

# HOSANNA

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Leconte & Parker

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*To Donovan*  
*God's Gift*

## Acknowledgments

All honor and gratitude to my Lord and family—for without whom, I would have no life, love, or meaning.

And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation. Acts 17:26



## Prologue

ALL my babies call me, Mother Hill. You can't make young folk honor you; you've got to earn it with some loving kindness and a big ol' slice of sweet tater pie.

I been earning that honor for some time—toiling and spoiling the same family from TR to Silent Cal. And I can say, it's been one tedious journey. And I can say with surety, that there ain't too many maids left these days who'd put up with the Steffners this long. Folks just don't have longsuffering anymore. But I can't say it's been too bad. They do treat me like family and grin once every red moon, keeping me on satisfied, giving thanks for the years of cooking and cleaning. I've never been one to grumble about my work. After all, that's what I get paid to do. But if I could be truthful, the hardest part about working here, is watching over the daughter, Miss Gracie, who I call *Miss*, and who I feel ain't been too much trouble—till *now*.

She ain't no baby no more, but she might as well be. I got to do everything for her. But that don't even matter now, as I bear witness to a far bigger problem over here. It's a real big problem 'cause I been knowing this town all too well and I been racked in the head with its rules: that black women ain't got no business bearing white babies. And white women, like Miss, *shonuff*, ain't got no business bearing black babies. Ain't that what her mama, Miss Margret, been preaching for years? But that ain't even all. She told me long ago that bold folks may want to do something altogether different, but they got to know that

if they keep meddling with God's law, they got to be ready to suffer the cost.

I just hope the cost ain't too high, Lawd.

I been calling God without ceasing for eight head scratching hours. I never been scared like this my whole life. All I could do is sit and watch Miss Gracie laying up in that bed, knowing without a doubt, she been meddling with her mama's laws as soon as I see the brown pushing outta her and I hear the breath pushing outta me. 'Cause my mouth's wide open, enough to fit a big ol' turkey leg, enough to feel the blood rising up in my head, so tight, it ain't got no place to go.

Now she's wet from crown to belly. I can tell she wild tired. And I can tell she need to wail something spiteful, but she won't. Instead her bleeding lips just keep quivering to stay shut. For hours she ain't slapped a laboring sound at me or the baby catcher yet. All I could do is stare in wonder, holding my burdened jaw, thinking of what Miss Margret got left to preach about now.

And thinking some more about the last few months and how I been so wrong—so wrong about why Miss ain't been out the house since her daddy, Judge Steffner, up and died last year. So wrong about why she ain't been speaking, blaming it on mourning. Just lying to folks who been asking for her. But Lawd knows I didn't know the truth till this day. I know now she had another reason she ain't been speaking: some black man done pluck the bud off her innocence.

*Oh Lawd, I'm so scared.* I wipe steaming sweat from my highest lip, worrying for the poor black soul who got himself in a fix.

My good 'ol church sister in here slaving, wearing out her patience, just working to catch this baby. Oh, it's been a chore; Miss been refusing to push that baby out for a good long while. But this baby ain't no fool. In due time, she pushed her own self out. And my Sister been staring at the baby since, all confused, all tongue-tied, as if Miss done birth a rattlesnake.

After she clean off blood, after she wrap the baby, after she lay her by her mama, I watch Sister pull out a black notebook



from her dress pocket. My eyes hop with fear as I press my prayer hands between my shaky knees, holding back a down-pour like I been needing an outhouse for more than an hour.

“I need a name for the father and the baby,” she say.

Miss close her eyes.

After we stretched the time, Sister look on me like she ain’t got much time to wait. “Do you know the daddy’s name? I got to record this birth with the state.”

“With the who?” I ask.

“With the Georgia Board of Health.”

I think on it quick. “We ain’t going to do all that recording today, Sister. You know how folks are around here. They’ll kick, lynch, and destroy if they get wind of what done happen here,” I say. “You just be meek and quiet and count this like it God’s work. Just go on home and act like you never been here, never did nothing, never seen nothing.” I press my hands so hard; a cramp ran through my fingers. “I believe God’ll do right by you later.”

She proved she ain’t too obedient. She act like she got to put her board license above the murder or lynching that I believe was soon coming. Sister didn’t heed my warning; instead, she shined her eyes at me. So I went ahead and told her the truth, “I don’t know no daddy.”

I soon rose up and reached to rub Miss’s thigh.

“Miss,” I say.

She don’t say nothing.

“Miss.” I rub her leg some more. “What you got to say for yourself?”

If she was playing possum, I couldn’t tell. So I just left it alone. I look down at the baby girl Miss refuse to hold and went to thinking. “Jesus,” I whisper, “help me.”

It didn’t take long. I wipe new sweat off my lip with the back of my hand and look over at Sister. My mind went way back, and I believe I came up with the best name I could.

“Her name, *Hosanna*,” I say.

“What you say?” Sister ask like I got no business giving the name.

“Her name, *Hosanna*. Don’t you worry. God is well-pleased. Just go on and write it down.”

She didn’t say nothing more. She just wrote down the name *Hosanna*. Then wrote Grace Ann Steffner for the mother and left a big ’ol “X” for the father, who we know was going to see death sooner or later anyhow.

It was the black of morning when Sister finally left, shaking her head as I warned she better not tell nobody nothing. When she gave me her word, I set off for my toilet, doing a whole lot a pushing for a whole lot a nothing.

*I’m still scared, Lawd.*

It didn’t take long for morning to come in good. And I still ain’t had a lick a sleep yet. Just sitting and praying by Miss’s bed, knowing that baby need a feeding with her whining and all. So I try to get Miss to let the baby suckle a little, but she won’t even budge.

After tarrying for a long spell, I give up on Miss and carry the baby downstairs to the kitchen table, pull that baby next to my bosom, and let it tug a little. I almost fell out; I thought I was all dried up. I done pushed my last baby five years ago, but the good Lawd stepped in and made a way out of no way.

*You’s a powerful God.*

The baby quickly went to sleeping, so I set her belly over my lap and start pushing peas out the pods. Miss’s mama, Miss Margret, walk up fresh, seeking the baby only after I done told her about Miss Gracie’s situation the day before. “Let me see it,” she ask. I know she looking to see who the baby favor after she been promising she’ll make the guilty do right before word get out good.

I get so scared I start to sing, *Blessed Be the Rock*.

“Hush, now,” Miss Margret say. She never did care for that song. I learn Miss that song when she was seven years old. But Miss Margret say the song make Miss Gracie sound like she got black charcoal burning inside of her. So she don’t want to hear it no more.

So I hush, but I know she ain't going to be grinning when she see this pretty brown baby. She kneel on one leg and twist her head to take a good ol' look.

My eyes begin to sting from the hot spring water swelling in them. I knew it wouldn't take long for Miss Margret to holler foul.

"Who's niggra is this?" She shout like she ready to fight.

I squeeze my personals for the fear. When I don't answer quick, she did the figuring all by herself. I didn't care where I threw down peas. I just raised the baby over my shoulder and held on tight.

I started thinking about that poor Negro again—about him getting hung, about how it won't matter to Miss Margret if the poor man she catches is the one who did it for sure.

She run off to Miss's bedroom. I hold the baby's head and trail Miss Margret. I want to know what done happened myself.

I catch Miss Margret sitting on Miss's bedside. "What niggra did this damage to you, Gracie?"

Miss don't say nothing.

They stay quiet for a good long while, Miss Margret just combing Miss Gracie's hair with her fingers and rubbing her jaw with the back of her hand. But Miss Margret couldn't wait much longer. She say, "Don't you worry, Gracie. If I got to have every niggra held to account, I'll do it. You hear, Gracie? I'll do it."

"No!" Miss growl. I felt the elephant stomp its feet; any harder and the house would've shook. Them the few words I heard her say all year long. I could see Miss Margret wasn't slow. She understood what done happened, and I got quick understanding myself.

Miss Margret frown ugly. I didn't have to turn ugly to see the truth: Miss didn't see one reason to holler and fight that black man while he was dropping seed.

Miss Margret stare at the wall for a time, tears running down her face, the anger just welling up. She look at me, licked her mad lips, and declared, "I only have one child from now on, and

that's Bill Junior." Miss grab her mama by the waist real tight. She say, "No, Margret, please." Miss Margret try to walk away from the hold Miss Gracie struggled to keep.

Miss Margret push Miss Gracie's hands off her and say, "I don't know you, you hear?"

"Please, don't—" Miss yell out.

"I will not let you bring shame on my family."

"I'm sorry!"

Miss Margret snatch her dress tail out of Miss's fist. "You make sure you never have anything to say about what happened here. If you do, I will put you out as fast as you put that vile baby inside of you."

Before Miss Margret leave, she say to me, "Cook, you keep her and her niggra child on the left side of the house where the alley cats and alley bats await their destruction." She turn to Miss and say, "And *you*, make sure no one sees your face ever again."

After Miss Margret leave, I put the baby down by Miss's bosom, hoping she'd let the baby cuddle a little. But Miss turn her back on her own baby, the way her mama did her. It ain't no surprise to me—you do what you know. So I sit next to Miss, pull her blanket, and wipe tears from her face. "She don't mean it, Miss," I say. "She hurting now. But she ain't going to be mad till the end a time."

Miss say nothing. And I wasn't sure she'd ever say much again.

Some night later, Miss Gracie ask me if her mama been asking for her. My armpits can't help but itch. I ain't the kind to lie. So I just keep my big ol' mouth shut. When eight o'clock come around, I get ready to leave for home after a long day of backbreaking work. I say, hoping she understand good, "Miss, I can't stay here always. I got me a companion and five boys I got to tend to at home. You need to see about your *own* baby."

I didn't nurse Hosanna willfully. I fix her right next to her mama's backside. *Lawd, I'm just trying to see what she'll do.* I sit for a while in the backyard listening to the baby wail up to

heaven. The more time go on, the more my motherhood went to perking. But I held on and let a good hour go by before I go on inside and find Miss Margret in the parlor reading *The Midville Progress*. Then I go upstairs and find Miss in her bed, looking out the window, as if she seen the Holy Ghost. But soon as I take one light step inside her room, she turn to me and shout, "Margret!"

"No, Miss, it ain't Miss Margret. It's me, Mother Hill." Miss soon turn her head toward the window once again. And I think, *Miss Margret got Miss Gracie hating her own baby*. That sure is sad when you a mama and don't feel nothing for your own. I knew then that they were going to let this baby die if I don't step in. So I fill Hosanna's belly and took her on home.

Soon as I get to the door, Fist's eyes shining bright. Our marriage certificate say Charles Hill, but when you slow to open your fist and slow to spend cash money even when you have to, your own sons shake their heads and call you outside your name. Fist sat up quick and stopped blinking over the dead possum you'd think I was carrying in my arms. "What you doing with a baby?" he ask.

Now, I think long before I speak and then I think again on how these white folks got me telling secrets that ain't mine to tell. So I warn Fist he better not tell a living soul, 'cause if he do, a poor Negro's going to be in real trouble.

He agree, but for a month he been watching me yawn with-out ceasing; even after I come out the bed in the morning. He soon say Miss Margret oughta pay me for my trouble. Then he say he got to know why she don't care much for her own grandbaby. I tell him, "If you keep asking that same ol' question, I'll keep giving you the same 'ol answer." He quit asking after a while.

But he didn't stop asking about needing more money, so I build up the courage to speak to Miss Margret about the cost of caretaking her grandbaby. She tell me that she pay me to cook and clean her house. She ain't paying me to take care of that niggra baby and her mama. If I need money, ask them.

I tell Fist what she say. He spew something mad 'cause he see that I'm so tired all the time, and on top of that, we got to pick up all the charges. He say, "It don't make sense." But he stop fussing when he recollect what Judge Steffner did for our family for years. And I call to mind the vow I made to the judge on his sick bed: that I'd see about his family, just like he seen about mine. Fist hush quick. He know the truth.

After a while, the good Lawd touch our hearts and opened Fist's clenched hands too. I know without a doubt, that it's on us to help shield this child from Miss Margret. And since I never had a daughter pass through my loins, ain't no harm in me taking care of Hosanna till Miss come back to life. So I tell myself, *this my gift child for a time.*

I been carrying Hosanna to work with me every day for three years. Miss Margret just a lying, telling her church folk that Hosanna's my grandbaby. Then she let on like she soft-hearted by giving me allowance to bring her to work with me. I say in my heart—*she better not let them folks ask me. God ain't going to let me lie for her.* But she sure is lucky, them folks believe what she say and don't ask me nothing.

This the year I start feeding Hosanna Miss Margret's food. It's the only way I can help Fist save a little. But I never did ask permission; never thought I needed to. But one supper, Miss Margret caught me serving cold-overs to the child and told me she didn't give me permission to do such a thing.

"Miss Margret," I say, "all these years I've been taking care of Hosanna, I need your help and you got good and plenty."

She told me something devil-crazy. "Well, if she got to eat, she'll have to work for it. Give her some plates to wash."

I itch to tell her the child still a baby, but I didn't need to say all that. She ain't blind. I can't help but feel scared for her; she don't know God's watchful. But she ain't even close to concerned. She keep creeping and popping up on me whenever I ain't suspecting. So I get on ready, quick to play like Hosanna working so I could feed her a biscuit or two. I believe it's a sin and a shame that I got to do all that.

Miss Margret keep mistreating the girl every chance she get. If Hosanna can't sweep the floor just right, I blame the broomstick for being too tall. But Miss Margret blame Hosanna 'cause she done lost her mercy, pinching the tidy-bit of meat on the girl's arm till she holler. And that ain't even all. On another occasion, after Hosanna broke a glass in the wash bowl, Miss Margret pull at the girl's long good hair till she cry high and I cry low. Oh, then I want to fight, but I know better; I don't want no sheriff coming to get me. I need to be free to care for my own kinfolk. It wouldn't make sense to wind up in the jailhouse.

When Hosanna thirteen, I feel something sorry for her. I see her do all she could to please Miss Margret. She sweep till her leg run sore. She clean every speck a dust she can rustle up. But I know Miss Margret done made up her mind to look for the wrong, working that girl like my grandmammy's mean overseer used to work her during them old slave times.

After a while I take some time to learn Hosanna about Emancipation. I tell her that my grandmammy grinned with her nose after she was made free.

"Nobody can grin with their nose," Hosanna say with a chuckle. I show her how my grandmammy did it. I spread my nose holes wide open and let it dance a grin. Me and Hosanna practice that grin every day, and she giggle so. I love to see her laugh happy. But Miss Margret don't. She like to stomp in and stop our joy time. Hosanna get sad quick after Miss Margret tell her she can't have supper 'cause she off in her cleaning. Hosanna ain't been eating supper much, and I get to thinking, *Lawd, Miss Margret's hate getting mighty ugly now*. I know he nod a little.

One night before I leave, Miss Margret watch me in the kitchen, making sure I leave without feeding nobody. I don't know what to do. I'm in a rush to get to my people.

So I learned to be tricky. I grab Miss Gracie's chamber pot. I pour out the dregs, clean it real good, put some food in, and pray over it. Miss Margret see me carrying the pot everyday,

but she don't even know I'm in a rebellion. I shout *Alleluia* in my heart. I got me a way to help my daughters. I feed Hosanna till she full to a burp. Then I shove food in Miss's mouth, hitting teeth, specially before she ask me for her mama again. When I don't answer, she act like she done lost her appetite. Then I'm there till nine o'clock.

Fist come carry me home these days. He don't want me walking in the dark a night. But now we leave Hosanna back at the Steffner House. Her bosom as round as a Georgia peach. And I got me some sense. I know my older sons don't see their blood in her, so they been licking their lips like she peach cobbler. So I rush to fix a bedroom for Hosanna right across the hall from Miss. I didn't ask Miss Margret's permission. She got to oppose anything I do for my daughters. So every night Miss Margret see Hosanna staying inside her house, and not in the maid's quarters outside, she got to speak loud against it. So all I do is press my hand over my heart like I'm so sad I'm having a heart attack. That's all it take for her to leave it alone for a time. Specially after I tell her somebody's got to see about Miss and nobody's got to know about how we living less we tell them.

So now that Miss and Hosanna one room apart, I decide it's real strange they don't speak. I been having a strong feeling that I should work to change all that. One morning, I sit by Miss's bed, I stroke her hair. I tell her, "Miss, your baby thirteen years old now. She need her mama. Miss Margret acting like there ain't no lake a fire. You going to need to be strong and see about your baby girl. Hosanna need you, Miss." It's like I didn't say a word. All Miss do is stare at the sparrow eating at the window. When I realize no change coming today, I swear I hear some heavy breathing, so I turn to look at the open door and I quiver. I know my heart stop for real this time just seeing Hosanna standing there. "Oh, Lawd Jesus, what I do?" I ask. I know she heard the truth, and I know if Miss Margret find out, she going to fix me good.

Since that day, Hosanna ain't been the same. She used to grin a little. But now, her chin looking to her feet, and her eyes



don't blink no more. I tell her, "Hosanna, don't you tell nobody about what you done heard me say. If you do, Miss Margret going to recollect she got somebody to hold to account. So hush your mouth." She don't say nothing, but she still keeping her grins from me.

Miss Margret didn't know this done happened. So it didn't help that she woke up with a little extra nasty this morning and walked over to the kitchen table to snatch the bacon out of Hosanna's teeth.

"Where's your uniform?" she ask.

"On the bed," Hosanna say.

"Don't you ever come down here without it."

Hosanna leave that bacon in Miss Margret's fingertips and run off. She come back in uniform and went to working like she do every day. She fill a bucket with soap water so she could clean the floor of the front hall like I told her. She fell to her knees and went to scrubbing. Miss Margret march over to the front door, pointing fingers at corners of dirt nobody but God could see. Hosanna rub everywhere Miss Margret say. I stand there watching with my gut churning sick. I know Miss Margret acting mean 'cause she don't like Hosanna living in her house. But she don't say nothing about it anymore. She don't like hearing my mouth ask for money.

Miss Margret, standing over Hosanna, smack her head with a rolled-up copy of *The Midville Progress* and say, "Didn't I tell you to get that corner?"

Hosanna don't speak. She cry a little. And I feel my spirit dying.

I see Hosanna do everything Miss Margret ask. But the devil done took over Miss Margret's mind; ain't nothing Hosanna can do right, so Miss Margret pull the lock of her hair. Hosanna couldn't help but howl. And I couldn't help but wipe the tears that wet my face.

After a while, Hosanna still kneeling, but she ain't howling no more. She froze like.

"Get that rag right now!" Miss Margret shout.

Hosanna didn't move, so Miss Margret slap and push her ear till she get her head facing the floor. But Hosanna raise her

head up quick. Her tears are dry now but she still look like a statue.

“Did you hear me?” Miss Margret say. “Get that rag!”

“Stop your mouth,” Hosanna mumble.

I hope I didn’t hear what I thought I heard.

“What did you say?” Miss Margret ask.

Hosanna lift her chin and say, “I said, ‘Stop your mouth.’”

Miss Margret put a tight hold on Hosanna’s hair again. I’m so scared, I look away. But not for long. I was too tempted to look for the strangeness. I wasn’t hearing a peep outta Hosanna. But I did hear Miss Margret—howling and jerking. “You ugly black niggra!” she shout.

I turn to look. I see Hosanna done took a hold a Miss Margret’s hair, pulling down, about to break her head off at the neck.

“Get this abomination off of me!” Miss Margret shout.

I try and I try. *Lawd, you know.* But Hosanna ain’t the same. She got that rope pulling strength. I can only hope she let loose Miss Margret’s hair before this night’s through.

After a while, Hosanna let go. But I see Hosanna go sit on one a them antique chairs Miss Margret real particular about. I remember Hosanna sat on one of them a long time back. Miss Margret took a hold to her arm and threw her off that chair like she some kitty cat. *Now Hosanna got the boldness to sit, Lawd.*

“Get up!” Miss Margret shout.

“I’ll get up when I feel like getting up.”

“Jesus!” I pray up.

I try to pull Hosanna off the chair myself, but it was like trying to push against a wall.

“You going to get out of that chair,” Miss Margret say, “fall to your knees, and scrub every corner of this foyer.”

Hosanna’s real sober-like, and she act like she got some authority. “Listen here,” she say, “from now on, I don’t want you telling me what I oughta do. You hear me! If you got something to say, talk to Mother Hill ’cause I’m sick a hearing your mouth.”

“I’m your employer. You will do what I tell you to do.”

Hosanna's head just a shaking. "You ain't my employer. I *know* who you are. I *know* who Miss Gracie is too. So today's the last day you going to tell me what to do."

*Lawd! The devil got folks telling the truth.*

Miss Margret look on me and let her eyes do the cussing for her. But they soon turned back to Hosanna, who was now stuck on that chair like dried jam on a stale biscuit. So Miss Margret did all she could to pull Hosanna's arm off, but nothing seem to work.

"Get off the chair!" Miss Margret shout.

"There ain't nobody getting me off this chair," Hosanna say. And she right. The chair fall, she fall. The chair roll, she roll. The bucket of water done poured all over this old wood floor and they still ain't parted yet.

Miss Margret and me got too much age on us, so we real worn out. While she breathing hard, Miss Margret's hair stuck up a style I ain't seen yet. So she had no better choice but surrender and went to her bed while it was still day. No time later, Hosanna picked up the chair and sat on it for a spell. So I fell to my knees drying the water that done poured out the bucket.

"You all right, daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I ain't never seen you like that. I'm scared for you."

"Ain't no reason to be scared. She need to tell the truth."

"I hope you know what you doing."

She cross her legs on the chair and comb her hair back into a clean bun.

"You know that emancipation your folks be talking about?" she say.

"Uh, huh?"

"Well, you know, *this* my emancipation day."

I've been suffering with a lump of hot coals in my belly ever since Hosanna's so-called emancipation. She been getting bolder with each passing day. Miss Margret play like she can't talk for a whole month. She think I done told Hosanna willingly. I tell her how it happened. She tell me I better tell that

girl to close her mouth. So I do—one more time. But Hosanna keep acting like she got a whole bunch a folk she got to tell. So my belly get to jumping, and that coal get to burning.

When I learn how I could shut Hosanna's mouth, I shook for joy. I tell her, "If you run your mouth, you'll lose your power. And Miss Margret won't have no reason to act right."

She so smart. She think on it long. Then came back to say, "I figure I'll hold to my power, Mother Hill, but Miss Margret don't need to know why."

"That's right, daughter," I say. "But remember, you got to work a little for your keep."

She nod, but only after I make her.

Hosanna been trying to keep her mouth shut about the secret, but she fight Miss Margret every day. She quick to cut off anything that come out Miss Margret's mouth. If she hear something she don't like, she warn Miss Margret that she about to tell them white folks who she kin to. We get some peace for a time till Miss Margret forget. Then Hosanna help her recollect all over again.

*I'm scared for her, Lawd.*

I figured she got to fight all the time to keep emancipation, but I'm getting real tired of all the fussing around me. I can't see an end to it. When the fussing start again and it always do, I feel like leaving here. I've got to have me some peace. But then I think on Judge. I think on that vow—the vow I can't share with Hosanna. Since she got to be scared into believing I can leave for good. That's the only way I can get her to let down the fight for a time.

But now Hosanna's eighteen years old. And she still fighting, fighting Miss Margret for the truth she say need to be told, fighting every soul who stands in her way. And I can see it racking her on the inside. She got the same chest burn I get from time to time, but worse. It thump something fierce every day, specially since she refuse to shed one tear of her grief. That's what happens when you let bitterness sink in deep—not even a jug full of turkemtime oil can bring on relief for long.

*So I got to ask you a little something, sweet Jesus. I need you to listen real close. I see danger everywhere I turn. Hosanna's mind ain't too steady. Her heart ain't too. So I hope you could take a good hold of them hands of hers, 'cause you know: she standing on ready to kill some folks.*

## Chapter 1

MISS Margret been wearing a frown since August 20, 1927—the day I came into this torn-up world. Years had come and gone and her scowl had worn out thin and the crook of her lips had crumpled with age, as though a wild horse had kicked her in the mouth and left the shoe print. This day would be no different—no different than a plague that festered yearly. It was my eighteenth birthday, the day of her mourning, the day no one could dare recognize 'cause she was still bitter, still sorry I didn't turn out white, still grumbling in her sleep over Miss Gracie, who dropped a millstone of shame on the family's prized reputation. Yet Miss Margret's partiality had made me strong, and I learned through trials to pay no mind to ignorance, except on the occasions when she erred and invited folks to the Steffner House just to recite the civil codes of Georgia. Then I have no choice but stand firm, clench my jaw, and remind her that she'd better not act like some royal hypocrite, 'cause if she does, I may have to put a bit in the horse's mouth and stop her at the teeth.

But Lawd knows I couldn't stop another one of them devil-hatched meetings she had planned. And I certainly couldn't stop the multitude of preparations required for proud rich folk, who got to proclaim to the nation, that they're raising money for the poor sick children in Africa. It's just a sin and a shame to call yourself the *Women's Foreign Mission Board* when your wicked heart ain't even in it. But soon as I set down the last fork on a napkin, I stand at attention, waiting with a hot-tempered eye, for her cotton head to bob into the sunporch like

she in some kind a hurry. And I hope, this time, I can hold my tongue.

“It smells like skunk fish in here,” Miss Margret said, fanning her nostrils. I knew she meant salted herring or the poor man’s fish. No doubt the one thing she despised more than Ulysses Grant.

I couldn’t be sure how she caught us. Mother Hill had fried the fish on the cookstove Miss Margret kept in one of the out-buildings far beyond the backyard where we had eaten breakfast earlier.

“Open all the windows. I can’t stand a putrid smelling house.”

“You’re not talking to me, grandmammy.” I’d sooner call her outside her name than flick saw dust at her eyes for being sassy. I’ve called her out in the presence of her friends once before, just so I could put her to shame. But once the initial shock had passed, she swallowed spit and then quickly told her visitors not to pay me any mind, ‘cause one day the Almighty sent me a strong delusion, and now I was believing a lie.

“Open the windows,” she said again.

I raised my brow, reminding her that I no longer took orders from her.

“Do you hear me? Open the windows.”

“I’ll open the windows the day you wish me a happy birthday.”

She decided opening the windows herself was far less complicated.

“Where’s your uniform?”

“If it was your birthday, would you want to look like a maid?”

“Make sure you’re wearing it when I return.”

“You talking to the air, Miss Margret.”

“Listen here—”

I punched open the kitchen door. I had no will to hear Miss Margret’s mouth.

In the kitchen, Mother Hill stood in front of a hot pan, turning darker brown, frying bacon, as her rough short hair crept out of a red-cotton headscarf limp in sweat.

"I'm so glad I ain't serving them folks today."

"Yes, you is," Mother Hill said, wiping greased hands on a blue and white gingham dress she floured on every side.

"No, I ain't! This *my* birthday."

She pressed her twig for a finger over my lips and whispered the scold, "Hush your mouth. You know Miss Margret don't never give you a Sunday off, so don't go starting trouble now. You know I can't serve all them ladies by myself."

I stretched my eyes at Mother Hill till her attention came upon me. "She better act right," I warned. "I don't want to hear how God don't go along with the Thirteenth Amendment."

Mother Hill gave up being civil, slapped a wild-child hold on my wrist, and waxed sober. "There'd better not be trouble here today, Hosanna. You just remember, ain't no need for you to answer to everything you see and hear."

Mother Hill returned to flipping bacon.

"When you going to wish me a happy birthday, Mother Hill?"

"Get me that plate on the table, Hosanna."

"I just want to hear somebody, anybody say, '*Happy Birthday*,' for once in my life."

"I need that white napkin too. Put it over the plate." She soon laid the bacon over the napkin that soaked up grease as she sang *Blessed be the Rock*, her favorite hymn. Each time I asked for my only birthday wish, she cranked louder till her son Silas knocked on the door and relieved us of her croak for a voice.

He came into the kitchen, breathless, as if he had sprinted over. He was the picture of Mother Hill—dark and beautiful. Not tiny in stature like her, but a Goliath of a man. She never could explain why he wore an army sergeant's uniform in the peak of summer. But I really didn't care how he dressed for the season, I was just happy he was back home and it was finally over. And I ain't just talking about the war. I was talking about Mother Hill, who had been living here since Fist died, staying on her knees till midnight, hounding God till she got what she wanted: her son, who was on the other side of the big pond,



fighting Germans, so we Americans could show them a thing or two about freedom. But Mother Hill didn't care much for my bitter politics. She said she was just grateful he ain't lost one finger. I'm grateful too. Now I could get me some good sound sleep.

Silas wiped the sweat off his neck with a towel Mother Hill gave him.

"I ain't going to be home today, Mama." Mother Hill had planned on slipping out to see her family while Miss Margret was away offending God on yet another Sunday.

"Why? Where you going now?" she pressed.

"I can't tell you now. But I got to make this wrong, right."

"Leave them folks alone, Silas." Mother Hill tightened her lips, perhaps wishing she could strike his behind with a plank. After all, the only thing he'd been fixed on, since being home, was organizing sit-ins.

Her thin veins sprouted when she clutched his arm. "Silas, I was scared when you was gone. Now it don't make sense for me to be scared while you back home."

"Mama, when you going to stop working for *that* woman?" he asked. I often marveled at Silas. He was the best model of rebellion I'd ever seen around this scared town. You'd never catch him at a back door with his hat in his hand stroking folks. But when he start going on and on about his mama leaving here to live with him, not once asking me if I could come along, then and only then do I want to grab my dust mop and bust his head in two.

"We ain't going through that again, Silas. God got me here for a reason."

"No God would keep you in the devil's house, Mama."

"Just shut your mouth and quit that rabbleroosing."

"I got to go, Mama." He pulled away from her grip and ran off while a worried tear crowded her eye.

"Why does this house still smell like fish?" Miss Margret said, startling our hearts. She was all dolled up, ready to impress God with her proud apparel.

Mother Hill grabbed a bottle of vinegar and poured it in a bowl. Her way of shutting up Miss Margret who fussed often about fish. "I'll take care of it, Miss Margret. Don't you worry."

"And make sure you take off that dress you're wearing; it has fish smell all over it."

Mother Hill snatched the headscarf off her head, flew upstairs to our bedroom, and buried away her dress so she could please her master.

Miss Margret was an hour late when she led eleven ladies to the Steffner House, marching like they were in a parade, wearing big 'ol rooster hats, all cocksure of themselves. I wondered about the message today.

"Ain't there somebody who got the power of persuasion at the First Baptist Circus of Midville?" I asked Mother Hill.

"*Ob*, Hosanna, no ma'am," Mother Hill said shaking her head and pinching my ear as hard as she could, about to faint with tears of fear in her eyes. "If I hear you disrespect the house of God again, I'll skin you to the bone from sunup to noonday."

I rubbed my sore ear and tried not to bicker with Mother Hill when it came to the church. So I condemned it in silence. It was a circus and them womenfolk, chiefly Miss Margret, were Midville's town clowns who came from their show every Sunday, still unmoved, still unchanged, still ugly.

Meeting every Sunday afternoon to pretend they cared about the sick and suffering children of Africa, these ten ladies would spend a measly five minutes raising funds, but an eternity bad-mouthing the folk whom they called the ungrateful disobedient Negroes, the ones who no longer accepted their station in life.

"Get your uniform right now," Miss Margret blew in my ear.

"Wish me a happy birthday first," I blew back.

On this day, I was biting my toenails at Southern decorum and made up my mind I'd rather churn butter every day for a year than be caught in that uniform ever again. Some of the ladies mumbled offended at my outfit. But it pleased me and that's all that mattered; they ain't the only ones who could wear fine linen in August.

The delicate ladies perched on over-polished chairs around a red-brown wood table, covered by a white stitched tablecloth underneath serving plates of roasted chicken drenched in creamy brown gravy along with bacon-stuffed potatoes, stewed tomatoes, and hot buttermilk biscuits. Mother Hill and I woke up early to fix.

“Can you believe the niggra soldiers today?” Fisher Hoke asked, raising both eyebrows. If I could nominate Miss Margaret’s favorite unreconstructed Confederate, I’d probably vote for Miss Fisher. Specially if I could run a spiked comb through them tight pin curls of hers, the ones she had on every square inch of her lemon-colored head. But she had an apple peeler by her hand, and I don’t believe she’d object to using it.

The ladies were reverent and hearkened to the words of Moses, who was on ready to deliver the Ten Commandments yet again.

“Sitting in *our* church,” Miss Fisher said. “I can’t believe it.”

Miss Margaret stretched her frown at Mother Hill.

“I’ll whip him good,” Mother Hill declared about Silas for the hundredth time in the past three months. She rushed back into the kitchen, not wanting to hear Miss Margaret fuss over Silas’s exploits.

“I’ll tell you this,” Miss Fisher said, “the Roosevelts are responsible for all of it. How they pranced around with them like they’re royalty. It’s a shame before the Almighty. I don’t see the justification for it. Can any of you point to one contribution they’ve made to warrant all of this?”

I itched to knock her curly head with a mallet. She never respected the presence of the help. But I stopped thinking evil for a spell so I could play the vision in my mind, of Silas, among the famed and the few who made history. I can’t wait to honor him with a salute. He was no different than Reverend Primus King—some kind a bold, going where he ain’t wanted.

“They’ve made a contribution, all right,” Miss Margaret said, “*the war*. And that’s why they want more.”

“I don’t believe they actually fought in that war,” Miss Fisher said.

“It really doesn’t matter,” Miss Margret said. “I knew once they wore that uniform and represented this country, they’d want the vote too. Here me well, this is part Arnall’s doing. He was behind the push to abolish the poll tax. But he can rest assured—he won’t ever hold office in the state of Georgia again.”

The ladies didn’t pick up a fork. Instead, they listened in horror over what had come of their sham for a town—the zoo, they declared was God’s country, where wild animals lived out in the open, so they could seek, kill, and devour one another.

“And did you watch Reverend Griffin?” Miss Fisher said about their pastor. “He did absolutely nothing to remove them.”

“I won’t forget,” Miss Margret said.

“The conspirators are everywhere,” Miss Fisher said.

“Don’t you worry, Fish,” Miss Margret said. “Everyone will soon find their proper places.”

After the board ended the rant and the uneaten grub had sat cold, Miss Fisher’s napkin fell off her lap and landed by the foot of her chair. It was her custom. She dropped her napkin after every meeting. I’d swear she loved to see me go on my knees and worship her. But I grew some sense and stared back at her, hoping she could interpret my highbrow—that I didn’t feel she was too dignified to lean over and fetch her own napkin, ‘cause if bending was too low-grade for her, then it was for certain too low-grade for me.

So I cleared out the table instead. It didn’t bother me that Miss Margret’s face was turning redder than a ripe chili pepper. She should’ve known better than them all. She’d been taught well. She knew my servant rules had not changed since the days of emancipation—I don’t kneel, squat, or stretch for nobody. If my Maker had meant for me to be on my hands and knees all day, every day, he would’ve formed a pitiful caterpillar in my mother’s belly. So Miss Margret poked out her mouth then, and poked out her mouth now, specially after she saw me kick the napkin under the high legs of the side table. *I ain’t going to*

*trip and fall over some doggone napkin*, I thought. Miss Margret's elbow suddenly hit the butter plate with a clonk.

And when she attempted utterance, she stopped her mouth quick. She knew she ain't my overseer *no more*. If she had a command, she'd have to see Mother Hill, who I had appointed overseer long ago; since she had a wise mind to use words like *please* and *thank you*, words I didn't believe Miss Margret knew. The ladies tried to figure out my puzzle. I was sure they'd never seen a Negro act this unseemly. What they didn't know, was that I was pulling at the horse's bit, and I could start, turn, and stop her whenever I needed. So all the horse could do was rise from her chair, snatch the napkin herself, and drop it on the side table; performing the most work she'd done all year.

Before she headed back to her chair, she leaned over and whispered into Miss Fisher's ear. Too bad she didn't know I could hear as far off as Golgotha.

The fierce winds whipped quick. So I let the iced jar filled with water fall lip first from my grip. You'd think them ladies spotted a shark and ran off to find dry land. But I didn't stop to help wipe or say sorry. I didn't care what I struck, pushed, and dropped on my way to Miss Margret who tried to look off when I lowered my shoulders to find the corner of her eye.

"Miss Margret, hear me and hear me well. If I'm an ugly white niggera, I'm *your* white niggera. Do you hear me!"

The fear of sharks had all but disappeared, leaving every person stunned.

"Cook!" Miss Margret stood up and shouted for Mother Hill. "Cook! Come out here *now!*" I made a fist with the corner of the starched tablecloth, the one Mother Hill prayed me to iron for one hour yester morning when Miss Margret kept finding whiskers.

"Say it again. You know I got a story for your friends."

I was ready to pull all the plates, glasses, and silverware to the polished wood floor if I had to.

"Come on, say it!"

Somebody must've put them ladies in a kiln. They were as settled as porcelain.

Miss Margret sat down, acting like I wasn't pestering her. But I knew she was waiting on Mother Hill to pluck out her thorn. But the more it took for the rescue, the more my belly boiled.

"Didn't I tell you to say it?"

"Cook!"

Mother Hill used her shoulder to push open the kitchen door. With soap water falling from her fingers, Mother Hill rushed to lock her arm around my elbow.

I couldn't break away. "Come on, let's go," she said.

"No, she need to come on. *She* the one with something to say."

"You'll hear from me later, Hosanna," Miss Margret said.

"Cook, take her away now."

Somehow I pulled my arm away from Mother Hill, "C'mon and tell these folks how big a liar you are."

When I grabbed the tablecloth again, Miss Margret's drinking glass crashed to the floor and flew into pieces. The ladies shook startled.

"Help me, Jesus!" Mother Hill prayed. I felt Mother Hill grab hold of my arm again, trying to pull me out of the twister, but I wasn't ready to come out. Miss Margret still didn't feel sorry for words I told her not to utter many times since emancipation.

When Mother Hill realized she had no strength for the fight, she rushed to the front door. "Sully!" Mother Hill shouted. *She'd better shout again*, I thought. Miss Margret's long-time driver was outside, busy boasting yet again about his daughter SeeSee, while the other sweaty drivers waxed cross-eyed, wondering what SeeSee got to do with Joe Louis throwing jabs and uppercuts.

"Sully!" Mother Hill called. "Come here quick."

"What's wrong with you? Can't you speak no more?" I asked Miss Margret.

I looked through the laced curtains of the sunporch and saw Sully's shadow running toward the house.

"You're a sick girl," Miss Margret said. "You'll need to get better soon." Oh, I was so ready to fight. I knew she was fooling

with my mind, trying to play like I'm the fool for wanting to speak the truth.

Some more glasses and bread-and-butter plates were moving closer to the corner of the table when Sully came into the house. He wasn't surprised. He never knew why I was a lunatic, but he'd seen me fuss and fight before. He waited for Mother Hill to issue the command. After a short time of plotting, Sully and Mother Hill stood between me and the ladies.

"Carry her out," Mother Hill said. He caught my legs and threw me over his shoulder like a winter coat. I beat on his back till he reached the front porch and Miss Fisher said, "We've got communists everywhere and they've got the darkies revolting." I tried to jump loose, but Sully locked both arms around my thighs.

He carried me down the stairs, onto the brick walk that led to a fountain at the nub of the property. Mother Hill told him not to let me go till I settled down. It took a good spell, but I finally laid down my will and surrendered. When I plopped down beside Mother Hill, she tried to grab a hold of my hair, but the tress was too wide for her hand. So she held me by the neck with her left hand while she filled her right with water. Then splashed my face and mouth to stop the grumble.

She then pulled out a jigger bottle of turkemtime oil she made for sure she kept in her apron pocket. After my fits, I'd feel a pumping in my heart that only that unction could calm. She sat next to me and rubbed circles of oil on my chest.

Sully and the other drivers walked off talking while he raised his hands in the air and told them he didn't know why I suffered from them fits all the time.

But I knew. I studied the Steffner House, the place where my troubles began. You'd think it was a mansion. There wasn't a window, a column, a blind, a balcony, a rocker, a potted juniper on one side of the milky white house that didn't have its match on the other. I wished I could fire off a cannonball. I'd laugh at its destruction.

*You've been a whole lot of grief to me.*

The burn of turkemtime put a sting in my eyes and pulled me out of the funnel cloud once and for all.

“I believe you waiting for Jesus to come back,” Mother Hill said, “so he could bridle your tongue himself.”

“I’m going to make her tell the truth.”

“The truth ain’t that easy to tell, Hosanna. Can’t you see the place we living in?”

“It don’t matter—right is right.”

“Girl, you living in her house.”

“She put me in this mess.”

“Miss Margret ain’t perfect. But if you ain’t trouble, she ain’t trouble.”

“When a person done worked forty years, seem like they can’t demand no better. I ain’t going to be a hypocrite, Mother Hill. If I got something to say, I’m going to say it.”

“You calling me a hypocrite, Hosanna?”

“No, ma’am. All I’m saying is, I’m not going to let her think everything fine when it ain’t.”

Mother Hill closed the jigger bottle and slipped it in her apron. “You can’t force the love of God in folks, Hosanna.”

“Folks won’t change, not less you make them.”

“While you making her change, where else you got to live?”

“I ain’t worried.” I knew Miss Margret would rather fast and pray for Abe Lincoln’s resurrection before she left her shame in the hands of strangers.

“You know she ain’t going to let you get away with this.”

“Nothing going to make me scared.”

“Hosanna, you getting sicker. Do you know you been using turkemtime more than ever? You can’t keep going on like this.”

“I’m going to keep on like this till I get me a family that want me too.”

Mother Hill let out a quick hymn. I couldn’t tell if she wiped sweat or tears from her face. “I keep on telling you, Hosanna, hold your peace. You’ll come out better. All your fussing won’t get you no closer to what you aiming for.”

The unction did the job, specially by the time a line of rooster-comb hats paraded out of the house. I knew Miss Margret made for sure those ladies left without a good sense for what had happened. And it didn’t help that the truth came



slow to these folks. But it didn't for their drivers, who knew they'd better open them car doors quick. Miss Margret waved goodbye, frowning like she couldn't stand the pickle in her mouth, while Miss Fisher almost knocked off her rooster hat trying to return the farewell. "We're not going to let these agitators get by," she told Miss Margret. Then she cocked the hat's beak so she could fix her eyes on me. I knew a silent reprimand when I saw one. Payback was coming. I tried to steal the jigger of turkentine that had settled in Mother Hill's apron pocket. I wanted to flick it at Miss Fisher, but I couldn't. Mother Hill fought me hard and won. I could see she'd been practicing some new technique. She pushed me to the grass, held me down with a knee, slapped her wild child with oiled-up hands she used as shackles.

## Chapter 2

MOTHER Hill and I had not spoken since the rooster hats left an hour earlier. I filled the time of head-busting silence, in a watch corner, with an elbow stabbing my knee and a hand propping my jaw. I was now hunched on the stiff floor, suffering long, against the kitchen's ivy lattice wallpaper, stretching an inch of patience above and beyond a country mile, while she culled two jigger-bottles from a hodgepodge in a basket and slowly refilled them with turkemtime before she screwed on the caps.

I soon decided I'd scratch the itch I had about making her speak. "Mama, you want me to clear out the table?" She swallowed spit and walked off to grab a towel near the cookstove.

"I could wash the dishes in the wash bowl," I said. But she licked her lips and wiped the falling oil from the bottles.

"You want me to start supper?" She examined the dust in the air, slipped the jiggers in her dress pocket, and washed her hands.

I leaped behind her, poking fingers at both sides of her waist so she could give off one of them "Praise-the-Lawd" laughs she was good for, but she slid away again, dried her hands, and looked to the wall.

I was soon short and sour. "Mother Hill, you want me to leave you alone?" She fixed her eyes on me and said, "Yes, I do!"

She seared my feelings. "Since you so offended by me," I told her, "why don't you cut my tongue with a switchblade?"

She kept her lips on puckered and walked so close to my face, I could feel the fan of her breath right before she squeezed her

teary eyes to a squint. I raced away from that kitchen as hasty as a thief returning a free Bible. I didn't want her whipping me with the cup towel she raised over her head.

I've been sitting outside the kitchen door since, holding my chin with a fist, soon relieving it from its post just so I could rub the fingers now afflicted by a rude cramp that rose up weary from all the waiting.

When suppertime came, I pinched my nose to keep from envying the whiff of onions dancing in fat salt pork and the sweet smell of nutmeg that took over afterwards. I thought long and hard about tiptoeing into the kitchen to swipe a slice of Mother Hill's sweet tater pie. I believe I'd be justified, nobody had been out here once to check if I was still living, or better still, had a belly worth filling.

I was now Lazarus begging for crumbs when Sully, the rich man in a black hat and suit, appeared, still on duty, rushing and waving his hands toward me. I just hoped he had charity. I pointed over his head and shouted, "Get me one of them plums."

He stopped and ran backward toward the old plum tree. After all that leaping and falling I did for nothing earlier, all he had to do was raise his heels, and lift his hand to take a good hold of the fruit.

Since it came easy to him, I said, "Get me three."

He came over and dropped them in my begging hands. I didn't even wipe off the dust. I was hog-hungry and taking the time to chew wasn't all that crucial.

"Slow down," Sully said grinning and tugging his crow-colored beard. I knew what was coming, soon as he shined all his teeth. "I don't want to hear nothing about SeeSee right now, Sully. You need to stop bragging. Do you know that's a bad habit?" He often told me I was wrong for believing he brung up SeeSee going to that good-for-nothing nursing school so he could show me what I wasn't. And he had Mother Hill defending him too, saying, "Sully ain't bragging—he just proud." I begged her to strike me with a sledgehammer, 'cause I couldn't see the difference.

When Sully wasn't allowed to talk about SeeSee, he had nothing much to say. So he stared, pitying me, I figured. "Why you looking at me like that?"

"I got to," he said, "I don't know if you drinking some shine in secret or you just plain crazy openly."

"What if I'm crazy?"

"Then I got to tell you this—get you some shine and learn how to respect Miss Margret quick." When I threw the last seed over a gardenia bush, he ran off and came back with two more plums. "I never could understand you, Hosanna."

"You don't know all that goes on around here, Sully."

"Now," he said smiling, "you right there. But I do know this—you got Mother Hill in there trying to stroke Miss Margret for you. And all her stroking, ain't doing much."

I didn't want to hear his mouth anymore. Sully stayed on scared and wanted everybody to stay there with him. "Why ain't you home?"

"I got to work." He suddenly froze as if a vulture stood ready to swoop and peck him on the head. "Oh, yeah, Miss Margret calling on you."

Sully followed me to the sunporch. It wasn't yet dark, and the open curtains displayed a full view of the gardens and the dogwoods with leaves swaying in the mild summer breeze. My heart stuttered when I first saw Mother Hill sitting at the table with her suitcase next to her chair. I soon made a fist and rubbed knuckles over my chest. I wanted to fall to my knees and plead for mercy.

Miss Margret was sitting next to her. I knew they were plotting against me, since nothing I witnessed felt at all customary. It wasn't Easter, yet Mother Hill was wearing her green dress, the special one, with tiny red roses that you'd need a spyglass to see.

They weren't talking when I first appeared. But suddenly Mother Hill started a conversation, trying to keep things pleasant, I figured. Miss Margret listened while eating a big 'ol slice of sweet-tater pie she had on a small plate in front of her.

Mother Hill started a story about Sully and his wife while he stood at the door grinning and anticipating. She looked to him, “Why don’t you tell it, Sully?”

He tried, but Sully didn’t talk forty miles an hour like Mother Hill, and Miss Margret didn’t have that kind of forbearance. So when Miss Margret kept yessing him on, Mother Hill took over quick so Sully could start breathing again. “Yeah, for a time, Sully been telling his wife that she make the best sweet-tater pie in the whole United States. Ooh, when he’d say that, she’d blush. But after he had a taste of my pie, he said he see things a whole lots different. He came in this morning and said he faulting me for all his troubles at home. So I ask him, ‘What I done, Sully?’ He said he couldn’t in good conscience tell his wife that lie no more. When she ask what he think of her pie, he say, ‘Sugar dumpling, you know you make the best sweet-tater pie on Siloam Beth Church Road.’ That’s the road they live on, you know.” Mother Hill chuckled, and Miss Margret grinned. The story wasn’t funny enough to push out the big ‘ol pickle stuck in her jaw, but Mother Hill went on. “She asked him, ‘Why it ain’t the whole United States no more?’ Sully act dumb-like. He said, ‘What you fretting about? Siloam a real long road.’”

Mother Hill let out a shriek, and it stirred Miss Margret to raise her cheekbones. Still chuckling and still gasping for air, Mother Hill said, “Sully say his wife still ain’t got no consolation. She say the road ain’t that long.” Mother Hill leaned back and clapped her hands.

She couldn’t pretend. I could see the truth in her eyes—she was troubled.

Miss Margret shook her head and said, “Sully is right. You do make the best sweet potato pie in the whole United States. I just hope it doesn’t cost him his marriage.” She winked at him and rested her hand on her chest. The chest that made her resemble a man. The chest so flat, it was a plank, a plank you could walk over without swaying once.

After Sully’s coughing died down, Miss Margret said, “Sully, go wait for Cook outside.” He grabbed Mother Hill’s suitcase and carried it away.

Just one full breath after he left, Miss Margret told me to get two things for her. I returned with a framed picture of her grandbabies and a rag soaked in alcohol.

“There’s a whole lot of dust on the frame,” she said. “I want you to wipe it clean so you could take a good look.”

I took a deep breath and tucked in my chin before I wiped every corner she pointed to. Mother Hill was still not speaking to me. She just listened to Miss Margret flap her tongue and teach the same old yawn-fueling lesson on customs, traditions, laws. She then stopped to tell me what her family stood for, and she didn’t mention prejudice yet. She told us more about her son, William Steffner, Jr., who was now a lawyer in Atlanta, who was destined to be the next Richard B. Russell. I tucked my chin deeper. I kept myself from reminding her that this was the third time I done heard this mess.

“Hosanna,” Miss Margret said, “give me that picture frame.” After I gave it to her, she pointed to the picture. “This is Elizabeth, my oldest grandchild.” I rubbed my chest. It was blazing now. “She’s nine years old. And here’s Margret, the middle girl right here. She’s eight. And Beth Sarah is five years old. Everyone says she has my eyes and I definitely see it.”

She resurrected the frown. “See, Hosanna, horses and donkeys weren’t meant to breed. That’s why the mule is barren. It’s a curse. The purebred was God’s intention.”

Now I knew she got God frowning too.

Mother Hill didn’t look at either one of us during the ‘ol fool’s lesson. But I wanted to tie her loose tongue with a tight rope soon as I saw that tear run down Mother Hill’s eye.

Miss Margret narrowed her eyes too, but clenched her teeth. “Don’t you ever speak or go anywhere near my guests again. And if you continue to spread those lies, you will never see Cook in this house again, you hear?”

When I didn’t answer, she shouted, “Do you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Miss Margret pointed to the bookshelf in the parlor across the foyer, “Go on and put the photo on the third shelf.”

When I returned, her eyes raced from me to Mother Hill and then back to me, looking for more stupid to utter, I supposed. “Where’s John Irvin?”

When I took too long to answer, Mother Hill said, “I ain’t seen him today.”

“That boy is a good fella, a hard worker too.” If you sweat like some slave, as John Irvin often did, Miss Margret called you a hard worker. So that was no compliment. If you asked me, John Irvin was a traitor. If he had anything to do with it, he’d take all us colored folks back to the time of slavery since he didn’t mind dying poor.

She went on, “I could see he fancies you. See if he could do right by you, so you could leave well enough alone. One day you’ll see, it’s a good thing when you can take a good look at your grandchildren and recognize who they are.”

*A bottle of whiskey got more judgment in it,* I thought.

We waited and watched as Miss Margret took two nips at her pie.

“I’ve got one last thing to say,” she said wiping her lips with her napkin. “You’re lucky you’ve got Mariette here to plead your case. However, I want you to understand, if you continue to spread lies about my family, I’ll have to deal with you in a manner you won’t be able to endure. We’ve been here many times, Hosanna. This is your last warning. You will have to prove you can perform your duties here. Until then, Cook’s going away indefinitely.”

*Why don’t she cut my arm off with an axe?* I wondered.

“She’s leaving so you can have some time to think and relearn the proper way to be a maid in this house. She’ll come back when I feel you’re ready.”

I promised myself I would never let anyone see me cry, above all else, this witch for a woman. So I held back tears as I’ve learned to do for years. But when it would get too hard to hold, I let it fall out my nostrils. I didn’t care how I looked, as long as it didn’t come from my eyes.

Soon Miss Margret cut off the silence. “Cook, it’s getting late. I think it’s about time you leave.”

When Mother Hill pushed back her chair, my eyes flew open; my shoulders jumped at the sound of the ship's horn announcing its departure. Fog blurred my eyes. But I ran through till I held her arm. "You staying with Silas?" I knew he and his family moved into Mother Hill's old house not too far from here.

"No, I'm going where you can't find me, daughter."

I grabbed her arm. "When you coming back?"

"When you stop killing yourself," she said. "Miss Margaret will let me know how you coming along." She yanked her arm and left for the kitchen.

"Please, Mother Hill!" I rushed after her.

When she opened the kitchen door and walked toward the driveway, Sully was waiting. Miss Margaret's old Ford, Serpentine, was hissing as I imagined she would, but this time I didn't have the desire to kick at fangs.

I made a fist with the back of her dress. "Let me go, Hosanna."

"I was wrong!"

"You know how many times I done heard that."

"Where she going, Sully?" I asked.

"Don't you tell her nothing," Mother Hill said.

Sweat rolled out my ears. And I let out a growl. Mother Hill rushed for the jigger of turkemtime in her pocketbook and folded my hands over it. "There's more in the kitchen, next to the washbowl." I fell and struck the side of the car when I went on my knees and wrapped my arms around her waist tightly. I made up my mind I wasn't going to let her go. I rested my head on her belly. She held my head with two hands. The soft buttons on her dress pinched my ear while I smelled sweet turkemtime on her fingers.

"We holding up Sully," she said, patting my ear. "He got to go home to his family."

Soon as Sully dragged me away from her, she sat in the car and locked the door. "You made your choice," she said through the slightly opened window. "Now you got to suffer for it. Hosanna, please learn better, so you could do better. And don't



you forget,” she squeezed her face tight, “to feed my Miss. Her belly better stay plump or you won’t like what I got for you.”

As Sully drove off, I pressed my hands on Serpentine and tried to run beside her. Each time I lost touch, I ran to her, and tried to hold on to any part of her I could. Soon Sully stepped on the gas and I fell to my knees on the brick driveway. When I finally came back to life, I looked back and saw Miss Margret sitting on the porch railing, drinking her evening cup of tea. I stood up quick. She looked a whole lot different. She had swallowed the pickle, satisfied that I was pitiful and hungry for crumbs only she could give. So I decided if I had any good sense at all, I’d offer to wash her feet daily—anything at all to get my mama back.

I overslept the next morning, waking up five times during the night, stewing over what I needed to do to get Mother Hill back here soon. I knew I couldn’t live in this stranger’s house without her. So I decided I’d be Miss Margret’s lapdog from now on, and I’d have to start today.

When I kicked my legs out the bed, I fetched the empty bottles of turkemtime that had fallen to the floor. I thought about Silas—soldiers, duty, sacrifice. I had me a war to fight too. I pulled out my black-and-white uniform from the floor under my bed. I smacked off dirt and pinched off lint. Then I ironed it to a crisp. I put it on and ran my hands till it looked just right.

I soon walked by the parlor and saw Miss Margret sitting at her desk, fully dressed, holding a pen, shuffling through papers and photos of her next African missions project she was raising money for.

I thought about Mother Hill and how often she boasted over Miss Margret’s plans to finish three primary schools, one hospital, and a church. It didn’t make any sense for her to be doing all that bragging, so I’d throw a full bucket of cold water on Mother Hill’s proud devotion when I told her, “It don’t make sense for Miss Margret to be taking good care of them Negroes all the way in Africa, when she got her a Negro right here in

America needing more than seven dollars a week to live on." Mother Hill felt her wet nakedness for the first time and said she didn't want me bringing that up no more. I had her thinking evil. Now she had to get all prayed up again so she could loosen the bitterness I had placed in her heart.

Miss Margret put down the papers to take a good look at me and shook her head. "That's how you should look every day."

"You got something for me to do?"

"You know what to do. You've been trained for years."

The days before emancipation came to my mind like Joe Louis's quick fist to my skull. Miss Margret's routine was worse than death: the breakfast, the dishes, the floors, the rugs, the furniture, the silver, the lunch, the dishes, the supper, and those dishes all over again. But I couldn't forget Mother Hill's greatest charge of all: Miss Gracie, a whole other job in itself.

"Did you forget your training?" she asked.

"No, ma'am."

After breakfast time was long over, I boiled Octagon and poured it into a bucket. I was already spent from a full morning of toil; so spent, I couldn't keep the bucket from hitting my legs or splashing water on my shoes. But I kept pressing, and I didn't cuss once to her face.

The save Africa papers occupied her mind, but she was watching me the whole time. I knelt on the carpet along the foyer where she could see me. I rubbed every spot of dirt I found on the rug's blossoms and the ones Miss Margret found too.

You'd think my knees endured cuts all day long from prickly greenbriers. Had I not stopped to rub my knees with spit, I wouldn't have made it through. Miss Margret kept me working all day long scrubbing clean floors, polishing underneath shiny furniture, and swiping off cloaked cobwebs.

When I grunted and growled from pain, she asked, "You got a problem, Hosanna?"

"Yes, you my problem," I mumbled.

"Did you hear me?" she said moving closer, "Do you have a problem?"

“No, ma’am. Not one problem.”

“Good.”

But that wasn’t true, I had a real big problem: all my servant rules had now been forsaken. I didn’t know if I could ever profess them again. Miss Margret’s scheme had worked. All day long, I wished she would run a band saw through my body. It would be far less cruel. I’d be able to die without the shame of admitting the truth—that she won this one.

## Chapter 3

THE day of redemption came finally.

It was a miracle I came through the fire and Miss Margaret wasn't dead yet. I took up a new habit of watching trees while Mother Hill was away. It was my way of plotting revenge, so I could one day blip Miss Margaret's mouth with oak, and whip Miss Gracie's back with spruce. I can't say what kept me from snapping off limbs. But I do know I fixed my mind on what I was sowing for: Mother Hill.

For weeks, I was an ox pulling a burden of a plow. Now I was ready to reap a reward. My mama was coming home. So I stood on a rock bench facing high country, leaned over the fence, and fidgeted without end, looking to catch a glimpse of Serpentine, as a line of motorcars teased and grieved me as they drove on by.

The news of Mother Hill's returning came early in the morning, so I decided the fresh cobwebs on the corner walls would have to wait. I dropped the cloth-covered broom on the floor and ran for the cookstove after I remembered I had not fed Miss Gracie that morning. On the rush, I burned my fingers twice, trying to reach for a short silver spoon that slipped into the scalding pot of gruel. But I was grinning too, blowing at my sore thumb, overjoyed Miss Margaret gave Mother Hill a good report.

She couldn't lie.

I had become the dog who returned to her vomit—the sorry mutt who went back to the days of antebellum to pick out lint, knife off scum, and scrub off dirt. My knees and feet grew callouses and tempted me toward violence daily. But I couldn't

keep lusting over tree branches from now on, so I prayed for a portion of wisdom and taught my eyes to look down at the grass instead and trained my tongue to keep from fussing. I figured there was too little time to keep fretting over the injustice of Miss Margret's free leisure and Mother Hill's paid vacation while I labored in the muck for three long weeks.

High above all, I couldn't tarry; my mama was coming home and I didn't want her inspecting Miss Gracie's belly, finding my work undone, and stumbling to a fall trying to pinch my hard-headed ears.

It was nearly four o'clock on a Monday when Serpentine blew right past me. I had taken my eyes off the road while I nursed the fitful bite I gave my bottom lip. Serpentine was next to the house by the time I jumped out from the bushes and ran behind it, rejoicing at the sight of Mother Hill's head.

I quickly leaped to open her door. Then I dropped my head on her lap and hugged whatever I could get my arms around.

"It wasn't that long," Mother Hill chuckled.

"It was too long for Hosanna," Sully said. They laughed as Miss Margret opened the front door and walked to the porch railing. I raised my head and saw her lifting unholy hands. "Manna has come down from heaven."

Sully smacked the air and laughed some more. "You know you telling the gospel truth, Miss Margret."

I didn't want Miss Margret to see how I was carrying on. I dried the tears from my nose and hopped quick and high off the ground.

Mother Hill stood and rubbed my cheekbone. "Ain't you been eating?"

"No time to eat. I've been working for you to come home."

She looked at every single one of us. "I ain't got time for you all to be fussing over me. I got work to do." Everybody laughed but me.

"Well, I'm happy you're here," Miss Margret said before she went back in the house, and Sully headed for the kitchen door with Mother Hill's suitcase.

“You been feeding Miss?” Mother Hill asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Every day.”

Mother Hill smelled like fresh lavender as she went from room to room to study my work. She didn’t think to change her clothes, she couldn’t wait to see her Miss, who was lying on her belly like nobody had been tending to her for days. Mother Hill sat beside her, sang *Blessed Be the Rock*, and raked Miss Gracie’s deserted hair with her fingers. She stopped singing for a spell just to tell me how pleased she was with the work I had done to the house. Then she returned to singing praises while I pushed out my chest. I wanted to strut badly. I believed I did a mighty fine job myself.

But that feeling didn’t last long soon as a storm of gruel flooded Miss Gracie’s mouth. My chest sunk quick. I worried that the redemption I had toiled for had come to an end. Specially when Mother Hill jumped up and started to pant. “By Jesus,” she prayed up. She threw her pocketbook next to her shoe and turned Miss Gracie’s head to the floor. “Miss chunking, Hosanna.” I froze at the door watching the overflow, hoping I could get my hand on a long branch of spruce and give Miss Gracie a good ’ol lashing.

Mother Hill pulled the blanket and built a mound under Miss Gracie’s mouth to catch chunks of corn grits. The grits I shouted at Miss Gracie to hurry up and eat. The grits I thought she took too long to swallow. The grits she used to tattle on me.

“What you done, Hosanna?”

“Nothing.”

Mother Hill raised her eyes like she didn’t believe it. “Lawd, please give me patience.” She stood fast, pulled towels from the hall closet, and threw it over the mush water on the floor. “Miss, what Hosanna done to you?”

Miss Gracie said nothing. She hadn’t said much in years, specially since she was abandoned and discouraged. For years, she’d ask if Miss Margret asked for her. Whenever Mother Hill would start another hymn, she knew the answer and stopped asking. Since then, Miss Gracie said fewer words, and the few she did utter were only to Mother Hill.

I quickly tried to seek Miss Gracie's eyes. I wanted to make for sure she didn't snitch or I'd have to chasten her when Mother Hill wasn't watching. But things never did change. She shut her eyes soon as I came near her. She was good at playing favorites. Her eyes were always wide open for Mother Hill but barely a squint for me. That just burned me up. So I'd squeeze Miss Gracie's chin the first chance I got, warning her that if she didn't look me in the eye, I'd surely pour a hot pot of clay down her throat. But them threats never would make her flinch.

"I need me some patience. Ooh, Lawd, I need me some patience," Mother Hill prayed on as she carried a bucket of water from Miss Gracie's bathroom and fell to her knees, washing off the four day old clumps of grits Miss Gracie didn't chew.

After she cleaned the floor and rubbed her back from all that bending, Mother Hill pulled the bed sheets out from under Miss Gracie as she lay dead wearing the same torn up casket dress she insisted on wearing every day. It was as old as me, embroidered long ago in fine linen, but now worn out from years of being buried between her measly thighs.

*You some kind a pity,* I thought.

Knock-kneed Jim Crow had knocked the sense out of her head and crushed her spirit too. For years, I watched Mother Hill use just about every praise song she knew to revive that spirit, but not one worked yet. You could dangle an ammonia-soaked handkerchief over Miss Gracie's nose, she still wouldn't quicken back to life. A while back I told Mother Hill, if she left Miss Gracie alone, two things would happen: she'd either flower or wither. Either way, there wouldn't be a reason to keep manuring.

"Could you turn away till this came to pass?" I asked. "She'd fend for herself."

"I couldn't let my Miss suffer. If I did, I'd reap a whirlwind in my belly."

"My belly would be as calm as a butterfly-loving breeze in May," I told her.

"That ain't no breeze in May," she said. "That's the devil finding a bed of southern hospitality year round."

But it was the heart and not hospitality that made Mother Hill climb and kneel on the bare mattress in her Easter dress to gather Miss Gracie's sand-colored hair, work it into a thick plait, and backslap the eighteen-year-old mane out of her way.

Mother Hill moaned when she pushed and rolled the dead body to its back before she pulled the casket dress over its head and threw it over the growing pile on the floor. Hastily covering pale naked skin with a long towel, she then shoved it till it reached the edge of the bed, wormed her arm behind its back and raised it to a sit, pulled its arm around her neck, and tried standing three times before she got it to take a crooked stand.

Mother Hill waited a while to keep the towel up and her feet steady. "Hosanna, please get Miss's arm. I need to get her to this here washtub."

"No ma'am." I felt a tidy-bit sorry for refusing, but if Miss Gracie wanted to be dead, I figured we shouldn't get in the way of that desire.

"C'mon, Hosanna. I'm about to fall on my face."

"No, ma'am. Tell her when she get out of that bed for good, I might do something for her." To be honest, I didn't want to touch Miss Gracie's body for nothing, and Mother Hill knew that. Now that Mother Hill was back home, I wasn't going to do one thing Miss Gracie wouldn't do for me.

Mother Hill struggled to move Miss Gracie forward. She pushed, then shoved the dead body till she turned sober and spoke real slow. "Hosanna, you better come and give me a hand."

"No, ma'am," I said. *I ain't touching vomit?* I decided.

Mother Hill didn't say more. She rubbed her back, pretending to be in pain so I could obey for the concern. But I didn't fall for the trick.

"I oughta go downstairs and tell Miss Margret I came back too soon."

"I ain't putting my hands in that muck."

Mother Hill stopped trying to carry Miss Gracie and laid her on the bed before she left the room and headed downstairs.



“Mother,” I called quick, “where you going? Ain’t you going to help me carry Miss Gracie to the tub?” Her lips poked out so far, you’d think she was sipping on a straw.

Soon as we placed Miss Gracie in the tub of water, Mother Hill started her inspection. “Hosanna, why Miss hair ain’t been washed?” She grumbled some more. “Look at her skin, her nails. You ain’t done nothing for her?” She looked over at me, expecting a defense.

“Tell your Miss she better look me in the eye for once and tell the truth, then I might do something for her.”

Mother Hill shook her head.

While Miss Gracie was in the tub, Mother Hill raised a hymn and closed her eyes, specially when she reached for Miss Gracie’s hush-hush areas. But then she stopped short, looked back at me, and said, “Hosanna, the least you could do is dress the bed.”

Charity grabbed me by the shoulder and forced me to mumble, “Yes, ma’am.”

Mother Hill held up Miss Gracie’s chin. “Miss, it would surely make my heart sing if you spoke some.”

When Miss Gracie didn’t say a word, Mother Hill said, “C’mon, now. You could say a word or two for me.”

“Yes, Mama,” she said.

“That’s mighty fine, sweet daughter.”

Mother Hill rubbed lines on Miss Gracie’s forehead with her thumb while she flirted to find her eyes. “You know what, Miss? He’s going back to the dust where he came from, just like you and me. That’s all he is: a man. Ain’t nothing more to him.” She then stroked Miss Gracie’s scrawny cheekbones with the back of her hand. “Don’t you leave this world thinking like you thinking now. You need to know—he ain’t your God.”

Fatigue took over Mother Hill after we laid Miss Gracie’s towel-wrapped body on the bed. So tired, she had to rest her head on the pine bedpost for a spell, but not for long.

An early evening wind was promising rain, making Miss Gracie shiver. The window was still open and her doggone sparrow was on its second visit of the day, waiting to peck on

Miss Gracie's half-eaten food. The food Mother Hill made a habit of laying out for the peculiar bird; the only sparrow I'd ever seen that could eat gruel and not fly away grumbling. But today it had no luck. Thunder threatened to crack the roof open, startling Miss Gracie and then her sparrow who flew off right before Mother Hill shut the window.

Not too long after, Mother Hill rubbed Miss Gracie's legs and feet with wheat germ oil to keep her skin from getting raw. No use in dressing her in anything other than her casket dress. If you ever tried something new, she'd stiffen her limbs and refuse to raise her head. So there was nothing else you could do except wash the old tired dress, then dry it, and mend it for the umpteen time before you let her die in it. Till then, a bedsheet would have to do.

"Miss," Mother Hill said smiling as she rubbed palms and knuckles down Miss Gracie's covered thighs. "I'm so glad the Lawd let me lift my eyes to see another day. I could a been cut off, but sweet mercy keep telling me it ain't time. And that's all right with me. 'Cause I get so glad when I get to see your face one more time. Ooh, wee! That's how I get my joy. You know what I be praying for when I see you? I say Lawd, 'Please don't ever let my Miss give up hope.' And then I get happy, happy, happy. And I feel like dancing. 'Cause I know I'm going to get what I ask for."

Miss Gracie was too dead to say a word, but Mother Hill was never the kind to demand a response. She hauled away the pile of mushed-up sheets instead, heading to the kitchen where she later chastised my ungodly disobedience and cooked a large pot of gruel that she later fed Miss Gracie for a good long hour.

As I watched Mother Hill toil, I didn't need three weeks to find out how much she meant to us. She was the only *real* person in this house. And if I could just kick Miss Gracie out that bed, she'd mumble the truth—that Mother Hill could surely teach her a thing or two about being a mother.

## Chapter 4

MOTHER Hill awoke the next morning with a grudge, fully persuaded that I had made the clown look sober by force-feeding Miss Gracie. So after the first meal of the day, she sentenced me to the tedious work of mending and ironing the line-dried casket dress. Her mind was now settled—Miss Gracie could've choked on account of me.

Several snubs later Mother Hill let me know she wasn't through carrying out the law. After she clothed the invalid's cold, naked body, and after she slow-fed gruel for another back-spraining hour, she condemned me with the cruelest punishment of all: her hair.

I swore I was in as much misery as Mother Hill, who sat flat on the floor of our bedroom between my legs, squint-eyed, twisting her mouth every time I pulled the comb through her short knotty hair. And when I felt a merciless cramp under my right thumb, I bent it three times to be sure the bone had not broken.

"Slow your hand, Hosanna," Mother Hill said, after I pulled on her hair with a tight fist.

"Why your head so hard?"

"Get it right, now. It ain't my head that's hard. It's my hair." She wiped off a falling tear. "I might not have my hair running down my back like you do, but I got all my teeth. I don't scare nobody." She laughed high and wept low.

"I should cut it off," I told her. Miss Margret won't have nothing to pull on."

"She don't pull your hair no more and you know it."

"I'm still cutting it."

"No, ma'am. If I had your hair, I'd let it grow from now on. I'd use it to take over a high throne somewhere." She shook her head and showed me what she'd do. "I'd shake it over here and then I'd shake it over there. I'd be so dizzy when I got through, I'd have to fall on that throne and look pretty till my head settled."

After we giggled, she said, "You know what?"

"What, Mother?"

"I wouldn't keep it though. I thank God for the hair I got."

"It would be a shame for you to give up your throne," I teased.

"Oh, no. I ain't said all that, now. My throne ain't going nowhere." She coughed into her fist and laughed.

When she settled down, she said, "I see why them folks fret about white and Negro blood mixing and all."

"Why's that?"

"See, your hair long like your mama's, but strong like your daddy's. Your skin's darker than your mama, but lighter than your daddy. You got his eyes, her nose, his lips, her body, his walk, and her feet. By God and by Jesus, I get tickled when I look at creation. Now I see why them folks get so mad about it all. If we keep on like this, nobody won't know for sure who they partial to."

"Ain't that how it oughta be?"

"But it ain't. Folks just need a deeper understanding. They may stew over that outer man, but there ain't a thing they can do about that blood. Do you know it's all the same? Before Fist went to glory, he used to say this all the time: 'We all one blood—no matter where we come from.' Every time I feel your hair and touch your face, I know he was speaking truth. We one blood. Ain't nothing a man on earth can do about it."

*One blood.* I fixed my mind on that thought till Mother Hill turned on her knees and labored to her feet. "Where you going, Mother Hill? I ain't done."

"I hear Miss. It must be a happy day." Mother Hill rushed across the hall to Miss Gracie's room. I trailed her skirt tail until we found Miss Gracie sitting on her bed, brushing out two weeks' worth of tangle from her hair.

“Oh, you happy today, Miss,” Mother Hill said. “I know it. He came for a visit, didn’t he?” The false invalid grinned, then nodded.

I believed I was in the right to call her a false invalid. I’ve seen and heard what she could do when Mother Hill was fast asleep.

She had a secret and I figured out the routine: Miss Gracie’s bed would squeal in the early morning hour, the floorboards would crack, the window would rattle against the frame. Then she’d sit against the window stool for as long as it took.

The first time I witnessed this routine, a pie of curiosity hit my face, drawing me back to my bedroom window to see what she had seen—some strange man standing.

This morning’s visit was no different, except for the flooding rain that trampled the brim of his hat till the first crack of light, which came before he placed his hat on his heart, before he put it back on his head, before he nodded his farewell greeting, before he departed for a time.

That was *my daddy*. As far as I knew, he never missed a Tuesday morning visit.

But Mother Hill never saw these visits willfully. It would prove the invalid wasn’t being real. She only knew ‘cause I told her. So she’d mention the visits to Miss Gracie to please her, but wouldn’t dwell on it for long. She knew if she did, Miss Gracie would bury her lips under blankets and pretend she was a deaf mute.

Once Miss Gracie put away her grin, Mother Hill moved on and shouted, “Well, thank the good Lawd Almighty.” Then she turned to me and said, “Ain’t God good?” She gave off one of them “Hallelujah” laughs and returned to our room.

I came to know my daddy five years ago, when Miss Margret sent Mother Hill and I to clean a house she owned on Siloam; a house she took from the owner who owed her a shipload. Well, instead of allowing Mother Hill to attend services at the Crown Hill Baptist Church, she sent us to clean the Siloam house every other Sunday. But we were sneaky. We never went

straight to work, so we never did miss service when we were there.

This house, the one I called my refuge, was a place where I could sit on the floor, laugh freely, take off my shoes, uncover my head, and simply be free of Miss Margret who once told me I'd never do anything more with my refuge than clean it. Ever since then, I made up my mind that I was going to own it someday and shut her mouth for good.

When we were heading to the refuge from church on one occasion, a colored man walked by and startled us. He didn't see us at first. So I watched him take a seat on the porch stairs of his whitewashed home, a lovely farmhouse girded by green stretches of land, two well-kept barns, fat animals, a vegetable garden, sugarcane patches, and two lanes of old pecan trees that were perfectly planted about twenty feet apart.

When he finally noticed, he picked at the morning crumbs in his eyes and took a good long look at us. Soon as he moved his fingers, I knew I'd seen him before; he was that strange man who visited Miss Gracie often.

"That's him!" I said. "That's my daddy, Mother Hill."

"Are you mad, Hosanna? That ain't your daddy."

When he saw us in a fuss, he walked over to the refuge to see what was going on. "What can I do for you, Mother Hill?" he said startling me. I wondered how he knew her name.

"We going home, Adison," she said. "We didn't mean to make you walk over here for nothing." That was funny. Mother Hill never mentioned him before.

"You my daddy." I pointed at him.

"Hush now, Hosanna."

"Your daddy?" he said.

"Yes, my daddy. My name's Hosanna. I see you every time you visit Miss Gracie. She's my mother."

He scratched his brow, his hand just a shaking. He must've seen a mote in my eye 'cause he was steady searching me and I was steady searching him. I thought he was a warrior in them overalls.

"You can't talk no more?" I asked.

He shook his head to the ground and turned to walk away. "I still got my life and my limbs. I ain't looking to come this far to lose out now."

Mother Hill caught on quick, rushed after him as he tried to steal away. She clutched his arm till he turned around to look at her. "Listen here, Adison. You been knowing me a long time. Do you trust my word?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"All right then. We ain't going to say nothing about this to nobody. There ain't no benefit to us if word get out either."

"Go on," he said. He might as well swat flies. He couldn't stop hitting his hat against his pant leg. His eyes were so red they were about to crack open, no different than the egg, with the yolk on ready to bleed out.

"Miss don't see no use in living no more," Mother Hill said. "All her upkeep been on me. Her mama don't care too much for what happened. She won't even let Hosanna go to school. I know this girl tired of me learning her how to cipher with these fingers, specially since she pick up real fast. But I need help so she can go as far as her ability."

After his trembling fingers scratched the middle of his uncombed hair, he put on the same 'ol raggedy hat he wore when he visited Miss Gracie. "Wait here," he said. He went inside his house and came back with his hand in his pocket. He took out cash money and put it in Mother Hill's hand.

"I know I got to provide for my own. I just don't want to get myself killed doing it."

"We need you to keep on living, Adison," Mother Hill said.

"You can send Hosanna over here a month at a time," he said. "I'll get the money to you."

"That's mighty kind of you," she said. "But what your wife going to say about it?"

"My wife? I ain't got no wife."

"Who that lady be with you all the time?"

"Lil'? Oh, she just a boarder."

We left him with our vow and since then he kept his: that Mother Hill would never be short of money again. But Miss

Margret was short of understanding, specially when Mother Hill paid some Negro college girl to come and sit at the kitchen table while I broke green peas out the pods, teaching me how to read a bunch of books I ain't never seen before. I'd get proud after I quizzed Miss Margret about the Civil War, and she didn't know the answers. She professed Frederick Douglass never lived, but I knew the truth and told her to stop fooling folks into thinking she knew her history.

But she did know a lot about the greenback. She counted the cost of all the provisions Mother Hill brung to the house each week. One day Miss Margret couldn't hold her peace. She asked Mother Hill where she been getting the money. Mother Hill sung a song for her—"God's got a way that's mighty sweet." Miss Margret frowned ugly. She refused to believe.

After we left Miss Gracie's room, Mother Hill sat back down on the floor to finish her hair. I put my fists on my waist, stood right in front of her, and fixed my eyes on her till she said, "Just leave it alone, Hosanna. You can't keep finding fault all the time."

I sat down behind her and pulled at Mother Hill's last braid till she squinted again. "She don't never get that happy when she see me. Ain't I her daughter? Her eyes wide open when he visit. But when I come along, her eyes get too heavy to open. She's a fool just like her mama. And you know I ain't lying, Mother Hill. Adison's just about the only person who can get her out of that bed."

"Didn't I tell you let it be?"

"For the life of me, I can't understand why she can't fight for nothing."

"She ain't wild like you. She take that noose serious."

"Then what she living for then?"

"Maybe Adison giving her something to live for."

"I don't need nobody to give me hope. Look and see. One day I'm going to get me a last name if I got to call on the name of John Brown to do it."



“You going to have the devil cheering for you too.” She shook her head and mumbled, “Some folks got to lie in a death box before they learn a lesson.”

“Watch. One a them going to give me what I want.”

“What if they can’t?”

“Then John Irvin will.”

Mother Hill turned to me. “Don’t push that boy. Give him time to think, Hosanna.”

“When somebody ask me what my family name is, I’m going to have something to say. Watch.”

“You need to calm down. I hope you didn’t finish the turkemtime I left you.”

“Calm down? I’m tired of waiting for these folks to do right by me.”

When I was done with her hair, Mother Hill pressed one hand on the side of the mattress, lifted her body, and sat next to me. “My neck cold,” she said. I knew what she meant. She’d been telling me her neck’s cold since I was a small child. “Didn’t I say my neck cold?” I rested my head under her neck, then she hugged me with both arms and rocked me too, like she did when I was ten years old, and Miss Margret had worked me well into tears and scabs.

“I’d rather pierce a knife through the palm of my hand than call her Mama.”

“That’s all right, but what I keep telling you?”

“Some folks going to love like Jesus, and some ain’t.”

“So what you going to do about that?”

I stayed on silent. I knew what she wanted me to say. ‘Stead I looked at the spruce tree outside our window.

“That tree can’t give you hope, but I do know what will. I had an old friend say to me once, that when you need a change, stand on your feet, look to the hill, then sing and shout, *Hosanna*.”

She’d been saying that all my life. “I don’t understand what you mean sometimes, Mother Hill.”

“You don’t need to understand. It work every time. C’mon now, do it. You bear that name for a reason,” Mother Hill said, brushing loose hairs from my eyes. “Do it, now.”

But I refused to move.

“You got to know what to do when you need a change.” We stopped rocking when she held my face between her hands.

“C’mon, Hosanna, do it.”

“No ma’am.” *I ain’t going to do nothing I don’t believe.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katelyne Parker was born in Brooklyn, New York. She's been an educator for over 15 years, as well as a stay-at-home mom and homeschool teacher.

Today she lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband and son. This is her first novel.

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