

PROLOGUE



1810

Lavinia

THERE WAS A STRONG SMELL OF SMOKE, AND NEW FEAR fueled me. Now on the familiar path, I raced ahead, unmindful of my daughter behind me, trying to keep up. My legs were numb, unused to this speed, and my lungs felt as though they were scorched. I forbade myself to think I was too late and focused all my strength on moving toward home.

Foolishly, I misjudged, and meaning to take a shortcut to the stream, I swerved from the path to dash through the trees. To my horror, I found myself trapped.

I pulled to free my long blue skirts from the blackberry brambles that ensnared me. As I ripped my way out, Elly caught up to me. She attached herself to my arm, sobbing and trying to hold me back. Though a seven-year-old is no match for a grown woman, she fought fiercely, with strength fostered by her own terror. In my frenzy, I pushed her to the ground. She stared at me with disbelieving eyes.

'Stay here,' I begged, and raced back down the path until I reached the stream. I meant to cross over by stepping on the rocks in the shallow water, but I didn't remove my shoes, which was a mistake. Halfway over, I slipped on the river stones, and

with a splash, I fell. The cold water shocked me, and for a moment I sat stunned, water bubbling by, until I looked up and recognized our smokehouse on the other side of the stream. The gray building reminded me that I was close to home. I rose, my skirts soaked and heavy, and scrambled my way across the water by clinging to the jutting rocks.

At the base of the hill, I leaned forward to breathe, gasping for air. Somehow Elly had reached my side again, and this time she clung like a kitten to my wet skirts. I was terrified of what she might see, but it was too late now, so I grasped her hand, and together we crested the bluff. There, I froze. Elly saw it, too, and whimpered; her hand slipped from mine as she sat on the ground. I moved forward slowly, as though in a dream.

Our massive oak tree stood at the top of the hill, its lush green leaves shading the thick branch that bore the weight of the hanging body. I refused to look up again after I caught sight of the green headscarf and the handmade shoes that pointed down.

CHAPTER ONE



1791

Lavinia

IN THAT SPRING OF 1791, I DID NOT UNDERSTAND THAT THE trauma of loss had taken my memory. I knew only that after I woke, wedged between crates and bags, I was terror-stricken to discover that I did not know where I was, nor could I recall my name. I was frail after months of rough travel, and when the man lifted me from the wagon, I clung to his broad shoulders. He was having none of that and easily pulled my arms loose to set me down. I began to cry and reached back up for him, but he pushed me instead toward the old Negro male who was hurrying toward us.

‘Jacob, take her,’ the man said. ‘Give her to Belle. She’s hers for the kitchen.’

‘Yes, Cap’n.’ The old man kept his eyes low.

‘James! James, you’re home!’

A woman’s call! Hopeful, I stared up at the enormous house in front of me. It was made of clapboard and painted white, and a wide porch framed the full length of the front. Towering columns circled with vines of green and violet wisteria stood on either side of the broad front steps, and the air was thick with the fragrance this early April morning.

‘James, why didn’t you send word?’ the woman sang out into the morning mist.

Hands on his hips, the man leaned back for a better view. 'I warn you, wife. I've come home for you. Best come down before I come up.'

Above, at a window that appeared open to the floor, she laughed, a figure of white froth capped by billowing auburn hair. 'Oh no, James. You stay away until you've been washed.'

'Mrs. Pyke. Prepare yourself,' he shouted, and bounded over the threshold. Inside, he continued to shatter the peace. 'Where is everyone?' I heard him call. 'I'm home!'

At a run, I began to follow, but the dark old man caught my arm and held me. When I fought him, he lifted me up, and I screamed in terror. Swiftly, he carried me to the back of the house. We were high on a hill, and out farther, lesser hills surrounded us. A horn blasted, frightening me further, and I began to hit at my captor. He shook me firmly. 'You stop this now!' I stared at him, at his foreign dark brown skin that contrasted so with his white hair, and his dialect so strange that I scarcely understood. 'What you fightin' me for?' he asked. I was exhausted by it all and dropped my head on the man's thin shoulder. He continued on to the kitchen house.

'Belle?' the old man called. 'Belle?'

'Uncle Jacob? Come in,' a feminine voice called, and the wooden door creaked as he pushed it open with his foot.

Uncle Jacob slid me to my feet while a young woman came slowly down the stairs, then came forward, quickly tying a band of green calico around a thick braid of glossy black hair. Her large green eyes grew wide in disbelief as she took me in. I was comforted to see that she was not as foreign-looking as the man who had brought me to her, for though her light brown skin still differed from mine, her facial features more resembled my own.

Uncle Jacob spoke. 'The cap'n send this chil' to you. He say she for the kitchen house.'

'What's that man thinking? Can't he see she's white?' The woman sank in front of me and turned me around. 'You been

sick?" She wrinkled her nose. "I've got to burn these clothes. You nothing but bones. You wanting something to eat?" She pried my thumb from my mouth and asked if I could speak. I could find no voice and looked around, trying to place myself.

Belle went to the enormous fireplace that stretched the length of the room. There she poured steaming milk into a wooden mug. When she held it to my mouth, I choked on the milk, and my body began an involuntary tremor. I vomited, then I passed out.

I awoke on a pallet in an upstairs room, too frightened to move after realizing that I still had no memory. My head ached, but when I rubbed it, I withdrew my hands in shock. My long hair had been cut short.

I had been scrubbed pink, and my skin was tender under the coarse brown shirt that covered me. My stomach turned from the scent of unfamiliar food rising up the open stairway from the kitchen below. My thumb pacified me, and I soothed myself as I studied the room. Clothes hung from pegs on the wall, and a pole bed stood off to one side with a small plain chest next to it. Sun streamed through a window, open and undraped, and from the outdoors came the sudden peal of a child's laughter. It rang familiar, and forgetting all else, I sprang to the window. The brightness stung so that I needed both hands to shade my eyes. First all I saw was rolling green, but below the window, I saw a path. It cut past a large fenced-in garden and led to a log house where, on steps, sat two small dark brown girls. They were watching a scene up toward the big house. I leaned out farther and saw a towering oak. From a thick low branch, a little girl on a swing sang out to a boy behind her.

When he pushed the swing, the little girl, all blue and blond, squealed. The tall boy laughed. There it was again! A laugh I recognized. Driven by hope, I ran down the wooden stairs, out the open door of the kitchen, and up the hill to them. The boy pulled

the swing to a stop, and the two gaped at me. Both had deep blue eyes, and both exuded vibrant health.

‘Who are you? Where did you come from?’ the boy asked, his yellow hair glinting in the bright light.

I could only stare back, dumb in my disappointment. I did not know him.

‘I’m Marshall,’ the boy tried again, ‘and this is my sister, Sally.’

‘I’m four,’ said Sally, ‘how old are you?’ She tapped the air with her blue shoes and peeked out at me from under the flopping brim of a white bonnet.

I couldn’t find a voice to answer, so I felt a rush of gratitude for Marshall when he pulled the attention away from me by jiggling the swing. ‘How old am I?’ he asked his sister.

‘You’re two,’ said Sally, trying to poke at him with her foot.

‘No, I’m not.’ Marshall laughed. ‘I’m eleven.’

‘No, you’re two,’ teased Sally, enjoying a familiar game.

Suddenly, I was swooped up in Belle’s arms. ‘Come back in,’ she said sharply, ‘you stay with me.’

Inside the kitchen house, Belle set me on a corner pallet opposite a dark brown woman who was suckling a baby. I stared, hungry at the intimacy. The mother looked at me and although her face was young, she had deep lines around her eyes.

‘What your name?’ she asked. When I didn’t answer, she continued, ‘This be my baby, Henry,’ she said, ‘and I his mama, Dory.’

The baby suddenly pulled back from her breast and gave a high shrill cry. I jammed my thumb into my mouth and shrank back.

Not knowing what was expected of me, I stayed put on a pallet in the kitchen. In those first days, I studied Belle’s every move. I had no appetite, and when she insisted that I eat, my stomach emptied violently. Each time I was sick, it meant another cleaning. As Belle’s frustration with me grew, so did my fear of upsetting her. At night I slept on a pallet in a corner of Belle’s upstairs room. On the second night, unable to sleep, I went to

stand at Belle's bedside, comforted by the sound of her soft night breathing.

I must have frightened her, for when she woke, she shouted at me to get back to my own bed. I scurried back, more afraid than ever.

The dark haunted me, and with each passing night I sank further into loss. My head throbbed with the struggle of trying to remember something of myself. Thankfully, relief from my sorrow came just before sunup, when the roosters and the horn called everyone to rise. Then another woman, Mama Mae, joined Belle in the kitchen. The two women worked easily together, but I soon sensed that, though Belle was in charge of the kitchen, Mama Mae was in charge of Belle. Mama Mae was a woman of size, although nothing about her was soft. She was a sober woman who moved like a current, and her quickness made it plain that she did not suffer idleness. She gripped a corncob pipe between her tobacco-stained teeth. It was seldom lit, though she chewed the stem, and after time I decided that it served the same purpose to her that my thumb did to me. I might have been more frightened of her had she not given me an early benediction of her smile. Then her dark brown face, her flat features, and her black eyes wrinkled into kindness.

In the days that followed, I no longer tried to eat, and slept most of the time. On the morning Mama Mae examined me, Belle watched from across the room. 'She's just being stubborn. When I get her to eat, she just brings it up, so now I'm only giving her water. She'll get hungry soon enough,' Belle said.

Mama held my face in her strong hand. 'Belle!' she said sharply. 'This chil' not fightin' you. She too sick. You got to get her to eat, or you gonna lose her.'

'I don't know why the cap'n give her to me. I got enough work.'

'Belle, you ever think maybe when I first find out they movin' you to the kitchen house, I think that way 'bout you?'

'Well, I sure wasn't making a mess, throwing up all over you.'

‘No, but you was ’bout the same age, maybe six, seven years at the time. And you was born and raised here, and you still carried on,’ Mama Mae scolded.

Belle was silent, but following that, she was less brusque with me.

Later that day, Mama Mae killed a chicken. She made a broth for me, and for the first time my stomach tolerated something other than water. After some days of this healing liquid, I began to eat and then to retain solid food. When I became more alert again, Belle began to quiz me. Finally, summoning all of my courage, I managed to convey that I had no memory. Whether it was my foreign accent or Belle’s surprise at my information, I do not know, but she stared at me, disbelieving. To my enormous relief, she didn’t question me further. Then, just as things began to settle, Belle and I were called to the big house.

Belle was nervous. She fussed at me with a comb until, in frustration, she finally wrapped my head in a scarf to cover the chopped mess that was my hair. I was dressed in a fresh brown shirt that fell below my knees, over which Belle tied a white apron that she had stitched hastily from a kitchen cloth.

‘Don’t suck your thumb.’ Belle pulled my swollen finger from my mouth. She stooped down to my level and forced me to meet her eyes. ‘When she ask you anything, you say, ‘yes, ma’am.’ That’s all you say: ‘yes, ma’am.’ Do you understand?’

I understood little of what was expected, but I nodded, eager to still Belle’s anxiety.

I followed closely behind Belle on the brick path that led us up to the back porch. Uncle Jacob nodded solemnly while holding open the door. ‘Clean those feet,’ he said.

I stopped to brush fine dirt and sand from my bare feet, then felt the smoothness of the highly polished wood as I stepped across the threshold. Far ahead, the front door was open, and a light breeze swept down the long hallway, past me, and out the

open back door. That first morning I did not note the mahogany high-boy standing sentry in the hall; nor did I see the tall blue-and-white tulipier, displayed proudly as the latest expense from across the sea. I remember very clearly, though, the terror I felt as I was led to the dining room.

‘Well! Here they are!’ the captain’s voice boomed.

At the sight of me, little Sally squealed, ‘Look, Marshall! It’s that girl from the kitchen. Can I play with her, Mama?’

‘You stay away from her,’ the woman said, ‘she looks sick. James! Whatever . . .’

‘Steady, Martha. I had no choice. The parents died, and they owed me passage. Either she came with me, or I had to indenture her out. She was sick. I would have got nothing for her.’

‘Was she alone?’

‘No, she had a brother, but he was easy enough to place.’

‘Why’d you put her in the kitchen house?’ Marshall asked.

‘What else could I do?’ his father replied. ‘She has to be trained for some use.’

‘But why with her!’ Marshall nodded toward Belle.

‘That’s enough, son,’ the captain said, waving me forward. ‘Come here, come here.’ Though now clean-shaven and dressed as a gentleman, I recognized him as the one who had lifted me from the wagon. He was not a tall man, but his overall size and his loud voice put forth a large presence. His gray hair was tied in the back, and his deep blue eyes peered at us over spectacles.

The captain looked past me. ‘How are you, Belle?’ he asked.

‘Fine, Cap’n,’ she replied softly.

‘You look fine,’ he said, and his eyes smiled at her.

‘Of course she’s fine, James, why wouldn’t she be fine? Look at her. Such a beautiful girl. She wants for nothing, head of a kitchen at her young age, and practically owning her own fine house. You have your pick of beaus, don’t you, Belle?’ The woman spoke quickly in a high voice, leaning her elbow on the table as she pulled repeatedly at an escaped strand of her red hair.

‘Don’t you, Belle? Don’t they come and go?’ she asked insistently.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Belle’s voice was strained.

‘Come, come,’ the captain interrupted, and again waved me forward. Closer to him, I focused on the deep lines that creased his weathered face when he smiled. ‘Are you helping in the kitchen?’ he asked.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ I croaked, anxious to follow Belle’s instruction.

The room exploded in laughter, though I saw that the boy, Marshall, did not laugh.

‘She said “yes, ma’am” to you, Daddy.’ Sally giggled.

The captain chuckled. ‘Do I look like a “ma’am” to you?’

Uncertain of my answer, for I did not understand this unfamiliar form of address, I anxiously nodded. Again there was laughter.

Suddenly, the captain turned, and his voice boomed. ‘Fanny! Beattie! Slow down, you’ll blow us out of the room.’

It was then I noticed the two small dark-skinned girls and remembered them from the first day when they had been seated on the steps of the cabin. Through kitchen conversation, I had learned that they were Mama Mae’s six-year-old twins. Now they stood on the other side of the table, each pulling a cord. The cords were attached to a large fan suspended from the ceiling that, when pulled, flapped over the dining room table like the wing of a gigantic butterfly, thereby creating a draft. With the excitement of the laughter, their enthusiasm was overventilating the room, but after the shout from the captain, their dark eyes grew solemn and their pulling slowed.

The captain turned back. ‘Belle,’ he said, ‘you’ve done well. You’ve kept her alive.’ He glanced down at some papers before him and spoke directly to me after skimming a page. ‘Let’s see. You’ll soon be seven years old. Is that right?’

I didn’t know.

In the silence, Sally chirped up, ‘I’m four years old.’

‘That will do, Sally,’ Martha said. She sighed, and the captain

winked at his wife. When he removed his spectacles to better study me, I felt faint under his scrutiny. 'Don't you know your age? Your father was a schoolteacher, didn't he teach you numbers?'

My father? I thought. I have a father?

'When you feel stronger, I want you to work in the kitchen,' he said. 'Can you do that?'

My chest ached, and I was finding it difficult to breathe, but I nodded.

'Good,' he said, 'then we'll keep you here until you've grown.' He paused. 'Do you have any questions?'

My need to know surpassed my terror. I leaned closer to him. 'My name?' I managed to whisper.

'What? What do you mean, your name?' he asked.

Belle spoke quickly. 'She don't know her name.'

The captain looked at Belle as though for an explanation. When none was forthcoming, he looked down again at the papers before him. He coughed before he answered. 'It says here your name is Lavinia. Lavinia McCarten.'

I clung to the information as though it were a life raft. I don't remember leaving the room, but I surfaced on a pallet in the kitchen to overhear Uncle and Belle discussing the captain. He was leaving again in the morning, Belle said, and she was expecting a visit from him that evening.

'You gonna ask for those papers?' Uncle Jacob questioned.

Belle didn't answer.

'You tell him that you needs them now. Miss Martha got her eye on you. The cap'n know she take the black drops, but he don't know that she drink the peach liquor with it. You gettin' more pretty by the day, and after all that drinkin', when Miss Martha pick up that mirror, she see that she lookin' more than her thirty years. She out to get you, and time goes on, it only get worse.'

Belle's usual determined voice was subdued. 'But Uncle, I don't want to go. This place my home. You all my family.'

‘Belle, you know you got to go,’ he said.

Their conversation ended when Uncle Jacob saw my open eyes. ‘Well, well, well. Lil Abinya wake up,’ he said.

Belle came over to me. ‘Lavinia,’ she said, pushing my hair from my forehead, ‘that name sounds like you.’

I stared at her, then turned my face away. I was more lost than ever, for I felt no connection to that name.

The next evening I was sent home with Mama Mae. I didn’t want to leave the kitchen house, but Belle insisted. Mama said that her twins, Fanny and Beattie, the two girls I had seen working the fan, would be there with me. On the walk over, Mama Mae held my hand and pointed out how the kitchen house was just a short distance from her own small cabin.

Fanny and Beattie were there to greet us. I hung back, wanting to stay next to Mama Mae, but the girls were eager for a new playmate. They drew me into a corner of the small cabin to a shelf that had been carved into one of the logs, where their treasures were kept.

The taller of the two, Fanny was the leader, with her mother’s quick eyes and direct speech; her arms and legs were like those of a colt. Beattie was short and plump, pretty already, with a broad smile emphasized by two deep dimples.

‘Look,’ Fanny instructed me as she withdrew toys from the shelf. She handed down a doll-size table with two chairs, constructed of small twigs held together with bits of animal sinew. Beattie showed me her doll, then offered it to me to hold. I grabbed for it with such hunger that Beattie hesitated until her generous spirit won out and she released it. ‘Mama make her,’ she said with pride, looking back to Mama Mae.

I gripped Beattie’s prize, my heart pierced with longing. The doll was made of rough brown cloth; her eyes were stitched in black thread, while black wool stood out in braids. I fingered the doll’s shirt, styled like the one the twins and I wore. She wore a

red apron, and I recognized it as the same fabric as Mama Mae's head scarf.

As dark descended, Dory and baby Henry joined us. They had frequently visited the kitchen house, where I had learned that Dory was Mama Mae's eldest daughter. I liked Dory well enough, for she left me alone, but I wasn't fond of the baby with his harsh cry.

Although distracted by the girls and their play, I kept a close eye on Mama's reassuring presence. When the door suddenly opened, a huge dark bear of a man stood framed against the even blacker night sky. I flew to Mama's side. Fanny and Beattie scrambled to their feet and ran to the man, who scooped them up. 'Papa!' they cried. After he released them, they went back to their play, and with Mama's encouragement, I joined them.

'Evenin', Dory.' The man's voice was so deep, he might have been underground, and when he paused by baby Henry's mama, his large hand covered the top of her head. 'How your lil one doin'?'

'Not so good, Papa,' Dory answered, not looking up from the bench where she sat nursing her infant. The child fussed when she gently pulled his swollen hands out to show her father. 'When his hands get big like this, he cry all the time,' she said.

Her father leaned down and, with a knuckle, gently stroked the baby's cheek. When he straightened, he sighed and then took a few giant strides across the floor to Mama Mae. The girls giggled and hid their eyes when their father reached for Mama, pulling her to him and playfully nuzzling her neck. 'George!' Mama laughed, then shooed him off. When he stepped back, he caught my eye and nodded at me. I quickly turned away.

Belle was expecting a visitor, Mama Mae said to the man, as though to explain my presence, and the pair exchanged a look before Mama Mae turned back to the fireplace. She scooped out stew from a black pot that hung over the open fire, and Papa set the filled wooden bowls on the narrow table. Then she brushed

the coals from the top lid of another black iron pot that was nestled in hot ash, and from it she removed a steaming round corn cake, browned to crispness around the edges.

The three adults pulled up small stools to the table, and Fanny and Beattie had me stand between them as they began to eat. But everything felt strange, and I wanted the familiarity of the kitchen house. With no appetite, I studied the food, and when Mama instructed me to eat, I began to cry.

‘Come here, Abinia,’ she said, and after I went to her, she hoisted me onto her lap. ‘Chil’, you got to eat. You need some meat on them bones. Here, I dip this into the gravy for you, and you eat so you get strong as Mama.’

The twins laughed. ‘You treatin’ her just like a baby, Mama,’ Fanny said.

‘Well,’ Mama said, ‘maybe she my new baby, and I got to feed her. Now you open your mouth, lil baby.’ I so wanted her mothering that I ate the corn bread she dipped into the thick ham gravy. She continued to feed me as she spoke of the captain leaving and how Miss Martha’s nerves were running over again.

Dory said she had to go back up to the big house tonight, no telling what Miss Martha would do when the captain left in the morning. Mama Mae said how she wished she could go stay with Miss Martha so Dory could stay with baby Henry.

Dory answered with a deep sigh, ‘You know it’s me she be wantin’,’ and Mama agreed.

We had almost finished the meal when we heard muffled voices from the outside. Papa George began to rise, and my stomach clenched when Mama quickly set me aside. ‘No, George!’ she said standing. ‘Me and Dory go. Won’t do nobody no good to throw another man in this stewpot.’

I heard footsteps coming at a run, and when the door flew open, Belle came in gasping for air. Her green head rag was missing, and her usual night braid was undone. Mama Mae pulled Belle inside before she and Dory rushed out. Belle leaned against

the wall, panting, then straightened herself before walking over to the table, where she sat across from Papa.

Belle said, 'She comes down after him this time. She never do that before. And Marshall, he comes with her. When she sees the new comb and the book he gives me, she takes them up and throws them at me. That starts Marshall pushing and hitting on me. The cap'n grabs him and sends him out the door, but then Miss Martha starts crying and hitting on him. He says, 'Martha, Martha, get ahold of yourself,' but she's so worked up, he tells me to go get Mama.' Belle put her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands.

Papa shook his head. 'Did you ask for the free papers?' he asked.

Belle spoke through her fingers. 'He says I'll get them next summer.'

The air clicked with Papa's anger, and when he stood, he pushed back the table with such force that two of the wooden bowls flew to the floor. 'Next year! Next year! Always the next time! Something's gonna happen here if he don't get you those papers!'

When the door closed behind him, I was more surprised than anyone that my supper came up without warning. With it, though, I felt some relief, as my involuntary action seemed to refocus Belle and steady her while she cleaned me.

The twins watched from their pallet, the sleeping baby Henry beside them. After Belle finished with me, she set me with them, then straightened the room. When everything was in order, Belle came to us, eased the sleeping baby into her arms, and nodded for me to join her. We were all startled to hear a loud thumping sound from outside, but as it continued, Fanny identified the source. 'Papa choppin' his wood again,' she whispered.

When we left for Belle's house, white moonlight offered only shadow on the far side of the cabin where Papa worked.

Kathleen Grissom

'Papa?' Belle called softly. 'Papa?'

The pounding stopped.

'Papa, don't worry. I'll get the papers,' she said into the silence.