes, when you want something so bad you can taste it, you have to maneuver your thinking to keep from feeling whipped when you can’t make it happen. Right now, I’m maneuvering, taking care of what’s at hand, and fretting about my town later.”

Maneuvering. Is that what he did when she told him about her baby? Worry about it later? Perhaps he would act like a future father if she showed that she was more like the other women. Suddenly she blurted, “Why don’t I help widen the trail? Get to our land quicker.”

He clasped her hand. “You’ve endured more than any woman should. I don’t want to add to your burden.”

“Oh,” her voice caught, and her mind swirled in confusion. Had he been trying to protect her all this time? “Well, at least I can get the wash done. We’ll celebrate reaching our land by wearing clean clothes.”

“Ha! That’d be a party. Clean drawers and shirt will make me a new man.”

*Drawers.* Susannah fingered her ring, remembered seeing Philippe in his drawers.

When Susannah woke at daybreak, Hezekiah was already wolfing down the leftover stew.

“May be late getting back. I’m staying with it until we lay the stake at our property line.” He leaned close, his breath against her cheek. “Take care.” Then he hurried into the woods behind Jacob and Mason.

She thought for an instant that he was going to kiss her. Would she have minded?

“My goodness. Your husband hated leaving you. Appears he’s worried about your. . .condition.” Mary Crankston called, her tight little smile showing from beneath her black bonnet. She was standing supervising the goings on from her rocking chair beneath the big cottonwood.

Embarrassed over Mary alluding to her expanding middle, implying Hezekiah’s intimacy, Susannah said, “Yes, well, he’s got so much on his mind.”

“Appears he has reason to take better care.” She snickered and cupped her hand over her smile. “Makes me wonder if he gave you that beautiful ring?

Susannah covered the ring with her left hand, ignoring Mary’s reach for a closer look. “Oh, no. I lost the one who made it.”

“How sad! No wonder you’re so protective. It’s fine work.”

“Yes, I’m blessed. Well, I must start my wash.” She fled, glad to have an excuse to escape the nosey woman.

Tucking Philippe’s ring in the tray of her trunk, she grabbed a large chunk of lye soap and gathered their clothing, stiff from weeks of sweat. She had watched women do their wash yesterday, beating the clothing with rocks. Even Mama Jess had a rub board. As she plunged the smelly garments into the river, dirt and dye squished from her riding habit, turning the water a sickly green. She had never handled a man’s underwear, and Hezekiah’s were so unpleasant that she clenched her teeth and pounded the rock into the nasty smell until her arms ached.

When Lizzie tucked her skirt under her apron and waded into the river, Susannah wanted to cry with relief. She watched the strong black hands clutch the garments, wringing each one until it looked almost dry.

They had finished spreading the wash out on bushes when shouts and the rattle of wagons announced the arrival of Mexican freighters*.* The train moved down the bank toward the river while children stared at drivers tilting their sombreros and offering greetings in Spanish.

Obie flagged each freighter, trying to find one willing to speak English. He kept repeating, “You got whiskey from Natchitoches? Give you a good price.”

To the man, they nodded and acted as though they did not understand.

Obie’s face turned as red as his nose, and he bellowed, “Ya gotta know English! You been in Natchitoches, for God’s sake! I know ya got whiskey.”

It was a sad spectacle. The Mexicans waved Obie away like swatting at gnats while he harangued them to the water’s edge. When the last cart disappeared into the woods on the far bank, Susannah did not try to suppress the tinge of satisfaction watching Obie stomp, cursing back to his wagon.

The repulsive man didn’t belong in this place where survival depended on bone-breaking work. And she didn’t either. Her whole body hurt after washing only a few garments. Every move she made reminded her of a future of endless toil. Even with Lizzie to relieve her, nothing had prepared her to live like these people. She wondered if their dreams of a better life, something she had never worried about, drove them to work from before sunrise until pitch dark. Determined not to appear as ill-suited for this life as Obie, she followed Lizzie’s instructions, from grinding corn for bread to the best spot to place pots over the fire.

It was well after dark before Hezekiah returned. He shook his head as she rushed to meet him. “It’ll take one more day.”

“I thought you’d finish today.” She didn’t try to hide her disappointment.

“Surveying’s a lot slower than I realized. Sorry to disappoint you.” He accepted a bowl of leftover stew and cornbread and sank onto a log near the fire.

When they retreated to their wagon, she tried to discern his reaction as she told him about Obie’s fury over the failed liquor deal. Perhaps he was too tired to gloat. Sighing, he said, “Obie tried to bribe my boys to clear his land instead of helping cut the road.”

“I hope they refused!”

“Absolutely. Maybe mid-winter, when the work lets up, they can hire out. Till then, Obie’ll have to manage.”

“You’d let them work for him?”

“Sure. So long as he pays.”

She wondered what drove this man she had married. One minute he was hard as nails; the next, he seemed soft-hearted. Or soft-headed.

\* \* \*

The next day seemed no different from the last, except for her body rebelling with every move––milking, churning butter, and keeping the fire going under the wash pot of beans. Surely, she would eventually get hardened.

The camp had grown quiet as each family reached their grant along the trail and moved children and wagons to their new homesites. The sun no longer burned with unrelenting intensity as she followed Lizzie through the endless animal chores and food preparation. Indeed, she welcomed cooling shadows as the last rays of light disappeared over the hill beyond the river.

When lantern lights bobbed through the trees, she hurried to meet Hezekiah. Joseph and Mason followed him into the clearing.

“Drove in that marker, Susannah. It’s a fine piece of land. Even has a natural spot for a boat landing.”

She swung onto his arm. “So, we go tomorrow?”

“Gotta start the cabin first, give you a place to sleep.” He turned to the ferryman who had spent every day watching the activity from his perch atop the beached raft. “Think you could take my outfit downriver? Five wagons and necessities?”

Eli Fulton sprang to his feet. “I can.” His grin in the lantern light exposed one front tooth yellowed with tobacco stains. “River’s not running very strong. Reckon I’ll need ten-dollar apiece.” He rubbed at his back. “Be a lot of poling for me and the missus to get back upriver.”

“I’ll have the first wagon and my boys ready at daybreak.” Hezekiah turned back to Susannah, watching the transaction from the top of the hill. “I’ll send two men with the road-cutting crew. It’s dwindling because the families quit when they reach their property.”

That night, Susannah was too tired and sore to sleep. If Hezekiah stirred, even a little, she would ask him where he stored the laudanum. But the man did not move. She stroked her baby to calm its stretching and gazed at stars forming a great bowl over the earth. They still blanketed the sky when she woke to the rattling of wagon traces and snorting mules.

Lizzie moved around the fire, managing iron skillets filled with cornpone that the men slathered in honey.

By first light, Hezekiah had readied a wagon for the trip. He directed two reluctant men to stay behind and finish chopping the route through the forest. The others waited, suspiciously eyeing the rickety raft. Before stepping aboard, Hezekiah shouted, “I’ll help Mason lay out the site and get work started on our cabin before I head back.”

She watched the wagon’s white bonnet glowing in the early morning light as it moved slowly around the bend in the river and disappeared. Turning back with renewed hope of finally settling into a home, she spent the morning doing chores.

In early afternoon, Lizzie started into the woods carrying a bucket. “Muscadine grapes is fat and ripe. Make mighty fine wine in about six weeks.”

“I’ll help,” Susannah rummaged in the wagon for another bucket. “I love to pick grapes.” She quickly realized that she could barely lift her arms to reach for the berries, and her fingers were soon a deep purple. By the time Lizzie decided they had enough, Susannah wondered if she would ever look at another grape.

She stirred the sugar-water mixture while Lizzie––sweat running down her cheeks––repeatedly plunged the cutter into the big crock to mash the grapes. She finally dumped the mush into the water, added yeast, and covered the mixture with cheesecloth. Dusting off her hands as if that would rid them of the stain, Lizzie said, “Stir ever day for a week. Then strain and close tight ’til we got wine.”

“You cook as good as Mama Jess.” As soon as she spoke, the longing for home brought stinging tears.

Lizzie nodded. “I miss my mama, too.”

Susannah watched the girl, who was really a child, turn quickly to the grinder and, keeping her head down, prepare more corn for their supper.

After the moon rose big and orange, Susannah and Lizzie sat together, dangling their feet off a sandstone boulder jutting out over the water. Crickets hummed, and a slight breeze brushed against their faces.

“Missus? I been needing to thank you. I loved them LeBlanc girls like they was my little sisters, but Percy’s different.”

“I knew you loved him.”

“Yes’um. You know about love.” Lizzie kept her head down, but Susannah could see the wicked smile on her face.

Susannah sighed. “Yes. And I know how it hurts when you can’t have the one you love.”

“You do?”

“Oh, look! They’re coming ’round the bend.” Susannah scrambled to her feet, surprised at how relieved she felt to see them. Then smiling, she watched Lizzie run to the water’s edge, bobbing on her toes as Percy leaped ashore with the mooring line.

While Hezekiah helped pull the vessel onto higher ground, he shouted over his shoulder, “It’s a great spot, Susannah. Can’t wait for you to see it.” He followed her up to the campfire, which still glowed under a pot of beans. He motioned for Percy to help himself, dished a bowl for Bramble, and settled on a log. “Our cabin’s on a high bluff; no worry about flooding. Found three springs. Water, sweet as you ever tasted. The land slopes down to good growing soil. Lots of trees. Perfect size for cabins.”

“So, I can go tomorrow?”

“I’ll make two trips. Take you on the last one if the boys have finished the roof. Thunderheads are off to the northwest. I want you settled before the rain comes in.”

When they settled down, Hezekiah pulled off his boots and groaned. “Soon as we get the land cleared, I’m switching to Tonkawa moccasins.”

Lying beside him, listening to him recount the number and kinds of trees, and where they were laying out the slave quarters, she kept moving, not finding a position to ease her arms and shoulders.

“You’re sure jumpy. You hurting?”

“I’m not used to washing. I mean in a river.”

“Let me rub your shoulders.” He ran his hand along her arm.

“No, no. Sleep’s the best medicine.” Rolling over stopped the warmth of his touch.

The night grew quiet, and Lizzie’s soft bursts of laughter carried across the darkness.

“Listen to that. Never thought I’d be jealous of some damn slaves.” Hezekiah turned his back to her.

\* \* \*

Morning came too fast. Susannah scrambled to gather eggs, but her body cried out with every step.

When Hezekiah finished loading, he came to her, squeezing her shoulder. “I asked Mary Crankston to let you use Joseph’s rocker today. You need to rest. In the shade.”

“But she’s so nosy. Sits there all day. Watching.”

He laughed and bent close to whisper, “She can see, sweetheart. Your arms are long and graceful, but that baby fills your dress.”

“I should have let out the seams.”

He leaned close and murmured, “Please rest.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mary standing next to her wagon. Watching, of course.

“Good morning!” Mary’s voice pealed across the camp. “Join me under that big cottonwood. We can see everything that’s happening from there.”

*A perfect place for you––watchdog.* Susannah glanced one last time at Hezekiah, gentling the mules as the wagon clattered onto the raft.

When she noticed that Mary had a basket of knitting, Susannah went to her trunk for her mother’s stowed needles and ball of yarn. Glad to have the knitting to keep from looking into Mary’s piercing little black eyes, she said, “I must thank Joseph for sharing his rocker.”

“My goodness, I should have offered the rocker days ago. I watched you struggling with that wash. Then all that berry picking and winemaking.”

“It was a chance to take advantage of days off the road.” She was not about to admit that it was her first-time washing clothes.

“Your dear husband doesn’t think you need to do all that work.” Mary pursed her lips and ducked her head as if she were embarrassed. “He adores you. Asked me to insist that you rest today.”

“I didn’t realize––”

“Sweet girl! Even my Joseph can see it. He said every time he needed to talk to Hezekiah, he was gone, riding down the line to check on you.” She giggled behind her hand. “My husband even suggested I ask you to ride alongside my wagon to keep Hezekiah from having to go so far.”

“Oh, Mary! I don’t recall all that attention.” She began thinking of the times Hezekiah came along the line. He always smiled at her; sometimes, he stayed with her for a while. “It’s his nature to watch after everybody.”

Mary leaned her head back and gazed into the thinning branches of the cottonwood. “There’s not a woman in the world who wouldn’t love that care.”

Susannah couldn’t think how to end this conversation. Feeling weepy over the thought of Hezekiah caring all that much, she knotted the yarn and cast off the first stitch in her baby’s blanket.

“Did you and your mother knit together?” Mary asked.

Susannah shook her head and laughed softly. “Afraid not. She tried many times to get me to knit or do needlepoint, but I preferred my harp.” Susannah bit her lip. “Now, I wish I’d spent more time with her.”

“I always wanted a daughter.” Mary stopped knitting. “I already miss the squealing children running along the riverbank, jumping in, and wading across.” She exhaled softly, “It’s hard sometimes. I lost three.”

Startled, Susannah turned to see the rosy little face twisting. “I’m so sorry, Mary. I had no idea––”

“I never made it past six months. Looking at you brings back every one of the times.”

Susannah reached for Mary’s tiny hand gripping the knitting needles. “I can’t imagine losing three babies.”

“It’s been five years. And no more babies. Suppose Joseph has given up. He wanted boys.” Her red-rimmed eyes gazed off toward the hills. “We left three graves. Came to start over in Texas.”

Unable to find words of comfort, Susannah leaned forward. She needed to make up for all the times she had avoided Mary. “Will you help me when my time comes?”

Mary threw up both hands, “Oh, my dear! I’ll be honored.”

“My mother told me to find women to help. I’m glad I found you.”

“I’ve helped a lot of women get through it. Some sail right along. Others don’t do so good. Don’t you worry. I know some methods.”

Susannah smiled to herself, knowing that was the truth.

“Obie’s wife’s trying not to lose her baby. That’s why those girls have her bedded down in that wagon. She’s lost six.” Mary had started knitting, the needles clicking as she talked. “Her husband’s so mean. Only lets his slave girls help. She needs the comfort of white hands.”

*White hands?* Susannah laid a protective palm over her baby’s movement.

Chapter Seventeen

October 1821

In mid-afternoon, Susannah jumped from the rocking chair when Hezekiah came into view, standing near the front of the raft, poling vigorously against the current. As the craft neared, Percy leaped ashore with the rope, swinging one arm around Lizzie as the two tugged the anchor line to the cottonwood.

“You ready to go to your new home?” Hezekiah shouted, his face blazing red beneath his big hat.

“Absolutely!” Susannah realized she was bouncing on her toes, as eager as Lizzie, and quickly composed herself.

Hezekiah dragged the loading ramp into place and turned around, his arm encircling her waist. “We’ll take our wagon loaded with the bed and your trunk on this trip.” He pulled her against him as they walked up the slope. “That dress is pretty.” Then he was gone, hitching the mules, leaving her breathless.

The goodbyes felt chaotic. Eli Fulton and his wife yelled directions for boarding. Mary burst into tears, clinging to Susannah like they were lifelong friends; even Obie and his slave girls came to watch the launch.

After settling Rose on the raft and anchoring herself with a firm grip on their wagon, Susannah felt limp with relief. Finally, the journey was coming to an end. The raft jostled slowly into the current.

“Look! They’re waving.” Eli pointed a crooked finger at settlers along the tree-lined waterfront, shouting like friends they’d not seen in a long time. Perhaps the exhausting trip had created a community, even if Hezekiah didn’t get his town.

Finally, Hezekiah called out from the front of the raft. “Those are our men up on the bluff. They’ve cut the trail almost to our place. Watch for a cloth tied to a stick.” Hezekiah grinned, “I saved part of that skirt you tore off for Lizzie’s bandage. Green’s the color of our property line.”

“I like that.” She swallowed to keep back tears as Hezekiah pointed to a hill where a piece of her riding habit fluttered in the late afternoon breeze.

He yelled, “See our cabin through those trees?”

Susannah spotted raw logs tucked under towering live oaks and cottonwoods. Sandstone rocks at one end formed a partially built chimney. An opening with no door stood beneath a narrow porch roof. Her spirits sank. It looked like slave quarters.

Bramble was the first to welcome them as the raft sloshed against the rocky bank.

“What do you think?” Hezekiah reached for her hand. “Let me lift you into the wagon for the trip up the hill.”

“No, no, I want to walk.” The road, mere ruts cut between vines and twisted trees, wound to the top of the rise. Each step upward pulled at her strength.

“Our land’s rich, Susannah. A little rain, and we’ll have a good corn crop by spring. The bottomland ought to yield fine cotton.” His face, lined with dirt and fatigue, looked radiant. He pulled her under his arm as they approached the cabin where Mason and the others––slaves who looked as dirty and worn-out as Hezekiah––waited for her approval.

*I can’t let them see my disappointment.* “You’ve done a masterful job. You’ve built it so quickly.”

“It’ll do ya,” Mason said. “Finish the roof tonight. You’ll be dry when rain comes.”

Percy had driven their wagon up from the river and helped the others unload.

“We’re heading back,” Hezekiah said. “I’ll bring one wagon in the morning. If the new road’s in good enough shape, I’ll have Percy christen it with our last wagon.”

“Stay here tonight. You’re too tired to pole upriver.”

He touched her cheek. “I like that you worry, but I can’t stop until it’s finished.”

He turned and trotted––a man driven by dreams––down the path to the waiting raft.

She stepped through the cabin door onto the soft floor that smelled of fresh earth. One open window––no glass––lit the room, and beams of light creased between log walls. The rope bed, already unloaded, was not as wide as the space under the wagon, and her trunk took up most of the opposite wall.

Mason placed a washtub before the half-finished fireplace. “We got a good fire out back. I’ll heat some water if you’re wanting some.”

“Please! First, would you show me the springs? Hezekiah said the water’s plentiful.”

“I’ll take you to the granddaddy up the hill. There’s a little one out back. When we make this place bigger, it’ll send water right into your root cellar.”

“So, you’ll make this cabin larger?” Relief erased some of her weariness.

“Mmm, suppose.” Mason grabbed a bucket and two kettles off the front porch and led the way around back and up the gentle slope into a damp forest. Each step crushed leaves that gave way to ferns draped over a rocky outcrop—a steady stream of water pooled at the base. “We laid the rocks for this bench to hold our buckets. That pool’s deep enough to keep cream cool,” Mason said.

“It’s lovely here.” Susannah cupped her hands and scooped a drink. “At home, we have a cistern because the Red River is so salty. This tastes wonderful.”

“Does for a fact. We been drinking like it might disappear.” Mason pointed to the slaves gathered around a fire blazing down the hill. “The girls got things cookin. I’ll set the kettles to heating while you eat. Hez said you ain’t to lift nothing.”

*Why did she want to cry?* “That’s so kind.”

One of the females called, “We got cornpone and fried squirrel ’bout ready. You eat a bite?”

“Oh, yes. I’m starving.”

Mason pointed to rough logs stacked a few yards beyond the fire. “Those are for our quarters. Boys start building on them come daybreak.”

Susannah walked toward the group. When they jumped up and moved back, she realized she had never eaten with the workers, not even Philippe. “I . . I’ll take my plate to that bench on the front porch––”

“I’ll bring your water,” Mason spoke, clearly relieved that she wouldn’t stay.

Venus, the large female who had helped with all the meals on the trail, smiled as sweet as Mama Jess. She extended a plate filled with steaming cornpone and squirrel. Then, nodding at Susannah’s belly, she said, “I’m gettin *me* a baby ’bout January”

*So, everybody has noticed.* “They’ll be playmates,” Susannah blurted. Then felt embarrassed in the awkward silence until Mason, wearing a proud smile, stepped to the woman’s side.

Susannah stammered, “Ahh, Mason! Congratulations.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Feeling like an intruder, she hurried up the hill and settled on the bench next to kitchen implements. Suddenly ravenous, she ate every bite of the squirrel and wished for more cornpone.

After Mason brought the hot water, she bent over the tub to wash her hair. When she sank into the still-warm water, it occurred to her that she would have to step on the loose dirt to reach the bed. How long would it take for the earth to pack hard?

The soft linen wedding sheets felt like home where Mama Jess would remove the tub and gather the soiled clothing. Susannah ached for the warmth of that big hand pressing into her back and the soothing whisper, “Sweet dreams.”

A gentle breeze tickled the hair against her cheek, and the moon climbed beyond the tree tops. She wondered how far up the river Hezekiah had gone and hoped the moon, so bright that it faded the stars, would light his way.

\* \* \*

The hands had a fire going down the hill when Susannah woke. Moving quickly in the morning chill, she slipped on her work dress while forming a plan to make the cabin livable. As soon as she stepped out the door, Mason met her with a tin mug of coffee and cornpone. “Did the cabin sleep good?”

“Oh, it did.” She took the plate. “Will you show me how to chink the cracks between the logs? There’s no reason to have a fireplace if the cabin is windy as a barn.”

“Figured Lizzie would do the chinking.”

*One more chore for Lizzie.* “I’ll probably finish before she gets here.”

Mason nodded. “Yes’um. I’ll bring clay from the river. Mixed with moss, it makes good chink.”

The hours dragged as she drove an iron scoop into the thick mixture and spread it between the cracks, only to discover that light continued to creep between the logs. Mason made no comments about her progress. Instead, he hummed a mournful bass and kept up a steady pace, hoisting rocks and mud up the ladder to finish forming the chimney.

The place felt alive with activity. Men bellowed commands as trees crashed, ripping holes in the forest. The zing of axes reduced the towering giants to naked logs that mules dragged to the site for the slave quarters. The women, their powerful arms bulging, walked behind plows. Their voices rose above the din as they shouted to reluctant mules cutting new furrows between downed trees. Rain had not come.

By noon, Susannah had flung her bonnet aside and sweated through her dress. She shoved her sleeves above her elbows to keep the sticky mixture off her clothing. When the blessed time came to stop for jerky and cornpone, she realized combs had come loose, allowing strands of hair to sweep into her work. Using the back of her hand to shove away stray wisps of hair, she gritted her teeth, determined not to dwell on this primitive existence.

Bramble’s barking announced the arrival before Hezekiah called from the river. She started to run, then held back and followed the workers who rushed to help Lizzie up the hill with her pigs. The cows balked a bit before they stepped ashore.

“Well, hello!” Hezekiah said as he took off his hat and surveyed Susannah. “Looks like you’ve put in a good day’s work.”

She drew herself up. “I’ve been chinking the gaps in our walls.” She was not about to show fatigue. “We’ll be a lot warmer when winter comes.”

Hezekiah ran his hand around her shoulder and almost carried her up the hill. “Maybe Lizzie and I can help you finish.”

“First, I’ll bring you some leftover lunch,” she said.

While they ate, Eli squatted, anchoring his skeletal frame against a big cottonwood. “Me and Josey been making plans. Until the rains come, we’ll be poling down to the old Atascocito Road. Make a few trades with Mexicans heading south. Obie ast me to get whiskey for his tavern.” Eli’s shoulders jerked like he was chuckling without making a sound.

“Does Obie think you’ll have better luck with the Mexicans?” Hezekiah asked.

“Helps to speak their tongue.” Eli crumpled his cigarette into the dirt and stood, “Also helps if you don’t cuss at ’em.”

“How far you figure to that crossing?” Hezekiah moved close.

“Tolerable ways. Near forty mile. If we get orders, may do a little trading ’til the river comes up enough for the ferry.”

Hezekiah picked up a rock and tossed it in the river like a man asking a casual question. “Suppose you could scout around, see if anyone’s settling in that area?”

Not convinced of his motive, Susannah waited until Eli and Josey poled their raft out into the river before she asked if he was planning another move.

“No, no! Just keeping abreast of things,” he called over his shoulder as he went to help Lizzie corral the pigs into a boggy area for a temporary pen.

Susannah went back to filling the cracks, but she did not stop wondering if her husband might be dreaming up another plan.

\* \* \*

By nightfall, they had finished chinking, and Mason had completed the chimney. The cabin still looked like slave quarters. Susannah sat, exhausted, on the bed and watched Hezekiah light a candle that created a dull stain of shadows.

Eager as a child at Christmas, he went to the porch and returned with implements––a shovel, tongs, and a Dutch oven. Reaching to the back of the hearth, he pulled forward the arm of an iron crane. “I asked Mason to put this in.” He slipped the pot handle into an *S-*shaped hook to demonstrate how easy it would be to move the crane in and out over the fire.

“Mama Jess has one of those in her kitchen.” Susannah had never watched her maneuver it, though. After her father sold Sarah, Susannah lost interest in cooking and never returned to the kitchen.

“Well!” Hezekiah rubbed his palms together as if about to make an announcement. “I’ll chop the wood in the morning. Meantime, I’m taking my first real bath since our wedding.”

He grabbed the kettles, and she heard his soft whistle as he headed to the spring. To avoid being in the room while he bathed, she slipped on her gown, wrapped in a shawl, and went out to the porch bench.

Hezekiah’s spirits seemed even higher when he returned, clutching buckets and hot kettles. She imagined him undressing as he sang in a boisterous baritone:

*Come and listen to my ditty, all ye jolly hearts of gold,*

*Lend a brother tar your pity who was once so stout and bold;*

*But the arrows of God Cupid, alas! Have made me rue,*

*Sure true love was ne’er so treated as I am by scornful Sue.*

She was not scornful Sue, but had she been tempting him? Making him think she wanted a marriage bed? He kept singing, taking forever before he stepped on the porch in his drawers and dumped the tub of water down the hill.

“You ready for bed?” He had shaved off his beard, and his hair, combed into wet waves, dripped on his bare shoulders. The pale flesh made his chest look extra broad and his nipples sharp as raisins.

She brushed past him into the cabin and sat on the bed, her gaze on the empty hearth.

“Well, I guess it’s the floor for Bramble and me.” It sounded like a question. When she did not respond, he said, “Least we got the Tonkawa hide.”

“Oh, and take my pillow.” She extended it without looking up.

“Then . . . good night.” He blew out the candle. Even with Hezekiah close enough to touch, the sudden silence in the tiny cabin made her feel totally alone.

Chapter Eighteen

Late November 1821

Hezekiah was so determined to complete the slave quarters and be ready for spring planting that he drove everyone from first light to well after dark. He insisted the women plow fields still pocked with tree stumps and prefaced every directive with, “Got to beat the fall rains.” Susannah was part of his plan. He turned the earth outside their cabin in great long rows, leaving the weeds for her to pull and plant a winter garden of onions, kale, and turnips.

When they first arrived, Hezekiah started tending the fire, raking the hot ashes to the back of the hearth at night and covering them with his mother’s old copper curfew. One morning, as Susannah sat on the side of the bed watching him separate the embers and lay on fresh wood, he pointed to the snapping fire beginning to catch. “This is something you could do while I bring the mules up. We’re starting the barn today.”

“Why not ask Lizzie? Mama Jess always took care of the fires.”

Hezekiah looked up, arching one eyebrow. “You want your slave to come into this little cabin while we’re asleep and warm the place for you?”

Embarrassed, she said, “That’s a little silly, isn’t it?”

“Believe so.”

“Go wake up your ol’ mules. I’ll tend the fire and start breakfast.” As she bunched her dress under her apron to keep it out of the ashes, she smiled, pleased at how quickly she had learned to cook over the hot coals. Watching her sweat sizzle on pots dangling from the iron crane made her think of Mama Jess doing slave work.

When Hezekiah returned, she set the biscuits––browned just right––and the gravy––rich and creamy as Sarah’s–– before him and watched as he devoured it all. Finally, he sopped his plate clean and grinned. “That was mighty fine.”

His words lifted her spirits all day as she dug determined weeds in the scraggly garden and gritted her teeth to wring a chicken’s neck.

That night, thunder rolled, and wind blew cold air under the door, setting it to thumping on its leather hinges. With each flash of lightning, Susannah could see Hezekiah and Bramble on the floor, huddled together under a wool blanket. Finally, shame forced her to whisper, “Hezekiah, it’s too cold on that dirt. I’m making room in the bed for you.”

After what seemed like a long time of constant crashing of thunder and thrashing of limbs against the roof, Hezekiah said, “We’re fine right here.”

In the sudden stillness, Susannah pulled the quilts over her head. The storm had passed without a drop of rain, and cold settled over the cabin.

\* \* \*

When Susannah woke, Hezekiah had already draped the buffalo hide over hooks near the door and had a fire blazing in the hearth. “I’m going to the quarters. The fireplaces aren’t finished. Need to make sure they get the doors and windows covered.”

“Since you beat me to laying the fire, will you return for breakfast?”

“I’ll eat with them.” He was out the door.

The fire blazed in the hearth, but she could not feel its warmth. Hezekiah would never ask, but it was clear he wanted her to forget his wedding night promise.

Susannah had barely dressed when Lizzie arrived with a bucket of cream. “It’s laid over since yesterday and got cold. May take a spell to get it churned.”

“Let’s have some coffee with a dab of that cream,” Susannah said. “Give you and the milk time to warm up before I start churning.”

Lizzie scrunched up the collar of a stiff coat that was large enough for a man. “Obliged, Missus, but I got chickens to feed and pigs to slop ’fore them rains come.”

Loneliness closed in as Susannah watched the girl scurry toward the chickens still cooped in the wagon. Lizzie would never be her friend. It had been different growing up with Sarah. They had not known the difference. Lizzie knew she had been purchased.

Susannah set aside a little of the cream for Hezekiah’s coffee if he returned. Then she gripped the smooth handle of his mother’s old wooden churn and wondered about the woman who raised Hezekiah before he became driven to be a big planter.

Lizzie had been right; the chilled cream took until mid-morning to finally churn into butter. Susannah had just finished forming it in the mold when she heard the snort of a horse and a man call out. “Wish I’d knowed how far you was from civilization. I’d never taken this job.” Susannah hurried out the door as he dismounted and pulled off a cap revealing a weathered face she remembered from the docks in Natchitoches. “I’m Jethro Gardner, Missus. Sorry to see you under these circumstances.” He reached for a leather folder in his saddlebag. “This here’s mostly for your husband.”

Hezekiah came around the house, trailed by the workers, curious to see a visitor. “What can I do for you?” He extended his hand—a man in charge.

Jethro Gardner turned his back to Susannah and handed an envelope to Hezekiah. “Only you get this. I’m to see that *you* read the letter. Mister LeBlanc says *she’s* to see the newspaper.”

Susannah’s heart thumped as she tried to imagine what he had meant by ‘these circumstances.’

Jethro Gardner extended a wrinkled *Red River News*. “This here’s the August issue.”

Susannah sank on the bench and opened to the front page:

***Louisa, wife of Jacob Mobley,*** *passed from this world on the morning of August 15. After a brief illness, a servant woman found her unresponsive. The gentle lady came to Natchitoches Parish as a bride and graced the community with her gala dinners and fine needlework. Her only child Susannah married one Hezekiah James and departed for Texas.*

Susannah stared at the words. If she read them again, they had to be different. A mistake. Her mother had been perfectly well when they said goodbye. She was going to come visit. Maybe get away from Father. Numb with disbelief, Susannah kept rereading the words. Then she became aware of Hezekiah’s arm squeezing her shoulder.

He stroked her hair back from her face and tried to slip the paper from her hands. “Why don’t you set this aside, take some laudanum, and lie down? Lizzie’ll make some tea.”

She thought of her mother taking laudanum for everything that wasn’t just right. “It won’t help. When I wake up, Mother will still be dead.” She looked at his face and saw the kindness, so different from the husband her mother had endured.

He lifted her from the bench. “Let’s go inside. We’ve got an audience out here.”

Jethro Gardner looked like a statue holding his hand over his heart. The slaves stood silent in a circle. Curious or concerned?

She started folding the newspaper when bold lettering made her freeze.

***$1,500 DEAD OR ALIVE***

***RUNAWAY–– MOBLEY PLANTATION***

***GOES BY PHILIPPE***

***BLACK SKIN, 6 FEET TALL***

***MAY HAVE RUN TO THE COMANCHES***

***SPEAKS ENGLISH, INDIAN, FRENCH, SPANISH***

Susannah crushed the paper against her chest and doubled over as the baby kicked in protest. “No! Dear God, don’t let it be.”

Hezekiah circled her in his arms and guided her inside to the bed. “Your mother loved you dearly.”

Susannah turned away, unable to look into the gentleness in his eyes, and whispered, “Yes, I was loved.” She cried as quietly as she could, allowing him to pull her head against the comfort of his shoulder, grateful he did not try to hush her. *Had they caught Philippe? Was he running in terror from the dogs?* She pulled away when she heard voices outside the cabin.

“Sounds like the neighbors have come to check on you.” Hezekiah’s fingers were tender, wiping tears from her cheek. “Want me to send them away?”

She shook her head. “I want to see that letter. That man had a letter. He said it was from Ezra LeBlanc.”

“LeBlanc’s offering to buy the place. You’ve had too much––”

She pulled away from him. “I want to see it, Hezekiah. Now!”

He kept shaking his head. “Please, no, Susannah. You don’t need to see it.”

“Now!” she grabbed the letter sticking out of his shirt pocket.

“Please don’t.” He folded his fingers over hers as she opened the unsealed pages.

*My dear Sir, please forgive this cruel intrusion on your happy state of matrimony. As you can see from the enclosed newspaper account, Mr. Jacob Mobley was butchered by his nigger cook. She took a knife from the hog-killing shed to gut him clean to his throat. Then in full knowledge of what lay ahead, she ripped herself from ear to ear.*

*The oldest boy, named Samson, came into town with the news. He was mighty beat up, so we figured there had been trouble before the killing.*

*Mr. Mobley operated a fine place. Cotton came in big this year. Please excuse my impertinence. As I feared waste of a good crop, I sent my boys to pick it clean. The Mobley hands, while coming around, were in no condition to go into the field.*

*My proposal, sir, is to purchase it all from you. When you are able, return to Natchitoches to chat freely about the price and arrangements.*

*This is all too much for Miss Susannah to know. Please protect her.*

*I tender this epistle with high esteem and respect.*

*Ezra LeBlanc*

Susannah held the sheet of paper between her palms. Staring into the dying embers in the hearth, she felt hollow, like the wind could blow right through her. Even squeezing her eyes shut, she could not erase the image of them sprawled on the kitchen floor––her father, bloodied and dead in his white drawers.

Hezekiah scooped the gourd into the water bucket and held it to her lips. She gulped the cool liquid and then rubbed the rest on her face to ease the burning in her eyes. Looking up, she said, “Mama Jess never let on about her hate for him. She had the gentlest touch.” Susannah’s voice caught. “I used to crawl on her lap and dry my tears against her big breasts.”

Hezekiah slipped his fingers through her hair that had fallen loose and pulled her head against his cheek. “I hate to leave you like this. I’ll get back as quick as I can.”

“Oh, Hezekiah! You can’t abandon everything to take care of my family affairs.”

“This is the best time with winter coming. Mason has most of the cabins finished. He’ll see that the barn and pens get built.”

They both jumped at the rap on the door. “We’re worried about you two. Can we help?” It was Mary, of course.

“Can you stand to let her in?” Hezekiah dipped more water.

“If we don’t open, she’ll knock it down.”

Most of the neighbors had gathered because Jethro Gardner had ridden through their property, spreading the word. They took turns gently embracing Susannah like a piece of fine porcelain to be handled––briefly––with care. She tried to respond to the mumbled words but drifted, lost in the sea of faces.

After everyone had offered condolences and waited in uncomfortable silence for more information that was not forthcoming, Mary said to Hezekiah, “You go right on back and take care of things. We’ll watch out for Susannah.”

“Appreciate that, Miss Mary. I’ll head out in the morning.” Hezekiah played the gracious host and herded the neighbors outside. After sending them home, he headed to the barn.

Ruby, who had remained silent in the background, ignored like a timid shadow, took Susannah’s hands. “Send Lizzie when it’s time. I’ve helped born plenty of babies.”

“It’s not due until mid-January.” Susannah reached to hug the dear woman and was surprised to feel Ruby’s bones.

“Rest until time.” Ruby squeezed Susannah’s hand extra hard.

“I’ve meant to come visit,” Susannah said, “I heard your cabin’s finished.”

Ruby’s smile made her sunken eyes light up. “I’ve cleared enough to get the plowing done.”

Watching Ruby ride away on her old mule, Susannah’s voice broke as she called, “We’re going to survive this wilderness.” Tears felt cold against her face, and when she turned back to the crude little cabin, she wondered if her words were true. At home, where it was supposed to be civilized, she imagined her mother lying among the pillows on her big bed. But this time, she was not asleep. Downstairs, her father and Mama Jess lay dead in their blood. And, dear God, where was Philippe?

\* \* \*

Hezekiah returned with a shovel. “I’m digging a hole to hide most of this silver I’ve been wearing.” Tossing aside his coat, he began moving the bed.

She watched his powerful hands grip the shovel and his back lean into the task as the earth yielded to his steady pace. “Won’t you need that money?”

He shook his head. “I’ll carry enough. This’ll be here for you.”

She wondered why she feared the future with this determined man in charge.

Before bedtime, Hezekiah stepped onto the porch and offered Jethro Gardner an extra blanket for the night.

Susannah called, “It’s too cold. Let him come inside.” In response to Hezekiah’s perplexed expression, she whispered, “I’ll share the bed with you.”

“Good idea.” Hezekiah quickly spread the buffalo hide for Jethro.

Lying in the cold bed, comforted by the warmth of Hezekiah against her back, Susannah felt caught in a briar of twisted emotions. This man she welcomed to her bed had no idea she was terrified for Philippe, aching for his safety. It seemed wrong to harbor secrets, yet she did not know how to make it different.

In the night, just like she’d done when they slept under the wagon, Susannah awoke with her body pressed against Hezekiah. Only this time, when she started to turn away, he held her and whispered, “Please stay.”

She allowed herself to relax in the comfort of his arms.

They both woke to Jethro adding logs to the fire. “Figured I’d warm this place up,” he said before going out to the privy.

Hezekiah stroked her cheek. “I can’t wait to get back to you.” His eyes searched her face, and his breathing quickened. Then he kissed her forehead and swung off the bed.

Chapter Nineteen

December 1821

Susannah packed Hezekiah’s old leather valise with ham and leftover biscuits, then hollow with dread for what lay ahead, she followed him into the yard. He took the reins from Mason and said, “Take care of things, buddy.” Then he turned and laid his palm against Susannah’s cheek, his eyes searching her face. In a husky voice, he said, “You want me to hurry back?”

“Yes,” she pressed into him, felt his hand move under her cape and stroke her back for one urgent moment, his lips crushing her hair. Then it was over, and he mounted his horse.

He looked down at Bramble, standing like a sentry, ready for the command to move forward. “You gotta stay, boy. Watch over our lady.” The dog inched forward as Hezekiah turned to leave, then dropped his head when Hezekiah raised his voice to demand the animal stay.

Susannah stroked the dog’s wiry fur and felt the weight of his body against her leg. Before Hezekiah and Jethro Gardner disappeared into the forest, Susannah called, “Please bring the old newspapers.”

Hezekiah turned in the saddle and said, “Newspapers?”

“I . . . I want to read about friends . . . getting married.”

He pulled up the collar on his wool coat and tipped his big planter hat. “Anything for you, my lady.”

A tinge of nausea forced her hand over her mouth as another lie threatened to rip her in two. She turned away and saw Lizzie standing on the path leading from the pasture, a milk pail in her hand—perhaps trying not to intrude.

“Woulda ’bout kill me if my Percy went off.” The girl’s lips puckered like she might cry.

Susannah remembered what her mother had said about slaves and Indians loving differently from white people. Her mother was wrong. Still, her forever absence carved an empty hole in Susannah’s chest.

Although she threw herself into chores—churning, weeding the garden, baking bread to send to the quarters––nothing erased her nagging grief. Bramble hovered like a shadow as though he knew she needed comfort. At night when Susannah crawled into bed, he settled against her feet. His devoted warmth could not erase the words in Ezra LeBlanc’s letter or remove the bold print in the wanted notice. She needed Hezekiah’s touch. When he returned, she would not be so distant.

\* \* \*

When Mary Crankston arrived astride a big grey mule, Susannah’s old dread at seeing the nosey woman dissolved with relief at the presence of a living soul. Before Susannah could find anything to serve as a mounting block, Mary threw her leg over the bulging saddlebags, dismounting as smoothly as a circus equestrian. “I’ve come for two nights. Thought we’d do some knitting.”

Almost giddy with relief over having company, Susannah ushered her guest into the cabin. “I’ve been knitting since Hezekiah left.” She did not add that when she withdrew the balls of yarn hidden in the trunk, Susannah had caressed each one as if it were a love note from her mother.

Mary’s eyes swept the room, lingering on two brass pots and a copper cauldron hanging from hooks alongside the hearth.

Feeling uncomfortable with the display of prosperity, Susannah said, “Those are wedding gifts.” She reached for the kettle suspended from the crane. “The water’s hot for tea.”

“Oh, my goodness, yes.” Mary continued to take stock––the Tonkawa hide and their only chair hung from wall hooks. “Dear me, I should have brought my rocker.”

“I’ve turned the bed into a settee.”

“And look at that crocheted coverlet.” Before perching in its midst, Mary ran her stubby fingers over the dainty raised flowers that had always covered Susannah’s bed.

“Mother was very handy with a needle.”Anxious to avoid Mary’s inquiry about her family, Susannah reached to take down the straight chair with the deerskin seat. “This belonged to Hezekiah’s father.”

“Well, *now* I know a chair is what Mister Crankston can make for you.”

Susannah laughed as she poured the tea. “Times are too busy for your husband to spend his energy on a chair.”

After tea, they had barely started knitting when Mary sighed deeply and said, “I wanted to come the very minute Hezekiah left you all alone, but Mister Crankston wouldn’t let me.”

Susannah let the knitting fall into her lap and said, “It wasn’t necessary, Mary. I was perfectly fine.”

“Well, I told Mister Crankston I couldn’t believe Hezekiah would leave you with that bunch of slaves. My word, that seems dangerous.” Mary’s eyebrows wiggled as she sat back and smoothed at her dress. “I worried you might be fearful after what your father suffered.”

*Stay calm!* Susannah covered her face with both hands.

“Oh my, oh my! I didn’t mean to upset you.” Mary leaned forward, clutching Susannah’s shoulders.

Trying to pull in enough breath to speak, Susannah lifted her head. “Hezekiah’s workers are as safe as family.” Her heart pounded so hard it shook her body. She had to end this talk, or this woman had to go. She reached for Mary’s hand and gripped it tightly between hers. “My father was a cruel man. He caused his own demise. I don’t want to speak another word about him.”

“Ohh,” The sound came like a soft wind. Mary’s eyes filled with tears as she pulled free, held a handkerchief to her nose and dabbed away tears. Finally, she whispered, “Never again.” After a moment, she patted Susannah’s knee. “May I stay and knit with you?”

Susannah nodded and picked up her knitting. “I need company, so long as you keep your word.”

Mary shook her head and struck a sad pose as she spread her black skirt and settled herself with her knitting. “I didn’t want to add to your burden when I first arrived, but poor Ruby needs help.”

*More gossip.* “Ruby’s ill?”

“Practically dead from work. Her good-for-nothing husband is still laid up. Claims that snake bite never healed.”

Susannah grew suspicious, lowered her knitting and stared at Mary. “Ruby told me they had finished their cabin.”

Mary sniffed. “It’s a lean-to shoved up against the hill with a brush roof. She’ll drown if the rains ever come.”

“I need to go see about her. Maybe take her some egg pudding.”

“Mmm. You make pudding?”

“A slave girl taught me.” *Why did I blurt that?* “I’ll make some while you’re here.”

Mary folded her hands as if in prayer. “As I head home, we can both call on Ruby.”

The time passed quickly, and Mary kept her word. Instead of a litany of questions, she shared the condition of every homestead. Obie had made no progress on his cabin, but he was trying to sell a few drinks out of his wagon. “He says Eli Fulton’s going to bring him a good supply of whiskey when he comes back upriver.” All the time Mary spoke, her knitting needles clicked. “The river’s so low, what with no rain, it’ll take Eli a while to return.” She stopped knitting and looked from beneath lowered lids. “As far as I can tell, Obie’s wife is still in a family way.”

She reported that the other settlers had finished their cabins and plowed for spring planting. “Your place has set the standard.” Mary hunched her shoulders. “Of course, you have all these slaves doing the work.”

Susannah tossed her knitting on the bed and stood. “Hezekiah works like he’s one of them. He’s out before dawn and doesn’t quit until after dark.” Embarrassed at her outburst, she sat back down and softened her tone. “Granted, we get much more done than a family with only one or two slaves.”

“Mister Crankston works along with his boy, too. He’s just not so ambitious as younger men.”

\* \* \*

On the morning Mary planned to leave, Mason saddled Rose and brought up Mary’s mule. “You be back ’fore dark?”

Susannah laughed. “Did my husband tell you to watch over me?”

The twinkle in Mason’s eyes was visible despite his brushy beard. “I’m not to say, ma’am.”

Surprised at how pleased she felt, Susannah whispered, “I’ll not breathe a word.” She slipped her foot into Mason’s cupped hand and settled in the saddle.

Bramble refused to remain at home. He trotted alongside Rose like he was the guardian. Susannah wondered if Hezekiah had instructed the dog as well.

“It’s shocking how close to your property Ruby and Preston Chambers built their place,” Mary said. “It’s just yonder through the trees. Like being near to you might rub off.”

“It’s good to know she’s close if I need her.” Susannah was determined not to feed Mary’s critical nature. But, as the cabin came into view, she wanted to weep. It was indeed a lean-to, and the winds had wrecked the thatch. A big wash pot sat over a fire in front of the cabin. Ruby was coming down the hill, her arms wrapped around a tarpaulin stuffed with winter-dried grass. She froze like a deer, ready to flee. Then she dropped her bundle and stretched out her arms in welcome. “I was about to work on the roof.” She allowed Mary and then Susannah to hug her. “Tomorrow, some neighbors are coming for what I suppose is called a house raising.” Her laugh sounded shaky. “I’ve heard of a barn-raising . . . not a cabin––”

“Well, *I’ve* heard of a cabin-raising,” Susannah lied. “Fastest way to get it done.”

Ruby’s face flushed, obviously embarrassed by her living conditions. “Mister Crankston came yesterday. Said they’d been helping everybody up and down the road. Now it’s our turn.”

Mary said, “Well, I never heard anything about––”

Susannah gripped Mary’s shoulder. “I heard about it. Mister Crankston came to our place. Said they’re getting everybody settled before winter sets in.”

Mary batted her little eyes, and her hands fluttered as she perched like a blackbird on a log near the fire. “I wanted Susannah to bring you some of her delicious pudding. I thought we could enjoy the treat with you.”

Susannah offered a helpless shrug as she handed the bowl of pudding to Ruby. Mary had already had her fill.

Ruby smiled like she understood, then disappeared into the dark recess that looked like a shallow cave. She returned with three of her elegant wooden bowls. “Maybe you’ll tell me how you make it.” She scooped servings of the creamy yellow dessert.

“Next time you come, I’ll show you.” Susannah almost said they had an abundance of cream and eggs but thought better of it. No sense in pointing out Ruby’s lack.

Preston Chambers emerged from his lair like a bear out of hibernation. “She tell you the neighbors are gonna help finish this cabin?” He rubbed his hand through tousled hair. “It’s been a big job with this ailing leg. Appears we’re the last on the line to get help.”

Ruby stared at her bowl like she wanted to crawl into it.

“I hear it’s been a big community effort.” Susannah looked pointedly at Mary for confirmation.

“Oh, yes. I hear it, too.”

When they finally departed. Mary headed home to confront her husband about his plans, and Susannah determined to do her part.

She found all the hands gathered around a fire, eating stew. Mason rose quickly and came to head her off. Time after time, it was clear she did not belong in their circle. She explained the plight of the Chambers and then took a deep breath. “Mason, I know you’ve not finished all the cabins, but could I pay you to spend a day or two helping build the Chambers’ place? I don’t care about Mister Chambers. I’m thinking of Miss Ruby living in that hole in the hillside.”

Mason rubbed a big hand through his beard. “Hez wouldn’t mind me helping. It’s pay I ain’t sure about.”

“I’mthe one who’ll pay you. Not Hezekiah. I have money to spend as needed. Is a dollar a day fair since I’m pulling you away from finishing your houses?”

“It’s more’n fair, Miss Susannah.” He hunched his big shoulders and studied the tip of his boot. “The boys know what needs doing. Mostly chimneys.”

“You’ll do it, then?” Susannah reached for his hand, then pulled back, remembering she was no longer with slaves she’d known all her life.

“Load tools tonight. Be there by daylight.”

“I know Hezekiah would agree,” Susannah said.

“Probably.” Mason nodded and headed back to the big fire.

The following day, soon after Mason left, activity picked up at the quarters. They did not let up on the work all day. It was well after dark when she heard the wagon and rushed out to greet him.

“It’s built,” he laughed. “My boys coulda done it in half the time.”

“You’re wonderful! Will you help me move the bed? Your money’s under there.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Let’s wait till morning. I could use some supper and sleep.”

Susannah clapped her hands. “Yes. First thing tomorrow.” She returned to the fire’s warmth, more content than she had been since Hezekiah left.

\* \* \*

The next day, Susannah heard whooping coming from the quarters. Wrapped in her heavy stole, she ventured out. “Last cabin’s done!” Mason shouted when he saw her approaching. “You mind if we celebrate tonight?”

“Of course! You’ve built a village. And it’s almost Christmas.” She hesitated, thinking he might invite her, but all he said was, “Thank you, ma’am.”

She turned back to the cabin, then stopped and called out, “I just remembered the muscadine wine that Lizzie made. It’s a perfect time to enjoy it.”

“That’s for you and Hez.”

“Absolutely not! No telling when Hezekiah will return.” She tried to keep her voice from breaking and showing the anguish of this incessant waiting.

“Hear that? We gonna have some wine.” Lizzie squealed and grabbed Percy in a hug.

Susannah waved and turned away.

That night, they roasted the pig Percy had carried on the trail and drank the last gallon of Lizzie’s muscadine wine.

Susannah opened the shutter and listened to Mason’s banjo. Then someone began beating sticks on a pot, and the dancing started. It was the old Patting Juba that all the slaves at home had performed with such precision, slapping their shoulders, thighs, chests, and cheeks while stomping their feet in a thumping cadence. The familiar rhythm always clouded out the words:

*Juba dis and a Juba dat,  
Juba gone skin da yella cat.  
  
We grow de corn  
Dey give us de husk.  
  
We bake de bread  
Dey gib us de cruss.  
  
We raise de meat  
Dey give us de skin.  
  
Dat’s how dey take  
Us poor souls in.  
  
Juba dis and a Juba dat,   
Juba gone skin da yella cat.*

Aching for home and chilled by the night air, she closed the shutters and snuggled deep into her feather bed, allowing the noise to lull her to sleep.

The next morning, when it was light enough for her to see, Susannah bundled up and walked toward the site where the men were out in force, raising beams to the partially finished barn. Startled for an instant, she recognized a clean-shaven Mason. As he drew near, smiling the same mischievous grin as Hezekiah, she was captured by the set of his jaw. And the Roman nose. No mistake. Her stomach knotted as she remembered what Hezekiah had said about suspecting his pa. It was true; the men were brothers.

Mason rubbed his hand over his face in a hiding gesture. “We all shaved our beards once we built our own place.”

“Hezekiah did the same!” she blurted, then turned away, shaken.

All that day and into the night, her thoughts kept returning to Hezekiah holding his brother in bondage. How would he treat her baby, whose skin would surely be darker than Mason’s?

Chapter Twenty

Late December 1821

Susannah heard a sharp whistle and yelling from the river. “Anybody home? Can folks find a welcome port?” Hurrying to the bluff, she saw Eli Fulton and his wife Josey, who had pulled their raft onto the riverbank.

“Welcome back,” Susannah called.

Eli took off his greasy cap. “We been up to Obie’s place. Delivering whiskey before he changed his mind and forgot to pay. Heard the sad news, Miss Susannah.” Eli spat a rusty stream of tobacco juice onto the base of a live oak. “Me and the missus extend our sympathy.”

Her throat swelled as Josey Fulton slipped an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “Terrible times for you right now.”

Susannah nodded and blinked back tears. “I’ll make coffee while you unload.”

“No! No! We’ll set up a little camp on this high spot and build a cooking fire. We got bad news from Obie. Seems our ferry plans got blowed out.”

“Whatever happened?” Susannah saw the bitter disappointment in the squint of Eli’s little bird eyes.

“A feller named Robinson crossed last month. Settled on the west side. Aims to operate a ferry right where we intended.”

“Can’t you stop him?”

“Nope. It’s my own greed. Thought I’d make some extra money bringing whiskey to Obie. Shoulda stayed put. Held onto that spot ’til the rains come.”

“What are you going to do?” Susannah wondered if he planned to make a permanent home under the massive live oaks overlooking the river. Surely Hezekiah would return soon and handle it. She had no intention of looking out her front door at Eli’s campsite.

“We’re thinking on it for a time. Figure Hezekiah might have some notions.”

“I expect him any day.” As she started back up the hill, she wondered if that was true.

\* \* \*

It was another two weeks and a beautiful fall day when she heard the jangle of a wagon and Hezekiah calling, “Susannah, you home?”

She hurried out the door as he galloped into the clearing, several yards ahead of a wagon. He pulled the horse to a stop, dismounted, and walked toward her, staring like he couldn’t believe his eyes. “Is that you?”

She moved to him, smiling. “It’s me in all my glory.” Her hand lay across the bulging dress. She reached for his sleeve just as he turned away and pointed.

“You remember Samson?” he said. “And that’s his wife and baby.”

She watched in disbelief as the wagon approached. Samson looked larger, thicker in his neck and muscled in his shoulders. Had she been too wrapped in her troubles before leaving home to notice that Samson was no longer Philippe’s wiry younger brother? He had become a man. But, his former cheerful smile was distorted by a raw welt swelling his cheek and spreading to the back of his head.

“Miss Anna, this here’s Eva and our baby Philippe.”

*Philippe! Anna!* Susannah cupped her hand over her mouth to muffle her cry. She had forgotten that all the brothers used Philippe’s name for her. Swallowing, she gasped, “Come, let me see you.” She started to hug him, but he turned to help Eva and his baby down from the wagon bench.

Susannah smiled at the tiny mother and stroked the baby’s cheek. “Philippe would be so happy to have a namesake.”

“You suppose my wife and baby can go to the quarters?” He nodded toward the Negros who had rushed up the hill to greet Hezekiah.

“Come to our cabin,” Venus said as she moved beside Susannah.

“Sure ’nuff,” Mason said. “Go with Venus. Boys’ll unload the wagon.”

Determined not to cry, Susannah turned to Samson. “While they’re busy, please tell me what happened at home.”

Hezekiah frowned and pointed toward the porch bench. “Go on, Samson. She won’t let up until she hears it all.”

“Please sit with me.” She turned her back to the men unloading the wagon to shut out the distraction. “Tell me everything.”

Samson took off his big floppy hat and bent respectfully. “I’m sorry about your mama, Miss Anna. Soon as you left, the missus took to her bed. Mama Jess couldn’t get her to eat nothin’. Not even Mama’s venison stew. She’d take laudanum and go back to sleep.”

Susannah tightened the shawl her mother had knitted, longing for her comforting arms. “Mama Jess always cared for Mother.”

Samson had not looked directly at her. His hazel eyes, so different from Philippe’s, reddened. “I been killed over what she done. I knowed there’d be no way you’d forgive her.”

“There is nothing to forgive. You were there, Samson, when I discovered the truth about my father.” She could not bring herself to say, *our father.*

He bowed his head. “Yes’um.” He took in a deep breath. “I imagine you figured it out.”

“That’s why I need to know everything that led to their deaths.”

Samson bent forward, elbows on his knees, held his head, and kept his eyes on the ground. “After burying your mama up on that rise overlooking the river, folks drifted toward home.” Samson pulled a rag from his pocket and wiped tears that appeared to inflame the cut across his face. “’Bout that time, ol’ Boss Martin poled up in his keelboat back from Nawleans.”

“So, he told Father that Philippe didn’t go to New Orleans?” Susannah pressed her hands tight against her pounding heart.

“Pretty much like that. Mister exploded right there on the dock. First thing, he went to Philippe’s cabin.” Samson glanced at Susannah, then looked away. “Them books you and Philippe used to read was still lined up. Didn’t take Mister two shakes to figure it out.”

She clenched her fists. “He took it out on you?”

“All of us. Mister wanted to know where Philippe went. Nobody would tell. When he took out his whip, we got more certain.”

“The account I read sounded like he beat you horribly.”

“’Bout kilt some of the young’uns.”

“He did that to your face?”

“Yes’um and my back.” Still, Samson did not look at her.

“So, your mama Jess tried to defend you?”

“Drove him off with his old musket. Doctored us best she could. Went to fetch herbs in the kitchen. Guess he cornered her.”

“She must have been in a rage after what he did to their sons.”

Samson’s head jerked up, and he choked, “Don’t know about that. I got up to the kitchen, seen her dress was ripped off, and them both lay dead.”

Susannah reached for Samson’s shoulder. “I’m sorry we share such a terrible father.”

“Ah, Miss Anna, it don’t make us equal. You got your white life. And I got a whole ’nother life coming up for me.” He stood abruptly and rubbed the back of his neck. “It ain’t my aim to hurt you. Jest the same, I’m asking forgiveness for me and Mama.”

Her mind swirling with the bloody horror in that kitchen, Susannah could only shake her head and whisper, “I hold nothing against you or Mama Jess.”

He hesitated an instant before turning away. The words trailed him, “I hope you keep them feelings, Miss Anna.”

Startled by his sudden departure, Susannah reached for his arm. “The wanted notice? Did Philippe reach Béxar?”

“We figure he made it.”

Before she could say more, Hezekiah came out the door, his smile radiating happiness.

“Come look. You’ve been so busy with Samson you didn’t see what we unloaded.”

For some time, the baby had been so still that when she stood, the weight forced her to grasp Hezekiah’s arm. She stopped short as she entered the cabin. “You brought my bed! I’d forgotten how big it was.” Her eyes fell on a cast iron stove perched on short, curved legs.

“It’s the newest kind,” Hezekiah blurted. He looked like he would burst with delight. “You put wood in the bottom door, and the upper door opens to an oven.” He ran his hand across the top. “Your kettle and pots go right up here. No more tying your skirt back to keep it out of the fire.”

“I can’t believe it.” She touched the smooth iron surface that was already getting warm.

“I traded one of your father’s boys for it.”

“Traded? One of Samson’s brothers?” Her mind swirled. “Did Samson know?”

Hezekiah shrugged. “He knew it was best. The boy’s too crippled up to be much good in the field.”

“Crippled? From the beating my father gave him?” She felt like vomiting.

“Come on, Susannah. The boy can get along just fine as a driver for Ezra LeBlanc. Why don’t you sit down? You didn’t notice your harp chair.”

She stroked the image of the harp carved into the smooth mahogany and sank onto her mother’s needlepoint cushion. “I can’t imagine why Samson would come all this way, leaving his brothers in such bad shape.”

Hezekiah squatted before her and reached to stroke hair away from her face. “Sweetheart, I’m sure he loves his brothers, but he wants his freedom. He begged me to buy him and his family. Let him work off their bondage. That’s what he wanted most of all.”

“And you agreed?” She reached for his hands and pulled them to her lips. “Freedom?” It was what Philippe wanted as much as he wanted her.

“I made a good deal with LeBlanc for your father’s place. He paid a fair price and let me go through the house and bring things you’d want. Here, I’ll show you.” He went outside and returned with one of her mother’s plates. “I’ve got a barrelful of these dishes.”

“How did you know these were my favorite?” Susannah ran her fingers over the leaves and tiny yellow flowers. “When I was small, I cleaned my plate to uncover the June bug on that leaf.”

“I thought the colors looked like you, all soft. But, until I add onto this place, those dishes will have to sit outside in that barrel.”

She stood to embrace him but grabbed the sudden heaviness in her middle.

“What’s wrong?” He pulled her to him.

“I’m overwhelmed. So many surprises.”

“How about trying out your bed while I check on the quarters. I brought late Christmas gifts––pralines, shoes, bolts of cloth for the women, and shirts and pants for the men.” He fumbled in his breast pocket. “First, I got a little something.” His hands trembled as he extended a gold chain.

“Ohhh––”

“It came with a locket. I’ve seen you protecting your ring. Putting it on the mantel, even in the back of the wagon. Figured you’d keep it clean around your neck . . .like a locket.”

“Oh, Hezekiah!” Her heart ached as she pulled his fingers, holding the necklace to her lips.

“Let me fasten it for you.”

She slipped off Philippe’s ring and watched Hezekiah threading it onto the chain. The magnitude of her betrayal forced her to bow her head in shame as his fingers fumbled with the clasp.

“Now, it’s safe next to your heart.” He turned her around, his eyes resting on her swollen breasts. “That’s a perfect place.” He took in a long breath and pulled his gaze away. “Why don’t you see how good your bed feels? I’ll be back.” He held her at arm’s length. “May I sleep with you tonight?”

“Yes, Hezekiah. I’ve missed you.”

He bent and kissed her. “It’ll all be behind you soon. Then I want you for my wife.”

She sat on the edge of her bed, loving the feel of the ring against her breasts but tormented by her deceit. Life with Hezekiah would be good if she could put away her past.

Chapter Twenty-One

January1821

Susannah sat still, cradling her belly as anxiety mounted with the increasing pressure. When Hezekiah returned, she couldn’t keep the tremor out of her voice. “I think it’s time for the baby.”

His shoulders dropped, obviously not what he had planned for his first night back home. “I’ll get Venus and Lizzie.”

She wanted him to stay with her, but he was out the door like a startled buck. He must have hurried as Lizzie rushed in the door out of breath. “We asked Eva to come. She knows about birthing.”

Susannah gripped the edge of the bed, fear rising. She had never witnessed a birth, had avoided listening to the women in the wagon train talk about their suffering. If only her mother and Mama Jess were here. “I’m glad you came,” she whispered. “It hurts.”

Lizzie clasped and unclasped her hands. “I told Percy to go for Miss Ruby. You want him to get Miss Mary?”

“Please.” She wished Lizzie wouldn’t be so jumpy.

Eva ran her hand over the bed. “You got an old sheet? Save this pretty one. Mama Jess told me what needed doing.” Her lips puckered. “She be gone ’fore my baby got borned, but I remembered.”

*Mama Jess!* “Oh, yes, she packed an old sheet and rags in the bottom of my trunk.”

Eva turned to Lizzie who was still wringing her hands. “Bring us two cups of lard, Lizzie girl. Mama Jess say it makes borning easier.” Humming deep in the back of her throat, Eva sounded like Mama Jess as she arranged the bed and helped Susannah change into a gown.

Her eyes drifting to the door, Susannah asked, “Is Hezekiah on the porch?”

“He hightailed it.” Venus wiped the sweat off Susannah’s forehead with a cool rag. “Men loves to put it in, but they don’t want no part in it coming out.” Framed in an orchid tignon, Venus’s smooth black face looked radiant. Maybe she wasn’t afraid to have her baby.

When Lizzie returned with the lard, Eva said, “Mama Jess say massage that baby’s path with lard. Makes it stretch easier.” She leaned close, “Keep you from getting all tore up. You willing?”

Susannah whispered, “If it helps.”

As Eva worked, the women sang soft words Susannah couldn’t understand.

Venus said, “Eva girl, I want you with me when my baby comes.”

“Shore, if I’m still here.”

*Still here?* Susannah wanted to ask where Eva might go, but another contraction wiped away the thought. A fog of pain blurred the night despite Ruby’s arrival and the soothing feel of her hand on Susannah’s cheek.

“Did you give her laudanum?” Ruby spoke in a whisper.

“Yes ’um,” Eva said. “She have plenty,”

“Hear that wagon?” Lizzie voice trembled. “Believe it’s Miss Mary.”

Like a black storm cloud sweeping into the cabin, Mary started talking the instant she stepped in the door. “My goodness, you’ve got lots of help. Let me have a look. I see she’s using that lard. Glad she knew about that.” Mary bent her face near Susannah’s cheek. “Mister Crankston made you a rocking chair. It’s a tall one. Should fit you perfect.”

Susannah gasped a noise of appreciation as she doubled forward, pushing, pleading with her baby to come.

Finally, the shutter over the window showed cracks of light when Susannah, drenched in sweat and growing weak, found strength for one last howling push. Then relief. Falling back on the bed, she raised her arms for the wet little body to lay across her breasts.

“Look at that? Pull the candle closer. For sure, it’s a pickaninny. That’s a nigger baby!” Mary’s voice rose to a bellowing pitch. “What *is* this?”

“Ma’am. I need to tie the cord.” Eva’s voice was firm.

“Can you niggers explain this?”

Susannah tucked the blanket around the brown bundle and smiled at the green eyes that looked right her. “I’m your mama, Anna.” She pulled her bulging breast toward the tiny mouth. “Are you hungry?”

“I can’t stay here.” Mary stomped her foot and barked, “Put that rocker back in my wagon. You tell Hezekiah James that I want to speak to him.” After the door slammed shut, the only sound was Susannah’s soft cooing to her baby. She drifted, half-awake as the women, without speaking, gently cleaned mother and child. Anchored within deep feather pillows, she yielded to the tiny suckling pull, exhaustion carrying her into contented dreams of her baby Anna nursing.

\* \* \*

Susannah roused from deep sleep to heavy fullness in her breasts. She felt for the child and raised up to see Lizzie curled on the dirt in the corner. “Where’s my baby?”

“Ohhh!” Lizzie cried and leaped from the floor to kneel beside the bed. “He come and took her. Gave her to Eva and Samson. They done climbed in a wagon and left on that raft.”

“Gone?” Susannah shoved the quilt aside and lurched for the front door, screaming, “Anna! My *baby*!”

The Negros were spending their free Sunday morning working the soil in the garden plots spaced between their cabins. Susannah’s shrieks froze them in place, their mouths thin-lipped, their black eyes staring as Hezekiah caught her running barefoot toward the river, her gown streaked with blood. Scooping her into his arms, he carried her kicking and clawing back into the cabin. Susannah fought with the last of her strength. She bit his face, then kneed him in the groin when he bent to lay her on the bed. “What have you done with her?”

Clutching her arms, he said, “Listen to me, Susannah. This is best. You won’t have that burden, that memory any longer.”

“Burden!” she shrieked. “That’s my baby. You took my baby.”

“It would’ve never worked. You saw Mary’s reaction. It would be that way with everyone. The child would be mistreated.”

“Nooo! You stole my baby!”

“Susannah, Susannah. It needed to be. You’ll get over it. “

“Over it? I’m not a cow! You can’t take my baby, expect me to bawl a few days and forget.”

He tried to grasp her wrists. “Susannah, you won’t have to remember the horror of that rape every time you look at her.”

She slapped at his hands, then gritted her teeth and yelled, “It wasn’t rape. It was love. Passionate love for a man I couldn’t have.” Suddenly spent, she slumped, weeping.

Hezekiah gasped, drew back, blinking as if his eyes had clouded over and blinded him. Finally, he said, “Who?”

“Philippe. Samson’s brother.” She saw Hezekiah flinch as if she’d hit him, and she was glad. “Did you give Samson his freedom for stealing my baby?”

Hezekiah’s face twisted, a man in shock. “When he begged me to buy him, let him work for his freedom, I knew that was the answer.” He lowered his head, and his breath caught. “I thought it would solve the problem.”

She flung herself face down on the bed. “Why didn’t I tell you the truth? You’d have called off the wedding. I would be offering harp lessons and living at Yucca Plantation with Anna.” She screamed and beat the bed. “I wish I’d never met you.” The door slammed shut, and Susannah rolled into a knot, sobbing and rocking with the pain of her swollen breasts. She jerked at the slight touch on her cheek.

“Miss Susannah, I got a basin for relieving your milk.” Lizzie’s eyes were red and swollen almost shut. “I helped my mama milk herself when she lost her baby.”

Susannah sat up, her wet gown cold against her body. “My breasts need my baby.”

“Yes’um. If you hold the bowl, I can ease you. We wrap you up. Few days, they be dry.”

The fire in the fancy stove had died out, and the cabin walls creaked with the cold. Susannah watched the thick yellow fluid leave her breast. “Will you throw it to the hogs?”

Lizzie whimpered like a pup. “Don’t know where else.”

She laid her hand on Lizzie’s shoulder. “Go rest. You’ve been up all night.”

“I be seeing to Venus. She ain’t so good.”

“Maybe it’s her baby.” Fresh tears burned Susannah’s eyes. “Tend to her.” She tossed her soaked gown on the floor, pulled her arms around the binding on her breasts. Her fingers caught the chain. Holding the ring to her lips, she curled naked under the feather coverlet.

\* \* \*

The sound of steady chopping woke Susannah and brought back the raw pain. She cried out and rolled away from the damp mattress.

Ruby came to her bedside. “Lizzie asked me to milk your breasts. She’s with Venus.” Dark circles framed Ruby’s eyes. “I went home to fix stew; left some for Preston.”

Feeling hollow, Susannah watched Ruby warm her hands over the stove and then begin gently pumping her aching breasts. Tears blended with her milk in the basin. “Is Venus having her baby?”

“Lizzie thinks it’s time.”

Susannah lifted her head. “What’s that constant chopping?”

“Hezekiah’s bark-stripping logs. Looks like he’s adding onto your cabin.”

Susannah was wrung out of tears and left with a dry sorrow carving into her chest. “You know what he did?”

“Lizzie told me.” Ruby set the basin of milk aside and pulled the feather coverlet around Susannah’s bare shoulders. “I washed your gown. Found a clean one in your trunk.”

Like a rag doll with no stuffing, Susannah gave herself to Ruby’s washing and tentative spoons of stew.

Ruby stroked Susannah’s hair away from her face. “I mixed this laudanum with honey. You need to rest.”

As Susannah drank, she remembered Samson saying her mother went to bed and took laudanum. She never got up again. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad choice. “Now I know why Samson wouldn’t look at me. It wasn’t deference. It was pure shame. He planned to steal Anna.”

Ruby whispered like she thought Hezekiah could hear over his constant chopping. “Lizzie said that’s how he paid for their freedom.”

“Will they sell my baby?”

Ruby squeezed her lips tight, then said. “I don’t think so. Your girls said Eva was nursing her baby boy and your baby Anna before they left.”

Susannah made a low keening sound and curled into a ball. “She’s taken my Anna.” She felt Ruby rubbing her back and finally gave into drugged darkness.

\* \* \*

Susannah woke with a start to Hezekiah saying, “I appreciate you staying with her, Ruby. I’ll be here for the night.” His voice sounded scratchy with fatigue.

Ruby touched Susannah’s cheek. “I’ll come in the morning.”

She watched Hezekiah hold the door for Ruby. Then he began taking off his clothes, clear down to his drawers.

“I’m coming to bed. Not sleeping on the dirt another night. I’m done carrying you on a satin cushion.” He snuffed out the candle, crawled under the covers, and appeared to be asleep immediately.

Susannah lay there, revolted by the weight of his body pulling her toward the center. From then on, she intended to keep her distance.

\* \* \*

The baby cried, and Susannah bound out of bed, frantic to remember where she left Anna. Her breasts were full; the child had to be hungry.

“What are you doing?” Hezekiah sounded groggy.

“I can’t find her.” Then as if slapped into her senses, Susannah knew it wasn’t true. The cold dirt floor sent a chill up her body as she gripped her breasts and watched her husband climb out of bed.

Without looking at her, he moved to the stove and began filling it with wood. “Sounds like Venus had her baby.”

Susannah sat on the bed and rocked, clutching her aching breasts. “Where did they take her? Free slaves won’t find welcome around here.”

“Eli took them down to Atascosito Road. Samson intended to make it to San Antonio de Béxar.”

“Of course, Béxar.” Susannah whispered.

Hezekiah raked grease off the top of Ruby’s stew and scooped the cold brew into a bowl. Holding cornbread in one hand, he said, “You know about Béxar?”

“Philippe is there.” She spit out the words and watched him study over the news.

He stuffed the rest of the bread into his mouth and chased it with the contents of the bowl. “No wonder Samson was so quick to accept my offer. Cunning little bastard.”

“Yes, a cunning bastard. You met your match, Hezekiah James.”

He stood perfectly still––his face paling as she spoke. She wondered if he was angry or hurt. When he grabbed his coat and reached for the door, she said, “Leave! So, you can’t hear what you are.”

Her words left a sour taste in her mouth. Groaning, she fell across her bed and tried to imagine holding Anna in her arms. The green eyes, so knowing, looking right at her. The soft feel of her mouth trying to nurse.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Susannah woke to a hand rubbing her back and turned. “Oh, Ruby. I’m so glad to see you.” She pulled the bone-thin woman into an embrace.

“You need help relieving your breasts?” Ruby turned to warm her hands over the stove and set the basin in Susannah’s lap. “Hezekiah said you haven’t eaten.”

“He said that?”

“He’s adding onto the cabin.” Ruby lowered her voice. “He has the same hang dog look as Bramble. Slaves are refusing to come around.”

“They’re off on Sunday. And they’re probably with Venus. She had her baby.”

“It’s Monday.” Ruby looked away. “Hezekiah said they’re avoiding him like the plague.”

“So, he talked to you?” Susannah wondered why she asked.

Ruby reached for Susannah’s hand and patted it absently as she looked toward the chopping noise beyond the window. “He looks awful. Keeps stroking that old dog’s mane like he’s looking for comfort. I think he’s eaten with guilt.”

“I hope it eats him alive.”

Ruby rubbed her arms like she was freezing. “I’ll heat the stew.”

“I know you want to say more.” Susannah lay flat and watched her friend struggle to form her words.

“He loves you, Susannah. He knows he was a fool to send away your baby. He stupidly thought that would relieve you of a terrible memory.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“In so many words. Fears he’s destroyed your marriage.”

They heard voices and looked toward the shuttered window. Hezekiah was asking about Mason’s new baby.

“We call her Robin.” It was Mason’s voice. “Venus says when everyone’s hunkered down believing it’s still winter, robins are out finding earthworms.”

“That’s a hope-filled name.” Hezekiah’s voice was so low that Susannah strained to hear him. “They both doing well?”

“Robin’s yelling plenty loud. Venus ain’t doing much good.”

“You want me to go for one of the women? See if they know how to help?”

“Naw. It’s her mind.” There was silence, and then Mason said, “She’s scared you gonna sell our baby.”

Susannah froze as Ruby grabbed her hand and sank onto the bed.

Hezekiah moaned, “God, no!” His voice broke. “Do you think I’d do that?”

“Never thought it before. Now, I gotta reassure my woman.”

“We’re like brothers––”

“Naw! I’m your slave. I been knowing I was your slave since I was eight years old and looked down at your ugly red face bawling your first breaths.”

“See there? You took care of Ma. Helped her through my birth. Ran all the way to the river bottom to get Pa. You’re part of the family.”

“Family! Takes a lot of twisting, Hez, to come up with family.”

“Regardless of what Pa did, I’ve always loved you. Kept you right with me, even when we fought with Jackson.”

“Yeah. You loved your old mare. Kept her right there, too.”

“I’m about crazy. I don’t want to lose you too. What can I do?”

“Do? Free me. Simple as that. Make me and my family free niggers.”

“You want to leave?”

“Naw! I wanna be a man. A man who works for ya. Not your damn slave. If you can’t tell the difference, I figure you’re no better than the man who sent that baby girl off with them niggers.”

“That was stupid and cruel.”

“Yep. Sure as hell was.”

Both women were rigid, listening and clasping hands.

“Want me to hire you?” Hezekiah said.

“I don’t see you making no money to pay me. We’re just here, building and laying out fields. Praying it’s gonna rain. Planning for someday.”

“Everybody’s doing that,” Hezekiah said. “All who made that long trip. Hoping for better. And I’m busting my butt trying to make it work.” There was a long silence. Then he said, “Sorry I said that. We’re all busting our butts.”

“I liked busting my butt when I worked on the Chambers cabin. Miss Susannah *paid* me.”

Ruby’s mouth dropped open, and Susannah gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“She paid you?” Hezekiah sounded winded with surprise.

“Yep. Makes a nigger feel like a man to get paid.”

“I’ve hired you out. You always keep the money.”

“*You* hired me out. I wanna do the hiring out.”

“What about the others? I can pay them for a little while. Then there’s no more.”

“I’m not speaking for the others. I want papers for me and my family like you gave Samson. They said he was free. He swelled up like a king when he stuffed them papers in his pocket.”

“Samson’s got a better shot at making it. He speaks Spanish. Oughta get along pretty good with the Mexicans in Béxar.”

Susannah lifted hollow eyes to Ruby and whispered, “And I taught him to read.”

“Samson paid for his freedom by carrying off Miss Susannah’s baby. I’ll pay for me and Venus and Robin by working right here, like always.”

“You thinking the others would do the same––work for me?”

“If they know you can’t up and sell ’em.”

“And they could just walk off when it suits them?”

“That’s how I figure it.”

Hezekiah sighed loudly. “I’ll write up your papers. I’m not freeing the others. Least, not now.”

“I’m gonna go whisper to Venus. She’ll be off that bed in no time.”

Susannah smiled at Ruby when they heard the chopping resume. “Wish we could’ve seen Mason’s face.”

“It’s Hezekiah’s face I’d like to see,” Ruby said. “He may have opened a can of worms.”

\* \* \*

As the afternoon wore on, Susannah heard the men hauling up more logs. She listened to their companionable chatter and realized they would follow whatever Mason wanted. She wondered how they could forgive Hezekiah so quickly.

Hezekiah’s voice was barely audible as he and Mason discussed the best way to connect the two structures. With the potential of losing his workers and no rain to fuel the crops, his grand plans for a sprawling plantation were dissolving, and she didn’t care. She wanted him to suffer.

Susannah had rolled into a knot, holding her aching breasts when Lizzie stuck her head in the door. Her smile did not hide the deep circles and fatigue on her face. “I got you some chicken livers and rice.”

“It smells divine.” Susannah pulled the covers around her shoulders. “Your cooking always makes me hungry.”

“How ’bout easing you a little? Get rid of some of that milk and bind you up again.”

“Is Robin nursing good?” Susannah choked and kept her head down as she reached for the basin.

Lizzie began the gentle milking process. “Me and Venus been crying, too.”

“Anna was a pretty baby, wasn’t she?” Susannah said. “Did you see her eyes? So wide awake.”

“Yes’um,” Lizzie whimpered. “I can’t sleep for seeing that little baby girl.”

“I want to visit Venus and Robin.”

“How ’bout waiting ’til tomorrow,” Lizzie said. “You be stronger by then.”

“I’m tired from all this staying in bed.”

“Let me help you wash up.” Lizzie reached for the basin. “Then I’ll brush your hair. Make you feel better.”

“You think Eva will love my Anna?”

Lizzie nodded. “She was right proud when the baby took to her breast, quick-like.” Lizzie cupped her fingers over her mouth. “Don’t mean no hurt. Just wantin’ you to know little Anna’s gonna be loved.”

Susannah was sorry when Lizzie left because Hezekiah kept bumping against the wall beside her bed. It felt like he was trying to connect with her. But she had no intention of acknowledging his presence.

It grew dark, the Negros left, and only the glimmer from a lantern showed through cracks in the shutter. The fire in the stove had died down, letting the rice and livers grow cold, and she had drifted into a hazy sleep when Hezekiah opened the door. She watched him light the candle, lay another log in the stove, and patiently watch his supper heat. His beard was getting heavy, and the candlelight cast a yellow color on his face. He pulled his father’s old chair off the wall and sat before the stove, holding the hot pot with a rag. He spooned the contents into his mouth without lifting his head.

“What do you think about freeing the slaves?” He spoke as though they were in the middle of an ongoing conversation.

She lay there a moment, still watching him from under the covers. “Why ask me? *You* know what’s best for everyone.”

He set the pot back on the stove and turned toward her. “Susannah, what I did was awful. I didn’t do it to hurt you.” He covered his face with both hands. “Don’t know why I thought it was best.” He moved to the bed and sat beside her. “I intend to do all in my power to help you admire me again.”

She rolled away from him. “I hate you so much; I can’t imagine you as a decent human. Even your slaves know you were wrong.” She felt him move off the bed and listened as he stripped off his clothes. He smelled worse than a field hand when he crawled in next to her.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Susannah lay still until Hezekiah finished dressing, ate some leftovers, and left the cabin. At least, he lit the stove and filled the kettle. She intended to get up before she got so weak that she couldn’t. She washed in the warm water, dressed, and was combing her hair when Lizzie peeked in the door. “You look good this morning. I got some cornpone. It’s hot and soaked with butter. Mister just ate a big chunk.” She dropped her shoulders as though she hadn’t meant to mention Hezekiah. “Left plenty for you.”

Susannah smiled. “You’re a kind woman, Lizzie. I must get busy and stop lying around grieving. Think it’s too early to go see Venus and Robin?”

Lizzie perked up. “Robin’s eating and crying. They been up half the night. You didn’t hear all that racket?”

Susannah laughed. “Should I wait until Venus has rested?”

“Oh, no. She be tickled to see you.”

Susannah lifted her trunk lid and gritted her teeth to keep from crying as she pulled the soft yellow blanket to her cheek. “I planned for Robin and Anna to be playmates. At least Robin can have Anna’s blanket.”

“You sure? That’s mighty fine.”

“I can’t wait to wrap it around Robin.” Susannah pulled in a deep breath, hugged her shawl around her, and stepped onto the porch. Stunned, she stopped and stared at the space for a wide dogtrot. It connected their cabin with logs laid out in the shape of another large room.

Hezekiah stood still. His arms dropped to his side as he watched Susannah’s eyes travel the outline of the building.

“I had no idea,” Susannah stammered. She wanted to scream at him for being so obvious, for trying so hard to make her forgive him. Taking Lizzie’s arm to steady herself, she walked around the future house and down the hill to the quarters.

“Look who come to see you,” Lizzie called as they approached the cabin door.

Warmth and the rich smell of fried pork filled the tiny room. Susannah wondered why she imagined their cabin was like slave quarters. The small hearth held only a cluster of blazing embers. Venus sat on a low-slung bed of split logs holding the sleeping baby in her arms. She smiled a serene welcome and lifted Robin to Susannah.

The little eyes opened, black and bright. “She’s looking right at me.” Susannah pulled the baby to her. Then she felt the surge from her breasts, releasing milk meant for Anna. “I’m getting her wet,” Susannah cried, laying the baby on the blanket. “I’ll come back later.” She turned away to hide the growing stain soaking through the binding and onto her dress.

“Thank you, missus,” Venus called as Susannah rushed up the hill feeling her clothing turn cold against her chest.

Chapter Twenty-Three

February 1822

The silence inside the cabin continued as Hezekiah placed a board on Susannah’s trunk to create a table. After working on the new addition all day, he spent several evenings writing separate manumission papers for Mason, Venus, and baby Robin. “I’ll go to the Crankstons, see if Joseph will be our witness. I haven’t heard from him since….” His voice trailed off like he couldn’t say the words.

Susannah held her tongue, having no energy to go down the path to another gut-wrenching fight. It felt easier to drift with the current of their separate lives. She wondered why Hezekiah kept pretending that he had to finish the addition to the cabin before planting time. There would be no crops this year. The soil had dried to a hard crust, and the countryside lay barren, as lifeless as she felt. Susannah went through the motions of each day––cooking, hauling spring water to the dying garden, and washing Hezekiah’s sweat-soured clothing. The highlight of each day came when she walked down to the quarters to hold Robin and absorb her baby expressions. Venus finally relaxed and didn’t appear so ill at ease when Susannah sat on their narrow little bed to talk and coo to the baby.

With Joseph coming to witness the manumission, Susannah had to rejoin the outside world, and she dreaded seeing him. Would he be as revolted over the birth of her black baby as his dear wife?

When the day arrived, she clenched her fists, listening to the men on the porch stomping crusted snow off their boots and discussing the drought.

“We got folks hurting. Not sure they can hold out this year if there ain’t no rain. This dab of snow sure as hell ain’t enough to make a dent in the drought.” Joseph’s voice sounded shaky. “Not sure *I* can make it beyond this year.”

“Take a lot more than a drought to chase me off.” Hezekiah sounded only a notch below angry.

“How you feeding all them niggers? Takes all I got to feed my woman and one hand.”

“They’re out hunting. Plenty of squirrels, turkey. Still some deer around and a few hares. Let’s get inside before we freeze.”

Joseph stepped into the cabin, and his cheeks, flushed with the cold, stretched into a kind smile. “You’re looking well, Miss Susannah.”

“Oh, thank you.” She thought for a moment that her knees would buckle from relief. “May I offer hot chocolate? Hezekiah brought bars of it from Natchitoches.” She gave her husband a sideways glance, a grudging thanks for his Christmas gift. He had also brought her a large bolt of green brocade so finely woven with silk threads that it felt soft against her cheek. He wanted her to sew another dress like her riding habit on the trail. She shook her head. “I can’t imagine wearing it in this wilderness.” She put it in her trunk and had not looked at it again.

“My, my! What a special treat,” Joseph gushed as he sipped the steaming brew.

“I’ve grated enough chocolate for Mary,” Susannah said. “She can add milk and whisk it as it heats.”

Joseph clasped palms together in prayer fashion. “And a tad more for me?”

Susannah realized that she had laughed. How long had it been since anything had made her smile?

“Well, I guess we should get to the matter at hand,” Hezekiah took his father’s chair down from its hook and set it at the makeshift table.

“If you’re sure you want to do this.” Joseph took his place on Susannah’s harp chair. “Mason’s the smartest nigger I ever saw. You’re lucky to have him. Once free, he’s gonna walk off and never look back.”

Hezekiah shook his head and examined the floor. “I’m betting he’s too smart for that.”

“Well, call him in. Let’s see how he behaves.”

Hezekiah stepped out to the porch and returned, chuckling, “Didn’t have to call. He and Venus were standing at their cabin door. Waiting.”

Mason entered first and looked around like a man checking for danger before motioning Venus and the baby into the cabin. “Morning, Mister Crankston.’ Preciate you coming, sir.”

Joseph’s face suddenly looked thunderous, dark as his coat. “I’m not here to approve this thing. You know you’re a dead man if you run off. Ever planter in this country would be looking to own you.”

“Yes, sir. Me and my woman plan to stay right here. Hez . . .Mister . . .gonna hire me.”

“Let’s get on with this.” Hezekiah motioned for Mason to sit. “This paper says you are a free man on this date. You should keep it with you at all times.” He waited a moment and glanced at Susannah. “There’s the place to sign that you accept being free.”

Susannah watched Mason take the quill, dip it in the jar of ink and then carefully write *Mason James* as clearly as any man could. She pressed her fingers over her lips to silence her cry. Philippe had wanted to do that, to write his name as a free man.

Hezekiah accepted the pen, bent over the table, and scrawled his signature. He handed the quill to Joseph, who drew back like it might be soiled. Then he clutched the feather, stuck it deep into the ink bottle, and dropped a clumsy blob of the brown walnut stain onto the page.

“You can’t rub it out,” Hezekiah barked. “Sign beneath it.”

“It’s been a long time since I needed to write,” Joseph mumbled as he labored to write his name.

“Thank you, sir.” Mason’s voice did not show surprise that the man witnessing papers to set him free could not write as well as he.

Venus clutched her sleeping baby as she watched Mason sign his name. When he rose from the chair, he offered his woman a reassuring nod. “You be fine,” he whispered and reached for their daughter.

The slave woman’s arms bulged with muscles beneath the newly sewn gingham dress. Her large fingers folded awkwardly around the quill, and she bent forward as she carefully drew *VENUS* in bold print. She lifted her head and smiled, a woman who had achieved more than she could ever imagine.

After completing Venus’ papers, Hezekiah said, “I never heard of this before, but I’ve drawn up papers for the baby Robin. Although she was born into slavery, she will be a free child today.” Hezekiah signed the paper and shoved it to Joseph, who managed to drop another stain of ink on the page before he struggled through his signature.

Susannah tried to wipe away her tears, but they came faster than her control. When Hezekiah placed an arm around her shoulder, she leaned into him. She had nowhere else to go.

Joseph stood and tugged his coat jacket down over bulging hips. “Well! I guess it’s done.” He raised his head and half-smiled at Mason. “How’s that yearling you trailed behind your wagon? You suppose he’s growed up enough to service one of my cows?”

“I believe so, sir. He’s been mighty interested in one of ours. She’s not paying him no mind. So, I can’t say for sure.”

“Why don’t you come along to my place in a day or so? Let him visit my cow. I figure it’s worth about three pounds of good venison sausage.”

Mason looked quickly at Hezekiah, who raised both eyebrows without comment. “Be there sunrise tomorrow.”

Joseph slapped his hands together. “Well then, how about showing me that new addition before I head home.”

After the men left, Susannah reached for the baby. “May I hold her?”

“Sure thing.” Venus’s nostrils flared with each breath as she fought to contain her emotion.

Susannah drew the child to her. “She’s so warm and soft. Slept right through her manumission.” Bending to take in that baby scent, she whispered, “Sweet thing. Whenever I hold her, I imagine how my baby Anna would feel. I hope she’s as content as little Robin.”

“Yes’m.” Venus folded her manumission paper carefully and slipped it into her dress pocket. Then she wrapped her arm around Susannah, offering more support for Robin.

They walked onto the porch and followed the men from the dogtrot into the cold, partially floored room. Joseph Crankston paced the boards, nodding his approval.

“Oaks are enormous in the bottomland. It took a while to split the trees and hew the logs.” Hezekiah smiled at Mason standing to one side, his hand across his chest, patting the pocket that held his and his baby’s papers. “I couldn’t have done it without Mason. He knows how to swing a broad ax.”

“It’s going to be a fine place.” Joseph grinned suggestively at Susannah and said, “That loft has plenty of space to sleep a bunch of kids.”

She saw Hezekiah glance at her before she handed the baby back to Venus and turned away. “Hope you and Mary enjoy the chocolate.”

“Say, got so worked up over this manumission, about forgot,” Joseph said. “We got neighbors across the river. Four families showed up toward the end of November, and a couple already went to New Year’s Creek to make a settlement. One of the others, Josiah Bell, is claiming land on yonder side. Figure he’s about even with your place.”

“We’ll be watching for him,” Hezekiah said.

“He’s telling folks Mister Stephen Austin made him justice of the peace.”

“Think that means he’s claiming to be the law around here?” Hezekiah asked.

“We’ll not pay it any mind until it’s final. No sense freely giving out authority.”

Susannah heard Hezekiah say, “My sentiments.”

She closed the cabin door and looked at the table where three slaves had just received their freedom. Philippe never got that chance.

\* \* \*

In early March, Hezekiah opened the cabin door admitting a blast of cold air. “You interested in seeing your new house?”

Susannah laid aside the shawl she had been knitting and followed him out the door. She had avoided looking at the work as it progressed. When she went to the garden, she made a point of going around the other side of the cabin.

It was strangely quiet; the men who had been working here every day, were all gone. She wondered if Hezekiah had sent them away so he could be alone with her.

He reached for her arm as she stepped onto the dogtrot. “Tomorrow, after I get you moved in, I’ll enlarge the cabin window into a door, so you can go back and forth.”

He had swept out all the sawdust and even washed off the windows along both sides of the big room. A stone fireplace dominated the far end, and the roof rose high to accommodate the loft. Susannah watched the afternoon sunlight spread warmth across the floor’s wide planks. “It is lovely, Hezekiah.” Then she looked at her husband, and her voice broke. “I know you’re trying.”

Hezekiah’s shoulders slumped. “Susannah, I want this to be a happy home.”

She turned away. “Let’s see the springhouse.” The dogtrot extended to the rear of the building, where a door opened to a chilly room. The spring bubbled into a stream that gurgled between rocks before it flowed out the far side.

“Think how fresh your vegetables and milk will stay in here. And you’ll have all the cool spring water you want.” He touched her shoulder. “No animals to chase away.”

“You should offer Mason some space for all the food he’s getting for that little bull’s visits.”

Hezekiah laughed. “Yep. Right now, it’s so cold he doesn’t need the springhouse. But, at the rate he’s getting paid for his bull’s service, he’ll have to open a meat market.”

She pulled her shawl tight around her shoulders and looked into his eyes. “I’m glad you freed them.”

Sobering, he reached toward her just as she turned away. “Me too.” His words trailed her.

\* \* \*

Susannah was knitting before the front windows and glancing at robins marching in droves across the cold earth, resolutely scratching up bugs. Venus had been right to name the baby after those determined birds.

Hezekiah and the men were in the bottom land cutting trees, continuing the futile effort to open more acreage for crops. Occasionally she heard the men whoop and the thunder of a giant oak crashing through the forest.

She was startled by a rasping plea for help coming from the river. Rushing toward the anguished sound, she joined Venus and the baby. Both women froze at the top of the bluff watching Eli Fulton struggle up the incline with his wife in his arms.

“She up and died. Last night. She was determined to help pole the raft, what with the river so low. Kept on working ’til she quit.” His mealy eyes spilled tears that traced the chiseled lines in his face.

Venus fled, saying, “I’ll get Mister Hez.”

Susannah watched Eli crumple to his knees and lay Josey out like an offering. She had hated him and hoped he would return so she could kill him for helping Samson steal her baby. But as he knelt, weeping over the scarecrow corpse, Susannah was struck by a wave of grief that sucked all her strength. She could not attack him; she could only look down at his twisted face turned up to her.

“It’s punishment,” he bawled. “The good Lord told me taking them niggers off with your baby was wrong. Josey did, too. But I done it anyway.”

“Where did they take her?” Susannah could barely speak.

“I figure they’re in Béxar by now. That feller was the most determined nigger I ever saw. Met up with a Mexican caravan just as we got to the Atascocita crossing. He talked Mexican ’bout good as them. They let him pull that wagon right in.”

“Did he tell you who he hoped to find in San Antonio de Béxar?” Susannah pulled the shawl over her head to ward off the cutting chill. She wondered if she was trembling from the cold or knowing that they may have taken her baby to Philippe. Samson seemed sure that Philippe had made it.

Eli knelt and stroked his wife’s emaciated cheek. “My Josey was friendly to the girl. They never told nothing. Real secret like.”

Hezekiah arrived, breathing hard. She let him wrap his arm around her shoulder, unsure if she needed his support or the warmth of his body.

Eli stayed on his knees, gazing at Hezekiah. “You see the price I paid. Never shoulda taken Miss Susannah’s baby.”

Hezekiah bent and placed his hand on Eli’s head like a blessing. “We both made bad decisions. I’ll help you bury her.”

Eli looked up like a supplicant seeking forgiveness. “I hoped to place her where we camped on that bluff under them big oaks.” His eyes sought Susannah’s. “If you’ll allow me.”

“Of course,” she whispered and started back toward the silence of her house.

Hezekiah headed to the barn for shovels and called out to Venus, who clutched her baby at her cabin door, “Get some of the boys to help us dig.”

Venus disappeared over the bluff, but no one followed when she returned and entered her cabin. Susannah wanted to be glad the boys were refusing to help the man who carried off her baby, but watching Hezekiah drive the shovel into the parched earth, made her resolve to punish feel empty as the hole they were digging. Turning away, sick with the anger gnawing at her gut, she moved her knitting to the back windows to avoid watching the two men who made her think of penitents toiling to erase their sin.

At supper time, a spindly cross made of tree branches marked the fresh mound of dirt. A small fire blazed near a tarp spread to form a shelter. Hezekiah did not return until dark, filthy with dust and debris from the fallen trees. He carried the washtub and a bucket of water into the kitchen. “I’ve got to bathe before I eat.” He stripped off his shirt and unbuttoned his trousers, showering the dirt floor with leaves and twigs. Wood chips stuck to his neck and chest, and grime created black outlines in the muscular curves of his torso. She turned away. “I’m going to bed. Your supper’s still hot.” As she swept through the door onto the dogtrot, she heard the smack of his clothing as he threw it on the floor.

\* \* \*

Susannah tried not to look out the window for several days to avoid seeing Eli up on the bluff sitting by the grave. The sight of him, hunched over, holding his knees, made her think of a dog waiting for his master. A dog would have stirred pity, and she didn’t want to feel mercy for the horrid little man.

Early one morning, Susannah was startled, even slightly embarrassed, when Eli appeared at the kitchen door, extending a string of small, flopping fish. “Night’s the best time to catch these little fellers. They’re out looking for a meal.”

After thanking him, she saw Hezekiah standing by the stove, smiling.

“That’s a good mess of crappie.” Then he stopped smiling and reached for the string. “You ever cooked fish?”

“No. Just tell me how to prepare them.” She and Philippe had fished many times. But they always carried them to Mama Jess. Susannah never saw the fish again until the platter was placed on the table, steaming with the rich fried aroma.

“With these little ones, you just cut off the head, scale them, and clean out the gut. Fry ’em whole.” Hezekiah hesitated. “Want me to show you?”

“It sounds easy enough.” She ran her hand along the fish scales.

“I’ll set up a board on the porch for you to clean them.” He stopped at the door. “You want me to bring a bucket of water to rinse them?”

Susannah nodded, her mind racing as she thought of how in the world to do the job. She grabbed the meat cleaver that hung beside the fireplace with the cooking utensils that belonged to Hezekiah’s mother. When he finally left, she set to work.

The meat cleaver was perfect for chopping off heads, but when she grabbed a fishtail and started raking the scales, they flew in all directions. Soon, her hands and apron were stiff with the prickly things. She looked up when Lizzie came around the corner of the house with the bucket of milk for churning.

Backing off, Lizzie said, “You believe I need to churn for you today?”

“Oh, yes. And where do I put all these heads and guts?”

“They’ll be good for the garden. I’ll help when you done.” Lizzie positioned the churn beside the open door and watched in silence as Susannah worked.

When Hezekiah came for lunch, she had changed her apron and proudly watched the fish crisp in the skillet. When they finished eating, Hezekiah rubbed his stomach and exclaimed over the meal. Leaning toward her, he grinned. “You mind if I pick the scales out of your hair? They’re thick as a bonnet.”

Her hands flew to the stiff coating on her head. “I was so busy; I didn’t look in the mirror.”

He reached across the table and touched her cheek, laughing. “Even with scaly ears, you’re still beautiful.”

She wanted to be angry, but she had to laugh. It had been a long time since they shared a laugh.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Spring 1822

For weeks, Hezekiah cleared land and spent evenings on the dogtrot building furniture. He wrestled the trunk of a large oak up the hill to serve as the base for a dining table and used rough anacua leaves to sand the tabletop until it held a smooth sheen.

As he completed each new piece, Susannah felt her heart softening until she thought of her baby Anna. Then a fresh jab of pain caused her to grit her teeth in anger over his obvious efforts to please her.

When he completed a bench with a gracefully curved back, Susannah said, “I’ll gather moss and make cushions out of that fabric you brought from Natchitoches.”

A frown of disappointment creased his brow. “Don’t you want to sew a dress for yourself?”

“Where would I wear such finery? Besides, the green material will add warmth. All that bare wood makes the room echo.”

“There’s plenty of moss in the bottomland. I’ll go with you.”

She held her tongue against saying that she preferred to be alone. Instead, she went to her trunk and took out the old sheet Mama Jess had sent for the birthing bed. Trying not to think of its original purpose, she tucked the cloth under her arm and started on her way.

Hezekiah sort of loped along, swinging a rake. Eagerly trailing beside her, he seemed as lively as Bramble. She didn’t speak, letting the steep slope pull her down the hill over dried out furrows twisting around tree stumps. Ahead, giant oaks draped in gray moss formed a dark canopy along a creek bubbling toward the river.

Hezekiah scooped a handful of soil and extended it toward her. “If we ever get rain, this will be good cotton land.” When she did not respond, he tossed the dirt into a clump of weeds. “Maybe you could ride with me when we take the cotton to Natchitoches.”

“That’s not until fall. Without rain, there won’t be any cotton.” She moved under low-hanging branches, tightened her bonnet, and shook the sheet open. When the cloth billowed across the ground, she stared at the broad, rusty-colored stain. Her throat convulsed into a guttural cry. “That’s Anna’s blood.”

Hezekiah jerked the sheet under his arm and gripped her in a tight embrace. “Let me take you back. I’ll get the moss later.”

Realizing she had surrendered to his comfort, she pushed him away. “I don’t want your help. I’ve got to stop this. I’ve been telling myself that plenty of women lose babies. They bury them and go on.” She gritted her teeth. “But their husbands weren’t the cause of it.” She jerked the sheet from his grasp.

Hezekiah nodded and stepped back, turned and started up the hill, his shoulders hunched like a man moving against a blizzard.

She tore into the hanging moss with a fury, heaving the rake into the drooping curtains and throwing it onto the sheet with all the force she could muster. When her breath came in gasps and her arms ached, she leaned on the rake and stared at the mound piled high on the sheet. Her hands, chewed by the prickling moss, were red and raw. She wrapped the bundle and tugged it up the hill into the sharp north wind. Her wool dress felt damp with sweat when she rounded the side of the house and stopped short, staring at a stranger standing in the dogtrot with Hezekiah.

He offered a courtly bow; his eyes averted as one might to protect the modesty of another. He said, “This must be Missus James.”

Hezekiah leaped and grabbed the dirt-stained sheet, his eyes searching her face. “This is Mister Josiah Bell, our neighbor from across the river. The new justice of the peace.”

She flicked a piece of something that seemed to be hanging from her hair and extended her hand. “Welcome, Mister Bell. “I cooked a hen and greens. Will you join us?”

“My pleasure. If there’s plenty.” He was a foot shorter than Hezekiah, but he looked official––black coat, white shirt that was not dingy, and recently blacked boots.

“I’ll ask my husband to store the moss while I finish supper.” Susannah glanced toward Hezekiah as though she’d just noticed him.

Cold air chilled the sweat running between her breasts and down her back. Hurrying to the kitchen, she tossed off her dusty bonnet and poured a basin of warm water that burned her scratchy hands and face. Glancing in the little mirror Hezekiah had hung at one end of the fireplace, she gasped in horror at the puffy welts on her cheeks. Her hair appeared to be sprouting twigs. Remembering her brush was in the new room next to the bed, she ran moistened fingers through the tangles and anchored it with combs.

When the men came in for supper, they stood for a moment taking in the handsome table laid with the floral plates––a startling contrast to the kitchen’s bare log walls. She must thank Hezekiah for fashioning such a beautiful piece of furniture and bringing her mother’s dishes.

To her relief, the sauce she’d made for the hen gave it such a rich flavor that both men requested hefty seconds. Her egg pudding, a favorite among their occasional guests, lived up to its growing reputation. Josiah Bell smacked his lips, licked the last of the pudding off his spoon, and said, “You folks are certainly going to meet the requirements Mister Austin laid out for settlers.” He bent toward Susannah as if sharing a secret. “As I told your husband, each man will receive 640 acres. A wife gets 320 acres. If you had children, they’d be allotted 160 acres. For every slave, you’re allowed 80 acres. That new baby brings you to nine.” He smiled like a conspirator. “She’ll grow up, of course.”

Susannah looked at Hezekiah, waiting for him to correct the man. Had he forgotten the manumission papers? They only owned six slaves.

Hezekiah shook his head like a man waking from a dream. “If my figures are correct, that’s 1,680 acres. Never expected so much.”

“You understand, Mister Austin stipulates that you occupy and cultivate the land within the first year. You’re a long way toward that. And you’re already Catholic. All that’s left is swearing an oath of allegiance to the Mexican government. Then pay Stephen Austin twelve and a half cents an acre, one half when you get the title and the other half one year later.”

Hezekiah blew a breathy whistle. “Sounds mighty good to me.” He offered Susannah a pleading look. “Sound right to you?”

She wished her eyes could bore a hole right through him. “You’rethe decision-maker, Hezekiah.”

His smile went slack, probably remembering when he last heard those words. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“Here’s added encouragement,” Josiah Bell beamed like *he* was bestowing the land. “There’s added acreage for men of capital. Extra land if you’re useful to the colony. You being a lawyer and a man of substantial means, should be well rewarded.”

Susannah grew tired of Mister Bell’s grand promises. “When will we see the title and official land grants?” She doubted her smile conveyed an innocent inquiry.

Josiah Bell cleared his throat. “When Mister Austin was in Nacogdoches last October, he named an agent to supervise the new arrivals, make sure grants don’t overlap. He’ll be coming along. Help you folks get surveyed.” Josiah half smiled and ducked his head as if he were slightly uncomfortable. “The water table’s so low, what with the drought, I should have crossed the river on my horse. I aim to travel along this east side, getting acquainted. I wonder if it’s too big an imposition to borrow a horse . . .even a mule? I’ll return this way within the week.”

“Of course, we’ve got extra horses.” Hezekiah looked at Susannah as though waiting for her approval.

She raised both eyebrows and offered an exaggerated smile, knowing he remembered that her father provided the extra horses. “You’re welcome to the kitchen for the night, Mister Bell. We have a small bed my husband can bring over.”

Josiah Bell clasped his hands at his chest. “You’re splendid neighbors. My wife just gave birth to our second son. She’ll be ready to receive guests very soon.” He hunched his shoulders and lowered his head in a self-deprecating way. “I confess to having only three servants.”

“Ha!” Hezekiah slapped the table. “I guess we’ll overlook that difference.”

The two men had a good laugh, giving Susannah a chance to leave the table and heat water to wash the dishes. She was eager to end the visit and hear Hezekiah’s excuse for reclaiming Mason as his slave.

When Hezekiah came to bed, he stopped as soon as he closed the door. Susannah stood, her thick winter gown hanging loose from her shoulders.

Hezekiah said, “I had good reason for claiming Mason.”

She sat down, folded her itchy hands in her lap, and waited.

“Eighty acres for each slave. That’s 240 acres for Mason’s whole family.” Hezekiah sat beside her and leaned close. “Don’t you see, I can’t pay Mason for work, but I can deed him that land.”

“You’d do that?” She watched him carefully, looking for a sign that he might be spewing hot air.

“Of course. He can carry the deed with his manumission papers. If I drop dead, he’ll have proof that he’s a free man who owns 240 acres. A lot by any measure.”

“Are you going to tell him before you get the title?”

“Yes, I’ll tell him.” He touched her shoulder. “I’m more interested in *you* believing I’m not a bad man.”

\* \* \*

Susannah rose early and hurried to the kitchen only to discover that Lizzie had the stove going and Josiah Bell was drinking coffee.

“Your girl and I surprised each other this morning. You’ve trained her well.”

“I forgot to mention that she’d come in early. I’ll have to thank her for starting the coffee.” Susannah felt her face blazing. Aware she looked like a pampered mistress.

While she cooked ham and eggs, Susannah listened to the men.

“Mister Austin went to New Orleans to meet settlers. He’s sending them on a ship to the mouth of the Colorado.” Josiah didn’t appear to notice Susannah’s sharp look when he leaned back on the fragile legs of the little harp chair. He continued to expound. “Mister Austin intended all settlers to come into the colony by boat. He was surprised that at least fifty of you folks had come through Nacogdoches.”

“Suppose that’ll be a negative for our claim?” Hezekiah motioned his guest up to the table, then looked at Susannah as if taking credit for saving the legs of her chair.

“Mister Austin thinks you folks coming so quick is a sign he’ll have more than 300 colonists to satisfy his empresarial agreement. Perhaps over twelve hundred.”

\* \* \*

The prospect of receiving more land filled Hezekiah with fresh energy. At supper every night, he offered glowing reports of how many acres he and his hands had cleared. “I figure we’ll have cotton and corn stretching miles back from the river.”

Finally, Susannah exploded. “Your talk scares me. The corn crop has withered, and there’re no prospects until next year. If we ever get rain, how will you gin all that cotton? And get it to market? With this drought drying out the whole country, the Brazos isn’t deep enough for Eli’s raft. Then I heard when the river gets to flood stage, it’s full of debris. Not much of a prospect for shipping.” Seeing the slump of his shoulders stirred her with nagging guilt. “Sorry to put a damper on your dreams, but Natchitoches is a million miles away.”

Hezekiah looked like a kid, defiantly sticking out his chin. “Pa’s little hand-crank gin is slow, and everybody hates it, but it’ll do until we get a full-size operation. Mules can carry bags of cotton across their backs even where mud would sink a wagon. I’ve been watching Eli. He’s started bringing a mess of fish to everybody like he’s ready to join the world. Think I’ll send him to Natchitoches for supplies. If it works out, he can help me and the boys lead a string of mules loaded with corn and cotton.”

“Supplies? What do we need? We came with wagonloads. Then you brought more from my parent’s house.”

Hezekiah leaned toward her. “Since you’re making cushions with that pretty material I bought for your dress, I’ll have Eli get another bolt of fabric, especially for you.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond. “*And* Ezra LeBlanc offered his commission service if I ever get in the cattle business. After Mister Stephen Austin’s generous grant, I oughta take advantage of good meadowland east of here.”

“You’re trusting Eli to handle all that?”

Hezekiah crossed his arms and rubbed his stubbly beard. “I thought I’d go with him. Get him broken in, introduced to LeBlanc and the other merchants.”

“And leave planting to the men?”

“I developed a formula––return with presents. They’ve been planting cotton and corn all their lives. When I’m gone, they work hard, expecting their reward.”

“I would love some fabric. I’ve used my old petticoat to make a dress for Robin. When she starts walking, I want to sew more for her.”

“You’re causing yourself more sadness going to see that baby so often. You’ll never heal if you keep torturing yourself.”

Susannah lifted her chin, determined to appear sure of herself. “It helps to measure how my Anna’s growing.” Her voice broke. “I’m forgetting how she looked. Her eyes are green, and they looked right at me, but I can’t see them anymore.” She quickly wiped at a tear that appeared on her cheek. “You heard that old cow bawling for her calf last week? I knew exactly how she felt.”

“Susannah!” Hezekiah shook his head and reached for her hands.

She pushed back from the table. “The cow’s stopped bawling. I guess she’s forgotten.”

\* \* \*

Hezekiah moved with an eager excitement as he and Eli planned their trip to Natchitoches. The night before they left, he announced that Mason would go with them. “He wants to start a herd.”

Susannah turned, her hands still in the dishwater. “Can he afford it?”

“I’m loaning him thirty dollars. That’ll buy three good head. Not a bad start.”

Drying her hands, she asked, “With both of you gone, who’ll be in charge?”

“Venus. She agreed to oversee the planting.” Hezekiah headed to the door and spoke over his shoulder. “Mason’s fortunate. His wife supports him.”

Susannah watched the door close quietly behind her husband, and she understood what he was saying.

The morning the men left, she had already started dreading the days that would turn into long nights without him. When he clasped her in a goodbye hug, she held to him for an instant. Then stepped back and watched him mount his horse.

He grinned down at her. “Would you like me to hurry back?”

“Yes. And be careful.” She meant it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

June 1822

Susannah wrapped her arms around herself to keep from calling to Hezekiah and begging him not to leave as he rode into the dark forest. Torn by conflicting emotions––hating him one minute and then drawn like a magnet to his kindness––she listened to the fading sound of snorting mules and jangling traces before turning away.

She planned to fill the lonely weeks ahead by planting seeds from the folks at Yucca Plantation. Even if it didn't rain, she would keep the soil watered. She wondered if wrapping their house and garden in a profusion of color would lift her spirits or if she was acting like a painted woman hiding the truth behind a mask of color.

Pushing aside nagging doubts, she went to the garden and had started planting in the moistened soil when she saw Venus leave her cabin with Robin strapped to her back. Hurrying across the yard, Susannah called, “Are you going to the field?”

“Planting time. I'm to watch over it.”

Susannah's breath caught. “Let the baby stay with me. I'd love to keep her.”

Venus hesitated, her hands going to her breasts. “Right now, she's tight as a tick. She be hungry 'bout noontime.”

“I'll meet you partway. You can nurse and eat your lunch.”

Venus frowned. “Reckon Mister won't mind?”

Susannah felt a tug of anger at Hezekiah having the last word. He had freed the woman, after all. “Remember, you make your own decisions these days.”

Venus's fingers flew to her lips. “I forget!” She shrugged, ducked her head as though embarrassed, and swung the bundle from her back. “She mostly sleeps of a morning.”

Susannah grew warm with pleasure as she cuddled the child against her. “I'll head down to meet you when she gets fussy.”

Venus cupped both hands over her breasts. “They lemme know it's time.” Both women laughed, and Susannah watched with lifting spirits as Venus turned to go.

Robin slept on one of the bench pillows while Susannah finished planting along the garden's edge. When the baby lifted her head, Susannah scooped her up. “I'm going to enjoy every minute you're here.”

On the way into the house, Robin reached for a strand of Susannah's hair that had worked out of her bonnet. The silent rooms became filled with Susannah's delighted responses to baby murmurs. Near noon, Robin began rooting against Susannah's breast, and they took a bouncing walk down the hill to meet Venus.

\* \* \*

Days stretched into early summer, but rain did not come. Even the paintbrush and primrose looked stubby, spreading faded color over the hills. On the way to the quarters each morning to get Robin, Susannah's hem soaked up dew that she prayed would be enough to nourish the cotton seeds.

As temperatures rose, Robin splashed every day in the big tub on the porch, and Ruby Chambers often arrived with a bundle of knitting or a stack of work clothes to mend. One morning as they both enjoyed the baby, instead of doing their handwork, Ruby's face crumpled. “You see how crazy we look? Two white women doting on a black girl's child instead of having our own. This baby makes me want to tolerate my lazy husband.” Ruby covered her face with both hands. “I should be ashamed for saying that. Truth is, I'm afraid. If we don’t get rain, we can't feed ourselves, much less a baby.”

Susannah scooted onto the bench and wrapped her arm around Ruby. “It's got to rain. Even if it doesn't, we have more milk, eggs, and chickens than we need.” She pulled back, laughing, “And my wild husband is buying a bunch of cattle. We can eat them!”

Ruby turned to face Susannah. “What's stopping *you*? Still making him pay for his dirty deeds?”

Susannah pulled away and raked her fingers through a loose strand of hair. “I don't know what I want. I can't imagine replacing Anna.”

“You'll always have Anna. Your heart's big enough to love other children. Look at you now. You adore this precious baby. She doesn't reduce your feelings for Anna.”

Susannah sighed and scooped Robin off the floor. “While he's gone, I have time to sort out my feelings.” She grinned at her friend. “I do miss him.”

“That's a heartening sign.”

Robin began to whimper and root against Susannah. “I've got to get this little gal to her mama.” Susannah kissed Ruby's cheek. “Think about tolerating Preston long enough to get that baby.”

Ruby laughed. “I'll be thinking about it. Maybe you should go first.”

\* \* \*

Susannah looked forward to the lunchtime visits with Venus, sharing all the cute things the baby had done each morning. “She chatters like she's talking, and I talk back like she understands.”

Venus smiled, then her face puckered. “She jabbered to Mason. Now he's gone, and the cabin's plumb empty. I used to get mad, always going off with that horny little bull. But when he come in, put Robin on his chest and go to talking to her, all that mad left me. Now I just want him home.”

Susannah thought of her conversation with Ruby. “I expect them back any day.”

“Sure be ready. Hope Robin remembers.”

Susannah nodded. It seemed odd to see a poor colored woman's life happier than hers.

\* \* \*

Late one morning, Susannah took advantage of the breeze and good light coming in the front windows to sew while Robin slept. She happened to look up as a heavy-set Indian astride a little painted pony appeared at the edge of the woods along the bluff. She squinted, realizing that he was the one she had seen holding the hand of the powerful Tonkawa woman. But he was alone, sitting very still. His head barely moved as he appeared to gaze about the clearing, examining the house, the barn, and the silent slave quarters.

His stillness made her think of an animal poised to attack. Increasing alarm sent prickles along her arms as she backed into the shadows, fearing he might see her through the window. She scooped up the sleeping baby and hurried across the dogtrot to the kitchen, where both doors had wooden arms that she quickly bolted shut. The room was totally dark except for thin slits of light seeping through cracks in the doors. She lay Robin in a corner, praying that she would not wake, not make a sound.

He mumbled as he stepped onto the dogtrot and thumped across the wood floor into the parlor. She listened to his clumsy steps and knew he was at the far end of the room beside their bed. He took his time shuffling about, talking to himself––words she couldn't understand.

In her haste, she had forgotten Hezekiah's old musket that hung over the parlor door. He had loaded it and warned her to take it down carefully. Why had she left it behind? She pressed her face against the door, trying to see him through the tiny slits. Her heart pounded so loud that when he returned to the dogtrot, she backed away, fearing he could hear.

He shook the door, grunted, and moved away. The meat cleaver! She could use that. If he broke in, she could surprise him, use it as a hatchet. Her fingers felt across the smooth log wall behind the iron stove, remembering each implement until she touched the cool iron handle. She'd used it to chop off fish heads, but Hezekiah had kept it sharp.

The breakfast fire had died in the stove, but it radiated heat, turning the kitchen into a suffocating prison. He would know she was in there when he discovered that both doors were bolted. If he had come to steal, the kitchen offered plenty to take. She shuddered, fearing he wanted more.

The front door shook, then he bumped hard against it. If it flew open, she was ready to strike. She must stay steady, stop trembling, quiet her breathing to keep him from hearing. Keep him from knowing how his looming presence terrified her.

He became strangely silent. No movement. No mumbling. Then a crack of light began spreading across the floor as his bare foot slowly lifted the heavy door. He intended to raise it off its leather hinges. She had to stop him. Sweat ran down her cheek. Drying wet palms across her apron, she gripped the iron handle and spread her feet for balance. Arms raised, breath sucked in, and using all her strength, she brought the cleaver down onto his foot.

His bellow made her jerk away and drop the cleaver as the door crashed back into place. It shook as if he had fallen against it. His piercing screams persisted, making her sweat-drenched clothing feel like ice against her body.

Robin whimpered and moved around on the blanket. Lost in the darkness, she began to wail. Susannah felt for the cleaver, then lifted Robin and the weapon. Kissing the baby's neck, she tried to comfort her without making a sound. As though she understood, Robin stopped crying and pulled her body into a sitting position, alert as they both listened. Nothing.

Susannah forced herself to the door and pressed her face against the rough wood, straining to see. Not even a wisp of air came through. He might be lying on the porch or leaning against the door. She could not take a chance on looking. He might be waiting for the door to open.

Robin rooted around, showing every sign of being ready for lunch. Surely Venus would come looking for them. But what if he were still out there? How could she warn the unsuspecting woman? He was hurt, but was it enough to render him harmless?

Robin began squirming. They were both sweating in the heat that grew more intense. Susannah dipped the gourd into the water bucket, moistened the baby's head, and let her lick the water off her fingers. Robin clamped her little mouth on the edge of the dipper and made sucking sounds. The novelty satisfied her for a short time.

Susannah jumped when she heard Venus call. She had to warn her even if it roused him. “Watch out! An Indian's on the porch.” Her screams frightened the baby, whose wailing drowned her mother's voice.

The door shook, and Venus howled deep in her throat. Her fists made the door jerk on its hinges. “Dear Lord, lemme in!”

“Stop shoving! I can't lift the arm,” Susannah yelled over the baby's cries.

When Venus burst in, her eyes bulged like a wild woman. “Robin! Baby! You hurt?” She clutched the child, who immediately hushed and clung to the front of her work shirt.

Susannah, stiff with terror, searched the yard. “Is he gone? Did you see him as you came up?”

Venus struggled for breath, her face wet with snot and sweat and tears. “Didn't see nobody. Jest blood.” She pointed at the red trail stretching toward the bluff. Her eyes lifted to Susannah. Thought it was Robin's. So much.”

Still fearing he was lurking nearby, Susannah pulled Venus into the kitchen and bolted the door until they heard shouting and voices calling.

Venus whispered, “Boys must've heard.” She sank to the dirt floor and cradled her hungry baby to her breast.

Percy yelled between gasping breaths. “You hurt, Miss Susannah?”

She pulled open the door, grabbed his hard-muscled arms, and buried her face in his chest. “Did he get away? I know I hurt him.”

Standing still as a post, making no effort to touch her, Percy said, “Yes'm. Boys is looking.”

Venus nudged against Susannah to ease out the door. “Tak'n her home. She wet all over.”

“I tried to cool her with water.” Susannah ran her hand over Robin's soaked hair.

“Yes'm.” Venus stepped onto the porch and nodded to Ruby, who was running toward them, waving a fireplace poker. Preston Chambers hobbled close behind, carrying his musket.

Ruby threw her arms around Susannah. “Heard the commotion. You hurt?”

“Lord have mercy!” Percy gasped and stepped back, staring at the entrance to the cabin. He bent, reached for bloody lumps, and looked at Susannah, his eyes wide with horror. “Them's toes.” He held out his open palm. Three toes had dirt caked under the nails.

Susannah's throat convulsed, and she covered her mouth to suppress the surge that gushed between her fingers just as she reached the slop bucket.

Ruby grabbed a rag and wet it to wipe Susannah's face and hands. “You must lie down.” She opened the dogtrot door, and they both stopped, gawking at the parlor. Mud prints and moss from Susannah's cushions marked the wood floor.

“He's torn up everything,” Susannah whispered, still feeling that he might be nearby, listening. Her sewing basket had spilled threads in a sprawl of colors mingling with feathers swirling about their feet and across the room. “He took the bed coverlet my mother made and the cushion covers.”

“I'll sweep them feathers.” Lizzie wrapped a damp rag around the broom and began moving feathers into a pile.

Ruby helped corral the fluttering plumage. “We'll bundle them in a sheet until we find more ticking for the mattress.”

One of the men leaped onto the dogtrot and stood in the doorway, extending ribbons and the mud-coated mattress ticking. “

“We found leavings plum to the river.” He grinned so big his missing teeth formed a cave opening into his mouth. “You shore stopped him, missus.”

Lizzie dropped her broom and rushed to the door. “Don't worry. I'll get the ticking washed 'fore dark. Be like new by morning.”

Susannah sank onto the wooden bench. “Maybe he never meant to hurt me. Maybe he just wanted to steal things.”

“Sure as hell should've asked. Woulda saved him and us a lot of trouble.” Preston Chambers sank to the bench next to Susannah and massaged his snake-bit leg.

“Go home, Preston.” Ruby scowled. “And leave your gun. I'm staying the night with Susannah.”

“Look!” Susannah said. “He didn't take Hezekiah's gun. It's still above the door. You suppose he didn't see it?”

Preston groaned as he stood. “A crazy bastard, that's for sure. Take that thing down. Won't surprise me if he comes back for more goodies. Kill him next time.”

Ruby pushed at the hulk of her husband. “Get out, Preston. We don't need you scaring us any more than we are.”

Susannah looked away, wondering how Ruby could stand to touch him, much less have his baby.

After they finished righting all the clutter, everyone drifted away, leaving Susannah and Ruby to shut up the kitchen and take turns glancing out the windows.

“I didn't tell the others, but I know who he is,” Susannah said.

Ruby's eyes opened wide, and she whispered, “One of the Tonkawas?”

“You remember that strange, kind of heavy boy who kept holding the hand of that headwoman? The one who had the child with the carbuncles?”

“Ohh! I do. He made my flesh crawl. Preston couldn't understand why the Indians didn't get rid of him. He said they don't usually let misfits live.”

“He's that woman's child. That's why. She was clearly important.”

Ruby rubbed both arms like she was suddenly cold. “I bet they're nearby. Maybe watching us.”

Susannah realized she felt cold too. “Why don't I watch the front, and you look out the back windows tonight?”

The moon rose high, casting shadows that moved beneath the stirring tree branches. The crickets' pulsing call and the owl's eerie hoot filled the night. Susannah jumped each time a small animal scurried through the grass. Hours dragged as they offered whispered assurances that the Indians must not be coming. Still, they sat, staring into the dark, fearing they might be wrong. Even as morning light began outlining trees, the moon seemed reluctant to disappear, and Susannah could not stop scanning the shapes beneath each tree. Sighing, she said, “I need to get Robin. Venus may think I'm too upset to keep her. Having that baby here helps me as much as it helps her mother.”

“You get her while I cook breakfast,” Ruby said. “We forgot to eat last night, and my stomach is letting me know.”

Susannah reached the cabin door just as Venus stepped out with the baby tied to her back. “Sorry, I'm so slow getting down here.”

Venus frowned slightly and studied the ground. “Miss Susannah, I been seeing that blood.” Her eyes, red with fatigue, were pleading. “I need to keep her by me.”

“Oh, Venus. I tried to protect her.”

“It ain't you. It's me. I'm scared.” Venus was already moving, taking Robin with her to the field.

“Forgive me,” Susannah whispered as she watched the woman carry Robin away. Blinded by tears, she stumbled up the hill and entered the kitchen. “I've lost Robin.”

“Listen to me!” Ruby stroked Susannah's shoulders. “That mother was terrified yesterday. She looked like a frightened animal clutching her baby. I can't blame her for not letting the child out of her sight. Remember, *we* were so afraid that we sat up all night.”

Susannah nodded. “I know. I'd feel the same.” She half-smiled. “It's selfish to want her anyway.”

“You need a baby of your own. Stop borrowing happiness.”

Susannah forced a laugh. “How about you?”

Ruby lowered her lids, wriggled her brows suggestively, then turned her face away. “I've been trying.”

“Ruby, you devil! Waiting all this time to tell me.” Susannah pulled the giggling woman into a hug. “Has it worked?”

“I'm not sure. You'll be the first to know.”

“So *that's* why Preston came all this way yesterday. He's your protector.”

“Something like that.”

After Ruby headed home, the glow of contentment Susannah felt for her friend was shaded with a patina of guilt. Her life was a hundred times better than Ruby's, yet she clung to her anger and kept Hezekiah at a distance no matter how many times he apologized. How would it have been if he had known that she loved Philippe and wanted his baby instead of her lying, pretending to be an innocent rape victim? Her breathing came in short gasps, and she sank to the floor, giving into tears of shame. “Anna, forgive me! My lies caused Hezekiah to send you away.” Spent with exhaustion, she lay on the floor and slept.

\* \* \*

Startled by the sound of Lizzie stepping onto the dogtrot, Susannah jumped up, wiped her face on her apron, and met the young woman proudly lugging the sun-dried mattress ticking.

“I boiled it clean. Them piled-up feathers is waiting to fill it. Want me to sew it shut?”

“I can do it. That thief didn't take my heavy thread.”

“Rotten thing dropped thread and ribbons in the mud. Boys said them hanks was clear ruint.”

“At least he didn't hurt Robin. . .” Susannah's voice trailed off.

“Yes'm. I seen Robin with her mama.” Lizzie dropped her head. “Hope you get a baby' fore long.” She lifted black eyes and grinned. “I be getting one 'bout next winter.”

“Lizzie! That's wonderful.”

“I been wondering if it'd ever be,” Lizzie said as she scooped feathers into the ticking. Then grasping a feather, she waved it slowly. “Venus say babies flutters like bird wings.”

“That's when you know it's real.” Susannah felt the tug of envy watching Lizzie move her hand over her stomach.

Susannah settled by the window to sew the feather mattress shut but could not keep from watching for movement in the trees lining the river bank. After finishing, she clutched the ticking against her face and breathed in the sunbaked smell as she tugged it across the room. Watching the linen sheet billow across the empty bed, she clasped her middle to ease the sudden painful memory of her parents’ separate lives––cold with disdain in the presence of the other. She couldn’t remember ever feeling warmth in their house. When did their marriage become so unbearable? She sighed and tucked the sheet under the ticking. It was too late to repair whatever had turned her mother into a lost soul. Now, she must tame her rage or her home and her bed would be as empty as her mother’s.

\* \* \*

The sun slipped beyond the hills, washing the sky with a soft afterglow. The lively sound of field hands returning to their quarters cut through the silence. They were getting on with their lives and preparing supper. It was not a good time to intrude on Venus. Susannah had learned that everything stopped when she arrived to play with the baby.

Her steps felt heavy on the way to the kitchen for bread and butter before bedtime. Stepping onto the dogtrot, she stopped short. Listened. It had to be cattle bawling. Yapping echoed out of the forest. “Bramble!” She ran into the yard, pulling the combs through her hair, wishing she had bathed that afternoon. Cattle burst into the opening, followed by Bramble, maneuvering them into a growing circle.

Hezekiah appeared astride his horse, grinning through a thick, sandy-colored beard. He swung down and wrapped her in a tight hug. “Ruby told me what happened. I shouldn't have left.”

She held to him, feeling his big hands stroke her back.

“Mason!” Venus ran with Robin on her hip, and all the Negroes followed close behind. As the wagons moved into the clearing, Mason leaped to the ground to grab his wife and baby.

Hezekiah touched Susannah's cheek. “I'll be in soon as we get the cattle into the upper meadow.”

She nodded, hope stirring that maybe he would accept her apology. The boys followed Mason's directions and hustled to unload the wagons and move the cattle. She went to the springhouse for a slab of ham and a bucket of tomatoes and cucumbers.

It was late when Hezekiah came in, but she had set the table in the parlor and made egg pudding. He took both her shoulders, his face creased with concern. “You look exhausted. Ruby said you both sat up all last night. What were you going to do tonight? All by yourself?”

She buried her face in his sweat-soaked shirt and didn't care that he had not washed. “I've been telling myself he didn't plan to hurt me. He just wanted pretty things, like the cushion covers.”

“They were pretty, but I brought a lot more fabric you can use to sew some that will look even better. If you don't like what I picked, I introduced Eli to the merchants who’ll send you their best.”

He gobbled his food like a man who had not eaten in months. “This is wonderful. We've been living off jerky. Eli is good with mules, but he can't cook. Mason's only a little better.”

When they finished, Hezekiah filled buckets in the spring and brought the tub into the kitchen while she washed dishes. “First bath since Natchitoches.” He stopped and looked very solemn. “Want me to shave off this beard?”

Her heart raced, and her breath quickened with her reply, “Yes.” She wondered why she was delaying. Perhaps blurting out an apology was better than waiting for the perfect time. Fatigue was making it difficult to think. She was acutely aware that Hezekiah was undressing and stepping into the tub.

She kept her back turned and quickly finished drying the dishes. When she reached to place the plates on the shelf Hezekiah had built near the fireplace, he said, “There's a surprise in Eli's wagon.”

Without thinking, she turned to see him folded in the tub, his knees bent in front of his bare chest. She intended to look away, but she couldn't stop staring. “I… what is it?”

“I'll show you when I get on clean drawers.” He reached for a towel and began to stand.

Turning, she gripped the dishpan and rushed past him to toss the water into the yard. She waited outside to give him time to dress. He wore only his drawers when he came out with his dirty bathwater. Broad and muscled and white as a bedsheet, his shoulders contrasted sharply with his burnt and blistered face and neck.

“Bring the candle,” he called as he dumped the water down the hill. The moon lit the whole yard spreading patches of light through the trees as he led her to Eli's wagon and threw back the tarp. “It's a pie safe,” he announced. “I wanted to show you after everybody went to bed. You can store your dishes and bread and pies in here. Those wreaths on the sides are made of tiny holes to let in air and keep out flies.”

She ran her fingers over the smooth pine wood and touched the lovely wreath design cut into the tin. “It's perfect, Hezekiah. You think of the best gifts.” She felt his arm around her waist, and she pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

His lips felt warm against her hair. “I bet you need some sleep.”

“I do.” Heart pounding, she carried the candle into the parlor and across to their bed. Stopping without turning around, she said, “My gown.”

“Oh!” He hesitated a moment. “I'll wait outside.”

Her fingers fluttering, she slipped on her gown, pulled the sheet up to her chin, and lay still, wondering if she should call him. Then he was there, easing into beside her. Everything had changed. Before, she had endured his presence. Now, it felt intimate, like they were together.

She tensed when he laid his hand on her shoulder. “You don't need to fear that Indian tonight.”

“I'm glad you're home, Hezekiah.” She wanted to tell him to forgive her and that she wanted to be his wife, but sleep overtook her before she could form the words.

\* \* \*

Susannah jerked awake, startled by Hezekiah's sudden absence. Bramble growled a steady low threat, and in the early morning light, she saw Hezekiah pulling on his pants. He moved quickly to the door to take down his gun. The urgency of his movements scared her. Someone was outside. She eased out of bed and reached for her clothing, slipping the dress over her gown. The boot leather felt damp to her feet.

“Stay inside,” Hezekiah's voice sounded gruff.

She wanted to tell him not to go out, but her throat constricted as she strained to see through the dense fog pressing against the windows. Her husband's voice rang sharp. Then, out of the mist, the Tonkawa woman's horse nosed up to Hezekiah. She muttered something, and the Indian appeared astride a horse, his shoulders cloaked like a nobleman in Susannah's green brocade cushion covers.

Her fists clenched against her chest as he drew near enough for her to see his empty, haunting expression. Did he remember that he had been here? Did he even see Hezekiah?

The mother grunted at him, and he lifted his foot wrapped in a bundle of leaves.

Hezekiah moved up to the boy and removed the primitive bandage.

“You need help?” Eli appeared out of the fog, carrying a rifle.

“Naw. Visitors need help.” Hezekiah looked toward the window like he knew Susannah was standing there, paralyzed with fear. “Heat a pot of milk.”

“Yes, yes. I can do that.” She tried to make her voice firm, not letting them know she was afraid. She hurried onto the dogtrot and met Lizzie.

“I come to light the stove,” Lizzie whispered. “Seen them Indians sneaking up. Hightailed it for help.” She pushed past Susannah and went to the spring house for the milk.

Susannah lit a candle as they waited for the milk to heat. “Did all the boys come up?”

“Yes'm. Mason has his old gun. Others got clubs. They ready.”

Susannah paced the floor, rubbing her arms. “They want Hezekiah to use his Mad Stone on that Indian's foot. When the fog clears, I wonder if he'll realize this is where he got his toes chopped off. I dread getting close to him.”

Lizzie spread both her feet, braced for battle. “I best take the milk to Mister.”

“No, no. I'll do it.” She wasn't sure why, but she didn't want Hezekiah to know how frightened she felt. She took a deep breath and wrapped a rag around the handle of the steaming pot.

Hezekiah removed the Mad Stone from its pouch and dropped it into the milk. “Leave that rag to tie on the Mad Stone. You can go back to the house.”

“I want to stay with you.” She tried to sound firm.

He searched her face a moment longer before grunting softly, “I'm glad,” and squatting over the milk pan to begin his work.

As the fog lifted, the Tonkawas nodded a greeting, and Susannah was surprised to see how few were there. It was primarily women circled by a few young men, sentries, holding bows at their sides. Only the woman and boy rode horses.

When Hezekiah finished securing the Mad Stone, the group moved toward the trees edging the bluff and made camp. He waved to the Negros standing nearby, clubs dangling by their sides. “Everything's settled.” He wrapped his arm around Susannah's shoulders and said, “Let's have breakfast. Think we'll have visitors until that foot heals.”

“Do they know I did it?” She let herself lean against him as they walked together.

“I'm not sure he has sense enough to tell them or even remember.” He squeezed her tighter. “I think you're right. He only wanted your pretty things.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

August 1822

While Susannah cooked breakfast, she kept looking out the door at the Tonkawas. They appeared busy preparing something over a fire.

Hezekiah came in after checking on the cattle. “I imagined a beautiful view sloping down to the river like the one at your homeplace. Instead, every growing thing is parched brown. We got a bunch of Indians camped on one side and Eli humped up beside his wife’s grave on the other.”

Susannah looked up from the biscuits. “Eli’s a nuisance, but he eased my fears last night when I heard his squeaky voice asking if you needed help.”

Hezekiah laughed. “I felt better once *all* the boys showed up. They told me Lizzie ran down to warn them.”

“She’s going to have a baby.” Susannah felt her face burning and wondered why she blurted that.

“I’m glad.” He moved close and picked a biscuit off the plate. “Having babies sounds good to me.”

“Me too,” Susannah whispered. “Bring the biscuits.” She turned quickly and crossed to the parlor with the bowl of eggs and ham.

He reached for her hand as they settled at the table. “You mean it?”

She closed her eyes, felt her breath coming in short gasps. This was the time to apologize, to admit that she had caused so much of their pain. “I… I’m not sure.” She couldn’t look at him. “I kept Robin while you were gone, and I loved it. Even Ruby’s trying to have a baby––”

“Ruby and ol’ Preston?” Hezekiah let go of her hand. “What about us? You want to love me, or you just want a baby?” He blew out a breath and pushed his plate away. “Susannah, I want children because we love each other.” His eyes looked glassy. “That’s the only way.”

She hesitated, her mind racing as she tried to form the words. She was startled when Hezekiah shoved his chair back.

He stared down at her, kept his voice low, almost menacing. “Watching you strain to respond makes me ashamed. I’m nothing but a sap. I can’t apologize enough times. Bow and scrape enough. And here I am about to trot to the wagon to get your goddamned pie safe.”

Her arms fell limp at her sides as she watched him storm out the door. *Call him back. Say all the things you planned.* She had grown numb, captured in her body, as her gaze moved to her mother’s lovely plates holding eggs and biscuits, turning as cold as her life.

Roused by Hezekiah and Eli shuffling across the dogtrot, she watched them carry the handsome pie safe into the parlor. “Where you want it?” Hezekiah’s voice held no emotion.

She forced herself to stand. “Here, next to the table.” She reached for his arm as he turned away. “It’s perfect for keeping the biscuits.”

The two men maneuvered the heavy piece into place. Hezekiah stepped back while she placed the uneaten food on the first shelf and closed the door.

She turned to look at his very flushed face. “No more flies on the butter.” Her voice broke, and she threw her arms around her husband.

Eli scuffed his feet, then grunted, “Be up on the bluff.”

“I’m sorry, Hezekiah. You’ve been good to me. I caused all this with my lies.”

He leaned into her embrace for a moment. Then he removed her arms and stepped back. “We’ll wait. See if you’re still interested in me after the newness of the pie safe wears off.” He walked out, his back rigid as a soldier.

Hezekiah did not come in for lunch. Susannah had gone to the kitchen to prepare supper that evening when she heard movement outside the cabin. Turning, she was startled to see the Indian mother standing in the doorway, holding a hollowed-out piece of wood mounded high with crispy fried fish. Susannah nodded and tried to smile as she reached for the gift. Then she jerked back and almost dropped the food when the boy appeared. He held one of the flowers she had planted across the front of their house. His face remained expressionless as he slid the yellow blossom into the edge of his mother’s hair.

The woman looked serene, clasped her son’s hand, and turned to leave.

\* \* \*

Days turned into a blur of heat, suppressed fear, and longing for Hezekiah’s attention. The Tonkawa mother continued bestowing delicious thank-offerings of fish, stews containing pieces of meat Susannah could not identify, and mounds of berries from the nearby live oak thickets.

One night at supper, Susannah asked when the Tonkawas would leave.

Hezekiah sighed. “That kid’s not right in the head. Foot’s never gonna heal. He takes off the Mad Stone and smears mud on the wound. Instead of letting it pull out the pus, he carries the stone in a sling he’s plaited out of berry vines.”

“What if they get angry? Blame you for the failure.”

Hezekiah’s eyes searched her face. Then he looked away. “They know it’s hopeless. Lately, after I apply the Mad Stone, they pour the milk into a gourd and force him to drink it like it’s their last hope for a cure. I’m more concerned they’ll decide the whole tribe oughta settle right here.”

Susannah shuddered, chilled by the thought of them never leaving, and Hezekiah’s stony face offered no warmth. Even the nights were lonely, with him staying on his side of the bed and turning his back if she pressed against him. To keep from permanently driving her husband away, she decided not to complain about the Tonkawas even though she couldn’t keep from watching their campsite. The bright cushion material made it easy to spot the boy among the dark bodies. He stayed near his mother, absently playing with what Susannah supposed was the Mad Stone.

The next afternoon as she sat by the window sewing new cushion covers, the boy limped toward their house. His gait made her think of Philippe, who struggled to walk normally without his toes to propel him. But the Indian’s pace and his blank stare terrified her. Tossing aside her sewing, she reached for Hezekiah’s gun above the door. He had repeatedly assured her that it was loaded and ready to fire.

The Indian hobbled in her direction, gazing straight ahead. Then he kept going and passed their house before Susannah realized he was approaching a man on a horse trailed by a pack mule.

Ignoring the Indian, the man called, “Anybody home around here?”

Susannah stepped to the door. “I’m Mrs. Hezekiah James.”

“Well, howdy-do, ma’am.” He tilted his head toward the Indian standing a few feet away. “He belong around here?”

“Tonkawas are camping for a few days.” She didn’t want to mention the Mad Stone. It could make Hezekiah appear foolish to this stranger. “My husband’s in the back fields. You’re welcome to go looking for him or rest here. He comes in near dark.”

“I’m Seth Ingram, surveyor for Mister Stephen Austin.” He nodded toward his pack mule. “You suppose it’s safe leaving my equipment?” The animal carried a bulging brown tarp with leather straps that dangled pots and a wooden tripod.

“Yes, hitch it to the porch post.”

Mister Ingram tied his mule and kept looking over his shoulder. “We been having all kinds of trouble with them Karankawas on the coast. Drought’s causing them to forage further north. Before Stephen Austin left for Mexico City, he was worried their stealing could get out of hand.”

Jolted by the news, she asked, “Why did Mister Austin go to Mexico City?”

“You ain’t heard? The surveyor pulled off his greasy hat and rubbed his face with a rag. “Mexicans didn’t accept the terms of Austin’s *empresarial* grant.”

Her heart felt like it had ground to a halt. “We may not get the land?”

“Jest a spell of trouble. Oughtn’t worry your little head.”

*My little head.* Susannah glared at the man as he mounted his horse.

“Jest mosey on down to meet your husband. See the lay of the land.” He waved toward the flowers blooming across the front of the house that Susannah had faithfully watered. “You got a pretty place, ma’am.” Touching the brim of his flopping hat, he rode on down the hill.

The Indian had not moved. He looked like a large wooden doll stuck in a standing position. Susannah went into the house and stood in the shadows to watch. Finally, the mother barked a sharp call, and her son hobbled back to take her hand—a child in a man’s body.

With the added company, Susannah decided to fry chickens for supper, which meant going to the hen house out back where the Indian could see her. If only she could ask Lizzie to come in from the fields without admitting that it felt safer having the tiny girl nearby. Gritting her teeth, she set a bucket of water to heat on the stove, crossed the backyard, and caught a glimpse of the Indian standing next to his mother. Susannah grabbed the nearest hen and carried it to the tree stump Hezekiah had left for a chopping block. When the cleaver came down, the head dropped to the ground.

He was watching.

She quickly hung the flopping bird on a tree to bleed and retrieved the second chicken.

He moved toward the edge of their campsite.

Instead of staying out in the yard where he could see her, Susannah carried the birds toward the dogtrot and dragged over the cedar box Hezekiah had made for storing feathers. After dipping each bird in the bucket of hot water, she hurriedly plucked feathers into the box. All the time, glancing up to make sure he was not rounding the back of the house.

\* \* \*

Susannah had fried the chickens, whipped potatoes, and boiled vegetables when the men came in for supper. She cut some of the Old Maid flowers that grew thick along the edge of her garden and felt pleased with how the variety of colors enhanced the beauty of her mother’s plates. The Tonkawa woman showed up with hot frybread piled on a lily pad, apparently aware of what Susannah was preparing for their meal.

Seth Ingram stepped into the parlor, stopped short, and clapped his hands. “That’s the prettiest table I’ve seen since Tennessee.” Hezekiah smiled at Susannah for the first time in over a week.

She wondered if being a good hostess was enough to please him. Watching the men eat, she grew concerned that she should have prepared a third chicken. The pleasure on Hezekiah’s face lifted her spirits, along with how quickly he consumed every morsel.

“In Mister Austin’s last letter, he said that the Mexican plan calls for more land than we expected. If you operate a ranch, you qualify for a *sitio.”* Ingram cast his eyes toward Susannah. “To keep the Mexicans happy, we’re using Spanish terms. A *sitio* is 4,428 acres.”

She nodded, trying not to look surprised at the amount of acreage.

“Farmers only get one *labor*. That’s 177 acres.”

“My husband’s already a rancher.” She looked at Hezekiah, hoping he’d notice her respect.

“Mighty fine herd. You’ll qualify for a *labor* and a *sitio*. Probably a lot more.” Ingram grinned knowingly at Hezekiah. For instance, Mister Austin won’t charge for your acreage if you build a gristmill on your creek. Won’t be anything to grind after this drought. But the weather ought to let up. Be ready for next year.”

“That’s been my long-range plan. Got a good man who helped my pa build a mill when I was a kid.” Hezekiah studied the space before him like it was his record book. “Have to send Eli to Natchitoches, get millstones sent up from New Orleans.”

“Have your boys dig a raceway along that creek. Won’t take much to power the mill.”

Susannah couldn’t resist asking, “Can you get everything you need for a gristmill?”

“Grindstones are the biggest drawback. They come into New Orleans as ship ballast. I started to ask Ezra LeBlanc to send word that I was looking to buy. I wouldn’t have delayed if I’d known Austin would increase the land allotments.” Hezekiah scraped back his chair and took a book off the shelf next to his Bible. Holding it with both hands, he read “*The Young Mill-Wright & Miller’s Guide*. Pa used this. Mason can follow it to start designing the gears and the water wheel.

She stood and caressed his shoulder as she looked down at the worn cover. “So, you’re going to operate a gristmill?”

“After this killing drought, I figure we need a long-range investment.” His hand closed briefly over hers.

\* \* \*

Susannah lay in bed, listening to the men’s conversation float in from the dogtrot. “Didn’t want to disturb the missus, but Austin’s not getting back from Mexico City soon as expected. Says everything down there is *mañana*. Colonization law probably has to wait until after the coronation of Emperor Iturbide at the end of July.”

“Think he’ll be successful?” Hezekiah’s voice sounded steady, but for him to ask, drew Susannah’s attention.

“Mexican government’s still getting organized. Several rivals have petitioned for *empresarial* grants, including for Irish and German colonies. Austin thinks our biggest worry is being crowded out by other land commissioners.”

“I’m more concerned about Mexico’s stand on slavery. I can’t make it without slaves to work my land.”

“Austin thinks he’ll settle the slavery issue. Comanches are the real trouble. And Tonkawas worry some of us. That lot camped on your place is suspicious. Haven’t seen their Chief Sandia. Figure he’s close by, waiting to see how this visit goes.”

Susannah wanted to call to Hezekiah, tell him not to mention the Mad Stone. Her heart sank when Hezekiah said, “We met them on the trail last year. I spotted Sandia watching every move from a distance. Figure that squaw’s his woman. Right now, she’s in charge.”

“Expect to miss a few horses,” Ingram spoke like an authority.

“You realize that Indian woman provided the frybread we had with supper?”

“Well, I’ll be damned. Suppose they’re trying to be good neighbors?”

“Something like that.” Susannah heard footsteps as Hezekiah said, “I’ll be turning in. The girl will come in the morning to light the stove and start the coffee.”

“Mighty fine. Feels like I’ve returned to civilization.”

Susannah waited until Hezekiah eased into bed beside her. “You think we’re wise to stay here with all the uncertainty? Slavery, the drought, the Tonkawas?”

“I’m not quitting, Susannah. I’ll hire Mason to design that mill. Couple of the strongest boys can dig the raceway while we wait on millstones.” He rolled away, then leaned back and whispered, “Thanks for a good supper and for supporting me.”

“I admire you, Hezekiah James.”

“That’s progress,” he mumbled and seemed to fall asleep immediately.

\* \* \*

While Susannah cooked breakfast, Hezekiah took hot milk out to the Indians. She was surprised at how quickly he returned.

“Foot looks bad. Braves have tied him down to keep him from removing the Mad Stone. Figure it’s too late.”

“What’s a Mad Stone?” Seth Ingram frowned over the top of his coffee cup.

“Supposed to draw poison out of a wound. That crazy Indian keeps taking it off. Gangrene’s set in.”

“Don’t make an ounce of sense,” Ingram said.

“Does to the Tonkawas.” Hezekiah took the pan of biscuits and started to the parlor. “Let’s eat before it gets cold.”

Their guest piled his plate high, and between bites, he said, “That Mad Stone sounds like some Indian god.”

“Could be.” Hezekiah looked at Susannah. “How about making up this ham and biscuits for our lunch?”

She knew he was trying to change the subject. “I cooked plenty. She looked at Seth Ingram. “You plan to start surveying this morning?”

Hezekiah was already scraping back his chair. Seth scooped up his last bite and stood. “We’ll start marking it off. Then, when Austin returns, Hezekiah can sign the papers and get the title.”

As they walked out the door, Ingram said, “Can’t figure why them Indians would come here with their healing god or whatever that Mad Stone is.”

“It’s a mystery,” Hezekiah muttered as he helped lift the bundle of surveying equipment onto the back of the mule.

Susannah moved through her chores with an eye on the campsite. She froze each time the boy’s howls ripped the air like a suffering animal. Watching the mother cradling her dying child, Susannah struggled with guilt for not offering comfort. Finally, she cut a bouquet of the same flowers he had picked for his mother. Placing the arrangement in one of her prized wedding jars that had contained pickled peaches, she started across the yard toward the campsite. The smell of rotting flesh grew intense. Trying to avoid looking at the oozing wound, Susannah knelt and placed her hand on the woman’s shoulder, extending the flowers. “I am so sorry.” She meant her words. She had injured this sad boy who meant her no harm.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

September 1822

Susannah kept easing to the door all afternoon, staying within the shadows to cast a furtive eye on the camp. The Tonkawa mother sat cross-legged on the ground, cradling her son, still wrapped in the green pillow cover.

Watching the woman stare ahead, rocking in a rhythmic ritual, Susannah felt like an intruder, defiling the death watch. Yet she was pulled back to look on the torment as though seeking atonement for all her heedless choices.

When the men finally returned, Seth Ingram stepped in the door proclaiming his resolute distrust of Tonkawas. “Heard they’re cannibals. Get their powers by eating parts of their enemies.” He folded his hands on his chest and leaned back on the spindly legs of her harp chair. “Ever heard anything so barbaric?”

“Can’t say I have,” Hezekiah glanced at Susannah and motioned their guest closer to the table, which grounded the chair. “Figure Sandia’s nearby. Making sure *we’re* not mistreating his woman.”

“Jest the same, I’ll sleep with my pappy’s old flintlock pistol. Reload that thing plenty fast.”

Hezekiah finally steered the conversation away from the Tonkawas. “Eli’s heading to Natchitoches in the morning to order millstones. We should finish the mill by the time the stones come in from New Orleans.”

“Mark my word, you’ll not be sorry.” Seth nodded toward the bluff. “What about Eli? You have him making regular trips to Natchitoches for supplies?

“That’s the plan. If our neighbors ask, he can bring back anything from coffee to calico and a couple of cows.” Hezekiah pushed his plate back and stood. “Black thunderheads forming south of here. Want to move your bed into the kitchen? Storm could blow you off the dogtrot.”

“Naw. I can sleep through anything. It’s cooler out there.”

Susannah washed dishes and excused herself, hoping to encourage Hezekiah to bed. When he followed, she whispered, “What do you think about that Indian boy?”

“Don’t figure he’ll live ’til morning.” Hezekiah crawled into bed and spoke close to her cheek. “His mother showed me the flowers.”

“It’s pitiful the way she’s grieving.” Susannah shuddered. “The smell’s awful.”

“Been getting worse for several days. Not sure what kind of ceremony they do for their dead. Don’t let it scare you.”

She laid her hand on his shoulder. “I caused all this trouble. And I’ve chased you away.”

“No.” He pulled her fingers to his lips. Then he turned her hand and kissed her palm. “I can’t help loving you.”

Lightning lit the room and instant thunder shook the house. Hezekiah sprang up. “That hit something.” Continuous flashes revealed him pulling on his pants and searching for the lantern near the door. “It struck one of those big oaks in Eli’s camp. We gotta move his wagon.”

Between bolts of lightning, she watched the men help Eli shove the wagon away from the raging fire consuming the tree. Pulling her dress over her gown, she hurried to the kitchen and stirred the embers to rekindle the fire in the little stove. Coffee would ease the chill of their sopping-wet clothing. She left the three men pacing the kitchen, gulping coffee.

The storm continued to rage after Hezekiah came to bed and wrapped his arm around her. “Thanks for making coffee. Mind if I get close to warm up?”

She leaned into his body. “I hope the storm breaks the drought.”

“Hmmm.”

She smiled, aware that Hezekiah was already asleep. Maybe the storm would break the drought between them.

\* \* \*

Susannah awoke when Hezekiah left the bed. Rain still pounded the roof. In the darkness, she could see his white drawers as he bent to rummage in his valise for dry clothing.

“That’s the only place I have to put your clean pants,” she said.

He came toward her, carrying his pants, and sat on the edge of the bed. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Maybe Eli will bring you something for storage.”

She reached for his arm. “What if I’d been honest? Told the truth about Philippe and me? Would you have married me?”

He sat very still. Finally, he stood. “Probably would’ve settled here. Waited for you to get over him.” He leaned down and clutched a handful of her hair. “I’d have come back as many times as it took.”

“Oh, Hezekiah!” She reached for him, but he moved away to light the lantern and stepped onto the dogtrot. Dressing quickly, she met Lizzie coming out of the kitchen. “Them two men is buck naked. You best wait till they put on them wet pants.”

“Is Hezekiah heating the milk?”

“Yes’m. Told ’em to get covered up.”

The two women stood on the dogtrot, watching the sputtering embers that had been the old oak tree. Susannah sighed, “It’s sad seeing that bare spot among those beautiful trees. Did you have damage?”

“Gotta fix roofs. Buckets catching most. Mason says it’s one of them storms he saw in Nawlens that come out of the Gulf.”

“I remember,” Susannah said. “When I went to school down there, we had several big winds and flooding.”

Hezekiah returned, still carrying the bucket of hot milk. “They’re gone. Not a thing there except worn-off grass. I figure the boy died. Probably taking him off to do their grieving.”

“What about your Mad Stone?” Maybe losing it would end explanations to people like Seth Ingram.

“Not a sign anywhere.” Hezekiah stepped into the kitchen, and Susannah followed.

Lizzie had started the biscuits. Seth and Eli were already drinking coffee.

“I’m going to check on the wagon,” Eli said as he gulped the last drop.

“Come back and eat with us,” Susannah called.

“Oh, oh! Look what’s at the front door.” Eli lifted two beautiful pair of moccasins. “They’re wet, but each one holds a rock that kept it from blowing away.”

Hezekiah quickly retrieved the Mad Stone from one shoe and slipped it into his pocket. “Set ’em behind the stove to dry. Couldn’t have come at a better time. Mine are worn out.”

Seth Ingram leaned close. “Prettiest I’ve seen. Sewing all those fancy beads, musta took a spell.”

“See why we’ve tried to be friendly?” Hezekiah picked up the pan of biscuits and carried them to the table in the parlor.

When the rain finally stopped, Susannah accompanied Hezekiah to check on storm damage in the quarters. Venus had tied the baby to her back and was sweeping water out the cabin door.

“Let me keep Robin while you clean up,” Susannah said. “We’re free of the Indians.”

Venus hesitated, her brows twitching as she pondered. “Be a help. Robin keeps tryin’ to crawl, and the leaky roof turned this dirt floor to mud.”

Susannah reached for the baby, who grabbed a handful of red hair and tried to put it in her mouth. “I’ll keep her as long as you need.”

“She be ready to eat near noon.”

“Don’t hurry,” Susannah called as she planted kisses on the neck of her charge. “We’ll practice crawling.”

As Susannah carried the baby up the hill, Hezekiah came from the other cabins. “Why’re you torturing yourself like that?” His lips looked tight, his face an angry scowl.

“Torture? I love this child. I wish Venus would let me keep her every day.”

“You keep pretending she’s yours; it’s gonna make Venus scared you’ll keep her.”

“You, of all people, accusing me of stealing a baby.” Susannah whirled away and ran toward the front of the house before he could see her tears. She heard him call her name and say “Sorry,” but she hurried inside, crying into the softness of Robin’s shoulder.

Much to Susannah’s relief, Hezekiah went out to survey with Seth. She spread her old sheet on the dogtrot’s wood flooring and placed a pan of water just out of Robin’s reach. All morning, the baby struggled to splash her hand in the water. When Venus came to nurse, Robin was ready for a long nap.

Susannah lay on the bed beside the sleeping child and thought of Anna, whose skin was probably the same soft, coffee-milk color. She drew Robin closer and dreamed of Anna laughing and splashing in the water.

\* \* \*

Perhaps it was the warmth of the sun sending gentle breezes and drying the rain-soaked soil that lifted Susannah’s spirits. Or maybe her contentment came from spending more and more time with Robin. Whatever caused her sense of well-being, she welcomed Hezekiah’s accounts of the cattle and his reports of how much land the men were clearing.

Seth Ingram finally completed the survey. On the morning of his departure, Hezekiah and Susannah stood in the yard listening to the clanking of pots and survey equipment as he disappeared into the forest.

Hezekiah slipped his arm around her shoulders. “Just you and me, now. Nobody underfoot.”

Susannah felt the pounding in her chest. “I’m glad.”

“Are you glad to be with me?” His voice sounded husky.

“I . . .I’ve been hoping we could start over, Hezekiah.” She felt him tense and looked up to see Mason stomping toward them, his nostrils flaring with each breath.

“Them two boys didn’t come in last night.” Mason’s face was red. “Bet they ran off with Obie’s women.”

“Shit,” escaped Hezekiah’s lips. Then he offered Susannah a pleading glance. “Be back as soon as I can.”

“What’s going on?” She looked at both men, who seemed hesitant to speak. “What about *your* boys and *those* women?”

Mason turned toward the barn. “I’ll saddle the horses.”

“Ever since we got here, those two have lit out every Saturday night for Obie’s place. Spent their Sunday off with his women. Since Obie’s wife died, I’ve expected him to demand that I buy them. Put a stop to the Saturday night goings-on.”

“Maybe you should. It would keep them at home.”

Hezekiah ran his thumb along her cheek. “I can’t afford two more girls. They aren’t good field hands. Know nothing about cattle. And you and Lizzie manage just fine.”

“Just the same––”

“I was wrong about Lizzie. But I’m right this time.” He leaned down as though he might kiss her, then stepped back as Mason rode up.

She felt as if her knees would buckle as she watched Hezekiah mount his horse, all the time looking at her. “Hurry back,” she said.

“For sure.” He whirled the horse about and trotted into the woods alongside Mason.

She moved through the morning by rote––churning, carrying a bucket into the edge of the woods to pick raspberries, and finally taking a bath and washing her hair––all the time thinking about what she wanted. Did she love Hezekiah, or did she just want a baby? She wondered if he had decided to accept her ambivalence.

With the afternoon stretching ahead, and her mind reeling with indecision, she decided to walk to Ruby’s with a dish of the morning’s butter. She gathered Hezekiah’s britches that needed patching and set out.

As she entered the trail, the trees formed a canopy of isolation. Birds chirped greetings to their mates. She was startled by a deer scrambling to its feet and bolting through the woods. Perhaps she should carry Hezekiah’s flintlock musket when she ventured far from home. When the trail opened into the Chambers’ clearing, she spotted Ruby and Mary Crankston sitting on the porch and felt foolish to be fearful with neighbors so near. She had not heard from Mary since she stormed out of the house when the baby was born. But, when both women waved to her, it was too late to turn back.

“We were talking about you,” Ruby said as she extended her arms in greeting. “Actually, it was your boys we were discussing.”

“So, you’ve heard?”

Mary approached, her lips sealed in a tight smile. “Mister Crankston heard this morning. Then we saw your husband on the way to get them.”

“I thought they ran away.”

“Oh, no! Obie caught them in the act. Chained both culprits to wagon wheels.” Mary’s black eyes danced with pleasure in the telling.

Ruby wrapped her arm around Susannah and walked with her to the porch. “Let me pour you some tea.”

Susannah extended her gift. “I churned butter this morning.”

Mary reached in and lifted the corner of the towel. “I was hoping it was that delicious chocolate like you sent with Mister Crankston.”

“It’s all gone. But, I asked Eli to bring more from Natchitoches.”

Mary cupped her hands over both cheeks. “I did the same when he passed our cabin.”

Susannah wanted to ask if the chocolate had won forgiveness for having a colored baby. Instead, she turned to Ruby. “I’ll bring you some chocolate when Eli returns.”

“I asked Eli for several yards of flannel.” Ruby blushed into her hairline. “For blankets–”

“Baby blankets?” Susannah squealed and grabbed Ruby in a hug. “I was hoping to hear that.”

“I’ve got some old wool dresses I can cut up,” Mary said.

Susannah wanted to ask if the material was black. Instead, she said, “We’ll help you sew. Eli’s bringing several bolts of material from Natchitoches.” She decided not to say she was making clothes for Robin.

“We’re fortunate Eli decided to become a peddler.” Mary leaned close. “Or, has Hezekiah started a mercantile business and hired Eli?”

“I don’t know the arrangements.” Susannah felt an inner satisfaction by denying fodder for the old gossip. The three women spent the afternoon doing handwork and catching up on all the neighbors. Mary shared the sad news that two families had given up trying to make a crop and returned to Tennessee.

When the sun slipped below the trees across the river, Susannah gave up watching for Hezekiah to return and accompany her through the woods. After agreeing to meet more often, Susannah pulled the repaired britches into a bundle and ducked into the forest. She walked as fast as her breath allowed, her eyes darting between shadows moving with every fluttering leaf. Shuddering with relief upon reaching the opening into their yard, she hurried into the kitchen, closed the door, and lit a candle. After moving cautiously into the parlor and scanning every corner, it felt safe to blow out the candle and change into her gown. It had seemed wise to place windows on the back of the house to capture the breeze across their bed, but when she was alone, the openness made her feel exposed to whatever might lurk outside. She sat by the front windows, watching the stars form a radiant blanket across the sky, and listened to activity down in the quarters. Long ago, she had given up hope of them coming to the house. Even Lizzie kept her distance until there was some duty to perform.

The lantern caught her attention before people emerged, followed by Hezekiah and Mason on horseback. She hurried to the dogtrot just as they arrived. “Take care of the horses. I want you men in the field in the morning. And I want you women here to discuss what Miss Susannah needs.”

“Yes, sir,” was the only response as they scattered toward the back of the house.

“I think you made a good choice about the girls,” Mason called as he walked toward the quarters.

“We’ll see.” Hezekiah was on the dogtrot in one leap. He lifted her face to his lips. “I came as fast as I could.”

When she could breathe again, she murmured. “Tell me what happened.”

“Obie wants to go back to Tennessee or Natchitoches or anywhere away from here. As we know, he can’t stay sober long enough to get anything done. He threatened to sell the two women to the next wagon train that came through.”

“And you couldn’t let that happen.”

“Well . . .they’re having babies.”

“I see.” Susannah felt the energy draining from her body.

“Please don’t draw away. I can’t change what I did to you. But I can do it different this time.”

She leaned against him, feeling him caress her hair and stroke her back. Pulling away, she said, “You must be hungry.”

“I forgot.” He reached for his knapsack. “Here’s some bread from Mary Crankston. She called to us as we passed. Looks like she’s over her snit.”

Susannah started to the springhouse. “I saw her today at Ruby’s. All is forgotten. How about cream over raspberries and buttered bread for supper?”

“If you eat with me, it’ll be perfect,” he called.

When she poured the milk into her mother’s pitcher, her hand caressed its cool smoothness. She did not want to live like her parents.

The meal felt awkward. Their conversation was as stilted as two strangers, unsure what to make of each other. Finally, Susannah said, “What should I ask the new girls to do?”

Hezekiah seemed to relax. “I thought they could enlarge the garden. We’ll have a couple of calves before long. All the baby chicks need tending. They’ve been catching a lot of fish for Obie. I figure they’ll fill in with fish when Eli’s gone. Of course, whatever you need in the kitchen.” He leaned close. “I never meant for you to work like one of the slaves.”

“Maybe I’ll have time to sew you some decent shirts when Eli brings the cloth.” She stood and picked up the dishes.

“Is there enough hot water for a bath?” Hezekiah’s smile looked suggestive.

“I filled extra kettles.” She hurried to the kitchen and kept her back turned as she heard him setting up the tub and filling it with water.”

“I’ll get your clean drawers.” She went to his valise, and when she returned to the kitchen, he was stepping into the tub. They both stood still long enough for her to gaze at his naked body. Shaken, it occurred to her that it was always dark when she and Philippe were together. She had no idea how a man looked without clothing. Her mouth felt so dry she could barely mumble, “I washed them.”

He held out his hand, and when their fingers touched, she pulled back. “I’m going to bed.”

“Are you waiting for me?”

She nodded and turned away to keep from collapsing. She changed into her gown and crawled into the bed. Then she took it off and tossed it on the floor. Fearing he might be shocked, she pulled it back over her head. Then she thought to brush her hair. Counting the strokes, she remembered the girls at Ursuline always brushed 100 strokes each morning and again before bed. She jumped when he opened the door, carrying a candle.

His wet hair dripped on bare shoulders, and he had shaved off the stubble of his beard. His drawers fit tight. As he carried the candle across the room, its light showed deep creases in his brow. “The bath washed off my fuzzy thinking. You don’t show any passion for me. You turn away like you can’t look at me naked. I need to know, do you want me? Or have I let my imagination run wild?”

She sucked in her breath. “I want to be a good wife.”

“For God’s sake, Susannah!” He slumped to the bed, bent forward, holding his head in both hands. “You can’t hang onto your nigger lover and use me to have a baby!”

“How dare you speak to me like that!”

He stood and stared down at her for an instant. “It’s true, isn’t it? I’m just replacing little Anna.”

Her fists clenched, and she wanted to hit him, but she couldn’t move. The room grew dark as he carried the candle to the kitchen.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

November 1822

Susannah gazed out the window at the patchwork of blazing fall leaves on the hillside across the river and remembered Hezekiah saying her hair reminded him of sumac leaves. She pulled her shawl close to ward off the chill that plagued her night and day. Those words of affection did not come from him now.

From outward appearance, the place looked to be thriving. The garden the girls had enlarged was already showing fresh young sprouts. Cows bellowed to announce the arrival of another calf, and baby chicks scampered about the henhouse. The slaves had cleaned up their quarters after the storm, and gardens between each cabin burst with an array of greens.

Silence filled their house. Each morning before Lizzie arrived, Hezekiah made coffee and ate leftovers from supper. He was gone by the time Susannah reached the kitchen. In the evening, he returned well after dark, ate alone, and slept on the dogtrot. He moved his bed to the kitchen when a cold front blew in.

This morning Susannah ached for the mother cow, pacing the back lot and poking her head through the fence to bellow for her calf. The baby kept up his long, high-pitched bleat, struggling on wobbly legs to press his nose against the fence and lick the walls of his pen. Hezekiah, determined to start bucket-breaking, insisted that the earlier the mother and baby were separated, the better. He had cornered the calf, but, as all the other painful ordeals proved, no time was good for separating the two.

Over the plaintive cries, Susannah heard the jangle of a wagon. As Eli pulled his wagon into view, Hezekiah hurried from the barn, his pants wet with the smell of milk, his face flushed.

“I got it wrapped up tight!” Eli climbed down, hurried to the back and sprang on the back of the wagon. Waving his arms like a magician, he unfurled the cover on a mirror that sat atop a walnut dresser.

Susannah gasped and stared at the beautiful piece of furniture.

“Lookie here! Mirror tilts so as you can see your skirt.” Eli demonstrated with enough pride for it to have been his gift.

Susannah burst into tears and threw her arms around her husband. “You are the most generous man.”

Eli leaped down and scurried around the other side of the wagon.

Hezekiah removed her arms and looked off toward the forest. “I’m a big sap.”

“Please don’t say that. It’s me. I can’t stop grieving.”

He slowly shoot his head, his face dark with anger. “You don’t *want* to stop grieving. You take care of Robin, pretending she’s yours. Helps you keep hating me.” He looked away. “Been trying to figure what makes me love you. Can’t find a damn thing. I’m done saying I’m sorry. You want to be my wife, you’ll have to come to me.” He brushed past her, calling over his shoulder. “Come on, Eli. Help me move this dresser in the house.”

With the dresser in place, Susannah ran her hand over the smooth wood. “It is the most beautiful furniture I’ve ever owned.”

Hezekiah stood for a minute, looking at their reflection in the mirror. Then he walked out, leaving her to stare at her image. Alone. Susannah placed his clothing in the bottom drawers, arranging hers in the next. Side drawers held her ribbons and combs. On the dresser top, she laid the silver brush her mother had given her when she left for Ursuline Academy. “You are too young to appreciate this,” her mother had said, “but someday you’ll place it atop your dresser, and you will remember me.”

Susannah pressed the piece against her breast and looked in the mirror. As much as she loved her mother, she did not want to be like her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

March 1823

Winter hung on as one storm followed the next. Trees groaned under the weight of ice, and nobody ventured out, which made it surprising to hear knocking on the back door in the middle of the night. “Can Miss Susannah see ‘bout Lizzie?” Venus's voice shook.

“I'm coming right now,” Susannah called as she pulled on her boots and wrapped in a heavy wool cape. When she stepped onto the dogtrot, Hezekiah was closing the kitchen door.

Their steps crunched over the frozen earth while Venus recited all they'd done to help the tiny girl deliver her baby. “Can't feel its head. It ain’t turned right. That girl ’bout give out.”

“What about Obie’s girls? They took care of his wife.”

“They been giving Lizzie hot drinks and poultices. They say ol’ Obie’s woman just up and died. Quit breathing ‘fore any baby showed.”

“Well, let’s see what we can do.” Susannah shook from the cold and from her fear of what lay ahead. She had no idea how to help Lizzie. The only part of Anna's birth that she remembered was the agony of losing her.

The sudden heat of the cabin felt suffocating. Percy was bent over the bed, stroking Lizzie's head. Sweat made his face shine in the candlelight. “It ain't coming.”

Susannah threw off the heavy cape and bent over Lizzie, who reached for her hand. “Told ’em you’d help.”

Susannah's mouth was so dry she could barely speak. “Let me feel for its head.” Her fingers probed as she prayed to know what she was touching. She was the mistress, after all, and they expected her to know.

“Used lard to help it come easier,” Venus whispered.

“That’s good.” She must sound strong, reassure the frightened girl. Lizzie’s body seemed open, willing to release the baby. Slowly probing, she felt a tiny bone, maybe a knee. “It's a leg!” She looked into Percy's solemn nod. “Baby’s turned wrong.”

The oppressive closeness of the room intensified as the bodies hovered, waiting for her to perform a miracle. Susannah pulled air through parted lips to slow her breathing and allowed her fingers to imagine the baby's position. Uncurling a little leg that was wrapped around the other, she tried to shut out the miserable sound of Lizzie’s keening by whispering, “You can do this.”

Lizzie's weak response began a slow release with Susannah gently pulling until the tiny body appeared. “It’s a boy,” she cried into the silent room as his head emerged, and he lay beautiful and still in her bloody hands. Startled by the lifeless figure, she moved his arms, turned him over. and pounded his back. “Breathe!” she begged and pulled him against her to blow puffs of air into the perfect little mouth. Sweating and helpless with no response, Susannah looked into Percy’s face that was twisted with sorrow. He reached for his son, and cradled the infant against his chest, stroking a finger over his cheek. Turning, he laid the baby on Lizzy’s breast and lifted her arms around the child.

Susannah looked away, her hands shaking as she fumbled for rags to pack into the cavity that had just given up a dead baby. When she finished cutting and tying the cord, Venus reached to gather the bloody rags, “Let me clean up.”

Backing away, Susannah felt Percy pull at her sleeve. “She ain’t gonna die?”

Susannah had no assurance to offer. She needed *his* comfort. “I . . .I hope the rags stop the bleeding.”

His eyes begged for more.

“She's strong. We'll keep her warm and make sure she doesn't bleed too much.”

“I'll make chicken soup,” Venue said.

“Yes. Chicken soup is good.” Susannah wondered if that were true.

Aching with the pain of failing Lizzie, Susannah slumped at the foot of the bed while Percy bent over his woman, stroking her face with a wet rag. When Lizzie slipped into sleep, Susannah stood, surprised at how weak she felt. “Let her rest. I'll come back in the morning.” When she opened the door into the cold air, she was surprised to see it was already morning. Robins scurried across the grass that glistened with frost melting in the sunlight. Walking up the hill toward their house, she watched smoke billowing from both chimneys. Despite its rough log walls, it looked like a picture of comfort and stability. And for the first time, she felt the burden of her station––the mistress who must care for a plantation.

Late that afternoon, everyone gathered on the bluff for the baby’s burial. Percy carried his woman, wrapped in a heavy quilt. Tears wet the cheeks of all the faces as they looked at Hezekiah and waited. He read Jesus' words from the Bible, *Suffer the little children to come unto me. For of such is the kingdom of heaven.* Then, he talked about children being special. “This tiny boy blessed Lizzie and Percy by drawing them together to share hope and sorrow. This baby makes their love stronger in their grief.” Hezekiah lifted his eyes to Susannah.

When he finished, she moved to his side, and he allowed her to circle her arm around him. As soon as the crowd began following the grieving couple back to the quarters, Hezekiah turned away, taking long, deliberate strides toward the barn. He did not return until after she went to bed.

\* \* \*

April brought warm weather that sent the men into the fields to begin cotton planting. The new slave women gave birth to two healthy boys, and because Venus hurried between the convalescing women, she allowed Susannah to keep Robin. The baby's walking and chattering was a bitter-sweet reminder of Anna growing up so far away.

As the weeks passed, Susannah grew concerned that she'd not heard from Ruby and set out one morning with a basket of eggs and fresh butter. The cabin looked abandoned, which caused her to call out just as Ruby pulled open the door. Her body showed no evidence of the baby that was due any day. Her hollow cheeks spread into a smile that reminded Susannah that Ruby looked like a skeleton even before her confinement.

Ruby nodded toward her husband stretched out on stained sheets, his snake-bit leg propped on a pillow. “Let's sit on the porch.”

Susannah grabbed her friend in an embrace. “You need to be in that bed.”

“You suppose Hezekiah could spare some help?” Preston's voice was a loud whine. “Ruby's not worth anything in the field. And I'm a cripple.”

“I'll speak to my husband. Meantime, you need to get up. Ruby needs the bed.”

Preston grunted, struggled to his feet, and hobbled onto the porch.

Susannah pulled the sheets as tight as she could over the cornshuck mattress––the same bedding used by slaves––and wrapped a quilt over Ruby. “I'll scramble eggs. Then I'll go home for some stew I left on the stove.” She stroked Ruby's pallid cheek. It felt way too warm. “Please stay in bed. Preston needs to be waiting on *you*.”

Ruby smiled. “I've given up.”

Susannah was surprised to see Hezekiah at the kitchen door when she reached home. “You're back earlier than I thought. Anything wrong with Ruby?”

She slumped at the table. “Ruby's worked herself near death. She won't live to have this baby unless her lazy husband gets some help.” She looked at Hezekiah and thought he was about to reach for her. Then he straightened up. She squeezed her eyes shut, determined to keep back tears.

“I'll go later.” He sounded disgusted. “See what they need. Maybe a couple of boys can get him going.”

Susannah scooped some of the stew to take with her.

He touched her arm as she started to the door. “Don't work yourself to death for that lazy bum.”

“It's for Ruby. She's my only friend.” Susannah smiled to herself as she hurried through the woods. He didn't want her to work too hard. Maybe that was a good sign.

The food and attention that Susannah offered did not rouse Ruby. Despite Hezekiah sending help, Preston continued his incessant grumbling. In the middle of the third night, he called from the bed. “She's cold as a corpse.”

Susannah jumped from the pallet spread in the corner of the room. Her heart ached when she held the candle up to the slack face. “Her body's too weak to give up this baby.”

Preston sat at the end of the bed and sobbed. “She's all I got. I can't stay in this wilderness without her.”

Susannah didn't try to comfort the man or stop her tears as she held her friend's hand, feeling her pulse slow. Then stop. Finally, pulling herself up from the side of the bed, she wondered if this brutal wilderness would kill all the women. “I'll get her ready. Hitch your wagon. We can take her to our place for burial.”

Preston dug his hands into his pockets. “What's wrong with burying her here?”

“Nothing's wrong, Preston. But, if you're going to leave, why can't she be near someone who loves her?”

He shrugged his shoulders a time or two, then dropped his head. “I'm getting out of this god-awful place. Drought killed my corn crop. I came as near starving as the deer. Now I ain't got no help. Fix her up. I'll get the wagon.”

Susannah watched his step quicken; his responsibility gone. Turning to the task of preparing the body, she retrieved a faded dress that lay neatly pressed in Ruby's trunk. Susannah pulled it to her cheek. “I'll miss sharing secrets with you, dear one.”

When Preston lifted his wife's body into the wagon, early morning light showed the trail through the woods.

Before the wagon clattered to a complete halt, Hezekiah stepped out the kitchen door and rushed to lift Susannah off the wagon bench before she could scramble down. “It's over?”

She nodded and leaned against his chest. “Our graveyard is growing too fast.”

“I'll get some of the boys to help.” Hezekiah motioned Preston into the kitchen. “I cooked sausage and eggs. You and Susannah can eat while we open the grave.”

Hezekiah started to the barn for shovels and then turned back. “Want me to send for Mary and Joseph? We can wait for them to come.”

Preston shrugged. “Suppose that’s proper. Can’t say I care for ’em, but Miss Mary’s hung around a tolerable bit.”

Preston talked while he ate every morsel from the breakfast skillet. “Gotta sell off Ruby’s stuff to buy supplies for that trip back to God’s country.”

“Where’s that?” Susannah didn’t try to hide her disdain.

“Not Texas, for damn sure. Natchitoches, maybe. Get enough for her bowls; make it to Tennessee.”

“I’ll buy them.” She watched the man’s head snap up.

“You pay twenty dollars? She’s got a pile of them things.”

*Her treasures mean nothing to him.* “I’ll pay you when I pick them up.”

“I aim to leave in a day or so. Think Hezekiah’ll buy my place?”

Breathless with fury at how he tossed away the bowls, Susannah stammered, “You. . .you’ll have to ask him.”

“Believe I will.” He rose quickly, then ambled outside, and stopped at a distance to watch Hezekiah and the boys dig the grave.

She nibbled at a piece of bread and thought of how it had felt when Hezekiah lifted her from the wagon. Ruby would have loved to hear that.

Chapter Thirty

Summer 1823

Hezekiah became more impatient with each passing day after word spread that Stephen Austin had returned from Mexico with an agreement that colonists could keep their slaves. Austin and the new land commissioner, Baron de Bastrop, would visit the settlements to issue land titles.

Susannah often heard her husband ranting to Mason. “I’m curious to see this Bastrop character. What’s a *baron* doing around here? If he doesn’t show up soon, I’m going after him. I bought Preston Chamber’s land figuring the gristmill would give me enough clout to qualify for the extra acreage. And the damn millstones haven’t arrived.”

Susannah listened with increasing sadness to Hezekiah shouting his list of grievances. Ruby would have understood her fears of him becoming a working machine. And like a machine, he was devoid of feeling––no longer the man she married. She would have told Ruby that the most painful part of watching him change was knowing she had been the trigger.

When Seth Ingram arrived in early August, Susannah hoped he would calm Hezekiah down.

“Bastrop assigned me to this Brazos District,” Ingram said. “Figured I’d start with your place.”

“I was about to give up on you,” Hezekiah stuck his chin out like he was ready for an argument.

“Aw!” Ingram said with a grin. “You ain’t uttering a breath of truth. I saw how you already got that piece of land next to you. You know well as I do that gristmill is gonna be contribution enough to earn you that extra land.”

Hezekiah settled down and became almost jolly when Ingram reassured him that agreements with the Mexican government allowed colonists to grow tobacco and keep their slaves. He leaned back and even smiled at Susannah. “Preston’s land ought to bring in a good tobacco crop.”

She nodded and wondered if he realized that he’d smiled at her.

Seth Ingram huddled close to Hezekiah like a man about to share a secret. “I came hoping you’d accompany me along this side of the river. Explain all the legal ins and outs. The baron’s having trouble with folks complaining about paying Austin twelve and a half cents an acre.”

Hezekiah barked, “*Mister de Baron* needs to realize nobody made a nickel last year.”

“Now, jest a dang minute before you jump.” For a little man, Seth Ingram looked plenty bristly. “They ain’t asking for money from those don’t have it. Upon receipt of the title, Austin will take a little––horses, mules, furs, even beeswax––any property. Depends on capacity to pay. Balance in one to three years.”

Hezekiah shrugged. “Sounds reasonable––”

“Damn right, it’s reasonable. But I need you to explain it. You know these folks. Since I’m done with the surveys, figure it’ll take about two weeks to make the rounds.”

“Glad to.” Hezekiah sounded eager.

“We need the titles secure before Tonkawas scare off the families. Down on the Colorado, they’re stealing folks blind. Austin’s about to send a militia. May call on your men to teach them a lesson.”

Susannah had been sitting throughout the meal without speaking, but Seth’s words made her cold with fear. “You think they’ll come back?” She glanced at Hezekiah for reassurance.

He ignored her and spoke to Seth. “Let me know if I’m needed.”

“I thought you considered the Tonkawa our neighbors,” Susannah insisted. It was clear the way Hezekiah stiffened that her words irritated him.

Seth interrupted, “Miss Susannah, surely you know by now that we can’t trust them Indians. They’re slippery as hogs––rooting around friendly one day and rank thieves the next.”

Susannah stood and began clearing the supper plates. “Would you leave Bramble with me?”

That caught Hezekiah’s attention. “Suppose he’ll stay.”

“He will if you tell him.” She didn’t want Hezekiah to know how unsettled she felt. “With the hands in the field all day and Ruby gone, help’s a long way off.”

There was a trace of concern in his eyes when he looked up. He stood abruptly. “Yeah. I’ll leave him. Come on, Seth. Wanna see a good-looking bunch of calves?”

She watched him lead Seth Ingram to the barn and already felt his absence.

The men were talking about Indian wars when Susannah went to bed. She lay there wondering where Hezekiah would sleep. His bed would go to Seth Ingram tonight.

She roused when he and Bramble came into the parlor. Each boot dropped on the floor. Then he hopped on one foot, taking off his pants, obviously wanting her to know he was in the room.

“I don’t intend to sleep on the floor,” he said as he climbed into the bed.

“I’m glad you’re here, Hezekiah.” She meant it.

He turned his back and lay perfectly still. For a long time, his silence exposed his fraud. Finally, she heard him breathing slow and easy.

Not a breath of air soothed the bed. Although there had been enough rain to produce a good corn crop, and cotton bolls were ready to burst, she longed for the kind of breeze that comes just before a storm. It would lull her to sleep. Perhaps she could think more clearly if Hezekiah *were* gone for a few weeks.

She awoke to him dressing, this time trying to be quiet. As soon as he left, she got up. The coffee smelled rich when she entered the kitchen, and biscuits added an inviting aroma. While Lizzie finished the ham and eggs, Susannah set the table in the parlor, away from the hot stove.

The men had brought the horses up by the time breakfast was ready. Hezekiah seemed excited during the meal, filling Seth in on the various neighbors and their crops. Watching his energy, she wondered if it sprang from eagerness to get away from her.

She stuffed the leftover ham and biscuits in his valise and followed him to the horses. As he accepted the food, she touched his arm. “Be careful.”

His eyes lingered a second too long. Then he nodded and mounted his horse.

Bramble scampered after the mare. Hezekiah had to tell him three times to go back before the dejected animal returned to Susannah’s side. She reached down, stroking his coarse fur. “We’ll have to take care of each other, ol’ boy.”

For the next three days, she sewed dresses for all three babies in the quarters, but Venus refused to let Robin stay with her. “Never know when them Tonks gonna come back.” Susannah feared it was true.

On the fourth morning, Mason was at the barn with another grieving mama cow separated from her calf. Susannah asked him to saddle her mare for a day trip to Mary Crankston’s. She’d make a neighborly call and escape the cow’s painful bellows that continued to open old wounds.

“That’s a prime idea, you calling on Miss Mary.” Mason’s face flushed, just like Hezekiah’s when he was uncomfortable. “Gotta be mighty lonesome in that big house with Hez gone.”

*Big house?* Susannah felt *her* face getting red. She had not considered how her home looked to the residents of the quarters. “I thought it’d be good for Rose to have a little run.”

“She’ll like it. I ride her ever few days to keep down the friskies. She’ll be tickled to take you up the road.”

Susannah gave Rose a chunk of sugar and rubbed the mare’s neck while Mason saddled her. As he tightened the girth strap, he looked up, “You’ll be in ’fore dark?”

Surprised and a little pleased at his concern, she smiled. “I’ll let Bramble trail me, but I won’t be late.”

“Good. Hez would have my neck if I let you roam about at night.”

She laughed, “Did he tell you to watch out for me?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. Besides making sure the boys keep picking cotton, you're my main job. That was Hez’s last and loudest instruction.”

Startled by the revelation, she stared at Mason. “I had no idea––”

“Sure ’nough.” He grinned. “I never saw anybody so smitten.” He locked his hands and leaned forward to assist her mount.

Susannah touched his arm with her fingertips. “I’m glad you told me.”

“Ha! Don’t you go telling.” His eyes grew serious as he looked up at her in the saddle. “I thought you might wanna know.”

“Yes.” Her throat constricted in a choking sob as Mason lifted her basket of darning and gift chocolates for Mary. With a tap of the reins, the mare began a gentle trot. Just as Philippe had said when she imagined no one knew about their meetings––“You can’t hide secrets from the quarters.”

Susannah had planned to enjoy the ride and feel the coolness of the forest against her face as Rose trotted, but she was blind to everything except Hezekiah. Perhaps all his anger had been a defense. He had said if she wanted to be his wife, she had to come to him. How would he have responded if she had wrapped her arms around him that night when he lay awake so long?

When she reached the clearing at Ruby’s empty cabin, Susannah’s breath caught in shock at the deterioration. An old hog that Preston had been too lazy to take with him had gone feral and stood defiantly in the open doorway. Trash cluttered the yard as if it had been thrown about in anger. Susannah felt as empty and abandoned as the scene around her. She wept as her mare trotted on, enjoying the outing. Before reaching the Crankstons, she used her sleeve to dab away the tears.

While the cabin was not large, a cheerful array of flowers bloomed across the front, and sheets swayed on a line strung at the back of the house.

“Well, look who’s here!” Mary called as she came around the corner, drying her hands on an apron bulging over her full belly.

Susannah dismounted and then realized she had been staring. Collecting herself, she reached to wrap Mary in a hug. Pulling back, she said, “I am delighted to *see* you. And surprised!

Mary untied her apron to let her black dress fall loosely over her middle. “This one’s gone well so far. Each day I have more hope.” She tucked her arm in Susannah’s. “Let’s sit on the porch where it’s cooler.”

When Susannah unwrapped the chocolate, Mary squealed. “I have wanted chocolate for months. Unfortunately, Mister Crankston ate the last of Eli’s supply.”

“Let’s hide this, so it’s just for you,” Susannah whispered.

Mary laughed. “I’ll probably eat it before Mister Crankston comes in for supper.” Then her face fell, and she appeared near tears. “Susannah, it must work this time. I’m thirty-two, much too old to keep trying.”

Susannah looked into the pleading eyes and realized they needed each other. She clasped Mary’s hand. “Let me send Lizzie to help until this baby comes.”

“Oh!” Mary gasped, “Shouldn’t you ask Hezekiah?” Then her little black eyes squeezed almost shut. “My, my, I almost forgot! She’s *your* slave. You traded your harp.”

Susannah waited a moment, telling herself that Mary had no control over her mouth. “Lizzie can keep you from working too hard.”

“You’re so kind. Hezekiah was lucky to find you in Natchitoches. Mister Crankston and I marveled at how quickly he captured your heart.”

*Captured my heart! “*Hezekiah has been good to me.” The words caught in her throat, and she felt her face burning.

“Yes, all those marvelous gifts. . . ”

Susannah knew Mary was trying to get her to talk about Baby Anna, but she spoke the truth. Hezekiah had tried. And she had rebuffed every effort. “I need to get back before dark. In the morning, I’ll send Lizzie.”

“It looks like you won’t need her for a while—no little bundle in there. You’re so young. I keep expecting you’ll join the ranks of all the mothers in our settlement.” Mary’s big smile exposed yellowed teeth that Susannah had never noticed. *Just like a witch!*

Susannah turned and stepped off the porch, determined not to continue the conversation. “Look for Lizzie in the morning.”

Mary’s “Thank you, thank you” followed Susannah as she hooked the empty basket over her arm, heaved herself into the saddle, and tapped Rose a little too hard. The mare bolted forward, and Susannah gave her free rein. Bramble, sprawled in the shade of a tree throughout the visit, scampered through the woods, chasing squirrels.

The forest shade tempered the heat and finally lowered Susannah’s temperature. Pulling Rose to a gentle trot, Susannah tried to shove aside her nagging guilt for sending Lizzie into that den of petty blather. She would warn the girl to close her mind to it all.

The following morning, Lizzie looked startled to see Susannah in the kitchen so early. “You feelin bad?”

“I wanted to catch you first thing this morning. Did you know Miss Mary Crankston is having a baby any day now?”

Lizzie scrunched her shoulders a fraction and busied herself cranking the coffee grinder. “Believe I heard.”

*Of course, you people know everything.* “She needs help.” Susannah’s heart sank as Lizzie’s head jerked up. She rushed on, “I thought you could stay with her until after the baby comes.”

“Stay the nights?” Her eyes opened so wide that the whites glowed in the candlelight. Turning away, she measured the coffee, assembled the pot, and poured the hot water. Her fingers trembled as they slipped along the fleur-de-lis pattern decorating the elegant wedding gift. Finally, she faced Susannah. “How long, you suppose?”

Susannah assumed a light air. “Any day, now. Then a week or so until Mary gets her strength back.”

Lizzie nodded and wiped the pan that had held the roasted coffee beans. “Need more beans browned.” Her head shot up. “Who’s gonna milk?

“I can milk. We only have two cows right now.” Susannah sank onto Hezekiah’s bed. “I know I should go, Lizzie. But I can’t abide Mary Crankston more than a couple of hours.” She watched Lizzie’s quick little movements as the girl sliced only enough bread for her mistress’s breakfast and cracked a couple of eggs. *She would refuse if she weren’t my slave.* Shame made her say, “How about Percy staying the nights with you?”

“Oh? Yes, ma’am!”

“I’ll talk to Mason. Maybe he can spare a mule for Percy. Meantime, gather what you’ll need.”

After the girl scurried away like a frightened mouse, Susannah sat on the little bed where Hezekiah slept. Stroking the old quilt covering his thin mattress, she thought of how empty Lizzie’s nights would be without her lover.

Susannah headed to the barn with the milk pails and found Mason hitching the mules.

He looked up and said, “Lizzie got a burr under her saddle? She’s down there swinging onto Percy and bawling like a baby.”

“It’s my fault.” While Susannah explained the dilemma, Mason nodded. “Is it possible for Percy to take a mule and stay with her every night?”

“Might as well. He’ll get there anyhow. Be more use in the field if he’s not worn out. I’ll send him along when we get in tonight.”

Susannah sighed. “Thanks for understanding.”

Mason shrugged and turned back to the mule. “Not one to stand in the way of lovers.”

“That’s true,” Susannah whispered to herself as she started back to the house. Then she stopped and walked back into the barn. Mason looked surprised.

“The other day, did you mean it when you said Hezekiah was smitten with me?”

Mason’s face softened into a gentle smile as he laid aside the mule’s harness. “I did.”

“What made you tell me?” She tried to moisten her lips, but her mouth had turned to cotton.

“I been watching over Hez since he drew his first breath. I hate seeing him and you hurting one another. Specially when you don’t neither one mean it.”

She hugged her arms tight around her middle to control the trembling that had taken over her body. “That leaves me to make the first move.”

He stood, arms hanging at his sides. “Way I figure it.”

She nodded, her throat closing with emotion. “If you saddle my mare, I’ll take Lizzie and get back quickly. I want to be home when Hezekiah returns.” She started out of the barn and stopped suddenly. “I forgot. I told Lizzie I’d do the milking.”

“I noticed them cows nudging up against the door.”

“Yes, well. I suppose they come in here to milk?”

“Bessie’s always first. She’ll poke her head in that trough expecting some good hay. Want me to toss it in?”

“Please.” She watched Mason pull hay down from the rafters just as Bessie came in to feed.

Susannah took a little stool down from a nail and settled at the animal’s udder. Rubbing her hands on her skirt to warm them, she gently fingered one of the teats. It felt firm, and the cow appeared not to notice. Remembering how the women had gently milked her breasts, she wrapped her hand around the udder and squeezed.

Bessie kicked the milk bucket against the wall and stepped sideways, knocking Susannah off the stool and onto the earthen floor.

Rubbing her shoulder, she scrambled up as Mason came into the barn.

“Want me to show you how Bessie likes to be milked?” His lips, seamed shut, did not hide the amusement in his eyes. Tightening a rope around Bessie’s neck, he squatted and wrapped his giant hand around one teat. “Squeeze it off at the top and then work your fingers down, starting with the middle finger, then the ring, and the little.” Milk hit the pail and kept coming as he reached with the other hand for the second teat and began alternating one hand and then the other, cascading milk into the bucket. Finally, he stepped back. “I’ll stay around and show you how to finish up. Don’t want to leave any milk lest her udder goes bad.”

“I guess it’s clear, I’ve never milked.”

“You’ll be good once your hands and arms get accustomed.”

Determined to show him, she took the first teat and began the massaging motion. Sure enough, milk started to come. It wasn’t long until she knew what he meant about getting used to it. Her hands and forearms were beginning to hurt from the constant motion. It seemed odd that all those years playing the harp hadn’t strengthened her for milking. She stared at the cow’s hairy body bulging into her face and wondered how long it would take to empty that thing.

Voices speaking in hushed tones outside the barn were clearly Mason and Lizzie. The girl stuck her head in the door. “How ’bout I milk the other one so’s we can get on to Miss Mary’s?”

“Please, yes!” She closed her eyes to the steady motion and listened to Lizzie’s cow giving up milk by the gallon. Sweating and weak with fatigue, she was glad when Mason finally returned to show her how to tell when the udder was empty. As she and Lizzie carried their buckets of milk back to the house, she dreaded doing it again that night.

\* \* \*

Very early on the third morning, Susannah had just returned from milking when Percy thudded onto the dogtrot.

“She done had that baby!” Percy was breathless, and the mule was wet from the hard run.

“Are they well?”

“Yes’m. You be proud of Lizzie. She knowed what to do. Miss Mary hollered a lot, but it wasn’t long ’til she had a fat boy.”

“I’ll go right away.” Susannah rubbed her aching arms that were still not used to milking and wrapped a towel around last night’s fried fish––a meal intended for Hezekiah if he had come home. She’d been sending the uneaten food to the quarters, but today, it would go to Mary and Joseph.

The sun was already lighting the forest when she and Bramble started. He ran alongside until he spotted a deer or some other challenge, then tore off in a storm of yapping. His noise alerted Lizzie, who came across the clearing to meet Susannah.

“It’s a fine boy. He’s doing good, but Miss Mary’s not happy ’bout nothing.”

Susannah handed down the basket and dismounted. “Is she hemorrhaging?”

Lizzie walked alongside Susannah. “Jest from her mouth.”

Susannah laughed. “Oh, Lizzie, I’m sorry. I’ll try to calm her down.”

When they stepped into the cabin, Lizzie stood stiff as a soldier.

“So, that’s why she ran off. I tell you, that girl flits around like a cockroach.” Mary was sitting up in bed with the baby latched to her breast.

“He looks beautiful!” Susannah stroked the bald head. “What’re you naming him?”

“Joseph. Can’t be nothing else.” The proud father spoke from his place at the table. He smacked his lips over a mound of grits and eggs. “It’s a fact. That girl of yours can cook.”

“She’s a prize, for sure.” Susannah smiled at Lizzie, who was heating water for the dishes.

“Yep. Been thinking I’d offer a trade. We got a litter of piglets a couple of weeks ago. Figured to offer three or four of the best.” The crash made them all jump. “Jesus, girl!” Joseph rapped his spoon on the table. “Get that cleaned up!”

Lizzie held her wet skirt away from her legs while the hot water streaked across the packed dirt floor. Whimpering, she bent to retrieve the scattered dishes.

“Let me help,” Susannah circled her arm around Lizzie. “Are you burned?”

“Little bit.” Lizzie looked like a terrified child.

“You have any lavender oil?” Susannah asked.

Mary dangled her feet off the bed as she burped her son. Pointing to a shelf near the hearth, she said, “Don’t use much.”

Lizzie’s legs looked scalded, but no blisters were forming as Susannah dabbed the pungent oil. “Go to the porch, and take a nap. You’ve been up all night.”

“Oh, please, no, Miss Susannah,” Lizzie whispered.

“Don’t worry.” Susannah patted the girl’s shoulder. “You’re staying with me.”

Mary stretched out beside her sleeping baby. “That’s her first mess.”

“Looks like you’ll be able to manage for yourself in a few days.” Susannah refilled the dishpan and rinsed the mud off the dishes.

“I’m serious about making a trade,” Joseph said as he rose from the table, facing Susannah.

“She can stay until Mary gets stronger,” Susannah said. “Then I need her at home.”

“We’ll see what Hezekiah says––”

“That won’t happen.” Susannah pulled back her shoulders and glared at Joseph. *I am an inch taller!* She lowered her voice. “Lizzie belongs to me. I won’t trade her.”

Joseph’s brushy black eyebrows twitched. Turning on his heel, he stepped out the door and stared down at Lizzie. “Your mistress is a big ol’ hard-headed woman.”

Susannah did not hear a sound from Lizzie, but she knew the girl was curled into a knot of fear. Turning to Mary, sitting cross-legged in the bed, taking in the whole thing, Susannah said, “She needs to be home at night. I’ll send her to help during the day.”

“I’m sorry Mister Crankston upset you; he’s trying to care for me,” Mary said.

“I’ll help Lizzie get your sheets washed and cook supper. Then, she’ll return each day in time to cook breakfast.” Susannah began soaking the bloody sheets before building a fire under the wash pot.

That evening when they rode back through the forest, Susannah felt the girl’s face pressed against her back. “Miss Susannah, I’m mighty glad to be going home.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Late Summer 1823

The earth had baked brown, and days passed in silence broken only by the incessant song of cicadas. Everyone in the quarters left before dawn to get as much cotton picked as daylight allowed. Late the day, Susannah and Bramble enjoyed a cool swim and a bath in the river. They would both smell good when Hezekiah returned. But each night, she went to bed disappointed.

Toward the end of September, she had finished bathing when Bramble erupted in wild barking as he paddled toward the far bank. Suddenly afraid of what he might be chasing, she hurried out of the water and began dabbing her dress to dry it. Then she spotted the horse, and Hezekiah threw up his arm to wave.

She grabbed the combs that she’d left with her towel and tried to smooth her hair. She wanted to swim to him but waited when he jumped from his horse. “Throw me the soap,” he called as he neared the shore.

Her heart racing, she grabbed the bar and threw it to him. He laughed at Bramble swimming circles around him as he scrubbed his hair and face. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the bank. Then his wet pants landed in the mud. She grabbed them, holding them against her as he came out of the water with his drawers clinging against him.

“Welcome home,” she whispered and waited for him to kiss her. Instead, he patted her shoulder, accepted her wet towel, and moved toward the house holding the reins of his horse in one hand and rubbing his hair dry with the other.

“That river bath was a good welcome.”

She trailed him, carrying his wet clothing, an aching hole opening in her chest. “I’m glad you’re back.”

He waved the towel to acknowledge her words. “You’ll never believe the past three weeks. Met everybody on the west side of the river. Nice folks.” He turned slightly and grimaced. “Trouble is, Bell appointed me constable for our side of the Brazos.”

“Should I congratulate you?” She trotted to move up beside him.

He shook his head. “Austin’s sending about thirty of us out to punish the Tonkawas. Seems they’ve been raiding settlers along the Colorado. Stealing horses.”

“You have to leave again?” She reached for his arm to steady herself.

He nodded and kept walking. “First thing in the morning. Do I have any clean clothes?” He stopped and pulled from his saddlebag a shirt and pants that smelled like something dead.

“Oh!” Her mind went blank. “I’m sure. Everything’s washed.”

He handed her the dirty garments and went into the kitchen. “Anything to eat?” He reached for the stove and lifted the lid of a slow-cooking pot of venison stew.

“I’ve been cooking every night . . .in case you came home.” She touched his arm again and felt no response. Her eyes trailed his chest and half-dry drawers. “I’ll get you some pants and a shirt.”

“I’ve worn the same two shirts and pants all this time.”

“Let me get the wash pot boiling; then I can eat with you,” she called as she started down the dogtrot.

“Not necessary. I’m starved. Then I gotta check on Mason.”

His words felt like slaps. Heat from the roaring fire dried her tears as she dumped spring water and grated lye soap into the iron pot. His clothes needed to soak before she scrubbed out the smell. She was still stirring the dirty brew with a long stick when he came around the house leading his horse. His sandy hair looked ever more sun-bleached than she remembered. He had stuffed his shirt into pants that fit tight, and he wore Indian moccasins. He barely looked in her direction on the way to the barn.

She had finished scrubbing his clothes and had thrown them into the rinse water when he emerged with his brushed and fed mare.

“The crew still down in the south field?”

She nodded and went on with the laundry. Ruby would have said to chase after him, but she could not take more of his indifference. After stretching his clothes on a line, she went to the kitchen, spooned some stew and cornbread. Finally, she returned it all to the stove and went to the parlor to watch the last of the sunset.

When all the hands returned from cotton-picking, they moved in mass to the river. As they bathed away the hours of sweat, they began to sound joyful. It was dark before they returned to their quarters.

She did not know Hezekiah had returned until she heard him pull his bed from the kitchen onto the dogtrot. The door was open into the parlor, but he made no effort to see if she were still awake.

*Go to him, go to him* kept running through her head. Ruby would call her a fool for waiting. Finally, she pulled on her gown and stepped to the door. She planned to say how glad she was that he was home when she heard his familiar snore. The man did not long for her. He was already asleep.

Susannah slept very little, fearing she would not wake in time to make breakfast for Hezekiah. Finally, she dressed by the light of a full moon and stopped in surprise when she stepped onto the dogtrot. He was sitting on the side of his bed, holding his head in both hands.

“I…I’ll get your breakfast.”

He did not look up. “Where’s Lizzie?”

“I let her work for Mary after she had a baby boy. Then I figured I didn’t really need Lizzie in the mornings with you gone.”

“Why didn’t *you* help Mary?”

Susannah stood still, her throughs whirling. Finally, she said, “I can’t stand to be around her for that long.”

“I figured with Ruby gone, you’d want to make friends with somebody.”

His words stung like needles piercing her chest. “Hezekiah, I’m sorry I’ve been so hard to live with.”

He stepped into his pants. “I’m used to it, Susannah. How about making coffee?”

Blind with tears, she stumbled into the kitchen and lit a candle. While the stove heated, she mixed up biscuits and pulled sausage and eggs from the spring house.

The biscuits were almost done when he came in, poured coffee, and paced the room while he sipped the hot brew. “Don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Mason will take care of the fields. You know how to dig up the chest if you need money.”

“Must you leave so soon? I’ve missed you.” She choked, couldn’t hide her tears.

“It feels like a mistake to go after the Tonkawas. Might even be white men doing the thievery.”

“I hope you stay safe.” She could barely speak and kept her head down as she poured last night’s stew in a jar and wrapped up the cornbread. She started to the parlor with the biscuits when he stopped her.

“Stuff the sausage in the biscuits. I’ll carry them with me.”

“You won’t sit down for breakfast?”

“Need to get going.” He reached for the coffee pot and emptied it into his old wooden canteen, the one he claimed had belonged to his pa.

She finished packaging the food and followed him out the door. *This was her last chance.* When he reached his horse, she threw her arms around him, buried her face in his chest and felt his heart pounding. “I love you, Hezekiah. I’m sorry I destroyed your love for me.”

His arms circled her and held tight for only a moment before he let go and swung into the saddle. “Let’s hope for better times, Susannah.” His voice was thick.

She watched him turn his horse south, blending into the darkness at the spot where the Tonkawa boy had first appeared. Cold fear settled over her as she imagined how the tribe might get even for him taking up arms against them. Butcher him? Come here, attack their settlement?

Chapter Thirty-Two

Fall 1823

Temperatures soared––good weather for picking cotton and turning the nights into hotbeds of sleeplessness. Hezekiah’s words about Susannah not having friends drove her to Mary Crankston’s every few days. She passed the endless mornings sewing for the babies and every afternoon she and Bramble cooled off in the river. The slightest movement––a leaf dropping or a deer roaming into view on the far bank––made them both alert with expectation. While she glanced toward the river many times a day, Bramble was more open about missing his master. He spent each day sprawled in the shade at the top of the bluff, watching the other side of the river.

One evening after the field hands had come in, Susannah heard low bellowing. It had to be oxen. Bramble shot to attention at her side, his hackles stood up, and he growled low as he moved beside her into the yard. The lantern revealed a pair of mules driven by a large woman whose veiled hat hid her face. Close behind, Eli leaped from a large cart pulled by complaining oxen. As he hustled to help the woman set the brake and clamber stiffly to the ground, Bramble bound to him, leaping and yapping until Eli scooped the animal into a fierce hug. “This ol’ dog was the most comfort a man ever had. Slept right next to me for several nights after we buried Josey.”

Ignoring Eli and the dog, the woman stretched out a calloused hand that gripped like a man. “You must be Miss Susannah. Don’t know when I been so glad to see a body.” She smiled at Eli, fully a half foot shorter. “I’m Pearl, Eli’s wife.”

Susannah blinked to clear her head. “So happy to meet you! What a wonderful surprise.”

“Yep. Like I told Pearl, it was fast courtin’.” Eli looked like an old rooster stretching his neck. “Worked out for both of us.”

Pearl laughed, a deep rich sound erupting from her belly. “Eli needed a driver, and I needed a husband.”

Susannah realized she was laughing, too, as she led the pair toward the kitchen. “Have some leftover fish and cornbread before you unhitch the animals.”

Eli shook his head. “Hezekiah’ll want to unload ‘fore it gets any later.”

“He’s been gone over a month. Fighting Indians down on the Colorado.”

“Well, if that don’t beat all. Make friends with ’em. Then kill ’em.”

Susannah breathed a deep sigh. “My sentiments as well.”

“I gotta get the boys to unload ’fore they turn in.” Eli started to the quarters, then called over his shoulder. “Go on and eat. Them boys is strong as bulls. They’ll help me.”

With the lantern held close, Susannah could see that the bride’s smile showed far-apart front teeth and lively blue eyes. Her hair, a tumble of sun-streaked blond curls, made her look like an overgrown child. But she didn’t eat like a child.

She squeezed into the space next to the kitchen work table. Between huge bites, Pearl said, “I’m not much of a cook. And Eli’s worse. This here’s the best I’ve had since Natchitoches.” She suddenly stopped and placed her fork on her plate. “I’m eating like a pig. Bet you fixed all this for company.”

Susannah laughed, embarrassed. “I cook supper every night in case my husband comes home.”

“Ohhh, that’s sad. Gone a month, and you’re still cooking.”

Susannah was relieved to be interrupted by the men carting in barrels of coffee, sugar, white flour, and a large box of chocolate. Then, Eli called from the dogtrot. “Come tell us where to put these things.”

When Susannah entered the parlor, the men held two elegant mahogany chairs with sloping leather backs.

“They’re Campeachy chairs. Hezekiah got them for your sewing and his sitting.” Without waiting for direction, Eli scooted both rockers to the front windows. “Figure you’ll sit by the fire when it gets cold.” He stepped back. “Wanna try it?”

Susannah fought to keep from weeping as she settled into the sloping chair, her hands stroking the smooth arms. “I’ll sit here all day. Never get a thing done.”

“Figure that’s what he wanted. You being a lady and all.” Eli folded his arms, a slight smile deepening the wrinkles in his face.

Pearl stood in the doorway, holding a slice of cornbread. “I told him them chairs are called *butacas* in New Orleans. They come in on ships.”

Susannah hugged her arms tight across her chest, warmed by the pleasure of a gift from Hezekiah. Since Eli needed to direct the unloading, and Pearl wanted to finish eating, Susannah relished a chance to sit in the chair, feel Hezekiah’s presence, and wonder when he placed the order. When did he last plan for them to sit together?

Finally, pulling herself away from the reverie, she began storing the hanks of wool yarn she planned to knit into warm socks for everyone on the place. Eli had remembered to bring bolts of fabric for the adults and shoes for the children. They had gone barefoot all summer, but as the weather cooled, they would need button shoes.

When the evening settled down, Susannah insisted the pair sleep in Hezekiah’s bed on the dogtrot. Eli stood still, finally appearing to work up his nerve to say, “Hoping I could build us a little cabin back yonder. Not in the quarters, but back a piece from there.”

“Let’s talk to Mason. He’s the boss right now.” She felt relieved Eli wasn’t planning to make his first wife’s gravesite into a campground.

Even though the hour was late by the time the house settled down, Susannah could not sleep. Moonlight streaming in the front windows lit the Campeachy chairs sitting side-by-side. Finally, she slipped out of bed and settled into her place, imagining Hezekiah beside her. Although he had ordered the chairs months ago, maybe the spark was still there. Maybe she could capture his heart again.

Stirring noises on the dogtrot woke her. She dressed quickly and found Lizzie and Pearl in the kitchen. The tiny girl and the giant bride circled each other preparing breakfast.

“I looked in, and you was sound asleep in that pretty *butaca*. Figured you musta had a hard night, and we’d surprise you with breakfast.” Pearl had mixed up a double batch of biscuits.

“My goodness, it’s so comfortable that I slept the night away.” It seemed odd to serve a hired man and his wife at their table, but she had invited them to stay the night in Hezekiah’s bed. She quickly set the table, wishing she had more everyday plates.

Holding a platter of bacon and eggs, Pearl stopped in the doorway and stared at the table. “Sure have pretty dishes––”

“Let’s eat before it gets cold.” Embarrassed that she might appear showy, Susannah motioned them to the chairs that Hezekiah had worked for days sanding to a soft oaken glint.

Pearl seemed uncomfortable. She kept tracing her fingers along the rim of her coffee cup and barely touched her food. Eli cleaned his plate quickly.

“I best catch Mason in the barn. Boys said they almost finished pickin’. Not gonna have more than a day or two to get ourselves settled ’fore we haul cotton back to Natchitoches.”

“Was there any word from Mister LeBlanc about the millstones?” She hoped for a surprise when Hezekiah returned.

“He figures they’ll be in by the time I get back. Hezekiah wanted me to buy oxen to be ready.” Eli grinned a toothless smile at Pearl and made a cackling sound. “Said I’d better hire a driver. He’ll laugh when he sees I got me a wife instead.”

“I’m glad you’ll have a companion on those long trips.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she saw Eli flush and drop his head. He was aware of how little companionship existed in this house.

Mason turned down Susannah’s offer of coffee when he came up from the barn. “I wanted to ask about them folks taking up housekeeping at Miss Ruby’s place. I already told Hezekiah that me and Venus don’t want to live there. I need to live in the quarter to manage the workers, but I’d like to have that feral hog still roaming around the place.”

Surprised by the question, Susannah stammered, “I’m happy for Eli and Pearl to live there. It’s your decision. Hezekiah left you in charge.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Mason had the same playful sideways grin as Hezekiah. “I’m in charge long as I make you happy.”

She shrugged, trying not to show her shock. “Well, that settles it. Let them stay there.”

Eli and Pearl wasted no time hitching the mules and moving their few belongings to Ruby’s old house.

Energized by the possibility of Hezekiah still caring about what she wanted, Susannah settled in her Campeachy chair and began knitting his warm socks and watching for him to ride into view.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mid-November, 1823

Susannah had not heard from Hezekiah, and her worry increased when the morning started with a cold drizzle and grew worse all day. Why hadn’t she insisted on him taking a coat? By dark, rain turned to ice, pelleting the house. She kept the kitchen stove going and decided to sleep on Hezekiah’s bed. Even with heavy curtains pulled over the windows in the big room, the fireplace couldn’t put out enough heat to take off the chill. She didn’t remember it being so cold the year before, but Hezekiah had been there to warm the bed.

She had reached to blow out the candle when Bramble jumped up, yapping, scrambling at the door. It had to be Hezekiah. Only he could excite Bramble into a frenzy.

Susannah quickly lit the lantern and pulled her shawl over her head. Bramble ran into the dark, barking and leaping at Hezekiah’s mare.

“Darling!” she cried, running across the muddy yard to grab Hezekiah as he slumped out of the saddle.

“Gotta get warm.” His teeth chattered as he leaned into her arms.

Ignoring Bramble’s whimpers, she threw her shawl across Hezekiah’s wet shoulders and half-carried him into the kitchen.

“Oh, darling!” she kept whispering as she stripped off his ice-crusted shirt and rubbed him dry with a kitchen towel.

His breath came in hard gasps as he fumbled with his trousers that were soaked through to his drawers. Clutching her shawl around his shoulders, he sank to the bed, letting her tug at his boots and strip him naked. While he pulled the quilt up to his chin, she grabbed another towel and dried his long, matted hair and beard.

“Hez! That you?” Mason stomped onto the dogtrot.

Relieved to hear that familiar voice, Susannah called. “Get the quilts on our bed. And look in the bottom drawer of the dresser for socks and a wool cap. Bring the nightshirt too!”

Mason burst through the door carrying the bedding. “I heard Bramble carrying on. Figured it was Hez. I knew something was wrong when his mare poked into the yard.” All the time Mason talked, he helped pull on the nightshirt and get the socks and cap on Hezekiah. “You best lay on top of him ‘til he stops shaking. I’ll get Obie’s girls. They know about fevers.”

Obie’s girls? Of course, Beatrice and Zephyr. They had cared for Obie’s wife. Surely, they knew what to do. She spread herself across her husband, her lips against his hot cheek. “Don’t leave me, Hezekiah.” In the dim lantern light, his eyes looked dull and slowly closed. “Please stay with me.” Her tears wet his face.

The two women moved into the kitchen like a wave of warmth. Susannah wondered if Hezekiah could hear their soft murmurs––a soothing sound––almost a song. Beatrice smelled like bacon when she leaned close, whispering, “Mustard plaster gonna hep that cough. It’s got extra flour, so it stays longer ’fore it burns.” Her long black fingers smoothed a sack filled with the concoction across Hezekiah’s chest. Her hand felt gentle on Susannah’s shoulder. “You stay on him, Missy. He needs comfort.”

Susannah settled tight against him, willing the mustard plaster to sweat out the fever, only to be startled by Zephyr shooing her out of the way. The powerful woman lifted his body and held a cup to his lips. “Drink this tea. Them little dogwoods, so pretty in springtime, got good bark for chills and fever. Few more minutes, we have honeysuckle tea. Loosen up you chest.”

Hezekiah roused, his face ghost-white as he sipped the hot liquid. When he finished, Beatrice greased his chest with lard. “Keeps the mustard from burning. Later, we put it on his back.”

The women took complete charge, directing Susannah to lie down with him and get out of their way when they administered another remedy.

Standing, her arms hanging helpless at her sides, she said, “What do you need me to do?”

Bustling away from the little bed, Beatrice said, “You do the lovin'. We do the healin’.”

The chills continued, and the rattle in his chest developed into a deep, anguished cough. A sudden foul smell caused Susannah to lift her head.

“Asafetida,” Beatrice said. “Keep it round his neck.”

“It smells like dung,” Susannah gasped, covering her nose.

Beatrice offered a soft, grunting laugh. “Stink goes down and stops that cough.”

Susannah nodded, remembering she had not bothered to even look at *Gunn’s Domestic Medicine* that sat on the shelf next to Hezekiah’s Bible and the mill book. She was dependent on the skill of two slave women. Their potions were making him cough up thick gunk, and they called it a good sign.

As light began seeping through the cracks in the door, one of the women handed Susannah a cup of tea. “Gotta see to our babies. Get our men fed.”

“I’m so grateful.” She wanted to be alone with Hezekiah but felt so inadequate before the raging fever. At least the chills had stopped.

Zephyr hurried back into the kitchen. “Ice is everwhere.” She held out her apron. “We gonna pack it under his arms and on his privates. Cool him down.”

Susannah watched in surprise as Hezekiah seemed unaware of the ice-filled rags placed on his body. Alone at last, she curled against him and drifted into a restless sleep, oblivious to Lizzie making coffee. Each time he moved, Susannah woke and felt the heat radiating from him. Since ice helped, she decided to bathe him in spring water.

From the dogtrot, she could see the sun reflecting in rivulets of ice melting across the yard. Scooping a pitcher of the cold spring water, she hurried back to the kitchen's warmth. Wetting a rag in the bone-chilling liquid, she stroked his face, whispering, “Please stay with me. I love you.”

She wiped the chilled rags across his chest and down his feverish body. “I am going to keep rubbing until you look at me.” His lids fluttered and then closed as if opening required too much effort.

Susannah felt weak with relief when the women returned, and Zephyr laid a hand on Hezekiah’s forehead. “Not so hot.” She wrapped a powerful arm around him and lifted him to the cup of tea. “See him take in that dogwood bark? He know it helps.”

“Do you think he hears us?”

“Sure do. Jest too weak to show it.”

Susannah sighed and dropped her head into her hands. “I needed to hear that.”

“You best curl up and sleep with him.”

Susannah drifted off, planning to dig up the money and pay those women a dollar each.

\* \* \*

During the days of lingering fever and racking cough, Susannah kept Hezekiah’s bed in the kitchen near the stove. At times he gazed at her and appeared to welcome her touch as she washed him in spring water. Other times, he drifted away into a world of restless dreams that made her fear he would never return.

Late one afternoon, she had been napping with her face buried in his shoulder when the sound of bellowing oxen sent Bramble dancing to the door, his tail wagging with excitement.

“Sounds like Eli and Pearl are back.” Susannah opened the door for Bramble and turned back as Hezekiah pulled himself up on his elbow.

“Millstones?” He pushed himself to an unsteady sitting position.

Susannah’s spirits lifted as she pulled quilts up around his shoulders. Finally, something stirred him, even if it were millstones.

Eli came in, beating his hands together to warm them, then wrapped his arm around his bride and ducked his head to offer a shy introduction.

Hezekiah’s grin was weak as he nodded toward Pearl. “Nobody told me.”

Mason had just stepped in the door and whooped a deep-bellied laugh. “This is the first time you’ve looked alive. Not spoken a word in a month.”

“Millstones?” Hezekiah stared at Eli.

“Yep. Oxen pulled them stones right through the mud. Rained ever mile.” Eli grinned at his bride. “And Pearl ain’t half bad with mules.”

“Mill’s ready,” Mason said. “Boys kept the raceway shored up during the rain.”

Susannah sat beside Hezekiah and felt his shoulders sagging. “When you install the millstones, Hezekiah wants to watch.”

Mason backed toward the door. “We’ll carry his bed to the creek.”

Eli and Pearl started to retreat. “You rest up. We got lots to unload.”

Hezekiah appeared to wilt under the quilts. Susannah stroked his cheek, praying that with the fever gone, he would get strong enough to watch his mill completed.

\* \* \*

It took another two weeks for the ground to dry enough to hoist the millstones into place. Word had spread on both sides of the river that the community-wide event would start on the last Monday morning in February if the weather held.

Hezekiah’s men rose early to get the fires going for butchering a calf. When Mary and Joseph arrived at daybreak, the aroma of roasting beef and pork filled the early-morning air.

“My goodness, you look so much better,” Mary cooed as she spread a quilt before Hezekiah’s chair and set her baby down to crawl up his leg. “Last time we were here, we weren’t sure you’d make it.”

When Hezekiah turned a knowing glance at Susannah, she realized that he recognized Mary’s aggravating tendency to blurt whatever came into her head.

Watching Hezekiah lift the drooling child into his lap sent a wave of envy through Susannah. She turned quickly and hurried to greet wagons loaded with their neighbors. Residents from across the river floated over on flat barges. To avoid looking at Hezekiah and the baby, she stayed busy supervising the food on a long line of tables.

The boys carried Hezekiah’s Campeche chair down to the creek, the signal that it was time to install the millstones. Even as they sat side-by-side, he leaned against her as visitors lined up to shake his hand.

Joseph grabbed both of Hezekiah’s hands like a long, lost friend. “We’re so glad to see you getting about. I tried to watch after your missus.”

“Appreciate it.” Hezekiah glanced sideways at Susannah, who forced herself to smile sweetly.

A grizzled farmer from across the river spit a stream of tobacco juice between his teeth, then leaned close. “Hear you men stopped them Tonkawas down on the Colorado.”

“Hope it settles them down.” Hezekiah lifted a thin hand to his head like it needed support.

She was relieved when the crowd fell silent to watch the men assembling oxen around a crane Mason had built to lift the millstones into place. The oxen slowly circled the crane, and the screeching pulley winched the bed stone until it disappeared into an opening in the mill wall.

The group sighed as though they had all been holding their breaths, then burst into chattering comments, “Them things weigh a ton apiece. That in-charge fella’s got to be smart. Getting’ that heavy stone up there and moved inside.”

Susannah noticed that when they began hoisting the runner stone, Hezekiah let his head rest against the back of his chair. She took his hand and whispered, “You want to go inside?”

He frowned. “No.”

When they were ready for a practice run, the boys carried several sacks of last fall’s corn into the mill.

“Look, they’ve opened the control gate on the sluice box. Can you believe those buckets are filling?”

Susannah wrapped both hands around Hezekiah’s icy fingers and pressed against his shoulder. “Ignore all the talk. It’s going to work,” she whispered, silently praying it was true.

“Betcha two bits, there ain’t enough water in that raceway to fill ’em.”

“Lookie, there it goes!” A hush fell over the crowd as the water wheel began a slow turn.

“Pouring in the corn,” a voice from the mill shouted.

“Listen at that racket! He’s lowered the running stone for sure.”

Susannah finally relaxed when the whole operation came to a halt. Hezekiah’s eyes were growing dull.

Mason came around the side of the mill, holding several small sacks of cornmeal. “Believe we got enough for each family to take one.”

Hezekiah muttered against Susannah’s ear, “He’s a damn showoff.”

“He got you some mill business.” She watched Hezekiah’s slight grin, then whispered, “Are you ready to get out of here?”

“Yes.” Hezekiah leaned his head back against the chair and waved briefly for two boys to lift the chair and carry him to the house.

\* \* \*

Even after Susannah moved Hezekiah to their bed in the big room, he ate very little and remained so weak that she had to help him up. He often reached out at night to touch her and welcomed her pressing against him. But his desires went no further.

After spring warmed the earth, all the hands headed to the fields to plant corn. She moved their chairs to the front porch, wrapped him in a blanket and wool cap, and sat with him to do her handwork.

One morning he had been silent, gazing off toward the river as though he expected someone to ride up over the bluff. “I still hate how we treated the Tonkawas.”

Surprised, Susannah laid aside her knitting and took his hand.

“Old Tonkawa Chief Carita’s band roamed south of here. Stealing cattle and horses pretty regular. Stephen Austin decided to teach them a lesson. Led thirty of us to their campsite.” Hezekiah’s face looked slack; his words sounded like a chant. We got the horses back. That didn’t satisfy. Austin demanded fifty lashes––half by Captain Abner Kuykendall. The old chief had to put on the other half.”

Unresponsive to her squeezing his hand, Hezekiah pursed his lips like he had a bad taste in his mouth. “Kuykendall laid the whip on plenty hard. When it came Carita’s turn, he put the lash on light. Kept looking up with those rheumy old eyes and saying, ‘*cuantos*?’ Those boys were like sons to him.” Hezekiah shook his head and turned pleading eyes toward Susannah. “I felt like a traitor being part of it.”

She pulled his hand to her chest, willing her touch to comfort him. “Do you think it bothered Mister Austin?”

“Hell, no! He has settlers whipped if he thinks they’re bad characters. Doesn’t need a whiff of proof. No innocence until proven guilty.” Hezekiah hunched into a coughing spell. When he drew a clear breath, he whispered, “Every lash that old Indian laid on those young men made me wonder if some bastard could make me strike my sons like that.”

Susannah kissed his cold fingertips. “You’d never do that.”

His eyes pooled. “You believe that, Susannah? Have you forgiven me enough to say it honestly?”

She turned his hand and kissed his palm. “Yes. Have you forgiven me for lying about Anna’s father?”

Hezekiah reached to trace his fingers along her cheek. “Yes.”

Late in the day, Susannah heated enough water for both their baths. Then, waiting for him to finish and come to bed, she trembled with pent-up excitement as she took from the bottom of her trunk the lacy gown she had not worn since their wedding night. She reached for the candle when he entered the room and walked toward him.

“Susannah?” He gazed at her, stroking her shoulders and then lifting her gown.

She closed her eyes, letting herself feel the building tension as he blew out the light and pulled her to him.

“I want you, Susannah.” His lips felt hungry, but his touch stayed so gentle that she wondered if she’d pushed him farther than his strength could go. Slowly, his hands explored her body, guiding her to new places of arousal. As her urgency grew, his eagerness increased, unbridling long-hidden yearnings. Finally, her aching need for him opened all her senses, and they lost themselves in desire.

Chapter Thirty-Four

July 1824

Susannah had cherished every moment during the long months of Hezekiah’s recovery, and watching him stride across the back lot made her warm with anticipation. She met him on the dogtrot before he finished stomping the dirt off his boots.

Clasping her around the waist, his big hand reached for her belly. “Did you two have a good morning?” His hand moved to her breast, “Where’s your ring?”

Suddenly hot all over, her mind raced for an answer. For some time, she had wanted to stop wearing the necklace with Philippe’s ring constantly against her breasts, but she had been afraid Hezekiah wouldn’t understand. And how could she tell him the truth? “With my breasts enlarging, the ring kept slipping in between––”

“But I love it!” His eyes sparkled. “Haven’t you noticed how I like to reach in there and pull it out?”

Indeed, she had noticed, and it made her ashamed every time. She had loved Philippe, but her life had changed. Hezekiah had given her satisfaction that she never could have imagined. That ring was a painful reminder of her deceit.

“Come on, indulge me. I love to see your red hair all twisted in those pretty knots. Then, I can reach between those lovely breasts and take it out for you.” He pulled at her waist. “Where did you put it? I’d like to place it back around your neck.”

*You cannot cry. You did this, and you have to live with it.* Susannah took his hand, led him to the dressing table, and reached into the back corner of the top drawer. The gold chain her loving husband had given her looked beautiful holding the ring of knotted hair. She choked and turned her back as Hezekiah took the chain and gently clasped it into place.

She turned, clutched his shirt front, and tiptoed to nibble his earlobe. “You asked what the baby and I were doing this morning. We were busy cooking your lunch.”

He looked down with a sly grin. “I’ve been hoping that we’d have time for a nap after lunch.”

She laughed. “I’ve had similar thoughts.”

Despite his eagerness to take her to bed, Hezekiah managed to wolf down most of a chicken and a mound of potatoes and vegetables before he pushed back from the table and took her hand. He had started unbuttoning her dress when Bramble tore across the front yard, barking like an army was approaching.

“Settle down, dog! You know me.” There was no mistaking Seth Ingram’s nasal twang.

“That spoils the day.” Hezekiah kissed her bare shoulder and quickly buttoned her dress.

Ingram stepped in the door, talking, “I’m bearing good news. Since we got that Mexican colonization law, Stephen Austin hired me to lay out the new headquarters. West side of the Brazos at the Atascosito crossing.”

“Isn’t that the road to San Antonio de Béxar?” Susannah exclaimed. Noticing Hezekiah’s cheek flinch like he’d been slapped, she reached for his hand. As much as she longed to see the route her baby Anna had traveled, she no longer wanted to punish this man.

“It is,” Ingram said, hoisting his sagging pants before sitting at the table.

Susannah scooped away their lunch plates, brought strawberries and cream from the spring house, and went to the kitchen to reheat coffee. When she returned, Ingram was holding forth while gnawing on the leftover chicken.

“Makes me a land baron, what with all that pay for doing the surveying.”

“I’m not so eager for a headquarters as I am to get my damn land title,” Hezekiah said. “Been following instructions, busting our butts, cultivating and improving for over three years. Doesn’t sit right to be fancying up a place for a headquarters that only had a ferry and a few cabins the last time I rode through. Called it San Felipe de Austin.”

“Yep. On July 24, it’ll be official––name and all. Best part is *the* Baron de Bastrop’s gonna be there.”

Hezekiah’s mouth dropped open. “He’s actually signing our titles?”

Ingram leaned back, swelled with pleasure over being the purveyor of news. “Around 272 titles are waiting for his signature.”

Hezekiah shook his head. “I had no idea so many folks had come in. That’ll about fill Austin’s empresarial contract.”

“Yeah, and he’s ready to ask the Mexicans for permission to bring in more. So come on down and have a look. Laid the town out on the Mexican model––avenues and streets with four big plazas.”

Hezekiah grinned at Susannah. “We should go. Get our title signed before the Mexicans think up another roadblock. Corn’s in. Cotton needs hoeing. Mason can keep the gristmill going if anybody wants to grind corn instead of grabbing their title.”

Susannah felt giddy at the prospect of going off with Hezekiah. Before she could speak, Hezekiah said, “You think you can ride Rose? It’s twenty miles to the first night at Bernardo Plantation. Another twenty to San Felipe.”

She laughed, delighted to hear his concern. “Have you forgotten I rode that mare from Natchitoches?”

“That settles it.” Seth Ingram pushed back his chair. “Expect you on the twenty-fourth.”

For two weeks, Hezekiah’s enthusiasm was infectious as he listed instructions for his men and laid plans for the trip. When he decided to take a pack mule, Susannah balked. “We’re not moving across the country, Hezekiah.”

He held up one finger. “Remember, it’s been three years since you rode so far. We need extra spring water and a pallet so you can rest at lunchtime.” Before she could argue, he added, “We gotta take care of you and the baby.”

Lured by his loving care and the prospect of their first trip as husband and wife, she grew more eager with each passing day.

They left at first light, and the trail was wide enough to ride side-by-side for several miles. Hezekiah pointed out how easily his men could clear a wagon road. “Living so near the seat of government, I figure we’ll make this trip pretty regular.” He looked around, taking long breaths like a nobleman surveying his domain. “Might discover they need my lawyering from time to time.”

Susannah relaxed into the easy sway of her mare and breathed in contentment as a breeze stirred a flurry of cottonwood leaves. The river flowed lazily next to the trail that began moving away from the bottomland and climbing into a dense forest of ancient oaks.

Hezekiah broke the silence. “Last time I rode through here, I was sicker than a mule and determined to get home.” He reached toward her. “I was remembering the way you hugged me before I left. Had to see if you meant it.”

Susannah pulled her mare to a halt and stretched to clasp his hand. “Now I know how much I missed.”

“Let’s stop for lunch right here.” Hezekiah leaped from his horse and held her against him as she dismounted. He pulled the quilt from atop the lunch basket and tossed it near the foot of a gnarly old oak. “A bed in the forest,” he said as his hand moved under her riding skirt.

She was fumbling to unbutton his pants when they both jumped at the sound of a voice echoing off the canyon wall.

“That’s on the river!” Hezekiah sprang to his feet and fastened his pants as they crept through the trees to the edge of a high bluff. Down below, two naked Indians, with flesh as dark as creosote, paddled a dugout canoe slicing swiftly across the water. Sunlight reflected off grease covering both powerful bodies.

Hezekiah whispered against her ear. “See that skinned calf? They’ve visited somebody’s place upriver.”

Susannah shuddered as the canoe disappeared around a bend.

Hezekiah stayed close, pressing his face against hers. “Now you know how to recognize Karankawas. They’re giants compared to other tribes. We better cut through the woods to the Coushatta Trace. It leads straight to Jared Groce’s Bernardo Plantation. Lots closer than following the river.”

Love-making and lunch forgotten, they mounted their horses and cut through thick foliage, leaving behind the river and the prospect of encountering Karankawas. As Hezekiah held back branches and hacked away at tangled vines, he kept apologizing for leading her through a wilderness. “The Coushatta Trace is an old Indian route. If I’d known about it, I’d have talked Joseph into taking it to the Brazos.” Hezekiah shrugged, “For all Joseph’s exploring the year before he organized our wagon train, he never discovered this old route.”

The sun still beat down through the trees until late afternoon when the trace suddenly wound back to the river and opened onto a cotton field. Susannah pulled her mare to a stop in an impulsive attempt to count the black bodies hoeing furrows that stretched beyond the horizon.

A lone rider, a tall man astride a black mare, rode toward them at an easy trot.

“That’s Groce’s overseer. He drove almost 100 slaves all the way from Alabama,” Hezekiah whispered. “Mister Gee, glad to see you,” he called.

The overseer doffed his big felt hat and waved vigorously. “You made it back!” His smile stretched across a face lined by years of sun. “Day you left, I figured you for dead.”

“Ha! I felt dead.”

“Look atcha now. Prime of life.”

“Mister Alfred Gee, I want you to meet my wife. Susannah nursed me back to health.”

He bent low in his saddle, his hat crushed at his waist. “I declare she’s pretty enough to bring a body back from the dead. Proud to make your acquaintance.” He pulled his horse around. “Let’s get to the shade of Groce’s front gallery. He’s down in one of them south pastures.”

“You see Karankawas on the river?”

Gee cut hard black eyes around. “Naw! They been here?”

Hezekiah shrugged. “Rate they were moving, I figure they’re near San Felipe by now.”

“Best we didn’t see. Groce says shoot ‘em on sight.”

Susannah saw her husband’s lips draw tight in silent disagreement. She wondered if he was the only settler who didn’t despise the Indians.

Gee’s spurs jingled against his horse’s girth as he led the way along the edge of the field toward a house looming on a distant rise.

Drawing near, Susannah couldn’t believe her eyes. The sprawling story-and-a-half mansion had a sandstone chimney on each end, and beautifully polished walnut posts fronted the sprawling porch. Around back, a massive fireplace dominated one wall of a separate kitchen.

Mister Gee appeared to follow her gaze. “Them places yonder of the kitchen is for the doctor, and that big’un is the Bachelor House.”

“It’s for guests,” Hezekiah said. “Six beds in there. Where I slept both times I came through––”

“But not your missus,” Gee said. “Ladies stay in the Big House.”

Gee pulled his horse to a halt and swelled his chest with evident pride. “We got artisans and brick masons. They know how to make the finest house in Texas.” Turning to Susannah, he said, “Now, you rest a spell on the gallery ’til Groce comes in. Settle in one of them rockers. Sanded so smooth they feel soft. I’ll yell at the cook to make spring water tea.”

Workers appeared, unloaded the pack mule, and led all three animals away. “They’ll feed and care for the horses,” Hezekiah said. “Our belongings will end up wherever we’re to sleep.”

Susannah sank onto a rocker, aware of fatigue pulling at her strength. She had slipped into a dreamy sleep when she heard Hezekiah’s voice.

“That’s Jared Groce.” Hezekiah pointed to a buggy driven by a hunched man who shouted greetings before the animal stopped.

“Heard you were still alive.” Groce dropped the reins, and a black man with shoulders as broad as a fence gate lifted him from the buggy.

“Groce’s arms are crippled,” Hezekiah whispered, taking Susannah’s hand as they stepped off the porch. “Meet my wife, Jared.”

“So that’s why you were hellbent on getting home. When that norther blew in, I figured you’d be dead ’fore morning.” He bent until one hand reached the brim of his hat. “Mighty glad to welcome you to Bernardo, ma’am.” He looked about at the handful of Negroes clustered nearby. “Anybody showed the missus to her room?”

“I be the one,” said a bright-eyed colored girl wearing a rough-woven dress bound at the waist by a starched white apron. She bowed slightly toward Susannah. “I be Caroline, the housemaid. Yo room’s fixed up. Fresh bath and cool tea.”

Susannah followed, glad to be away from the oppressive heat. She hesitated, adjusting to the dim, canyon-like hallway. Candles burned in sconces, edging both sides of the broad staircase leading to bedrooms that appeared to spread on both sides of the upper floor.

Susannah stopped at the sight of her wedding nightgown freshly ironed and stretched across the foot of the bed.

Caroline smiled and ran long, thin fingers over the delicate lace bodice. “Don’t never get womans here. All men folk.”

“Well, you’ve made it very nice for me.” Susannah moved behind a nearby screen to a tub of water. “Oh, my! That tub’s long enough to stretch my legs.”

“I hep you.” Caroline reached for the buttons on the back of Susannah’s dress. “Wanna rest a spell? Supper gong don’t ring ’til seven.”

“My husband?”

“Dem men’s carrying on a spell. His man’s gonna draw fresh for him.”

Scooting low in the soothing water, Susannah ached with the memory of Jess drawing her bath and laying out fresh-ironed clothing. Watching the energetic housemaid gather up the sweat-soaked clothes, Susannah wondered what secrets *she* carried.

\* \* \*

Susannah woke to a clock chiming half-past six and saw Hezekiah stepping into the tub. “I see you,” she said.

“Keep looking. It makes me hurry to get done.”

“You’re too late. Supper’s in half an hour.” She dressed, then sat before a full-length mirror to form her hair into a loose bun.

Standing behind her, Hezekiah cupped his hands around her breasts. “Jared’s gonna want me to talk business. How about waking you when I come to bed?”

Susannah stood and circled her arms around him, pressing hard against his body. “Please do.” The gong vibrated through the house like a command. She took her husband’s hand, and they presented themselves for supper.

Jared Groce stood smiling beside a long table, his face lit by candles clustered at one end. He looked like a gentleman planter––white shirt, open at the neck, black coat, and boots shined to a high gloss. “Glad to dine with a lady. A home’s not so tame without a woman.” After making an awkward display of seating her, Groce directed Hezekiah to the place across the table. Taking his seat between them, he nodded to a group of black men who began serving wine, moving ghostlike in and out of the candlelight.

Another Negro whom Susannah remembered lifting his master from the carriage showed only a flicker of a smile when Groce said, “This is Edom, my body man.”

Susannah tried not to stare as Edom stood by the serving board and cut bite-size pieces of the sizzling beef. He removed the corn from the cob and spread butter on thick slices of bread. Groce kept the conversation going despite spearing each morsel and bending forward to reach his fork. He missed often and seemed not to notice food streaking his chest.

Groce pointed to a beautiful silver salt cellar, the only elegant piece on the table. “I tell every guest to enjoy the salt. After the 1822 drought and living like the damn Karankawa, eating wild Mustang flesh and bread without salt, I sent men to the coast. Had them dig shallow wells to get the salt water. They boiled down enough to last for years.”

“Tell her about the silver dish,” Hezekiah said, obviously proud to be privy to the story.

“Nobody had use for money. Bartered everything. Had my silversmith hammer a bunch of Mexican coins into that salt cellar. Reminds me of that first damn year in Texas. I was feeding almost 100 slaves and many visitors who came for land grants. We ate through the supply of scrawny deer, squirrels, and even the bear population.”

The few sips of wine and the rich food caused Susannah to drift, but she perked up when the talk turned to the Karankawa danger. Then she heard Groce say he was worried about her sleeping on the ground in San Felipe.

“She wanted to come with me.” Hezekiah looked at her, a frown creasing his brow.

“Yes. I’m eager to see our first town––”

“Not even a hotel,” Groce said. “No place for a lady.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Groce half-raised his arm to maintain control. “I’ll have the boys arrange the wagon seats for you.”

“Oh, no! I camped every night on the trail from Natchitoches––”

“Don’t give it another thought.” Jared Groce bent his head and clutched a napkin to his lips, signaling the end of the discussion and the dinner.

Hezekiah shrugged slightly and looked amused as a server extended a box of cigars and a tray of brandy to Susannah.

Both men leaned back and sucked in cigar smoke that quickly clouded the room. When Susannah stood and said she was turning in for the evening, Hezekiah jumped before Groce could rise.

Taking her arm, he whispered, “Are you feeling well?”

“Of course. You two need to visit.” After fleeing the haze-filled room, she took deep breaths and hurried up the hall.

At the top of the stairs, Caroline sprang from a pallet. “Yo bed’s turned down.”

“My goodness, you’re not sleeping on the floor?”

“Mister say, be handy.”

Susannah bent close to the girl’s ear and whispered, “I won’t be calling. So, sneak away when you can.”

Caroline giggled as Susannah closed the door.

She was glad Hezekiah wasn’t there to see how quickly she collapsed on the bed—the day had been too long. Enjoying how the crisp-ironed sheets cooled her flesh, she was almost asleep when the tiny flutter roused her. The memory was fresh. Anna had moved the same way. Clasping her belly, she barely breathed, hoping for more movement until sleep came.

Susannah smelled him before he tiptoed to the bed. “You must have enjoyed several cigars and lots of brandy.”

He was on top of her before she could say another word. “Never thought he’d shut up.” Hezekiah’s hands moved under her gown.

“Was it worth the long stay?”

“Umm, he’s building a cotton gin next year. We’ll bring our cotton to the gin, and he’ll flatboat it to the mouth of the Brazos. Ship it to New Orleans.” He began nibbling at her ear.

“I felt our baby move.”

Hezekiah froze. “Let me feel.” His hands eased over her belly, slowly caressing like he was holding the baby. “I wish he’d move again.”

So, he wanted a boy too. Wrapping a leg over his body, she said, “Right now, *I* want your attention.”

\* \* \*

The following morning a huge carriage waited at the front door. Jared Groce motioned Susannah to the mounting block saying, “Those big wheels and plow horses can pull us through anything.”

“It’s lovely!” Susannah smoothed her hand across the soft leather seat in a welcome gesture to her husband.

Edom maneuvered Groce into the seat facing them, swung up onto his place as the carriage driver, and they were off at a good clip, barreling down the steep river bank and splashing onto a shallow sandstone crossing.

Susannah looked back at two supply wagons loaded with tents and firewood. Each driver, including Edom, had a long rifle anchored beside his bench. Perhaps this trip wasn’t as safe as she had imagined. She said to Groce, “You’re well-prepared for safety and comfort.”

He grunted, “Expect a big crowd. Since the baron got himself elected to the federal Congress, a swarm of settlers will be eager to catch him before he heads down to Saltillo.”

“Bastrop’s so old,” Hezekiah said. “You think he can represent us?”

“Ha! Claims to be a man of the world. Says he knows how to deal with the power folks in Mexico. At Austin’s meeting in May, we passed two resolutions for Bastrop to push in Saltillo. One allowing colonists to bring their slaves into Texas. The other permits raising tobacco.”

Susannah heard Hezekiah say something about needing his slaves, but they had moved into a forest that felt steamy, almost suffocating. The swaying and jolting over ruts rocked her to sleep against Hezekiah’s shoulder. She woke smoke curls filming the sky. Wagons, tents, and several large trees claimed the raw expanse along the high river bluff. She gazed at the empty spaces they called Austin Colony headquarters. A half dozen log cabins that were little more than lean-tos blemished the grand plazas and avenues Seth Ingram had bragged about.

A few women and a lot of men were cooking over open flames. Children ran up to the wagon, welcoming them with dirt-smudged smiles before standing back and staring at the supply wagons. Maybe they were transfixed by the sight of black men carrying rifles.

“Head on to Bullinger’s Creek,” Groce called to the wagon drivers. “Austin’s building his cabin a half-mile west of town. We’ll camp there. Be first in line for our titles.”

She couldn’t blame Austin for wanting to live away from this sad expression of a capital.

Despite Groce’s plans, the string of wagons and families continued to Austin’s half-finished log structure. A white-haired man––undoubtedly the baron––sat at a table out front. A stole draping his shoulders reminded Susannah of a Roman toga. As they drew closer, the adornment paled into a threadbare wrap warming the aging man. He did not lift his head as he ran his hand over page after page of titles, signing to certify each man’s signature.

“Well,” Jared Groce sighed deeply. “We’ll not be first. Perhaps we can wake the baron before dawn tomorrow.”

The crew began unloading the wagons. Groce, lifted to the ground, strode directlyl to the Baron de Bastrop. After a brief exchange, he returned, wiping his face with a freshly-ironed handkerchief. Smiling at Susannah, he pointed to one of the fine rocking chairs from his front gallery. “We’ll settle you under that big live oak. You can watch the goings-on and stay as cool as God allows.”

She watched Hezekiah and Jared Groce move into the crowd, glad-handing people they appeared to know. Occasionally, Hezekiah brought someone for her to meet. She listened to comments like: “Never dreamed when I struck out for Texas that I’d get this much land. Man’s gotta be thankful.”

“Ever see anything like the baron? Looks pretty threadbare for a nobleman.”

“Yeah, that old rag over his shoulder ain’t seen a woman’s touch in a hundred years.”

Susannah nodded at those who looked her way. Mostly, they received their signed titles and kept their heads down as they hurried away. She wondered what she had expected––certainly a town. Instead, she felt surrounded by a jumble of cursing, sweating rabble. The place smelled worse than the docks at Natchitoches.

When it was time to settle for the evening, Hezekiah helped her crawl onto the makeshift carriage bed. “I feel like a pampered princess while everyone sleeps on the ground.”

“Jared’s known as a gallant host. Let him indulge you.” Hezekiah’s hand slipped across her stomach. “Any activity from our boy?”

She giggled, “Stop that. You can feel when we get home.”

Susannah heard people forming a line outside Austin’s cabin long before daylight. When Jared Groce and Hezekiah moved to the breakfast fire, her heart sank. She had hoped they would finish their business and get away before another day passed. Slipping on her shoes, the only thing she had removed for the night, Susannah climbed down as Hezekiah hurried to her side.

“You could have slept longer. Unfortunately, breakfast isn’t near ready.”

“I hoped you’d be in line before now.” She didn’t try to keep the irritation out of her voice.

“We have a proxy. Edom slept next to the baron’s table.”

She touched his hand in apology. “I should have known you’d handle it.”

He leaned down, “I’m eager as you to get away.”

By the time the baron, still wearing the same toga, took his place at the table, Jared and Hezekiah had secured their position at the front of the line.

The baron was busy sorting his papers when Stephen Austin walked out to greet Jared and Hezekiah. For a man with so much power, he looked almost frail. Brown, unruly curls haloed a long face and pointy nose. Hezekiah towered over him, and even Jared Groce was larger than Austin. Yet, she watched the great man’s face, and he clearly commanded the conversation. A hush fell over the crowd as they stared with an air of reverence.

Susannah watched in surprise as Groce labored to grip the quill and write his name. With a slight wave of his hand, his papers were certified. When Hezekiah finished signing, he looked across the expanse at Susannah and smiled.

At last, Hezekiah owned the land he craved. But how would he manage it? Watching her husband and Groce, deep in conversation as they moved away from the crowd, stirred a gnawing worry in Susannah. She feared it meant adding slaves who wanted nothing more than to be free.

Chapter Thirty-Five

September 1824

Susannah felt Hezekiah remove his hand from her bulging belly and knew it was time to get up. Despite the heat, he insisted on sleeping close enough to feel the baby move. Her restless nights didn’t disturb his energy. Since securing the land title, he had thrown himself into work like a man clawing back every hour he had waited for his grant. Cotton picking dominated their days, and Susannah took over Lizzie’s chores, so the girl could go to the field and hand-crank the little cotton gin.

Like every morning, Hezekiah’s goodbye kiss included stroking Susannah’s belly. She did not tell him that sometimes his open joy at the prospect of being a father felt bitter-sweet. *Their child* would arrive amidst unbounded love so unlike Anna’s welcome.

As soon as he left, Susannah started a fire under the big wash pot in the backyard and tossed in the sheets and chips of lye soap. By the time the water heated, she would finish the milking.

Sighing at the plaintive bawling of ol’ Bessie locked in the outside lot, separated from her baby, Susannah entered the barn where two cows waited for milking.

She positioned herself on the little stool––legs spread, offering room for her distended middle. Patting the cow’s side, she said, “Feel your baby kicking? Mine’s rowdy like a boy. In a few weeks, you’ll be grieving like Bessie. And I’m sorry for that.”

She had not admitted to a soul how proud she felt in learning to milk. The slaves no longer turned away to hide their laughter. And her arms and hands had stopped aching.

After washing the udder, her fingers wrapped around the teats. Resting her forehead on the animal’s hip, she fell into the rhythm––working her fingers and tugging slightly to start the flow. The ringing spatter of the force against the bucket sounded as powerful as when Lizzie milked.

When finished, she turned the cows out to pasture and stopped to stir the boiling sheets with her battling stick. She had reached the dogtrot when movement near the back lot caught her attention. Bessie trotted through the gate, her calf struggling to get to her teat. Naked Indians, big as giants, were driving the stock into the yard.

For an instant, Susannah was rigid in disbelief. Then terror shoved her into a run along the dogtrot to reach the musket above the parlor door. Looking back, watching for them to step into view, she stretched on tiptoe, wrapping her hand around the cool barrel. Fire it, and Hezekiah will come. If she missed, her mind raced to remember: pour in powder and ram it down the barrel. Cock and pull the trigger. No, she forgot to grab the pouch of powder next to the gun. Her breath came in noisy gasps.

She eased to the edge of the dogtrot just as Rose burst through the gate. A savage gripped her mane, his bare legs goading her toward the river.

He could not steal her horse! Trembling, Susannah lifted the old musket. Heavier than she expected. The cock pulled back stiff. With clenched teeth to steady her aim, she squeezed the trigger. The shot rang out, jolting hard into her shoulder. Acrid smoke cleared, and a trickle of blood crease down his bare back.

He yanked Rose about, his eyes wild, scanning for his attacker. Spotting prey, his mouth opened wide; an enraged wolf howl pierced the air.

Rose danced sideways, her eyes bulging. The Indian’s glare gripped Susannah as he settled the mare and walked her forward, one slow-paced step at a time.

Whirling about, she fled to the kitchen, slammed and bolted the doors to the dogtrot and to the front porch.

She waited, listening. Unlike the Tonkawa, who kept grunting as he rummaged through her pretty things, this one didn’t make a sound. She wished he’d yell again, let her know where he was. The stove, still holding coals from breakfast, radiated heat. Sweat soaked her dress and made her feel feverish as she felt along the wall for the meat cleaver. Clutching its cool handle, she would surprise him, crush it into his scalp when he came through the door.

He was so much bigger than the Tonkawa boy he could easily knock the door off its leather hinges. She jumped. Something heavy hit the roof, then another hit. Smoke spiraled into the kitchen, filling the air and choking off her breath. Covering her mouth to keep him from hearing her gasp, she moved to the front door and pressed her face against a crack. Gasping to pull in air worsened her cough. He meant to smoke her out. Where was Hezekiah? Did he hear the gunshot?

The baby stirred, and her hand stroked to comfort it. She must breathe for both of them. Crouching on the floor, pressing her face to the threshold, her body convulsed into a ball of pain with each raking cough. He could hear, knew his plan was working. He was waiting for her to flee, waiting for her to be desperate for air.

Hezekiah’s voice startled her. When he yelled again, she knew it wasn’t a dream. The door thudded and bumped against her face. He was screaming, telling her to open up.

She must reach the bar and shove it up. Her fingers scratched at the wood as the door shook, and Hezekiah shouted, “The roof’s on fire. Unbolt the door, Susannah. Listen to me! Push up the arm.”

Her knees held as she clawed at the door and reached for the arm.

“Susannah! Listen to me. Stretch out your hand. Push up on the wooden arm. You can do it. Remember the baby.”

*Baby? Our baby.* She pulled herself to the latch. It was so heavy . . .using all her strength; she made it move.

Glaring light and air rushed in as Hezekiah grabbed her. He lifted her and begged, “Breathe, Susannah.”

His touch felt rough as he pounded her back then hugged her against his heaving chest as he ran. She kept gulping for air as he pleaded, “Breathe, precious.” Suddenly they dropped into cool water, and he held her between his legs, washing her in the river. Between his gasping breaths, he kept saying, “Breathe, precious. Breathe for me.” Cupping her face, his eyes searching, he cried, “I thought I’d lost you, Susannah.” When she stopped gasping, he scooped river water in his hand for her to drink.

Over his shoulder, the sky glowed like an inferno. “What’s burning?” Her voice sounded hoarse as she gripped Hezekiah for strength to stand and gaze over the bluff. Their field hands were scrambling up the riverbank with buckets of water. “Did you catch them? That Karankawa was taking Rose!”

“They set fire to the roof and high-tailed it.”

She craned to search down the river for their canoe.

“Lizzie, come help!” Hezekiah shouted and then held Susannah’s face in both hands. “She’ll take care of you. I gotta help with the fire.”

“Let me!” She pushed his hands away and stumbled far enough up the bank to see a red glow consuming their house. “It’s lost,” she called even as Hezekiah topped the bluff, racing toward the flames.

Her legs would not hold her. She dropped to her knees, clutching her chest, and coughed up black bile. Leaning into Lizzie’s arms, she closed her eyes to let tears wash away the sting that made her head throb with each beat of her heart.

Lizzie tore at the hem of her dress. She scrambled back to the river, wet the rag, and stroked cool water on Susannah’s face and the back of her neck. “This here’s too hot. We get you under them ol’ oaks.” She tugged at Susannah until the two of them reached the shaded graveyard.

Bramble followed, and when Susannah collapsed on the ground, the dog laid his head in her lap, pressing his nose against her belly. She stroked his stiff coat and cupped her hand over the baby, who had grown very still.

The two women clung to each other and watched the roof sink. The thundering collapse of timber after timber sent firefly sparks spiraling through the canopy of trees and across the grass. The front windows burst, offering a view of flames dancing over the furniture in the parlor. Hezekiah and Mason had formed the crew into two bucket lines relaying a pitiful spit of river water into the raging hell.

Joseph and Mary emerged from the forest riding mules. As they moved through the billowing smoke, Mary shouted, “Dear God in Heaven! Dear God in Heaven!”

*I wish God had kept her at home.* Ashamed for her thoughts, Susannah reluctantly lifted her arm in a wave as Joseph ran to join the bucket brigade.

Sheltering her sleeping boy from the sun, Mary slumped to the ground. “What happened?”

“We was out yonder pickin. Heard the gun.” Lizzie’s eyes grew large as she rose to her knees. “I tell you, Mister leaped them cotton rows like a scalded dog. Jumped on his mare and beat up a dust cloud headin’ home.” She reached protectively for Susannah’s shoulder. “Ever’body jest dropped them sacks, picked up the kids, and tore out.” She gripped Susannah’s shoulder. “Mister had her down in the river.”

Mary clutched at her breast, listening to Lizzie. “Mister Crankston saw the smoke. He said it rose like a stovepipe, not spreading like a grass fire. It must have been Indians. What with the dead animals.”

Susannah’s heart lurched as she pulled at Mary’s sleeve. “What animals?”

“Your mare! The cow and calf. Arrows sticking out like porcupines!”

“Arrows?” Susannah wheezed and coughed up more bile. “He was stealing Rose––”

“My goodness, you look awful.” Mary left her son to crawl on a pallet and hurried down to the river. When she returned, she said, “Let me wash your face.” Nodding at Lizzie, “You go on, now. I’ll care for Susannah.”

The dismissal was abrupt. Susannah wanted to defend Lizzie, who dropped her head and backed away. Instead, she whizzed, “Thank you.”

To Susannah’s relief, Mary made no effort to force conversation. Instead, she kept going to the river to freshen the cloth and wipe Susannah’s increasingly hot face.

Josiah Bell climbed up the riverbank, carrying two buckets of water. His wife and little kids trailed behind him, then froze at the sight of the fire.

Mrs. Bell knelt next to Susannah. “We saw the smoke. I’ve brought some quilts. I just made bread––”

Susannah nodded between coughing spells.

When Beatrice rushed up, sweat making her black face shine, Mrs. Bell backed away, obviously repelled by the sudden appearance of a slave kneeling with a concoction of something in a cup. “This here’s Bugleweed. Mister say fix that cough.”

After drinking the bitter potion, Susannah turned to Mrs. Bell and rasped, “Beatrice and Zephyr saved my husband last winter.”

Neighbors came through the forest, and others arrived from across the river with food, clothing, and buckets. Some fought the fire. Others herded the children and laid out meals that no one ate. Every person seemed to have an opinion about what happened.

“Looks like Karankawas. Coming up from the coast.”

“My husband said they killed one of ’em. Chased the nasty things to the mouth of the Colorado. Stink something awful.”

“Hear they smear on alligator grease. Wards off mosquitos.”

Little by little the red glow subsided, leaving the log walls looming over a gutted interior.

After throwing a last bucket of water on the standing hulk, Hezekiah returned and knelt to run his fingers along Susannah’s cheek. “Are you feeling any better?”

She swung onto his hand and pulled him down beside her, “I’m being cared for; it’s you that I’m worried about. You’ve not stopped running for an instant.”

He rubbed his face with both hands and rested elbows on his knees. “It’s like watching an execution. A horrifying sight, but I couldn’t look away.”

As the firefighters––coloreds and neighbors––still breathing hard, staggered down the riverbank and plunged into the water, Hezekiah wrapped his arm around Susannah. “We owe them so much. Woulda lost every log if it hadn’t been for their help.”

“It’s my fault.” Her voice cracked. “I should’ve let that savage take Rose.”

“Susannah! You didn’t cause it. They meant to kill the stock at the river. Load the meat in their canoe. Remember seeing that skinned calf?” Hezekiah lifted her chin and turned her face toward him. “I can’t waste the meat. We gotta butcher that cow and calf.” He stroked her cheek. “I’ll get back soon as I can.”

“I want to see Rose.”

“Aw, Susannah. Don’t torture yourself.”

Susannah began to stand. “Let me see her. Please.”

Shaking his head, he said, “C’mon. Let’s get it done. Then you must rest. Take care of yourself and that baby.”

Her hand went to her belly, and it dawned on her that it had not moved since the fire. Brushing aside her unease, she reached for Hezekiah, who half-carried her around the house where the mother cow lay with the baby huddled against her. Well-placed arrows created a deathbed of blood. Then she saw Rose, her eyes wild, her legs stretched out in mid-bolt. Susannah bent to stroke the sleek red neck, sobbing, “I’m sorry, girl.”

Hezekiah scooped his arm around her and took her back to the women and children sitting under the oak trees.

Lanterns burned as men butchered and smoked the meat. Near dawn, the task complete, folks stretched out on pallets and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Susannah tried to smother her coughing to keep from disturbing Hezekiah. He had reached around her to clutch their child and fell asleep. She rolled away from him as grinding pain began accompanying every choking spell. Finally, it became clear that the muscle spasms were not in her chest and were not the cause of her coughing. Hezekiah jerked awake when she touched his shoulder. “I think the baby’s coming.”

He leaped up, looking frightened. “Lemme get the women.” He stumbled away without putting on his boots. She could see him bending over the sleeping bodies of workers who must have found their cabins too hot to stay inside.

Very quickly, Beatrice arrived, and her gentle hands began their examination. “Aw, Missy. That baby oughta wait a spell.”

Zephyr bent with a hot cup. “Sip on bugleweed tea. Eases coughs and slows them cramps.”

The pain made her draw into a ball. “It’s too soon,” she whispered.

“All that stirring around. I knew something was up.” Mary Crankston, her hair still wrapped in a nightcap, slumped to the ground and elbowed Beatrice out of the way. “Laudanum might stop the contractions.” She called out, “Send Lizzie. She knows where I keep it.”

“I’ll get her a mule.” It was Hezekiah’s voice, surprising Susannah that he had stayed close. This baby would be her gift to him. He wanted a son. But not so soon.

The first few sips of laudanum, mixed with whiskey to mask its bitter taste, had done little to ease the powerful contractions. Hezekiah huddled beside her, stroking her cheeks with cool rags. Finally, the thrusting pains became more muted, and she relaxed into her husband’s touch. The women’s voices grew hushed, and the probing hands seemed to bother someone else. Drifting in and out of drugged sleep, Susannah tried to form the words to tell them she was suffocating. Quilts, hung to offer privacy and shade, created a stifling cocoon. Suddenly voices rang out––words ran together in a blur that thrust her into a whirlwind that gripped her body in a vise, then ripped her apart. Was that her scream? She must get away from this burning hell of pain. And then it stopped.

“It’s a boy. Look at that fuzz of red hair.”

Susannah forced her eyes open. Hezekiah sat beside her, rocking a bundle in his arms.

“Boy?” She formed the word as Hezekiah’s tear-streaked eyes met hers.

He laid the baby in her arms. “I’m so sorry, Susannah.”

She pulled their son to her breast. His wrinkled old man’s face lay slack; his eyes closed tight.

“Never took a breath,” Hezekiah whispered.

She wept as she stroked the little fuzzy head. Trying to ease the empty hole in her middle, she curled around their boy. His tiny arms and curled fingers hugged his chest, waiting for the breath that never came. Hezekiah lay against her back, his big hand reaching to sheath his son’s body.

\* \* \*

She woke to the sound of shovels gouging into the earth as men––on the other side of the quilts that walled off her privacy––dug her baby’s grave.

The neighbors who had helped with the fire and butchering formed a circle, their faces gaunt from exhaustion and shared grief. Susannah wore one of Mary’s black dresses and sat in a deerskin chair brought from one of the cabins in the quarters. Hezekiah, smoke-blackened and hollow-eyed, read something Susannah did not hear from a borrowed Bible. Then he went to his knees and gently lowered their son, still wrapped in a faded birthing blanket, into the grave. He lifted his head and said, “Here lies Hezekiah James, our first-born son.”

Susannah covered her mouth to muffle her cry. He was burying all the hope of happiness that little life brought to them.

As the sun slipped behind trees on the far bank, she nodded thanks to neighbors who gripped her hands, folded her into embraces, and searched for ways to comfort her. The men appeared in no hurry to leave and ignored the women who finally herded children to the river for baths.

The men moved into a circle a short distance down the hill, and Susannah grew cold listening to their conversation. “Gotta do something about them Indians stealing us blind. Caríta’s boys haven’t given any trouble since your militia made him whip his sons.”

“Naw!” Josiah Bell’s voice chimed in. “This here’s Karankawas. Tryin’ to burn out Miss Susannah like that? They’re vicious!”

“Back in June, they caught Karankawas skinning one of Captain Kuykendall’s calves. We rounded up ninety men, including thirty of Colonel Groce’s niggers––armed and ready to fight.”

“Gave guns to slaves?”

“Sure ’nuff. Say, Hezekiah. What you think about all them slaves having guns?”

“I’m buying a rifle for every man on this place soon as I get the cotton to Natchitoches. They come around again, it’ll be the last time.” She heard him walk away.

“Can’t blame the man.” Josiah Bell’s voice stayed low. “Lost his home and his baby.” The men began gathering up their share of meat, calling to wives and children to get along home.

When they were finally alone, Hezekiah took down the blanket screens, and lay beside her. “This bluff’s the coolest spot. You mind being among the graves?”

She pinched her eyes shut and leaned into her husband’s arms. “How could I mind? We’re close to our son.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, Susannah woke in the dark as Hezekiah backed a wagon up to their pallets. “We gotta get that cotton picked. Can’t tempt rain any longer. I’ll take you to the field. Park the wagon under the pecan trees. You can rest there as good as here.” He kissed her forehead. “Besides, I won’t be worrying about you all day.”

“Breakfast? Is the stove destroyed?”

“Naw. It survived. Our silver dollars survived under the dirt floor. Wish I could say the same for the wood floor in the parlor.”

“Did everything burn?” She stared at the black hulk looming in the early morning fog.

“Walls are scorched. Mason’s encouraging. Says he’ll start rebuilding––make it two-story––soon as the cotton’s in.”

Lizzie appeared, her arms outstretched, offering a generous mound of eggs and biscuits. “It’s you mama’s plate. I found three.”

“Oh, Lizzie! You’ve searched in all that ash?”

“Betcha, we find more soon as it’s good light.”

Susannah and Hezekiah shared the breakfast, and then he lifted her into the wagon. They rode behind the line of men and women from the quarters who had washed their faded clothes in the river and let them dry on their bodies. Sweat rags bound the women’s heads; straw hats flopped over the men’s brows—family, all of them.

Hezekiah and the workers spread out along the rows, pulling long canvas bags, both hands moving in a rhythmic cadence of clutching bolls and stuffing them away.

The three little girls toddled around Lizzie’s feet as she fed cotton into the little gin’s cylinder with one hand while her other hand turned the crank. She kept both arms working, creating a steady clink of cotton seeds falling into a tray beneath the gin. Sweat soaked through her dress, and yet she did not miss a beat as she chattered to the children digging in the dirt.

Susannah called out, “Lift the babies into the wagon.”

“Mister wants you resting.”

“Lizzie,” Susannah made her voice firm. “I’m perfectly able to play with babies.”

Looking over her shoulder as though she expected to be in trouble, Lizzie helped one squealing girl at a time into the wagon.

Robin snuggled against Susannah, followed by the other two, who mimicked Robin’s every move. All three wore faded dresses that Susannah had made last winter. Another loss. All the fabric in her trunk.

Robin laid a tiny dirt-smudged hand on Susannah’s arm. “You cried?”

*Dear God, let me control myself.* “I was sad.”

Robin squinted black eyes and bent close. “Mister put yo baby in the ground.”

Susannah’s mind raced as she looked at the earnest little face. “He’s with Jesus.”

Robin dusted her hands together. “Him’s dirty. My baby not dirty.”

Susannah gazed after Venus, heavy in her middle, stooping in the long row of cotton. Beatrice and Zephyr could also be expecting as they bent almost double in the searing heat. “Your mama is strong. Your baby won’t get dirty.” *Oh, make it so!*

After lunch, all three little girls sprawled out in the wagon for naps. Stroking Robin’s thick black curls, Susannah wondered if Anna’s hair had grown that long. Had it stayed red or turned darker as her baby hair disappeared? Was she talking as much as Robin? The aching hole opened again as she thought of her son never growing more hair or learning to talk.

When Sunday arrived, it was like all the other days during cotton picking––everyone worked. That evening, when Hezekiah pulled the wagon up to the barn, Eli and Pearl appeared from around the burned-out house. “Godamighty, what happened?” Eli looked like he was about to cry.

Pearl was crying. She clasped Susannah in a muscled arm. “Mercy, girl. I feared you was dead.”

“I saw that little grave.” Eli’s face contorted as he looked up at Hezekiah.

Taking a deep breath, Hezekiah nodded. “We lost our boy.”

“Aw, shit. And I got that cradle––”

“No, no!” Hezekiah took his arm to turn him away. “Not now.”

“I heard.” Susannah gritted her teeth. “Keep it. We’ll need it someday.”

“Oh, sure you will, honey.” Pearl strained to smile through her tears. “Won’t be no time ’till you’ll get another.”

Eli reached for Pearl’s arm. “Hush now. Help me unload—we’ll store it in the barn.

“Did you bring fabric?” Susannah spread her hands over Mary’s black dress.

“Lordy! That's all you got to wear? We brought all kinds of pretty bolts.” Her eyes roamed over Hezekiah, whose shirt and pants looked like they belonged on field hands. “We’ll dig out you some trousers and shirts.”

“How’s the picking going?” Eli said. “Ready to head back?”

“Few more days. We’ve got so much this year that I’m going.” Hezekiah looked at Susannah. “I’m hoping you’ll go with me.”

She felt breathless at the thought. Leave here? Go back to Natchitoches? She nodded. “Oh, yes!”

Hezekiah frowned and shook his head. “I don’t plan to stay, Susannah. I . . .I thought we’d get furniture. Dishes.”

“Oh, of course. I didn’t. . . .” She swallowed hard. What had she been thinking? Certainly, he would not abandon this place. He meant to stay, even if it killed them all.

“I’ll hep you sew.” Pearl ran her arm around Susannah’s waist. “You’ll need something for the trip. Not that black thing. So short your ankles show. Something beautiful for Natchitoches. You gonna love all the fabric.”

Susannah nodded. “It’ll be nice to sew with you.” She pulled quilts from the wagon and walked toward her son’s grave to spread their bed for the night.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Fall 1824

Thoughts of seeing home again, of returning to civilization, even for a few days, filled Susannah with new energy. She refused to remain confined to the wagon while everyone worked in the field. Instead, she spread quilts under the pecan trees and helped Lizzie care for the babies. When it was time for lunch, she encouraged the mothers––Venus, Beatrice, and Zephyr––to play with their children before heading back into the blazing sun.

Near the end of the harvest, Susannah expected to see jubilation and renewed fervor, but the pickers slowed to a crawl. She wanted to shout for them to hurry. Get it done! Go home! Jump in the river! Celebrate the end! “What’s taking them so long, Lizzie? I’m exhausted watching them dally over every boll.”

Lizzie’s shrug made her faded sack dress lift with her shoulders. “Jes another day. Work here or the cornfield. Hot is hot.”

Susannah jumped to retrieve a doodlebug that Robin was about to taste. But Lizzie’s comments haunted her. That afternoon as she rode back to spend another night beside their baby’s grave that Hezekiah insisted on calling the campsite, she said, “I finally realize why the field hands drag through the day. There’s nothing for them to achieve. We’ve stuffed sack-after-sack with cotton to sell for a nice profit. But they’ll still be here, clawing through corn stalks higher than their heads. Not a breath of air to dry their sweat.”

“Well, Lizzie and Percy won’t suffer in the cornfield. I just told Percy they’d go with us. Help Eli and Pearl lead mules.” Hezekiah ran his finger along her cheek, one of his ploys to avoid an unpleasant subject. “Think you’re strong enough to drive the supply wagon?”

“I know I am.”

\* \* \*

Despite being early October, the first day on the trail felt as hot as mid-summer. Susannah was determined not to show how exhausted she was after jolting on the wagon bench behind a string of smelly mules loaded with sacks of cotton. She tied the reins onto the brake handle as Hezekiah had directed and climbed down from the wagon, welcoming the solid feel of earth.

Lizzie, whose string of mules had walked up ahead, peeked from around a bulging mound of cotton. “Bet them mules is tired as us.”

The campsite, carved out of a post oak forest, offered space to unload and stake the animals nearby. While Pearl and the men cared for mules, Susannah uncovered the food in the supply wagon. She smiled at Lizzie. “Aren’t you glad we don’t have to cook?” They had made a large pot of stew, fried several chickens, and packed enough smoked beef to last several days.

“Yes’m!” Lizzie laughed as she darted about, scooping twigs into her skirt. Soon, she gathered enough wood to build a fire and make coffee.

Susannah sank to the ground beside Hezekiah when they finished eating, wanting nothing more than to stretch out under the stars shining through the trees. Her husband, who had ridden his horse up and down the line to help move along the balky mules since daybreak, was still full of energy. “How long do you think it’ll take?” she said.

“Since your supply wagon is the only thing that might get stuck in the mud, we should make it in eight to ten days.” He slipped his arm around her waist. “Why don’t I lay out our bedrolls and let you get to sleep?”

She pressed her face against his shoulder. “If you lie down with me, it sounds like heaven.”

“I’m taking the first watch. We’re splitting into two-hour shifts.”

“You think it’s necessary?” She wanted to say that the Tonkawas loved him. But it wasn’t true. Not anymore.

\* \* \*

The trip was uneventful except for one day of hard rain and the mud it created. The night before they reached Natchitoches, everyone enjoyed a creek bath and a change of clothing.

At the edge of town, Hezekiah rode ahead to Ezra LeBlanc’s commission office to arrange for their mules to go around the freight wagons clogging the docks. He returned, saying, “Good news! We’re staying at LeBlanc’s townhouse. Miss Effie and the girls are spending summers at your old place.”

*My home.* The image of the big house high above the Red River swept Susannah with dread. Although Ezra LeBlanc bought her father’s entire plantation––slaves and all, she had not imagined ever returning to that place of death. Trying not to think about calling on them, she forced her eyes to the LeBlanc’s imposing white townhouse, where baskets of lush ferns swung from its second-floor porch. Then past the hitching posts where she’d once tied Rose. And the brass knocker on the carriageway door.

“Welcome, welcome! I be Florence. Mister said you get fine treatments.” She was the color of a ball of caramel and just as round. The woman’s legs swished against the starched black dress as she led them through the courtyard bedecked in a riot of flowers. “Mister said you stay in de front room so’s you have breakfast on de poch.”

“Miss Susannah would like to freshen up and rest before supper,” Hezekiah called toward Florence’s back.

“Water’s heatin’, and de cover’s pulled way back.” Florence spoke without turning around as she huffed up the black iron steps rising above the flower baskets.

“Ah, the room’s lovely,” Susannah breathed an exhausted sigh as she gazed at an elegant four-poster.

Hezekiah’s lips brushed her cheek, and he whispered. “Be back soon as I get it all unloaded.” He smiled. “I’m looking forward to a nap.” Then he was gone, his boots tapping noisily as he descended the stairs.

“Jes’ rest on that chaise till I bring hot water.” Florence disappeared, leaving Susannah to sink onto the lounge and doze to the shouts of men on the dock and horses clopping along the brick street.

The tub behind a silkscreen was long like the one at Groce Plantation. While Susannah enjoyed the pleasant soak, she could hear Florence humming and her iron thumping across the two extra dresses in Susannah’s valise.

“Mister said yo house burned down. We get you to the missus’ dressmaker first thing tomorrow.”

After the water cooled, Susannah reluctantly stepped from the tub, wrapped herself in a soft towel, and stretched out on the thick cotton-filled mattress. She dozed off, vaguely wondering where Eli, Pearl, Lizzie, and Percy stayed. When she opened her eyes, her husband had stretched out beside her.

“Florence’ll bring our supper in half an hour.” His hands moved under the towel. “I thought you’d want to slip on Miss Effie’s robe for supper on the porch. There’s a bottle of wine on the table.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “All this luxury is adding to our perfect evening.”

\* \* \*

Susannah spent the next three days seeing the dressmaker and selecting the furniture necessary to get back to housekeeping. She replaced dishes, pans, and linens that had not survived the inferno. Hezekiah insisted on ordering a four-poster and a long tub from New Orleans. “I want you to live as fine as Miss Effie LeBlanc.”

The dreaded invitation arrived for supper at her former home––the LeBlanc’s summer place. Susannah dressed nervously in the only special gown she had ordered. Everything else was for everyday wear. Susannah smoothed her hands along the slender bodice as Hezekiah buttoned the back of the delicately embroidered cotton dress.

She had asked the dressmaker to leave wide seams in each garment. The woman’s watery blue eyes squinted almost shut as she smiled. “I leave wide seams in all the young’uns’ dresses.”

Ezra LeBlanc sent his carriage, pulled by a sleek black mare, to pick them up. The driver’s back bent in a hump when he bowed awkwardly. “Evening, Miss Anna. I’m Jethro, Samson’s next brother.” His eyes peered from an almond-colored face, scarred with welts.

*Anna!* She gasped. Her hands reached for the man as Hezekiah’s arm steadied her. “Father crippled you!”

“It be fine, missy. I drive for the LeBlancs now.”

She realized that Hezekiah was lifting her into the carriage. Then as though part of a nightmare, she watched Jethro’s powerful arms propel his twisted body into the driver’s seat.

She rode in a sick daze past the line of shouting Mexican freighters who grew quiet and stared at their handsome carriage. Jethro turned onto the road to her old plantation as the sun slipped to its evening low. Trees canopying the road cocooned cool air that brushed her hot cheeks. So familiar. So foreign. Though still a young man, Jethro’s brutally crippled body put a lie to any decency in her past. Yet, little had changed. The cotton stalks were plowed under, making the rich black soil glow in the changing light. The barns were still unpainted, and orange glimmers of candlelight outlined doors in the quarters. A whinny sounded sharp and insistent. Then Susannah saw a mare at the fence. “That’s Daisy!”

“Ha! Sure nuff!” Jethro shouted.

“Daisy! It’s me!” Susannah cried.

The mare paced the fence line, her whinny sharp and insistent.

“Oh, stop. I’ve got to speak to her.” Susannah clutched her skirt and scrambled from the carriage before Hezekiah could help. When she reached the beautiful animal, she burst into tears. “Rose is gone. But you’re so alive” The mare poked her head over the fence, welcoming the embrace.

Ezra LeBlanc trotted across the lawn. “We got a family reunion down here? She’s a mighty smart mare. But, never figured she’d remember you.”

“Would you consider selling her?” Susannah didn’t look at Hezekiah for fear he’d disapprove.

“Well, I can’t say. Let me think. Meantime, come on to the house. The missus and the girls are jumping out of their skin, waiting to see you.”

Hezekiah leaned forward. “You mind if we go around to the front door?”

Her heart lurched with relief. He knew going through Mama Jess’s basement was too much. Unable to speak, she leaned into the circle of his arm.

As they climbed to the porch, she found herself counting the stairs. Like always. They were in the door, being hugged and passed from one warm embrace to another. The evening became a blur of memories. She was startled after they were seated at her mother’s oak dining table when a handsome black man began pouring wine. Miss Effie held her napkin to muffle a petite twitter. “This is Roberto. We think he serves as elegantly as your Philippe.”

*Philippe!* His memory filled the room. The way he balanced a tray. The grace of his body as he bent toward each guest. Susannah managed to nod. “Yes, he’s quite good.”

If Hezekiah made the connection, he didn’t show it.

When the meal ended, they moved to the parlor. Seated beside Hezekiah on her mother’s settee, Susannah lost herself in the harp concert offered by her two former students. As their supple fingers moved across the strings, she folded her toughened hands together. Any suppressed desire to ever play again was beyond hope. When the concert ended, her only wish was to offer blessings. “I could listen all evening to your playing. I’m so proud of you.”

“It would’ve been prettier if Daisy’s whinnying hadn’t drifted through the French doors,” Ezra LeBlanc groused.

As though waking from a pleasant dream, Susannah heard Hezekiah say they’d finish loading tomorrow and be ready to head home the following day. “It’ll be inconvenient waiting for most of the furniture to come from New Orleans. Still, with all the supplies for ourselves and the neighbors, I had to buy a couple of wagons.”

“How’ll you manage to take that mare?” LeBlanc asked.

Susannah perked up. “We could trail her behind my wagon,” she looked for Hezekiah’s nod.

He grinned. “I intended to buy another slave, not a horse. Looking for a good marksman. Don’t intend to ever leave Susannah unprotected again.”

Feeling a swell of emotion, she reached for his hand.

Ezra LeBlanc cleared his throat. “Gotta be a worry in that wilderness. When we settled here, Indians were tamed down. Or gone.” He looked at his wife, and a clear signal passed between them when both her eyebrows shot up, and a faint smile creased her soft round face.

LeBlanc cleared his throat again. “We got a marksman. Hit a squirrel in the head at fifty feet. Smart as a whip but not much good for anything else.”

Hezekiah frowned. “How’s that?”

“Jethro.” Ezra LeBlanc lowered his head and mumbled. “You saw how crippled he is?”

“Speak the truth, Ezra,” Miss Effie pursed her lips, eyes sweeping to her daughters, who were flushed crimson. “Jethro’s awkward. We’re uncomfortable with his driving.”

“Now Effie, he’s perfectly safe. Just doesn’t make an appearance like Roberto. Shame, too, because he can read.”

Feeling she might explode, Susannah clenched her teeth and then burst out. “I taught him to read.” All the faces, including Hezekiah’s, snapped toward her. “I played school. Mama Jess’s kids were my students.” She froze and turned slowly to her husband, dreading his response. It seemed an eternity watching the tiny twitches work around his eyes before he lifted her hand to his lips. “Let’s take Jethro home with us.”

“Father tried to kill him.” Susannah burst into tears.

“Now, now, Missy.” Ezra LeBlanc crossed the room and laid a hand on Susannah’s shoulder. “You can’t take on the weight of the chattel business. Not something a young woman oughta think about.”

Hezekiah wrapped his arms around her. “Figure up how much you want for the mare *and* for Jethro. I’ll settle up with you in the morning.”

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Jethro was standing beside the carriage, holding a lantern and extending an old worn book. “Wanted to return your book. I sneaked it out before the old mister burned the others.”

Susannah clasped the brown cover and bent to read by lantern light, *Fables of Aesop and Others.* She choked, determined not to cry, and extended the storybook to the startled man. “Keep it, and come home with us.”

Jethro stared at her, his mouth slightly open in wonder.

“We hear you’re a marksman. I need you to guard my wife and my home. We want to take you with us.”

The breath seemed to escape the man as both hands pressed to his face, and he wiped feverishly at his eyes. “Much obliged, sir. Much obliged.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Eight Years Later, October 1832

Susannah could not imagine her life more complete––four stair-step sons as lively as their father. Yet, when Hezekiah returned from Groce Plantation, where he hauled cotton to be ginned and shipped down the Brazos to the port at Velasco, his news made the outside world seem at odds with peace and stability.

He had bounded onto the front porch, swinging Susannah in his arms, saying, “How about the two of us going to San Felipe? This time we’ll get a hotel room.” He stopped turning. “It won’t be grand, but it beats you sleeping in Jared Groce’s carriage.”

She laughed, clinging to him, enjoying his energy, and imagining how wonderful it would be to go away, alone, for a few days. Then the trip sounded less romantic when he nuzzled her hair and said, “Trouble’s brewing unless we stand up to the Mexican government.”

Susannah pulled back. “You’ve done your part, fighting the Tonkawa and then going off to East Texas for that rebellion––”

“Things are boiling over. There was a big uproar over the damn custom duties up on Galveston Bay. Velasco folks tried to help by sending their cannon, but the Mexican fort fired on their ship. Several got killed on both sides.” He cupped her face with both hands like he was explaining to one of their boys. “Susannah, we need that port at Velasco to get our cotton to New Orleans.”

“I thought Mister Austin had charmed the Mexican government, settled all the differences, even tempered the slave laws.”

“Naw. Folks think we need to have a convention, make our position clear to the authorities.” He grinned, incorporating his charm tactic to smooth over her concerns. “Your husband’s one of the fifty-five delegates. I’ll be representing our district.”

Trying not to show disappointment, she pulled his arms around her waist. “Will you have any time for me?”

“Absolutely. Every evening.”

She laughed. “I heard San Felipe opened a few stores. Maybe I can shop for Christmas.”

\* \* \*

Getting away on a two-week trip meant arranging for Lizzie, who had three children of her own, to continue preparing meals. Jethro would watch the boys, a chore he appeared to prize along with his reading and number lessons for all the children. From the moment he arrived, instead of his twisted and scared body creating a barrier, he charmed the children, and they followed him like the Pied Piper.

Beatrice and Zephyr had sons who made good playmates for Susannah’s boys, and before the trip, they wrangled permission from Hezekiah to put up tents and camp down by the quarters.

As their wagon pulled away, she looked back at their sons standing like sentries on the front porch with Jethro. “They aren’t a bit sorry to see us go. Even little Erchel is content riding Jethro’s back.”

“Be glad.” Hezekiah ran his hand along her leg. “Maybe we can go off more often. This trip will be easier. Road’s cut all the way—no more chopping through the forest. We don’t have to guard against Karankawas. And we’ll enjoy Jared Groce’s hospitality tonight.”

She leaned against his shoulder, content to watch the sunlight play through the trees and feel the cool morning air against her face. Her mother would call her a matron, which was true if she counted the blessing of a husband eager to be with her and their healthy sons. She rarely cooked and had given the garden chores to Beatrice and Zephyr. Instead, her days revolved around sewing and supervising the children from the quarters and their sons, who were not still for a minute. Lately, Hezekiah had hinted that a daughter would round out the family and give her a companion as the children grew older.

Susannah didn’t know if prayer worked, but she had prayed for a son through every pregnancy. Anna still seemed like her daughter, and she feared a second girl would stir too many memories. She often wished for a best friend, as Ruby had been. Companionship with the settlers’ wives had never been comfortable. Even when they came to the mill with their husbands, they seemed ill at ease in her two-story house despite its log walls, just like theirs.

Hezekiah interrupted her thoughts. “If we’re going to have lunch before we reach the Coushatta Road, we better stop here.” He wrapped an arm around her and grinned. “I packed a big quilt.”

\* \* \*

The road skirted a field of freshly-plowed black soil that spread over a rise to a cloudless sky. Alfred Gee rode out to meet them and called, “Mister Jared’s gonna be happy to see you. Since his boys took over, he’s not so busy. Enjoys the distraction of company.”

“Health bothering him?” Hezekiah asked.

Susannah thought of how sad it was that such a powerful man had lost the use of his arms, his independence, and now the control of his plantation.

The overseer stopped at handsome brick gateposts that had replaced the old wooden columns. He nodded at the scene before them. “What with Leonard being the oldest son, his wife, Miss Courtney, is the new mistress. Made lots of changes.”

A brick sidewalk extended up to the big house—painted dark red. Despite having shed their plumage, Peacocks strutted across the expansive lawn, screaming at the mules until warning kicks established dominance.

Jared Groce appeared at the front door, gripping the arm of Edom, his body servant. “Been expecting you. We’re heading to San Felipe in the morning.” A wide grin softened his weathered face. “Come in here and meet Courtney, Leonard’s pretty wife.”

She was indeed a blonde beauty, and she had transformed the house––plastered walls, silk damask curtains, and thick-piled carpets cushioning every step. “My goodness, it’s grand to see another woman.” She looked up at Susannah and squeezed her arm like they were old friends. “After you’ve rested a bit, we can chat before dinner.”

The men were already talking convention plans as the women swept up the stairs. Susannah said, “It’s wonderful to meet you. Except for the housekeeper, I was the only woman the last time we were here.”

“She’s still here. Most likely warming your bath.” At the bedroom door, Courtney leaned close. “I contend with three men in this house.” She hung onto Susannah’s hand. “I’ll meet you in the parlor.”

Susannah was still smiling when she stepped into the bedroom and stopped short, overwhelmed by the enormous four-poster so high off the floor that a dainty step stool sat beside the bed. Caroline, the housekeeper, had finished filling the tub. “Bet you’re glad to have another woman in the house finally.”

“Yes’m.” The slave’s crooked grin made her look impish, like a young girl. “Missy always smells good. Baths and fresh dresses ever day.”

Susannah sank into the soothing water, aware that having to draw baths and press dresses all day long might not be an improvement over the all-male household. In any case, Susannah wanted to get to know the lively mistress of the mansion.

Just as she left the bedroom, Hezekiah bounded up the stairs. Grabbing her in an embrace, he whispered, “See you after supper.”

“Ha! I expect you’ll be very late.”

Susannah entered the parlor, an elegant world she’d not seen since Natchitoches. Courtney stood beside a piano, wearing a delicate cotton gown that lay against her body like silk. The waist pushed up to an ample bosom as white as magnolia blossoms. She presented a perfect embellishment to a room transformed from a field hands’ hall of guns, horns, and animal skin rugs to rosewood furniture gleaming in the candlelight. Chairs upholstered in red silk sat before the piano as though waiting for a concert.

Courtney rushed to Susannah’s side. “You look lovely, and your necklace is so unusual.” Courtney’s delicate fingers eased under the chain and drew Philippe’s ring into her palm. “Aww, it’s finely woven.”

“I lost the one who made it.” *A practiced lie.* “Hezekiah gave me the chain to keep it near my heart.” Those words never came easy. Yet, she rarely thought of the ring except when Hezekiah slipped it from between her breasts or when the boys nursed. Little fingers often stroked the smooth strands of hair until she drew the little hand to her lips.

Courtney’s sympathetic frown vanished as she rushed on in a breathless whisper, “You’ll hear all the news from the convention before any of us.” She giggled making her breasts tremble like they might erupt from the top of her dress. “I begged Leonard to stay home. I can’t wait for us to have the house to ourselves.”

Susannah took the girl’s hand and didn’t try to suppress her laugh. “I can’t imagine living with a houseful of men.”

Courtney’s face clouded as she motioned Susannah to the sofa. “I know the convention’s so important. Papa Groce was in charge of a committee that will recommend lifting all those hateful tariffs for three more years.” She sighed heavily. “Can you believe those Mexicans are making us pay duty on books!”

“Goodness, I’m afraid I’ve been so busy with my sons that I haven’t paid attention.”

“Of course not! Papa Groce said you have four little boys.”

Susannah jumped when the dinner gong vibrated through the house. “I’d forgotten that call to the dining room.”

“I’m putting a stop to it very soon.” She cut determined blue eyes at Susannah. “Small steps.”

The dining room had become as grand as the rest of the house––a long mahogany table lined with sparking candelabra set off china, glass, and silver. The old sideboard, crammed with whiskey decanters, had been moved into the hall. Two black boys, barely older than Susannah’s sons, stood at each end of the table fanning the diners with brilliant peacock feathers.

Candles lit the room, making it easy to see the black men serving and Edom dutifully cutting every morsel before placing it on Jared’s plate.

Susannah was relieved to see Jared Groce tuck a napkin into the neck of his white shirt. She imagined Courtney had grown tired of seeing food streaking his chest. After taking his first bite, he leaned back. “Did you hear Father Muldoon went back to Mexico City? Got fed up with being broke and waiting for the government to provide decent living quarters.”

Hezekiah laughed. “The couples in our settlement who weren’t Catholic went to his big event.”

Jared snorted, “Leonard and I attended. Muldoon baptized more than 100 and married four couples. One bride was suckling a baby. Several had their half-grown kids in tow. When it was all done, the good padre got drunk.”

Leonard, who had said little, perked up. “Yep, and he charged that mob two dollars for a baptism and twenty-five cents for a wedding.”

Courtney shook her blonde curls and spoke loud enough to be heard in the hall. “In fairness to the padre, the government won’t legalize land grants until settlers become Catholic. And Paddy was the only one in the whole of Texas who could help.”

Jared Groce melted like butter before Courtney’s comments. “True, sweet girl.” He smiled at Hezekiah. “First woman I’ve known keeps up with the goings-on and makes sense.”

Leonard, whose wavy dark hair and piercing eyes made him a handsome match for Courtney, lifted her hand to his lips. “She’s correct. He’s baptized so many, we’re calling them Muldoon Catholics.”

After the laughter died, Groce said, “You sure you want to take your wagon? We got room, and my carriage offers a lot smoother ride.”

Hezekiah laughed, apparently unperturbed by turning down the important man’s offer. “We’re picking up supplies.” He grinned at Susannah. “And my wife plans to shop.”

The evening seemed to go on forever. When Susannah finally climbed into the canopy bed, she fell instantly to sleep, unaware of Hezekiah crawling in with her.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

1832 Convention

The sun was slipping into a fading arch on the horizon when their wagon rattled into San Felipe. Forgetting the bone-weary ache in her body, Susannah roused as they reached a high bluff above the Brazos, edged by a scattering of bleak, roughhewn cabins. Chinaberry trees lining both sides of the street cast a pleasing green against the graying log structures. She and Hezekiah returned the nods of men standing by the wide-open door of a blacksmith shop, the forge sparking in the dark interior. A line of wagons loaded with cotton backed into an open field, waiting to move down the river slope to flatboats anchored in the muddy, copper-colored water.

Hezekiah pointed to a small building. “We’ll eat at Peyton’s Tavern. Angelina makes a good breakfast for twenty-five cents and charges thirty-seven and a half for supper.”

*It looks dirty.* “The town has certainly grown. Lots more activity.”

When they turned the corner past a row of freight wagons, Susannah saw a weathered sign swinging from the front of a story-and-a-half building. “Is the Whiteside our hotel?”

“Yep. It’s the biggest house in town. Stephen Austin built it for himself. Never moved in. Leased it to Whiteside. Most of the lots around Commerce and Constitution squares belong to Austin’s brother and others who helped establish the colony.”

Susannah tried not to let Hezekiah see her disappointment at the bleak surroundings.

Jared Groce met them on the hotel porch. “We have the only private rooms. Men fill the others.” He led the way down a dim hall that reminded Susannah of a dogtrot separating the building into two parts. Upstairs was split the same way.

As she stepped into their room, a tiny space with a window overlooking the street, Hezekiah squeezed her shoulder. “Rest while I take the mules to the livery.” His gaze took in the small, sagging bed and the lone candle atop a spindly table. “Maybe you can buy a bowl and pitcher for washing up.” He shrugged, “I’m sorry, it’s not Natchitoches and certainly not New Orleans.”

“Don’t forget! I wanted to come.” She watched his frown disappear as he bound out the door like one of their sons who had just been forgiven for his latest transgression.

\* \* \*

Susannah pulled her shawl around her shoulders against the cool evening air as they walked around the corner to Peyton’s Tavern for supper and joined the line at the door. The interior, no larger than their parlor, smelled of whiskey, tobacco, and grease. The heat made her wish she’d left her wrap in their room. They crowded around a table with Jared, his son, and several men there for the convention.

A scattering of women sat at nearby tables. She wondered if they also were hoping to find a way to get out of the place. Finally, Susannah excused herself after a few bites of steak as tough as shoe leather. Hezekiah jumped up and insisted on walking her back to the room. “Are you well? Do you need me to stay with you?”

Laughing, she pulled him close and whispered, “I’ll take a little nap and wait for your return.” After agreeing to latch the door as soon as he left, she pulled on her gown, opened the window, and fell asleep on the bed that smelled of unwashed bodies.

She woke to men shouting about where they would sleep, complaining that their partner snored like a thunderstorm. When tapping on the door became insistent, she pressed her face to the bare wood and listened for Hezekiah’s voice. Pulling him into the room, she whispered. “The walls are thin as paper. They can hear every word.”

“I hurried back as soon as I could.” He blew out the candle and began undressing on the way to the bed.

Their routine developed with breakfast at Peyton’s and Hezekiah hurrying next door to the Town Hall for the day-long convention. Susannah strolled the town’s few blocks, well past the squares and the houses to the *Campo Santo.* She walked among the crude wood crosses and hand-carved stone markers, reading the goodbye words. Except for the cemetery’s name, Seth Ingram’s design of a Mexican town with plazas and fountains had not materialized.

Susannah soon realized she enjoyed eavesdropping on the conversations in the rooms next door. The men were as agitated as Hezekiah and Groce over the Mexican government’s crackdown on their rights.

“Sure as shootin', them Mexicans gonna outlaw our slaves. Can’t depend on Austin to keep them in line. Gonna ruin me for sure.”

“Santa Anna’s backing us ever step. Get him installed president. He’ll straighten ’em out.”

“Gotta separate Texas from that state of Coahuila. We ain’t anything like them people. Land’s different. Religion’s different.”

“I’m fed up with pretending to be Catholic.”

“Ha! You one of them Muldoon Catholics?”

“Yep. Me and the wife paid the old buzzard to baptize us. Then we paid him to marry us. Felt like a fool with five kids standing there watching.”

On their last night, Susannah heard Hezekiah coming up the stairs with several men laughing and joking—drunk again. She shushed him as she let him in the door.

“I’ll be quiet as a mouse,” he whispered as he followed her to bed.

There was not even a lull in the comments from next door.

“Why ain’t them Tejanos in Béxar here for this convention?”

“Yeah. Tejanos still kissing Mexican asses.”

“I’m wondering if they sent that nigger here. Claims to be a bigshot merchant from Béxar. I believe that pretty half-white child’s his cover for spying for them Tejanos.”

“What kinda woman would let a man black as that in her bed? Had to be a mighty white gal to come out with a kid as light as that one.”

Susannah stiffened, suddenly blazing hot, and pulled away from Hezekiah’s eager caresses.

“Hey!” Hezekiah shouted. “That’s enough talk.”

“Sorry! Didn’t know we was getting loud.”

The voices became muffled. Susannah curled into a protective ball. *What kind of white woman?* The words burned into her like hot coals. She was that kind of woman, unacceptable to white people. She covered her head with the mildewed pillow and pretended to be asleep.

\* \* \*

Susannah woke to rain pelting the window, chilling the air, and muffling the rumbling snores from the room next door. Throughout the night, Hezekiah made his noisy contribution to the whiskey-induced discord.

Determined to push away the hurtful comments of the night before, she snuggled against him for warmth and forced her thoughts to the coming day––by mid-morning, the convention would end, and they would leave this place immediately. She had walked every block and visited with the handful of merchants who sold things besides barrels of whiskey. She purchased shoes and fabrics for her boys and everyone in the quarter. Her last stop would be the open-air oven to buy several loaves of the woman’s delicious bread.

Hezekiah wrapped his arms around her, whispering, “You feel like an icicle.”

“Our first cold front. Hope the boys had plenty of covers.”

His hands explored the curve of her back and the fullness of her hip. “I miss the kids, but I want to get you home. Our neighbors are too noisy.”

“Let’s go down to breakfast. Make the time go faster,” she said.

His hand slid between her legs. “And when we get home...”

\* \* \*

Susannah brushed her hair back into a tight bun and wrapped a wool scarf around her head before slipping into a shawl with a deep hood that made her feel tucked in and cozy against the sharp north wind. She walked to the edge of the bluff to watch flatboats loading cotton, then strolled back to the square where men crowded into stores for last-minute purchases and wagons clattered along the muddy street.

While the line to the oven moved slowly, she listened vaguely to men hashing over the final resolutions of the convention.

“Austin didn’t hanker to Texas being a separate state from Coahuila.”

“He wants land for primary schools. So why teach English and Spanish? Get Texas separated from Coahuila; we won’t need the damn Spanish.”

“When Santa Anna takes over, he’ll be on our side.”

Susannah wondered if the last five days had been a waste of time. She was relieved to stop listening when she reached the front of the line and purchased several loaves of bread hot from the oven. Holding the warmth to her chest, she turned to scan the activity around Constitution Square, half expecting to see Hezekiah coming to say the wagon was ready to go.

Then she stopped, rigid with shock, as she watched him approach through the crowd. He used a cane to ease the limp. His black coat and white shirt reflected against his face, still smooth as ebony––a startling contrast to the shabby wardrobe of the unwashed white men hustling past. He was looking down, talking to a child clutching his arm. The girl’s quilted bonnet barely covered dark red curls framing a face the shade of creamed honey. Could it be? Could it be her baby––tall, slender as a willow?

Aching to run, grab them, beg them to recognize her, she could not move.“Philippe?” His name felt strange on her tongue. She tried to moisten her lips, breathe, and slow the pounding of her heart.

He turned sharply in her direction. Then his brow creased. “Anna?” He leaned toward her as if to see better. “I... I can’t believe it!”

Still clutching his arm, the child turned a curious smile to Philippe and then to Susannah.

His eyes explored the curve of Susannah’s face.

The girl tugged slightly. “Papa?”

Without averting his gaze, he said, “You two Annas need to meet.” His voice was the same deep baritone.

“Another Anna!” She bobbed in a little curtsy, and her dark eyes, flecked with green, opened wide as she looked to Philippe. “You know her?”

His nostrils flared as he gulped air. “Natchitoches.” His lips moved again without uttering another word.

*Tell her, Philippe!* Near collapse, she reached out. The child accepted her hand.

“Natchitoches? You knew my mère?”

Susannah searched Philippe’s face, which had changed to fear. He looked at his child, his mouth open in a grimace. Turning to Susannah, he shook his head slowly as though pleading with her.

Susannah closed her eyes. She could have her baby if Philippe would break the silence. Feeling the faint tug on her hand, she looked into an innocent, expectant smile.

“Tell me about her.” Anna glanced indulgently at her father. “Papa says she was beautiful.”

*Was beautiful?* Susannah’s throat constricted. Trembling began as a steady vibration in her shoulders and spread to her arms. The bread tumbled unnoticed into the mud. Anna believed her dead. Susannah swallowed and heard herself saying, “You look like her.” Then her gaze moved to Philippe’s reddening eyes.

“You knew she played the harp?” Anna looked at her hand still wrapped within Susannah’s and pulled it away.

*Don’t leave me!* Susannah clutched at the space between them, then formed a fist to cover the emptiness in her chest. Watching Philippe’s slumped shoulders, she realized they must navigate a storm of their own making. “Your mother played beautifully.”

“Papa ordered a harp over two years ago. It finally came for my tenth birthday. I’m working hard to get better.”

Susannah pulled both arms tight around herself to keep from touching her baby again. “I could tell you’re a harpist by your strong grip.” She had grown so cold that her whole body shook. “I’d love to hear you play.”

Anna’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Come to Béxar. We live on the Main Plaza, over Papa’s office. Across from San Fernando Church.”

“So, you don’t live here?” How silly to ask. But she had to say something. She had to keep them from leaving.

“I came to hear how the convention’s demands will affect my import business.” Philippe appeared to relax; the rigidity dissolving when he saw that she wasn’t going to expose him. The corners of his mouth lifted in a slight smile. “I heard there was a superb teacher here. Thought I’d bribe him to come to Béxar.” Tilting his head toward one shoulder in the old self-effacing way she remembered, he added, “Too late. He left San Felipe last year.”

“I don’t need a tutor. Papa’s the best teacher.” Anna tugged at his arm. “Even French and Spanish.”

Susannah laughed. Forced merriment. “I imagine he’s taught you some arithmetic.”

“Too much.” She giggled behind her fingers. “Do you have children?”

Susannah fought to hold her voice steady. “Boys. Four boys.”

Anna’s smile faded. “Oh, I thought you’d have girls.”

Susannah gripped her middle and whispered, “I lost my daughter.”

“Ohh! Was she a baby?”

A reflex glance at Philippe caught his face drawing into deep lines. Her voice cracked, and tears came like a flood. “Just born.”

Philippe’s hand reached out just as Susannah felt her husband’s arm circling her shoulders. She leaned against him to keep from collapsing. “Hezekiah, this is Philippe.” She felt him stiffen.

Neither man extended his hand. She could hear her pulse hammering against her temple. Her two lives were colliding––Hezekiah, unshaven and rumpled from days without a bath, and Philippe, pressed and elegantly out-of-place in this primitive village.

“I’m Anna.” Her soft words broke the silence, and she bobbed a quick curtsy.

Hezekiah’s big shoulders appeared to fold as if to genuflect. “You look like your mother.”

Susannah caught her breath, frantic to stop him.

Anna’s face broke into a childish grin. “You knew my mère?”

“Aw…” Hezekiah straightened and cut his eyes to Susannah and then to Philippe. Slowly, he bent toward Anna like he was sharing a secret. “Yes…yes, I did.”

Susannah sucked in a prayer of thanks that her husband had not exposed her baby girl to the web of deceptions that created her life.

“This is the best day! I want to hear everything about her. Papa gets too sad when I ask.”

“I’m sure he does.” Hezekiah did not look at Philippe. He kept his eyes on Anna and tightened his grip on Susannah’s shoulder. “You’d have been proud of her.”

Philippe touched his daughter’s arm. “We must go, sweetheart. Our buggy’s waiting.”

Susannah gazed after her child, trying to absorb every piece of her––the red hair, prominent green flecks in her eyes, and the smile. The smile. Extending her hand, she said, “I always dreamed my daughter and I would be best friends. And she would kiss me goodbye when we parted.”

“Well then…” Anna looked at her father, who nodded.

The kiss on Susannah’s cheek felt like the brush of a sparrow’s wing. Her hand flew to the place where Anna’s lips had been. “I pray to see you again.”

“*Au revoir.*” Anna backed slowly away, her eyes twinkling with childlike hope.

Susannah watched Philippe and her daughter move away. Anna’s little bonnet bobbed as she took skipping steps to keep up with her father, who had lowered his head and was taking long strides into the milling throng.

“I can’t lose her again,” Susannah whimpered. Unaware of Hezekiah’s arm still tight around her, she stood in the middle of the street with cold mud seeping into the thin soles of her shoes, ignoring strangers brushing past, talking, laughing, busy. A sharp north wind blew across her face, and she looked at the steel-blue sky washed clean by the rain. “I’ve got to go to her.” Ignoring the sound that escaped Hezekiah, she broke loose and ran. Darting through the crowd, bumping without apology into men and animals, she called out before they disappeared.

Anna was the first to turn and tugged at Philippe’s hand to stop his rushing pace.

“I have something. It . . .it belonged to your mother.” Fingers stiff from the cold, she unclasped the chain, pulled it from the warmth of her breasts, and extended it toward her daughter. “It’s woven from your mother’s hair.”

“Ohh!” Anna cupped the necklace in both hands. “Look, Papa, it’s like yours.”

Philippe appeared unsteady, the corners of his mouth turned down, lips sealed.

“Papa! Show her yours.” Anna tugged at his arm.

His long fingers covered Anna’s hand. “I can’t.” His eyes, red and swimming in tears, searched Susannah’s face. “Thank Miss Anna. Then we must . . . must go.”

“May I fasten it for you?” Susannah didn’t care. Philippe could walk away, but she intended to touch her baby one more time.

“Thank you, Miss Anna. I’ll wear it forever.” The girl turned to face Susannah, a devilish smile on her face. “Mine’s the prettiest on this gold chain. Papa’s hangs on an old green ribbon.”

Philippe turned his back and reached his arm around Anna’s shoulders. “Come.”

“This completes the circle, Philippe.”

“It does.” He lowered his head, pulled their daughter tight against him, and guided her away.

Her cheeks, raw in the sharp wind, burned from tears that almost blinded her. Stumbling in mud and animal dung through the weaving, noisy crowd, she spotted Hezekiah standing where she had left him. The brim of his big hat pulled low against the wind; his arms hung limp as he watched her approach. She wanted to call for him to come to her. But he stood, waiting.

She fell against him, buried her face in his scratchy wool coat, feeling his heart thump and his hands clutch her.

She looked into his face, stubbled with whiskers. “Please take me home.”

When they reached the wagon, he lifted her to the bench and pulled off her mud-soaked slippers. He rummaged in his old valise, withdrew the thick wool socks she had knitted for him, and pulled them almost to her knees.

Their wagon, loaded with lumber and barrels of flour, sugar, coffee, and whiskey, creaked behind ox carts and freight wagons until they turned onto the road edging the river. Hezekiah stroked her back and made no effort to quiet her racking sobs.

Finally spent, she rested her head against his shoulder, and he ran his fingers across her wet cheeks. “Anna’s beautiful like her mother.”

She cupped her hand over his and held it against her face. “I’m thinking of how close I came to making her bear my burdens.”

Hezekiah pulled the mules to a stop and took her shoulders. “I’ll take you to Béxar. You can visit with Anna like an old friend of her mother’s.”

Susannah’s heart lurched, and she threw her arms around her husband. Now, she must live with another lie. Hezekiah could not know that Philippe still wore a ring of her hair on the old ribbon she had used to tie her braid. Visiting would torment Philippe and Hezekiah and eventually hurt Anna. She said, “Anna’s too smart to be fooled for long. And she’s too young to live with the truth.”

“I’ll do all in my power to make it right.”

Susannah held his tired face in both hands. “I gave the ring and your chain to Anna.”

“I saw. I’ll get you another, even nicer next time I go to Natchitoches.”

“Instead of another chain, will you give me a baby girl?”

“Aw!” He threw his head back in a howl of delight. “Can’t think of anything I’d rather do.” Sobering, he tucked in loose curls creeping out the edge of her hood. “I can’t give you another Anna.”

“I don’t want another Anna. How about Louisa? My mother deserves another chance at happiness.”