
CHAPTER ONE

March 1777

MA BELIEVED. One Sunday before sunrise, she headed out early for church at Young's spring with her infant, Gabriel, swaddled and slung across her chest. She walked briskly along the footpath that she and so many others before had worn to the creek. Later, Pa would join them for worship, bringing the oldest boy, Martin, while toting the middle one, Solomon.

Since Gabriel's birth, Ma kept most of her days at the great house, away from the field, which she was glad to be, but away from her husband, which left her empty. The cook, Kiskey, often reminded her to give thanks for Mrs. Prosser, who granted Ma a weekly

Sunday reunion, but Ma yearned for more than half a borrowed morning with her family.

Ma did give thanks for her friends. “Praise the Lord for Kiskey and Old Major,” Ma said aloud as she set her baby down.

In her pocket nestled the apple seeds; she had kept them safe and deep in her apron until the captive ground of winter gave way to spring’s rightful thaw. The morning smelled of sunshine, new grass, and flowers to come. Before she reached the stream where all the people from all the quarters would gather to pray, Ma squatted down on the still side of the hill. There at the south end of Brookfield plantation, she tugged, and the reluctant earth opened enough for her to place the seeds.

She could hear the tinkle of the creek beyond the field. *When the rain comes, before long, that trickle will be a roar*; she thought.

Gabriel began to root around for his second meal of the day. Ma could not help but think of the other hungry babe. Brookfield’s infant master, little Thomas Henry Prosser, would need to eat soon, too. The mis-sus could produce no milk of her own, so Ma fed both boys.

For times when Ma would be away from the great

house, Old Major had fashioned a wooden spout from persimmon wood so that Kissey could feed Thomas Henry the early milk Ma squeezed from herself. If that milk ran out and the little master turned fussy, Kissey would placate him with a sugar teat until Ma returned. The missus rarely asked for her son before noon on Sundays, anyway.

Praise the Lord for Ann Prosser's Sunday sick headaches. Ma gave thanks for this, too. She stretched out long in the grass and nursed her six-month-old son without interruption. After while, Gabriel opened his walnut eyes, and Ma gave him her other breast. On some Sundays, he got his fair share.

Ma stroked Gabriel's troubled brow. "Eat all you like, child. Take what's yours."

When he finished, Gabriel protested being wrapped up so tight. He pushed away from Ma with his head, the only part of him unhemmed and unbound. Kissey had warned her not to loosen his dressing; the crude March air might do the child harm.

Ma unswaddled her son. "Another baby'd fall fast asleep from such a full little belly. You wide awake, my Gabriel."

She swept him up and then swung him down—from the earth to the dawning sky and back. When his

tender bare feet brushed along the downy grass, the baby laughed. He tried to stand on his own, and Ma approved. “Oh-ho! Where you off to, my strappin’ boy? You got business at the market, work in the city? My baby boy off to the sea?”

What Ma believed was this: her youngest son would grow strong and grow free. He would run pick an apple anytime he pleased, even if only to taste the good fruit given by the Lord, and see, from this spot, the amber sunrise painted by His hand.

She reflected on the talk so often heard in the quarter and the stories Pa brought back from the city, stories of a people insisting on freedom. *Tall tales*, she had first thought. *Tall tales of a David thinkin’ to slay a giant*. Yet Pa had been right all along. Virginia and the other colonies had condemned rule by tyranny and were now at war with England.

Ma prayed aloud for the apple seeds and for Gabriel, her youngest-born. “Lord, set my Gabriel free, too. One way or another, set my angel-boy free.” She kissed the baby in the hollow of his tender neck and refused to bind him up again.

The Lord sent a gentle rain that same afternoon and a blessed sunshine the next morning. From the

soil once full enough to grow tobacco, now completely spent, God and Ma together helped the apple tree's roots grow deep and its limbs slowly full on the protected shelf in the hill overlooking the spring. Gabriel grew, too.

CHAPTER TWO

March 1786

GABRIEL LIVED with his mother and his two brothers in a small hut at the edge of the woods, just up the hill from the creek, only a short ways from the swamp, and a fair enough distance from the great house. Their home's only window served also as the doorway to one room, where they cooked and ate, where they prayed and slept.

A hole in the ground held an ever-burning fire for cooking, warming, and keeping away bugs. A second hole, knocked in the wall, drew the smoke out. Beside the fire hole stood a table made by Pa, and at the east end of the room, a bed of Pa's hand, too. To make it, Pa had felled a black-walnut tree, stripped the bark, smoothed the boards, and turned the posts.

Ma had delivered Gabriel in that bed, with Pa at her side. Even under threat of a well-laid-on lashing, Pa had not left his wife in her time. And when Gabriel entered the world, Pa breathed on the boy first.

Nowdays, Ma slept alone on the mattress pieced from coarse, heavy Negro cloth and piled with corn husks. Martin, Solomon, and Gabriel slept on the floor—Gabriel right at the door. So that the breeze would cool his skin, on hot nights he slept atop a wool rug, issued him by Mr. Prosser. In cold weather, Gabriel curled up beneath his rug and tried to keep warm. And by full-moon light, Gabriel could see well enough to memorize words from the book given him by Mrs. Prosser. He liked his sleeping spot; from this place Gabriel could see and hear everything in the night.

Whenever Old Major, who lived just across the yard, got up to grind his weekly corn ration with the hand mill that all the folks shared, Gabriel knew Ma's turn would come next. Every time, Old Major's hound dog let Gabriel know when to rouse Ma. Whether Dog counted up the minutes or whether she detected the slightest finishing-up shift in Old Major's weight, Gabriel did not know. But whenever Ma's turn came, Dog always gave a half howl, and Gabriel would then

wake his ma. Soon after the little yowl, Old Major and Dog would appear in the yard between the huts.

Last summer was when Dog had first come to them, snarling and growling, seeking refuge in the quarter. At first, the year-old pup had acted more like a rattlesnake than a hound. The women and children hid from her; the men tried to beat and subdue her—all except Old Major, who said to the insolent beast, “Keep still; you all right. Set down here. I know just how you feel.” And soon after, Dog let the people in the quarter come to know her.

Old Major would only call her Dog. The quiet man’s own given name had been put away since ever Gabriel could remember. Ma said a dash toward freedom was what got the master started on saying “Old Major.” Ma said Old Major’s run happened before Gabriel was born.

According to the women, Old Major had changed since being hunted down and dragged back to Brookfield. Even Gabriel knew the story of how Prosser’s man had tied the captured freedom fighter to a tree and hit him with a tobacco stick until Old Major’s true spirit left him and took up in the ebony heartwood of the persimmon to which he was bound.

HENRICO COUNTY, NOV. 2, 1775

Ran away last Night, a Negro Man named James, who is a very shrewd sensible Fellow, and can both read and write; and he always waited upon me, he must be well known throughout most of Virginia. He is very brown, about 5 Feet 9 Inches high, marked with the Smallpox, is very fond of going into the Water. He took a Variety of Clothes, stole several of my shirts, a saddle bag and my light Bay Mare, about 3 Years old. From the Circumstances, there is Reason to believe he intends an Attempt to get to Lord Dunmore. His Elopement was from no Cause of Complaint, or Dread of a Whipping (for he has always been remarkably indulged, indeed too much so) but from a determined Resolution to get Liberty, as he conceived by flying to Lord Dunmore. I will give 51 to any Person who secures him and the Mare, so that I get them again.

Even when the night was still, such olden memories lived on in the quarter, keeping Gabriel awake.

On some rare Saturday nights, he would listen to Old Major playing the fiddle and calling a dance in the forest, right below the quarter. He could hear Kissey's spoons, too, holding the rhythm of every tune. When the two of them got going strong, the neighbor kin would holler out, "Go on! Go on!" Often, an old voice Gabriel recognized but could not place would shout above the music and the laughter, "Shine it up! Shine out!"

Sometimes the slowest mournful ballad would fill Gabriel with delight. Sometimes a fast jig could make him cry. And sometimes a piece that was supposed to sound happy and content could draw out moaning and wailing from the very earth, from the trees, the creek—as if all the peoples' sufferings were alive and lingering there in the notes, as if all the people were calling out *Come, freedom. Come, freedom. Freedom, go on and come.* Those times, Gabriel knew in his heart that the familiar voice he heard was Old Major's true spirit, now binding to the dance from the deep, black heart of the persimmon. He wondered whether everyone else heard it, too.

On these nights, when the grown folks made

music and dancing together—when they practiced at joy—Gabriel suspected that every chestnut and cedar, hickory and oak, in the night forest united to sway and rock the people into a little place of happiness to help them bear another day. He loved nothing so much as to fall asleep tapping his feet to the sounds of his beautiful people, safe in the dark woods.

He had once overheard Mrs. Prosser laughing with another missus. “Virginians would rather die than not dance!” From his place by the door, he could tell she was right: dancing was a dangerous pastime for his people, but even so, they would not stop.

On occasion the fierce urgency of his kin’s dancing seemed to rise up out of the woods, insistent on reaching the great house. Now and then, through a cracked window, an open flue, or the propped-wide kitchen door, the people’s singing even breached Mr. Prosser’s dreams and woke him. *Come, freedom. Come, freedom. Freedom, go on and come.* On those dangerous nights, the trees could not protect the people. The whole forest could not help.

When the fiddle turned suddenly silent and the lively sounds of the dance fell hush, Gabriel knew that Prosser’s man was coming down. On those nights, he would suspend his breath and pray Ma’s psalms while

the people slipped off into the shadows and melted away into the trees. During the eerie quiet, Gabriel would stay awake until he heard all return, and until he didn't hear the shot of a gun.

Ma never went to dances anymore, not since Prosser's man took Pa off to Richmond. Prosser's man had come back to Brookfield with the cart full of new people from the city, packed with fine goods from the market house, but empty of Pa. At first, after Pa and his stories of freedom vanished, Ma took to the bed built by her husband.

From his place by the door, Gabriel watched his mother weeping. At night Ma cried, "Tell me, why would the Lord take my husband? What can a woman do, Lord? Tell me."

Ma seemed deaf to Solomon's tears and blind to Martin's retreat into himself. She would not rise even to grind corn. When her turn came around, Gabriel went instead, and Dog went with him. At the mill, with no one to see but Dog, Gabriel wept, too.

Like Pa and for Pa, Ma resisted what life Brookfield had to offer her. After a short little while of Ma's absence from the field, Gabriel saw Prosser's man crossing the yard toward their hut.

“Ma?” Gabriel had said. “Somebody’s coming.”

Gabriel’s mother had curled up tight against Pa’s bedpost. But the man picked her up and hauled her to the woodshed next to the tobacco barn. Solomon could not stop him, and Martin dared not try. All three brothers pretended still to sleep when Ma staggered back to the quarter with her white slip in bloody shreds.

The smell of Ma’s torn flesh filled up their hut—a reminder that theirs was a family always at the mercy. Martin and Solomon could not stand to be near her. For a while, they slept elsewhere. Martin, who at eighteen often found reasons to leave the quarter, took to the forest. Eleven-year-old Solomon went to stay with Kiskey.

Gabriel remained in his place on the floor, but he hardly slept for keeping watch over Ma. During the day, he went with his mother instead of to the great house for his lessons with Thomas Henry. *From here on*, he thought, *I’ll keep Ma from all danger.*

After the beating, Ma returned to the field where the people trudged through the tobacco, digging up cutworms and plucking away hornworms. Kiskey came at night to doctor her up and to show Gabriel how to

wash the gashes in his mother's back with a tincture of apple-cider vinegar and herbs from the kitchen garden. To Gabriel, Ma's whip marks resembled the earth between the tobacco hills, newly tilled and ready for planting.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are either products of the author's
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