

Chapter One

~May 1863~

Another woman today, just from “de main,” said to me that she had hard work to escape, sleeping in “de ma’sh” and hiding all day. She brought away her two little children, and said her master had just ‘licked’ her eldest son almost to death because he was suspected of wanting to join the Yankees. “They does it to spite us, ma’am, ‘cause you come here. They spites us now, ‘cause de Yankees come.”

Laura Towne, Teacher, St. Helena Island

Harriet’s eyes flew open at the cock’s crow. Her mouth was dry and her heart pounded. In the early morning light she still sensed her husband’s solid hip against hers, as if all she had to do to take him in her arms again was roll over. Instead, she pulled the sheet across her face. John Tubman was gone for good.

Their marriage had been a happy one. John’s timber business thrived in the five years they lived next to the plantation where Harriet grew up, rented to one sour-tempered mistress after another until strong enough for fieldwork outside slapping range. Her master, Edward Brodess, hadn’t objected to the union. As she recalled, he even smiled when she asked permission. If a free man wanted to waste his seed on a slave wife, Brodess was happy to reap the fruit.

Free people of color like John Tubman often loved the wrong person. It was an easy mistake in a Maryland county where half the black population was enslaved and the other half not. John had been smitten ever since he spied her felling a hickory all by herself—one tiny woman against the forest, he'd said, singing like an angel and swinging an axe like the devil.

Daylight filtered through the thin fabric. Harriet lowered the sheet in the stuffy boardinghouse on Port Royal Island and gently pressed two fingers against her lips, as John had done in her dream. She breathed slowly and deeply through her nostrils, filling her lungs. She could almost smell him.

His voice still sounded in her ears. "You know I can't, sweet baby," he'd whispered. Tracing a line down her cheek, his fingers had come to rest on her lips, stilling her objections. Then he'd lifted his head and kissed the dent above her left eyebrow—she felt it even now—in that tender way he once had. The gesture never failed to soothe her, though for some reason she couldn't abide a kiss on the back of her neck where the whip scars of childhood tingled and shied at any touch.

Why had he been unwilling to attempt the break? Why was she not enough?

She'd tried so many different ways to phrase the question, this way and that, though she knew all of them made him feel weak. If she wanted to be his woman, she needed to let him be a man. Or so Mama said, and she had been married to Harriet's father nearly three decades. They'd brought nine babies into the world despite seeing each other only on the Saturday nights that Daddy's owner let him visit. Mama cried and begged whenever Harriet talked about running away, and told her to obey John.

Mama thought that's how matrimony worked, or so she pretended. If she was a good wife, and Daddy a strong man, they would be together always. But Harriet knew that marriage was like a bizarre children's game. One cruel tap on the shoulder by the master and you were gone.

John had promised again and again that he would earn the money to free her. In the dream, now fading so quickly she couldn't recall how it ended, his voice hadn't been much louder than the cicada that used to hide in the corner of their one-room cabin. But he must have said—as he had many times in person—that she shouldn't worry. That he'd saved nearly half the cost. That she'd see.

But Harriet had never seen. She wanted to believe her husband was right, yet she also knew Brodess would sell her the minute he felt like it. And when she'd become pregnant, she decided she couldn't fool herself any longer. From then on, as her belly got bigger, it squeezed against her love for John Tubman.

Harriet sat up in bed. The limb of a live oak tree outside her window bobbed in the sea breeze. Grey Spanish moss trailed like an old man's beard. A cart passed on the street below and a dog barked. The occupied town was stirring. Somewhere on the far side of Beaufort, an army bugle piped reveille.

She pushed down the old hurt until she couldn't feel it and thought about the morning ahead. If she and Septima finished their baking before noon, she would make it to Hilton Head Island on time. General David Hunter needed to know what they'd found on yesterday's scout of the Combahee, stealing past Rebel soldiers on picket-duty who guarded the mouth of the river against Yankee warships.

Though she felt scarcely rested, Harriet threw off the sheet and swung her feet onto the cool floorboards. It had been fifteen years since she left John Tubman and joined the Underground Railroad. If that no good, no account ever dreamed about her, which he probably didn't, he wouldn't imagine she'd become a spy for the Union Army.

The woman on the far side of the whitewashed kitchen looked up brightly from her mixing bowl as Harriet entered the small outbuilding and took an apron from a hook on the back of the door.

Harriet looped the strings behind her. "Morning, Septima. Thanks for starting without me," she said. "Felt like the sun climbed out a bed early today."

The apron tied high on Septima's swollen abdomen was dusty with flour and markedly askew. It looked ready to come undone. Her green turban was smoothly wrapped, though, and a necklace of tiny seashells indicated a resolve to preserve appearances despite the big belly. Behind the worktable stood a brick fireplace with a beehive oven. Nearer the door sat a beaten sideboard from which the finer crockery had disappeared early in the war. Something sweet bubbled in an enamel pot on a stove against the far wall while a tortoiseshell cat supervised from a windowsill that overlooked an orange tree spangled with white blossoms.

It was a southern kitchen like any other except for the absence of slaves, which gave it a cheerful air, as if there was extra breathing space. Set back from the main house to prevent the spread of grease fires, it possessed windows on three

walls, another feature that put Harriet's mind at rest as she instinctively preferred as many escapes as possible.

"Morning, Miz Harriet," Septima said with a smile, her slim fingers kneading continuously. "Don't you worry on it. De beer is on t' bile and I got de buscuts jest bout confangled."

Harriet walked over to look in the mixing bowl. It had taken a year to accustom her ear to the local Gullah dialect that combined African expressions with twisted-up English, but she saw that Septima had almost finished the biscuits. Clumps of gingerbread stuck to the back of her hands.

"That looks a bit wet," Harriet said. "May I fetch up more flour?"

"Yes'm. I might a added too much 'lasses. But we almos' out a flour, I b'lieve."

Harriet took the limp sack from the sideboard. From the weight, there might be a cup or two.

Harriet carefully tipped the large, floppy bag. A small amount of pale flour dusted the tacky dough. "That enough?"

"Maybe jest a bit mo'."

Harriet jiggled harder. The flour was stuck in the folds. She gave the bottom seam a good shake. The remainder dumped into the bowl and a puff flew up into her face. She straightened and sneezed. Then sneezed again.

Septima's eyes widened. She burst into laughter. Her apron came loose and the strings flapped down altogether.

"Ki! You done turned white, Miz Harriet. Now you one a dem high-falutin' Buckra. Don' have to work no mo'."

Harriet put her hands on her hips—she hadn't time to waste—but she pinched back a smile. Sometimes she did want to play. Not be Moses for a spell. Lay down her burdens. Septima looked so pretty with her seashell necklace and catlike eyes. Harriet wondered if she ought to bead a necklace for herself, but couldn't picture wasting time on such folderol.

Septima grabbed the edges of her apron with sticky hands and sashayed around the table. She was nimble for a woman seven month's gone. "Play whenever you want!"

"Septima, I got to catch the packet for—" Harriet said.

"*Dance* whenever you want! No more cooking no how. Mm-mm." Enjoying herself, Septima began humming a tune. She snatched up Harriet's hands. "Come on!"

Harriet saw Septima wasn't going to give up. She shook her head, then laughed and squeezed Septima's hands. Motes of flour flew upward as Harriet batted her lashes in her best imitation of a Baltimore belle. "All right, baby girl. Do-si-do."

The two women dipped and swung one another, humming, breaking into song, smiles bigger at each turn. Harriet ducked easily under the bridge of Septima's uplifted arms. The Sea Islander towered over Harriet like an egret twirling a sandpiper.

Harriet finally stopped. She brushed the flour from her nose with the hem of her apron. "But don't you lay that burden on me. Then I'll never get to heaven." She

slipped behind Septima to retie her apron strings. “Most white folk topple clean off Jacob’s Ladder. Shouldering too much guilt, poor sinners.”

Harriet turned back to the table. The dough looked firm. “Ready to roll that?”

Without awaiting an answer, she fetched a wooden pin from the shelf to start the task herself. Septima tended to give dough a heavier workout than advisable, and Harriet didn’t feel like making a lesson out of the afternoon. The day’s biscuits needed to get done—and a soft crumb kept customers coming back.

Septima wiped her hands on her apron before taking up a wooden spatula. She scraped the contents of the bowl onto the work surface. Harriet shaped the dough into a ball that she rolled flat with the pin.

Septima followed behind, cutting biscuit shapes with a tin cup. “Why you never marry, Miz Harriet? Purty gal like you.”

Since she’d hired Septima three months earlier, Harriet had avoided topics she didn’t care to discuss. The curious Sea Islander must have assumed that the abolitionist everyone called “Moses” had never had much of a personal life.

“I did,” Harriet said as she gathered the last remnants into a couple of lumpier biscuits for Septima’s two boys and wondered what she’d done that morning to rile John Tubman’s ghost.

“What happened?” Deep lines furrowed Septima’s brow. A corner of her mouth quavered and she looked like she regretted the question. “He git sold?”

Harriet wrestled a baking sheet from a crate of jumbled pots and pans and placed it on the table. She began arranging the cut rounds. “No. He was already free. I went without him.”

“By yo’self? Like me?”

“Uh-huh.”

Septima heaved a sigh. “Clare to Gawd, I thought I seeing Aingel Gabrul when you and Mistah Plowden chanced on we last fall. Don’t know how much longer de boys could a held out. Famembuh?”

“I remember thinking the Lord marked you out special,” Harriet said.

Harriet and two other scouts had plucked Septima from a marsh along the Combahee on a moonless night, four miles south of the plantation from which she had escaped with her children. Although most of the Gullah lived on the Sea Islands, planters moved servants around as it pleased them and the Gullah dialect—whose origins time had obscured—had spread across the Low Country. Septima was born on St. Helena, called *Sa’leenuh* by folk on Port Royal, before being sent to the main. Harriet guessed she was around twenty-five. The father of Kofi and Jack, Septima’s two boys, had been traded away long before as a down payment on a racehorse.

Septima placed the last row of gingerbread rounds on the sheet. She set the tin cup on a shelf next to the windowsill on which the cat slept and folded her hands atop her high belly.

“Chillun, what bout dem? You and Mistah Tubman have any chillun?” Septima said after a cautious pause. It was a question women often hesitated to ask. Seven-year-olds sent to auction instead of school.

Harriet picked up a dishcloth to avoid Septima’s eyes, folded it into a potholder, and told the lie that haunted her. “Thank the Lord, no.”

A dodger might call it the truth. She had never possessed a child. Zenia took Margaret.

John's younger brother Isaac and his free wife—a seamstress named Zenia—lived across the Chesapeake in Baltimore. Zenia had been expecting around the same time as Harriet, and agreed to pass off the newborn as a twin. John and Harriet's child would come back later as their free "nephew" or "niece."

Harriet recognized the merit of the plan. The baby wouldn't belong to her anyway. It would belong to Master Brodess. But if the child went to Zenia, that was different. Free mother, free baby.

Even so, a terrible foreboding swelled along with the belly that Harriet hid under bulkier and bulkier coats that winter. Her arms cramped at the idea of never holding the child that tumbled just below her ribs. And even if they smuggled the infant safely to Baltimore, what if Brodess took it into his cussed head to peddle Harriet before John finished saving up?

It had happened before.

As if he had taken a cleaver and removed her mother's fingers one at a time, Brodess sold Harriet's three older sisters a year apart. The frigid November that traders showed up for Linah, Harriet had been but twelve. Hauling water from the creek in pails, she'd heard a child scream from the far side of the Big House. Although her hands were frozen stiff, something in that wail caused them to fly open and she dropped both buckets. One tipped over. She didn't stop to right it, but rushed around the building to find her mother restraining a grandbaby. Linah, the

child's mother, clutched her skirt to her thighs while a man in a beaver hat rudely pushed up her cotton petticoat to get his cuff around the ankle.

Master Brodess just stood there counting his money. "You said \$400," he told the man, whose partner grunted and pulled out another \$10 bill in response.

Harriet ran to Linah and grabbed her arm. "No," Harriet had yelled. "No!"

The man with the money tried to push her aside, but she clung for dear life. Linah almost tripped on the chain since his partner had by then secured the band around the other ankle. The trader had broad arms, and he shoved Harriet so hard the second time that both she and Linah stumbled. A button popped off her sister's sleeve as Harriet fell onto the rough gravel.

There was no uglier sight under Heaven than one human locking chains on another, or a mother looking over her shoulder at a child for the last time, as Linah did when the traders' wagon turned past the white Methodist church and rolled into the forest. Ashamed, Harriet felt she should have done something more to save her sister. But her grip hadn't been strong enough, her voice not powerful enough. So gentle Linah—who knew how to nudge a comb through Harriet's stubborn hair in a way that it never hurt—vanished into Georgia, leaving behind two children and the button that Harriet picked up off the ground.

John just didn't understand. He sometimes ribbed her for being too serious. "Always last to get the joke," he once said in annoyance, when she'd fretted so much during a Sunday supper with Isaac and Zenia that she failed to smile the whole evening. This time, though, she thought he was the slow one. If history repeated itself, as was its tendency, she might be separated from her baby forever.

Yet John wouldn't hear of making a break for Pennsylvania. It would mean pulling up roots sunk by his grandparents a generation earlier and abandoning the business. And she could hardly go alone or take a newborn. What sort of woman exposed her infant to patrollers if she didn't have to or deserted her husband to live on the run? In nightmares, she heard hounds baying. When she awoke, John held her to his chest until she stopped shaking.

"You asking too much, Hattie. You my woman and you staying put," he said in sterner moments—one moment humble as a kitten, the next angry as a bear—when the sun came up over Cambridge and it was time to face the day.

So Harriet prayed instead for Brodess to change his ways. But then he took \$350 for her cousin when he got a notion to buy some acreage, and she pleaded with God to let scrawny old Edward Brodess sicken and die. The wish became a chant in her head as she chopped firewood on the plantation, slaying one stump at a time, though she knew the prayer wasn't Christian. Each morning, Harriet scrubbed her face in the horse-trough with extra vigor, trying to wash her soul clean, trying not to forfeit God's grace.

A bang interrupted Harriet's troubled reverie. The tin mug bounced across the floor as a black and tan blur leapt from the windowsill and dashed through the open doorway. Bits of dough flew off the lip of the cup.

Harriet threw the dishcloth over her shoulder, snatched a broom, and ran to the threshold. "Shoo!" she said, though all she spied was a swaying clump of ferns near the stable. She shook her head with disgust.

Harriet whisked the debris out the door and returned the broom to its corner. She picked up the fallen mug since Septima couldn't touch the floor any longer and handed it to the tall Sea Islander who stowed the object on a shelf too high for the cat. Even Harriet would need a crate to stand on.

"Evuh see yo' man agin?" Septima asked.

"I went back for him the next year," Harriet said. "By then, I knew folk on the Railroad. I bought John a suit a clothes, thinking he could pretend to travel north for a funeral. We'd pass through Bal'more. I got as close as I could, but he'd found already himself another wife."

Hurt thickened Harriet's throat as she lifted the tray. Anger and sorrow, braided tight as a pigtail, yanked her back to that instant when everything that made life sweet turned sour and her heart broke beyond repair. The messenger she'd paid to find John had had to restrain her. She'd wanted to raise Cain. Bang on her husband's door and make him explain, regardless of who heard.

Even now, she couldn't get over the way John had cast her aside. He wouldn't even talk to her, as if she were lower than the path down to the swamp and deserved nothing at all for the years they'd been married. She'd thought of him as the answer to her prayers. Then he betrayed her.

No man could do that ever again.

"He married a free woman," Harriet added. She reminded herself that he had found someone of greater value. That's what happened when you reckoned a wife in dollars.

Septima's mouth fell open. "Ki! A free lady? To replace you? I's sorry, Miz Harriet. You deserve bettuh. Dat man gafa!"

Harriet shook her head. "Not evil. Jest weak."

Most people were. A friend claimed that the blow to Harriet's forehead at thirteen had knocked some moral sense into her that others didn't possess. But she'd been able to see the right and do it even before an overseer brained her for defending another child. As Daddy said, "Hattie came with gumption for two." Others accepted how things were. Harriet asked how in the world they could be.

The future would be better. It had to be. She resolved to keep that thought foremost for the rest of the day.

Harriet gestured with the metal tray towards the oven. "Get the door?"

Septima took the rag from Harriet's shoulder and held the cast iron handle as Harriet slid in the pan.

"Why don' you find yourself a new man? A bettuh one," Septima said as she closed the oven. "Alfred sho make me 'n my boys happy. I made my X and now I's a lawfully lady. Married right under de Union flag. Wish you had someone like him, Miz Harriet."

But Harriet knew she was best off relying on only herself, so she shook her head and smiled. "A new man? Why I get new men all the time. I got six right now. Hunter's scouts keep me plenty busy. I'd find jest one man boring."

Septima laughed and laid an arm across Harriet's shoulders. "You allus got an ansuh. Dat must be why folk listen."

Harriet slipped her arm around Septima's waist. She didn't always have the answer—half the time she didn't know which way to jump—but she knew that a husband made life complicated. And Harriet had no use for that kind of trouble.