



*The*  
GARÇONNIÈRE

ALI MACLAGAN

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE GARÇONNIÈRE

By Ali MacLagan

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# THE GARÇONNIÈRE

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## Photo Description

Two shirtless men embrace as if dancing. One is a black man with shorn, dark hair; the other is white with blond hair. Each has one arm wrapped around the other's body, while clasping their other hands together. The white man's head is tilted toward his partner's shoulder, while the black man appears to be whispering something in his ear.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*The young man in my arms, singing to me as we dance, is the most important person in my life. We grew up together and for years he has been there for me during the darkest days of my long illness: entertaining me, telling me stories... singing to me. He is my best friend... no, my ONLY friend, although he shouldn't be. I am the cherished son of a wealthy plantation owner, and he is an owned slave.*

I would like for their relationship to be sweet with good sexual tension and with at least one intimate scene between them that includes their first fumbling discovery of each other... so please make them old enough so it isn't icky. No PWP.

Please include the scene from the photo in at some point of the story.

Please do not give this a bittersweet ending even though one character has a chronic illness; I would like for it to at least have a HFN ending.

In case it wasn't clear in my prompt, I'm hoping this will be set at some point around the American Civil War

Sincerely,

Heather C

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** interracial, coming of age, illness/disease, friends to lovers, slow burn, tearjerker

**Content Warnings:** racist language and violence as was typical in the Deep South pre-Civil War, off-page deaths of minor characters

**Word Count:** 54,941

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And, of course, to Heather C. who provided all the inspiration and support I could have asked for. Thank you for everything... for giving me Joseph and Henry... and for putting up with my less-than-stellar updating habits. I hope this story does your prompt some justice.

I am truly thankful to all of you, along with the *entire* DRitC family, there are not enough accolades to bestow upon you.



# **THE GARÇONNIÈRE**

**By Ali MacLagan**

## Prologue

*Joseph*

It was real quiet. Birds tweeted in the trees and the songs from the fields carried on the wind. We weren't talking. Not me. Not Ghosty. The splashes and squelches of our steps through the mud created a music of their own as they wove together with Ghosty's heavy breaths and the soft jingles and jangles of the manacles hanging from the post.

The post was tall and straight, casting a long straight shadow over the ground that had been left soft by the overnight rain. It was tall enough to stretch out even the largest of men with his hands pulled high above his head. It stood as a reminder to all us niggers. Each tinkling of the bracelets reminded us what our place was. What we were. Who owned us. And what could happen if we ever forgot.

My already bruised ribs screamed as Ghosty nudged me from behind. Even that small jostle made me stumble and fall to the muddy ground. I opened my mouth, but the groan caught in my throat as Ghosty yanked me to my feet by my arm and pushed me up against the pole. I wanted to clutch at my waist, try to rub out the pain all the jolting around had caused, but I was stopped short as Ghosty began to talk.

"Joseph. He won't be as hard on you if you agree to what he wants," he said in a hushed voice. With my one good eye, I studied the wood in front of me. Its core was solid. Oak. The surface had roughened. Scarred and splintered. Probably much like all the men and women who'd been chained to this spot before me.

"You will build it."

I startled at the sound of Master Ashe's voice and turned my head toward the sound, feeling the splinters slide into my cheek. The man stood with a whip clenched tightly in his fist. Tall, and, like the post, unbending. I couldn't see *his* scars. They didn't show on the outside. But I knew they were there. I knew because those scars were the reason I was here in front of this man. The master let his scars rule him. I would not let him do that to me. He could take a lot away from me—he *had* already. But this time, I wasn't breaking. I pulled my body as straight as my aching muscles would let me, and looked him in the eye as I said with a voice as solid and as sure as the post cutting into my face, "No."

“Francis,” the master called, directing Ghosty with a nod.

I felt the overseer’s callused fingers wrap around my wrist before the cool of the metal bracelet clamped around it. The clank sent an icy chill down my spine contrasting with the warm air, thick with the morning moisture.

Scents of the earth and of the leaves, of growth and of life surrounded me as my other wrist was manacled. The rough hiss of ropes began and my arms were pulled above my head high enough that I was stretched to the point where only my toes remained on the ground. I turned my head and watched Ghosty pulling the ropes tight and then tying them to a ring on the ground before he backed away. My ribs hurt something fierce, stretched out like they weren’t meant to be. I closed my eyes, rested my forehead against the wood, and breathed through the pain.

With my eyes closed, I couldn’t see anything around me, just the pictures in my head. Pictures that soothed me. They never changed. Not after all these years.

Yellow hair. Blue eyes. Soft, melodic laughter. Smooth, pale skin.

Hot air hit my already warm skin as my shirt was torn away. But the thin edge of a blade scratching against my back was what made me start to sweat. The fire it lit within me burned hot, and I leaned closer to the post, inhaling its rich scent as I felt the blade cut through the waistband of my pants. The last bit of clothing fell to my ankles and into the mud, leaving my body exposed. Naked. Vulnerable.

*Swish... crack. Swish... crack. Swish... crack.*

My muscles tensed with the rhythm of the whip as it struck the air behind me.

But that didn’t matter. I hadn’t changed my mind. I hadn’t lost hope. Not like the master.

“Will you build it?”

“No,” I repeated once again, trying to sound stronger than my body felt.

“Very well then.”

*Try to stay relaxed, Ol’ Val instructed the night before. Breathe with the lashes. Tensing will make it worse.*

Yellow hair, soft laughter, smooth skin.

With the sound of a harsh swoosh, I lifted my head from the post and inhaled the thick air. And in that brief silence before a hundred blades sliced into me, I breathed out the one word that meant everything... the one word that *was* my heart.

“*Henry.*”

\*\*\*\*

## **PART ONE**

## 1845

### *Henry*

Papa was building Mama a new house. Well, he wasn't building it. He'd brung some men up from New Orleans to do it. I don't think Papa knew how to build a house. I didn't want Mama to go somewhere else, but at least she'd still be close. I'd seen where it was being built already. It was tiny and gray and up on the hill underneath the great big oak tree. But, I liked Mama right where she was. She was laying down, and so pretty. I brought her flowers every day—yellow ones 'cause they matched her hair. Papa said it was okay, but I had to be quick and not talk. I'd just sneak up to the bed, put the flowers next to her and whisper "I love you" and run away. I don't think Papa was mad about the whisper.

Mama didn't smell like Mama, though. She used to smell like sunshine and like the flowers I'd bring her. Not now though. Maybe that's why she was getting a new house. Papa told me that today was the last day Mama could stay in her own bed. His eyes got watery when he talked. He hadn't gone to see Mama in three days. Just had Sallah or one of the other kitchen slaves sit with her. He waited for me at the door. And when I came out he took my hand and walked all stiff. Hardly bended his legs at all, straight like a tree.

Papa usually didn't act like that. Before Madeleine, he and Mama would laugh and dance. He would rub circles on her big belly and sing soft songs. I used to sneak down the stairs and watch them. Peek from around the corner. It made me feel all warm inside. I think Mama knew I was there. Sometimes she'd wink at me. Or at least I thought she did. Now she just sleeps... It doesn't matter how much Madeleine cries.

\*\*\*\*\*

### *Joseph*

There was a big noise outside our cabin. Men was hollering.

"I need the nigger with wet tits!"

My belly start getting all bubbly and shaky when I heard that. They were talking about Momma, and I didn't know why they wanted her, but she was the only one with a baby sucking on her.

The men outside the cabin kept shouting, and I was shivering in bed next to Momma, hoping they weren't coming to drag her out and beat her again. *Bang!*

*Bang! Bang!* They banged on the door so hard the whole cabin shook. Woke Momma up out of a dead sleep. Agy started crying. I wanted to cry too, but I remembered what Big James say and kept huddled down with my fist in my mouth so I wouldn't make any sounds.

The door burst open, and the bossman came busting in, screaming. Sometimes I didn't think those white folk knew how to do nothin' but scream.

“Come on now! Get dressed and be quick!”

Momma put Agy in my arms, and she scrambled out of bed real fast. I hugged Agy close and tried to hush her best I could, but she be scared too. Boss was banging his whip against the wall. And Momma just put her dress right over her nightclothes and wrapped her hair up real fast. When she took a step toward the bossman, he up and slapped her, then yelled, “Your nigger children, too!”

Momma took Agy from me and started bouncing her. “*Prese prese*, Joseph! Git yo' shirt on,” she snapped at me.

I clambered out of bed and grabbed my shirt to cover my naked body. I didn't like the way the bossman looked at me. His eyes were all squinty, and he was licking at his lips. I'd seen him look like that when they made those men dance around on the porch of the Big House. I got my shirt pulled down real quick-like and went and stood behind Momma. Her skirt was rough against my cheek when I pressed my face into it, but I didn't want to look at the bossman no more.

“Bout time,” he said before walking out. Momma followed him, and I hung tight to her skirt.

We walked all the way to the front of the Big House. I saw a horse and cart sitting there when I peeked out from behind Momma's legs. A white mister was standing there next to them.

“This her, then?” he asked, looking at my momma.

The man was taller than the bossman. He had a head full of brown hair and these big dark eyes. Pale as a ghosty though, especially with the black clothes he was wearing. I wonder if he *was* a ghosty. Why else he be lurking around in the middle of the night?

He stepped right up close to Momma, squinting his eyes, and started walking around her in a circle. I just pressed in closer.

“Is it a girl child or boy?” he ask not even glancing down at Agy.

“*Ti fiy*,” Momma said. “A baby girl, suh.”

“And the boy? How old is he?”

“Joseph born Christmas, f-five years ago, s-suh.” Momma’s voice was shaking then. I stuffed my face into her skirt real tight and grabbed her leg as hard as I could. Agy quieted down. Momma’s bouncing worked—always did.

“Mister Ashe only wants the woman,” the man said. I clung to Momma tighter. “But he’ll agree to take the baby too. He’s willing to pay one thousand dollars. A more than fair sum.”

My belly was doing all kinds of wonky things. I squeezed my eyes tight shut and bit into Momma’s skirt. I didn’t want Momma to go nowhere. I didn’t want to stay here without her. No Momma, no Agy. Me alone. With the scary bossman. My eyes started to leak.

“Well, no, sir. I don’t think that is,” the bossman snarled. I opened my eyes when I heard that. “Mister Delacroix got no need for the nigger boy. That means I gotta call the nigger trader up here. Or take him down to Naw’lins myself. That takes time and costs us money. Mister Delacroix said you buy all three of them, or you get none. And the price is two thousand.”

Ghosty looked at Bossman and Bossman’s eyes got all squinty again, his mouth curling in the corner. But I done saw a glint there in Ghosty’s eye, and it got me thinking that maybe Ghosty was smarter than the bossman.

“Mister Ashe will pay fifteen hundred and no more,” Ghosty came back, he sounded all stern, like Momma did when I was being foolish.

Bossman stared at him real hard-like. “Sixteen hundred. Take it or leave it.”

Ghosty didn’t say nothing. So the bossman grabbed Momma’s arm and started walking us away. But then I guess Ghosty changed his mind, ’cause he said, “Fine. Please forward the bill to Mister Ashe.” Then the man turned to Momma. “Come now. Into the wagon, all of you.”

Momma pulled away from Bossman, and we went to the back of the wagon. Momma helped me in and handed Agy to me, and then she climbed in too.

We left that place. And I was glad. My belly was all warm as I huddled down and wrapped my arms around Momma.

\*\*\*\*

I liked the new house. We’d been here three days. It was quiet. Not all the yelling like the other one. Momma, Agy, and me slept in the *Big House*. I never



went into the Big House at the old place. We weren't allowed. Just in the fields and our cabin.

Not here though. Here it was warm. Momma slept on a tiny bed in the little girl baby's room. There was another room next to it where I was supposed to sleep. But I didn't most of the time. Instead, I slept on the floor next to Momma. It was all right. I had a couple blankets Momma folded up like a bed for me. Sometimes I woke up and crawled up by Momma's feet. Her bed was too little for me to sleep by her back like I used to. But I didn't mind so much. I'd sleep anywhere as long as they didn't send me back to the old master.

Momma had to get up whenever that little white child cry. When that girl cried, Agy started crying too, and Momma ended up having both them sucking at once. Sometimes I'd get up to try to help, but Momma say there weren't nothing I could do and to get back to sleep. I sure was glad I was a boy. I didn't think I'd like them babies sucking on me.

Momma said we here 'cause the master's missus died, but the baby lived, and he need someone for the baby to suck on. That's all she did. Just let the baby suck. Kept her clean. Changed *sa chouche*. Changed Agy's. I had to take those down to the wash. She showed me where that was. I tried to stay out of the way. I just kept my head down. Didn't want to get Momma in trouble. This was much better than the old place. No yelling. Nobody holding a whip over our heads telling Momma to work faster.

The new house might have been warm, but there was black everywhere. All the mirrors had black curtains over them. Everyone walked around with long faces, and their clothes were all dark and dull. I hadn't seen the master yet. I hoped I didn't. I was afraid he wouldn't like me. I remembered what the man said when he picked us up. Master Ashe didn't want no little boy, just Momma and Agy. But the old bossman made him take all of us. I wanted to make sure I didn't do nothing to end up with a nigger trader.

There was a little boy about the same age as me. Momma told me. Young Master Henry. I hadn't seen him yet, either.

They were up on the hill to put the missus in the ground. Only they don't put her in the ground. No, sir. She was in this fancy box. I watched from the window in the baby's room. They put the fancy box into a big stone thing. There was this leafy tree overhead, and it looked real pretty. But I thought it was all kind of strange. The white folk even got nice houses when they died.

*Henry*

After they put Mama in her cold, gray, windowless house, all the people headed back to the parlor. Sallah and some of the kitchen help came and put food on the tables. I just stayed by Papa, holding his hand tight. I was glad to be away from that place, but I didn't want to be around all these people. Big folks talking about big things. I just wanted to go upstairs to my room. I missed my mama. She'd give me a wink and a hug and send me off to play. Papa said she was in heaven. I wouldn't be able to see her for a long time.

I pulled my hand out of Papa's big one. I missed how warm it had been, but he'd let me hold it another time. Some time when we were alone. Maybe when we were holding Madeleine.

Mama's favorite little cakes were sitting on a plate at the end of the long table. I took two of them and looked around to see if anyone saw me, but everyone was too busy talking. I crept out of the room. Hoping nobody would see me with all the big people milling about. I climbed up the stairs, but instead of going to my room, I went and sat outside Mama's door. Papa had the room all shut up. He told everybody that now that Mama was gone, he didn't want anyone to go in. It made me sad and cold and lonely. I sat down outside the door and took a bite of one of the cakes.

I heard a shuffling sound coming from Madeleine's room, and when I looked up from the cake in my hand, I saw a little boy peeking out from the door. His skin was dark, just like the chocolate cake in my hand, and his hair was all tight curls cut close to his head. He had his fist shoved in his mouth. I thought that was just silly.

"What's your name?" I asked him, and he jumped back. It looked kind of funny, but I didn't laugh. The boy almost looked like he was scared. How could someone be scared of me? I was just little.

"Joseph, suh. I sorry, suh," he mumbled, taking his fist out of his mouth but keeping his head down. "I just up here to stay out the way. I didn't mean to bother ya, suh."

"My name's Henry. Not sir. Is your mama the one who's come to help with Madeleine?"

"Yes, suh. She is. I'll go now, so I not cause no trouble." The boy turned to leave. But I didn't want him to go. We'd never had a boy my size before. I think there might have been some out in the cabins, but Mama and Papa wouldn't let me go play with them.

“Do you want a cake?” I asked him, as I held it out to him. I hadn’t even finished the first one. I think Mama would like it if I shared some with him. She told me that’s what good boys did.

The boy’s brown eyes got all big and round as he stared at the cake in my hand and chewed on his lip. He took a step toward me, but then stopped and looked down at the floor again. “No thank you, suh. I don’t think that be proper. That food’s for the white folk. Not us niggers.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got another one. And no one else is going to come up here. I won’t tell.” I wanted to talk to someone who wasn’t big.

“You sure? I don’t want no trouble, suh. I don’t wanna get my momma in trouble neither.”

“Why would you get in trouble? I’m giving it to you. You’re not stealing it.”

“Sometimes that don’t matter,” the boy whispered. He was still looking at his feet. He wasn’t wearing any shoes. No pants, neither. Maybe some of mine would fit him. I didn’t need all the ones I had.

“Please, Joseph. Sit next to me and eat cake,” I said and patted the spot next to me with the back of my hand hoping I didn’t leave any crumbs.

He moved slowly toward me, and I grinned. He slid down the wall and scrunched his legs up. I put the cake into his hand but he just stared at it, looking all serious, so I went on, “Go on, eat it! It’s really good. These were Mama’s favorite. Mine too.”

“Thank you, suh,” he said and glared at the cake before turning his head and looking at me from the corner of his eye. Then he opened his mouth and *finally* took a bite.

I knew he liked it. His eyes closed, and his smile grew real, real big. The crumbs stuck in between his white teeth. I just smiled. I was pretty sure there was cake stuck in my teeth too. “It’s real good, isn’t it?”

“Oh! Yes, suh! It sure is,” he admitted when he finished chewing and swallowing. “Thank you, suh. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And I’m not sir! Just Henry,” I told him as I grinned.

Then I heard a thud.

“Joseph!” Sallah said, sounding all hard and mean. She’d never talked to me like that.

The boy jumped up so quick, I'm surprised he didn't fall over. Joseph was looking down at his feet again. The cake was now all crumbly in his fist. His voice was real soft when he talked. "Yes, Miss Sallah?"

"What is it you doin'? That cake ain't for you! You supposed to be watchin' Agy! Not sittin' out here eatin' the white folks' cake!"

I stood up. My belly was sloshing around. It wasn't Joseph's fault. "But Sallah..."

She looked up at me, and her eyes turned a little soft. "No, Mister Henry. You've gotta stay outta this." Then she looked back down at Joseph. "Joseph. You go out back right now, and you cut yourself a switch. You make sure it's a good one, 'cause you sure don't wanna see the one that I'm gonna pick if you don't. You wait for me by the back door, and you think about what you done wrong."

Joseph's bottom lip was trembling when he answered. "Y-Yes, M-Miss Sallah."

I felt my face get all hot, and my heart felt all fast like I'd run all the way down to the river. Joseph would think I lied to him. I looked up at Sallah and almost-yelled, "That's not fair, Sallah! I told him he could have the cake. He didn't even ask for it. He said no, and I told him it would be okay! Now he's gonna get a swat. He shouldn't! He didn't do anything wrong!"

She reached out and patted me on the head. "Oh, Mister Henry. That boy got no business eatin' cake with a young mister. It's best he learn that now. It'll be harder later on if he don't."

Sallah turned and walked away. And I sunk back down with my back against Mama's door. My eyes were all stinging, and my fist was covered in crumbs.

\*\*\*\*

I went to sleep that night still sad and mad. My stomach didn't feel good, and I didn't want to have Mama's cakes ever again. And that made me even more mad, because I really liked Mama's cakes. I fell asleep and dreamed of her. She was still all pretty, and her skin was so soft. I felt all safe and happy. She sang to me like she used to before she went to heaven. I told her I loved her and missed her.

*Je t'aime, mon bon garçon. Toujours. Ah, cher, it will all be all right. You'll see. Take care of your papa, and Madeleine. And take care of—*

I woke up before I heard the rest of what she said. The light from the moon was making shadows across my big bed, and I pulled the covers up because everything looked all scary. That's when I heard something else. A tiny whimper. A snuffle. It was so quiet, I thought I might have made it up, but then I heard it again. Madeleine and Papa didn't make sounds like that. I sat up and moved the covers off and carefully climbed down onto the floor. It was cold on my bare feet.

"Hello?" I whispered. Shadows were dancing all over my room. I knew it was just the moon, and the big tree outside—Mama had told me that—but it was still creepy scary. The room was all quiet. I just stood there in my nightclothes. I don't think I even breathed, and my heart was pounding like a drum in my ears. No wonder I couldn't hear nothing. I closed my eyes and listened, and there was another whimper. It sounded like it was coming from the sitting room that was between me and Madeleine's rooms. I tiptoed over to the door and pressed my ear right up against it, and I heard a soft cry. I put my eye to the keyhole, but it was too dark in there to see anything.

Mama and Papa always kept the door locked, but I knew where the key was. I went over to the chiffonier and reached way up into the top drawer. I moved my hand around 'til I felt that piece of long, cold metal and wrapped my fingers around it. I went back to the door and stuck the key in the hole. I tried to be as quiet as I could; I didn't want to wake no one else up. Slowly, I turned the key until I heard the *click!* and then I turned the knob and pushed the door open.

I heard a hiccough and tiptoed over toward the sound. I still couldn't see much, and I wish I had a candle, but I was too little for those—at least that's what Mama had told me. I squinted up my eyes and crossed the room best I could. In the corner was a dark, lumpy shape. I saw it shake just a bit, and I scrunched my little body down and crept just a little bit closer before saying, "Hello?"

"G-Go away, s-s-suh." Joseph's voice came from the darkness. He sounded all snotty and gaspy. I didn't like that. "I-I'm sorry if I w-woke you up, suh. I-I'll be quiet now."

Oh, poor Joseph! I wanted to hug him like Mama used to hug me. But I couldn't see him more than a lump on the floor. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled over next to him. When I got close, I reached my hand out and shook the lump. Joseph was hiding under some blankets. "Joseph," I whispered. "Are you okay? You didn't bother me. I was havin' a dream about my mama, and I woke up and heard you. I wanna make sure you're all right."

“I’s fine, suh.” He was too quiet, sounded too sad. I wanted him to look at me, and I wanted him to smile again like he did when he bit into that cake. *Stupid cake. Stupid rules.*

“Not sir, Joseph. I’m Henry. I want you to call me Henry,” I whispered back. I reached up and pulled the blanket back so I could see his face, but he was turned away from me. His shoulders were all shaky, and I looked over them to see his fist in his mouth. I pulled at his shoulder and tried to turn him but he wouldn’t budge. “Please, Joseph.”

“Go back to bed, suh.”

Oh! My hands turned into fists, and my face got all hot. I was so mad at Sallah. I think I started growling ’cause Joseph asked me, “*You* okay, suh?”

“I’m fine!” I think my whisper was more than a whisper ’cause I saw his shoulders shrink just a tiny bit. Why wouldn’t Joseph turn over? This was all stupid! I moved closer and climbed right on over Joseph’s body and wedged in best I could between him and the wall. Now he had to look at me!

“Suh! This ain’t proper! I don’t wanna get in trouble again!” He pushed his body back from mine, but I was fast, and I grabbed his hands before he could pull all the way away. My eyes had gotten used to all the dark, and I could see his face now. His cheeks were all shiny, and his eyes were big and round like the moon. My stomach got all twisty, and I gave his hands a little squeeze.

“Stop, Joseph. Please stop.” I said real quiet-like so I didn’t scare him. “I just want to say I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to get in trouble today. You shouldn’t have. Mama wouldn’t have liked that. And I didn’t like it neither.”

He tried to pull his hands away, but I wouldn’t let him. I hung on tight.

“Suh, I really don’t want to get in trouble again. I’s scared. Don’t want the switch again. Don’t want my momma to be cross with me. Don’t want the nigger traders to come and get me. Don’t want no one to beat on Momma ’cause I ain’t been good. Please, suh, please.”

Joseph’s voice was all wobbly. And his lower lip was sticking out. I didn’t understand what all he was saying. Why would his mama get in trouble? Some of the words he was using I never heard before.

“What’s a nigger trader?” I blurted out.

“Well, you know. It’s those men that sell us niggers.” He guffawed like I should know what he was talking about, but he didn’t make any sense.

“What does that mean? I don’t understand.”

Joseph let out a big breath. “Suh. You live on a plantation. Your pappy is the master. He *own* all the niggers here. He own me and my momma and lil’ Agy too. We’s his property.”

His words made my head hurt. I think my heart might’ve hurt a little too. I screwed up my face. “Huh? That don’t make any sense. None at all!” I didn’t like Joseph talking like that.

“Suh. Us niggers, we be slaves. Your pappy can do whatever he want with us. Just like an ol’ rug. If he’s want to, he can stomp on it, beat it, sell it, or just throw it ’way. Same with us. He don’t like us no more, he just send us to a nigger trader, and that man sell us to someone else. Or if we do somethin’ bad, your pappy can send us out to a whippin’ post and take a whip to us.”

“I don’t believe you. My papa wouldn’t do nothin’ like that.” My breath was coming quick. Joseph’s words were mean.

“Well, I ain’t met your pappy. Maybe he be different,” Joseph said. He squeezed *my* fingers this time. And my belly started to feel less swishy. “But it’s true. I seen it with my own eyes. My ol’ master, the one your pappy bought us from, he was a mean ol’ man. One day, when Momma’s belly all big with Agy, they come screamin’ and hollerin’ at her sayin’ she done stole extra food. Now, I know that weren’t true. We’s hardly had nothin’ to eat, I woulda been happy for extra, but there never was none. But they come yellin’ anyways, and then they dragged her down by the post. I was scared. I run after her fast I could, but my legs still little. By the time I get there, they had shovels and were diggin’ a hole in the ground. I didn’t know why they doin’ that. I just want to go to my momma, and I try runnin’ to her, but Big James just grab me and tell me to hush. I watch them strip Momma down to nothin’ but her skin and make her lie down on the ground with her belly in the hole. They tied her arms and legs to the stakes in the ground. She all spread out everythin’ showin’ to everybody. I closed my eyes. I was scared the worms gonna eat into her belly and the baby in there was gonna get sick. But Big James tell me it was so the baby be safe, babies be worth a lot of money. I didn’t understand why bein’ in the ground was safe. But then they start beatin’ her with the strap ’til her skin all red. Momma was cryin’. I was too, but I stayed quiet like Big James said. He was a smart one, and I think he liked my Momma. Don’t matter now, no how. Anyways, couple weeks later, Agy been born okay.”

Joseph finished talking, and I realized that my cheeks were the wet ones.

“Now, suh. Don’t be gettin’ all watery,” he said as he took the blanket and wiped my tears away. “Just the way things is. Not your fault.”

“I-I don’t like it.” There were a lot of things I didn’t like. “I don’t care about any of that. I’m not gonna let anyone take a strap to you.”

Joseph let out a little chuckle, and that made me mad too. I squinted my eyes at him in the dark, but I don’t think he could see me so well. “Suh, you little like me. I don’t think your pappy or Sallah gonna listen too much to you when it comes to a nigger child like me.”

“Ohhh!” I whispered putting as many of my twitchy feelings into my words as I could. “You, Joseph. You and I are going to be friends. I ain’t had one before, and I like you. I wanna play with you, and if those big folk don’t like it, well I’ll tell ’em just that!”

“Now, suh, I don’t think that’s the best of ideas.” Joseph started pulling away again. But I held right on and leaned my face right up to his.

“Yes it is, Joseph. If you’re scared that’s okay. I don’t want you to get in trouble again. Nobody else will know. Only you and me.”

“Suh?”

“Please, Joseph. We can play together, and I can come in here and talk to you, and we can...” My mouth wasn’t working as fast as my brain was thinking about all the things Joseph and I could do together. He still didn’t say anything, and I was getting twitchy. But then I heard Joseph let out another big sigh.

“Aw’right, suh. We can be friends. But we’s gotta keep it a secret. Sallah and my momma and your pappy can’t know, otherwise I be in a world o’ trouble.”

I felt a smile stretch across my face and saw the same on Joseph’s.

“Okay then,” I agreed as I squeezed his hand. “And Joseph, my name is Henry. Just Henry.”

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## 1847

*Joseph*

“*Vite, vite!* Mister Henry!” I shouted as I ran fast as I could into the trees, far away from the Big House. I’d done finished my chores for the afternoon. Mister Henry didn’t have his studies ’cause it was Saturday. We had an hour before Momma started looking for me. I didn’t have a full workload. No trash gang today. Ol’ Valere didn’t need me for nothing. I’d done taken all the dirty *chouches* to the laundry. There’d be more later—always was. But, I really liked Saturdays. I got time with Mister Henry. We always found time to sneak off somewhere and play.

“*Vous êtes trop lent!*” I said. Couldn’t keep the giggle in either. Mister Henry always got all growly when I got somewhere first. And it always made me chuckle.

“I am not slow!” I heard him yell. “It’s not fair! I got to wear these stupid trousers! And all you’ve got is your shirt. Your legs can go quicker!”

“Shh! Mister Henry,” I huffed as I pulled to a stop under one of the big oak trees, and Henry nearly ran right into me. “That kind of clatter’s gonna get Sallah down here and me out back cuttin’ a switch!”

Henry’s face got all scowly. Sallah still didn’t want us playing together. And Henry still didn’t like it. I didn’t neither, but that’s how things was. “You want me to wear trousers, I will. But I don’t think that’s what your pappy has a mind for. ’Nuff of that face now, suh. What’s you want to do today? We got the sun shinin’ down, and it ain’t too cold. Ain’t too hot. We’s gots an hour or so ’fores I’s gotta be back. What’ll it be?”

Henry looked at me. His yellow hair was sticking up in all different directions. His skin all pink from running down the hill. I put my hand over my mouth to keep him from seeing my smile, but the way he was eyeing me, I don’t think he was fooled none. But then that big old smile of his spread across his face, and he joined me in laughing.

“Ummm... how about hide-and-seek? I’ll even let you go first.”

“No, suh, you go first. I know you likes to,” I said to him, ’cause I knew he did, and I’d just finished teasing him.

“Unh-uh! You first!” Henry looked at me, almost daring me to say something else. That’s when I look around me. I was under an old oak, all right,

but I hadn't been to this place before. The few times we could get outside, we'd head off into the trees and the brush, but stay pretty close to the Big House. We stayed where we could hear Ol' Val's whistle. He'd usually give us a wink when we started out. Mister Henry'd go first. I'd follow along, and we'd meet up somewhere out of sight. Usually by the big oak tree, but this definitely weren't *that* oak. We must've run real quick, and I must've got turned around. And good ol' Mister Henry, well, he'd just followed me right along.

"What you got up yo' sleeve, Mister Henry?" I narrowed my eyes trying to figure out what he was plotting. 'Cause Mister Henry never gave up on something he liked that easy. Not ever since that night he came bounding into the sitting room. I hadn't had no chance to not be this boy's friend. And not 'cause he's the son of the master. Nosirree. Just 'cause this was Mister Henry. And Mister Henry was stubborn!

That boy, he just looked at me all wide-eyed. I shook my head 'cause I surely couldn't figure out what he be thinking. "Aw'right then, suh. I'll go hide. You count *en français*. And you best be fair!"

"I'm always fair, Joseph!" He growled at me but he couldn't stop that big smile from growing across his face any more than I could help smiling right back at him. Then when he turned to the tree and started counting real loud, I tiptoed a bit into the brush then ran a bit more before I stopped and looked around. I moved behind a big tree. The branches were too high for me to climb. Behind me, I could hear Mister Henry.

"*Huit... neuf...*"

I took a few more steps, and then I saw something peeking out from the leaves. Something big and white that sure didn't look like nature had done put it there. I tiptoed all quiet like, moving the branches out the way. I hated that the twigs and the dirt crunched under my feet. Mister Henry sure had good hearing. I didn't want him to find me too quick. And first I wanted to find out what was white behind all this green.

"*Dix-sept... dix-huit...*"

I moved a branch up and away, and suddenly it was like the whole world opened up all big, and I was somewhere else. There was this clearing, but the grass was all high, and little bushes had done started to grow. And there, in the middle of all that, was this perfect little square house! It was white, though the paint was chipping off, and full of windows. I saw five just from where I was standing. The door was black, and the shutters too. It like a little version of the Big House.

I was still standing there staring at the thing when I remembered what I was *supposed* to be doing in the first place. I didn't hear no counting no more. I rushed around the other side of the house and found a tiny porch there too. I climbed up on it and hunched down into a little ball and just waited. I kind of wanted Mister Henry to find me fast so I could ask him about this place. I wondered why we'd never been here before and where *here* was. This place older than me, for sure. The boards on the porch had been battered on by the rain. Dead leaves were all over the place. I'd seen them on the roof, and they were on the porch too. I thought it had been made from oak and knocked on it with my knuckles. *Thump, thump.*

“Gotcha!”

I think I jumped ten feet in the air! I hadn't even hear Mister Henry. My heart was thud, thud, thudding away in my chest. I brought my hand up and held on to my shirt to make sure it didn't just go ahead and pop itself right out.

“Mister Henry!” I squealed, loudly. Louder than it probably should've been, but that little white boy, he'd done scared me half to death. He knew it too. 'Cause when I was finally able to bring my eyes up and look at him, he was holding his belly, laughing away. “Ooooh, suh, that just be mean.” I scrunched up my eyebrows and sent my best glare at him. 'Course, that just made him giggle more!

“Stop that!” I chuckled. But he couldn't. I knew he couldn't. Once Mister Henry got to laughing it took him a right long time to get all calmed down and straight faced. Well, unless Sallah was around. That woman, she could make anyone straighten up mighty quick. That was one lesson that hadn't taken me long to learn. I think even Master Ashe himself would jump if she done told him to.

Mister Henry was still hooting and red faced. And I still didn't like it. His eyes were watery and dripping, and that's when I just ran down the steps and tackled him to the ground. Then I gave him something to laugh about. I started tickling him. He howled and yelled and thrashed about all underneath me as I grabbed at his sides.

“Joseph! Joseph! Stop! *Arrêtez!* Please!” he cried at me, but I didn't stop. No, suh. I just dug my fingers in his sides scrunching them up, and dancing them up and down.

“You think it's funny now, suh?” I said and gave him another go.

“No, Joseph, please...” Mister Henry got all gaspy and wheezy, and I felt his belly rising up under me. His arms were all flailing and trying to get at me, but he still couldn’t stop me. Then I saw his face go all red, and his laughing wasn’t so much laughing anymore. I paused and stared down at him.

“You okay, Mister Henry?” I asked him. He sighed and closed his eyes, and I started to worry that maybe I hurt him. I didn’t want to hurt him, I just trying to tease him and get him back ’cause he scared me. I moved off his belly and rubbed his yellow hair out of his eyes. They was shut, and he was still breathing all deep. “Mister Henry?”

His chest was all shaky. I rubbed at my face and took a deep breath of my own. “Suh, please answer me. Did I hurt ya?”

I was reaching down to touch his shoulder when the next thing I knew I was on my back, and he be tickling me! “Gotcha, again!” he yelled at me. I started giggling ’cause really I didn’t mind the tickling so much. But then he dug his fingers into my neck. That place where it met my shoulders, and that was all it took. I started wriggling and writhing. And he all snickering and smiles. Then he just stopped and climbed off.

“There! Now we’re even.” He looked over at me, and his eyes were sparkly.

“Oh, you—you! What am I gonna do with ya?”

His answer was a big grin.

“What is this place, Mister Henry? We ain’t never been here before,” I asked him, ’cause really, that’s what I been wondering since I’d seen it.

“This? This is the garçonnière. It’s my house,” he said as he leaned back on his elbows and looked up at the tiny house.

“Garçonnière?” I asked. Then I chuckled, and that little master turned his head and raised his eyebrows at me.

“What are you laughin’ at, Joseph?” Those raised eyebrows got all knitted together. I just smiled right on back.

“I just thinkin’, Mister Henry. I be right when I was five years old. You white folk got houses for ev’rything. You got the Big House, you got the kitchen house, you got your mama’s house, and you even got a house for boys! What you all do if you ain’t got all those houses? And if this your house, why you got a room in the Big House too?” I teased him. “And all them got these big names. Garçonnière. Beauchesne. Mausoleum. Fancy names for fancy

houses. Why don't people just call them what they are? 'The Boy House' or 'the Dead House'."

That grin he'd been wearing turned into a frown, and I thought about my words. My belly knotted up, and I started chewing on my lip. I knew Mister Henry still missed his mama. And my words were rude. "I-I'm sorry, s-suh. I didn't mean it like that."

But Mister Henry just sighed and leaned back again. "It's all right, Joseph. I know that. And, well, it's not my house yet. Nobody ain't ever lived here before. My grand-père built it when he built everything else back before my mama was born. It was in case she ever had a brother. I guess the big folk think that boys get too loud or rowdy or something and need their own place away from the Big House. My grand-mère never had a baby boy though, so this hasn't ever been used. But now, since Madeleine is here, I get to live here when I'm bigger."

I leaned back onto the ground and felt all the grass scratchy against my neck and head. My belly was a little looser, but I still felt bad. "Well, that's good I guess. That way Miss Madeleine don't have to listen to all your squealin'." I looked up at all the leaves on the roof and let out my own sigh. "It's gotta have some work done first, I'd imagine. This been left alone a lot o' years. Gotta be all dusty."

Mister Henry jumped up then and rushed up onto the porch. "What's you up to now, suh?" I yelled at him as I raised myself up on my elbows.

"Come look, Joseph!" he said.

I pushed myself up from the ground and started up on the porch. Mister Henry had his face pressed up against the glass of one of the windows, his hands on the sides to block out the light. I moved in right next to him and did the same thing.

It was dark inside. There was a bit of light shining in from the windows, but not a whole lot. I just saw a wide space with a couple of doors toward the back. I was guessing those were rooms. I peeked out the side of my eye, and Mister Henry just over there staring back at me.

"It's nice, suh," I told him. "I glad you gotta place to live close to the Big House when you get bigger."

And that was the truth. I didn't want to think about life without the boy with the yellow hair.

“Yup! And then we won’t have to be sneaking off! You can just come on down here!”

A whistle came shrieking through the air. It was the one Ol’ Valere used when someone was looking for us. He was good like that. Mister Henry and I both jumped back, and I took off first. Mister Henry’d follow in a couple of minutes. We weren’t supposed to be playing. The master didn’t know, but he wouldn’t like it. But no one would beat on Mister Henry. I’d be the one in trouble. I’d tried letting the little master go first before, but after Sallah took the switch to me for the second time, he was having none of that.

I ran through the brush and the leaves and the trees and was still smiling when I reached the Big House.

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### *Henry*

By the time I got back, Valere was shooing me inside. Papa was looking for me, he said. I rushed on in, brushing the leaves off me as I went.

“Papa?” I called, closing the door behind me. I went down the hall toward his study. He usually spent most of his time in there working on all the business things I didn’t understand.

“In here, Henry,” I heard his deep voice call. I reached the door and took two steps in, making sure I stood up real straight. I wanted to look like he expected me to. He was sitting behind his big desk. Papers were everywhere. I didn’t know what all the papers were for. When I’d asked him before, he always said “business.” His looked all stiff in his leather chair, and his forehead was crinkled, but still, he gave me a small smile. He leaned down and shut a drawer. I heard the click of a lock.

“What’s in the drawer, Papa?” I asked him, but he just waved his hand in the air and mumbled something I didn’t catch.

“Been outside playing again, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir. I went for a walk,” I told him.

“I think you might have been doing more than walking, judging from the leaves in your hair.”

I felt myself get all hot, and I knew my face was probably all red. Joseph told me it did that. I looked down at the floor and shuffled my feet. I didn’t like to disappoint Papa.

“It’s all right,” he said, getting up and walking around to the front of the desk. I felt his hand rubbing on top of my head. “It’s good to go outside. In fact, I was wondering if maybe you’d like to go on a small trip with me.”

When I looked up at him, his blue eyes were staring down at me, and he was leaning back with his legs crossed, holding a green leaf between his fingers.

“A trip?” I asked him. I mostly stayed at home. Papa travelled on business, but he’d never asked me to go.

“Just a small one. A few days down to New Orleans. Would you like that? Just you and me, and, well Sallah, too. We’d be staying at the house down there. I thought maybe you’d like to see the ships.”

The ships! New Orleans! I knew Papa did more than just grow cotton. He’d talked a bit about shipping, but I’d never seen it. He’d never invited me. And just him and me! I tried not to scowl too much about Sallah coming too.

“Oh yes, Papa! I want to go! When?”

“We will leave tomorrow. Madeleine is still quite little so she will stay here with Tami.”

I jumped at Papa and threw my arms around his waist, pushing my cheek into his stomach. I was so excited! I wanted to tell Joseph! Ships! I wondered how big they were. Oh, I needed to tell Joseph! *Joseph*. I’d never been away from him. Not since he came to live here. “Papa?” I whispered.

“What Henry?” I peeked up through my hair and saw him looking down at me.

“If Sallah is coming, can we bring Joseph too? He can help Sallah in the kitchen and with the trunks.”

My father narrowed his eyes and rubbed his hand in a circle on my back. “No, Henry. Joseph will stay here.” His tone was hard. I pushed my cheek into his stomach again, and mumbled “okay” against his shirt. I shut my eyes and hoped no tears leaked out. Papa wouldn’t like it if I got his shirt wet.

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I snuck into the sitting room later that night. I could do it with my eyes shut. I didn’t go in every night, but I’d done it enough.

“Joseph,” I whispered. “Are you awake?”

“Mister Henry? What you doing in here, suh? I heard Momma say you was leavin’ in the morning.”

I moved closer to the lump in the corner that I knew was Joseph and huddled down next to him. I curled up and reached out for his hand. And when I finally found it, I squeezed on to it and wouldn’t let it go.

“Papa’s taking me to New Orleans to see the ships. I asked if you could come too. I said you could help Sallah with things, but he still said no. I’m sorry.”

“Now, suh. There ain’t no need to be sorry. Ain’t yo’ fault. I got stuff to do here anyway.”

I knew it wasn’t my fault, but I still wanted Joseph to come with us. I wanted him to see the ships and all the people and the shops and buildings and everything.

“Sides, I’m sure you’s gonna tell me all about it when you’s get back. It’ll be like I was right there with you.” He smiled at me, and I smiled back, but my stomach was still twisty.

“I’m going to miss you, Joseph.” I felt my lip trembling. “I’ve never been away from you.”

Joseph looked at me with those big brown eyes of his and brought his hand up to push my hair out of my eyes. “Mister Henry, you know I still be here when you get back. I’m not going nowhere. ’Sides, this way you’ll not have your studies for a few days. That make you happy, don’t it?” His smile got big, but I thought his eyes were sad. It wasn’t fair, but I knew Papa wouldn’t change his mind. I reached over and grabbed Joseph to hug him real tight.

“Suh, I cain’t breathe!” he whispered to me. But I felt his chest shaking, so I knew he was laughing. I let go and smiled.

“I’ll tell you all about it!” I said.

“I know you will, suh. Now off to bed with you! You’s got a big day tomorrow, Mister Henry.”

I pushed myself up off the floor. “Goodnight, Joseph.” I blew the hair up out of my eyes before I said, “And how many times do I got to tell you, it’s Henry. Just Henry.”



*Joseph*

Mister Henry'd been gone more than a week, and I missed him something fierce. The silver lining, though, was Sallah went with him, so I didn't have to worry about any swats. But still, I was itching for them to get back.

I'd been helping Momma with the babies, but she shoed me away, since they both sleeping; she said I talked too loud. So I headed out to see Ol' Val. Mister Francis—that's what Ghosty's real name was—hadn't come looking for me the whole time Mister Henry been gone, so there couldn't be anything for me to be doing in the fields. He was always mighty quick to call my name. I just say, "yessuh," and head out to pick the trash or whatever else he might tell me to do.

Ol' Val was piling wood up when I found him.

"*Bonjou*, Joseph!" he called to me.

I ran over and grabbed some of the wood to help him. "Let me help you, suh."

"Thank you, Joseph. Your momma shoo you out 'gain?"

"The babies be sleepin'."

Ol' Valere shook his head and chuckled. "Those girls not be babies anymore, Joseph. Miss Madeleine be two years old. When she let loose, I think she's gonna give Mister Henry a run for his money. She sure does keep yo' momma busy."

I put the wood down on top of the pile. "Yes, suh. She sure do. And with Sallah gone, Momma's got Agy to watch over now too. So she got twice the trouble."

"Well, that is surely the truth. Though I bet little Agy likes spending the time with the little miss. The master don't like it though. She'll go back with Sallah when they get back. And I reckon that child probably won't be likin' it none. Sallah will put a stop to her fussin' though."

"Does the master know about me and Mister Henry playin'?" I asked. My belly felt all sick-like, and I held all my air in.

"I think you know the answer to that, Joseph," Val said, letting out a long sigh. "It's the way of things. White folk don't like the slave children to be playin' with their own."

My body felt all heavy, and my head was hurting something awful. I knew that, but I didn't like it. I kicked the ground. Ol' Val reached over and swatted the back of my already-hurting head. "Stop that!" he scolded. "That kind of thing ain't gonna get you nowhere, you hear? Now, I'll help you, but you gotsta keep all that long face hidden away. Sallah already suspectin' and so the master. Why you think he took Mister Henry to Naw'lins? He want to put distance between the two of you. Maybe he be lookin' for a new wife, too. Folk already talkin' about him not bein' married. If he come back here with a new missus, that means new babies. Or maybe the master gonna just move on down to Naw'lins and take Mister Henry with him. I don't know, but if you don't get yo'self together, you's gonna get a whole lot more than a switch."

I let Ol' Val's words sink in. Mister Henry move? But his house be here. Never seein' Mister Henry 'gain made my eyes watery.

"I think when he get back, maybe you should maybe take a bit of time away. Just so the master don't get more suspicious. You two have been mighty close, and you do aw'right with your sneakin' away, but folks still notice." Ol' Valere patted me on the shoulder. I don't think he meant to be hurtful, but I didn't want to hear those words. Even if he just making sure me and Mister Henry could stay friends and all.

"Okay, Val," I said to the ground. Then I felt a big fat tear roll down my cheek.

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It weren't too hard to stay away from Mister Henry. He come back that morning when I was out on the trash gang. After the trash gang, I went and stacked some more wood. Then Ghosty told me to go back to the mill and help load up the cotton. By the time I was done that night, I fell fast asleep in the corner of the sitting room. The only reason I knew Mister Henry was even back was 'cause I saw the trunks being hauled in the house, and I could hear Sallah yelling. Everyone could hear Sallah yelling.

I woke in the dark, and that door be creaking open and Mister Henry be whispering to me. "Joseph?" I just went on pretending to be sleeping. But the little master called out again, this time louder. "Joseph?"

"Mister Henry! You's gonna wake the whole house like that," I whispered back, though it might have been more than a whisper.

"Oh, Joseph!" I heard his feet shuffling along the floor, and when I opened my eyes, there were a pair of blue eyes staring back at me. "I missed you so much!" little master said.

“Missed you too, suh. But I’s real tired and need to sleep. You should too,” I said. I felt bad when I saw his shoulders drooping. But I remembered what Val told me.

“But I want to talk to you,” Mister Henry whined. He reached his arm out and ran it over my shoulder.

I wanted to hear all about New Orleans and the ships, and I knew little master wanted to tell me, but instead I answered, “Maybe we can talk tomorrow, suh. I want to hear all about it, but Val told me people startin’ to talk about us bein’ friends. And I don’t want no one findin’ out and you gettin’ in trouble and havin’ to move away to Naw’lins or gettin’ a new mama and new babies and then you won’t need me no more. And that would make me sad and I don’t wanna think about that, so if we don’t talk for a while, just a little while, maybe the people, well, they’ll stop talkin’ and your papa won’t sell me away.”

I didn’t mean to say all that. Mister Henry took a quick breath, then he took my hand and squeezed it. “I wouldn’t let him do that, Joseph,” he said, his voice soft like when he talked to Miss Madeleine.

“Sorry, suh, but I don’t thinks you could stop it. Your papa gonna do what he want. I ain’t nothin’ but a slave. I like it here. I like it here with you. So if I cain’t talk to you for a while, that sure be better than not being able to talk to you forever.”

“But Joseph, nobody knows I’m here *now*.” He sounded sure, and he was right, but...

“Scuse me, suh, but if we be talkin’ now, tomorrow’s gonna be mighty hard. I think it might be easier if I’s just go on pretendin’ that you’s still in Naw’lins.” My belly started tearing and twisting. If there was anything in it, it surely would have ended up on the blankets. “Please, Mister Henry,” was all I could say, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

I felt him squeeze my shoulder and whisper, “Okay, Joseph,” before I heard his feet shuffle right back out and heard the door creak. And then those darn tears started rolling down my cheeks again.

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The next day, Sallah told me I was moving out of the Big House and out to the wood shack with Ol’ Valere. She said I was old enough to start learning something besides carrying the laundry and bustling about getting into trouble. If she’d told me that the day before I wouldn’t have sent Mister Henry away.

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*Henry*

It had been four whole days since I'd seen Joseph. Sallah told me he moved out to the shack with Valere. I tried not to scowl at her, but I don't think it worked. I didn't know what to do. So, since I couldn't play with Joseph, I played with Madeleine. She looked like a tiny little Mama. She had all those blonde curls piled up on her head. She wore all kinds of fancy dresses. Didn't really make a lot of sense to me. Why dress a little girl up when all she was going to do was smear food all over herself? But I still think it would have made Mama happy.

Madeleine and Miss Tami were sitting on the porch when I found them. Madeleine was playing with one of her dolls, and Miss Tami was just sitting in a rocking chair, mending a dress or some other thing I couldn't make out. I plopped down next to Madeleine and snatched her doll.

"Reeee!" she squawked. She couldn't say my name yet. To Madeleine, I was just "Ree."

"Ma doll!" This time she pouted too. I looked up at Tami who was giving me that look that told me I'd better start behaving mighty quick.

"Can I play with you, Madeleine?" I asked, bending my face down next to hers. But she wasn't looking at me, just her doll.

"Ma, Ree, ma doll!" I reckoned nothing was getting between my sister and her doll. That toy was all squeezed with its hair going every which way. I blew a long breath in her face and gave the thing back. A great big smile grew across Madeleine's face, and she hugged the doll close to her.

I blew out another breath, and Madeleine started giggling away, her yellow curls blowing to the sides of her head and back. "'gain, Ree! 'gain!" And so I did it again, and my little sister's laughter was everywhere. She tried doing it to me, but all I got was a face full of spit. Miss Tami just kept rocking away, but now the corner of her mouth was turned up.

I wiped my face with my sleeve and curled up on the blanket next to Madeleine, and she laid right down next to me. She reached her hand out and patted my hair. Then she took those little fat fingers of hers and pulled it!

"Ow! No, Madeleine! That hurt," I cried at her, pulling back with my face all scrunched up. I rubbed the top of my head where she'd pulled, trying to rub the hurt away, but it didn't do any good.

“Miss Madeleine,” Miss Tami said. “Be nice to your brother.” Her voice was stern, and Madeleine looked from Miss Tami to me and back again. Her lower lip was all sticking out. Then she looked at me and leaned over and kissed my cheek. Which got it all slobbery, but I just smiled.

“It’s all right. Just don’t do it again.”

Madeleine smiled and then giggled, and I would swear I could hear Mama’s laugh somewhere hiding behind it. I leaned in close and rubbed my nose against hers. “You sound just like Mama,” I whispered.

I sat with Madeleine until my tutor, Mr. DuMont, arrived, and then I got up with my head hanging low and marched to the parlor to learn about arithmetic.

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The first day Mr. DuMont came back, I learned about addition. Wrote all over my slate. Got smiles and nods. I did good! Second and third days too.

The fourth day though...

I tried to pay attention. I really, really did. Mr. DuMont kept talking, and I knew I should be listening, but I just couldn’t. My brain felt foggy, and my throat was all itchy. I was afraid he was going to take the ruler out. But instead he just came over and ruffled my hair.

“How are you feeling, Henry? You look a bit flushed.” His sounded kind when he spoke, not like he did when I thinking about running off and playing with Joseph instead of my lessons. Those times, he was all hard and loud. I didn’t know why he was being nice.

“Henry?” He was harsher that time, and I snapped my head up, which made it ache a little.

“Um... um... I’m not sure, sir.” Then I coughed. And coughed again.

“I think maybe we should call off the lesson today and you should head up to bed. I’ll go let Sallah know you’re feeling under the weather.” I stood up, and Mr. DuMont put his hand on my back and guided me out of the room and toward the stairs before he headed to go find Sallah.

I climbed up the stairs. Slower than usual. Usually I could get up those things faster than even Joseph. But everything felt heavy. I stopped halfway up to cough and then started up again. One step... two steps... three steps... I bet Mr. DuMont would be proud I was using my lessons, but I was too tired to bother to shout down to him.

I made it to my bed, and it took me two tries to get up onto it. When I finally did, I didn't even pull the blankets back, just shoved my face down on the pillow and closed my eyes.

I must have fallen asleep though, 'cause suddenly Sallah was there, right in my face. All I could see were all the wrinkles on her forehead. She pulled back before I could.

"Oh Mister Henry, chile'. You surely don't look well." She shook her head and walked out the door.

I think I fell back to sleep.

"C'mon little master. Sit on up for me."

I felt someone pulling at my shoulders, and I opened my eyes. The room was dark, except for the candle lit on the table beside my bed.

"That's it Mister Henry. Sit on up. Here, I brought you something to help. You's gotta drink it. And to do that, you gotta be sittin' up. I don't wanna pour it down your throat, ya hear?"

Oh, I heard. I just didn't really care. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep. I started to turn over.

"Master Henry!"

My eyes opened quick with Sallah's screeching. "Yes, Sallah?"

"Come on chile', drink this, then you can go back to sleep." She pulled me up and propped a pillow behind me. She was kind of lookin' at me funny, but then she reached over and took hold of a cup and brought it to my mouth. "Drink, Master Henry."

Sallah held the cup for me, and I took a tiny sip. "Yeelchk!" I cried out and tried to push the cup away.

"Oh no, you's gonna drink this all down. I know you don't like it, but you's need it. You hear me?" Why did she keep saying that?

I looked into the cup. It was clear and brown and smelled so bad my whole face scrunched up along with my nose. My chest got tight too, and I turned away so I could cough. Then I looked up at Sallah, and I hoped that she could see how mad I was. "Drink."

So, I drank, and I coughed. And I hated it. I really hoped I got better soon, 'cause I surely did not want to be drinkin' that stuff again.

*Joseph*

Mister Henry couldn't visit me out in the wood shack. I was starting to think I was stupid for saying what I did. I missed him and hearing his laugh. I'd lay there on my little mat and listen to everything that was going on around me. The wind outside the window howled away some nights. And some nights, all you heard were the crickets. And Val's snores. That man was louder when he slept than when he was when he was awake. I spent a lot of time just tossing and turning on that mat.

The days weren't much better. I still did my duties. Helped Ol' Valere with the wood piles. Then there was always the trash gang. I hated the trash gang. The other children looked older than me. And they were all mean. Calling me names 'cause I worked in the Big House. I just kept my mouth shut and picked up the trash. I had nothing to say to them. The only words I had were for Mister Henry, but I'd done gone and told him I didn't want to say them. I really wished I hadn't said that.

Then about a week after I told Mister Henry to go away, I saw a doctor ride up to the house with his horse and cart. I got all sweaty when I saw that. I didn't know anyone else who be sick, and if the doctor was there, it must really be bad. I worked and worked all day long. Stacking the wood. Listening to Val whistling away. I was all sweaty and itchy, but I don't think it was 'cause of all the work I'd been doing. I was trying real hard not to think about what be going on inside that house. Inside Mister Henry's room. What would happen if they sent him away to get better, and the last thing I said to him was I didn't want to see him? My eyes were getting stingy. But I just kept stacking away. Listening to Valere push and pull that saw back and forth across a board as I walked back and forth between the wood and the pile. I grabbed the broom and started sweeping, and I kept it up 'til finally Valere touched my shoulder and made me stop.

"Now, boy. I think that there is as clean as that floor gonna get."

"I'm almost done, suh," I say to him as I looked up into his wrinkled ol' face.

He tilted his head to the side and took the broom out o' my hands. "You okay, boy?"

I didn't know what to say. All my words be dried up 'cause I ain't have any use for them. My lip started quivering, and I just nodded my head.

The days kept passing and before long, it seemed like everybody in the house was sick. Everybody but me. Sallah called down to Val and told him I had to come back to the Big House to help. At night, I slept in the hall in case somebody woke up and needed something. They were all coughing something fierce. They'd call, and I went running. "Joseph go fetch this!" "Joseph go do that!" I was running all day long!

I lay in the hall at night wide-awake. Couldn't sleep none. Just kept thinking of the boy with the yellow hair on the other side of that door. I knew Sallah be spending the night in there, so I couldn't go wandering in. Momma had the babies. They be all fussy. Crying and wailing. Then they started coughing too. And I just laid there on my mat and thought about all the stuff I wanted to do with Mister Henry.

I only got to see him a couple of times. He look all red and sweaty wet lying in his bed in just his nightclothes. I tried to go in once but Sallah shooed me away. "Git, Joseph!" *Cough*. "Git! And go fetch some water." She shoved a pitcher at me and then another one. And I trudged myself down, got the water, and then trudged right back up those stairs. Sallah just grabbed the water and shut the door in my face.

Master Ashe, he just walked around with his face all long. Standing in the doorway of Mister Henry's room, then Miss Madeleine's. I'd see him sneak in there and pet their hair, kiss their cheek, say something real quiet that I couldn't hear. But then he just get up and go and be walking somewhere else. He looked more ghostlike than Ghosty did.

Momma didn't look so good either, her skin looking a little grayish under her usual rich brown. Miss Madeleine be coughing but then that little girl turned all blue, and then she squeaked when she finally done breathed again. It scared me. Momma be coughing but not so bad as that little girl. I had to start watching Agy. And neither me or her liked it one bit. My sis just look at me with wide eyes, crying for Momma, crying for Sallah. I tried to hush her best I could, but I never been as good as Momma. My rocking and bouncing didn't work. I'd sit in the hallway and sing her a song Momma liked to sing, and that was about the only thing that kept her quiet.

When night came, Sallah looked something awful. She came out from Mister Henry's room, looked at me and at Agy where she was sleeping on the floor. She told me to go in and watch Mister Henry. She needed to go fetch medicine. I don't know why she didn't just send me, that's what she usually did. I was guessing she was going somewhere to be sick. That medicine the



doctor told everyone to take made their stomachs hurt then they got sick, and it didn't matter where they were at. Sometimes Momma or Sallah took this clear liquid and put it on a hanky and put it up against Mister Henry's and Miss Madeleine's noses. That made them sleep. I liked that one best. At least then they didn't realize how miserable they were.

I looked down at Agy. She was still sleeping. I patted her back before I pushed myself up and crept on into Mister Henry's room. He looked mighty small in that big bed of his. His hair be all stuck to his face. Poor little mister was working mighty hard just to breathe. I blinked real quick trying to keep that water from spilling down my cheeks.

I tiptoed to the bed and brushed the hair out his eyes. His chest stuttered up and down.

"Oh, Mister Henry," I say. I got a trembling in my own belly, and I moved my hand down to squeeze his fingers.

His chest started shaking all fierce-like, and his shoulders done popped up off the bed. His eyes popped open, and they still be blue, but now there were these red spots where the white was. Mister Henry looked at me all scared. His breath wheezing out but nothing be going in.

"Mister Henry!" I yelled. "Help! *Aidez moi!*" I called. But I didn't hear no one. Mister Henry just shook and shook and trying to get that air in, but it just wouldn't go. "Mister Henry, please, suh, how can I help? I'm sorry, I don't know what to do!" His eyes got wider and wider and then they shut! And I took his shoulders and shook him and shook him again all the while yelling nonsense at him.

*Whoooooooooop.*

I was so darn glad to hear that sound. Mister Henry started breathing again. It was still all wheezy, but he was *breathing*, and that's all that mattered. I reached over and took the glass of water that Sallah must have left on the nightstand along with a bunch of other bottles. I scooped on in close to him to bring my arm under his shoulders to help him sit up a bit before bringing the glass to his lips and tipping the water into his mouth.

He closed his eyes as the water went down. I just gave him a little bit, 'cause I didn't want him choking again. I felt his shoulders get loose under my arm, and I slowly laid him back down on his pillow.

"There you go, suh," I whispered. "It's all right. There's all this stuff here on the table. Do you need any of it?" The boy just looked at me, kept on

wheezing. I turned to the door to find Sallah, or maybe to go get Momma, but I felt Mister Henry grab at my arm.

“Suh?” I stopped and looked at my friend.

“Pah... pahl... please... doh... don’t... gah... gah... go... Jo... Jo... Joseph,” he said to me, gasping as he talked. I didn’t like it. Mister Henry was supposed to talk all fast and smooth-like. Not scratchy and crackling. His eyes were all teary, and then my eyes got wet too. His hand moved down into mine, and he tried to talk again. “Ple...”

“Aw’right, suh. I’ll stay right here,” I said quickly before he tried to use up all his breath with the words. He closed his eyes again when I say that and gave my hand a soft squeeze like the ones Agy gave. That boy was so tired. “You should try to sleep. Do you want the hanky medicine?”

Mister Henry’s head started shaking back and forth, and then he was coughing again. I wanted to go find Sallah, but his hand was holding fast to mine. It was all tight now, like he trying to hold on to his air by holding on to me. I’d give him my own air if I could. I’d do anything to help him.

The coughing finally stopped, and Mister Henry lay back on his pillow again. “Don’t talk, suh. Just rest. Is there anything you need?” I asked him.

He gave the tiniest of shakes with his head. His big blue eyes with those darn red spots looked at me and he mouthed “Thank you” to me. I wanted to give him a hug. He looked like he needed a hug, to be all cuddled up with someone taking care of him. But I was afraid I’d hurt him. So I just gave his hand another squeeze before I let it go and went to pull a chair up close to the bed.

I sat down and picked up his hand, and ’cause I didn’t know what else to do, I just started singing.

*“O brother, don’t get weary,  
O brother, don’t get weary,  
O brother, don’t get weary,  
We’re waiting for the Lord.  
We’ll land on Canaan’s shore,  
We’ll land on Canaan’s shore,  
When we land on Canaan’s shore,  
We’ll meet forever more.”*

By the time I finished singing, Mister Henry was fast asleep. His hair was sticky, his hand was sweaty, and underneath those lids, I knew his eyes be blotchy. But my Mister Henry was breathing and that meant that I could breathe too. I lay my forehead down on our hands and fell right to sleep.

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That next morning I woke up to Momma screaming. And that afternoon I was out in the wood shack helping Valere build a box.

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### *Henry*

Tami was screaming. Loud wails. I didn't know what was happening. I was too tired. My head hurt. My chest hurt. But my hand was warm. It felt nice having Joseph's fingers curled around them and feeling his smooth cheek. I even liked the way his coarse hair tickled. Until the screaming woke him too. He let go of my hand and tore out of the room. Tami was never loud. She'd just look at you, and you knew to start behaving. I didn't know what was going on to make her sound like that.

I took a breath. I could hear it wheezing. I hated it. I wanted to breathe normal again. I wanted to go outside and play with Joseph. And I didn't care what Papa or Sallah said.

I heard Papa in the hall. I heard him let out a long wail.

My brain started churning. I hadn't heard him make that sound since Mama went to heaven. I stopped breathing. This time it wasn't because of some stupid cough. This time was because I knew the only thing that would make Papa cry like that.

### *Madeleine.*

My own tears started rolling down my cheeks.

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Everyone was up on the hill again. I was looking from my window. I couldn't go, 'cause I'd had one of my fits, gotten sick, and fallen asleep. Papa was standing so straight and all the slaves and folk from the neighboring houses were standing under the big oak tree. Standing outside Mama's house. They were putting Madeleine in there with her.

I wondered what Mama looked like now. I remembered her soft blonde curls. Madeleine had those curls too. Mama's big blue eyes—Madeleine's too.

I'd seen Madeleine before they took her to the hill. Her pale, little face was all blue. Was Mama blue? I'd seen dead animals in the woods. Small creatures that had died in one way or another. They were covered in bugs or worms. Half-eaten. Eyes all sunken in. Did they go to heaven too? Could you go to heaven if your body was eaten away? Was Mama like that? All shriveling?

My little sister was going to see our mama. I hoped Mama was smiling at her. I hoped Mama still had her blue, shining eyes and her bright rosy face. I missed her. I wanted to go with Madeleine. I wanted to go to heaven too.

Papa didn't smile or laugh anymore. There were no songs in the house. No more dancing. It's like part of him died with Mama. I didn't want to think about how he would be now that Madeleine was gone too.

I moved slowly. Everything was slow. Everything was hard. Everything hurt. But I knew where I had to go. I got to my door and looked out into the empty hallway.

The doorknob to Mama's room was cold when I put my hand on it. Papa hadn't let anyone in this room since she'd gone away. No one went into clean. No one had touched anything. But no one locked the door either. They knew not to cross Papa.

I turned the handle and went in the room.

It wasn't like it used to be. Mama always had the drapes open. There was always light shining in. The bottles and brushes and jewelry on her vanity were still there, but they weren't shiny no more. Dust was everywhere. The mirror where she'd sit and do her hair up, and where Papa would walk up behind her and hug her shoulders... now, that mirror was covered in black. They did it because they didn't want her taking any of us to heaven with her.

I walked up to that mirror and pulled that black away. I was ugly. My hair was all straw-like. My skin all pasty looking. I wheezed some air in. *Cough... cough... cough...*

Good. Maybe this cough would take me to Mama and Madeleine. I knew Papa would be there too, one day. Only one person I'd miss...

"Suh, w-what you doing in here?" Joseph sounded shaky.

*Cough... cough... cough.* I couldn't stop all the tremors and the fit hit, but that's when I felt Joseph's arm around my waist keeping me steady.

"You okay, suh?"

I looked up into the mirror. I was shaking and coughing, my whole body was getting trembly. I hated my blotchy eyes the most. Red spots where white should be. Red to match the color my skin was turning as I coughed. If I wasn't coughing so hard, I would have scowled at that ugly boy in the mirror.

"Mister Henry, let's get you out of here, suh."

"N... no," I huffed. I tried to shake Joseph off, but his arms just hugged me closer. "Le... lea... leave... me... ha... here... Jo..."

"I will not, suh. I don't care if you whip me for it. I's not leavin' you like this."

I felt him tugging on me, trying to get me to move, but I just dropped my weight down and landed on Mama's bench. A big cloud of dust puffed up around me, and it was harder to breathe. I pulled in some air, but it didn't seem like enough. Then my stupid body tried to do it again. I looked into the mirror and saw those red blotches, my face all pink, my hair standing on end... and then there was Mama.

She used to talk to me. A lot. Even after she went to heaven. I'd hear her singing and crooning away to me. Speaking French. Papa didn't speak French very much. Some of the slaves did. Joseph knew how. Mister DuMont was trying to teach me, but there were a lot of other things to learn. But that wasn't going to matter anymore.

I looked into that mirror, and behind me and Joseph, I swear Mama was looking at me. Her hair *was* shiny, her skin *was* rosy, and her eyes were still bright and blue. I was glad that the bugs didn't get to her in heaven.

"*Vas avec Joseph, Henry,*" I heard her say softly like she used to when she told me stories. "*Je t'aime, cher.* I will see you soon, but not yet."

I didn't want to go with Joseph. I wanted him to come with me. Mama would let us play together. Mama wouldn't care if he was a slave. Mama would just let us laugh and run and she'd be doing it right along with us. Madeleine too. I wouldn't even care if Madeleine pulled my hair.

My breath stopped again. My body couldn't get the air in. And I was happy about that. I closed my eyes. I knew Joseph was still there, I felt him pulling at me, and then I felt him go. *No, Joseph. Come with me.*

My body kept pulling and pulling, and the air whooped in. *No! I want to go with Mama.*

“Mister Henry,” I heard Joseph say. I knew there were more words, but I just heard the thudding in my ears. My stomach started turning, and then there was vomit on Mama’s floor. I started crying.

I felt something being put over my nose and mouth, and then I didn’t know anything anymore.

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### *Joseph*

I’d never been so scared. When I found Mister Henry in his mama’s room, just staring into that mirror. All those people say you can’t do that or the dead’s going to take you with them. So why was Mister Henry doing that?

He got all stubborn. Just sat down instead of leaving. All that dust. I didn’t want to look in that mirror. I didn’t want to go nowhere. Nowhere with any dead folk. Nowhere without Momma, Mister Henry, I even wanted Agy to be with me.

Then he was having another fit. I tried shaking him. But it didn’t work. I let him go and ran to Miss Madeleine’s room where Momma was cleaning.

“Momma! *Vite!* Mister Henry is havin’ a fit!” I called. My own breath didn’t seem to be working. Momma put down the blanket she was folding and rushed after me as I led her to Mister Henry’s mama’s room.

Momma didn’t even question what he was doing there. Mister Henry whooped and got sick right there on the floor. Momma didn’t even look at that; she just quick lifted him up and carried him back to his room. I watched her take the blue bottle of hanky medicine and put it over his face, and then Mister Henry finally got quiet. The way his chest shook, I could tell it still weren’t easy for him to breathe, but at least he weren’t fighting anymore. That stubborn boy! When he done got better, I’d be having some words with him.

“Joseph!” Momma say as she tucked the blankets around Mister Henry. “Quick! Take this bucket and get the mess cleaned up in the missus’ room. Master Ashe will be mighty angry if he sees that. And get the mirror covered up too. Them white folk will have themselves a conniption if they think Miss Madeleine or the missus is comin’ back for someone. *Presse, presse!*”

I got the bucket and some water and went back to Mister Henry’s mama’s room, closing the door behind me. First thing I done was get that darn mirror covered back up. I don’t think it was perfect, but I didn’t know what it look like before Mister Henry done tore it down. The other mirrors in the house be

covered all fancy-like, I just draped the sheer black cloth over it and hoped it was good enough. The way I figured it, no one be coming in here anyways, so ain't no one going to be seeing it. The sick on the floor though, that were another problem. No one might see it, but they sure were going to smell it. I got down on my hands and knees took the cloth from the bucket and started scrubbing at the slick and nasty liquid. Smelled mighty sour. I was real glad it missed the rug, 'cause that would be a fine mess.

I was all done and starting to put everything together to lug downstairs when I heard the thumps and commotion of all the people coming back from the dead house. I stood there, sweating, not knowing what to do. If someone came upstairs and saw me leaving *this* room, I'd be in a world of trouble. Mister Henry was in his bed sleeping, no one'd believe he'd been in here first. I grabbed the bucket and crept over to the door and snuck a peek through the keyhole. I didn't see no one. I put my ear down on the floor and could hear the voices talking downstairs. I just needed to get to Miss Madeleine's room. It was just across the hall. I turned the handle so slow trying to make sure it didn't squeak none. These old doors, they all squeaked when they opened. I started pulling it open when I heard heavy steps.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

I saw short, dark hair, and I knew it was the master. I couldn't leave. I couldn't move. I got too much to be moving without him hearing me. I inhaled all deep and let it out all silent like. I closed the door enough so it didn't look like it wasn't latched. I huddled down and figured I'd just wait. Just wait 'til he went in and kissed Mister Henry like he always did. Then wait for him to go back downstairs with all the rest of the folk.

But that's not what happened.

“Get away from my son!” *Crash!* Then another and another.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I bit down on my fist—hard—so I didn't make any sounds. I bit it 'til I tasted blood. I didn't want to open the door. But I didn't want to sit there neither. I opened the door just a sliver and peeked out. No one was in the hallway. I was sure people would be coming soon with all the banging. So as quick as I could, I slipped out the door and shut it behind me, just leaving the bucket there. I'd come get it later, when the master was done with his yelling, and everybody was back to worrying about their own business.

More crashing and banging came from Mister Henry's room. I didn't know what was going on. But I edged on down the hall, anyway. The light shone

from the doorway. Shadows moved quick all over. When I finally got there and looked in, I felt the stings in my eyes. Master done have Momma by her hair, and he was throwing her around. She hit the dresser then the floor. He kicked her then. Momma just cried and said, "Please, Master. Please." But I don't think he heard her none.

"What did you do to my girl?" he hollered. "Were you too busy taking care of your own nigger whelps? That little nigger bitch of yours, she's still breathin' while my Madeleine is in a box. Cold and gray. Do you know what it feels like? No. You don't, do you. You're just a piece of chattel. No sense to know anything. Let me show you." Master kicked Momma again, and she was doubling over on the floor, clutching at her belly. That's when I heard Agy crying, and my chest got all tight, and I looked down at Momma. She'd done heard that cry too. She turned toward the sound, and I looked trying to figure out where Agy was hiding.

I saw her at the same time Master Ashe did. Agy was huddling right under Mister Henry's bed. And poor Mister Henry, he just kept sleeping right on through everything. I was glad for that; I didn't want him to see his papa like this.

Master Ashe reached down and grabbed Agy's leg and dragged her out from her hiding spot. He hold her up so she be hanging; her shirt falling up around her ears. Momma let out a scream like I'd never heard before, and I stuffed my fist in my mouth. Master kicked Momma again, and then he held Agy up all high and brought his hand back and punched my sis in the head before just dropping her on the floor! That little girl wasn't moving, and that's when my fist stopped working, and I let out my own cry. I didn't care no more. I rushed into that room, darted around the master, and gathered Agy's tiny body up in my arms just like she was a baby. I felt tears rolling down my cheeks, and I just whispered to my sis. And I be hoping and hoping everything be okay. The master's face was purple when he looked down at me. His foot draw back, and I knew I'd be getting the next kick. I just closed my eyes and turned my back cradling Agy to me so he couldn't hurt her no more. I looked over at Momma and saw her lips moving but she wasn't talking. Her eyes were all big and round. *I love you. Je t'aime, cher.* I saw her mouth. Her face was all wet and puffy.

"Pa... Pa... pa?" Mister Henry sounded so quiet, so soft. But Master Ashe must have heard him, 'cause I never felt that kick. My whole body was trembly.

"Uh, uh..." Agy sighed, and those tears of mine started coming down like a river. My sis might be loud and silly sometimes, but I didn't care what those



white folk say. She was my sis. We weren't no chattel. I looked over at Momma and smiled, and she tried to smile back, but her lip was swelling up like a nest of wasps had gone at it.

Master Ashe was mumbling something. I guessed he was talking to Mister Henry, but then his voice come out clear as day.

“Get up! And take those nigger bastards of yours with you! Find Francis. And tell him to come out front. Tell him to bring the horse and cart too.”

“Jo... seph?” I looked over at Mister Henry. His eyes were half-shut, but there was this big question in them I knew I couldn't answer. I just raised my shoulder to him and turned and followed Momma out.

“Pa... pa... I... I... wa... nt... Jo...” That was the last thing I heard before I headed down the stairs with Agy in my arms.

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I put Agy down on the ground next to the kitchen house before I went over to Momma and helped her down too. She didn't look good. She kept holding her side, and every time she breathed, she let out a little cry. I moved Agy over next to her and gave Momma a light kiss on her cheek. I wanted to grab hold and hug her real tight, but I was afraid of hurting her, and she'd already been hurt enough. I straightened up and balled my hands into fists.

“I'll go get Mister Francis, Momma. You and Agy just rest here.” My teeth were grinding together so hard, I was surprised the words made it out. I didn't want to do nothin' that Master Ashe told me. But I knew if I didn't, he'd start kicking on Momma and Agy, and probably me too.

I didn't hurry none, but maybe I should have. Mister Francis was down by the slave quarters, yelling at somebody for something when I found him. That nasty old whip of his was hanging by his side. “Suh, the master, he want you to come up to the house,” I said, keeping my eyes on the ground. “He said to bring the horse and cart.”

Francis sneered at me and yelled something over his shoulder before he started up toward the house. I just wanted to get back to Momma. My belly was churning, and I had to stop for a minute before my lunch done hit the ground.

“Hurry up, boy!” he yelled, and I just started trotting behind him like a good little slave. I was glad he wasn't looking at me; I sneered at his back.

We got back to the kitchen house, and I ran over to Momma and Agy. My sis now had a puffy face too, and a big old lump on her head. I wanted to give

Master Ashe a lump on his head. Momma reached over and put her hand on my cheek.

“Now, *cher*. Don’t you be lookin’ like that. You’s can’t let them see. I knows you got all these feelin’s going round and round in here,” she placed her hand on my chest, “but you keep those hidden. These white folk, they done use them against you if they can.”

My eyes started watering then. “I’m scared, Momma. What’s the master goin’ to do?”

Momma pulled my head close and placed her lips against my forehead. “I don’t know, Joseph. But whatever it is, you be strong, you hear? I love you and I love my Agy. You’s my children. You’s not chattel. You’s smart. You’s my heart, no matter what happen.”

“TAMI!”

We both jerked at the sound of the master. I helped Momma up, and her gaze traveled down to look at my sis. I knew she wanted to carry her, but she was hurting too bad. I picked up Agy who just made a gurgle and squawked for Momma. Momma bent over and kissed Agy, then she kissed me again, reaching out and rubbing her thumb along my sis’s cheek. “Remember what I said, Joseph. Be strong.”

“Yes, Momma,” I told her as we started walking toward the front of the house. “Momma?”

She stopped and looked at me, and her eyes were all soft. “*Je t’aime*, Momma. *Toujours*.”

“And I you, Joseph. *Toujours*,” she say before she start moving again. With every step we took toward that house, my legs got heavier and heavier. It was like they were made of stone. Like every piece of me was made of stone. Felt like a big rock was just sitting on my chest and another weighing down in my belly. I shifted Agy on my hip, and she curled herself around my neck as I reached my free hand out to take hold of Momma’s fingers. I felt her squeeze, and I held on tight. We rounded the corner, and there was the master talking with Mister Francis, and when his head come up, my blood ran all cold. There weren’t nothing but ice in that look. I stopped, and Momma did too, moving right in front of me so I couldn’t see that man. Agy started fussing. I tried to hush her. I squeezed her and brought my mouth to her ear and started singing. She quieted a bit. I wouldn’t have blamed her if she hadn’t though.

Momma started speaking, keeping her head down. “Master—”

“Keep your mouth shut, bitch!”

Momma took a step back, and I just moved with her, clutching Agy close. Ma’s skirt was dragging on the ground. I wanted to pick it up for her, I didn’t want her to fall and get more hurt. I pushed my face into her skirt like I did when I was five years old. It was a different skirt, but it was still scratchy against my face. Momma just gave my fingers a squeeze then brought her hand up to the back of my head and pulled me closer.

I heard the man moving toward us. And I felt Momma lean back cringing away from him.

“You. You had one duty in this house. One and one alone. You were to take care of my little girl. Make sure she had everything she needed. Everything she wanted. Look where that got her!” Momma suddenly jerked forward jerking me right along with her. Master Ashe looked down at me with that icy glare and I tried to shrink down to nothing. But then Master turned back to Ma. He stopped pulling and let go of her arm and started squeezing her face and pushing his fingers into her cheeks. Her mouth opened ’cause he was pressing so hard. Master turned Ma’s face toward the hill. “That’s where it got my Madeleine!” he cried as he pointed up to the hill. “I lost my wife. And now my daughter too, because *you*—you couldn’t do one thing right.”

Master pushed Momma away by her face, and she cried as she stumbled. She looked up at me and mouthed “*Je t’aime*” before Master hit her so hard she fell all the way to the ground. I took a step toward her, but Momma saw me, and the look in her eye told me to stay where I was, so I hugged Agy with one arm and shoved my other fist in my mouth trying to keep quiet. I couldn’t stop the tears though. Momma had them too.

“Please! *S’il vous plait*, suh—” Master hit her again.

“No! I don’t want to hear anything out of your mouth ever again! You took my daughter away! There are no words. You think you’re not chattel. Okay, then I am giving you a lesson. One you should have been given years ago. Because of you, I know what it feels like to have my heart torn out for the second time. I will never see those blonde curls again. Never see those rosy cheeks. And *you*—you will know that loss. You will know how that feels.”

I didn’t understand what Master meant. Momma took good care of Miss Madeleine. It weren’t her fault the little miss took sick. It wasn’t Ma’s fault the

girl died. Ma's head was lying on the ground. Her tears were making a puddle in the dirt.

Master turned to Mister Francis. "Take her," he said with a suddenly calm voice. That voice had gone icier than his eyes.

"Ma!" The word just ripped out of me, and I stood up real fast and ran over to where she was laying. I leaned over her mashing Agy between us. Grabbing onto her shirt, pulling her as close as I could, just wanting to climb right in her. Ma's arms came around us and held us tight. "Joseph! Agy! No! Suh, please, Master! Please! Give me my children."

"Oh no. Your children will remain here. You say you love? Then you will know what it is like to lose what you love most. And I will relish every hour knowing that I was the one to teach you that lesson."

Master kept talking but I couldn't hear nothing just a *thud thud thud* in my ears. I held on fast to Momma, and she held right back until I heard a smack, and then Momma went limp. "Momma!" I yelled over and over and over again. Agy was crying and we both still be holding on to our ma. I felt big hands on my arms pulling me back, and I started thrashing and kicking and trying to get away. "Ma! Ma! Momamama!"

"Hush, chile'." Ol' Valere spoke softly in my ear. "Hush, baby, you's only gonna make it worse."

I stopped thrashing; just dropped to the ground and wailed. The master wanted to hurt Momma, but he was hurting all of us. Mister Francis picked Momma up and put her in the back of the wagon. Then he put irons around her ankles and wrists. I hated Master, and I hated Mister Francis. And I hated everything about Beauchesne.

"Come now, Joseph," Valere said. But I didn't move. I ran to Agy and hugged her close and just screamed. Screamed as that cart drove away. Screamed as my momma was taken away from me.

I don't know how long I sat there yelling, but someone came and picked me up, Agy and all, and carried me and laid me down on my mat in Ol' Valere's shack.

That day was the last day I let them see my heart.

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## **PART TWO**

## 1850

### *Henry*

After the whooping stopped, my breathing never got better. I couldn't run like I used to. Not without stopping to wheeze. There were days I had a hard time breathing even without running. I'd wake up, and the wheezing would start. The doctor said I had bronchial asthma. There was medicine to take. He told me cigarettes would help, but I didn't like those. Coffee to drink. That was okay if it had a lot of sugar, but Sallah didn't put much in. I liked it when she sent Agy up with it. Agy would always slip extra in for me.

There were some good spells when taking in and letting out air wasn't so hard. Sometimes a few days, sometimes even a month. It didn't seem to matter much, though.

Joseph didn't sleep in the sitting room anymore. I couldn't visit him. He was always busy with Ol' Valere. At least that was what he told me when I'd go down to see him. I missed my friend. I had no one to tell my secrets to without Joseph. No one to laugh with. No one to tell me the funny stories or have tickle fights with. There was no one to play with. Madeleine was gone. Papa was away on business most of the time. Sallah just pushed me off to Mr. Chandler, my new tutor. Papa had hired him after my eighth birthday. I couldn't learn French. Papa didn't want it spoken in the house. Not since Madeleine died.

A lot had changed since then.

When Papa was home, he walked around with a long face. He'd still hug me, tell me he loved me, but it wasn't the same. It was like he was somewhere far away. I asked him to take me on his trips with him, but he always said no. I had to study and learn so I could take over running everything when I got big. Sometimes he had tears in his eyes when he said it. Part of me thought he didn't think I'd ever get big. That I'd be going into Mama's house before I ever grew up. Sometimes I thought he wished it. That we would both go there. I'd see him in his study, just looking out the window. Looking up at that gray stone under the oak tree. He'd close his eyes and put his hand over his heart. Maybe that's when he could hear Mama talking.

She still talked to me sometimes, though not as much as when I was little.

I heard an axe chopping, and I knew Joseph was outside. Getting wood ready for something they had Ol' Valere building. He was training Joseph to be a carpenter like him. I'd seen some of the things Joseph had made. I'd find them on the table next to my bed. A bunch of tiny wooden ships, carved just so. They were so fine. He even put individual boards along the sides and tied tiny bits of cloths on for sails. I never got to tell him that some of the ships Papa owned didn't have sails. But Joseph tried his hardest to do things right, he'd always been like that. He was good with the wood. Building things. I wish I could do that. Be able to build something I could see, hold, feel. I asked Papa once, but he told me "That's niggers' work. You learn the books." I hated it when he said that. I'd still try to sneak down to the wood shack though. Joseph would see me and turn away quick, suddenly busy somewhere else. I loved the smell of all that wood. I'd smile at Valere, but then the stupid sneezes started. Then I'd be wheezing again and have to leave before I'd had the chance to corner Joseph and talk to him.

One day he'd talk to me again. I didn't know when, but one day he would.

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## 1852

### *Joseph*

Ol' Valere's hands didn't work like they used to. He sat in the corner on his old stool, and I stood planing the wood like he'd taught me to. I'd bore the holes where they were supposed to be, fit the boards together, hammer the nails. Today, I was building a new desk for Mister Henry. He'd done grown too big for the one he'd been using. I wanted to make it nice for him. And I knew I could. I'd gotten really good with working with the wood and the tools. I knew the best wood to pick. Didn't want none of them knots or nothing. But sometimes you just couldn't avoid them. Still though, I'd use up a whole tree worth of wood if I had to just to find the right boards for Mister Henry.

I didn't talk to the little mister no more. Just a few words since Momma been torn away from us. I was afraid if I talked to him, I'd forget what I was, why I was here, and what his pappy did to my family.

I watched Mister Henry sitting out on the porch sometimes when he didn't know I was watching. He just sit there and stare out at the fields or down the alley under the oaks. Even from as far away as I was standing, he looked like he was working hard at breathing. After all these years, he still hadn't gotten much better. My heart ached when I thought about that too much. But I knew he was okay. Agy was right there to bring him anything he needed. Sallah been training my sis to do anything and everything in the Big House, but most of the time, when I saw Agy, she was helping Mister Henry. Sometimes I'd give her things for him. Ships I'd carved before I laid down on my cot at night. I think I'd made him a whole fleet of ships. Trying to get each one just right. I'd never seen a ship—just pictures from books the little mister showed me—but I'd get one of those pictures in my head, and I'd make sure the wood in my hand was just like it.

“Joseph!” Val's words snapped me out of those thoughts. Probably for the best. If I thought too long on Mister Henry, I'd start thinking about all I'd been missing.

I looked up at Val, and he was jerking his chin down at the wood I'd been working on. Sure enough, my work had gone askew. I took the tool in my hand and threw it down. It clunked across the floor as I ran my hands over the top of my head.



“*Pardonez*, Val. I don’t know where my head’s at.” Well, I did, but I didn’t think I should be *saying* exactly where that was. “Let me go fetch another piece. I’ll do it right this time.”

Ol’ Val start chuckling at me, and I squinted my eyes at him. “Now, now, Joseph. No need to get all in a dither. Son, if I done had a penny for ev’ry time I done a board wrong, well, I’d be rich as the master.”

His words weren’t making me feel none better. Wouldn’t matter if he had any pennies anyway, the master would just take them away. ’Cause that’s what that man did. Anything worth anything was taken when he find out about it.

I looked over at Valere sitting there with his knotty fingers and his gray hair. I don’t know how that man could smile. I couldn’t remember the last time I did. I don’t think I’d smiled since I was seven years old. Val would try and get me going. But I’d just give him a nod and get back to work.

“You ever think of runnin’, Val?” I asked him, then I felt my eyes get wide. I’d been thinking of running ever since the master sold Momma away. But that be something I shouldn’t be talking about. No slave should talk about that out loud—but I couldn’t imagine any slave that didn’t think about it.

Val pushed himself up off that stool faster than I thought he was capable and come at me. “Hush! You don’t be talkin’ like that, you hear me! Those words ain’t safe. And ’less you wants to be sold off in chains like your momma, you don’t be sayin’ that ever ’gain! You’s hear me?”

Ol’ Val’s chest was heaving up and down when he done talking, and my whole body was shaking. I knew better than to have said that, but I couldn’t help but thinking what it be like to be free. To be back with Momma and Agy. Our own place, our own land... not worrying about a master telling us what we need to do and when to do it... not worrying about being sold off just ’cause some white man said so.

“I’m sorry, Val,” I mumbled then focused back on the wood under my hand. Ol’ Valere’s big brown eyes went soft, and he patted me on the shoulder before he hobbled back to his stool. The rest of the day, the only sounds in the wood shack were the sounds of wood being smoothed and shaped and that dust hitting the floor.

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The crickets were chirping that night as I lay on my cot staring up at the pitched ceiling. Val was sleeping a couple feet away. His breaths low and

steady. Since Momma had gone, that's what I focused on. That's what kept my thoughts down in the real. I was mad at myself having made Val raise his voice to me. He was the only good thing I had. Him and Agy. And Mister Henry, but I didn't really have Mister Henry no more. I'd done made sure of that and sometimes I let myself wonder why that's what I'd done.

Mister Henry was good and pure—not like his pappy—and nothing done light up like that boy's face when he smiling. I still remembered how we'd play and laugh. How he'd get all mad and puffy when I'd win, but how it weren't a minute later he'd be laughing at something all over again.

"I belong with this land, Joseph." I looked over at Valere. Those words didn't make sense to me. Ol' Val'd been here a long time, I wasn't sure how long, but that didn't mean he belonged here.

"How can you say that?" I asked him, 'cause surely I wasn't understanding him proper.

"This is where *mon coeur* is, Joseph. And there's no way I can leave it. I don't want to leave it."

"What you *sayin'*, Val? You think the master has the right to own you?" There was more to that thought, but I didn't want to put words in Val's mouth. I didn't want him to be disappointed in me again.

"No, that's not what I said. My heart is here, *cher*. It's done buried down in the slave fields under a small willow. That willow be growin' and someday I'll go and be with *mon coeur* 'gain. I can't leave this land, 'cause I can't leave my heart. And *that's* why I ain't thought of runnin'. Anywhere I go, I wouldn't be whole. That's why I belong with this land. Not 'cause I belong to the master, 'cause I belong to my heart."

I lay there in the dark and thought about those words. Val had loved a sweetheart. A sweetheart who died and was buried, and he didn't want to leave her. I opened my mouth to ask him about her, but I stopped when I heard him snore. Ol' Valere weren't much for words. He said what needed to be said, and that was about it. I lay back and thought about it. Letting his words run through my head. Thinking about how it was different to give your heart to someone, have them own it. I fell asleep wondering if I'd ever really know what it felt like.

## 1853

### *Henry*

It was a good day. The air moved in and out of my lungs. *Freely*. Agy and Sallah were downstairs, doing what they did. I still wasn't exactly sure. I didn't make it much further than the porch these days. I remembered when I would run and jump and yell and scream and laugh. How it felt to just go. I could remember that warm feeling I'd get. I missed it. I missed all of it. But most of all, I just missed Joseph.

I hardly knew what I was doing when I left my room. Went down the stairs and out the front door. Most of the time, someone stopped me, started fussing over this or that... but not today. I stepped down off the porch and crossed over the grass and around to that long forgotten path. Nobody used it anymore. I'd never used it. It had always been more fun to run through the trees and the brush and to listen to the sounds of feet falling and crashing behind me. But this time I walked along the path not laughing, nothing crashing, only to the sound of my breaths filling the air.

Then, I was there. My garçonnière stood tall in front of me. It truly was a mess. Leaves everywhere. Paint peeling. Shutters askew. It was perfect. It was mine. The last place I felt happy. I lay down in the grass, listening to the birds chirp and the wind rustle.

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"Mister Henry! Mister Henry!" I heard Joseph... it had been so long since I'd heard Joseph calling my name. The air was cool around me. Cooler than when I'd left the house. I opened my eyes and looked up at the clouded sky. The sun wasn't as high as it had been when I lay down. The birds weren't chirping anymore. I let my muscles relax back into the grass and realized for the first time in years, I'd gone to sleep with no one fussing over me. No one plumping my pillows, slamming windows shut, closing curtains. Now, it was just me and my house, and the leaves and the sky, and the tromping of footsteps through the brush... and Joseph.

I was free. Just for a moment. Not fighting for air. Just me and the earth and the sound of Joseph. My chest felt light. My belly was warm. I could just sink down and not worry about anything anymore.

“Mister Henry!” he called again, but this time his words came with the snaps and cracking of brush and wood and leaves. I pushed up on to my elbows and saw Joseph standing by the edge of the clearing. His chest was heaving, and he bent over with his hands on his knees.

“Hi, Joseph.”

Joseph’s eyes grew bigger, and he straightened up and started stomping toward my place on the grass.

“Hi, Joseph? That’s what you got to say, suh? *Hi, Joseph?* Do you realize what a ruckus you caused disappearin’ like this? Sallah up there in the Big House about beside herself. She’s spittin’ hornets. Agy’s just sittin’ in the corner cryin’. She done searched the whole house lookin’ for you. They don’t know what to think. Called me and Ol’ Val and grabbed some of the kitchen folk to help find you.”

“Well, here I am,” I said with a smile. The warmth in my belly spread up and through my arms and down into my legs, and I just lay back in the grass and closed my eyes.

I felt a thump and a jostle when Joseph plopped down next to me. “Yes. Here you are,” he replied with a sigh. “Can we go back now? Much as I might appreciate Sallah croakin’ I don’t think that would go over too well with the master. Or Agy. I don’t know how that girl can like the old bird as much as she does.”

I looked up at him. His hair had leaves in it from when he came from the brush. I reached up and plucked one out, twisting the stem in my fingers, watching the fading light dance through the thin green.

“Lie down with me, Joseph.” He opened his mouth as if to protest, so I spoke quickly. “Please. For just a couple of minutes. No one in the house is going to die if it takes me an extra few minutes to get back. They don’t even know that I’ve been found yet.” I scowled with that last bit. I was thirteen years old. I was supposed to be outside carousing, but it seemed I was the only one who thought like that. Most days they might as well throw the lock in the door the way everyone else saw it. Lock me right up. It seemed like I’d been locked in the stupid house for years. Never making it any farther than the porch. Didn’t do any good. I still got sick more often than not. Still couldn’t breathe most of the time. All the medicines and everything else they said would work, didn’t. Even had a stupid wheelchair for when I was really bad. But I wasn’t bad today, and I didn’t think going for a walk would hurt me any more than anything else. And Joseph was here.

“Ugh,” Joseph sighed. I knew he was letting me have my way, and I let a smile creep across my face. “As you wish, Mister Henry. What are you doing anyway? Lyin’ here on the grass, no one around, not tellin’ anybody where you was goin’?”

“They wouldn’t have let me go, you know that.” I paused and thought over those words. “No, I guess you wouldn’t. You’ve been far away for so long. Just across the lawn, but so far away, Joseph.” He was close enough now that I could feel his body tense up, and my body responded in kind.

“Just easier that way, suh.” His voice sounded loud out here with hardly any sounds to compete with. “The way you and me was when we were little, that just didn’t seem possible no more after Momma was sold. It was easier before. With me sleepin’ in the sittin’ room. Runnin’ around helpin’ Momma with the chores, helpin’ with the babies. Then she was gone, and all I had was Ol’ Val and the wood. Even Agy almost gone. I still see her, but she spends most of her time up with Sallah. Only see her on Saturdays or when somebody needs something and she’s sent to fetch me or Val.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m sorry Papa did that.” I wanted to say more, I knew there was more I should say. Yet nothing that could make any of it go away. An anvil sat heavy on my chest, but it wasn’t because of any illness. I rolled on my side and looked over at the boy next to me. His skin was still the color of molasses, and his hair just a shade darker. I knew hidden under his lids, his eyes were the color the chocolate treats Mama used to sneak me. I let go a breath and watched the grass bend and sway when it hit it.

“Do you remember the last time we were here? Playing hide-and-peek. I remember the way you jumped halfway off the porch, and then the way you tickled me ’til I couldn’t breathe. I was happy, Joseph.” I sighed before finishing my thought. “I think that was the last time I was happy.”

I plucked at the grass, content to listen to the air whistle in and out of Joseph’s mouth. “Do you think we could go back to that, Joseph? Be like we used to be?” I stared into the green tangles of grass not really sure if I wanted to know his answer.

I stared into that green web... waiting... holding my breath. Seemed kind of funny that every other day I would be cursing the world that I couldn’t breathe right, and today when the illness wasn’t plaguing me, my body was holding my breath in.

“Suh...” Joseph sounded defeated. His neck muscles were working as he swallowed; they stretched as he turned his head away from me.

“P-please? I’ve missed you so, so m-much.” My voice cracked when I said it, and the tears followed the words. “You’re all I have here. I know it seems like I have a lot, and I know I do. I have anything anyone could want. But I’m all alone. I have Mr. Chandler and the doctor and Sallah and Agy and my father... but all those people... they all... everyone talks *at* me. They tell me this and that... What I should be doing. Where to go, where not to go...” I let out a cry when I realized what I was saying. I was selfish. I had everything I needed, everything I ever *wanted*. And, yes, people told me what to do, but I didn’t risk the whip if I didn’t do them. “Oh, I’m so sorry. So sorry, Joseph.”

I pushed myself up off the ground and started running up the path back to the house. My tears fell, I didn’t care. I shouldn’t have left the house. I just ran and ran.

“Mister Henry! Wait, suh, wait!” I slowed my feet when I heard him call, and turned to face him, not caring if he saw my tears. But then, he reached his hand out and swiped my cheek clean, and I was warm again. “Suh, I think I’d like to be friends.”

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## 1854

### *Joseph*

It was hot. Sticky. Didn't seem to matter none that we were naked and still dripping from the creek. This was Louisiana after all.

Mister Henry stepped up onto the porch and lay down, stretching his body out to dry. I let my gaze drift over him for just a second before I lay down a couple feet away and closed my eyes, feeling that heat soak into me. In my head, I let myself picture the little master's body. Mister Henry was thin. No muscles. Not really. Not like the ones I had. My body had gotten bigger, taller, thicker. His was still all wiry. His skin was white as the cotton in the fields, though I had a feeling it would be pink after lying out in the sun. But his skin... it was all smooth. He was pretty... for a boy. My gut fluttered thinking of it. I suddenly realized it wasn't just the sun getting my body all hot. I pushed myself up and put my pants back on.

"What you want to do, Mister?" I asked him while buttoning up my pants.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing, Joseph. I'm happy just like this." His eyes were shut, and his face turned toward the sun. He looked like an angel from the picture books. I swallowed—hard.

I scooted down against the wall feeling the paint chipping off against my back as I looked up at that bright sun. We'd been coming here to Mister Henry's house almost every Saturday for a year. That day I'd found him here, he'd gone back to the Big House and created even more of a ruckus than when he'd left. He yelled at Sallah then he even yelled at his pappy when his pappy finally came back from wherever he'd been. Mister Henry told me he'd done told them all he was going out. He was tired of being all cooped up in the house. They could try and keep him in, but he was going to leave anyway. I knew how that felt... but I knew it in a whole different way than the little master.

I took what I could. And the master and Ghosty gave me Saturdays. I don't think they would've been happy knowing where I was or who I was with, but it didn't matter. Val knew. I didn't tell him, but somehow he knew. He seemed to always know the things no one spoke out loud. So every time I headed out, he gave me a wink and a wave, just like he'd done when I was seven years old. I gave them right back to him, too. Every week I did that. The only Saturdays

Mister Henry and I *didn't* meet were the ones when he was having a spell, or it was raining so hard Sallah wouldn't let him out the door. It wasn't like it used to be, but it was good.

“You goin’ to Naw’lins soon?” I asked. Mister Henry told me that his pappy wanted him to go down and learn about the business. He’d been talking about it for a few weeks.

He grabbed his own pants and put them on. His arms moved all fluid-like. I couldn't move like that if I wanted to. I was all clunky, like a hunk of wood sometimes.

“Yeah, this week I think.” He started biting on his bottom lip. I knew he wasn't looking forward to going. I didn't blame him none... not after what happened after that first and only trip down river. My own skin got itchy thinking about it. But there was nothing could be done about it. His pappy said he was going, so he was going.

“Well, suh. I reckon when you get back, you will have a whole bushelful of stories for me. I never did hear about those ships you were so excited about. This time, there ain't nothin' gonna keep me from hearin' about them.” He stopped gnawing at his lip and looked at me. His hair needed to be cut again. Seemed that boy needed a haircut every week. The yellow strands now dry and drooping down over his eyes.

“Maybe so.”

“I bet by the time you're done talkin' I'll have enough pictures in my head to carve you up another fleet.” Mister Henry smiled all the way to his blue, blue eyes. “By the time I'm done, you can have two fleets battlin' each other in a big war at sea. You can be one, I'll be the other, and this porch will be our sea.” I swept my arm out wide.

“Naw, Joseph,” he said, shaking his head.

“Suh?”

“No. See... you and me, we're the captains in one fleet. We'll work together. Fighting off the ships of the evil pirate Sallah, and her first mate Agy!” He let out a long belly laugh, clutching his waist with his hands.

And I laughed right along with him as we planned the great battle of Mister Henry and Joseph versus everyone else in our great big porch sea.



## 1856

### *Henry*

New Orleans was loud. And bright. And colorful. It was full of life and laughter. But even I could see the shadows lurking around the corner. The whole place made my skin itch.

We'd spent the evening at a gentleman's club. This was different from the other trips I'd made with Father. Usually we'd work in the office most of the day, and then, when it got late we'd go to our New Orleans house for dinner. I'd stay up in my room, and eventually I'd hear Father rustling around and thump down the stairs and out the door. I think I liked that way better.

I looked around me. Men dressed in fine suits were smoking cigars, playing cards, and talking about politics. They exalted a man called Freemont and condemned the evil Northern abolitionists while I sat in a corner in a plush chair, sipping whisky, and wanting to crawl out of my skin. I watched my father clench his fist and pound the air as he spoke heated words. "It's the way of the South!" "Chattel! Property!" Men of color stood against the wall wearing black suits and starched white shirts not batting an eyelash. They just stood holding trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres, only moving when something was demanded of them. I sat wondering what kind of world I lived in. And because I couldn't sink down into the chair and disappear, I drank more whisky thinking about how the night couldn't get much worse.

I was wrong.

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We'd spent another hour at the club before my father took me by the arm and guided me back to our waiting carriage. I thought we were going back to the house, but I was mistaken. We only drove a few minutes before the driver stopped the carriage, and my father dragged me into another house and another world I had no desire to be in.

Perfume hung thick in the air, and my lungs got tighter with each passing minute. Father shoved a glass of whisky in my hand, and I gulped it down eagerly before promptly asked for another. Sitting in yet another plush chair, I crossed and uncrossed my legs and clenched my hands into fists trying to prevent my fingers from fidgeting now that they had nothing to hold. I sighed

in relief when the underclad brunette brought me a new glass, but that didn't stop the prickling sensation on my scalp or the churning in my gut.

The room was full of rich colors, reds, blues, purples. Heavy drapes comprised of yards and yards of fabric—some of which, I thought, would have been put to better use on clothing. There were women, a lot of women. Dressed only in their underclothes. Their bosoms hung out of corsets cut so low, I didn't see the point of wearing them at all. They lounged on chaises, draped their arms over men—because there were a lot of men too. Dressed in their finery, laughing away, while petting their fingers over bared skin. Garishly painted lips moved with seductive words. Hands with brightly painted nails. Men were being led away, up the staircase, each seemingly unable to tear their gaze from the *derriere* in front of them.

My father sat in a chair in the corner opposite me. A woman with yellow butterflies in her red hair leaned into him as she ran her hand up his leg. He twisted his head up to whisper into her ear, and I watched her as she smiled and stroked my father's chin before standing up and sashaying her way to me.

I took a gulp of the whisky in my hand when she leaned over me. Red ringlets bounced against my nose, and her overly large breasts blocked my field of vision.

"Hello, *cher*," the woman purred at me, bringing her bosom even closer. I lost the ability to catch even a semblance of air as I was suffocated by the monstrosities. I pushed back into the chair, but I couldn't push far enough. She was so close, I could see the peach color of her skin peeking out from under the white powder she covered it with. Her red lips clashed against the orange tones of her hair and her pale pink tongue. "Aw, *cher*. There ain't nothing to be nervous about," she purred as she trailed her finger down the buttons of my shirt.

My chest was tighter. The powder, the perfume. My nose itched, and I felt the pressure building in my lungs. She murmured soft words at me. Stroking down my chest, my sleeve. *Achoo!* I sneezed spraying spittle all over her. Wet spots exposed her skin, and I let a chuckle bubble out of me.

"Oh, darlin', aren't you a charmer." She cackled a high-pitched laugh and batted her eyes at me as her lips pulled up into what was obviously a forced smile. I looked over at my father who had a new woman on his lap, rubbing on his chest and face and hair. "Don't you worry none, there, baby," she crooned. "Your daddy already took care of everything." She licked her lips. "I'm going to take real good care of you."

She wrapped her hand around mine. Her fingernails were painted red, and they reminded me of bloody claws. I flinched away from her and opened my mouth to give a polite refusal. But when I looked over her shoulder and saw my father staring at me, I grew cold. There was an expectation behind his gaze. *Go. Be a man. Act like the man I expect my son to be.* Then he smiled at me and nodded before turning his attention back to the blonde in his lap.

The painted woman pulled at my arm and walked us toward the stairs. My feet had never felt heavier than they did when I climbed those steps.

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*Joseph*

“What’s you doing here, Joseph?” Mister Henry slurred as he waved an almost-empty bottle out wide in front of him. “S not Saturday.”

“Agy said you were missing, suh.” I leaned against the porch pillar, watching him scowl.

“Not missing!” he spat. “I’m *choooooosing*. Chooooosing not to be there. Choosing to be here... away from there.”

I had to swallow a chuckle that was threatening to escape my gullet. Even all drunk and grumpy, Mister Henry looked cute with his face scrunched up and his cheeks all red, which made my own face get all hot. “Are you *choosing* to drink all the whisky in Louisiana?”

“Yes, sir, I surely am,” he sang before taking another swig from the bottle. “Doc told me to drink it. I’ve been drinking since I was seven, ya know. It helps with the bron-broch-shal ass-ma.”

“Uh, suh... I don’t think that the doc meant for you to drink a whole bottle. Think he was talkin’ about a glass or two.”

“Pfft! Don’t tell.” He waved his non-bottle-holding hand at me dismissively. “I can handle it.”

I snorted. Couldn’t really help myself. “Suh, I don’t think anyone can truly handle as much as you been drinkin’.” I took a step forward and reached out to take it from him. Mister Henry jerked his arm back quickly and, in the process, lost his balance. He tumbled backward onto his rear end, losing his grip on the bottle which tumbled up into the air, end over end, until landing on the planks of the porch.

I started to snicker, but then I looked at Mister Henry's face and saw the wet streaks. My gut rolled, and I hurried and squatted down next to him. "What's wrong, suh? What can I do?"

"I wanted to finish that," he whimpered as he looked over at the somehow-unbroken bottle. The tears were still pouring down his cheeks as his bottom lip started trembling, but he didn't make a move to reach over and grab it.

"Suh, you don't need it. Please, Mister Henry, please tell me what's wrong. I wanna help. But I just can't do that unless you talk to me." I hesitated just a second before reaching my hand up and wiping away those tears from his cheek. It was wrong—just plain wrong—that something had upset the little master so much he felt like drowning himself in a bottle. That did no good for nobody.

"Jo-Joseph?" he hiccupped and closed his eyes, pushing his face into my palm. I closed my own eyes and, for just a moment, let myself feel his smooth skin. Let myself enjoy the warmth in my belly and chest, and a calm I didn't know I needed washed through me.

"What happened in Naw'lins, suh?" I asked him quietly. Mister Henry had returned that afternoon, and from what Agy had told me, he'd been more ornery than a hornets' nest. Yelling at everyone who crossed his path. She told me he was so angry even Sallah was hiding down in the linen closet making Agy go see to Mister Henry's needs. Agy said all she got was a door slammed in her face. I'd done known the little master a long time, and there wasn't any way he'd be acting like that unless something was eating at him. I just needed him to tell me so I could go and fix it.

"M-M-My f-fa-father..." he started.

I didn't even try to stop the growl that vibrated out of my chest. That man had a mighty fine talent for making me angry.

"What did your pappy do, suh?"

Mister Henry jerked his face away from my hand. I let it fall to the floor and scooted down next him, leaning my back against the rail. The little master's shoulders started shaking, and then his whole body followed right along with 'em. The churning in my belly was getting worse and finally I moved myself as close as I could get, and before I could stop myself, or let myself *think* about what I was doing and the possible consequences, I wrapped my arm around Mister Henry's shoulders.

My touch seemed to help, 'cause his body stopped shaking so badly, and he leaned into me. I just let my fingers rub up and down his arm, and then I started singing a song Momma used to sing to me. I kept my voice real low and soft. I think it was supposed to be a chanting song, but I just let the rhythm flow through me, like Momma used to, slow and steady.

*“There’s no rain to wet you,  
O, yes I want to go home.  
There’s no sun to burn you,  
O, yes I want to go home;  
O, push along, believers,  
O, yes, I want to go home  
There’s no hard trials,  
O, yes, I want to go home.”*

When I finished, Mister Henry let out a long sigh and wiped his nose with his shirt-sleeve. I didn't stop rubbing on his arm. It seemed to help him, and if I was truly being honest, it was helping me too.

“J-Joseph?” He sounded so tiny, so unsure and so unlike Mister Henry it made my chest get all tight and my own eyes wet.

“I’m right here, suh.” I said, keeping my own voice low to match his own.

“Have you ev-ever... you know?” The little master’s head was hanging all low not looking at me. Looking straight down at the porch planks, but even in the fading daylight, I could see those cheeks of his turning bright red.

“Suh?” I wasn’t sure what Mister Henry was getting at. He was usually clear with his words and their meaning. Never afraid to tell me what he was thinking about. Not this time though—and that had an ice-cold spike racing up my spine and settling right in my chest.

“You know... have you ever... with a wo-wo-woman?” he asked, his voice trailing off to almost nothing.

I sat there as still as a stone. Mister Henry and I had never talked about this. We’d talked about all kinds of other things, but not this. The only person I’d talked to about this particular subject was Ol’ Val, and that’s 'cause the old man cornered me when I was twelve and wouldn’t let me move until his piece was done and said, and I’d been “educated” on the other kind of *wood* I’d have to be dealing with.

“Uh... suh?” I shook my head. This was what was eating at the little master, and I had to be strong enough to get past the itchiness it was causing me. “Uh, no, suh. I’ve not been with no women in that way before.”

“B-But... you’ve... *spent* before, right?” My face felt like it was being held over a hot stove. I couldn’t even turn my head to look at Mister Henry. I didn’t want to give him a full answer. Didn’t want to tell him whose face had been in my dreams those nights when I woke up with wet spots on my cot—or even the times I’d taken myself in hand.

I heard him start crying again and knew I had to answer him. I could do it... for him.

“Y-Yes, suh. Uh, I think most boys our age have.” I was surprised I’d done managed to get the words out. “There ain’t no shame in that, Mister Henry. Val done told me so.” I hoped my words sounded trusty-like, ’cause it didn’t matter none if I knew they were true, this was one subject I did not want to be discussing with the little master.

“But Ol’ Val didn’t take you to a whorehouse. Father t-took m-me to a whorehouse, Joseph.” Mister Henry’s words were so quiet I wasn’t sure if I’d made them up in my head or he’d actually spoken them until he started speaking again. “He took me to a whorehouse, and there were all these women. And it smelled so flowery it made me sick and it was loud. Everyone was laughing and petting on each other. I hated it, Joseph. I really, really hated it.”

My belly was churning again as I tried to come up with some words that would make Mister Henry feel better. “It’s all right, suh. I suppose there ain’t nothin’ wrong with that. I’m guessing lots of white folk go to those places.”

“But not me! I didn’t want to go, Joseph. But Father took me there, and he put a glass of whisky in my hand, and I sat and squirmed and thought about how much I’d rather be back here... with you... sitting on this very porch.”

My words done dried up in my throat. The thought of my Mister Henry surrounded by all those women in one of those places... I had to swallow down some sick that wanted to come up and paint the porch floor. He was too good for that.

“It’s all right, suh,” I said as I stroked my hand up and down his arm, doing it as much for him as I did it for me. I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of his body spread from my arm throughout the rest of my body trying to get that iciness to melt away. Mister Henry was right. This is where he belonged. Right here on this very porch. Right here with—

“H-He sent a woman over to me. I was just sitting there in a chair holding on to a glass of whisky like it was the only thing that mattered. And in that moment, it might have been. S-She sat in my lap and p-pushed her chest in my face... And I couldn’t breathe. I wanted to disappear. But Father was looking at me. I didn’t have a choice.” Mister Henry’s voice got firmer, angrier as he went on. His hands were clenched up so tight his knuckles were turning whiter than his already too-white skin. I just kept petting on his arm. Trying to soothe away his worries. “She t-took m-me upstairs, Joseph.”

I felt his body stiffen when those words came out his mouth, and I did the same hearing them. I tightened my grip around his shoulders trying to pull him closer, even as my mouth tasted sour, and I was sure I was not going to be liking whatever it was that Mister Henry had to say next.

“The-the room she took me to... There was a b-bed,” he hiccupped out. I felt him pulling away from me, and I was going to pull him back, but he just leaned forward and grabbed that damned bottle. I figured the little master probably needed it. I thought I probably needed it too, but one of us needed a clear head, and the thoughts floating around Mister Henry’s head were already muddy.

He took a long pull from the bottle before he leaned back and surprised me by pushing his body closer to mine. I pulled him closer and let myself pretend—for just a moment—that the rest of the world wasn’t there. It didn’t last long. Mister Henry’s next words shattered it like an ice pick hammering down on a block of ice.

“I was just standing there you know. My back was all stiff, and I felt itchy and dirty. And then her hands were on me—” He took another drink. “—and then it was her mouth. And all I could do was stand there.”

“Suh, i-it’s all right to—”

“Stop!” Mister Henry interrupted, and my whole body jolted with the force he put behind that single word. “Please—I need to say this—” His voice had gone all quiet again. “—need to get it out... to apologize... to you.”

Even this late in the evening, the air was warm around me, but that didn’t matter. I felt cold. This icy-cold feeling that shot up my spine and came to settle right in the middle of my chest. “But, suh, you ain’t done nothing to apologize for. You—You are ’bout the only good thing I got here.”

The blond boy cocked his head and was back to biting his lip before he said, “Oh, Joseph. How I wish that were true—” I watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down. “—but it’s not.”

“Suh?”

“I was just standing there—all my clothes were still on—by that bed with that woman... that woman who was too soft, her lips too red, her laugh too high... and her hands...” His words were blending together again as the whisky started to regain its hold on him. “Her hands were everywhere. Groping me... grabbing me... *feeling* me.

“I knew what was expected. I knew what my father wanted me to do. *Become a man.*” Mister Henry let out a guffaw. “But I didn’t want to, didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t want to be there, but I didn’t leave. I just stood there—by that bed—with that woman. And then, my trousers were open and her mou... It was... And, Joseph, God help me, I-I-I spe—”

His words must’ve gotten all caught up in his throat, because the little master didn’t finish his sentence. He didn’t have to. He just sat there looking at me with his mouth open and his eyes all wet, looking like he was going to shatter. I reached over slowly making sure I didn’t startle him none and took the bottle from his hand and placed it behind me before I reached both arms around him and pulled him close.

“Oh, Mister Henry. You don’t be needin’ to apologize to *me* for that. Of course you did. It probably felt real good.”

He pulled himself back a fraction and placed his fingertip over my lips to stop me from saying anything else.

“Let me finish, Joseph. Please.” Those big blue eyes of his were boring straight into my soul, and I don’t think I could’ve said one more word if I’d wanted to.

He sighed. Then drew a long breath—one he wasn’t always able to take. “You see, Joseph. I need to apologize.” He leaned his head down on my shoulder. I held my body all rigid-like. I was afraid to move, afraid to break this spell.

Mister Henry nuzzled into my neck. I felt every brush of that blond hair against my skin like it was a feather. The way his nose pressed into me. My heart was thundering away, and my skin was on fire.

“I need to say I’m sorry, Joseph, ’cause as those too-soft hands roamed over my body, and those too-red lips kissed against my skin, I closed my eyes.”

I closed my own eyes and imagined what he must’ve looked like. Hair all a mess. All fidgety and then throwing his head back ’cause his body was feeling



better than it ever had. With that image in my mind, and Mister Henry's nose and cheeks rubbing on my neck...

"I closed my eyes, Joseph," he continued, and I was about ready to jump out of my skin. I felt all strung tight like my body would snap or shatter.

"And I let myself forget about the painted lady." He sighed. "I let myself forget about her... and I started... I started thinking about you."

It felt like I had a bale of cotton in my mouth, and was trying to swallow it.

"I was thinking about your rough hands and your perfect lips..." He whimpered again, and then I felt those godawful tears of his running down my neck, wetting my shirt.

"Shush now, suh," I whispered. I had to say something. "It's all right. If that's what you needed to do to get through it, I don't mind." There was a lump in my gut as I said the words. 'Cause I'd been guilty of the same crime against Mister Henry, except it had been my own hand doing the groping. And thinking of him, like that, picturing me—

"But don't you see? It wasn't right, Joseph!" He pulled his face away from my neck and looked at me with his puffy eyes. The redness in them made the blue stand out, and even with the tears running down his face and snot running from his nose, I was certain no one prettier had ever walked this great earth.

"It weren't wrong, suh," I told him, trying to... hoping to soothe him.

He shook his head so hard, I was afraid he'd go and hurt himself. I brought my hands up to his cheeks and gripped hold to stop him as I repeated myself. "Mister Henry, it weren't wrong."

"Joseph, I *used* the thought of you. I used *you*. I promised myself I would *never* do that. I'd never treat you like a piece of property like my fath—"

"No you stop right there!" I squeezed his face. "Don't you say another word, Mister Henry. You, suh, are nothing like your father. Nothing! I don't know what words to use to get that through that thick head of yours, but—"

"But... I thought of you! Like that!"

"Same as I think of you!" I snapped back. My chest was heaving, and I looked at him with my eyes wide as he looked back at me not even blinking.

He leaned his face into my hand and with the smallest of voices asked, "You do?"

I breathed in deep and let air stutter out of me before saying, “Yes, suh, Mister Henry. I surely do.” It felt good to say. The iciness I’d been feeling earlier melted away, and my gaze drifted down to watch Mister Henry’s pink tongue sneak out of his mouth and lick at his bottom lip.

“Really?” he asked.

“Really,” I said. I felt like all the air was leaving me. My shoulders slumped down, and I felt loose—felt like some big rock had been lifted off my chest.

Mister Henry’s mouth was all shiny and pink, and I couldn’t look away. Not even as his face started moving closer to mine. It was so close, I had to close my eyes... And then, that mouth, all soft and wet, was pressing against mine, and I felt like I could fly.

I gasped and Mister Henry’s tongue was in my mouth. It was cool and tasted sweet, probably like the whisky he’d been drinking. He wrapped his arms around my neck, and I rubbed my hands up and down his back feeling the softness of his shirt and the lean and lanky body beneath it. It was too much... and it was not enough. I pulled at him, and he climbed into my lap, pushing his body closer still. This was what I’d seen all those nights... what I’d imagined. But right then, I done knew my imagination was nowhere near good enough, and I’d been foolish to think the *idea* of Mister Henry would ever be as good as the real thing.

I felt his arms squeezing around my shoulders before he pulled back an inch and rested his forehead against mine as he panted out his breaths.

“Oh, Joseph,” he said. I watched as his chest rose and fell all quick-like before slowly evening out.

“Mister Henry, I-I don’t know what to say.” There weren’t no words for what I was feeling sitting there rubbing his back as gently as I could. My body felt so light, there was no world beyond me and the boy curling around me.

“You could start by just calling me Henry,” he whispered. I let out a soft chuckle and thought maybe he was right.

He laid his head back down on my shoulder, and I squeezed him tighter.

“Henry?” I whispered, loving the sound of his name all by itself.

I was answered with a snore.

*Henry*

I paced. Back and forth. Back and forth... across the length of the garçonnière's porch and back again. Would he even come? Did I finally commit that final act that pushed Joseph away? He was too good. Too good for me. Too good for this plantation. Too good for—

I heard a rustling in the brush, but unlike all the other times I heard it, this time it didn't bring with it a soothing time. This time a cool sweat broke out over my skin, and I tasted blood I was gnawing on my lip so badly. He rounded the corner. His eyes were shining that chocolate brown I loved so much.

"Hello, H—"

"I'm sorry!" I cut Joseph off before he could say anymore. "I'm sorry for the other night. I was upset and drunk and you shouldn't have had to come here and find me and take care of me like you did. Agy told me you carried me all the way back to the Big House. I shouldn't have put you in that position."

He stared at me, his brow furrowed. His feet planted in the tall grass of the lawn.

"It wasn't any t-trouble," he stuttered, cocking his head.

"How can you say that?" I cried. "I was a drunk, slobbering mess! I can only imagine what I said—what I did! I don't even remember most of it. I remember you showing up and then I started blabbering on about my father and then I fell and dropped that foolish bottle and then I can't remember *anything*! And trust me when I say I've tried to. I've tried to remember that time I've lost 'cause I am quite sure I *deserve* to remember what an ass I was, what humiliation I must've put myself through. I'm just sorry you had to carry the brunt of it. Because it wasn't fair. You deserve better and I am so sorry."

Joseph's eyes were shiny, and his Adam's apple bobbed repeatedly. "It was no trouble, s-suh. No trouble at all," he said, but his voice was thick.

Something wasn't right, and it felt I had a pile of rocks sitting in my stomach. I narrowed my eyes at him trying to figure out what was happening. "What did I do, Joseph? What did I do to put that look on your face?"

He jerked his head, seeming to shake himself free of whatever thoughts had taken hold of him. "Nothin', M-Mister Henry. It was just like you remember. You fell down, had yourself a good cry and then passed out, right there where you standin' now. I just picked you up and carried you back. Weren't no

problem, suh. Most days I carry boards around that weigh more than you do.” He smiled wide, but I didn’t believe it.

“Joseph?”

“Now come on, suh. We got a whole Saturday ahead of us. What do you want to do?”

“Joseph...”

He rushed up on the porch and over to the box we kept there, opening it up and rummaging through its contents. “How ’bout a game of Nine Man’s Morris?” he asked not looking at me. “I do believe the last time we played, you said you were planning to finally stop letting me win.” He pulled the board he’d made himself, out of the box, and I let out a chuckle.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to stop *letting* you win that foolish game,” I replied, still trying to puzzle out what was happening.

“Maybe today’s the day, suh. Won’t know ’til you try, now will ya?” He finally looked up at me with a smile that barely touched his eyes. “C’mon now, Mister Henry. Why don’t you show me how it’s done?” He sat down cross-legged, placed the board in front of him, and started pulling the pieces out from their compartment.

I just stood there watching him as he sorted out the black markers from the white ones. Something wasn’t right, but I knew Joseph wasn’t going to tell me. Not today at least.

I moved across the porch and sat across from him, and we started to play.

I didn’t show him how I could win, but, once again, he taught me how I could lose spectacularly.

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## **PART THREE**

## 1857

### *Joseph*

Of all the places on Beauchesne, I thought this place was the saddest. Just a field. Trees of all different sizes planted in no order. Just spaced out a few feet in between, some closer than others.

Kneeling by a willow that was just shy of my height, was Ol' Val. From where I was standing, I couldn't hear his words. He was leaning over it, plucking the stray weeds from around its base, talking and singing. The man had a strong voice, but I don't think I'd noticed before how frail his body had become over the years, all I'd done noticed was that the top of his head got a little bit grayer with each year that passed. I still remembered those arms wrapped around me as a child. Lifting me up and carrying me back to my bed as my entire world crumbled around me. The thought of him trying to do that now, brought a smile to my face. I'd never known my pappy. Didn't even know his name... but Val was as good to me as any father would have been. I think Momma would've been happy about that.

I must've made a sound, because Val paused in his work and looked over his shoulder at me.

"What you doin' here, boy?" he asked. It wasn't an accusation. His tone didn't imply I was interrupting, just that he was curious was all.

"I finished the table. Just lookin' for you to see what else you'd like me to do."

"Come sit with me, Joseph," he said patting the ground next to him. And I did.

I knelt down, feeling rocks bite into my legs through my trousers. I breathed in, enjoying the smell of the earth. I lay my hand down to feel it against my skin. Feeling the grass tickle against it with the grainy soil resting underneath. I closed my eyes and just was. Just there, with the wind blowin' against my head, listening as it rustled the leaves.

"This..." Val began. "This is where my heart lay. And this is why I can't ever leave here. Do you remember that? That day when you asked me about runnin'?"

I was surprised he remembered. I'd been young, impulsive, and there was a part of me that still was, but I was starting to think I was as tied to this place as Val was. Though my heart wasn't buried in the ground. My heart was with the boy who couldn't breathe. And didn't remember...

"Yes, Val. I recall," I said staring at the short wisps as they swayed in the breeze.

Ol' Val, he turned his face to mine and worried his lip, before looking back down to the tree and smoothing the grass in front of it.

"I was young. A little bit older then you are now," he said softly, and I could tell he wasn't really sitting next to me no more, his mind had done taken him away to a place and time far away from this little plot of land. "Master Ashe had just bought me, and I was angry, just like you was. I'd had to leave my family just because the man in the Big House needed a carpenter."

He let out a sigh and was silent for so long, I thought he was finished speaking. But then his voice chimed through the silence with a power in it I had rarely heard from him. "I was out back of the wood shop, choppin' away. Imaginin' that every piece of wood was a white man. The master. The nigger trader. Man, oh, man. I think I'd done chopped up the whole parish. But then I heard someone call my name. 'Valere?' And when I looked up at the source of that voice, I think my heart done jumped out of my chest right then."

A smile grew across the old man's lips. Spreading out and showing all those white teeth shining against his dark skin. "The o'erseer had us workin' together, so we 'round each other a lot. Every day, I'd hear that voice and every day, my heart was less and less mine. But that was the one thing I never let *them* see. Nobody knew but us. And when we kissed for the first time, Lordy! I knew right then that I couldn't ever leave. No way on this earth I could leave my heart, 'cause I was right sure, that it didn't belong to me no more."

Ol' Valere pushed himself off the ground; his bones cracking as he straightened. I followed him up and was turning to leave when I felt the pressure of his hand on my shoulder. I looked down at him. His wrinkly skin seemed smoother, his hair not as gray, but the fire in his eyes was surprising when he stared back at me and said, "You know that feeling, too."

A big old lump formed in my throat. Val saw a whole lot more than I gave him credit for.

"You goin' where I think you're goin'?" he asked me. I felt my cheeks get hot, and I just ducked my head with a small nod. "Well, then you best git. The

young master's eighteenth birthday is comin' up mighty quick, just a couple months after yours if I recall correctly, and yours be next month. I reckon if that gift you're workin' on is gonna be done in time, you got a bit of work ahead of ya. 'Specially if it's gonna be done before he gets back here from Naw'lins. You're not gonna be able to work much on it after that."

Val was right. I had a lot of work to do and not a whole lot of time to do it.

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I worked and worked... whenever there were even a few moments of extra time. Mostly late at night or early in the morning, but whenever I wasn't building something for the master or Ghosty, I was working to surprise Mister Henry.

I blew the sawdust away and looked at everything I'd done finished. I let myself smile as the warmth of pride in my chest spread out through my whole body. All I had left to do was clean it up and get rid of the last of the dust so it wouldn't send Mister Henry into a coughing fit.

I was heading back to the wood shack when I saw Agy tearing down the hill. The heavy feeling in my gut told me I wasn't going to be showing Mister Henry anything anytime soon.

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## 1858 – March

*Henry*

I kept my hand in my jacket pocket with my fingers wrapped around the carpenter ruler, rubbing the tips over the brass edges, over the embossed numbers. It was a foolish gift. Impersonal. But early in my trip, I'd been walking around New Orleans and saw it in the window of a shop. It made me realize how much I missed him. Missed his smile, his voice... so I bought it. It was a gift that wouldn't look out of place in the wood shack. It wouldn't raise questions neither one of us could answer.

Then I got sick... again.

I hadn't been at Beauchesne in over fifteen weeks. Father and I were supposed to be in New Orleans for a month, but then the wheezing started and then the coughing. It was... bad. I didn't have much memory of the first few days, just that I was sick, and the doc turned up and gave Sallah some medicine that she kept pouring down my throat. But, after a while, I gained enough strength to move to the chair in my room. Still though, the doctor wouldn't allow me to travel. So I'd been stuck in that room with Sallah as my nursemaid—which should have been motivation enough to get healthy, unfortunately, my body had other ideas. Months passed before I recovered, and then finally—two days ago—I got permission to come home... permission from Father, from the doctor, and from Sallah, too.

I hopped out of the carriage before it even came to a complete stop forgetting my hat on the seat.

“Master Henry!” I heard Sallah yelling behind me, but I ignored her as I bounded up the steps and into the house. I needed to find Agy; she could get a message to Joseph.

But she wasn't in the house. I worked my way through. There were slaves tidying rooms, putting fresh linens on the beds. I gave greetings as I passed, but my focus was elsewhere. I'd circled through the house, and it became obvious, Joseph's sister wasn't here.

“Sophie,” I called to the woman in the parlor. She was dusting off the mantle and jumped when I spoke her name. She was an older woman and had been here since I'd first gotten sick all those years ago. My cheeks heated as I

realized how rarely I had spoken to her in all that time. “I apologize,” I said. “It wasn’t my intent to startle you.”

“I-It’s no bother, suh,” she replied. She gripped the rag she’d been dusting with in her hands in front of her, twisting it tightly as she stared at the floor. “What can I do for you, suh?”

My gut turned with her uneasiness, hating how I’d barely noticed her before. “I was wondering if you’d seen Agy?”

“I believe she was sent out on an errand, suh. To get your medicine. Sorry, suh. We just got word of your return this mornin’,” she explained, still looking at the floor.

“Thank you, Sophie,” I said, before adding, “And... you’re doing a good job.” My words were ridiculously insufficient, and the way the woman was acting, it was obvious, and unfortunately no surprise, that she did not receive praise enough. I needed to work on changing that. Though first, I needed to find Joseph.

As I headed out the back door, I heard Sallah directing the slaves to place the trunks in the appropriate rooms, but I paid her no mind and ducked out the back door before she noticed me. I’d heard enough of Sallah over the past four months. I thought I was due a break.

I looked down the hill. Everything was still around the wood shack. Everything was still everywhere. Quiet even. My skin itched with a nervousness I couldn’t explain. I wasn’t going to let the nerves stop me. I put some steel in my spine and started walking.

There was a shuffling sound coming from beyond the door as I neared it. My belly began to flutter, and I tried unsuccessfully to keep the bounce out of my step. Four months was too long to not see Joseph’s smiling face. To not listen to his timbre voice... to not feel his stoic, calming presence.

“Jo—” I started, but silenced the word when I saw it was only Valere sweeping up the floor. “Hello, Val... Um... how are you?”

The old man paused his chores and leaned against his broom. “Welcome back, suh. I think I’m the one who should be asking you how you’s doin’,” he said.

“Thank you, I am feeling much better,” I replied, giving him a smile and shoving my hands in my pockets. “Um, you wouldn’t happen to know where Joseph is, would you?” I looked down at my shoes as I felt my face redden.

I heard the broom start sweeping harshly across the floor, and I looked up. The muscles in Valere's forearms were bunched tight, and I thought he might break the handle he was gripping it so fiercely. His hands might have well have been wrapped around my throat, it felt so tight at that moment. "Val?" I whispered. "Where's Joseph?"

The man across the room threw down his broom, and I jumped at the clack it made when it hit the floor. Val's jaw was tight, and his hands were balled into fists. He spoke through clenched teeth when he explained, "The Delacroix place, suh. Francis done hired him out to the Delacroixs being there was no use for him here."

I swallowed down a mouthful of bile. "The D-Delacroixs'? Why is he at the Delacroixs'?"

Valere bent and grabbed the broom from the floor with a huff and started sweeping furiously at dirt I wasn't even sure was there. "Ain't been no work for him here. The Delacroixs be lookin' for a carpenter. Francis sent Joseph."

My throat felt all thick. It was the plantation where Joseph had been born, where my father had bought him from. Joseph had told me stories about the place—about the overseer. "H-Hired, not s-s-sold?" I stuttered.

Val looked up at me, the look in his eyes softening before he answered. "Yes, suh. Hired, not sold." He sighed. "But that's 'bout the only thing to be thankful for. The boy only supposed to be gone for a month. He been gone for close to two."

All the air left me, and I had to reach back and grab at the wall to keep from tumbling to the floor. *Two months*. Two months he'd been gone. Beauchesne might not be the best place, but here, I knew he was safe. I clutched at my stomach as my breaths came faster and faster. Ol' Val came rushing over and placed a chair behind me gently pushing down on my shoulder and guiding me to sit.

"It's too long, Val. A day—hell, an hour is too long." I inhaled deeply through my nose a few times as I tried to calm the tempest that was battering away in my chest. I needed to do something. I needed him back here... I needed him.

I sat there feeling lost, not knowing what to do, and that was the last thing I needed to waste time doing. It was time to act, not time to sit. As an idea formed in my mind, I closed my eyes and shook my arms and then let out a long, long breath, finally regaining control. I opened my eyes and looked up

into Val's wizened face. I had a plan. I cocked my head to the side and clenched my fists as I asked, "So, you think you can still handle a carriage?"

He gave me a wide smile, and I swear his eyes twinkled. "Why, yessuh, I believe I can."

"Good. Go to the carriage house, tell them I sent you and get it out front. It shouldn't take long, probably just need to switch out the horses. I'm going to find Francis."

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The trip to the Delacroix Plantation seemed to take hours, though it was only a couple of miles down the road. I sat up top next to Val on the way there, we'd stop before we arrived, and I'd get down inside the carriage to look the part of a *proper white master*. As Val sat there shaking the reins, he told me the stories the slaves spoke of the place. They did nothing to help my now-ailing stomach. I would need to act a part I never wanted; I needed to act like the man my father wanted me to be. Francis had told me they'd sent papers over just the day before to renew the hire for another month, and Francis, as representative for my father, had readily signed them. I was about to back out of it, and no doubt I would not be making friends.

The carriage stopped. "It's best you get in the back now, suh," Val said. "We's almost there and no tellin' who we might be seein'."

I hopped off the seat and started toward the back but stopped and looked up to the man who'd I'd known my whole life. "Thank you, Valere. I don't know if I've said that to you before, but thank you, for this and everything else."

He smiled at me. "No need to thank me, suh. This here, this is enough. Now you get in there and let's go get our boy and bring him home."

I was smiling when I sat down on the bench.

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We bumped along the alley to the house, and I pulled the curtain back and peeked out from the window. It was different from Beauchesne. I could hear the drivers hollering even over the clapping of the horses' hooves. The land just looked... sad... but maybe that's because I was afraid of what I'd find when I found Joseph. I closed the curtain and then my eyes and drew some air in, long and deep, as Valere pulled the carriage to a halt.

I sat there fumbling with my foolish hat as I waited for him to come open the door. *Proper appearances and all*. I let out two huffs before the door

opened, and I stepped down to the ground, straightening my spine as I placed my hat back on my head. I locked my knees, trying to stay as rigid as I could, schooling my face to the sight before me on the porch. *He* was there, standing without a shirt, with his shoulders slumped and three other slaves standing at his sides. I didn't look at him more than a fraction of a second; I couldn't. I searched the area until finally my gaze fell upon the white man... the white man with a whip at his belt. I took another deep breath and started toward him.

"Hello, sir," I began, bringing my fingers to the brim of my hat in greeting. "I apologize for the trouble so late in the day, but my name is Henry Ashe, and I am here in regards to a piece of my property that has been hired out to you." I hated the words as they came out of my mouth. I'd sworn long, long ago to never use that language when talking about Joseph, or any other slave, but in this instance, it was unavoidable... and expected.

The man took three steps, closing the distance between us while I swallowed down the vomit that was threatening to make an appearance. "Good day, sir. I'm Samuels, the overseer here," the sweaty man said, tipping his own hat to me. "What seems to be the issue? I believe Mr. Francis signed the extension for hire just yesterday. I have work lined up for your Joseph for another two to three weeks at least."

I allowed myself a sideward glance at the porch before looking back at the man and sneering. "Yes, I can see that."

He let out a deep laugh and held his belly with one hand while pointing at the porch with the other. "This?" he asked. "This is the afternoon entertainment. They all take turns, see. Don't want none of them feeling left out." He smiled leeringly at me and winked, and I suddenly felt like I needed to bathe with a pound of lye.

"Yes, sir, I can understand that. We too enjoy being entertained at Beauchesne as well." I winked back. "And I am truly sorry to interrupt, but you see Mr. Francis did not have all of the information, and unfortunately he signed the papers in error. I'm afraid I must terminate our agreement—effective immediately—as Beauchesne has urgent need of its carpenter."

"But sir," the overseer started. "It has been signed. You can't terminate at will."

"Oh, but I can," I announced, pulling the copy of the agreement Francis had given me out of my pocket. "You see here, sir, it says here that the hire is at sole discretion of the owner, meaning my father, and by extension, me, and can

be terminated at any time. Compensation will be offered of course.” I handed him the paper and watched him stare at it—the blank look in his eyes making his illiteracy obvious—and a small weight felt like it was lifted from my shoulders—I *may have exaggerated the finer details of the agreement*—but I needed to get Joseph away, and I’d do anything to make that happen. I pulled my wallet from my belt and, with a show, removed enough bills to cover the cost of Joseph’s “rental.” I made sure to leave some of the remaining bills visible.

“Now, sir,” Samuels started. “No matter what this paper says, it just ain’t proper for you to be showin’ up with no notice like this.” I handed the money to him and snatched the agreement back as he stood there with his mouth agape.

I didn’t want to play this game anymore. “Mr. Samuels. I am here in regards to *my* property. And when it comes to *my* property, and the needs of *my* plantation, I can and will be wherever it is necessary for me to be. And at this particular moment, it is necessary for me to be here and to take my slave back to my own plantation where he has work that takes precedence over *entertainment*.” I moved to the porch and without taking my eyes off Samuels, held out my hand, and gestured to the carriage. “Come now, Joseph. It’s time to leave.”

Joseph looked at the overseer and then at me before taking quick steps to the carriage and climbing up in the seat. I didn’t care about his shirt, or anything else he might be leaving behind. None of it was important. I just needed Joseph back, back where he was safe.

Samuels’ face was pink and sweaty as he stood there clenching his fists. “I thank you kindly,” I muttered when I walked by him. I paused as I met Valere at the open door and turned back to the red-faced man, pulling a small bill out. “For your trouble,” I said before dropping it to the ground and climbing in. Val shut the door behind me, and I leaned into the leather of the seat, clutching at my chest. I wouldn’t feel better until we were off this land. Not until we were home and Joseph was where he belonged. If I was really honest, I didn’t think I’d feel entirely whole until it was just him, me, and the wind sitting on the porch of the garçonnière.

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As planned, Val stopped the carriage once we’d made it far enough away. I opened the door and beckoned Joseph down. I wasn’t planning to stop again before we got back to Beauchesne. If anyone thought things not proper, I’d have words with them.

Joseph hesitated before he slowly descended from the front seat. “You sure, suh?”

I hated the doubt in his voice. “Please, Joseph,” I answered quietly.

“All right, suh,” he said and took the two steps up and in and moved to the seat across from me. Silence hung thick between us. It was so unlike how things usually were—how things were supposed to be. He was looking into his lap and twisting his fingers together. His broad chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Joseph,” I whispered. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, suh. I’m fine, suh.” He started looking around at everything in the small compartment—everything but me.

He wasn’t fine. “I think you’re lying.” I said bluntly. This wasn’t the Joseph I left four months prior. I pushed myself off my seat and kneeled in front of him, placing my hands on his thighs to steady myself from the jostling of the carriage. There was one big question. One that was hanging in the silence between us like a bale of cotton, thick and seemingly impenetrable. As much as I didn’t want to know, I had to ask, and I thought *maybe* he needed to answer. “Joseph? Did—did they do anything to you? Did that awful man—” My words got stuck in my throat with the thought of their meaning. “—do something?” I rubbed my hands up and down his legs trying to soothe him—maybe trying to soothe myself. Keeping my words soft, I continued, “Please, please talk to me. You’ve always talked to me. You’ve always been there to listen to me when I was sad or angry. Always been that strength for me. Please, Joseph. Please let me do the same for you.”

I closed my eyes and listened to him breathing. Having him there, having him there safe calmed that internal storm that had been whipping around my insides for the past few hours. I stroked my hands up and down his legs feeling the coarseness of the fabric and the firm muscles underneath.

“They didn’t do nothin’, suh,” he whispered finally, and I snapped my attention to his face, but he was still looking away. “This afternoon was the first day he put me on the porch. I’d made sure to stay busy all the other days. Always buildin’ something, planin’ something. Yesterday, the bossman cornered me, showin’ me this smile that made me itchy, tellin’ me how he’d gone and got another extension. He was lickin’ his lips and I felt like I was five years old again, only I couldn’t hide in Momma’s skirt this time. There wasn’t any work left for me to do, I’d done finished it all. I knew there was only one reason Bossman got that extension... and it weren’t to use me as a carpenter.” I

felt his legs go rigid beneath my hands, and I just rubbed on them harder. Each word he uttered was another stone weighing on my heart. “I was scared, Mister Henry.” I felt the words more than heard them, Joseph’s voice was so small.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here,” I said, raising one of my hands to cup his cheek. I stroked my thumb across it, and finally, he met my gaze with those beautiful brown eyes of his. “You should have never been sent there. I just got back, just found out, and—” I felt a prickling behind my eyes. There was no excuse I could give to make it right.

“Oh, suh, I know that,” he sighed, and he pressed his face into my hand. Heat traveled down my arm spreading through my torso and beyond.

For the rest of the ride to Beauchesne I knelt there holding his face and stroking his leg, staring at him with hope—hope that he could see in my eyes, the silent words and feelings that were pounding away in my heart. When I felt his roughened hand cover mine, I thought, maybe—*just maybe*—he could.

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## 1858 – June

### *Joseph*

The wood shack had been a welcome sight when I'd come back from the Delacroixs'. It didn't matter none what chores were waiting for me. Even my lumpy old cot was a welcome thing. It weren't the lumps that caused me to toss and turn. I didn't tell Mister Henry the whole truth in the carriage that day. It truly had been my first day on the porch—the first day I was expected to *perform* with the other slaves—but before that, nothing had stopped Samuels from grabbing at me or from speaking of all kinds of unthinkable acts in my ear with his sour mouth. He'd started in on me after I'd been there a month. Leaning close, making me feel his sweaty body pushing against the back of me, pushing his hardness against my rear end, telling me exactly how he wanted to use it, what he was planning for me. I still didn't know how I'd escaped without him actually doing any of the things he was describing, but I was thankful that I had. His words had done enough damage. I just wished it hadn't changed the way I acted around Mister Henry.

I didn't visit him none down at the garçonnrière. That first Saturday, he'd come looking for me when I didn't come and found me curled up on my cot. I told him that I wasn't feeling too good and sent him on his way. The frown on his face didn't make me feel none better, but I wasn't ready to act the way he was expecting me to. I didn't know if I wanted to anymore.

Before I got sent to the Delacroixs', I could pretend that it was just me and Mister Henry... It was just us fighting our battle against all the evils of the world from the great big porch sea. The sea had gotten smaller as we'd done got bigger, but it had never mattered none. Mister Henry was my friend... at least that's how I used to think of him. After having Samuels foul breath on my neck, I didn't know no more if I could be friends with no one. Mister Henry used to make me feel safe. Now, all I had to see was the creamy *white* of Mister Henry's skin and that rolling feeling in my belly would come back. I hated Samuels for that more than anything else.

Dreams kept coming though. They didn't stop no matter how hard I wished they would. Seems like most nights, I tossed and turned... couldn't sleep right... woke up covered in sweat. There wasn't anything I could do to stop the blond boy from visiting my dreams, 'cause I had surely tried. But I'd still be

sweaty, and I'd still wake up with wet spots on my cot. Before Samuels, I used to smile when I woke after dreams like that, now, I'd roll over and pull the blankets closer around me, trying to figure out how to stop them from coming back. If I were taking Ghosty's advice, I'd find a good-looking woman to jump over the broom with and start breeding. That idea left a worse feeling in my belly than any of the dreams ever could have.

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It was the end of the workday a few weeks later that Val found me working on a slave cabin.

"You almost done here, Joseph?" he asked, as he walked over and smoothed his hand over the piece of wood I'd just nailed down. "Your work keeps getting better. This is mighty fine."

"Uh, thank you. I appreciate you sayin' that," I said to him, putting the hammer in the box. "Do you need me to do something?"

"Naw. You just finish your work up here. I'm heading down to the willow tree, why don't you meet me in a bit," he suggested before patting my shoulder and walking away.

I finished picking up the rest of my tools putting them in my box before heading back to the wood shack and putting them away for the day. Some I just left in the box, the things I'd be using when I had to fix things up around the grounds. Others I put back where they belonged. Once everything was in its proper place, I ran my hands down my pant legs trying to shoo off the dust and dirt that had collected there during the day. Then, I headed off to find Val.

I wasn't surprised when I saw him sitting there weeding or when I heard him singing, "*Aine, dé, trois...*" He always sang when he came here, and the old Creole song seemed to be a favorite. If he wasn't singing he was whispering soft words, "*Je t'aime, toujours, mon cher.*" I stood there watching him, gnawing on my bottom lip as I realized how much I wanted what Valere had. Something so strong it had survived when half of him was already in the ground.

"There you are." He spoke without looking back at me. "Come on over here, boy." His words and actions were the same as they always were when I met him here. Calling me to him, patting the ground beside him. There was comfort in that. Ol' Valere was steady, and that was something I done needed right about then.

I went over and sat cross-legged next to him, putting my hands on my knees and watching the breeze move through the grass. I closed my eyes and inhaled the scents around me, the leaves, the grass, the—

My whole body jerked forward when Valere smacked the back of my head, ripping me out of the momentary calm I'd been feeling. I brought my hand up and rubbed at the spot he'd hit, turning my head and glaring at him. "What was that for?" I asked him.

"That was for bein' foolish, Joseph. You've done been foolish for months now, and I'm just about done with all of it."

"What do you mean?" I spat at him, though I had a pretty good reckoning what he was talking about. "I've been workin', doing everythin' I'm supposed to. Followin' all the orders from Ghosty... from Sallah... from *you*! What more do you want me to do?"

"Yes, you've been followin' orders just fine, Joseph! Just like you want. No thinkin', just workin'. Actin' just like expected. I wanna know what you done did with Joseph. I think he still be over at the Delacroixs' waiting on Samuels."

My hand formed into a fist at the sound of the man's name, and I drew it back before I realized what I was doing.

"You want to slug me? If that's what's gonna calm the hornets shootin' round inside of you, you go ahead and do it. I may be old, but I remember how to take a punch." Val sat there with his jaw set and his eyes daring me to let loose my fist. I stared at him for a moment, then looked at my fist still held high in the air, and then felt my eyes starting to sting. I let my hand fall and turned my gaze to the ground.

"I'm sorry, Val. I don't want to hit you. That's the last thing I want to be doin'." I said with my throat feeling all thick. "You been nothin' but good to me."

He reached out and grabbed my chin between his fingers and pulled it up so he could look at me level. "I ain't the only one," he said, and I felt my cheeks heat with shame. "You remember me telling you the story about when I first come here? How I been mad at the world?"

"Yes, suh. You chopped up the whole parish, if I 'member correctly."

He chuckled. "Yes, I did." His face turned serious, and he gripped my chin harder. "And I think you need to do the same, only you don't need to be choppin' up the parish, you need to be choppin' up Samuels. And you need to keep doin' that 'til you got it all worked outta ya and your heart's free of him."

'Cause right now, you be lettin' that man win. You be lettin' him take all that good right out of ya. You's might as well be layin' here next to *mon couer* 'cause ever since you been back, you ain't nothin' but a shell." Val paused, seeming to think about his words before he started again. "And up there—" He pointed toward the Big House. "Up there in that house, is a man who still calls you his only friend. A man who misses you and fights every day to keep air flowin' into his lungs. And all you's doin' is tellin' him you don't care none!" Ol' Val spat on the ground, then sighed. "But I reckon that's probably not gonna matter much for too much longer no how, seein' there's talk of the young master movin' to Naw'lins permanently."

My head snapped up, and my stomach weighed heavy. "What did you say?" I asked.

Val's eyes were narrow as he looked at me. "You heard me right. They be talkin' about Master Henry takin' on a bigger role in his pappy's shippin' business. Thinkin' of movin' down to the Naw'lins house. This place done running aw'right when it's just Francis here anyway. From what I hear, the young master's thinkin' of agreein' to the master's wishes."

Val's words hit their target—right square in the middle of my chest, and I clutched at my heart, realizing how true his words were. I needed Samuels out of my head. I needed to start living again. I needed to let the blond boy back in to make me whole.

I sighed and looked up at the wise man sitting next to me before asking, "So, we got a big pile of logs up at the shack, don't we?"

Val grinned and gave me a nod.

By the time I finally laid my head down that night, my shoulders ached with a fierceness I'd never felt and, in my mind, Samuels was nothing more than some bloody chunks of flesh lying under a pile of wood chips. My whole body was sore and achy, yet my chest felt light, and I could smile. I don't remember dreaming, but when I woke up the next morning, I was ready to start a new day.

It was Saturday after all.

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*Henry*

Agy whisked into Father's study with barely a knock and skidded to a stop in front of the desk I was working at. Her dress hadn't even stopped swooshing around her ankles when she huffed out her words. "Mi-Mister Hen-Henry," she

sputtered and paused a moment with her shoulders shaking up and down. “You—You busy, suh?”

“Eh, Agy?” I certainly had no idea what had gotten into the girl. “What—”

“No? Good,” she continued without letting me finish. “Come on now, Val be needin’ ya.”

“But Agy...” I started, but I was pushing up and out of my chair even as I protested. Truth was, I wasn’t doing much of anything. I’d been sitting at the desk all day looking out the window—looking at Mama’s house—thinking about what I should do. Father had given me a choice: stay on the plantation and learn all the workings of it, or come to New Orleans and prepare to take over the shipping business. There was only one reason—one person—that gave me pause to stay, but over the months since I’d been back, it seemed he wasn’t of the same mind as I was.

“Suh!” Agy said sternly. “Come on, let’s go now. You ain’t had one of your spells for a while, so I know you can be movin’ faster than you is. Now let’s go.”

I followed Agy out of the house and down the hill, except halfway there I realized that I was the only one walking, and she’d stopped somewhere behind me. I twisted around in time to see her turn and holler over her shoulder, “Just go down to the shack, suh. I done forgot I had something to do for Sallah.” And then as quickly as she’d breezed into the office, she was gone again.

I started walking again, watching the shack in front of me get bigger and bigger as I drew closer. I tried to swallow, but my throat was parched, and I brought my hand up to rub it as if that would bring me some relief—it didn’t. When I finally reached the open door of the wood shack, I paused, wondering what I was doing and rocked back and forth on my feet. Last time I was here, I’d all but been dismissed. It had hurt more than I could admit to anyone. There was no one to share the pain I felt that day, because the person I’d always shared my feelings with was the one who’d sent me away.

I steeled my shoulders back and stepped through the door. “Valere?” I called.

There was no answer. I looked around me. Tools all hanging from hooks, broom leaning up in the corner. A well-used carpenter ruler sat right there on the bench smeared with fingerprints. I moved over extending my hand over it and felt the embossed numbers, missing the warmth I’d felt when I first purchased it.

“Thank you, suh,” I heard behind me. I closed my eyes letting those words wash over me. It had been so long since I’d heard his voice. Always sending Valere when I’d made up some excuse to need a carpenter. “I don’t think I ever properly thanked you for that.”

I kept my gaze focused on the bench, letting my fingers list back and forth. “No need,” I said not trusting myself to say more.

“Well, I should’ve said it long ’fore now, suh. Truth is...” He paused, and I heard a shuffle, and then I felt the warmth of his body at my back and his words in my ear as he moved closer to me, so close, but not touching. “Truth is, Mister Henry, I was lost for a spell after I got back here. I was lost and I had a mighty difficult time findin’ my way back.”

I turned then and looked up into his brown eyes—the same eyes that had been looking down on me for years... eyes that should reflect hate or anger, but now reflected understanding, and I’d dared to think affection, even. Meeting his gaze for the first time in too, too long, my heart started racing, and I could feel a layer of sweat breaking out over my skin. I ducked my head as I felt my cheeks get pink. “But you did? You found your way?” I whispered.

“Yes, suh. I did. And I am here.”

“You’re here,” I sighed.

Joseph took a step back and started fidgeting with his fingers as he peered down at the floor and began shuffling his feet. I’d missed him—he’d cut his hair since I’d seen him last—and the timbre that did more to soothe me than any medicine the doctor had ever given me. “Suh, I know I got no right to ask, but I got something to show you. Something I was goin’ to show you a long time ago, but you got sick and I... Suh, do you trust me?”

There was no one in the world I trusted more, because regardless of what had happened over the past few months, the man in front of me had had my trust since I first saw him as a little boy peeking around the corner.

“Of course, Joseph.”

His smile grew wide then, and he held out his hand. “Then come on! Come with me!”

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Joseph’s hands covered my eyes, and I couldn’t help the giggles bubbling out of my mouth. “It’s all right, Mister Henry, I got you,” he said from behind

me as he started moving forward, and I let him guide me from behind. I knew where we were heading. I felt the divots and rocks under my feet, I knew every one of them. I'd traveled this path so many times over the years; I didn't need his fingers blocking my sight or his body steering me to be able to find my way blind. Though I had to admit how much I liked it—his hands on me and his body pressing into me. The nearness of him made my skin tingle, my scalp get tight—my length start to thicken.

I gasped.

Joseph stopped moving and leaned over my shoulder to ask, "You all right, suh?"

His hot breath so close did nothing to calm my traitorous body. "I-I'm fine," I said, though the stutter was enough reason to give him doubts to the truth of my statement.

"You sure? We can—"

"No!" The word was too loud. I brought my hands up and covered his fingers with my own, pressing them against my eyes. "Really, Joseph, I'm all right. I don't want to go back." And that was the truth. I didn't want to go back to the Big House, and I didn't want to go back to the way things had been for weeks. I wanted to be right where I was, and I wanted, for better or worse, Joseph's hands on me.

"All right. We're almost there now."

I grinned. *Yes, we were.*

Evening had set in, and the air had started to cool, as much as Louisiana air ever did. I made myself focus on that. Focus on the sound of crickets and of twigs crunching under our feet. I felt the world open up around me, and I knew we were in the clearing in front of the garçonnière. Even with my eyes closed I could see it. I could see the paint peeling off, and the shutter from the right upstairs window hanging askew. I could see the post that needed to be replaced on the railing.

"Will you keep your eyes closed for me, suh," Joseph whispered in my ear, and all I could do was nod as I broke out in gooseflesh.

I felt his absence keenly when he moved away, but I did as he asked and kept my eyes shut. I heard the thump of his feet on the porch and then a scritch and a squeak almost like rusted hinges, but I'd not heard those sounds in this

place before. My spine went rigid, and I tried to figure out what he was doing. Another scrape, another squeak. And then nothing but the crickets and the wind. I pushed my hands into my pockets and dug my nails into my palms trying to ground myself to that spot. Without Joseph behind me, I wanted to run—run to find him.

Then I heard his footsteps. He was coming closer, shuffling through the grass. I let out a long sigh, and my body relaxed when I finally felt him in front of me. He placed his hand on my shoulder, and I craned my head toward it wanting to feel more of him.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.” *And I was.*

He moved behind me again and placed his hands back over my eyes and began steering me forward. “Step up now, suh,” he prompted when we reached the porch. And then he moved me—not the three steps it usually took to reach the wall—he moved me six steps. The air became thicker and tasted stale, and for the first time in my life, I realized that I was standing inside the house that was supposed to be mine. I was inside the garçonnière, and I let go a small cry as the weight of that knowledge pressed down upon me.

I’d wanted this place. I’d been dreaming about it since Mama had brought me here when I was a tiny boy.

“You ready, suh?”

“I’ve been ready for years, Joseph,” I said as he moved his hands, and I opened my eyes.

I felt that telling sting just before the first tear fell. It was beautiful. I might not have been inside before, but we’d peeked in through the windows. We’d seen the dust and all the covers and shredded piles of cloth where it looked like animals might have made their homes. That was all gone now.

Now, there were lit candles lining the interior of the fireplace, their flames dancing and casting shadows across the newly polished floor. There wasn’t much furniture. A table stood along the wall with two straight-backed chairs next to it. The walls were white and looked freshly plastered. But it was the molding that ran around the room that caught my attention. Joseph had done it all by hand, and it was carved so—My eyes watered even more.

“H-How?” I asked, marveling at all he’d done.



“Well”—he ducked his head down—“Agy knew where the key was, and I had her push it into some soap so I could carve up a match. I’m sorry, suh, I didn’t have a lot of the proper materials. I couldn’t clean out the chimney, there weren’t no paint or wallpaper and I had to piece together the moulding from scraps left over. I-I’m sorry—”

“Don’t!” I hadn’t meant to yell. “Please don’t, Joseph. This is perfect. I wouldn’t have asked for anything different.” I didn’t stop myself from reaching out and taking his hand in mine, from rubbing my thumb back and forth across it. “I love it, Joseph. This is the greatest gift I have ever—could ever—receive. And I can only guess how long it took you to do all this. You work so hard with everything else, and then to come here and get this done too. I’m humbled. It—you—are amazing.” The last words came out in a whisper, though they were the words I felt the strongest.

Joseph still held his head down, shifting his weight between his feet. I reached out and tipped his chin up with my finger. “Show me.”

We went from room to room—the small parlor, the dining room—and with every room, Joseph became more excited, showing me all he’d done. When I led him upstairs and into the bedroom, now clear from clutter and dust, he mumbled his apologies about not having a curtain for the bed, and then quickly turned and retreated down the stairs.

I let myself take a final glimpse into the room before following him.

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“Seems like I’m the one who owes you thanks, Joseph.” I said to him, shoving my hands in my pockets.

“Naw, suh, I wanted to do this,” he mumbled, looking around the room.

“Joseph, I gave you a ruler; you gave me a... home.” I whispered. “I don’t have the words to thank you. This is—this is more than I’ve learned to hope for. But you knew. You knew it was what I wanted, and *you* gave it to me.”

The sun had faded, and the only light in the room came from the candles, but they reflected from the windows and the mirrors on the wall setting the whole place aglow. I let my gaze linger on Joseph as he stood there. His skin was shiny in the light, and he was beautiful.

“Oh, I forgot,” he said, suddenly breaking me out of my thoughts. He ran over to the table and from underneath it he pulled a small basket. “Agy packed

it up. Didn't know if you'd be hungry or not figuring you're missin' your evenin' meal and all." He pulled a quilt off the top and laid it in the center of the room before placing the basket in the center of it and pulling out a jar and some glasses followed by a few pieces of fruit. He sat down next to it, opened the jar, and poured the glasses full of what looked like tea.

I watched him, enjoying the warm feeling that was growing in my belly. "Sit with me, suh," he said, handing me a glass.

I took a sip of the tea—Agy must've made it because it was sweet—and put the glass down beside me and leaned back on my elbows. Joseph did the same. There was about a foot of space between us, but part of me figured it might as well have been a mile; nevertheless I put my hand down flat and spread out my fingers trying to close that distance just a bit more. We sat there in silence for a while watching the flames from the candles swirl about. I closed my eyes and let myself imagine that I could have this for more than a fleeting moment. Remembering a time long ago...

"When I was little, I used to watch Mama and Father dance. Sometimes they'd be in the parlor... sometimes the great room or the dining room. Father would actually sing, if you can believe that. He'd hold Mama close, singing to her, just for her. I wasn't supposed to see it, but I did. Even back then, I knew *that's* what I wanted. I wanted someone to hold me the same way. Look at me like I was the most perfect creature they'd ever seen. Just a caress, or a kiss, and I'd know how much I was loved. That's what I wanted. Part of me still wants it. But I know now..."

"Suh..." Joseph tried to interrupt but I put my hand up to stop his words.

"No, Joseph. I'm not one to fool myself. I may be stubborn, but I am no fool. That future I wished for is not the one that is meant for me. Between my father and my illness..."

Joseph had his fist in his mouth. He'd always done that when he was trying to stay quiet. Sometimes I don't even think he knew it. I hated that he was trying to silence his thoughts, but the way he looked—that innocence shining from him—it was one of the things that endeared him to me... one of the things that made me...

I swallowed hard and then let out a small gasp. Joseph was beside me before I even had a chance to process what was happening.

"Mister Henry," he began as he rubbed circles along my back. "You okay, suh?"

His voice had deepened over the years. It had become rich and thick and smooth.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be living in the garçonnière Jo-Joseph,” I whispered. My voice cracked on his name. “But it is so beautiful. So, so beautiful.”

I let myself look up into his face. I wondered if he realized that though this house *was* beautiful, the true beauty was Joseph. Only Joseph.

“Suh, please—”

“Don’t call me sir!” I snapped. I hated that word. It made me feel cold all over, and I was enjoying the warmth of the room... and the company. I sighed and brought my hand to his cheek. “Please, *s’il vous plait*.” We hadn’t spoken French to each other since we were children, but it reminded me of a happier time. A time with no pressure, no expectations, no illness. “*Je m’appelle* Henry. Please, call me Henry.”

Joseph brought his hand up to cover mine. His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he tilted his head and began speaking.

“Do you know why I’ve always called you ‘suh’ or ‘Mister Henry’?” he asked, still keeping his hand on mine. I just shook my head ever so slightly. I was afraid to say anything. Joseph rarely talked, but when he did, the words were always meaningful, heartfelt... and this was a question I’d been wondering about for over ten years.

“When I was five years old, my momma was sold in the middle of the night. The man that came—Ghosty—said the master didn’t want a little boy... only the woman to feed the white child. He was willing to take the baby too, but he had no need of a boy.” Joseph paused. There were tears welling up in his eyes, and I could tell he was somewhere else—his own other place, his own other time—yet his time held none of the happiness that danced through my memories.

“I remember just holdin’ on tight to Momma’s skirt. Prayin’—though I didn’t even know what that was—prayin’ that no one would take me away from her. Take me away from Agy... And someone answered me, because the next thing I knew, I was here at Beauchesne, and this little blond boy was givin’ me a piece of cake.”

“A piece of cake you got the switch for.” I scowled as I dipped my chin down remembering the muffled cries from the sitting room along with the small raised stripes across his legs that he didn’t think I’d seen. But I had. I’d snuck

down after Sallah and looked from the window as she took that switch to him. And I hated her for it. “It should have been me,” I whispered.

“Don’t you ever say that!” Joseph was fierce. He took his hand from on top of mine and squeezed my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “Never you, suh. Never. It shouldn’t have been anybody. But that’s not the way this world works. That’s one thing I learned. It will never matter what I am capable of. How much I can learn. How much I can love. Never. Because to them, everybody outside these walls right here, right now, I am nothing but a nigger.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but callused fingertips were suddenly pressing against them. I held my breath. My heart beating in my chest so hard I was scared I would go into another fit.

“Everybody but you,” he whispered. And then he looked at me. There was a storm inside him. Raging. I knew that. I’d seen it brew and strike for years. “You saw me as a boy. You saw me as *Joseph*. And I was scared of that. ’Cause in this world, it is such a dangerous thought. What would happen if I started to think like that? If I started *acting* like that? The master didn’t want no nigger boy. And I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to leave Momma and Agy. But that wasn’t the only reason. Before long, I realized that the truth was...” Joseph let it out a long sigh. “I didn’t want to leave you. Because it was always you that made me feel... *hope*... and that was the one thing I could never let them see. ’Cause I didn’t want that one thing that was *mine*—the one thing that they couldn’t touch or grab or *own*—taken away from me. The only thing I have ever had. The only thing worth anything to me. And I knew if I called you by your name, just once, everyone would see, because you make me forget how they *see* me. You make me *feel* like *I* see me. Even back then, you made me feel like a boy. Not a nigger boy. Just a boy. And now...”

His words trailed off, and he closed his eyes. We sat without words, just the sounds of the crickets and the glow of the candlelight. I wanted to ask him what the next part was, but the feeling in my belly kept me from opening my mouth. He was thinking. And it was important. And my whole body was warm with the thoughts of... hope.

Joseph squared his shoulders and pulled his hand away from mine. He looked at me, still not saying a word, before pushing himself up and off the floor. That warm feeling turned icy, and my breath grew quick and shallow. *He was leaving.*

“D-Don’t—” I stammered. But then that beautiful boy—no, the beautiful man in front of me, held his hand out to me.

“*Henry.*” My eyes watered, and I felt full and whole. I never thought a single word could make me feel so much. I choked back a sob as I reached up and put my hand in his. “Henry, may I have this dance?”

I couldn’t hold back my tears when I pushed up off the floor and into his arms. His callused hand held my too-soft one, and his other arm wrapped around my waist. And then he sang. And we danced.

*“Aine, dé, trois, beau Henry, ça ça yé comme ça mon chère,  
Aine, dé, trois, beau Henry, ça ça yé comme ça mon chère.”*

And it was beautiful. His voice soft, yet rich. Deep. I closed my eyes and leaned into him. Hearing the words. Feeling them vibrate in his chest. I felt the tears come as I swayed with him, letting him lead, because I would follow wherever he took me.

*“Papa di non, Sallah di non,  
C’est li mo oulé, c’est li ma pren;  
Ya pas l’arzan pou acheté cabanne,”*

I didn’t understand most of the words. It was Creole. But I knew my name, and I knew “my dear,” and then with our bodies pressed together, he sang the last line. And I knew those words, too.

*“C’est li mo oulé, c’est li ma pren.”*

*’Tis he I want, and he wants me.* My chest felt tight, and I pulled back a fraction to look up into his eyes. And the swirls of emotions I saw there mirrored what I was feeling in my whole body... what I was feeling in my heart... There was fear. There was a shyness that was so foreign, it didn’t belong with him. Not with my Joseph. But there was a determination too. His gaze didn’t break from mine. It held fast.

Everything in me was suddenly alive. Everything in my life made sense. Because it was all part of the course. Part of the course that led me here, to this moment, to this man. I leaned my face closer to his. His lips were wet as he bent down that fraction of an inch and pressed his mouth to mine. I froze. And then it all made sense, and I pushed my lips against his, giving him the softest of kisses as he gave one back to me.

When I finally pulled away, his eyes were closed. He squeezed my hand and in the tiniest of voices whispered, “Hmmm... better than I remember.”

The warmth and glow of the kiss quickly turned cold. “*Remember?*”

Joseph stood there, looking at me with his head cocked and tears running down his face... and then he was gone—running for the door.

“Joseph!” I yelled. “Joseph, please! Stop!”

He must’ve slowed down because I caught him as he was twisting the doorknob. I plowed my body into the back of his pinning him to the door. I put my hands on either side of his head and leaned over his shoulder whispering raspily, “W-What did you mean, Joseph? What do you remember?”

There was a quick jerk, and I was spun around so quickly, Joseph’s body pushing against mine, and what little breath I had, left me. I felt gooseflesh raise on my skin, and I opened my mouth to say something... to ask him again, but words never made it passed my lips because Joseph’s mouth was on mine. His lips, his tongue ravaging, pressing, owning mine. And I gave it all to him. I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close. He gripped and groped, and I knew I would give him anything he asked for, gladly. His long lean body pressed into mine, and I could feel how hard he was—felt him against my thigh. I panted into his mouth as I felt my own length rising to meet his...

“This—” His chest heaved as he ripped his lips away from mine. “—this isn’t the first time we’ve kissed.”

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### *Joseph*

Henry looked at me with wide, wide eyes. “What are you talking about?” he asked in a whisper.

I let out a long sigh before pushing off the door and moving back to the blanket where I plopped myself down. I stared at the candles I’d lit, imagining they were an actual fire, and this was Henry’s house—and mine, too—and we could just curl up in front of it when it got cold and forget about the rest of the world. It weren’t but a moment or two before Henry sat down next to me. He took my hand in his and turned it over, rubbing circles on the inside of my wrist. “Joseph?”

“It was that night, couple years back, you got drunk after you came back from Naw’lins,” I explained. “I found you here waving a bottle around. You were upset. Upset about the whorehouse.”

Henry let out a gasp. “I told you about that?”

I felt my cheeks get hot. “Yes, su—”

Henry growled, and it made me chuckle. “Yes, H-Henry, you told me about it. Told me how your pappy was just lookin’ at you expectin’ you to do things that you didn’t want to. And how it didn’t seem to matter none what you did or didn’t want, ’cause you still ended going upstairs with the ‘painted lady.’” I paused and looked over at him. He was biting on his lip something awful. “And then you told me the rest. How the lady was trying to get you *excited* but the only way you could finish was by—”

Henry’s mouth opened wide, and his face got paler than he had ever been, looking all stretched out as he shook his head back and forth over and over. “Oh, no no no no no!” he rambled real quick. I reached over and smoothed my fingers down the side of his face.

“Shh, now. ’S all right. ’Cause you told me how you was able to get the *job* done. You told me how you thought of me while her hands were on you. Told me how you closed your eyes and imagined it was me touchin’ you...” I sighed and moved my face closer to his. “And then I told you I had the same thoughts about you.”

I was nearly bowled over backward when Henry smashed his face into mine, biting at *my* lip this time, clawing at my neck, and then he pulled back and glared at me as he spat out, “That was two years ago, Joseph!” And then he was kissing me again.

His hands were on me, pulling at me, and we toppled over—him underneath me, clutching at me, sucking on my lips. I tipped my head back a fraction and looked down into his eyes. They looked as big as the moon, so blue against his white skin, and gazing into them, I felt that restlessness inside me begin to calm. He whimpered as he reached up and pulled my face back down for another, this time gentle, kiss.

His yellow hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat, and I rested my own forehead against it, rubbing it back and forth, listening to his words as he whispered, “Two years, Joseph... We could’ve had this for two years...” He sighed and pulled me down on top of him.

“Henry. I-I don’t want to hurt you.”

It was his turn to hush me. “Shh, I like it. I like you pressing into me like this. Feels good, reminds me this is real.”

It *was* real—that’s what made it so frightening. What would happen when we left this house? I’d spent years burying this. Hiding behind “suh” and

“Mister.” But now, it was real and beyond these walls if anybody saw it for what it was, it would be my neck getting strung up.

It was like someone went and threw a bucket of water on me. I pushed up and off Henry as my stomach doubled in on itself. Twisting and bubbling, because even with all that... I liked this. I wanted it... I bent my knees hugging my arms around myself, trying to hold it all in. All the feelings, the fear, the anger, the... hope. The love. 'Cause despite the fact that it was the most reckless thing I had ever done, nothing, *nothing*, had ever felt so right. I kept staring at the floor. Henry, because there was no mister anymore... the feel of his soft lips, the taste of sugar on his tongue had taken the mister and done tossed it out in the field to be buried alongside the other corpses. That's what scared me. How could I be proper with him? The man with the yellow hair... how could I look at him and have no one else know how I felt about him. How could I hide my heart, because now that it wasn't mine, it wasn't mine to hide, and as soon as they saw it, I would lose it. It would be taken away, just like everything else. Just like Momma. Just like Ol' Val's...

I stayed there hunched down trying to find the breath that had always come so easily to me before. With hand on my chest, I felt the thumping of my heart. It might still be in my body, but it belonged to Henry. It belonged to the man curled around me, rubbing circles on my back. The man who lifted my chin and looked in my eyes and the man who pressed his lips against mine once again. The man who gave me my breath back. I'd worry about “beyond” tomorrow. Right then, the only thing I wanted to think about was a kiss.

This wasn't like the drunken kiss that had happened years ago. This was soft, but not. We were both here. We'd both remember. This kiss made my heart ache with more feeling that I'd ever felt—ever even knew I wanted to feel. I pressed my lips into his, matching his strength. And when Henry pulled back, I chased him. Grabbing at his neck pulling him to me and back onto the floor. Henry was tall, but his body was light. I could feel the bones beneath his skin. And oh, how I wanted that skin.

I panted and heaved and sighed and brought my hands down his back stroking him through his shirt. His body relaxed into mine, and I felt his hands on my cheeks, his fingers tracing down my face, to my neck... I felt his prick hard against me, and I drew my mouth from his and looked at him. Because a need, a need I didn't know if I could control was growing inside me. It was a tingle in my spine, a flutter in my belly...

“Henry,” I sighed, once more.



I felt his hips give the smallest of thrusts against mine, and that tingle turned into a lightning bolt. I pushed up in response, feeling all my blood rush to my groin. I kissed him again—and again—and pushed my hands up under his shirt finally feeling that creamy skin, loving the moan that escaped from his lips. Breathing his name over and over, I moved my mouth down his neck as he thrust harder and harder against me. I was so close, so close...

“Please,” I begged, placing my hands on his face and pulling him back to look at him. I felt my face warm. “Henry, I only have one set of pants, and if you keep that up I’m gonna need to be washing them in the creek tonight.”

Henry clenched his jaw, and there was fire in his eyes.

“Joseph—Joseph, do you want this?”

“Oh, yes,” I sighed, because surely I wanted it as much as my next breath.

He pulled up and sat up on his knees and started fumbling with his pants. I quickly did the same. I couldn’t tear my eyes away as his fasteners came undone, and Henry pushed his trousers down revealing a thick patch of curly dark-blond hair I wanted to comb my fingers through. I wanted to push my face against. And then he pushed the trousers farther down and I saw his long thin hard cock. Its hood was already pulled back revealing the drooling red head. I forgot about my own pants... so focused on him... on that rod sticking up angling toward his belly... and on all the things I wanted to do with it... I forgot until I heard Henry whining my name, and I ripped my gaze away and focused on getting my own buttons undone.

I didn’t have words for the relief I felt when I was finally free of my pants, but my blood boiled knowing that Henry watched me the whole time. When he gripped my shoulders and climbed into my lap, well, something inside me was building and building... I was on fire and almost spent when his cock first touched mine, skin to skin. Soft, smooth, nothing like the rough skin of my own hand. I bit down on the inside of my cheek—trying to hold on, needing to hold on so bad, I even thought about Sallah just to let that moment last a few more seconds. Henry wrapped his legs around me, pushing his still-clothed chest against mine, lining up our already wet cocks, and then he started grinding. That lightning bolt in my spine started shooting through my whole body, and I was surprised I didn’t burn up into a pile of cinders as I dug into the bare skin of his backside with my fingers, while searching for his mouth with my own—kissing, biting, sucking at any skin I could find.

He was losing his rhythm, and I knew he was as close as I was. I stilled his hips with my hands and pulled him down so he was lying on top of me. I let my fingers wander up his back and then down, still amazed at the feel of his skin... amazed at the feeling of warmth in my chest.

“Please, Joseph,” he pleaded. “Please.”

And that was it. I let go and saw nothing but white and felt nothing but pleasure singing through my body as my cock spilled my seed between us. I felt Henry tense above me, and I looked down watching as his prick did the same, and then he collapsed on top of me. Feeling content and—*whole*—I stroked my fingers through his hair and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

I let out a sigh as he rolled off me, suddenly feeling too light. He was panting, but this time, I wasn't worried, I was having a hard time drawing in my own air. His hand found mine, and I squeezed my fingers around it before looking down at my belly and my spent cock.

“Damn,” I said, turning my face to look at him. He scrunched his eyebrows at me as I finished, “I should have taken off my shirt too.”

Henry looked down at all the white wetting my shirt, and then up at my face, and then we both busted out into a fit of giggles.

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The next morning I tried to keep the smile off my face. We'd left the garçonnière late; Val was snoring when I got back to the wood shack. I got dressed and came out to start my chores. Ol' Val just was standing by the bench, staring at me.

“So, the young master? He liked it then?” he asked.

I kept my head down feeling Val's eyes on me and answered, “Yes. He did.”

I'd started putting the tools in the box I'd need for the day, when I felt Val behind me.

“You like it too?”

I started sweating, feeling hot up to my ears. “Yes,” I mumbled.

“Stand up a minute.”

I took a deep breath and straightened myself. I truly wasn't ready to be talking.

Val looked at me. Just stared. I started to feel like ants were running around under my skin. Then he took the stick in his hand and swatted the side of my neck. I let out a curse.

“Val! What you do that for?” I yelled rubbing at my neck. It hurt.

“I’m trying to give you a bruise big enough to cover that love bite on your neck.”

I wanted to sink down into the dirt.

“Tonight,” he started. “Tonight, you and me gonna have a talk. From the looks of things, it’s about time I gave you an education.”

Val walked out of the shack, and I let my shoulders slump.

That night I got an education all right, though not one I thought the white folk would consider—*typical*. The whole time Val was talking, my face felt so hot I thought it was going to go and catch fire—and it weren’t in any way as good as the fire that was catching me the night before.

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## 1858 – August

*Henry*

I'd told my father I was going to stay and learn the ways of the plantation. I think he was disappointed, but he just nodded and started spending more time at Beauchesne.

And that brought its own set of complications.

Joseph and I had been avoiding each other during the week for the most part. He'd be busy with Valere, and I'd be busy with Father. Which was probably for the best. I was trying not to think of Joseph, because all I had to do was think the tiniest thought, and I'd be wearing a smile so big, whistling, practically bouncing down the halls—Sallah had threatened to call the doc once.

But it was Saturday, and it was *our* day. And it was hot.

I left Father in the study and headed down to the garçonnière. Joseph would be there once he finished up the few chores he had. I rounded the corner of the path, and saw he'd actually beaten me there. My lips parted at the sight of him, and I quickened my pace.

He was leaning against the rail—with his shirt off. The muscles of his chest perfect and smooth under his molasses-colored skin as he raised his arms to run his hands through his short, rough hair. I could stand there and watch him all day. His solid body, his skin, his eyes... but if all I did was stare, then I'd never get to touch him or hear the sound of his voice as he whispered sweet, thoughtful words to me. I broke into a jog.

Joseph turned toward me when he heard my step up onto the porch. His eyes were full of light, and a smile spread across his face as my belly got warm... along with some other parts of me. He started to say something, but I never heard the words because I crossed the distance separating us and pushed my body against his and silenced him with my mouth. I ran my tongue over his full bottom lip before I delved inside his mouth to taste him, and to stroke his teeth, his tongue... Letting my hands roam freely over his body, I squeezed at his muscles and scratched at his skin. He felt so good against me, and I felt so good... so hot... right down to my core.

“And good day to you, Henry,” he said, pulling back with a chuckle.

Over the past couple months, we done a lot of kissing, a lot of rubbing; we'd even used our hands... And we'd become good at it—*really good at it*—but there was something... something I wanted to try.

“Oh,” I whispered, leaning up to his ear, “I think today’s going to get a whole lot better, Joseph.”

He let out a loud bark of a laugh that stopped short as I dropped to my knees and started fumbling with the buttons of his pants.

“Uh...” he mumbled. I looked up to see his eyes get big and round and stare heatedly down at me. I gave him a smirk.

“That night... when I was here and I was drunk... when you came to find me... do you remember the stories I told you?” I asked him as I undid another button—there were two more.

“Y-yes,” he gasped. I leaned forward and licked a circle around his navel; the saltiness of his skin driving me on... I hadn’t imagined this, I hadn’t imagined ever bringing that night up again, but I still remembered the pictures I had in my head. I still remembered the wet warmth surrounding me... I still remembered how hard just the idea of Joseph had made me, the tightness, the buildup, the heat, and the stars... I wanted to give that to him.

“And did I tell you how, in my mind, the whole time I was really here... with you...” Another button. Itchiness was spreading over my own skin, and bit down into the muscle right above his waistband, needing more of him. But I wanted—needed—to wait... I wanted to help him feel all of the delicious anticipation.

“Y-yeah,” he stammered. I saw the gooseflesh erupt over his stomach, and I flattened my tongue and ran it across.

“That it was your mouth I imagined on me... that it was your tongue on me...” The last button was undone, and I pulled the flaps apart.

Joseph gulped.

Pushing his pants down to midthigh, I looked my fill. He was already getting hard. The purple head of his member just starting to peek out from its hood as I wrapped my fingers around it and gave it a couple of pulls, loving the feel of his foreskin rubbing back and forth on the pole it hid. I wasn’t sure exactly what to do, and my heart was beating at a staccato, but I was going to do this, and I was going to make Joseph feel *good*.

I closed my eyes, inhaled, and leaned in. Joseph.

I nuzzled my nose against the base, feeling the short hairs tickling my face. Joseph was making noises, and each time a sound fell from his lips, I heard my name and a bunch of nonsense words, and then I kissed *it*, and he let out a moan. I ran my tongue up the length as I moved my hand down and cupped his balls, rolling them in my palm as my tongue reached his tip and dipped into the slit. A long soulful moan escaped his lips. He tasted sweaty, salty, and his musky scent alone made me harden.

I pulled back and stared, stroking with one hand, playing with his balls with the other. I opened my mouth and sucked in the tip, and Joseph let out a keening cry. “Oh, Henry... Henry, Henry, Henry...”

My name was a mantra, and it only encouraged me to suck harder. With every moan, every gasp—every sound he made—I took him a bit deeper. I stroked him with my tongue, before pulling back and swirling it around the tip, while my hand caressed his balls, and the other ran up and down his sweat-drenched thigh. My sense lit up when that first taste of his early seed hit my tongue. I lapped at it, relished it, and when I felt his fingers scrunching in my hair like he wanted to grab it but was holding himself back; it just spurred me on.

I tried to take him deeper still and gagged, I felt him tense above me, but I ignored him, diving back down and trying again and again. I felt him give a gentle thrust, and his ball sac tightened in my hand.

“Henry, I—I—I’m gonna...” he choked out. I felt his hands on the sides of my face trying to push me off, but I was going to do this. I wanted a piece of him in me, I wanted to swallow him down, taste him as he was—the thought lit my whole body ablaze.

Above me, he grunted and groaned, and his whole body went rigid as my mouth was filled with his bitter, salty seed and I swallowed down what I could, but still some spilled down my chin. I started to wipe it away, when Joseph dropped to his knees, bringing his face level with mine, licked it off, and kissed me soundly.

“Now, *suh*, I think I need to be findin’ out if you taste any different than me.”

He pushed me down to lie on the porch, and a while later, with my body curled around his, he told me, “Why *suh*, I do believe you might be sweeter.”

## 1858 – September

*Henry*

“Henry!” I heard Father call as I walked through the front door. I straightened out my shirt and jacket, wiped the sweat from my palms on the legs of my trousers before heading to the study. I rounded the corner and stood in front of his desk waiting for him to finish putting things in the bottom drawer and lock it up. I’d yet to see what was in there. He always said it was mama’s business...

“How are you feeling today?” he asked me. He always asked me.

“I’m fine, sir,” I answered.

“Good, good.” He leaned back in his chair clasping his hands together under his chin. “I wanted to talk to you about something. I’d like you to reconsider your decision to stay on at Beauchesne. I’d like you to think about working with me as my partner at Ashe Enterprises.”

I let out a huff that blew my hair out of my face. “We’ve talked about this, sir. I am content to stay here—”

“Henry... Henry the world is not as it was a few years ago. Things are becoming—*unsettled*—here in the South. It’s only a matter of time before things completely destabilize between us and the North. We rely on the North too much. If you come and work with me, we can relocate. We’ll move the main office. Still keep the outfit here, of course, but hire a manager. We can go to Portsmouth, my family still lives there. And Beauchesne—we can sell—”

“No!” I shouted before I could stop myself. I straightened myself up and rubbed at my chest to try to calm my stuttering heart. “We can’t sell Beauchesne,” I said evenly.

My father waved his hand at me and leaned forward on the desk. “Of course I can. I might not get what its true worth is, but there are buyers out there.”

My jaw hung slack as I stared at him in disbelief. “B-But Mama is here... and Madeleine...”

“Your mother and Madeleine are dead!” Father snapped at me.

“What about the slaves?” I asked him. “You’re planning to sell them off too?”

“Of course.” He was cavalier in his response, and I stood there in silence with my jaw hanging down. So many people, so many lives, families—Joseph—and to my father, they were nothing but chattel. Nothing but property. I couldn’t let this happen.

Steeling myself, I finally found words again. “Valere, he’s lived here longer than I have, you’re going to send him to the trader?”

“Henry, Valere is a slave, just like every other nigger on this plantation. They do what they are told. They, including Valere, will go where they are told, too—but this isn’t about Valere is it?” Father narrowed his eyes at me. “This is about that boy Joseph, isn’t it?”

I put my mouth into a firm line and started “N—”

“You have unnaturally gravitated toward that nigger since he and his whore mother came to Beauchesne.”

I swallowed down my disgust and the mouthful of bile that went with it. “Well, *sir*, from what I have seen with my own eyes, you certainly have nothing against whores!”

He glared at me. “There is nothing wrong with a good whore. Maybe you should visit New Orleans with me more frequently; it might help your temperament,” he sniggered, and then after a moment he sighed. “Forgive me, Henry. That was uncalled for. Though, it does bring up the subject of the fairer sex. You are high past the age to start looking for a suitable wife.” He gave me a small smile before continuing. “You are handsome, have a mind for numbers, wealthy, charming—when you choose to be.” He winked. “I think if you were to make yourself known in New Orleans—or English—society, you’d have all the young ladies lining up, dance cards at the ready. You—”

“Until a spell comes upon me and I’m bedridden and vomiting on myself,” I said flatly. “No, sir, I have no desire to marry.” For once, maybe this godawful illness of mine could be useful for something.

Father moved from behind the desk and came to stand in front of me, placing his hands on my shoulders and squeezing. “You must think about your legacy, Henry. If we don’t sell, and we don’t have to make that decision today or even this year, but if we don’t, one day Beauchesne will be passed on to you, along with Ashe Enterprises. You have plenty to provide for a nice woman and a big family.”



It had taken some convincing, but after a few weeks, I'd finally got Joseph to come upstairs in the garçonnère and use an actual bed. Even after eighteen years of sleeping on a cot or the floor, he was reluctant. He stood in the doorway staring at it like it was going to bite him... it made my chest hurt.

He'd taken to it well enough—especially when we were sucking each other at the same time.

The moon was full that night, shining in the windows, illuminating the whole room in its cool light. I lay with my head on his chest, stroking my fingers over his belly and up over the muscles of his chest ever so lightly making circle after circle around his nipple.

“He wants to sell it, Joseph. He wants to sell Beauchesne.” I whispered, taking comfort in the steady beat of his heart under my ear. “He wants me to partner with him in the shipping business and move to England. I told him no.”

Joseph sighed and looked out at the moon. “Henry, he’s the master. If he wants to sell it, he’ll sell it. If he wants to sell me, he’ll sell me.” Resignation rang clear, even through his soft whisper, and my stomach twisted. He sounded distant. We’d already spent too much time apart, gone through so many struggles to be here, to enjoy this. I wasn’t going to let anyone take it away from us—not even my father. And I was going to make sure the man beside me *knew* that.

“Oh, no you don’t, Joseph. Don’t you dare start pulling away from me! Not after everything we’ve been through... you’re not going to give up now,” I said, climbing over him to straddle his hips. “He’s just talking about it. He won’t leave me. If I don’t go, he won’t. He doesn’t want to admit it, but I’m all he has left and he doesn’t want to lose me too... and he would.” I stroked my hand down Joseph’s brown cheek. “Because I’ll never leave here. Because I’ll never leave you. And I will fight to make sure of it. I will fight whoever or whatever might get in my way. I will claw and bite and I will win. Because this—” I bent down, placing a gentle kiss on his mouth. “—because you, Joseph, you are worth it.”

His big muscular arms wrapped around me, squeezing me closer as he kissed me hard and fast before clenching his hand in my locks and pulling my head back hard enough for my scalp to sting and for my desire to notch that much higher. The heat in Joseph’s gaze spurred me on, and I rolled my hips and was rewarded with something close to a whimper. Our times together had taught me that though I liked to be under him and feel his weight pressing into

me as our bodies rubbed together, this was Joseph's favorite position. He liked watching me and looking at my body. And I used that knowledge to get him hotter, to make that intensity we were feeling burn away any thoughts of the world outside that room. Because just like years ago, it was still Joseph and Henry against the world.

My whole body was moving in a wave as my hips rolled and grinded against his. I was searching, he was searching for that perfect ending that we knew would come, but was still just out of reach. I growled, and he moaned with each of my movements until his breath caught as his cock moved between my cheeks. I rocked a bit harder as his gaze bore into mine. Oh, the fire, the passion I saw there—and my skin tingled knowing he gave it all to me as I gave it all to him and only him.

I kept moving trying to find a rhythm, squeezing my cheeks around his cock. I felt him thrust beneath me, the head of his cock brushing against my hole, and I groaned long and loud as he did it again and again. A jolt of pleasure shot up my spine with each pass leaving my whole body trembling.

"That f-feels good," I stuttered. I was already rock hard and so was he. "I-I've heard some things." I started, but my words failed me as my desire took over, and I ground down against him.

"I've heard stories, too," he said, grabbing my hips and thrusting up.

"I want to try." And I did, I'd been holding him so close to my heart, for so long, I wanted our bodies to be that close. I wanted him to feel it, to feel me.

Joseph stopped moving, and I let out a cry at the loss. With a questioning look that did nothing to disguise the heat and lust lurking behind it, he asked "Henry?"

"Please, Joseph. Please, I-I want to try it," I panted. "It—It feels good with you *there*."

His rough hand circled around my neck and pulled me down and kissed me. It was passionate, violent, full of teeth and tongues, battling, biting... And then he was gone, out of the room, and I was left alone on the bed—empty and bereft.

I smoothed my hand over the blanket on the bed, as the thumps of his movements drifted up the stairs from the first floor, then I heard his footsteps, and then his mouth was on mine again, and our tongues were once again tangling in a dance that I would happily dance forever. He pulled back to ask, "You sure?"

I grabbed his chin and looked him dead in the eye. “Yes. Take me, Joseph. Take all of me.”

He kissed me, rough and forceful, and I was pushed back into the mattress. As his body covered mine, I closed my eyes and relished in his weight on me, on the delicious sensations his mouth caused as he laid wet kisses down my neck. And when he wrapped his lips around my nipple, I cried out at the wave of pleasure that traveled straight to my cock.

He pulled away, and I wanted to shout, but a quiet pop stopped me, and I looked up trying to focus my unfocused gaze. There was a tiny bottle in his hand and a smirk on his face as he mumbled, “I had an—education.” He poured some of the liquid on his fingers, and then I felt a slick finger at my entrance circling it slowly.

My cock was engulfed in the wet heat of his mouth and pressure was added behind that still-circling finger. Round and round. “Oh, Joseph,” I cried. “Yes!” I’d never felt anything like it. It was like something inside me was coming alive. My skin was on fire, and my cock was harder than it had ever been. “More.”

Joseph took my prick to the back of his throat as he pushed his finger inside me, just a bit, but I felt a sharp pain. I gasped and whimpered, but Joseph’s mouth never stopped. He pulled back and swirled his tongue under the hood of my cock, and I couldn’t stop when I thrust up into his mouth. He pushed that finger deeper and started a rhythm. Mouth sucking and fingers thrusting, my body was a shaking and writhing mess. My hands clutched at the linen, trying to find something to keep me from flying off the bed.

I felt a second finger nudging into me. My breaths were pants, and my chest heaved, but Joseph still didn’t stop sucking, didn’t come up for air. His fingers continued—quick jabs followed by stretching and scissoring. Over and over, until he twisted his wrist and hit something deep inside and my whole torso arched in ecstasy.

“Now,” I grunted at him. His gaze met mine, and the hunger I saw there almost made me spend right then. He grabbed the bottle and smeared the liquid on his cock before climbing up my body and eating at my mouth.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I felt him there, prodding gently letting me get used to the sensation but still wanting entry. He looked at me, and I nodded and he pushed—*hard*. I felt like I was being ripped apart.

I cried out again, though this time in pain instead of pleasure.

“Henry?” I heard him say as he started to pull away.

“Just a minute. Give me a minute.” I huffed, hooking my arms under his and pulling him close, needing his weight on me. He placed soft kisses on my neck, murmured soft words, while rubbing his hands over my shoulders. The pain was receding and behind it, there was a tingle, something, something that made me want more. I gave a small thrust—testing—moving him deeper inside me, and the tingle got stronger. I did it again... and again... and Joseph took over.

He pushed in and pulled out, slowly, rhythmically, going a little deeper each time, until I felt his balls against my backside. I was full. I was whole. The physical sensations washing over my body paled in comparison to the emotions that raged in my heart. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I brought his face to mine and kissed him, all teeth and tongue, trying to put all the passion, the desire, the *love* I felt into it. This is how it was meant to be.

Forcefully, he drove into me, and I cried out as he hit a spot inside me, electrifying my skin. I saw nothing but white light as he found it again, his thick rod brushing over it with every stroke.

He rested his forehead against mine, his beautiful brown eyes focused on mine as he grunted, “I’m going to spend.”

I reached down between our bodies and grabbed my own cock and started pulling on it viciously. My balls tightened as Joseph’s thrusts became erratic. His hand covered mine, and we jerked at my cock together. The tingling in my spine, in my balls, grew and grew. Our hands flew over my cock, and I cried out into the moonlit room as my seed spilled.

Joseph threw his head back, his whole body tensed, as I clenched around him. He yelled out my name before collapsing on top of me, pressing into me as I kissed his hair and finally felt like I was home.

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With our bodies tangled, we lay in the bed gazing at each other, giving little touches and small caresses. My heart was full. *This must’ve been what Mama felt like.*

“What you thinkin’ about?” Joseph asked quietly.

“Just thinking about Mama.”

He let out a deep melodic chuckle. “After what we just did? You’re thinkin’ about your mama?”

I batted my hand at him and giggled. “I’m thinking that this was what she felt like, you know? Like what she—and Father—felt when I was watching them when they didn’t think anyone was around.”

I smiled up into his chocolate eyes and ran my finger down his nose.

“Come here,” he said, and I leaned into him expecting a kiss, but instead he pulled me right out of the bed. “Dance with me, Henry.”

I let out another laugh as we started swaying. My chest was light, and Joseph was smiling down at me, and I realized, it didn’t matter how my parents had felt. This, *this feeling*, like my heart was going to beat right out of me, like I would smile forever as long as the man in my arms was by my side. This was how *I* felt... and I never wanted it to end.

*“I used to call him Mister Henry. The boy with the yellow hair,”* Joseph crooned, and I laughed louder as he smiled wide.

*“He tried to give me some cake one time, but Sallah said he couldn’t share. So Mister Henry done pout. Then Mister Henry done cry...”*

I nuzzled into his neck listening to his made-up song. I wrapped my arms around him a little tighter, and he sang softly into my ear.

*“Then Mister Henry got stubborn! and wouldn’t let me say good-bye.”*

I felt his lips kiss my forehead.

*“Years went by and we smiled some more.*

*Oh my sweet Henry, Je t’aime, mon coeur, toujours.”*

I jerked back and grasped at my chest, looking up at him. I saw it. I saw the truth of his words I saw the passion and the love that I, too, felt bubbling and brewing behind his gaze. And with tears falling from my eyes, I leaned in and kissed his nose and his eyes and finally his mouth, and said, “I love you, too, Joseph.”

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## 1859

### *Joseph*

Things were going too well. I should have seen the storm coming. Henry and I would meet at the garçonnière—*our house*—as he'd started calling it. We'd take the joy of each other's company, the pleasure of each other's bodies. We'd talk and we'd laugh—I'd never thought life could be like that. Thought those were just stories folk told; but for me and Henry, it felt real—it was real. And it was easy during those months to forget all about Henry's illness... to forget what it was like when he had a spell or when he couldn't breathe. It was easy to forget... 'til that storm came rumbling in and reminded us.

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It was a fine day for winter with the sun high in the sky, but I just stood staring at the bench. The grain was fine, and there were chips where some tool had dug into it... maybe last year, maybe a decade ago. The bench didn't mean anything. The only thing that meant anything was lying in a bed upstairs in that house. Struggling to breathe, struggling to live. The last thing I wanted to be looking at was that foolish bench. I didn't want to be here. Staring at those knots. Feeling its roughness. I wanted to feel soft, uncallused hands, smooth yellow hair off a forehead, listen to the sounds of air moving in and out of lungs. I didn't belong here. Not in this shack. I belonged next to Henry. My heart ached for not being able to hold him in my arms.

There was bustling coming down the hill. Some big ado. I could hear it scuffling along the dirt, heavy. When I turned to look out the window, I saw Master Ashe storming down toward the shack, raisin' a dust cloud in his wake. He stomped, tall and straight, but his face was a mask of resignation. I stood up and walked to the door.

“Joseph!” he yelled. “Joseph!”

My heart was fluttering, and I felt my scalp draw up tight as a shard of ice ran down my spine.

“Right here, suh.” I called out to him.

The man came to a stop a few feet away from me, his body was stiff, his hands clamped into fists, but it was his voice that scared me the most. Cold and calm. Nothing matched. It was how he sounded right before he sent Mammy away.

“My son,” he began. “My son is just a hair shorter than you, wouldn’t you say?”

I didn’t know why he was asking me. As far as this man was concerned, Henry and I never spoke. We didn’t see each other. Why would he want me to know how tall his son was?

“Yessuh, I’d say that’s about right. I can’t be sure though.” I kept my voice low as I spoke, and kept my head down, just glancing up with my eyes.

The man glared, and I forced my gaze back to the ground. “Well, I can be sure!”

“Yessuh. Sorry, suh.”

Master started pacing back and forth. Pausing to look at me, then paced again before finally stopping and straightening himself up.

“You, Joseph,” he snarled with a cruelty I had not heard directed at me since I was seven. “You will make the box for my son.”

I looked up then trying to puzzle out what the man meant. He held my gaze there was a lot he was saying that I didn’t hear. “Suh?”

“A box.”

“Yessuh, I heard ya. Just wanted to know what type of box Mister Henry be needing. One for his medicine? Or a chest for blankets?”

My head whipped around so fast I saw white as the master backhanded me with a force that made me stumble back and drop to my knees. “No! You nigger fool! Not for medicine. Not for blankets. You will build the fucking box that his *body* will lie in when I put him in the godforsaken crypt!”

The whole world stopped right then, and I knew what Henry must feel like every day. I couldn’t breathe. I grasped at my chest and started to straighten up when the master’s fist met my cheek, and the pain exploded. I fought the tears that threatened, and I stayed down as I whispered the question, “Is he dead, suh?” God, I wanted to vomit. To let loose everything inside of me. That’s when the kick came, catching my jaw and knocking me backward onto my ass.

“He will be. It’s only a matter of time now.” He stomped up to me and grabbed my shirt hauling me to my feet before pulling my face in close.

“He’s alive?” I asked and felt the smallest amount of relief radiate through my body. The master raised his hand and slapped me again.

“Build the fucking box.”

Spittle covered my face with those four words, and a storm set off inside me. I raised my eyes to his and glared back at the man, letting my nostrils flare.

“He’s alive.”

Slap.

“Build the fucking box.”

“No.” I’d never spoken back to the master. I don’t think I’d ever said more than five words to the man in the fourteen years I’d been here. But I knew in my bones, if Henry still lived at that moment, if he was breathing at that moment, he would remain doing so. My Henry wasn’t going to leave me here. I wouldn’t let him. One way or another, I would make sure he lived, even if I had to give him my body to do it. I would not doubt him. I would not build the box.

“What did you say? What did you say to me, you nigger whelp? You fucking...” Master punched me over and over.

“No.”

I heard the crack of bone when his fist met my face again. I wasn’t sure whose bone it was.

“No.”

Finally, he threw me on the ground and drove his foot into my ribs—once, twice, three times—each kick forcing more air from my lungs. With the coarse earth scratching against my cheek, I looked up at the man, and even with blood running into my eyes, I saw his trembling finger pointed at me. “You will do as I say or so help me, you will be whipped to your bones until you do. You will be dragged to that post and whipped day and night until your fucking spine is hanging down and you are nothing more than a lifeless piece of meat!”

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“That’s a mighty fine blinker, you got there, brother.”

Agy’s voice cut through the fog that had settled in my head. Agy!

“Henry?” I asked. My own voice sounded as weak as I felt. “Is he alive? Agy?”

“Relax, Joseph.” My sister pressed a cool cloth against my eye. It smelled of stringent herbs and other things that I had no knowledge of. I tried to pull away, but that just made her press it harder. I relaxed back against the pillow. “There, that weren’t so hard now was it.”



I looked at her with the one eye that wasn't covered trying without words to ask what I so desperately wanted to know. She cocked her head to the side and brought her hand to my good cheek.

"Mister Henry is alive... for now. He's not well, brother. He's got pneumonia, and the doc, well, the doc don't know what else to do for him. They done all this white-man medicine for him, but they ask me—and you knows that they don't—he be better off with a mustard plaster and some ru to get his lungs to open up. Maybe e'en some gum turpentine. All this bleedin' and cuppin'," Agy growled. "that stuff just don't make no sense. What make those men think that takin' out a man's blood is gonna make him better? Or makin' his skin all blistery. You tellin' me that fluid's the stuff from his lungs? I can go down the kitchen house and show them what a blister done do. Nothin' but hurt. They's all crazy. At least they give the man some morphine. He won't know how much he hurtin' 'til he wake up.

"*You* on the other hand. You's a right fool. I don't know what's gonna be makin' you better. I think the master done knocked the sense outta ya instead of inta ya. What you be thinkin', Joseph?"

Agy was looking down at me. My sis knew her mind. She was like a younger version of Sallah, and I was right sure glad she liked me. I didn't need the both of them looking to get me.

I closed my eyes. "He wanted me to build Henry a coffin." I felt the tears coming back. "He wanted me to build a box for Henry before he's even dead."

I was pinned to the bed by the glare my sis gave me. "No, brother. He *wants* you to build it. He still wants it. That man not change his mind."

"And neither have I!" I snapped back at her. "I am not, will not, build any such thing so long as Henry still breathes on this earth. He is not dead, and I for one am not going to go building a box that is going to give Death any ideas about taking him one second before his time is up. 'Cause it ain't up. And it won't be. Henry's gonna be livin' a long, long, life, sis. He's too good for anyone to be takin' him yet. And if Master Ashe want a box for him, he can find someone else to be buildin' it. I'll take the whippin'."

"Oh, *cher*. I'm right afraid that's what you's gonna get." Agy batted her hand against my arm. "Look at you. You's a right mess. And you's think you's gonna be able to take a whippin' on top o' this? I say it before, and I say it again—Are you's crazy? What you think Mister Henry say when he wake up and hear 'bout that?"

I didn't need to think about it. Henry'd be mad. He'd get red faced and puffy probably go after me with his wheezy yells. He'd tell me it was a box. A wooden thing with a top, a bottom, and four sides. And he would say it wasn't worth getting whipped for. Henry didn't think anything was deserving a whipping. But I thought that Henry was worth everything.

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That next morning, I trudged down to the post with Ghosty at my back. I let him chain me to the post. And when the master told me to build the box, my answer hadn't changed.

I took the lashes. Twenty given in the morning. The twenty promised in the evening. All to be repeated until my answer changed. With each lash, I could feel the pain, feel the blood running down my back, itching its way down my legs. I watched it seep into the ground until I was dragged back to my cot to lie and to think. Yet, it didn't work the way the master had intended. My thoughts were focused.

*Yellow hair. Soft laughter. Blue eyes. Smooth skin.*

*Henry.*

I would not build the box.

\*\*\*\*

*Henry*

Someone was sniffing. It was a soft sound, like they were trying not to cry and failing at it. I tried to open my eyes to see, but my lids felt heavy. I tried to shuffle my body, to push up, but the smallest of movements made my skin scream, my muscles protest, my chest get tighter. My mouth was dry, full of cotton. I gave up, letting out the tiniest of "umphs."

"Mister Henry! You're awake." Agy.

"Wa... Wat... er," I scratched out before forcing my eyes open.

Agy was scrambling to the nightstand. She looked tired. I noticed her cheeks were damp when she came close and gingerly helped me sit up. The water was welcomed relief, but Agy only held the glass to my lips for a moment before taking it away. I was about to protest when I saw how red and puffy her eyes were. She quickly looked down into her lap, and as I let my gaze follow hers, I noticed the blood on her dress. The energy I thought had deserted me was now buzzing under my skin. Why would Agy have blood on her dress?

I glanced down at my own bedding and saw nothing but white. It wasn't my blood. At that realization, I started trembling, and my body started shivering.

"Agy?" She moved away from me silently and shook her head. I lifted my hand from beneath the blanket. Every move hurt, but the hurt in my chest had nothing to do with any physical ailments. "Agy... wh... whose bl... ood is that?" I asked. The ants under my skin told me I didn't want the answer. "Agy? An... swer... me... please."

She turned and looked at me. The tears now freely flowing down her face. "Jo-Jo-seph's," she hiccupped out.

I squeezed my eyes shut, almost wishing I hadn't opened them in the first place. I felt my tears stinging, trying to get out. "Wh... what hap... pen... ed?"

"Suh. Don't you worry none," she fussed, coming over and tucking the blankets around me.

I shot up, and Agy startled, stepping back. It felt like my back was on fire, but I couldn't stay lying in my too-soft, too-comfortable bed, while Joseph was... *while Joseph...* I let out a low wheeze and caught Agy's wrist, giving her a look that I hope conveyed everything I was feeling. It would take too long for me to try to say it all.

"Joseph was whipped, suh."

The whole world tilted. Joseph had lived here for almost fifteen years and had never done anything anyone would ever say deserved a whipping, not like anything really did. I felt my stomach gurgling, and before I could stop it, it unleashed itself on to my sheets painting them a sickly yellow.

Agy rushed to the wash basin and wet down a cloth before returning to the bed and trying to wipe my face. I pushed her arm away. I didn't want to be clean. I didn't care about any of that. I only cared about Joseph.

"Nooo..." I rasped. "Tell... me... a... bout... Jo... seph." My whole body rocked with the effort.

The girl clasped the towel in both hands before dropping it on the floor and pulling forcefully at the dirtied linens.

"Why... Agy?"

"Your father, suh." She spoke the words quickly, angrily, her words mimicking the jerking of the sheets. "The *master* told Joseph to build you a coffin, and he refused. He still refuses. He's done been whipped four times already, and still that stubborn-as-a-mule brother of mine sayin' 'no'!"

Four times. Oh my... *four times*... God! I didn't know if there was a god listening to me, but I was praying to him none the less. My breaths started coming rapidly. But I couldn't get enough air. I grasped at my chest, tearing at my nightgown, trying to relieve all the pressure that I could feel building.

I knew Agy was in the room. I knew she was talking. I heard her voice, but not the words. I heard the clanking of glass...

Then I heard nothing.

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I woke up naked with a sweet taste in my mouth and surrounded by the scent of mustard. The room was dark, but I could see Agy's slumped form in the corner chair.

"Joseph," I wheezed the word out, but it came out whole, unbroken. My chest didn't feel as contracted. There was an ache radiating from my back, but I pushed through it as I moved the sheets off me and tried to swing my legs to the floor.

Agy darted out of her chair to the bedside. "Naw, suh. You lay right back down. You in no shape to go meanderin' about."

"Why am I naked, Agy?" My body shook from the cold as I asked the question. "Where is my nightshirt? And what is that *smell*? Ach. Why does it smell like mustard?"

"You been asleep about eight hours, suh. You's naked 'cause I put mustard packs on ya, and they had to be wrapped onto your chest. I used some cloth pads to cover your nipples, but they might be sore," she asked, turning her back to me.

"Agy!" My cheeks flushed hot, and I glared bullets at her back.

She grabbed my shirt and handed it to me. "What?" I didn't think it was really a question. "You's ain't got nothin' I ain't seen before. Yours just a different color is all."

Stitches tore as I pulled the garment over my head and shoved my arms in. I closed my eyes and inhaled, trying to center myself before asking what I most wanted to know.

"Agy. Where is Joseph? How is...?"

"My brother is..." Agy started "...my brother is as good as he can be, I guess. When you's asleep, I go down to the wood shack and poured some water

with cayenne pepper down his throat. Then I made the man drink some willow-bark tea, dressed his back the best I could with a chamomile press. But it don't make no difference. Your pappy just gonna tear him up again come mornin'." She busied herself gathering the cloths strewn across the floor. I sat still and wiped my suddenly sweaty palms on the bed. The trembling in my body grew worse as her words repeated in my head. *Again?*

"What do you mean, Agy? What do you mean, 'again'?" My voice was nothing more than a whisper, low and hoarse and disguising a fear that was pitted low in my belly.

The girl let out a long sigh as her shoulders slumped. The cloths in her hands fell to the floor, and when she turned back to me, but not before I saw the tears in her eyes. "Your pappy gonna whip Joseph 'til he say he build it. I done told Master Ashe you woke up, but he not care. He can't see past that anger of his. All he see is Joseph sayin' 'no.' And no one say no to the master. Especially not Joseph. Not any part of my family. That man got it all twisted in his head. Blamin' my momma and my brother for all that nature done brought down on him. Master gonna whip Joseph 'til he dead 'cause my brother probably more stubborn than your pappy." Her body was wracked with sobs by the time she finished.

I took a deep breath and straightened up best I could. "Agy. Bring me some coffee. Strong. And my clothes. I'm going to see my father."

"Ma-s-ster Ashe ain't h-here," she stuttered. "He gone, said he'd be b-back by m-mornin'."

I shook my head, not understanding where Father would be. Or why. "Doesn't matter. Take me to Joseph."

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Agy pushed my wheel chair across the lawn to the wood shack, cursing me the whole way, and purposefully hitting every bump the earth had to offer... at least it felt that way. I'd lost the battle to walk myself. Agy and Joseph were both stubborn jackasses.

"You's a right daft coot, Mister Henry. Crazy as a loon, I say. This just beat the devil. You's deserve to get sick again after this and don't you be thinkin' that I'm gonna be carin' for you. No, suh. Sallah gonna have my hide for this. She not gonna let me within ten feet of you."

I was glad she was behind me; she couldn't see the smile threatening to spread across my face. If she saw it, I was certain she'd find a few more bumps to jostle me with.

She steered the chair next to a wood pile as she stomped to the door and threw it open making it bang against the wall. She was stormy with her hair curling up and everywhere around her head. She looked like a young Medusa.

"Well, sirrr," she said, placing extra emphasis on the "r." "Here you is. Maybes you can talk some sense into that brother of mine. You's both fools."

A laugh that wanted to bubble out of me quickly died, as a low moan filled with pain floated out from within the shack.

I pushed up and out of the chair quickly enough to startle Agy back from the door. It smelled of wood and blood. I stumbled and grabbed at the wall to keep myself from falling. My stomach was twisting and twisting, churning the coffee round and round. I bent in half afraid it would reappear on the floor adding to the other smells: the metallic scent, the smell of sweat, the wood dust... my chest got tighter. And I moved toward the sound of the moan.

I couldn't stop the cry that escaped my lips. It was out, and more threatened to follow it. Candlelight lit the room, but it couldn't soften the scene. Joseph. *My Joseph* lay there, a cloth, soaked with blood, covered his back. His left eye swollen so greatly that I couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep.

"Oh, *dear God*..." I cried. "What did he do to you?"

I shuffled to the stool next to the cot. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I wanted to break things. But I couldn't. Joseph was broken enough. The storm within me had to wait. I looked at him... at the red linen on his back. At his wrist now red, shiny, angry, instead of beautiful smooth molasses. I wanted to touch him.

I felt the warmth of a hand on my shoulder but I couldn't turn to look.

"Hello, Mister Henry." I hadn't even realized Valere was in the room.

"I need to get him out of here. Away from here. Somewhere safe." My words came out hushed and rushed and true. Joseph shouldn't be here. He never should have been here. He should be somewhere in his own shop, carving and building and smiling. Not lying with his blood dripping onto the floor. Feeling this kind of pain. "Agy? What does he need? What needs to be done?"

"Suh," she whispered. "If I do anymore, it will be worse come morning when he chained back to that post."

I turned, looked her dead in the eye. “He won’t be. Do we have what is needed?”

“But suh, your fath—”

“Do. We. Have. What. Is. Needed!”

“Yes, suh, I think so.” Agy stared at me as if she did not know who I was. I don’t know if I knew either.

“Get it. And come back here. If anyone, Sallah or Francis, *anyone* questions you, send them to me. My father will not be doing anything. This is done.”

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The silence in the room was almost reverent. A heaviness that weighed down on my back and limbs. I wanted to kneel. Pay worship. I reached out my trembling hand and stroked my fingers through his hair feeling its roughness; it had grown.

“Val, you’ve seen this before,” I whispered. “Will he be okay?”

I didn’t know if I wanted the answer or not.

“Depends,” Val said quietly. I felt his warmth at my back. “He be fine as long as no infection get to him. But, suh... there’s a lot open.”

I bit down on my lip. My cheeks were wet. *Oh, Joseph.*

“Agy real good, though, suh. She young, but she got that healin’ touch.” Val paused, and I heard him sigh. “And I think Joseph got something, *someone* he want to live for.”

I closed my eyes. Yes, Joseph had something to live for. And he was my reason. Every breath I struggled through was for this man who lay flayed and broken in front of me. Flayed by the hand of my kin. Broken by the world that allowed this. That condoned *this*. That encouraged *this*. How could *I* let this happen. How could anyone in this world...

“And I ain’t talkin’ ’bout stubbornness. Though this boy got that in spades.”

A mournful chuckle bubbled out of me. “That he does, Val. He wouldn’t be the same man if he didn’t. He wouldn’t be Joseph.”

“No, suh, that’s for sure. He gots a fire burnin’ in him. It burns bright. Lights him right up.”

I sighed. Let the melodic tones of Val’s voice wash over me as I combed my fingers through Joseph’s hair over and over. The side of his face that was

visible was so swollen, darker than its usual chocolate color, puffed up with ragged red lines where something, someone... where *my father* had torn the skin apart.

“I remember that feeling. I’s had it once too. Still do, I’s just holdin’ on to it ’til I join *mon couer* ’gain.”

“Willow,” I said softly, finally realizing that the words Valere spoke were more than just sound.

“Willow, suh?” he asked.

“Joseph, told me about your sweetheart. He called her Willow because you planted a willow tree to remember her.”

Valere let out a gaffaw that sounded too loud in the small room, and my whole body jerked at the sound. “Ha ha ha. Aaah, Joseph.”

“Val?” I asked, not entirely sure what was funny.

“Well, suh, you see, I can see why the boy here would tell you that, but...” He paused, and I turned my head and looked up into his face. His eyes narrowed a bit as if he was trying to puzzle something out. Puzzle *me* out. And then he continued, “I can see why he would say that, but somehow I don’t think my sweetheart, *Jacques*, would have liked that so much if he still walked this green earth.”

I sucked in a raspy breath as all those puzzle pieces finally fell into place. Val’s lover had been a man. Val had been the one who had helped Joseph figure things out. Val...

“Thank you.” My words were choked as the gratitude filled me. “Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for trusting, *for helping*, Joseph... and for keeping our secret.” Just saying those words, that tiniest, vaguest of admissions to another person, made my heart, my head, made *me* feel lighter than I had in so long. My eyes were wet again, and I turned from Val and wiped them quickly with the back of my hand.

A rustle came from outside, and a moment later, Agy’s small frame filled the doorway.

“I got ’em, suh. I gots all the things I need.”

I pushed up off the chair and turned to her. “Thank you, Agy. I’m going to my father’s office.”



I looked over my shoulder to give Joseph one more glance. Letting my gaze drift from his head to his back, watching it rise and fall with each breath he took. Down to his legs and then his feet as they hung over the edge of the cot. That hard thing that was so inaccurately called a mat. Not much better than a board.

I heard the buzzing before I saw it. When I looked back up to the red soaked cloth on his back, I saw the flies. Dozens of them, hovering and landing. I thought of them eating at him, piece by minuscule piece. Their thread-like legs wading through the pools of clotting blood on his back, swimming in the wounds.

I lost the battle with the nausea that had been ever present since I'd awoken. I ran to the door and the coffee sloshing in my gut, rose and splattered upon the ground, leaving my mouth bitter and sour.

"A-Agy," I coughed. "I want to move him. I d-don't want him here. I-I want to move him."

She sighed. "We'd need a cart, suh. I don't think he can stand on his own. But—but I don't think I's able to carry it with him in it."

No, she couldn't. Joseph's weight would be too much. I knew that. That weight I loved so much as it pressed into me, down on me, grounding me was now working against us. On a good day, I could do it, or help, but if I were being honest, I was more than slightly surprised I was still upright.

I took a step away from the puddles of vomit that had formed in the wood dust and dirt on the ground. I leaned my back against the wall of the shack, feeling the unevenness of the boards, the roughness of the wood through my shirt, and I gave in to my weakness sliding down 'til I was on the same level as the vomit puddles beside me. The earth was cool under my hands as I stretched them out, letting the dirt play between my fingers. I closed my eyes, listening to the sounds of the night... an owl hooting its lonely song into the darkness. I thunked my head back against the wall, needing that pain, trying to focus. Needing to figure out what to do, how to do it, and how to be what Joseph needed.

My lungs protested as I inhaled, I could feel them tightening, but I couldn't worry about that. Not then. I opened my eyes and searched the darkness. The light from the lantern in the doorway illuminating a small circle. The piles of wood dust. Some discarded boards. The former contents of my stomach and the rivers they created in the dirt as they crept toward my wheelchair.

“A... Agy!” I yelled, pushing myself up of the ground and stepping back to the door not caring what my feet might step in.

“Yes, suh?” she asked, turning from Joseph’s cot. “What is it?”

“Ca... Can we use my whe... wheel ch... chair?” I asked while my chest heaved with the effort.

She looked from me to the wheelchair and back. “It will tear at his back, that’s for sure. But less than your pappy’s whip will. We can pad it with a blanket.” Agy bit at her lip, and scrunched her eyebrows together before asking, “Suh, where we supposed to take him? We can’t wheel him to the North. We can’t wheel him off this plantation. Ain’t no where gonna be safe for my brother once your pappy get back.”

I straightened my shoulders and let my gaze bore into her. Valere stepped up behind her and put his big hand on her shoulder. “Well then, li’l miss. I reckon Mister Henry here has an idea ’bout that.”

I relaxed my body and let free a small smile. “We... we’ll take him to ou... our house. To the... garçon... nière.”

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It had taken all three of us to get Joseph into the chair. And despite our best efforts, all three of us were painted red with his blood by the time it was done. He didn’t wake though, and that’s what had me worried the most. Just let loose a moan or the occasional cry, and with each one that fell from his lips, my heart grew heavier and my eyes got wetter. I should have done something so long ago. Convinced him to run, to let me help him get to safety. Somewhere far away from Louisiana, from the South.

We’d gotten him into the house and into the room and bit by bit we got him lying on his belly in the bed I’d come to think of as ours. All of us were huffing by the time it was done. Val leaned against the wall; I collapsed in a chair next to the bed; but Agy still fluttered around. She looked at me nervously before shoving a glass into my hand and ordering me to “drink!” before heading out the door and back to the wood shack to get the supplies she’d left there.

The ginger tea was strong and lukewarm, but it felt good sliding down my throat. I sipped it as I gazed at the bleeding man on the bed. A small gasp escaped his lip, and the eyelashes on his swollen eye twitched. I heard the glass shatter as I jumped forward and grasped Joseph’s hand in mine.

“You’re all right,” I whispered, leaning over him. “I’m here. I’m not going to let him hurt you again.” I stroked my fingers through his hair and gently pressed my lips against his forehead.

“Henry,” he sighed, and I felt like I could fly my chest was so light.

“Oh, Joseph,” I said, kissing his forehead again. “You foolish, foolish man.”

Soft shuffling sounds behind me told me that Valere was leaving the room. I’d forgotten he was there. My world was lying on the bed. Joseph turned his head a bit, his good eye shining brown against the white of the linen.

“I-I wouldn’t let—” he started, but I cut him off with a kiss. His lips were still soft and I could feel them press back against my own.

“Shh.” I whispered against his mouth. “It doesn’t matter now. I’m going to figure this out. He’s not going to touch you. I... I—”

The words cut off as my throat thickened. My mouth silently agape. All the emotions boiled up, the grief, the anger, the love, the hope... they were all there sitting heavy in my chest, my throat. My body was trembling, shaking and I buried my face in the pillow next to Joseph’s face. The warmth of his breath next to my ear soothed the turmoil raging inside me, and finally I felt the dam break and the cry let loose.

“I love you.” He squeezed my hand and kissed my hair, and I turned my face to his.

“*Je t’aime, mon coeur, toujours,*” I said before placing my mouth over his once more.

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I scowled into my father’s study. The dark wood. The books lining the walls. The heavy oaken desk sitting center. I would wait for him here. Here is where I would end this. I crossed to the desk in three strides and moved behind it, plopping myself into the leather-covered chair I’d so often coveted in the past. My heart pounded, and I felt out of place in my own skin. I leaned back against the leather feeling my skin stick even through the costly fabric of my shirt. What would I say to the man? He was my father, but I hardly knew him. He’d lost himself to grief years ago and never found his way back.

I looked down at the desk, the ink spots, the nibs and rubbed my hand across the smooth grain. So much had happened at this desk. It had sat in this exact same spot for as long as I could remember.

I stopped my hand halfway across the desk and reached down and started throwing open the drawers. Ledgers, papers. I had seen it all before. Everything but...

I grabbed the paper knife from the top of the desk and jammed it into the keyhole of the bottom drawer. The drawer that was never open. The one that Father always told me was meaningless. I wiggled and twisted and shoved. The drawer wouldn't open. It was stubborn. But more than once my Joseph told me I could out stubborn a mule. The sweat was dripping into my eyes when I heard the lock click.

Papers, some folded some not. A bundle of envelopes wrapped neatly with a ribbon. I picked up the stack of papers and scanned through them. Business agreements, deeds. And then a bill. One with my father's name written in loopy scroll at the top and another man's large signature at the bottom. It was the bill of sale. For Tami and Agy and "the negro boy, Joseph, of black complexion, age 5."

My stomach turned over, and I began to wonder how many times I could be ill in the span of such few hours. I put the paper to the side and after scanning the rest of the papers, placed them back in the bottom of the drawer.

The bundle of envelopes was thin. The ribbon black that bound them together black and well worn. I flipped the stack over in my hands, and as I read the faded words, an icy chill went down my spine.

*Henry Beauchesne Ashe*

1843

I pulled the ribbon off and pulled the paper from the already-opened envelope. *Inter Vivos* was scripted across the top. I leaned back into my father's chair, and I read.

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I'd had time to right myself by the time my father opened the door to the study. His hair stood on end, and I could smell the whiskey pouring off him from across the room. I sat at the desk with my shoulders straight and looked him dead in the eye. The papers were set out in front of me.

"Hello, Father." I spoke slowly, keeping my voice low.

"H-Henry?" His brows knit together, and he rubbed his forehead. "Henry! Son, what are you doing out of bed? I thought... I thought..."

“I know. I know what you thought,” I said, unable to keep the venom from my words. “You thought it was time to call the preacher. Time to drape the mirrors. Time to build a box.”

My stare was steady, and my father shifted beneath it.

“But the doctor said—”

“But Agy told you I was awake! I was breathing! I was alive! I *am* alive!” I shouted as I stood up and pushed away from the desk. I moved toward the window. My chest heaved, and I felt my skin burning. I stood there with my fists clenched waiting, waiting to hear the next words for I knew if I opened my mouth I would not stop, and if nothing else, the years had taught me that breath was precious. I looked up at Mama’s house. She would not recognize the other man in the room.

“Henry. Forgive me. I lost hope.” It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough.

“When did Grand-père and Grand-mère die?” I asked keeping my tone flat.

“W-What? Why are you asking? Where is this coming from, Henry?” He asked as he crossed the room. He put his hands on my shoulders and squeezed lightly. A small smile curled at his lips. “I’m so glad you’re all right.”

I looked up into his gray eyes. They’d weathered with the years. Dulled even. I could barely remember the light that would dance in them when he’d tell me stories or when he’d sing to Mama. “I don’t believe you,” I told him. “I think you’ve been waiting for me to die for thirteen years.”

His dull eyes welled with tears. “That’s not true. Henry, that’s not t-true.” The words choked in his throat. “I-I l-love you. So, so much.”

He turned from me, and his shoulders shuddered as he bent and hugged his waist. “It’s not true,” he whispered.

“When did Grand-père and Grand-mère die?” I repeated, keeping my spine steely straight. I knew the man I remembered was in there somewhere. In that husk of a body that was before me. But the only way I could do this was if he recognized me for what I was.

A man. A strong man. Not the child who was expected to die. Not the boy who couldn’t breathe. A man.

He looked at me over his shoulder. “I got news of their death in forty-seven. W-When you were s-s-still s-sick. Right before...” he grasped his stomach and bent over like he would be sick, “...b-bef-fore M-M-Madel-leine died.” He let

loose a long low wail such that I didn't think a man, let alone *my father*, was capable of.

I could feel the tears stinging the backs of my eyes. My chest was tight but I couldn't give in, I couldn't let him see that. I needed to keep my emotions locked away.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked him.

He twisted his torso around to face me. Before straightening his spine and turning back to the window. Back toward Mama's house. "You were so sick. And you'd never met them. They moved back to France before you were even born."

"I remember Mama reading me their letters. I remember sitting outside with her, listening to her and watching the way her curls would bounce in the breeze." Father's shoulders were shaking again. "I remember a lot. But I don't remember you reading me any letters."

"N-No. I suppose you wouldn't," he said huskily.

I sucked in a lungful of air and then set it free as I uttered two words. "*Inter vivos*." The words hung between us, and I saw my father's spine stiffen.

When he turned to face me this time, his skin was pale, his eyes widened, but his jaw hung open. Open then closed. Open close as if he was trying to form words that wouldn't come.

"I found them, Father. I found those letters. The correspondence from my grandparents' solicitors. I found the *inter vivos*. Both of them."

"So you know," he sighed, mournfully.

"That their estate in Brittany is mine? Yes." I narrowed my eyes at him. Brittany wasn't my biggest concern, not yet anyway. "That *Beauchesne* is mine? That it and everything, every building, every *slave* on this land... every *slave* that was bought or sold with estate funds has been mine since I was three? Yes, Father. I know that too."

As he looked at me, a tear finally escaped his left eye and started a lonely trail down his cheek. My father didn't cry. Not even when Mama died. Not when Madeleine died. He'd kept everything bottled up inside him for fifteen years and it had all turned to rot.

"I am the *master* of this house. Of this land. I am the one who makes the decisions. And that has been my right since I came of age. Since I became a

man.” The anger was coming, and I didn’t think I could stop it. I didn’t want to stop it. “But instead of telling me any of this. Instead of giving me a choice. You took me to a gentleman’s club. You took me to a whorehouse.”

“Henry...” His voice was soft, pleading.

“No! No, Father. I don’t want to hear it now. I own the man whose back you flayed into ribbons. I own him! And every other slave on this land.” I pounded my fist on the ledger from the drawer, the one that listed every name of every slave on Beauchesne. “And I owned one you sold off. Sold off for no other reason than grief. Because you weren’t man enough to admit the truth. That it wasn’t Tami—” My father gasped when I spoke her name. “—who killed Madeleine. It was a disease. It was nature. You blamed a woman who’d showed my sister and who showed me nothing but love and kindness. But you blamed her because you couldn’t face the fact that there was no one to blame. If you want to blame someone, if you need to blame someone, you should be blaming me. I brought the sickness here. Do you want to take me out to the post? Do you want to strip me naked and cut into my skin with a whip? Show me that you’re the one with all the power?” I tore at the front of my shirt. Buttons sprang free from thread and bounced to the floor. I pulled the shirt off and threw it, before turning and baring my back to him. “Do you want to add to the bruises? Give me a real *treatment*? Do you, Father? Will that make you feel better? Like a man? Will that make you *feel*?” By the time I was done shouting, I had no breath left. I sunk into the chair. The leather was cool to my heated, naked skin. With a trembling hand reached out for the now-cold cup of coffee on the desk.

“No. I don’t want that, Henry. I don’t want that at all.” Father sighed, his shoulders slumped. He moved from the window and came to kneel before me. “When I lost your mother, I lost me. She was my light, my reason. But I tried to hold on. To hold on to that tiny bit of feeling left in me. For you, for Madeleine. I love you. I loved her. I loved your mother. And then Madeleine was gone. Her skin was all blue, and you were still so sick.”

He let out a rough sigh and placed his hands on my knees. “You see, it was like God or Nature or Death was just toying with me. Like a cat stalking a mouse. Just waiting, waiting for that moment to take it all away. You are the ‘all,’ Henry. You are the everything. And I couldn’t play that game with Death anymore. I lost hope.

“It was my fault. All of it. And yes, you are the master, Henry. I know that, I always knew that. But you’re my son. And I was afraid if Death didn’t take

you, you'd leave me on your own. There isn't anything left in me. Everything good, your mother took with her, but she left me you, and she left me Madeleine. And now there's just you. And you do so well, for a while, and then you're in bed. And your skin is gray. And your breath whistles in and out of you while your chest wracks. It kills me to look at you like that." He let out a sob. "I just want you well. I don't want you to struggle. And I hate the God that makes you."

My father's face was pale by the time he finished. I could feel his hands quivering where they sat on my knees. We were different, he and I. I didn't realize how different until just then. I'd always thought I was weak. I couldn't run. I couldn't *breathe* most of the time. But I held on. My father hadn't had the strength to do that.

"I love you, Papa." And a cry escaped from the man on his knees before me. "I love you. I love the man you were. I love the man somewhere inside of you. But I don't like or respect the man that could treat people the way you have treated Joseph, Tami, and even me, all to spite a God you don't believe in."

"I'll change, Henry. I'll change. I'll be better. For you... I'll be better."

"Oh, Father," I sighed. "I'm leaving you. I can't be here anymore. And I'm taking Joseph and Agy with me."

"B-But..."

"There's no buts. I can't be here anymore. We both know things are changing. Violence, more violence is coming. I don't want to be here for that."

He laid his head on my lap. And for just a moment, I let my own hand rest upon his hair, petting it, just once, before pulling it away.

"I need you to do something."

"Okay," he whispered.

"I need you to get passage for us to France. On one of your ships. Or maybe someone else's. I need you to find a safe way for us to travel across the Atlantic. I know you have the resources."

"B-but he's a nig—" he started, raising his head.

"He is a man. And he is my friend," I said softly. "I don't care what color his skin is, or how the rest of the country sees him. How you see him. He is a man. A man that I trust."



Though my words were quiet, there was no denying the conviction behind them. I could feel the truth in them down to my bones. I could feel it radiating out of me. And the way my father's eyes softened when he looked up into my face—when he squeezed my knees one more time before pushing up off the floor—I knew he felt it too.

“Okay, Henry. Okay,” he resigned. “I’ll make it happen.”

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### *Joseph*

I knew where I was when I felt the pillow under my head. There weren't nothing that soft in the wood shack. I opened my eyes and saw my Henry slumped in a chair fast asleep. His yellow hair covering his eyes. He would have a mighty fine crick in his neck when he woke up.

My arm was dangling over the side of the bed, and I reached over and ran a finger over his knee. It had been so long since I'd seen him, since I could touch him. His eyes fluttered open and the world that had seemed so dark not so long before was bright again.

“Hello,” I managed to get out, my voice was raspy and my throat sore. I wondered how long I'd been here. I pushed up on my arms, but immediately fell back down to the bed as pain shot through my back like nothing I'd ever felt before.

“You've got to be still, Joseph,” he said, placing his hand on my head, and then leaning closer and softly kissing my lips. “Your body is still healing. I tried to send for the doc a couple days ago, but that just sent Agy on a tirade about white man medicine. She's been tending to you. And I have to admit, she's done well.”

“I don't know if my back done agree with that,” I said with a chuckle that hurt my chest. “How long I been out?”

“Three days.” Henry sat back in his chair and looked down at the floor.

“Three days!”

“Three days, and if I'm feeling like I'm feeling now after only three days of you being hurt, I can only imagine how you felt all those times I was ill. I'm so sorry, Joseph, you deserve so much more.”

If I could have stood up and would have been next to him thwacking the back of his head like Val liked to do to me when I was acting all foolish, but instead I stated the truth. “I don't want any more. I just need you.”

My Henry cocked his head and gave me a small, sad smile.

“What’s on your mind, Henry? There’s something stormin’ around behind those blue eyes of yours.”

“I have a question for you. And—and I want an *honest* answer. I don’t want you telling me what I want to hear. I want you to answer for you and only you. Can you do that? For me?”

“Course,” I replied, not really sure what he was getting at.

Henry let out a sigh, then looked at me, his gaze not straying. “I want to know if you would like to move to France... and live with me.”

I let out a bark of laughter that hurt something fierce. “Henry, I think you’re still feverish, ’cause you ain’t makin’ no sense. I’m a slave. I can’t go to France. Heck, I don’t even know where France is.”

“I’m getting that taken care of. But it won’t be easy and there could be problems, but I want to leave this place. I want to leave, and I want to take you and Agy with me.”

“Henry, I have no idea what you are sayin’ to me, but know this, there ain’t no where on this earth that I won’t go as long as you’re with me.”

A smile spread across his face, all big and bright. “Oh, Joseph, do I have a story to tell you.”

And what a story it was.

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## Epilogue

### *Joseph*

I sat next to Henry in the back of a carriage, bouncing along to his grandpappy's estate... well, it was Henry's now. And, like the garçonnière, if you asked him, he'd say it was *ours*. I was still getting comfortable with hearing that.

We'd arrived in France two days before, tired and weary. We spent two nights in an actual inn! Each of us had our own rooms with our own beds. I would have rather stayed in Henry's room, but we didn't want any questions asked. I hardly recognized myself. My hair was cut proper, and I was wearing a suit. I now had a whole trunk full, though I was still unsure about how to wear it right. I just let Agy tell me what to do—a task she seemed to like doing a little too much.

Master—*no*—Mr. Ashe had done like he said he would, and somehow Henry, Agy, and me ended up on a ship bound for France. If anybody asked I was a “free man of color” and Agy, she was too. There were papers involved, and Henry called me his business associate, “Joseph Carpenter.” I let him do most of the talking. I think some miracle must have occurred because somehow we made it to France even though I kept expecting someone to pull out chains and lock them around my wrists to haul me back to Louisiana.

Things would be changing back there. Henry said the current laws didn't allow him to free the slaves, the white men had done seen to that, so instead of freeing the slaves we left behind, Henry decided to start paying them. He told me time would take care of the freeing part, and from all the talk I heard on that long journey across the blue, blue ocean, I reckoned he was right. He had Ghosty set up accounts for every single slave, and he told the old overseer that he expected a financial report sent every three months to make sure things were being done right. I would have liked to have seen how it all turned out, but I wouldn't lie and say I wasn't happy to be gone. There was only one thing I be missing—one man and he'd done turned down Henry's offer to come along with us. Last time I saw him, I was looking out the carriage window. He raised his hand and gave me a wave, then he gave me a wink before he turned and headed down the hill toward where his heart lie.

That was something I'd surely come to understand.

Now, I was looking out another carriage window, smelling the scent of the ocean, watching the trees go by. My chest had never been so light. I reached my hand over and squeezed Henry's fingers with my own, trying to ground myself, half-afraid I was going to float away. Agy looked at our hands, then up at me, and she shook her head and laughed. And I laughed right along with her, 'cause I could, 'cause I was free.

**The End**

Author's Note

The songs in this story were taken from *Slave Songs of the United States* published in 1867.

The song Joseph sings Henry in the garçonnière is an old Creole song entitled “Aine, dé, trois, Caroline (Song of Longing),” though Joseph changes the words to fit his love for Henry. The translation, taken from the book *Six Creole Folk Songs* published in 1921, is as follows:

*Aine, dé, trois, beau Henry,  
ça ça yé comme ça mon cher,  
Aine, dé, trois, beau Henry,  
ça ça yé comme ça mon chère.  
Papa di non, Sallah di non,  
C'est li mo oulé, c'est li ma pren;  
Ya pas l'arzan pou acheté cabanne,  
C'est li mo oulé, c'est li ma pren.*

One, two, three, beautiful Henry,  
What is the matter with thee?  
One, two, three, beautiful Henry,  
What is the matter with thee?  
Papa says no, Sallah says no,  
'Tis he whom I want, and him I'll have;  
No money has he, a cabin to buy,  
'Tis he I want, and he wants me.

## **Author Bio**

*Ali MacLagan lives in a tiny town just west of Portland, Maine. When she is not holding on for dear life as her sixteen-year-old daughter learns to drive, or gritting her teeth as her fourteen-year-old son is acting—well, fourteen—she enjoys crocheting and knitting (sort of) and photography, but most of the time she is found with her eyes glued to her tablet reading about sexy men and all the mishaps they find themselves in.*

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