
CANDLE *in*
the DARKNESS



LYNN AUSTIN



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For Ken, always
and for
Joshua, Benjamin, and Maya

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Prologue

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 1864

Silvery moonlight slanted through the closed shutters, faintly illuminating Caroline Fletcher's bedroom. A pattern formed on the hardwood floor, a pattern that reminded her of prison bars, and she shivered at the thought of what she might soon face.

It was useless to remain in bed waiting for sleep. It refused to come. Caroline's mind and heart were much too full. She tossed aside the tangled bedcovers and crossed the room to light a tallow candle. Downstairs, the chimes of the hall clock announced the hour. She paused, counting each stroke—ten . . . eleven . . . twelve. Midnight.

Caroline had lain in bed for more than two hours, whispering urgent, tearful prayers for all the people she loved. But she felt no relief after bringing her concerns to the Lord. She'd pleaded especially for Charles, for Jonathan and Josiah, and for her father and Robert, begging God to keep them alive and safe throughout this long, dark night. And she'd prayed that her foolish mistakes and failures would not bring them harm. She hadn't prayed for her own rescue.

The water she was now treading was much too deep, the currents too swift for her own safe return to shore.

If she could begin again and not become so entangled in this long, horrible war, would she watch from the sidelines as a spectator this time? Would she choose differently, take fewer risks? Caroline had asked herself these questions countless times and had reached the same conclusion each time. She would do everything the same, walk the same path. But how could she explain her reasons to the people she loved? How could she hope to make them understand?

Her thoughts spun in useless circles as she quietly paced the room. If only she had some paper, then she could write a chronicle of her actions, explaining exactly why she had placed herself and her loved ones in such danger. But finding paper in besieged Richmond was as impossible as finding meat—and nearly as costly. Some newspaper editors had resorted to printing their latest editions on sheets of wallpaper.

Caroline halted mid-step. The walls of her front foyer were decorated with imitation marble wallpaper. Her father had purchased it on one of his trading ventures, and although it reminded Caroline of him and of the gentle life they'd once led, perhaps it could now serve a more important function. It was paper, after all—sheets and sheets of paper. And what earthly good was wallpaper in a house that Union troops might burn to the ground any day?

She remembered seeing a loose corner of wallpaper that had come unglued beside the library door. Caroline carried the smoky, homemade candle downstairs and set it on the floor near that spot, then knelt to gently peel the paper away from the wall. To carefully strip the entire entrance hall would require more patience than she possessed in her distressed and sleepless state, but before the clock chimed the next hour, she managed to tear away a ragged piece nearly a foot and a half long. It was enough to begin. She would make her script as small as she possibly could.

Praying for the right words and mindful of the urgency of her task, Caroline sat down in the library behind her father's mahogany desk and began to write.

As I write this by candlelight, Union troops have my beloved city of Richmond under siege. The hall clock tells me that it is well past midnight, but I am unable to sleep. I no longer know what tomorrow will bring, nor do I know when my arrest will come—but I'm now quite certain that it will come. Lying awake on nights like tonight, I listen in the darkness for the knock on my door. I think about Castle Thunder and wonder if I will soon join the gloomy prisoners who peer out from behind the barred windows.

I don't fear for myself but rather for all the people I love. I need to explain why I've done what I have done, to tell my story in my own words before it's told by those who won't understand. They will surely call me a traitor and a murderer, and I suppose I am both of those things. I have betrayed people who trusted me. Men have died because of me. My involvement with certain events in Libby Prison has led to accusations of moral improprieties, but as God is my witness, I am innocent of those charges. Even so, people will believe what they choose to believe. And when a host of vicious rumors is added to the list of my misdeeds, I'm not sure anyone will ever understand why I've acted the way I have. I can only pray that they will try.

I don't fear prison, nor do I regret a single decision I've made. As the Bible says, "No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." I only regret that I've hurt innocent people. I've tried so hard never to lie, but I realize as I'm writing this that falsehoods can consist of more than words—and I have been living a lie. For that, I beg God's forgiveness.

These long, sleepless nights have afforded me plenty of time to think things through. In my mind I've traveled all the way back to where my journey first began, to the morning I awoke to the sound of Tessie weeping for her son. I need to see if I could have done

things differently, made different choices, and perhaps have ended in a different place than I am today. I've decided to write down my story, telling it from the very beginning. I pray that you will read all of it before deciding if what I've done was a sin.

Here, then, is my tale.

Part One



Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

1 John 2:10–11 NIV

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RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 1853

The first scream jolted me awake. The second one chilled my soul.

I sat up in bed, searching for Tessie in the darkened room, but the pallet where my Negro mammy usually slept was empty.

“Tessie?” My voice trembled with fear. “Tessie, where are you?”

Rain drummed against the windowpane, keeping time with my heart. Beyond the shuttered windows, the day had dawned dark and dismal. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Then the heartrending cries broke the silence once again.

“No . . . *please!*”

The tumult came from outside, just below my room.

“Please don’t take him, please don’t take my boy from me, *please!*”

The voice, barely recognizable in its anguish, was Tessie’s.

I couldn’t believe it. For all of my twelve years, as far back as I could recall, Tessie had been a happy, carefree presence in my life, always humming or singing as her elegant brown hands dressed me and brushed my hair; cheering me when I was lonely, chasing away my sadness with her laughter, her smile lighting up her dark face. Mother was the one who had “spells” that caused her

to weep and pine away in her room for days on end, but I'd never once heard Tessie weep before. And these were such horrible, anguished cries.

"Please don't send my boy away, I beg you, Massa! Please!"

Then Tessie's son started screaming as well. Grady was nine—just three years younger than me—and I hadn't heard him cry since he was a baby, sleeping in the wicker basket in the kitchen beside the fireplace. Tessie had let me play with him as if he were a living baby doll, with plump brown cheeks and a giggle that made me laugh out loud. I remember being fascinated by his little hands, with their tiny brown fingers and soft pink palms.

Outside, the begging and weeping grew more distant. I climbed from my bed and hurried to the window that overlooked our rear garden. It took me a moment to open the shutters because I'd never done it. That was Tessie's job every morning.

Two strangers tramped down the brick walkway and through the wrought-iron gate, dragging Grady, screaming, out of the safety of our backyard. They were rough-looking fellows, dressed like laborers, and I watched as they lifted Grady into a wagon waiting at the curb. The wagon was packed with Negroes of all ages and sizes, some in chains and leg-irons. The men prodded the slaves with whips, shouting at them until they shifted themselves around on the wagon bed to make room for Grady.

Daddy stood watching near the back gate, his arms folded across his chest. He was already dressed for work, and rain darkened the shoulders of his overcoat and the brim of his hat. Big Eli, our stable hand, stood in the middle of the walk, struggling to hold on to Tessie as she screamed for her son.

"No! Don't take my boy! He all I got! Please! No!"

I turned away from the window and ran downstairs in my chemise, not bothering with slippers or a dressing gown. As I raced outside into the rain, Esther, our cook, spotted me from the kitchen, which was a separate outbuilding behind our house. She ran outside and

grabbed me before I could reach Tessie, then pulled me into the kitchen's smoky warmth.

"Whoa now, Missy . . . where you going in you nightclothes?"

"I want Tessie," I said, squirming to free myself. I tried to dodge around Esther and make a dash for the door, but she moved surprisingly fast for a woman her size, blocking my path with her broad body.

"No you don't, Little Missy. You not be going outside in the rain dressed like that."

"But . . . but Tessie's crying. And Grady is, too. Where are those men taking him in that wagon?"

"Massa Fletcher not be telling me his business. Hear, now! Stop you fussing, Missy!"

Esther held me as I struggled to break free, but she cast a worried eye on the ham she'd left frying in the pan for our breakfast. I could hear Tessie's pitiful screams above the sound of the ham sizzling in the pan, the fire crackling in the hearth, and the rain drumming on the roof of the kitchen. Then I heard the clatter of hooves and wheels as the wagon finally drove away.

A few minutes later, the kitchen door opened and Big Eli trudged inside, carrying Tessie in his arms like a child. She no longer fought against him but lay limp in his arms, her hands covering her face. Rain soaked both of them, streaming from their curly hair and running down their faces like tears. Tessie sobbed as if her heart would break, and I saw that it wasn't just rain that coursed down Eli's face. He was crying, too.

"God knows all about it, Tessie," he soothed as he sat her down in a chair near the fire. "God know how you suffering. They took His son away, too, remember? He know how it feel to lose His boy."

Esther finally released me and hurried back to her cooking. She flipped over the ham slice with a smooth flick of the frying pan, then shoved the pan back into the fireplace. I was free to run to Tessie, but I didn't. I backed away from her instead, overwhelmed by her despair. Rarely had her attention been focused on anything or anyone

but me. Even when Grady was a baby, she would leave him crying in his basket to tend to me if I demanded it. For the first time in my life, Tessie seemed completely unaware of me, as unaware as my mother was during one of her spells.

"Shh, don't cry," Eli murmured. He lifted Esther's shawl from the nail by the door and draped it around Tessie's shoulders. "Don't cry. . . ."

"No sir!" Esther suddenly shouted. She slammed the frying pan down on the table with a *clang* that made my skin prickle. "You let that girl cry," she told her husband. "I know how she feel and so do you. Isn't our son sold and gone, too? That pain don't never leave a mother. Never! I feel it to this day."

Tessie lifted her head to face Esther, her features twisted in anguish. "Your boy only over to Hilltop. You know where he at. My boy's gone to auction and I ain't never seeing him again!"

"Only for this lifetime, Tessie," Eli soothed. "Then you be with Grady all eternity."

Tessie wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands and pulled the shawl tightly around her shoulders to stop her shivering. Her gaze fell on me for the first time. She looked me straight in the eye, something she'd never done in my entire life. No servant dared to look a white person in the eye. Tessie's eyes were cold with hatred.

"This here your mama's doing," she said, her voice hushed with rage. "Your mama behind this."

"Tessie!" Eli said in horror. "Hush your mouth!"

I turned from them and fled, crying as I ran across the yard, into the house, and upstairs to my room.

I didn't see Tessie again for the rest of the day. Luella came up with my breakfast tray a little while later and helped me get dressed and brush my hair. But Luella didn't hum or sing like Tessie always did, and she brushed too hard, snagging my hair in the bristles and bringing tears to my eyes.

"Where's Tessie?" I asked her as she made my bed. "Why did those men take Grady away?"

Luella shrugged her bony shoulders. “Don’t know, Missy. Don’t know nothing about all that.”

I sat alone in my room all morning, gazing through the windows, watching the rain gather in puddles in the street below. Our house on Church Hill stood on the corner of Grace and Twenty-sixth Streets, and from my bedroom in a rear corner I could look down on our backyard and the street. The gate stood open, swinging a little in the wind. I stared at the spot where the wagon had stood, willing it to return, willing the men to bring Grady home so our lives could all return to normal. But the carriages and wagons that splashed past our house never even slowed, much less stopped. Grady didn’t come back.

Around noon, my mother’s maidservant came to fetch me. “You mama asking for you,” Ruby said. “She’s wanting you to eat lunch with her today. In her room.”

It was the first time I’d seen Mother since her latest crying spell had begun, several weeks ago, and I had no idea what to expect. I was very nervous as I approached her suite down the hall from my room—especially since Tessie wasn’t with me to prod me along and give me courage. As soon as I entered the room, I saw that Mother was in one of her cheerful moods. Ruby had drawn her curtains back and thrown her shutters open, and even though it was still rainy and gloomy outside, her room was not the dismal, depressing place it usually was during her sad spells.

“Hello, Sugar,” she said, smiling faintly from her chair near the window. “Come on over here and give your mama a kiss.”

I crossed the floor and brushed my lips on Mother’s cheek. She looked painfully thin, her bones sharply defined beneath her pale skin. But my mother was still a very beautiful woman, one who stood out among her peers. I’d inherited my wavy brown hair from her, but not my dark eyes. They came from my father. Mother’s eyes were a soft, faded gray, like spring storm clouds. I wondered if the many tears she had shed had washed the color right out of them.

Mother motioned for me to sit across from her at the little table by the window. She had a frenzied intensity about her, as if a relentless, pulsing current raced through her veins. While Ruby laid out all the food, Mother chatted excitedly, hopping from one topic to the next like a little bird flitting from branch to branch. I barely listened. Instead, I studied my mother's perfect, moon-shaped face, her graceful movements, watching the sweep of her small, round hands as she spread her napkin across her lap.

Her breathless voice and rapid words made her sound as though she were running up flight after flight of stairs to the very top floor of a building, where a thrilling view awaited her. Once she reached that place, where all the world lay spread at her feet, I knew that her days would be filled with laughter and happy conversation. She would make glorious plans for all the things she would see and do: shopping in Richmond's finest stores, ordering fancy silk dresses and bonnets imported from England and France, attending balls and parties and elegant dinners. I'd been to the top with her before, and I knew what would come next. Inevitably, she would begin to descend the stairs once again. The pleasant conversation and laughter would gradually die away as she trudged downward, until one day she would finally reach the cold, dark basement, where she lived with sorrow and tears.

I remembered Tessie's bitter tears earlier that morning and summoned all my courage. "Did you send Grady away?" I asked when Mother paused for breath.

"Hmm? Did I do what, Sugar?" she asked absently.

"Did you send Grady away . . . my mammy Tessie's boy?"

"Now, Caroline, you know I don't have anything whatsoever to do with those servants—except for Ruby, of course. She has belonged to me ever since I was just a little girl like you. Did I ever tell you that? Ruby has been my own dearest mammy for just as long as I can recall. My daddy gave her to me for a wedding present when I got married because he knew I wouldn't be able to get along for a

single day without her. Just like you and your mammy. But Tessie and all the rest of them are your daddy's property, not mine. It's his job to see to them, and—"

Suddenly she stopped. Mother frowned at me, and for a horrible moment I was afraid she was angry with me. Maybe I shouldn't have asked her about Grady. What if she decided to send me away, too? But a moment later she said, "Who made that awful mess of your hair, Caroline? Why, your part is as crooked as a country lane—and it's nowhere near the middle of your head. And the rest of your hair is sticking out of your net like . . . like an old bird's nest."

Mother set down her teacup as if she couldn't possibly take another sip with my hair in such a state. "Ruby!" she called. "Ruby, come see if you can do something with this child's hair. What in the world has gotten into your mammy that she would make such a mess of it like that?"

"Tessie didn't do my hair. Luella did."

"Luella! But she's only an old scrub maid. Whoever heard of such a thing—a common scrub maid brushing my daughter's hair? Why, it's disgraceful."

"Luella had to help me today because they took Grady away and Tessie was crying, and—"

She put her hands over her ears. "I told you, Caroline, I don't want to talk about those people. Proper young ladies don't concern themselves with such unpleasant subjects as slaves. I've warned and warned your father that you were becoming much too familiar with them, and see here? I was right. This is exactly what I was talking about. It isn't good for you at all. Ruby, don't just stand there gawking; fix the child's hair."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ruby guided me out of my chair and seated me at my mother's mirrored dressing table. I watched as she took off the net that Luella had clumsily pinned on and began brushing my hair with my mother's silver hairbrush. The soft bristles caressed my head

the way Tessie's gentle fingers did when she stroked my temples to soothe me to sleep.

"She have your hair, ma'am," Ruby said. "So thick and nice. She look like you when she grow up . . . see?" Ruby deftly twisted my hair into a little bun and held it up on the back of my head like a grown-up lady's. Somehow she had made it puff out on the sides, too, so that my face looked fashionably moon-shaped, like my mother's.

"Can Ruby pin it up like that, Mother?" I begged. "So it looks like yours?"

"Heavens, no. You're much too young."

"Please, just for fun?" I don't know what made me so brave. I was usually too timid to say a word to anyone, especially to my mother, who was a virtual stranger to me. But I missed Tessie, and I took courage from the fact that Mother seemed to be climbing her way up from her sad spell again. As I watched her face, reflected in the mirror, she finally smiled.

"Oh, all right. Pin it up for her, Ruby. Then Caroline and I can sip our tea like two Richmond belles."

Ruby expertly parted and pulled and twisted my hair, sticking hairpins in the back and tucking a pair of Mother's beautiful ivory combs on the sides. My head felt strange and wobbly. I stared at myself in the mirror and barely recognized the grown-up girl who stared back.

"Missy Caroline gonna be beautiful, just like you, ma'am," Ruby said as she worked. "And she have your skin, too. Just as white as milk."

"If only we can keep her from running all around in the backyard from now on, it just might stay white, too," Mother said. "I told her father she's twelve years old now, and it simply won't do to have her pretty white skin all freckled from the sun. Or worse still, to have her looking as brown as a Negro. Honestly, it's disgraceful enough that she plays with one of them all day without her looking like one of them, too."

Grady.

I suddenly recalled the feeling of warm sunshine on my hair and my face, of cool grass beneath my bare feet, and the sound of Grady's rippling laughter as we chased each other around the backyard. High above us, I remembered my mother standing behind her curtained window like a shadow, watching.

Tears filled my eyes. Grady was gone—my playmate, my friend. They'd thrown him into the back of a wagon full of Negro slaves wearing chains.

Mother didn't seem to notice my tears as she rattled on and on. "Goodness, you do look all grown up, Caroline. Why, before long you'll be too old to wear short-sleeved dresses. We'll be sewing hoops to your petticoat instead of those girlish cords you're wearing. But I really must remember to tell that worthless cook of ours to give you more to eat. Honestly, you're thin as a willow."

I was fine-boned and very small for a twelve-year-old, but it wasn't Esther's fault. She did her best to try to fatten me up, complaining that I didn't eat enough to keep a sparrow alive. She swore that a good, strong wind would pick me up and blow me clear to Washington, D.C.

"Now, come back over here and sit down, Caroline. We have some very important changes to discuss."

Mother's words sent a shiver through me. I slipped into my place at the tea table, but I was suddenly too nervous to eat. I hated change of any kind. Other girls my age went on afternoon social calls with their mothers, visiting the homes of their friends, learning the art of polite conversation. But my mother, once the belle of Richmond, hardly ever left our house. I'd pieced together the reason why by listening to the servants whispering and by watching the family doctor come and go from my mother's room. Her spells of deep sadness, which made her weep for days on end, were caused by the fact that she hadn't been able to give my daddy a son.

I once heard Ruby say that Mother had "lost" her baby, and I worried for the longest time that Mother would lose me, too. For months, whenever I ventured outside with my mother on those rare

occasions when she went visiting or attended church with Daddy and me, I clung to her skirts for fear of becoming lost. I later learned that the “lost” babies had died before they were born.

When I was eight, Mother did give birth to a son. She and my daddy were overjoyed. But their happiness quickly turned to grief when the baby died just a few hours later. My brother had been a “blue” baby, according to Ruby, and was simply too weak to live. Mother’s grief lasted a very long time. I didn’t see her for months, but it didn’t really matter. I had Tessie to take care of me. Tessie’s slender brown arms hugged me close; her long, graceful fingers wiped my tears. And I had Grady to play with.

My mother’s spells followed a cycle after that. She was joyously happy when she was expecting, and in deepest despair when the baby was lost. Over the years, she gradually withdrew from the glittering Richmond society she had once presided over, unable to leave her bed when she was in a family way, unwilling to leave it after her hopes were cruelly dashed once again.

I became as much of a recluse as my mother, more at home in the kitchen with the Negro servants than visiting with the few relatives and acquaintances who still called on my mother from time to time. I had no idea how to talk to grown-ups—and no desire to talk to any of them, either. Shy and awkward, I became as jumpy and high-strung as a hummingbird. When I was nine, Daddy hired a governess to teach me reading, writing, needlework, and how to play the piano. She lived with us for three years, then quit a few months ago to marry a clerk from one of Daddy’s warehouses.

Now I fidgeted on the scratchy horsehair chair in my mother’s room, waiting to hear what these new, important changes in my life were all about.

“Listen, Caroline,” she began, “I’ve decided that it’s high time you attended a real school every day, with other girls your age.”

Cold fear froze me to the chair. I wanted to shout, “*No!*” but I couldn’t get a single word out of my mouth.

“Your father and I are sending you to the Richmond Female Institute. It’s where I went to school when I was a girl. All the arrangements have been made.”

Her words sent a shudder of fear through me. I always became ill at the slightest deviation from my usual routine and would even get sick to my stomach when church services varied at Christmas and Easter. The idea of entering an unknown school, facing a stern headmistress and a horde of strange girls, filled me with terror. My hands flew to my mouth as my stomach began to seethe.

“Now, don’t you give me that look, Caroline, like you want to run and hide under the bed. I won’t stand for any more of that nonsense. I don’t know what your Negro mammy has done to you to make you so skittish, but it’s high time you grew into the proper young lady you’re meant to be. And that means learning how to get on in society, learning what’s expected of you. I’m sorry that my poor health has prevented me from teaching you properly, but it can’t be helped.”

“But you’re well now, Mother,” I said hoarsely. “Can’t you teach me here at home?”

“Don’t be silly. It’s much better for you to be out among other girls your age. By the way, classes begin at the school in two weeks.”

I covered my face and sobbed.

“Caroline Ruth Fletcher, you stop crying this instant! You are no longer a baby, and you are going to that school, so you had better get used to the idea, you hear? Look at me.”

I lifted my head and nodded, but the tears kept falling.

“I’ll have to see about hiring a seamstress to stitch you a new dress,” she continued. “I believe girls at the school still wear outfits of forest green broadcloth with white collars. That’s been the tradition since I attended as a girl. It’s such a lovely color of green, and it will look very pretty on you. I’ll order some matching ribbons for your hair, too. And under no circumstances is Luella ever to touch your hair again, you hear? Your mammy will either have to pull herself

together immediately or face a whipping. Why aren't you eating, Caroline? Finish your tea and sandwiches."

I felt so sick I didn't know if I could eat. I dutifully picked up one of the finger sandwiches Esther had made and nibbled half-heartedly around the edges as my mother rambled on and on about her memories of the Richmond Female Institute. It would take much longer than two weeks to get used to the idea.

By the time lunch was finally over, Mother was ready for her laudanum pill and an afternoon nap. She dismissed me at last, and I was secretly pleased when she forgot to tell Ruby to take my hair down again. I floated carefully out of the room with my head held high so my hair wouldn't escape from the combs.

Talking with my mother had made me feel all mixed up inside, as though I was being pulled in two directions at the same time. I liked the grown-up way I looked with my hair done up fancy, but I didn't want to be grown-up enough to attend school. I liked eating sandwiches and drinking tea with my mother, but I missed having Tessie fussing over me and babying me. Tears filled my eyes every time I thought about Grady or recalled the hateful way my mammy had looked at me. I still hadn't seen Tessie since morning.

I decided to go searching for her and eventually ended up running outside through the rain to the kitchen. Esther bustled around the steamy room, barking orders at poor Luella. "Move faster, girl, or this here sauce gonna burn to a crisp!"

"Where's Tessie?" I asked above the din of rattling pots and dishes.

"She sick in bed," Esther replied. "Luella, I said bring me the *jar* of salt, not that puny little old saltshaker. You hearing me?"

"But I just looked in my bedroom," I said, "and Tessie wasn't in her bed."

"She up where us folks sleep." Esther motioned with a tilt of her head to the ladder that led to the slaves' quarters above the kitchen. I started toward it, but Esther stopped me again. "Oh, no you don't. You get on out of here, Missy. You leave Tessie be."

“But why can’t I see her? Is she mad at me?”

“Land sakes, child. Why she be mad at you? She you mammy. You her precious girl-child. She grieving over her boy, that’s all. And you has to give her time to do that.”

I slumped down on a kitchen chair, hoping Esther or Luella would talk to me, but they were busy cooking a huge, fancy dinner and had no time for conversation. I finally wandered back to the house and upstairs to my room again, disappointed that neither of them had noticed my hair.

Rain raced steadily down my windowpanes all afternoon. I couldn’t remember a day without Tessie by my side, and I felt terribly alone. She didn’t even come upstairs to tell me to take a nap, so I decided I would rebel and not take one. I sat in a chair and read a book instead, careful not to mess up my hair.

When it was nearly time for my daddy to come home, I tiptoed to the upstairs hall window and knelt on the bench to watch for him. Maybe if I begged Daddy to bring Grady back, Tessie wouldn’t be sad anymore. And maybe if I told Daddy how scared I was to go to school, he would tell me I didn’t have to go after all.

At last his carriage pulled up to the front of the house. I ran down the stairs to the entrance hall and pulled the heavy front door open for him all by myself—something Tessie would have had a fit over if she had seen me. Gilbert, Daddy’s manservant, held an umbrella over Daddy’s head as he hurried up the walk to the door. My father looked tired; the deep lines in his handsome, square face made him look old. I knew by the silvery threads in his hair and in his mustache that he was several years older than my beautiful mother, but just how old I didn’t know. I also had no idea what kind of work my daddy did all day—only that he owned warehouses near the James River, that he sometimes traveled far away for months at a time, and that he constantly worried about his ships, which sailed back and forth to South America. But in spite of the rain and his fatigue, Daddy looked pleased to see me. He smiled the familiar, cockeyed smile

that I loved so much, making one arched eyebrow and one side of his mustache lift in amusement.

“Well, now! Nobody told me that we had company! Who is this lovely young lady who has come calling at my house?” He bowed like a gentleman and kissed my fingers.

I covered my mouth with my other hand and giggled. “It’s me, Daddy!”

“No! This can’t be my little Caroline. Why, you look just like a Richmond belle.”

I danced from foot to foot, waiting for Gilbert to take Daddy’s coat, my stomach writhing in an agony of nerves. When I finally found my voice, it sounded very small. “Can I ask you something, Daddy?”

“Why, certainly. Right this way, young lady, if you please.” He offered me his arm and led me into his library. Daddy sank into his usual armchair behind his desk, but I was too fidgety to sit. I stood in front of him, squirming with anxiety.

Suddenly I didn’t want to be a fine lady anymore. I longed for Daddy to open his arms wide and invite me to crawl up onto his lap and hug his neck the way I hugged Big Eli. I loved my daddy because he was so handsome with his neatly trimmed mustache and wavy brown hair, his finely tailored clothes and crisp, white shirts. Daddy was kind to me and brought me all sorts of treats whenever he returned from one of his long trips. But I could never recall sitting on his lap. If I needed a man’s strong arms to hold me close and comfort me when I was upset, I ran to Eli.

“Now, tell me why you are all dolled up today,” Daddy said as Gilbert handed him his evening drink. “Did you have a gentleman caller, Sugar?”

“Daddy!” I blushed at the thought, then drew a deep breath as I remembered my mission. “Mother says I have to go to the Richmond Female Institute.”

“You’ll be the prettiest girl there,” he said after taking a swallow.

“But do I have to go? Can’t you hire another governess to come and teach me at home?”

“Now, Caroline. It isn’t good for you to stay shut up inside the house all the time.”

“But Mother does.”

His crooked smile faded. “I know. But that’s different. Your mother is . . . delicate. You’re a strong, healthy girl.”

I waited for him to take another sip of his drink, then I blurted the truth. “But I’m scared to go.”

“All the more reason why you should go. You need to make friends with girls your own age, Sugar. Get over your shyness.”

I hung my head in disappointment, fighting tears. Daddy set his drink on the desk and leaned forward to lift my chin.

“Look at me, Caroline. I happen to agree with your mother this time. You’ve been spending far too much time with Tessie and Eli and all the other Negro servants. You’re a young lady now, and it’s high time you made some proper friends.”

“But they *are* my friends—my very best friends.”

“No, Sugar. I don’t want to hear any more arguments, understand?”

I nodded, choking back tears and protests. Daddy appeared satisfied as he settled in his chair again. But at the mention of Tessie, I remembered the awful scene I had awakened to that morning and the other question I needed to ask.

“Daddy, where did those men take Grady?”

He selected a cigar from the box that Gilbert held out to him. “You don’t need to worry about all that, Caroline.”

“Tessie said we’ll never see him again. Is that true?”

“Yes,” he said with a sigh. “Yes, I suppose it is true.”

“But why? What did Grady do wrong to make you send him away?”

“Why, not a thing, Sugar. What made you think that he had?”

“Some of the men in that wagon had chains on their legs, like they were going to prison.”

He shook his head. "They're not going to prison. Only slaves who have tried to run away wear chains. I'm sure Tessie's boy has better sense than that."

"Tessie said it was all Mother's fault. That sending Grady away was *her* doing."

Daddy's expression changed. He looked very uncomfortable all of a sudden, and he stirred in his armchair as if the springs had poked him. For an awful moment I was afraid that I'd made him angry, that he would glare at me in the same hateful way that Tessie had. But Daddy looked down at the cigar he was fingering, not at me.

"Listen, Caroline. Grady is a grown boy now. It's time for him to go out into the world, just like it's time for you to go to school. You need to make new friends, and he needs to start earning his keep."

"But Grady does earn his keep. He helps Eli with the horses, and he carries water and wood for Esther, and—"

"A bright, healthy boy like Grady can be trained for something useful—how to be a blacksmith or a carpenter or some other trade that will benefit his new owner. Besides, we have enough help around here without him."

"But Grady—"

"Hush." Papa placed his fingers over my lips to silence me. "We no longer own Grady. I sold him. And that's the last I ever want to hear about the boy. Understand? Forget about him."

Daddy finished his drink in one gulp and laid aside the unlit cigar. "You'll have to excuse me now, Caroline. Your mother and I are expecting company for dinner and I need to get ready."

Esther fed me all by myself upstairs in my bedroom that evening. She looked worn out from cooking all day. "Missy," she said, wiping the sweat from her face with her apron, "I so tired I could fall asleep standing up, just like the horses do."

"Will Tessie come up to tuck me in bed?" I asked.

"No, child," she said gently. "Let Tessie finish grieving in peace. She be herself tomorrow. You see."

“But who will help me get undressed? I can’t reach the fasteners in back by myself . . . or undo my corset laces . . .”

“It have to be Luella or Ruby. I clean wore out.” She turned to leave the bedroom, then paused. “And listen, Missy. Don’t you be talking about Grady and asking Tessie bunch of questions tomorrow. Best thing is to forget him, and she can’t do that if you talking about him all time.”

It was what my father had told me, too. Forget him. Forget Grady.

“But may I ask her—”

“No, Miss Caroline. You can’t be asking her nothing about that poor boy.”

The day ended as strangely as it had begun. Luella came upstairs to help me undress, but her hands were so rough and callused from all her scrubbing and polishing that I only allowed her to unfasten my bodice and loosen the corset laces. I took off my petticoats by myself. Luella didn’t know how to pull back the bedcovers like Tessie always did, either. Or how to tuck me in properly.

It seemed strange to see my mammy’s empty mat across the room. I had never gone to sleep all by myself before. I begged Luella to leave a candle burning.

“Just don’t be setting the house afire,” she warned before hurrying back to the kitchen to finish scrubbing the dishes.

As I lay in bed watching the candle’s wavering flame, I couldn’t help thinking about Grady even though Daddy and Esther had told me not to. I’d watched Grady nurse at Tessie’s breast and helped him take his first toddling steps. I’d seen him grow from a plump, contented baby to a carefree little boy who’d played with me as if we were brother and sister. We’d romped in the garden together, climbed the magnolia tree, and pestered Big Eli while he worked, barraging him with our endless questions. Soon Grady had grown big enough to be put to work, and while I’d learned to read and write, he had learned how to take care of the horses and grease the carriage wheels. But every afternoon when our work was finished, we had played together.

Grady was as happy and good-natured as his mother, and the chores he did every day—hauling wood and toting water—molded him into a sturdy, muscular youth. By the age of nine, he'd grown as tall as me and twice as strong. But he had looked so small and helpless this morning as those men had dragged him down the sidewalk, so lost and despairing as they'd thrown him into that slave wagon. Daddy said I had to forget him. He said I would never see Grady again.

I rolled over onto my stomach, buried my face in the pillow, and sobbed.