Chapter 6

"I sho' hope that boy—uh, James. I sho' hope he keep Carlton busy. He been under my feet too much," Master Johnson said to Stanley as they approached Johnson Hall. Twice a month they took a tour of Penelope Farms, usually going over the orchards and forest, then to the slave-quarters area, which was beyond the view of Johnson Hall and near the tobacco-curing barns. As the overseer, Stanley spent most of his time in this area. Or transporting recently purchased or sold slaves to and from Penelope Farms.

They continued through the forest of slender oak trees that separated the slave quarters from Johnson Hall's view, and on to the cherry orchards to the northwest. And as always, they ended back at Johnson Hall.

"Mr. Johnson, sir. The boy needs his daddy. Wit his momma gone and all."

"That jest ain't me. Miss Penelope was so good at that kinda stuff. She and that boy—God, I sho' miss her."

"We all do, sir," Stanley replied as they arrived and started up the stairs to Johnson Hall's porch. An uneasy silence came as they opened the oak doors and continued toward the spiral staircase.

"You talk to him, don'tcha?" Master Johnson finally uttered as they reached the staircase. His voice trailed off, and he resisted making eye contact with Stanley as he stopped going up the stairs.

"Uh—yes, sir. Some. But, but he really needs you."

After no response, Stanley realized Master Johnson was no longer next to him. He turned and saw him stopped on the third step of the stairs. Stanley then looked in the direction of his gaze, and at the painting overlooking the entrance.

"Shit. That boy look more and more like his momma every day. Huh—I don't even like to look at him. Reminds me too goddamn much of Pea—of, uh, her."

"Yeah, he do, Mr. Johnson."

"I may get that painting taken down."

"That would hurt him something fierce, sir."

"Yeah, but seeing it every day hurts me! Anyhow, talk to him for me, will ya'. I'd 'preciate it."

"But he needs you. His dad—"

"Nah. Not me! I ain't the one. Shit, that's why I had a wife. This daddy shit! It ain't me. Anyways, I'd 'preciate it if'n you keep talkin' to him."

"I don't mind, sir. You don't have to ask me to. Just spend some time wit him, Mr. Johnson. Take him huntin', fishin', travelin'—anythin'. Long as it's wit you. He'll like that."

"Nah, I tolt ya'! That ain't me. Good ideas, though. You can do it if'n you want to. You can take him anytime—on me. I won't make it part of yo' job. But if you do it, I'll pay ya' like it's yo' job. Anyways, how's ev'rythin' goin' in Cupid's . . ."

The slaves were already out in the fields by the time James began his workday with Ruth. There were two other slaves who worked in the Big House at times, though they never spoke to him with words—only glances and glares. As he moved through his days, he could see slaves walking around and several buildings beyond the stand of slender oaks. A million thoughts and questions of his existence began to swirl.

Who am I? Who is this little boy I see in Carlton's looking glass? And who are those people out there? I look like them, like the other slaves. Nothing like Carlton. What is different about me? We the same, ain't we? But these looks—they make me feel—they scare me.

They all had their chance in here, didn't they? Why they mad at me? I want to know them, to get to know them—like I, I'm learning about Ruth. They look like me. I look like them. We the same, ain't we? I want to know more. But how do I do it? Get to know them? I've only talked with Ruth and Carlton since I been here. Nobody else say anything to me. Who am I? I know I'm James—the Slave of Carlton. But is that it? Who am I? . . .

The days spent in Ruth's nurturing companionship helped acclimate James to his situation. This particular day began with cleaning the rooms downstairs, dusting the dining room, cleaning up leaves and branches from around Johnson Hall, and now back to the kitchen to prepare the evening meal.

"Ruth, how long you been here?" James asked while washing dishes.

"Oh, 'round ten—'leven years, I suppose," Ruth replied as she alternated between several simmering pots on the stove.

"You like it here?"

"Where? Here—at Johnson Hall? It's all right, I reckon. Better'n where I could be, I suppose."

"Nah, I mean here at Penelope Farms."

"Like it! Well darlin', I can't answer that one. You can never like being a slave. No matter where you be."

"What that mean? 'Being a slave'?" James asked as he stopped what he was doing and took several steps toward her.

She turned and looked into those big, brown eyes. Eyes that searched hers for answers to life's most profound questions. Knots filled her stomach, lumps filled her throat, and sorrow filled her heart as she struggled to hold in her emotions.

"James darlin', don't—don't you worry 'bout that. Boy, you sho' was quiet-like when you first got here. Now, questions, questions, questions."

"I'm sorry. I ask too many questions. I'll stop," he replied as he went back to his dishwashing.

"No darlin'. It—it's okay. Yo' questions—uh, you, you got the right to ask 'em. It's jest—I—I don't got no answers fo' 'em. That's all," she squeaked out as emotions overwhelmed other words she wanted to say.

She looked at James with dry eyes while a torrent of tears flooded her heart. Memories of her children asking similar questions fueled her sorrow as the little boy sought life's answers. Answers that she didn't have back then. Answers that she did not have now. Answers that she would never have.

Clearing her throat, she finally said, "C'mon. I'm goin' to the orchards fo' some fresh air."

"Uh, nah. I'll go back and wait on Carlton. I could use a hug, though."

"Okay," she replied as her secret wails continued. She walked out of Johnson Hall for her solitary lament as James started up the staircase.

Dong! Dong!

Hmm, Massah Johnson say he be gone all day.

James walked down the hall and approached the study. Looking ahead and behind him, he dashed in and softly closed the door behind him. His heart pounded, his ears strained for noises outside, and his eyes scanned the room, with quick darts to the left and then to the right.

"All these books!" he mumbled in exclamation, as he walked around the room he hadn't been in for a score of months.

During the first meeting with Master Johnson, his focus was completely on that giant of a man and his barking orders. Now, his attention and eyes scanned the forbidden area, which seemed larger than before. Beginning at the floor and going up to the ceiling, James' head went up and down and back and forth and side to side as he gazed at the volumes of books covering the entire right wall.

"Wow! He even got a ladder," he marveled as his eyes caught glimpse of the wooden steps with rollers at the top and bottom.

He continued walking in awe while he gawked up and down the wall of books. He walked between the bookshelf and the desk, and approached a thick, opened book on a stand. He glanced at it as he passed and mumbled, "'Lone'—'long'—a lot of 'l' words. Oh, yeah, that's right. Carlton called it a—uh, dik—uh, yeah, a dictionary. Yeah, that's it! A dictionary."

Continuing his journey, he looked out at a different view of Penelope Farms than Carlton's room offered as he walked past the double window. Against the left wall, there were tables filled with newspapers and magazines. He peeked at several headlines without pausing his stride. Closer to the door were several four-foot-high cabinets. He peeked in and saw various documents, including maps, but James was overwhelmed at the number of books. As he walked back over to them, he changed his course, sat down, and was swallowed up in Master Johnson's chair. He spun it toward the bookshelf, his feet dangling a half-foot off the ground as they lazily swung.

I'm gonna spend all my time in here!

He hopped out the chair and walked up to the bookshelf. Peering up and down the wall of literature, James scanned the titles as he mumbled, "Uh, *Pride and Pre-ju-dice. Pride and Prejudice. Wu-the-ring Heights. The Rime of the An-ci-ent Mariner. Nature.*

Boy, there's a lot of books by this man. Uh—Shakespeare, I guess that's how to say it. Huh, Julius Caesar—*I seen Caesar in the Bible.*

James continued his tour through literary history while he slowly rubbed his fingers over the intricate designs on the bindings. Some had twine and leather coverings, while others included magnificent etchings with gold leaf. He slowly shook his head in amazement as he continued his stroll.

"*The Scarlet Letter. Rip Van Winkle. Moby Dick. Ru—Ru-bai-yat, Rubaiyat*. Huh, there's a lot by this man, too. Edgar Allan

Poe—I guess he writes poetry, huh. Uh, *The Pur-loin-ed Letter. Ivanhoe. Fran-ken-stein. The Charge of the Light Brigade.* Massah Johnson got lots of books in here," James exclaimed with a whisper of wonderment. He took a step back and looked to his right, where he had been, and then to his left, where he hadn't, and slowly shook his head.

Grabbing a book off the shelf, James sat back down in Master Johnson's chair, opened it to a random page and began reading.

"'*Silence!' then ex-claim-ed another stern voice which Mi-lady re-cog-nis-ed as that of Felton.*

"'*What are you meddling with, stupid? Did anyone order you to prevent that woman from singing? No. You were told to guard her—to fire at her if she attempted to fly. Guard her! If she flies, kill her; but don't exceed your orders.*'"

"An ex-pres-i-on of unspeakable joy lighten-ed the coun-te-nance of Mi-lady; but this ex-press-i-on was fleeting as the re-flec-ti-on of lightning."

Dong! Dong! Dong!

Startled, James dropped the book. Only then did he realize how long he'd been in the study. He wondered if he had been missed. He scrambled out of the chair and carefully placed the book back in its proper place.

"I got to be careful not to change anything," he said as he looked around the room.

"The chair! How was it?" he asked himself as he slid it under the desk. "I got to pay closer attention next time," he mumbled as he headed out the door and down the hall to the bedroom to wait for Carlton, his body tingling with exhilaration.