Chapter 4

Like every night before, James lay on his cot. This night, however, his heart pounded as never before. Sweating profusely, he thought about her. About his love for her. About his lust for her. About what they were going to do that late summer night.

If Rogers catches us, I may not survive. Shoot, we may not survive. Is it the Christian thing to do? "Thou shall not fornicate."

One of the Bible's absolutes. Maybe during those times. I don't know. During ordinary times, yeah. But these are not ordinary times. "Thou shall not fornicate."

We don't have a choice to have sex or not. They are forcing us to fornicate, so why can't we choose at least who we do it with? At least the first time. "Thou shall not fornicate."

And I promised. If she's caught out at night waiting on me, I'd never live with myself. But what if we're caught? Shoot, I'm going! I don't care if—shoot, I'm going!

Sliding out of his cot before midnight, he tiptoed toward the window.

"J-J-James. Where ya' goin'?" asked Isaac in a hushed tone as James passed his cot.

"Shh, be quiet. I'm going to see Chloe."

"Umm, look at 'cha n-n-now."

"What are you doing up so late?"

"Huh? Uh, J-J-James. I been thinkin'. Th-Th-Thinkin'—'bout runnin'," Isaac replied and slowly turned his head away from James.

James moved closer and sat on the ground near Isaac's cot.

"No, you should wait. Rogers is still too new. It's only been a couple of months. Give him time to settle here first. He'll get careless."

"Can't wait no m-m-mo'. I'm not saying it's tonight. But maybe. I jest up tonight thinkin' 'bout it—that's all. Maybe you right, James. G-G-Give him some time to make a mistake."

"Good. I'll see you later then, okay? Okay? The first one will never make it, okay? You gonna be here, Isaac? Don't go."

"You be c-c-careful out there. Rogers would whup you sumthin' fierce. And wit Chloe, too. Y'all b-b-bein' pure and all."

"You gonna' be here, Isaac? Isaac? Isaac. I—I don't want to leave you, my friend. But, but Chloe may get in trouble waiting on me. Wait. Please—wait. I—I can't leave you like this. Rogers might catch you. He may—he will kill you. You would be the first to try and run."

"I don't care. Don't care no mo'. Quickest w-w-way to freedom, huh. Yeah—freedom."

As he looked past James and into the darkness, his voice trailed off. James slumped his shoulders, lowered his head, and realized he was running out of words—and time. After some moments, Isaac looked back at James and allowed a smile to crack his solemn demeanor.

"J-J-James, you can keep me here tonight. Tomorrow. The next day, the next. But one day, you won't, and I'll be g-g-gone. We all gotta do what we gotta do. You go 'head—be wit Chloe. If'n I'm here when you git b-b-back, then I'm here."

James embraced and said goodbye to his friend. As he slid out the window and headed for the storage barns, he was startled by the way his heart was being ripped apart by this emotional entanglement. A chunk stayed behind with his friend. A chunk came along for the journey to Chloe. And pieces dropped along the way, leaving a trail of sorrow and emotional uncertainty he hemorrhaged—as certain as any footprint—with every step he took.

The half-moon shone enough for him to make his way through the night. The silence and solitude made the area he had walked so many times before seem new. He turned the corner of a building

and caught sight of her. The supple curves of her body were enticingly highlighted by the partnership of dancing shadows from the moon and trees.

"Wow! You—you look different. I mean good, Chloe!" James blurted as he approached her. Seeing her immediately reminded his body of the wonderfully, queasy sensations he'd felt earlier.

"Thanks, James. I tried to fix my hair up. Folks always said I was big fo' my age."

"Well, I think you are beautiful for any age."

A flushed Chloe giggled, "Thanks, James."

Finally coming down off the Chloe high, James realized that standing where they were wasn't a good idea. Most of the buildings on Penelope Farms were built up on bricks because of the regular overflowing of nearby riverbanks, so they slid under one of them.

"You nervous, James?" Chloe asked as they lay next to each other, the underside of the floor of the building twenty inches from their faces.

James, for the first time, felt the warmth of her body and the thumping of her heart. After a hard swallow and a forced laugh, he mumbled, "Huh? Uh, yeah. A little. You?"

"A little—huh, a lot," she said with a laugh-like anxiety.

"Yeah—a lot." The tingling now reached his fingers. He looked at his hands and added, "Yeah, uh—a lot."

"Whew!" both simultaneously marveled as James' nervous eyes finally looked into Chloe's, which he had been avoiding all night. Smiling, she looked back as best she could, and then she turned away.

"What's wrong, James?"

"Uh—huh? Oh, nothing. I was just uh, thinking and looking and—ooo, look."

James pointed to a spot beneath another building. What first appeared to be more dancing shadows from the moon and the trees were the sensually rhythmic motions of bodies. Giggling,

they looked under other buildings around them and saw several couples doing what they came there to do.

And, so, they did.

An hour had passed since the lovers had introduced themselves to each other, and James gazed upon his lady's beauty. He noticed the fullness of her lips. The way she breathed slowly in and quickly out. The way her eyebrows arched when she was excited. The way her lips curled crookedly when she was thinking. And now, the way her face exuded a calmness of contentment. The rhythm of their heartbeats matched the rhythm of their bodies minutes before. James let out a slow sigh as he held Chloe tightly to his chest and listened to her speak.

". . . My momma and daddy still here. She work wit Miss Netty. My daddy work in the orchards 'cause of his age. What 'bout your family, James?"

"Huh—what? Oh, my family? I don't remember them, exactly, you know? I mean I used to see faces, hear stuff. Talking, singing—stuff like that. No more, though. She, my mama, she used to sing me 'Amazing Grace.' That's all I remember."

"Yeah! That was you when, what was his name? Shadrach! Yeah, he was singin', and you ran up there hollerin'."

"Yeah, that was me."

"I'm sorry for you, James. I don't know what I would do if my momma or daddy—or me—was sold. I would just cr-y-y-y-y."

"It is unusual for Master Johnson to keep y'all together. Folks say he splits up families whenever he can. Y'all must be valuable to—"

"Shh," Chloe warned.

The sound of footfalls got louder as someone approached. James could discern steps, shuffles, whines of reluctance, and grunts of pains. Out of the darkness appeared Mitch, forcibly leading a lady by the arm.

"Her name Martha," Chloe whispered as the couple passed by and then disappeared into the night. "She old—'bout 30, I guess. She work in the orchards. My momma say she done finished havin' her babies for Massah Johnson. Momma says you gotta have babies or it bad for you."

James' emotional roller coaster took another dip. He held her closer as his heart ached with remorse and sorrow.

"How—how are we supposed to live like this? Chloe—we shouldn't have to sneak around. We shouldn't have to rush. I can't live like this. We shouldn't live like this!"

"Now, James, don't go doin' nothin' crazy. Gittin' no crazy thoughts in yo' head. Okay? You hear? You ain't thinkin' 'bout runnin', is ya'?"

"What? Uh, naw. Not me."

"Good. I don't want you to git hurt. . . ."

. . . slave . . . nigger . . . chattel . . . property . . . servitude . . . freedom . . . liberty . . . citizen . . . slave . . . nigger . . . chattel . . . property . . . servitude . . . freedom . . . liberty . . . citizen . . . slave . . . nigger . . . chattel . . .

". . . I had a—uh, I had fun. You? James? James!"

. . . nigger . . . chattel . . . property . . . servitude . . . freedom . . . liberty . . . citizen . . . slave . . .

Chloe looked into James' distant eyes and whined, "James!"

"Huh—uh, what's wrong, Chloe?"

"I said I had fun tonight."

"Yeah, me, too," he replied with half a smile as he focused again on her.

Her look begged to ease some of the torment she sensed in James, to relieve a bit of the anger that was building. It was somewhat successful. He lost himself in her gaze, wrapped himself in her embrace, and escaped that strident bondage, if only for a fleeting moment. For him, it was something. Something where nothing was all he had.

"Anyway, we better go, huh, James. James? You hear me?" she asked as his stare became more intense. "James!"

"Yeah, I heard you. But I was just thinking, Chloe. Laying here, with you in my arms. Enjoying these moments. I just don't think our second time should be in The Uglies, either," he said as he pulled her closer.

"I likes the way you think!"

James arrived at his shack an hour before dawn and ruefully discovered Isaac's empty cot. The emotional roller coaster he'd been on all the night took another devastating plunge, forcing him along for the ride.

"Dear God. Please protect my friend Isaac as he seeks his freedom. Keep him safe from harm, and don't let Rogers catch him. Amen," prayed James. He lay down as his soul sang for Chloe and sobbed for Isaac. He was soon awakened by the yelling and greeted by, "G-G-Good morning, James."

"Isaac! You're back!"

"Shh, James. Not so loud. I just went out to the th-th-thicket to see how far it was. And how long it would take. I think I'll wait, like you s-s-say, though. Rogers gits comfortable, then I'm gone. Anyhow, I'll ask ya' 'bout last n-n-night wit Chloe later," Isaac said as they left the shack.