Chapter 6

The first cold front of the season whipped through Penelope Farms as Master Johnson, Dr. Andersen, Rogers, Mitch, and Smitty huddled in the study and discussed the running of the plantation during the winter months.

". . . and gettin' as many babies started as ya' can betwixt now and thaw is jest as good a idea as it's been all the while," said Dr. Andersen.

"Ya' needs to keep the young bucks busy, too," Rogers added as he stood near the table with the magazines and newspapers, all the while pretending to read them.

"Yeah, that always a good idea, Doc. Me and Mitch heah, uh, we gone git a list together 'bout which young buck gone go when," Master Johnson replied as Mitch nodded.

"I'm jest glad these heah brutes of yours stopped damaging the others. Hell, I wuz missin' bitness in town comin' out heah so much," Dr. Andersen replied as he glared over at Rogers.

Rogers, standing with his back to the group, noticed the room's silence, and he turned to see Smitty and Mitch looking at him, while Master Johnson and Dr. Andersen were not.

"He called us 'brutes,' Rogers," Smitty whispered loud enough for all to hear.

Not quite sure of what it meant, Rogers replied, "Oh, yeah?"

"Hell, yeah! Brutes, beasts, heathens—"

"Beasts!" Rogers screamed as he latched on to a word he recognized.

"Hell, yeah. Beatin' up them folks fo' the fun of it," Dr. Andersen replied as they took strides toward each other.

"All right, all right!" Master Johnson proclaimed as he sprang from his chair, his lanky frame dominating the room. "Everybody calm down, now. We got all that fixed, Doc. Me and Rogers come to a understandin' a while back, huh, Rogers?"

Walking back to the table, Rogers mumbled, "Yes, sir, Mr. Johnson. I ain't no goddamn beast or, or brute. I'm a man. . . ."

"Anyway," Master Johnson continued, "I want all them boys who ready to have one chance or mo' and—hey, wutn't that James I saw walkin' the other day?"

"Yeah. Today, too. He jest getting' on his feet a'gin," smirked Rogers.

"Shit! I don't wanna hafta' sell that boy. He a real moneymaker. Smitty, go git him. Bring him heah."

"I'll go git him, sir," Rogers replied.

"Oh, hell naw, you won't! Sit yo' ass down. Smitty. Git."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Johnson. Be right back."

Coming back from their daily walk to the orchards, Netty and James saw Mr. Boo headed their way. Even though he was still at a distance when they first spotted him, his unique gait gave him away. As he approached, the background scenery of reds, browns, yellows, and oranges gave way to the most revered slave at Penelope Farms.

". . . and this is my favorite time of the year. All the colors!" Netty exclaimed while walking arm in arm with James and looking all around.

"Yeah, it's gonna get cold soon."

"How ya' feelin', boy?" Mr. Boo asked as he came up on them.

"Good, Mr. Boo. Getting stronger and stronger every day," James replied as he glanced at him and then looked away.

"Not *too* strong, huh," Mr. Boo replied with raised eyebrows.

"Huh—what?" asked Netty, who was still admiring nature's mosaic hues but picked up on Mr. Boo's tone. She turned to James and repeated, "What?"

"You can't get too strong, Mr. Boo."

"Ya' can git too strong fo' yo' own good."

"Nah. James, you ain't thinkin'—'bout runnin', is ya'? Rogers loves beatin' young bucks like you. Especially you," Netty replied as her voice cracked under the tension.

"Next time, you may not survive, boy! He gonna shackle ya' up at night. Might sell ya'! I heard some even cut your foot off! Uh, huh—you can still do what they want you to do with one foot."

"Well, I need two feet to do what *I* want to do, so I just won't get caught again."

"Some of the other bucks mad, too. Ol' Rogers didn't whup 'em this time, but maybe next."

"Well, that's why I ain't told nobody. I'm sorry if they get whipped. But I ain't staying. Mr. Boo, Netty, I can't breathe here. I can't stay here. The Uglies coming! They're coming. Slavery—shoot, Mr. Boo, it ain't right. Netty—it ain't right! I got to run—run to my future. My future is freedom—or death. Nothing in between. No other option. Freedom—or death."

"James, baby. Please don't—" Netty said.

"Hey, boy," Smitty called out as he came up on them. "Master Johnson wants to see ya' now. Let's git!"

James' heart pounded as he walked up the steps to Johnson Hall. Entering through the double doors for the first time in 4 years, his mind rushed to the past.

Johnson Hall seems different—I'm not sure. Smaller, maybe. Huh, the picture is still here. Carlton at 5 years old.

Memories of his days running up and down the stairs, reading with Carlton in the bedroom, helping Ruth polish the silver,

sleeping on the floor, sneaking in and out of the study all flooded his mind as he climbed the spiral staircase. His head remained still and straight, but his eyes darted all around, soaking in every bit of scenery he could. When they reached the landing, he turned left, Smitty a step and a half behind him with his hand on his holstered revolver.

They walked past the seven-foot tall, ornately decorated timepiece in its familiar position. The gold-plated pendulum glistened and swung as they passed.

Ah, yes, my partner in crime. God, I hope it dongs before I leave.

They kept walking, coming closer and closer to the study, as James gave a subtle, silent sniff.

Huh, there's no—no smell. I guess after the years in the shack, no smell is a smell.

They turned the corner into the study. Master Johnson was seated at his desk, Rogers at the table, with the newspapers to James' left and his hand on his revolver. Dr. Andersen and Mitch were sitting in chairs to James' right, and Smitty stood behind James.

"Hey, James. How's the back, boy?" Rogers laughed.

Go to hell!

James' eyes surreptitiously scanned the room he had spent so many hours in, eventually eyeing Webster in the corner, on its stand. Seeing it there, he imagined all the "l" words exposed for all those years, including "longevity," and it brought a smile to his heart.

There were times I didn't think I'd see "longevity." Here I am, though. Still here. So are you, my friend. Aardvark to Zanzibar. Slave—nigger—servitude—chattel, huh. Also, honor—respect—trust—freedom—liberty—friend. Yeah, a book filled with beauty and ugliness, with hope and heartache...

"James, I didn't mean for you to get whupped like that. You're my prize buck!" Master Johnson began. "But dammit, you shouldn't have run. You try, you run again, and I swear, I'll sell your ass off! I tolt Rogers heah not to . . ."

. . . I can sense the words in this room. I can smell the stories. I can taste the times. "Longevity—Long duration of individual life." Can't forget that one! Escape—citizen—future . . .

". . . beat yo' ass like that no mo'. Lessen you runnin'! Hell, I can sell yo' ass off anytime I want. You seen how people act when I take you to auctions. Some of them are mean and will do worse things to you than I would ever do!"

. . . David Copperfield—I will be the hero of my own life. Shakespeare—to be or not to be. The Three Musketeers—all for one, one for all. . . .

". . . If you want to stay on this plantation, don't you try to run again, you heah! I'll put you in charge of the boys in the shack—how 'bout that, huh? I'll, I'll . . ."

. . . New York City. Paris. Brazil. Katmandu. A place that sounds like fun. . . .

". . . I'll take you out of the tobacco fields and let you work in the orchards. I might let you have a family someday if you're good. Okay?"

. . . You got to be out of your mind! Nothing you can say will keep me here. First chance I get, I'm gone.

"Oh, so you ain't gone talk, huh? You jest 'member what I said, 'bout folks worse than me. Git his ass outta heah!"

I'm not scared of you anymore.

James imagined looking directly into Master Johnson's eyes and telling him exactly what he thought about his offer. Twelve years of anger and rage that festered into hate would spew out in torrents, flooding this room and washing everyone and everything away with the tidal currents, leaving only memories of what is and what never was. But, alas, the pain would still remain, the dignity would still be denied, and the respect would still be refused. And James would still be half a step above an animal—a slave.

Huh, that would scare the shit out of him, though!

James and Smitty arrived at the double doors of Johnson Hall and prepared to leave when his secret partner cooperated.

Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong!

Huh, Carlton will be home soon.

Fully recovered, James was back in the shack and working in the tobacco fields. Netty, fearful her time to convince James had run out, begged Mr. Boo to say something to get James to stay. The most respected slaves on the plantation, Netty prayed that fact would help.

Every time she got a chance to bend Mr. Boo's ear, she did. When their paths crossed walking to and fro. During supper, after all were fed. On Sundays during church and reading. And during days when work was slow, no one was hurt, and he hadn't left with Master Johnson.

". . . Mr. Boo, please. Go talk to him. Please! Rogers gonna kill that boy if he run again. Please stop him. Talk him out of it. Please. Rogers gonna kill that boy!"

"Shoot, Netty! If'n I was a young buck, I'd run, too. This ain't no way for nobody to live! We men! You women! Human beings with feelings, uh huh! What right we got to tell him not to do something we would do if'n we was young enough?"

Mr. Boo, sitting on the porch of his cabin in a wooden rocker, paused for a couple of drags off his pipe. He looked at a sobbing Netty, nodded, gave her a wry smile and a wink, and added, "Don't worry none, Netty. I gotta idea. Lemme tell ya' a story 'bout a brave—"

"Mr. Boo. I don't wanna hear no story! No disrespect, but help James. Help him, Mr. Boo! Tell *him* yo' story if you needs to. Just help him. Please!"

Mr. Boo had hair like snow and a heart of gold. He was past 50 and the father figure for all the slaves. This had been Master

Johnson's reason for not selling him. Once, Stanley was going to whip him, and five young male slaves took the beating for him.

Mr. Boo had been on the plantation for more than 25 years, longer than any other slave. He even garnered enough respect from Master Johnson to get to pick his own name. Initially named "Jeremiah," he never told anyone how or why he chose the name "Mr. Boo." He was also, the only slave who lived in a cabin by himself, a fact he appreciated.

He traveled with Master Johnson to towns, auctions, and other plantations. Mr. Boo had chances to talk with other slaves and the few free Negroes that were around. He witnessed many slaves come and go and all the trials that happened in between. He'd seen James come in as a little boy and grow into a young buck. From a scared, confused child to a strong, soul-searching Negro man.

And he had a plan for James to get his freedom. However, James was going to need to prove to Mr. Boo his desire to run, run to the future. Mr. Boo wanted to make sure James wasn't a Judas. He didn't want to risk telling his plan to the wrong person. After okaying it during a trip with Master Johnson earlier in the week, Mr. Boo sent a message for James to come and see him.

Seeing James approach his cabin, Mr. Boo silently considered, *that boy jest got whupped something fierce. Went up to the Big House to talk wit Johnson. Coulda' sold us out, uh huh. I heard stuff. I gots to be careful. Sho' do, uh huh.*

"Hey, Mr. Boo. Ezra said you wanted to see me."

"I got Massah Johnson to let you help me and the other boys out some. You gonna do most of the work. Miss Helen boys ain't gonna work so hard no mo'. I kinda sweet on Miss Helen. You gone bring me fresh-cut tobbacky ev'ry night. Not so Rogers suspects anythin'. Oh, yeah, and gimme that 'tater pie Netty fixes up!"

"I gotta give you my potato pie? How long I got to do this, Mr. Boo?" James asked, still unsure about the circumstances.

"Until I tell ya' it's done!"

"But why? Why I got to do this?"

"Shh, boy! I gots a plan fo' ya'—maybe. Miss Netty tolt me you been talkin'. 'Bout runnin'. If you ain't, then go. If you is, then jest hush, and do what I say," he screamed a whisper as he alternated looking at James and past him, out toward the surroundings, for listeners.

"A plan? A plan for what? For running? How? When?" James began before Mr. Boo motioned for silence with a finger pressed against his lips.

"Jest hush! And do what I say."