

I

June 1863



AT FOURTEEN, AMETHYST MARCH HAD TERRIBLY SMALL feet. That meant that the brown leather, scallop-top boots that laced up the front, which had been issued to her by whichever Union officer oversaw such things this season, had very little wear. Amy had never owned anything with very little wear, though until she had her brown boots, she also hadn't known that. It naturally caused her to ponder the child from whom she'd inherited them.

Whatever child had first been in possession of her brown boots before their family escaped Roanoke Island ahead of the battle—or quite possibly evacuated afterward rather than watch the soldiers confiscate their lands, harvest, and cattle—must have owned more than one pair. That or they didn't share their shoes with siblings at the very least, and perhaps didn't have to walk far, when they weren't in a grand house with even flooring.

The floor was even enough here, and it belonged to her. Amy's father had built the house on the corner of 4th street. If she understood what she'd eavesdropped, the honor of owning one of the first homes in the colony meant he'd proven himself of some importance, and in wartime, important men were rarely at home. He'd had his pick of the lots, Mammy said, and he'd chosen well. Amy was certain he couldn't have done otherwise, since in the old life—which was what the March family had taken to calling everything that came before the circumstance of war had freed them—there had scarcely been enough cover over their heads. Near the fields, her whole family had been able to count the stars between the feeble slats meant to constitute a roof. She was young—as her family reminded her all too frequently because they'd decided to guard it as a precious thing—but Amethyst was already on her second lifetime, and in this one, Papa had built a roof that was whole.

This house on Roanoke Island faced Lincoln, one of three avenues in the village, and that meant that despite it being too hot to amuse herself outdoors, Amy could at least watch the others as they came and went. She saw her eldest sister hustle up the avenue and then cross the street, the young woman's skirt in her hands as she acknowledged a salutation from a colonist Amy couldn't see. When Meg was nearer, Amy opened the door before her sister's hand could take hold of the knob.

“Amethyst March, how dare you!” Meg pressed her sister

out of view of the street, and rushed to close the door. “In nothing but a chemise and boots? Where’s your sense?”

“Meg, your hat,” the girl said, mimicking her sister’s disapproving stance, though she didn’t actually care.

“Oh, I know,” Meg said apologetically. And then as though recalling why she’d come back to the house, she hurried past her little sister without unpinning and removing her straw bonnet. “I’ve only come back for a moment.”

Amy placed the toe of an unblemished leather boot behind the opposite heel so that she could swivel slowly to watch Meg move through the room, down the hall, past Mammy and Papa’s room on the right and the room their four daughters shared on the left, and into the kitchen at the far end of the long house.

“That was nearly perfect,” she shouted down the hall when she was finished. “I’ve taught myself to do it just like the dancer in that music box we had to leave behind! Meg, come and see!”

“I have to get back to school, Amy,” the eldest replied, returning with full hands and her face glistening. “It’s so hot now, I’ve had to start shortening the lessons just like the missionary teachers do. Four hours for the early class, and four this afternoon, but at least I had time to come home when I realized I’d forgotten my lunch.”

“Cornbread and an apple is hardly lunch.”

“Don’t pout, it’s unbecoming.”

“And who have I got to be becoming for?”

Meg forced herself to slow a moment and looked down into her sister's face.

"Amy," she said, and smiled. "For yourself, of course."

"I like myself just fine, thank you."

"All right," Meg answered with a laugh. "I like yourself, too. If you get dressed in a hurry, you can walk me back."

Amy's large dark brown eyes brightened, her cheekbones leaping up to meet them, and her sister immediately regretted the invitation.

"Only if I can stay and take my lessons properly, like everyone else."

"Oh, Amy," Meg began, her shoulders sinking at the start of a familiar discussion for which she had no time. "We've been over this. More than one hundred new freedpeople arrive to this colony every other day, and most of them have never had a single lesson until now. We simply can't spare the space, not when you can already read, and I can teach you fine when I'm home. Try to be reasonable."

When her sister crossed her arms, Meg continued: "If I had my way and a too warm day to pass, I'd go to the edge of the village and lie underneath the cypress trees. Doesn't that sound angelic?"

"I'll stand outside a window—"

"The missionary teachers have the buildings. I teach in a tent."

"I'll stay outside the flaps!"

"Amy, I must get back, dear one," Meg cried. Amy's only solace was in the breeze created when the door swung open

and shut again, after which she stomped around the front room in her lovely brown boots until someone else came bursting in.

“Mammy, what a lovely surprise!” Amy threw her arms wide, and when her mother created a new breeze, it was as she swept past her youngest child, whose forehead she fell just shy of kissing in her haste. “Is it hot enough that the officers are finished dictating their letters and they’ve sent you home?”

“Wouldn’t that be delightful, my love.” The woman’s voice carried from her bedroom, into which Amy followed her with a disappointed trudge. “Fan Mammy’s neck a moment.”

The young girl retrieved her mother’s fan from the dresser, admiring the pink ribbon that trimmed the woven straw and wrapped around the handle. It had seen better days, and now only half the ribbon clung to the handle, the rest dangling dejectedly.

“Amy, please!”

Finally the girl fanned her mother, while Mammy pushed her rolled hair up from her damp neck.

“I have to get back,” she said after a time. “I only thought your sister might have come here. She wasn’t at the school-house.”

“Meg teaches from a tent, Mammy,” Amy reminded her. “She isn’t a missionary teacher, after all.”

“I can’t imagine where else she’d be. It isn’t like her to be unpredictable . . .”

Amy didn’t say it aloud, but she knew that Mammy meant

her eldest daughter could be a dreadful bore. Everyone knew it, though she'd gotten in trouble on more than one occasion for saying so.

"She came home and went back again," Amy said.

Mammy sucked her teeth. "Well then, I must have just missed her."

"Whatever you needed done, perhaps I could do it!"

"Thank you, Amy, but it's nothing like that. I've invited someone to supper, and I didn't want it to be a surprise." Mammy kissed her on the forehead successfully this time and then swept back out through the front room; Amy hurried to follow. "I'll send word to her somehow, but don't you go bothering her at school, do you hear me?"

And before Amy could argue that whether or not she was allowed to deliver the news, she should at least know it for herself, her mother was out the door.

She collapsed onto the floor, though there was no one to see or pity her. It was just as well; someone would have made her get up, and it turned out lying on the floor was slightly cooler than all that moving around.

Amy was bored—dreadfully, in fact—but if it meant she'd have to wear heavy skirts to make up for the lack of a hoop, she was glad at least that she didn't have to do important work like Mammy and Meg. Joanna, the second oldest, worked alongside the freedmen charged with building more houses, and no one chided her for wearing the kind of flat skirts one might wear on a plantation in the old life. Bethlehem, the third-born March girl, was a celebrated seamstress;

no one minded what she wore so much as what she made for them.

Still lying on the floor of the front room, Amy closed her eyes and willed her other two sisters to come home, too. When the door flew open for the third time, she sat up so quickly she felt light-headed, but still managed to blurt out, “Mammy’s invited someone to supper!”

“Has she?” Beth came just inside the door and dumped an armful of uniforms on the floor.

“Isn’t that unpatriotic?” Amy asked as her sister rushed to retrieve something from their bedroom.

Beth was sixteen, and the nearest to Amy in age. Along with her calm manner, this made her feel most like her younger sister’s equal, and *that* made Amy feel certain she was the leader of the two.

“I don’t think so,” Beth answered breathlessly when she returned, because it wouldn’t occur to her not to, however silly the question. “I think something must be intentionally unpatriotic, or it isn’t at all.” She spread the thin throw blanket she’d collected onto the floor beside the pile, then transferred the uniforms onto it before tying the ends to create a cumbersome-looking bundle. “You haven’t told me who Mammy invited to supper.”

“Oh. I don’t know.” Amy hated to admit that. She lit up like a spark at recalling something important that she *did* know. “It’s got something to do with Meg, though.”

Beth stood up, wayward strands of her very dark hair swaying with the motion. Whether from the heat or from

hustling around, or from a headwrap not properly secured the night before, her thick hair was puffy at the root, so that the two once neat flat braids looked too swollen to fit beneath anything but a cloth bonnet. Amy grew warmer just looking at it; it was a familiar occurrence in the summer, and it made her scalp swelter and steam like a pot of crabs.

“I hope she’ll enjoy it then,” Beth said, and smiled a bit. It was enough to produce her charming dimples, which Amy couldn’t help but envy because Papa had never seen his daughter’s dimples appear without marveling at them. Mammy said it was because Beth had gotten them from his mother.

It didn’t seem fair, since Amy hadn’t been born a March and couldn’t have gotten any adorable feature from her parents, let alone their parents. Beth was at a distinct advantage, and pretending not to know it only made her more insufferable, though no one seemed to know that but Amy.

She was the youngest, at least. Smart, which Meg informed the family, otherwise Amy would have had to; pretty enough that it shouldn’t have bothered anyone how much she hated having her hair managed. Hers wasn’t as thick as Beth’s, and so there were always hats to cover it.

She wished it’d been Joanna to come home next. Whatever distraction had sent her into the house, at least *she* was curious and inventive enough that at news of a supper guest and Mammy’s search for Meg, Jo would’ve concocted an entire conspiracy to explain it. A story anyway, which was Jo’s one talent.

Amy huffed. Enough of this wretched house, and her boredom. It would be stiflingly hot out in the sun, but she'd put on the limpest skirt allowed and a blouse with eyelets so her skin could breathe. She'd walk at a reasonable pace, quickly enough that the inevitable sweat would produce a momentary chill, if she was lucky. Jo would be at the build, and there were only ever one or two builds ongoing, as there were only enough builders to construct one or two new houses at a time. Whichever lot they were on, it was a good bet they'd be along Lincoln Avenue—or visible from it, at least. There were only three avenues in the colony's village—Lincoln, Roanoke, and Burnside—and very few homes so far. Amy would be able to spot them, even if they were clear on the other side.

Jo would have something interesting to say about this new development, and she wouldn't scurry back to her task once her imagination was captured. She might even insist on going to Meg's school tent—and if she did, Amy couldn't be chastised for accompanying her older sister.

She'd made up her mind, until Beth's dimples reappeared.

"I don't suppose you'd like to take the ferry back to the mainland with me?"

"Bethlehem," Amy said suspiciously. "It isn't like you to suggest mischief."

"It isn't. I've gotten Mammy's permission, for whenever I need to use the sewing machine. And I could use an extra set of hands, if you're willing to work just a little."

Amy leapt up on her toes.

"I have an impeccable work ethic," she exclaimed, constantly

annoyed of the “freedom” that made Mammy insist the youngest child shouldn’t have toil.

For Beth’s part, she smiled and rolled her eyes. “Come on, then. A soldier’s been instructed to take us to the shore.” Then she raised her finger, as though to halt Amy’s excitement. “But we’ll be walking from Manns Harbor to the big house, and this bundle must be carried.”

“I’ll get a blanket of my own, and we’ll halve the burden,” Amy said, not waiting for a reply before dashing off to find one.

“That’s very good thinking,” Beth told her.

“I know,” Amy called back from the bedroom. “Meg says I’m the smartest of us all.”

II



THE NORTHERN REPORTER HAD TAKEN UP THE WHOLE DAY'S conversation among the boys at the build, and by the time Jo made it home and cleaned herself up, she was impatient for someone else to arrive so she could relay the news to her sisters. Mammy likely already knew of the gentleman's assignment, working for the Union officers as she did, since he had come to report on the success of the colony in order to drum up donations from wealthy northern abolitionists.

There was someone else she was anxious to tell the family about, though, and she expected a much more engaged response to news of a handsome, young Black man, also from up north. This one she hadn't simply heard about. Joseph Williams was his name, and despite that Jo wasn't in the habit of considering marriage prospects herself, she'd felt immediately that Meg—who thought of little but teaching

and marriage—would find the nearest broom to jump at the sight of him.

Jo hadn't had much chance to acquaint herself with the man, though he'd come to watch some of the construction—and just to be in their company, as far as she could tell. It *had* occurred to her that perhaps they were a kind of novelty when she learned that Joseph Williams was a free man visiting from Pennsylvania, and had no old life.

Whatever the newly arrived young man might have called it, Jo couldn't imagine what it must be like—not knowing the time before. Before the freedpeople colonies and villages, and the pilgrimages in between, when the big houses of the North Carolina islands were still inhabited by white families who thought they could own another human being. Before they'd run off—either to fight to keep Black folk captive or to escape the judgment brought by the veritable sea of Union soldiers who so handily conquered the area—those white families had done abominable things.

The truth was that if there'd never been violence, the writing of a person's name on a piece of paper that said they belonged to someone else would have been horror enough. There was no better or worse when the condition was enslavement. There were no good and bad masters when there were masters at all. Be they young or old, man or woman, ill-tempered or applauded for their mild manner, they were all heathen beasts who should have expected they'd be held to account. That they hadn't expected it—or at least that they

hadn't expected to lose—only proved they were not what they claimed to be.

They were not superior, Jo had always known. They couldn't be, when they were so bewilderingly ignorant.

Because Jo knew all this at a young age, she'd trained herself not to speak. Unless she was alone with Papa and Mammy, or Meg and Beth, she'd rarely said a word as a child. She certainly didn't speak to white people. They mostly assumed her mute as a result, and thought very little of poor Meg—whom they'd made keep their daughter company during lessons—pretending to teach those lessons to her younger sister, who was clearly touched in the head.

What a revelation they would have received, could they witness what really went on inside Jo's head. Not speaking aloud had been her act of intentional self-preservation, but what she began because of it was a wonderful surprise. Sentences she was not yet permitted to write down, beautifully crafted with words lovingly chosen. All day, she'd knit them together in her mind the way Beth would learn to stitch fabric, taking something most anyone could use and making from it something only she could conceive.

She developed a formidable memory, waiting as she was forced to until much later in each day, when her family returned for the night to what the white people generously called a cabin. Then she would recite everything she'd composed that day, and even if it wasn't a story, which Meg and Beth liked best, and was instead a scathing indictment of this

land and its crimes, Papa and Mammy would let her recite it. They would huddle close, in a circle so tight that their knees and shoulders knocked against each other, and sometimes their foreheads, too.

But the old life was over. It had been for several years now. She wasn't a child anymore; she was seventeen, and Jo spoke as often as she had a mind to. She spoke freely because that's what she was.

Free.

She still didn't make a habit of speaking to white people. It could be reasonably avoided, now that the family had found their way to the colony. There were so many people around all the time, and if she stayed in the village, which she almost always chose to do, all those people were Black like her. It was glorious, a stunning sight, to look in every direction and see brown-skinned people building houses of their own, or coming and going. When she did see a white person, they were missionary teachers who'd come south to teach the newly free, or they were wearing Union uniforms. That didn't make Jo trust them, but at least it meant they were on the right side.

She hadn't meant to think all of that just because of meeting Joseph Williams and finding out that he had no old life of his own. She'd been so caught up in her thoughts and memories that she was halfway to slathering sweet butter over the deep cuts she'd made in the shad fish she'd brought home. She was ready to put the first collection of them in the skillet she'd set on the wood burner when she finally heard the front door open.

“Meg?” she cried, leaping back so she could look down the hall and into the front room. “Meg, are you home?”

“Joanna, it’s Mammy.”

Jo felt guilty at the way her shoulders sank. It was lovely to have a Mammy, especially the one she had. And especially because Papa was away.

“Come and sit near me while I cook, Mammy. You must be tired.”

“If I must be, then so must you,” the woman said, beginning to unpin her hair now that she was home for good.

She moved much slower now and Joanna smiled, though she could not help bristling immediately after at something her mother had once told her. There were no soldiers or officers to demand things of the woman here, and so while it was safe to take a restful posture in the comfort of her home, and despite that this was not a plantation, in the office Mammy dared not appear affected by the heat or the hours spent briskly at a dozen tasks—no matter how many times she was forced by some officer’s error to rewrite a letter or document. On any such occasion, they freely berated her, intimating that she was a lazy cow if she didn’t work twice as fast as they had to.

Though few outside the family would say so, in the March house, Jo was known for her passionate character, and so Mammy had not been surprised by her daughter’s outrage. Joanna had raged that she hadn’t been there when one of the Union men had had the audacity to say such a thing to Mammy, who had for her entire life done more work before

sundown than many a white man, and never for a day's wage or the lavish congratulations they all seemed to require for the slightest effort.

But of course that hadn't even been the reason Mammy took issue with their complaints. It was that none of them had children to mind in the morning. She'd said that before she could even think of helping a white man sort his correspondences or make a list of supplies or men or the wounded, she had to make sure her daughters were well. She had to know they were fed, even if one of the blessed dears had taken it upon themselves to prepare or set out the food. She had to see them, lay her hands on them, to know that they were all still here.

Few things could silence Joanna March, but that had succeeded. It stilled her to hear her mother admit that daily she had to be convinced anew that the colony wasn't a dream, and that no one had come in the night to snatch them back. She had to hear her children, she'd said, while Jo held her breath to ensure she didn't interrupt. More than that, Mammy had told her, she had to remind her daughters that they could be heard. She had to listen to her Jo, whatever her second born wanted to say, because it was a blessing that the girl spoke at all. She had to make sure her children knew they were her treasure. And, like people who knew something of respect and consideration, her four daughters didn't mind if she moved at a reasonable pace, she'd finished with a smile.

Today, Mammy made it to Jo's side in her own time. She had a metal pin between her teeth, which she removed before

wrapping an arm around the girl's waist. She kissed her cheek four times, because the other three girls weren't there to kiss, and then Mammy let her head rest on her daughter's shoulder and breathed a full and restful sigh—which is when she smelled the skillet and the fish and the butter.

“Oh, Joanna, no!”

“What's the matter?”

“Not shad, when we're having a gentleman guest!”

“You love shad fish, Mammy,” Jo contested before turning with a start. “And how was I to know there'd be a gentleman guest?”

The newly arrived Joseph Williams sprang back to mind, but it was too great a coincidence to imagine.

“We'll either spend half the night picking bones out of our mouths, or choke on them, there are so many.” Mammy sighed again, only this time, it was heavy with agitation.

“How lucky that Mary Pollack came by the build today, then, or we wouldn't have enough of anything to offer your guest.”

“We have cornbread and smoked fish, and plenty of fruit,” Mammy said, looking around as though to confirm her stock.

“And you'd rather feed a gentleman something hot, even in the dead of June, Mammy.”

That was true.

“I don't care at all,” Jo added, turning the fish once more. “But I know you do.”

“I do,” Mammy agreed before sighing again. “Thank you, Joanna.”

“Thank Mary Pollack—haven’t you been listening? The boys and I are nearly finished building her house, and she’s so pleased to have been next on the list that she went by the fishery and brought us each a feast of them.”

“I’ll thank Mary tomorrow . . . if none of us choke on shad bones tonight.”

Jo laughed as Mammy retreated to her bedroom to store the handful of pins she’d fished out of her rolled hair. The night was still warm, so she would no doubt braid and cover it with a crocheted snood so that it stayed off her neck but still looked becoming for their guest.

“It smells wonderful,” Meg said in salutation before anyone knew she’d come home. “But I couldn’t bear to stand before a stove in this heat.”

On her way out to the yard, Meg poked her younger sister in the ribs, and then she was back outside. Jo heard her working the pump and then gave a quiet prayer of thanks when she brought the cool water to wet her face and neck.

Jo smiled. “We’re all lucky I had the conviction, since Mammy’s invited someone home.”

Meg reentered the house. “Oh?”

“Meg, you’re home!” their mother exclaimed when she returned to the kitchen. “I meant to send word to you at the school, but I couldn’t get away again, and now he’ll arrive at any moment. And with Beth and Amy still not back!” She was speaking excitedly, and though she’d seemed tired before, now Jo could guess at the prayers her mother might have said throughout the day.

“You have high hopes for this gentleman, whoever he is,” she said, somewhat incredulously.

“Gentleman?” Meg wrapped one arm around her own waist, and straightened.

“She’s invited someone to supper and hasn’t even told us his name,” Jo explained, “but he must have impressed you, Mammy. You sound ready to commission Meg’s wedding gown.”

Now both of Meg’s arms tensed at her sides, and if Jo noticed, at least she didn’t make a show of it. It would be embarrassing to find it common knowledge how distracted Meg had become this past year, wondering when she’d marry, and whom. She was nineteen, and Mammy assured her it would be several years before anyone wondered why she wasn’t. It was meant to put her at ease, but the problem was that Meg wished to be courting and couldn’t help being disappointed not to be. Worse, men poured into the colony on almost a daily basis, but few were prospects. They were too young, or else they came with wives already or women they intended to marry. Others were concerned with the war, and when they would be allowed to enlist in the Union; they had no head for romance, and Meg had every desire to be a wife, but none to be made a war widow.

“Don’t be dramatic, Jo,” Mammy said, but then she covered her mouth with her hand, and both her daughters knew that Joanna had been right.

“I thought I was the only one desperate to find me a husband,” Meg said, doing only slightly better at seeming calm. “Well. At least tell us who he is.”

Mammy looked between her two eldest daughters, whose eyes were wide and expecting, one with nervous anxiety, the other with curious excitement.

“If ever I were going to make a perfect husband for you, Meg, it would be him,” she said, taking her eldest daughter’s hand. “He’s the kind of man Papa would adore; I know it. That’s the first thing I thought, when we met.”

“Which was only this afternoon,” Jo said with a smirk that made Mammy drop her chin a bit, as though embarrassed.

“That’s true. I shouldn’t have let my imagination get away from me. It matters more what Meg thinks of Joseph than your father or me.”

“Joseph?” Jo asked incredulously. “Joseph Williams?”

“That’s right.”

Now it was Meg whose attention volleyed between the other two women.

“Will someone please tell me who this Joseph Williams is?”

In reply, Jo grabbed her sister’s wrist and pulled her from the kitchen, and Mammy’s hand, and toward their bedroom.

“It turns out Mammy might be right, Meg,” Jo explained, closing the door behind them and pushing her older sister backward until she had no choice but to drop onto the bed they shared. Then she opened the trunk where Beth kept all the lovely pieces she fashioned for her sisters, among the scraps that were not yet completed.

“You know something of this Joseph Williams, too?” Meg asked, unbuttoning the blouse she’d worn all that very hot day.