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LIGHT IN THE  
*W*ILDERNESS

A NOVEL



JANE  
KIRKPATRICK

  
Revell

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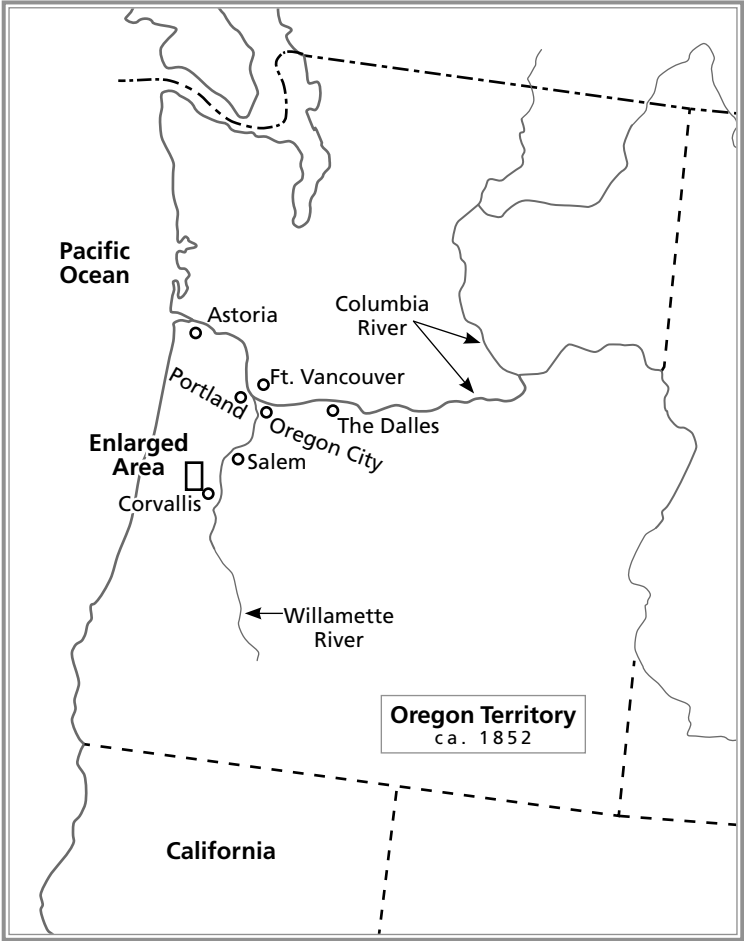
Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

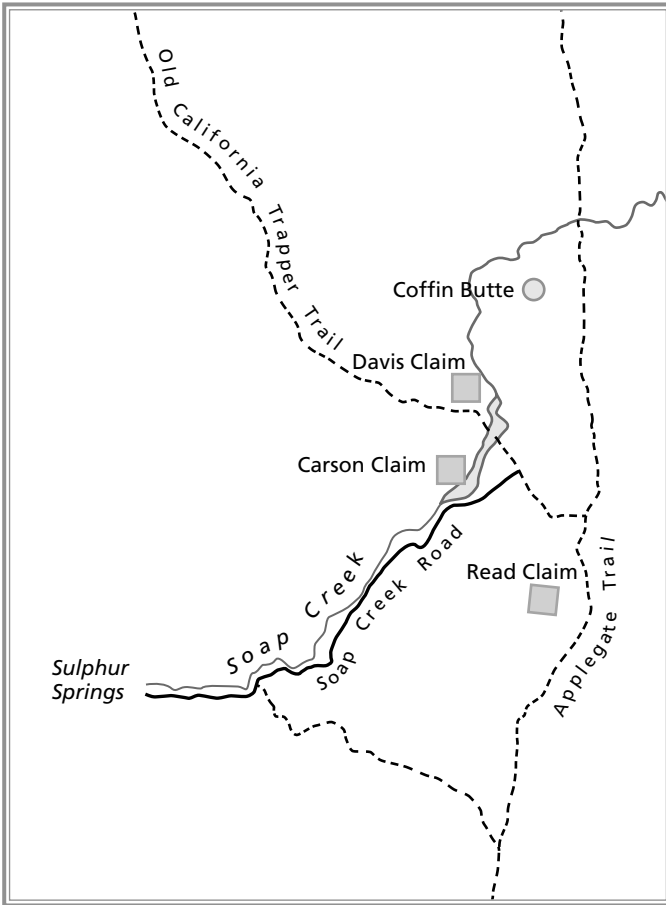
This book is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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# Cast of Characters

Letitia (Carson)	an African American woman
Martha & Adam Carson	Letitia and David's children
David (Davey) Carson	Former mountain man/farmer/ common-law husband of Letitia
Smith Carson	brother of David Carson
Junior Carson	David's son from first marriage
Sarah Bowman	a Missouri and later Oregon neighbor
William Bowman	husband of Sarah
Zachariah Hawkins	doctor in Iowa/Missouri/Oregon journey
Nancy Hawkins	wife of Zachariah, neighbor of Carsons in Missouri and Oregon
Samuel, Maryanne, Martha, Edward, Laura, Nancy Jane	children of Nancy and Zachariah Hawkins
The Woman, Betsy	a Kalapuya woman in Oregon country
Little Shoot	Betsy's grandson
Greenberry Smith (G.B. Smith)	slave patroller and neigh- bor of Carsons in Oregon
Eliza White	slave girl under contention in Missouri
Stephen Staats	captains whom Carson trav- eled with in 1845
Levin English	
Henry Knighton	drovers for Carson
Hardin Martin	
Joseph and Frances Gage	Letitia's neighbors
A.J. Thayer	Letitia's attorney





**Soap Creek Valley around 1852**

Being one of the “Poor Whites” from a slave state I can speak with some authority for that class—many of those people hated slavery, but a much larger number of them hated free negroes even worse than slaves.

—Jesse Applegate, Oregon emigrant from Missouri in 1843

The essential code must include . . . how to crawl from the wreckage when this life falters, how to plunge to the cellar of sorrow and grope for the ladder that might bring you back into some kind of light, no matter how dim or strange.

—Kim Stafford, *100 Tricks Any Boy Can Do*

She walked toward the prairie,  
the unexpected promise of possibility, new grace  
in her heart . . .

—Kathleen Ernst, *Facing Forward*

# Prologue

1842—KENTUCKY

She had imagined the day she would escape; it would be high noon when people least expected them to run, when the dogs lay panting in the Kentucky sun and the patrols rested, not seeking a colored woman making her way to freedom. She'd be fearing for her life. But now, no one chased her. No braying hounds barked; yet her heart pounded.

Here she was, her bare feet ready to leave Kentucky soil; and she was going as a free woman. Letitia patted the parchment inside the bond at her waist. It was secure. Then she pulled the shawl around her shoulders, lifted her tow linen skirt and her only petticoat, and pulled herself up with ease onto the wagon seat beside Sarah Bowman. Not that she was their equal, oh no, she knew that wasn't so. But she was free and free people rode facing forward. The rough cloth pressed against her legs as she sat.

"All set?" Mr. Bowman turned to his wife.

"As good as I'll ever be." The woman held a baby in her arms. She patted Letitia's fingers, held them for a moment, then withdrew them as though she'd touched a snake. "Maybe you should

ride in back, Tish. Yes, that would be better. Make sure the little ones are settled.”

Letitia hesitated. *Was now the time?*

“Letitia?”

She moved then without complaint under the wagon covering, the August heat already stifling, the scent of canvas new to her nose.

“Over!” One Bowman child barked at her sister, who sat on the older girl’s doll. Letitia wiggled her way past the two-year-old who smiled at her even when Letitia lifted her to retrieve the sought-after doll. Like a lily pad on a pond Letitia nestled herself within the array of bags and bedding and other property of the Bowmans. She swooped the toddler into her lap when the child crawled to her, smelled the lavender of the girl’s hair, then pointed so the child would look out the back arch of the opening. Caged chickens cackled their discontent on the other side of the wagon. A hot breeze pushed past them. As Letitia looked out through the wagon’s bow, a thousand memories bled through the tears in her eyes.

She’d miss the Kentucky goldenrod. She wondered what flowers bloomed in Missouri, what life would bring there. It didn’t matter. She was leaving this place as a free woman; she wouldn’t have to be afraid now. She could own firkins, candlesticks, and kale seeds, property that belonged to her. She had papers to show.

Her heart no longer pounded as a woman running. Dust drifted up to scent the warm air. Flies buzzed. The children had settled their claims for space. A slow grin worked its way onto her face, sent a shiver down her bare arms. She brushed at the tears, rested her chin on the toddler’s head, indigo-colored arms soft around the child. “Thank God Almighty,” she whispered. The toddler reached up without looking and patted Letitia’s cheek. Letitia began to sing, a low husky sound. “I gotta right. You gotta right. We all gotta right to the tree of life.” Letitia stared out the wagon back and smiled. A free woman didn’t have to face forward to know she headed in the right direction.



A decorative flourish consisting of several overlapping, light gray, swirling lines that frame the text.

# *Part One*





## Having an Opinion

1844—PLATTE COUNTY, MISSOURI

Letitia preferred the shadows, avoiding the skirmish before her. But the child tugged on her hand and led Letitia to the dust in front of the Platte County courthouse. Men’s voices sliced the air like the whips of a field marse, sharp and stinging. The air was heavy as a wet, wool quilt, yet dust billowed around the two men as it did when bulls scraped the earth. “She was contracted for, fair and square. She failed to do the work!” Letitia knew the speaker, Davey Carson, once of Ireland, now of Carroll Township, Platte County, Missouri. Today, full of consternation. Bushy eyebrows with the tint of auburn formed a chevron of scowl over his nose. “Sure and I did nothing like she says I did. Not a thing. The girl didn’t work, I tell ye!”

Letitia shrank back, grateful his anger wasn’t directed at her. She tugged at the child’s hand to move toward the Platte City store.

“We’ll settle it in court then.” The second man brushed past

Davey, leaving the Irishman like a shriveled pickle in the bottom of a barrel, no one wanting to touch it.

Davey's red face scanned the disappearing crowd. When his eyes caught Letitia's, she glanced down. Hot sun brought out sweat on her forehead, intensified the scent of coconut oil and honey she'd used to smooth her crinkly hair. She turned her head to the side. "Let's go." She started to reach for the child's hand.

"I suppose you believe that too," he accused.

She halted.

"That I'm a madman capable of beating a young lass and misusing her, slave or no! Is that your opinion, woman?"

Was he really speaking to her? She should walk away. She didn't need to get in an argument with a white man. She was in the town getting buttons and bows for Mrs. Bowman and looking after Artemesia, who had begged to come along. The child stared, slipped her hand inside Letitia's. It felt wet and warm.

"I gots nothin' to speak of, Mistah Carson. I gots no opinion. I jus' stayin' out of the way." She did have an opinion, though. He had been kind to her the year before, not long after she'd arrived in Platte County, when she'd asked him to take her money and buy a cow with it.

His voice rose again. "I may be an old mountain man not accustomed to town ways, but I know how to take care of property." He threw his hands into the air. "I never touched her. Never! It was a trick all along, I tell ye. They told the lass to run away so they'd have their property and my money and I'd be without her labor and my money both." Davey stomped up the courthouse steps past the black and white cornerstones. Letitia was dismissed.

Each American was due his "day in court," or so she'd heard. She hoped he was successful in his lawsuit. She wasn't sure why. Taking sides wasn't her way. Her heartbeat returned to a steady pace.

In the store, they waited. The mercantile owner had customers to keep happy, and serving those white people first was a given. Letitia spread her hands over the smooth bolts of cloth, the new

dyes tickling her nose. She lifted the lacework on the shelf, fingering the tidy stitches. Irish lace? She shook her head. People were trading their finery for hardtack and flour, getting ready for travel west.

Letitia was going to Oregon too, with the Bowmans. She wasn't certain how she felt about that. She'd learned the rules of Missouri, showed her papers when asked, endured the sneers and snarls of "free black" as though the word meant stink or worse, a catching kind of poison spread by being present near her breath. But good things had happened to her since she'd been in this state too. She'd earned money helping birth babies, enough to buy a cow. Davey Carson had in fact made the purchase for her, taking her money to acquire the cow that she paid the Bowmans for feeding—along with her own keep.

But she'd heard that the Oregon people wanted to join the states as free. She'd be free there too, and without slavery and its uncertainty hovering like a cloud of fevered mosquitoes. Maybe in Oregon she'd try her hand at living alone. Or if she married and had children, they'd be born free there and no one could ever sell them away from her. What property she had would be hers to keep. Like the cow she owned. She eyed a silver baby rattle on the mercantile shelf. She felt its cool weight. For when . . . if ever again. No, Mr. Bowman said they could only take essentials. A baby rattle wouldn't qualify.

Still, Letitia chose to go to Oregon with them, chose to help Sarah with the laundry and care of the children. She felt free to call her Missus Bowman whenever they were in public, even though at the log cabin she could call her Miss Sarah, like an older sister. Though they weren't ever so close as that.

While Artemesia ogled the hard candy counter, Letitia wandered the store, placing a set of needles into her basket, looking at a hairbrush, her face reflected in the silver back. Coal black hair frizzing at her temples beneath her straw hat, damp from humidity heavy as a dog's breath at high noon. Dark brown eyes set into a face the color of the skinny piano keys. Sadness looked out at her,

reminding her of all those eyes had seen in her twenty-six years. The set was nothing she could afford.

A gust of wind burst sand against the store's windows. Outside the weather worked itself up into a downpour. Getting home would drench them. She ought to have remembered the slicker for the child, but it hadn't looked like rain. She didn't want the child to catch cold.

A sewing box caught her eye. Tortoiseshell with green and blue silk lining the inside. She opened it and saw the ivory spool holders. She could make a false bottom and put her paper there, somewhere safe and secure.

"What can I do for you, Miss Artemesia?" The shopkeeper spoke to the child. He and Letitia were the only adults now, all other customers serviced and gone, scampering through the rain with the umbrellas the shopkeeper loaned them.

"Mistah Bowman will be in tomorrow to pick up these things." Letitia handed him a list, careful not to touch his fingers even though she wore gloves. "I's buying the needles."

"This your mammy, Miss Bowman?" He nodded toward Letitia.

"Yes sir. She's Aunt Tish."

"She has money to buy needles?"

Letitia raised her voice. "I has money. Suh."

He frowned. Letitia handed him the coins. "Bowmans pay me. I's a free woman."

He harrumphed. "So you're all really going to Oregon then, Miss Bowman?"

Artemesia nodded.

"Must say, you'll be missed, little lady." He turned to put Letitia's money in the till. "Half the town seems to be heading west. I see the wagons rolling." He sighed. "Wouldn't mind a change of scenery myself now and then. Not sure though that I trust those letters sent back about all the good things Oregon has awaiting."

"We able to borrow one of your umbrellas, suh? It rainin' harsh."

"Should have remembered to bring one."

“Yessuh, but didn’t see no storms walkin’ in. Don’t want the chil’ getting’ sick.”

He nodded. “Wouldn’t want that on my conscience either. Here you go.”

Letitia didn’t give her opinion of letters sent and received. He wouldn’t care. Few asked her opinion. Miss Sarah didn’t invite suggestions for how to clean the bedrolls of fleas or how to lessen morning sickness. Mr. Bowman acted like she didn’t exist except to help break hemp or butcher hogs. But Davey Carson *had* asked her opinion of his lawsuit, now that she thought about it. She wore a little shame that she’d sidestepped his question, didn’t answer that she found him to be a kind man, unlike what he was accused of. He had treated her as though she was more than a post. That so rarely happened, she’d been shocked and was now surprised at the feeling of warmth arriving on the memory.