

Dahlia's Bouquet

Chickasaw Bluff

Memphis, Tennessee

1917

There was the finest multicolored forest, ever changing in autumn and in spring and summer more vibrant still. And at the back end of that abundant forest, flowed a stream that offered smallmouth bass and speckled trout. Low country land where white oak, hickory and cypress trees colonized the edges of steep bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. An in-between time, after a man could no longer own another, after Auction, Exchange, Market, and Court Street were no longer centers for the business of bondage, before the Great Migration that pulled a race of people north swelled to a cosmic exodus—before Daisy could get her foothold into womanhood.

If she and Joseph had remained at the cabin that morning, they would have heard the horses maneuvering their way through the narrow path to the clearing. But on that stifling hot July morning, Daisy was restless from the humidity. She'd already tended to the small garden of corn, sweet potato and cabbage. She had already darned Joseph's socks and swept out the single clapboard floor of their one-room cabin. The quilt Birdie had given her for a wedding present had been pulled neatly over the corn shuck mattress. As far as Daisy was concerned, it was a full day's work.

"Why can't you skip the wood choppin for today?" Daisy swatted a mosquito lingering from the night before.

"I already told you why," Joseph said and readied another piece of wood for the next blow. Whack! "Ain't the time for easy livin if I'm gon make somethin of this land."

Whack!

Daisy put her hands over her ears. "Pleeease, Joseph. This air is so thick, I can hardly breathe."

Joseph put another log on the stump, mumbling, "That's what I get for hitchin myself to a house gal . . . don't know the meanin of real work."

Daisy smiled before she leaped off the porch and kissed his sleeveless arm, which was already raised high and ready to swing down again.

"Be careful, girl."

She put her hands on her hips. "You be careful."

Whack! Whack!

Joseph hacked two more times before the log split. It was only eleven o'clock, but the sun had already begun to change his forehead from chestnut to brown's darkest

hue. Daisy watched him put another log into position. She had been listening to that whacking since dawn and was tired of it. It reminded her of her brother's stories, "If you don't go to sleep old Masta Neely gon come and chop yo head off."

Of course, they'd never had a master. Master Neely was just a name Daisy's brother conjured up to scare her. Nevertheless, his tale of a wrinkled old white man with half a face coming to chop off the heads of all the little girls who didn't do what they were told frightened her well into the latter part of twelve.

"Wanna watch me dance?" She swung her hips back and forth in front of Joseph.

"I wanna finish what I'm doin. Then I'll have the rest of the day to watch whatever you want me to."

She danced around him nonetheless, toying with her thick brown hair that should have been braided neatly at the back of her head, but instead swelled to sultry ripples down the sides of her shoulders. She raised her leg high and spun around similar to the ballerina in the music box back at the Collins' Mansion. Daisy peered over her shoulder to see if he was watching. He wasn't, which spurred a major modification in dance choice. She wiggled her hips back and forth pointing her toes with each step away from him. When she turned back around to see if she'd caught his attention, Joseph had stopped chopping to enjoy the performance. She shimmied her way closer and jumped on top of the wooden stump in front of him. He still held the axe in his hand when she blew into his face. Joseph closed his eyes and jerked his head back, when he opened them he stared at her.

"You got eyes the color of fall, girl," Joseph told her, softening a bit. "Gold, brown, green . . . they always changin up on me."

She shifted her hips to one side, "You talkin about my eyes, didn't you see my dance?"

Joseph dropped his axe and swung her around, letting her legs dangle in the air. "Don't you want me to build you a nice house?"

"It's hot and I want to go swimmin," Daisy pouted. She kissed him fast on the cheek. But Joseph set her down, moving her hair away from her face and kissed her as a husband does his wife. Daisy blushed, pressing her hand against his chest. "It's daylight, Joseph."

"Daylight, nighttime . . . don't matter." He pressed against her.

Daisy eased away. "Swimmin, Joseph. Then we can do what you want."

He bit the inside of his lip, hesitant. Then he shook his head. "I'm gon have to learn how to say no to you," his eyes still glued to hers. "Come on. But you'll be lookin for more than this broke down shack come winter."

They took the narrow path the Chickasaw Indians cut when the whole region was still theirs down to Daisy's favorite spot by the river. Dense masses of endless green

surrounded them, and bald cypress stood watch doing the cooling. Joseph led the way, clearing the leafy branches that encroached the path, swatting swarms of whiteflies so that they'd break for Daisy. She hadn't fully adapted to life outside of the Collins' mansion in the city, but she was bending toward it. Despite his protests, Joseph liked to take this journey with her, each time seeing it fresh through the eyes of a girl once trapped in a house of chores, who now had the forest for a playground. They were quiet in their mission down to the river. The sounds of the steady forest balanced their silence until Daisy joined in. Joseph listened to her humming behind him. It was a happy tune—the sound of contentment. It made Joseph feel young, too.

The dappled forest sunlight had more power at the river's edge, shining openly on the river giving it a welcoming patina. Joseph had brought fishing poles with them, determined to make part of their adventure productive, but Daisy shed her clothes and jumped into the water before Joseph could set up his rod.

"You gon scare the fish!"

"I am a fish!" Daisy called back, darting in and out of the water like a gilded river nymph.

"Well, I already caught you!"

"I'm gettin away!" She swam out deeper.

Joseph grinned and snatched off his shirt. The cool water did feel good on his back. He watched for snakes as he entertained her, plunging deep under water, coming up and squirting it from his mouth, adapting to the playful ways of his young bride. Joseph, twenty-two years her senior, was determined to have a union of give and take with Daisy, who was just three days into nineteen. He watched her push the water through her arms, making angel wings along its surface. Her golden-brown skin glistened in the afternoon sunlight. Her hair had let go of its waves and clung to the back of her neck and down the small of her back. She would be the death of him: a good death.

She smiled.

He died: again.

After their sunny spot began to shade and Daisy grew tired, she wrapped her arms around Joseph's neck from behind, resting her cheek against him. He glided in circles around the water, holding her hands in place at his neck. She let him pull her through the water until he came to a standstill and her feet sank down against the back of his legs. She snuggled her face into his wide back. He felt it and smiled. They stood there, quietly fused, and Daisy wasn't hot anymore.

"This gon be our lives, Joseph?" Daisy's face still pressed against his back.

He squeezed the petite hands around his neck. "This gon be it."

It was near dark before the two of them returned to the cabin. They'd caught two bass, one small catfish not worth keeping, and Joseph's favorite—a speckled trout. Daisy removed her boots and set them down beside his at the side of the door. It was a two-mile hike back to the cabin, and the balls of her feet were tender to the touch. After they had settled in and Daisy started on cleaning the fish, Joseph pulled out his lucky deck of cards. He passed out two piles, playing against an imaginary partner, as he hadn't yet taught Daisy to play.

"Tell me again how you got all of this, Joseph. I'll bet that man about lost his mind when you flipped over them cards."

Joseph leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms out. "You want the fat version or the skinny one?"

"Whichever you feel like tellin.'" She hoped he'd tell the long version.

"Nawh, he wudn't happy that night." He started the tale as he had many times before, wherever Daisy placed the starting point. "I worked for Mista Forsythe since before I had fuzz on my chin—wudn't in no fields pickin cotton. I was the only colored man workin for him, but he used to say I was better than anybody in his shop. His pay sho didn't match his mouth. The master cabinet maker wudn't no master at all." He shifted in his chair, "Mista Forsythe knew I was the one with the skill, too."

"But he don't wanna put you in front of that other man." Daisy added.

Joseph shook his head. "Work for Mista Forsythe almost twenty years, watchin him get rich off me before I tell him I'm gon be movin on soon."

"He didn't like that."

"He was plenty mad, but he gave me a couple dollars more, expectin that was gon keep me from leavin. . . . Ain't right takin credit for another man's work."

"Sho' ain't." Daisy imitated, attempting to sound like her husband, but coming off as a distorted caricature of him.

Joseph grinned. He'd told her not to come down to him, but to bring him up to her, but he kept on with his tale. "Once he realized that didn't work, he start threatenin me with everything that come to mind. Said he was gon make it so I can't work for nobody else in Arkansas."

"But you weren't scared," Daisy stressed as if it were her part to tell.

"Nawh, Mista Forsythe wudn't that kind of white man . . . good down deep."

"Deep enough where he don't feel bad about givin that other man credit for your work."

Joseph's face tightened. Daisy wasn't sure if she'd overstepped her role in the tale. He hadn't solicited her opinion on the matter and from his expression, she was certain she'd violated some rule that existed between man and woman. So she advanced to the part of the story he liked most, "He loved to gamble though, huhh?"

“Yes indeed. Mista Forsythe had two loves, gamblin and money, and if they were women, money would be the mistress.”

Daisy laughed, seeing that his relaxed mood had returned. “Taught you to play them cards.”

“Almost every day after I finished my work. He used to say, ‘Joseph, if you leave then who am I gon practice with?’ Work for him for almost nothin, and entertain him for free. He didn’t want to give that up. But I was determined. One day he just came into the shop and said, ‘Get out of here then.’ I picked up my tools right then and left.”

They were at the part that gave Daisy a tickle. “Then you heard him knockin on the door.”

“Yep, must have been two or three in the mornin, standin there with them cards in his hand. Lord, when I saw him wave that deed in front of me I almost pissed my pants from excitement.”

“Then he made the bet,” she said.

“If he wins I got to stay, and there’d be no more talk about leavin. But if I win, he’d give me the deed to this land in Tennessee. A chance to own land? I didn’t care where it was. Then he dealt the hand.”

“You weren’t worried about him cheatin?”

“Told you Mista Forsythe treat them cards like they the Holy Bible. I saw him pin a man’s knuckle to the table with a knife once for tryin to cheat him.”

Daisy giggled, “He didn’t know you were practicin with them cards.”

Joseph cut an apple with his pocketknife and popped a piece into his mouth. “Had my own set of cards. Thought I’d make my way gamblin on the side to get money to open a shop of my own somewhere.”

“And he didn’t go back on his word like they do?” Daisy asked, as if she had firsthand knowledge of something she knew nothing about.

“Tell me when I win he don’t have to sign nothin over to me—deal between colored and white don’t mean nothin. But he did sign that land over to me. Say, ‘If you lie you’ll steal, if you steal, you’ll kill.’”

Daisy put her hands out. “And all of this was yours.”

“Yep, found out he’d won it from a man in a game two days before. Mista Forsythe don’t care nothin about no yellow fever land in Memphis, least that’s what he told me it was. I don’t know if he was tryin to scare me or what. When I looked at that deed and it said a hundred sixty acres. . . .”

The two of them sat a few moments more, sharing the apple Joseph cut into equal parts.

Daisy’s feet still hurt, but it was time to cook the fish. Joseph opened the small wood clad box that sat by the fire and set his cards inside. He pulled out his plans for the new house and spread them out on the table, eating the rest of his share of the

apple while he pondered over the worn papers in front of him. "I'll start with our bedroom. It's gon face east so we know it's time to get up in the mornin."

"I already know when it's time to get up in the mornin," Daisy said. "When you start gropin at me."

Joseph cut his eyes at her, playful like before he went on. "This room is gon be for entertainin."

Daisy's mood darkened. "My family gawn up north. All I know is Birdie and the Collins. They sho won't be comin'."

Joseph was quiet for only a second. "You got my family. You haven't met them yet, but you'll sit right with 'em. You'll like my momma. I told you she work up at the Medford house in Memphis. 'Round Christmas, they let her come for a day and visit. And don't forget about my sister Leotha, just married too. You and her about the same age. She real smart. Her and her man work the fields now, but they savin up for a place down on Beale Street. Colored folk got shops and restaurants and everything over there. They probably bring us some goods when they come. So we gon have lots of company."

Daisy lit up as if it were already Christmas. "I want a rocking chair and a big dinner table where all of my babies can sit." Joseph grinned. "Lots of space for us to sit together and sing and be proper—like the white folks, a stove to cook on instead of this fire, a cabinet, a bigger space out front where I can do my plantin and . . ." She couldn't recall everything she wanted. It was a long list of items that changed from day to day.

"First we start with more chairs to match that one," Joseph said.

He continued with his dreams for the second level, describing three more rooms that would house the children she had not yet borne. Daisy's mind wandered back to the chair.

The Green Striped Chair

Daisy had no last name she could benefit from, nor a past worth mentioning—her future just as bleak. Her history was a compilation of many like her, one seldom detailed in books, but rather by oral accounts salvaged by those who listened. Daisy's mother had said, "If you work real hard, we can send you to school and then maybe you can go on to the teacher's college down in Tuskegee when you older."

That was eight years ago. Laundress was her goal now. Then she could come in, do her work, and promptly leave at the day's end. However, as part of the live-in staff at the Collins' mansion, work, and more work, was all she knew. Daisy was housed and fed in exchange for twelve to fourteen hour days of fulfilling innumerable tasks

for the Missus; the money earned, two dollars and twenty cents a week, was sent home to the family by Mrs. Collins.

Daisy never even saw it.

Over fifty years had passed since the Civil War, but Daisy, just as her mother, had a life of servitude.

The Collins were considered a good family to work for, as much as good was worth. Daisy thought herself lucky. Most colored girls were sent out at ten years old to work. Daisy's mother had held on to her until she was twelve.

"Daisy, it seems your family has gawn up north to Philadelphia," Mrs. Collins had said. "Do you know where that is?"

"No, ma'am," Daisy answered, but was still processing Mrs. Collins first comment.

"How old are you now?"

"Fifteen, ma'am."

Mrs. Collins went silent. "Well, that's hardly an age for you to go chasin up after them. It's about time you handle your own affairs anyway. Birdie knows her money—she can help you with yours." Then she raised her scant eyebrows, "You been touched?"

"No, ma'am!" Daisy felt her cheeks flush.

"Mr. Collins?"

"No, ma'am! He ain't never come after me!"

Mrs. Collins paused again, seeming surprised by her outburst. Daisy hoped she believed her. It was the truth. After Mrs. Collins' stern face relaxed its jaw, she said, "There are many dangers for a white woman alone down here in Memphis—doubly so for colored."

Daisy knew she was right. On the river, a woman had two choices: belong to one man, or fall prey to many. It was a new beginning for Memphis, a phoenix blossoming from the ashes of yellow fever, re-inhabited by a combination of rural settlers, gambling gunslingers and robber barons all living amongst one another. She was relatively safe inside the walls of the Collins' mansion.

Marriage to an older man could have sentenced Daisy to a life of oppression: backbreaking chores and acquiescent, one-sided conditions at night's fall, essentially trading one life of servitude for another. But she would have accepted a life with a man half as good-natured as Joseph to get out from under the Collins' residence and out of the rough-and-tumble town of Memphis.

Daisy's morning had started out like any other. She was in the kitchen helping Birdie, the cook, peeling potatoes when the colored man arrived with the piece of furniture. She'd watched him from the kitchen window walk around to the back entrance with the chair in his arms. It was covered in broadcloth, but Daisy could see four legs

peeking out from the bottom. Birdie told the man that he could set it down on the floor, that he could have a drink of water, settle himself while he waited for Mrs. Collins.

"No thank you," he said to all three proposals. "I been carryin it in my arms all this way, might as well hold it a little while longer."

"Suit yourself." Birdie went back to peeling potatoes. Daisy eyed the cloaked chair, wondering why he guarded it so. It was an amusement her mind could play with while her hands busied with her work.

If Mrs. Collins had talked with the man in the kitchen or the breakfast room, Daisy would have peeled the rest of the potatoes and minded her business, but Mrs. Collins had escorted the man to the dining room! Neither Daisy nor her kind was welcome in there except for serving and cleaning. She ignored Birdie's unyielding warnings and peeped into the dining room just as the man began to unveil the piece. He uncovered it gently—taking his time, as if he were performing a magic trick. She understood why as her eyes feasted on the unveiled chair.

It was the most beautiful thing Daisy had ever seen. The legs were carved to perfection, with a sheen that caressed the length down to its clawed feet. The seat and back curved like a woman's hourglass form, and it was covered with exquisite green striped upholstery.

"Daisy!" Mrs. Collins called from the dining room.

Daisy jumped back against the wall and waited a moment before she entered, so that it would seem as if she were in the kitchen helping Birdie where she belonged. Mrs. Collins had scolded her just yesterday about poking around white folk's business and not minding her chores.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Take this," Mrs. Collins pointed to the broadcloth. "And bring me a cup of tea."

"Yes, ma'am." Daisy hurried back with the tea as fast she could so that she could marvel at the chair again.

The new Mrs. Collins, replacing the more temperate first, made an unconvincing attempt at appearing unimpressed by the magnificent craftsmanship. But her eyes danced about it. She ran her fingers along its ornately rolled arms, caressed the fabric, and finally parked her backside in it as if she were the Queen of England. The mansions of Memphis were spacious and comfortable, rather than grand and stylish. Many streets still needed pavement and lights. Mr. Collins, a wealthy cotton merchant, had returned seven months ago from a trip to South Carolina with candy and fine dresses for his three girls, a pistol for his young son, and a new wife for himself to replace the one dead.

The second Mrs. Collins' tastes were refined and opulent, and she went about the metamorphosis of the mansion's simple décor with vigor.

"You made this chair yourself?"

“Yes, ma’am. Carpentry been my life since I was a baby. My Daddy say he gave me a piece of wood to cut my teeth on.”

Mrs. Collins ignored the man and went to her writing desk. Daisy watched her unlock the top drawer and pull out a handful of money.

“Do you know how to count?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He said proud, but then relaxed his shoulders a bit to remain respectful.

“Sixty was what we agreed upon. Here is sixty for the one and another hundred for the wood to get started. . . You’ll get the rest when you finish the other five,” she said, and counted out the money very slow as if she hadn’t heard him say that he could count. “I expect the others to be just as precisely made as this one.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Collins caressed the back of the chair. “This is along the lines of the kind of furnishins I was brought up with in Charleston,” she said. “Of course I couldn’t bring everything with me.”

“Of course, ma’am,” the man nodded as if it mattered that he agreed.

Daisy had never seen a colored man paid that much money in her life. Her mouth was wide open in awe of the whole matter, which stirred Mrs. Collins, “I don’t want you puttin your grimy hands on it. Go back to the kitchen!”

“Yes, ma’am, I mean . . . no, ma’am,” Daisy answered quickly. But it was too late. She’d already fallen in love with the chair and made a point of traveling past the dining room to marvel at it daily. She fancied having the chair as her own, just so she could admire it. No one would ever, ever be allowed to sit on something so splendid, not even her. She hadn’t given the maker of that fine chair a thought until the third was completed.

Joseph admired Daisy from the first.

By the time the fourth chair was completed, Daisy was convinced she could make a life with him. When he finished the sixth chair, he took her with him. And on their wedding night, in the cabin built for only one full round of seasons, was a beautiful bed carved from chestnut. And there in the corner, was her wedding gift—the seventh chair, as exquisitely crafted as the first. It was the last of Joseph’s green striped fabric.

Goodbye Joseph

Daisy directed her attention back to Joseph, who was still going on about the house he planned to build, only now describing the type of wood he was going to use and which trees he would cut. She nodded her head and said a couple of “*hmmms*” to

convince him that she was still paying attention before she'd drift again, this time to Joseph's boots sitting next to hers. The difference between the two sizes tickled her.

She was just getting to know him. Just beginning to learn how to sleep with his arms wound so tightly around her that she could barely breathe a cricket's breath. Just understanding that his voice naturally carried a thunderous tone that didn't necessarily mean he was upset with her. She liked the way he carried her as if she weighed nothing at all. How he was determined to keep her from ever working for something that wasn't hers, and that as long as he was alive, neither one of them would sharecrop. How he was patient and gentle with her at night. She'd decided that tonight she'd reward him by wrapping her legs around him tightly to help him put a baby in her belly.

Just as Daisy gutted and cleaned the last fish, they heard the horses rearing outside. One of the men called out to Joseph, "Hey boy! Get yo black ass out here!"

It wasn't the first time men had tried to run them off their land, but Daisy had married a vigilant man, protective of what belonged to him. Joseph loaded his rifle before they called a second time, and was out on the porch just as quick. She heard his rifle go off only a few seconds later. Joseph was fast with a gun and even quicker with his hands. But the skill of one man against a group armed and prepared was futile—a hero's tale spun for children gathered around a campfire. She heard Joseph's body fall hard against the porch. The gunshots ceased then, but the chaos continued. One of the men yelled, "Hold him tight!" She heard them dragging her husband off the porch, and she attempted to count the voices against her husband: four, maybe five. Joseph was a big, robust man. It would take that many to bring him down.

Daisy didn't know what to do. It was happening so fast that her body couldn't keep up with what her mind already knew. Instinct told her to crouch behind the bed. She clasped her hands against her ears to block out Joseph's cries, praying that they wouldn't kill him, but merely give a lesson; Tennessee was known for teaching colored land owners a thing or two about limitations. She clasped her hands tighter over her ears, rocking her body back and forth, crying. After what felt like eternity, the commotion outside the cabin quieted. Daisy released her hands slowly, listening deeply now for any sounds of life from Joseph.

Nothing.

No moans, no pleading from Joseph, only the muffled sounds of laughter from the men outside. Daisy remained crouched behind the bed, waiting for the men to leave so that she could go out to him. Then the cabin door burst open. She squatted smaller and put her hand over her mouth. She heard footsteps cross the dirt floor, stopping very close to the bed...

Outside the cabin, two of the men stumbled and giggled like school girls, still passing back and forth the bottle of gin they'd brought to stoke the bravado they found only in numbers. One of them kicked at Joseph's lifeless body, disappointed that he had died so quickly.

Another man leaned against an oak tree and let the bark dig into his back as he smoked a cigarette. He looked up at the tree's sturdy brown branches and wondered why Joseph built the house so close to it. "It's done. Let's go," he ordered to the other two.

"Come on, Dean, let's stay for a while," said one of them and picked up a stick to poke at Joseph's castrated manhood. He grinned and said, "We got time for a wiener roast."

His brother picked up a stick to join in, but stumbled over a log and fell to the ground, spilling the bottle of gin in his other hand. "Shit," he hissed but then the two of them burst into drunken laughter, poking and wrestling one another beside Joseph's bloody body, as if Joseph were a dead bird, not worth giving a second thought.

Dean loathed these two. They were stupid little men barely out of boyhood and easily manipulated. The two jumped at the chance to do something favorable in Dean's eyes. Very few men had been to college. Dean had gone for two years. He didn't graduate, but it didn't matter. He had been to Nashville and that was farther than many would ever go.

Killing Joseph was personal for Dean. He left for college with all the dreams a white man has of making his mark in the world. Dean was smarter than most, armed with quickness in thought, and a favorable manner that convinced him and most in town that he was destined for something big. But in Nashville they were smarter—cleverer. His small town wit didn't fare well with the professors or his classmates, and in a year and a half Dean learned that he wouldn't make it big, but would take the train ride back to Memphis.

While he was away, the town seemed to have matured behind his back. There was a new grocery store called the Piggly Wiggly, and a new church where there were socials once a month. Even the girls he knew (of which he could have had his pick before he left), were married off now, or spoken for by a more promising suitor. His father, during a heated argument vocalized his son's shortcomings, chiding that there was even a tall black man named Joseph from Arkansas who had more of a future than he.

The remark was a harder blow than intended.

Dean's first encounter with Joseph only fueled his animosity as he witnessed him walk right past a white couple without making the customary move off of the sidewalk and onto the street. He had rode past Joseph's land and saw the chimney smoke while his own family froze from the Tennessee winter air. Reconstruction had

brought too many changes too quickly for Dean to digest, and this firsthand account of colored progress frightened him. He let that fear and discontent fester toward Joseph until his face was the root of why he couldn't find a good job, why he couldn't get the respect he had when he left for college, why he wasn't the golden boy anymore.

He started rumors about Joseph bringing other coloreds to stir up the ones who knew their place, how Joseph was going to build other homes on Rodney's land and let other coloreds buy from him, how that was going to make him richer than most whites in Memphis.

"Dean I don't know about that," said Egan Banks looking at the other men gathered in the shed in the back of the grain and food store. "He don't bother nobody, and from what I hear he just wants to grow a few crops and raise a family."

"That's what he says but we all know of coloreds in Louisiana that got more than we'll ever have. And when I was in Nashville there were schools teaching them to move right on past us." The other men nodded in agreement. "Now I'm telling you we got to get a handle on this before we're all working for him."

They had all agreed, but when it came down to it, only Rodney, the two brothers and Dean were on board.

Dean gave one last backward glance to the brothers wrestling beside Joseph's lifeless body and turned toward the gaping cabin door.

Inside the cabin, Rodney was having a rough time. His stomach convulsed, ill equipped to handle the bloody scene just moments ago. He wanted to run, but the vomit kept him hostage and he bent over with his hands on his knees for support. He wanted Joseph dead as much as Dean, but not for the same reasons. The land Joseph called his was owned by Rodney's uncle, an avid gambler. There was a feud between his uncle and his father that Rodney still didn't understand completely. All Rodney knew was that two years after that fight, a colored man named Joseph had legal papers on the land. Land Rodney always thought would be his.

Daisy heard one of the men yell to the one inside the cabin. "Are you gon be alright!"

Rodney yelled back that he was, but the depth of death still boiled in his stomach and twisted his gut. "I'm just seeing if he got anything to drink in here!"

Daisy heard the man come inside the cabin with the other.

"Whew wee, he was a fightin bull wasn't he? Better be glad Angus and Arlen can't see you in here all hunched over like this. You'd never hear the end of it."

Rodney cleared his throat and stood upright. "Did you pull them two idiots up off the ground so we can get out of here?"

“Figured I’d let them roll around a bit longer while you checked out your place— Auwwh shit! Look what that boy did to my boots.”

Rodney laughed and said, “That’s your own blood, fool.”

“Betcha twenty acres it ain’t. . . . Shit.” He inspected his boots.

Daisy concentrated on squatting very still behind the bed, even though her thighs burned. She prayed to God again to make them leave, to make her Joseph be alive, to be invisible just this once. She listened to the men shovel through their belongings. One of them said, “Damn, look at this. . . . Now where the hell you think that boy got the money to buy this fancy chair?”

“No telling, probably stole it like he did my land.”

“Let me have it, Rodney. You got the land and all.”

“Take it . . . and the bed, too.”

“Whew wee! I’m givin ‘em to my momma. Watch my daddy shit his pants.”

Daisy heard them walk toward the door. “I can’t believe he ain’t got no hooch,” said Rodney.

“Maybe not, but I think he got somethin much better.”

The bed was flipped over before Daisy knew it, exposing her to the two men looming over her. Two more men entered, young men with identical faces. Daisy coiled against the cabin wall. A man with a bloodied lip dangled her boots from his hand and said, “Looky what we got here, a pretty little mouse. You behave now, or I’ll squash you.”