

ASSUMPTION

by

WILLIAM DEAN HINTON

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ABSTRACT

Assumption is the story of a slave named Nathan living in a racially hostile environment in antebellum and post-Civil War Louisiana. Assumption Parish was the kind of place where slaves were whipped frequently, where disease and rustic living were the normal course of life, where the swamp, with all its savage foreboding, loomed nearby. It was a place, Nathan discovered, that traded in men's spirits, breaking them little by little for purposes that were difficult for him to comprehend.

Like many slaves of his time, Nathan is raised without biological parents. His surrogate mother, Abbie, longs for the day when slavery ended. But she is too conservative in nature, too aware of her powerlessness, to do anything to force change. Nathan's surrogate fathers, on the other hand, are only too willing to rebel against the plantation system. Nefs, in fact, covertly plots revolt. He hopes Nathan will join him in this crusade. But even after being brutally whipped for a petty, accidental infraction of the plantation's unspoken code of conduct, Nathan does not fight back but instead opts to run from the plantation.

This illusion of leaving the harshest of the Old South's conditions was fomented by Nathan's other surrogate father, Pinder Beauregard, who dreamed Nathan would become a New Orleans musician as Pinder once had been.

Eventually, the plantation's slaves revolted and Nathan escaped, though not before witnessing Pinder death in battle. Nathan wanders the swamp where he discovers freedom is not what he'd expected. Every institution, from the military to religion to marriage, is closed off to him. Nathan falls into a deep fever, like the kind

that killed his parents. He is returned to the plantation where he grew up, recovering to find the plantation has changed little since he's been away. The biggest shock is the fate of Nefs, who has been rendered into a catatonic, bootlicking, house servant. Nathan sees in Nefs his future self, a strange alien puppet with barely a mind of his own. He decides his musical life can wait until he can begin a campaign to topple the post-Civil War society.

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CHAPTER ONE

Because the melody came first, Nathan respected it. It was in him and he was of it. Music moved through him as easily as his pulse, consuming the mindless hours he spent stocking and restocking Larawood's pantry with figs, olive oil, and drams of bourbon. He was not a field hand, which was a blessing in Assumption Parish the years before the fighting began. Assumption, Louisiana, was one of the smaller parishes along Bayou LaFourche, which, in French, means "the fork." To the slaves shipped there from the auction blocks in New Orleans, this meant it forked away from small farms they'd been sold from, families they'd been raised with, the rest of the South, and the rest of good-natured society. It was, all of them felt, the end of the road—so far south pelicans from the Gulf hovered over the bayou, looking for a way to return to the sea.

The LaFourche ran from the Mississippi to the Gulf, its floodwaters leaving a topsoil so rich it gave a harvest of sugar cane as plentiful as any cropland in the South. The people of Assumption, though, were mostly miserable. The heat and humidity were thick as vapor, almost too dense for lungs to filter, for those who spent the longest, hottest days bent over in the sun. Food was abundant but still had to be shot, skinned, and smoked before it rotted in the climate. Alligators were a common sight. So were such predatory birds as gadwalls, shovelers, and ring-necked ducks, and such animals as bobcat, bear, and river otter. Larawood was the fourth-smallest plantation on the bayou, but sat so close to the swamp the air hardly ever moved, creating long, stagnant summers. Winters were just the opposite. The icy wind blew constantly from the west, often in headstrong gales. Pleurisy was common. So was consumption. The fever picked

at random those it wanted to send, full of regret and recrimination, to a sweaty, everlasting grave.

Nathan's parents had died in one of the fever epidemics. They were buried in the colored cemetery at swamp's edge, near the eastern-most sugarmill, which is where Nathan went to practice his music. He had taken to singing to the graves of his parents, out of devotion and out of a need to release the melodies passing through his mind.

Nathan went to the cemetery once a fortnight, more if the rain wasn't too heavy. He kept to himself and hummed songs so as not to attract too much attention, as was the custom of Assumption gravesingers. Many of Larawood's guests marveled at the diligence and vocal talents of the plantation's slaves, though voices were not the only thing heard in the cemetery. Negroes brought all kinds of instruments to play for lost loved ones. The tradition stretched back a hundred years, when the first black woman in Assumption buried her first son, who wished to hear his mother's voice on his deathbed. Mouth to mouth, slave to slave, the same request went round like a prayer at harvest, so that the one comfort slaves knew they might count on was beautiful song once they'd passed into death.

One of the more beautiful sounds produced in the cemetery was played on the violin by a slave named Pinder Beauregard. From grave to grave, soul to soul, he traveled to play songs for those he remembered. Nathan saw him often but the two never spoke much. Then one day when Nathan was ten and already beginning to grow tall and handsome, he saw Pinder play a hymn on the violin, and finish by kissing the violin, then kissing the tombstone on top of Nathan's mother's grave. Among most of Larawood's slaves, Nathan was shy and polite and distrustful. He had grown up sickly,

isolated from other children, spending most of the working hours alone in the pantry, where he churned butter or sorted figs. He clung to the two things he knew best, Abbie and music.

Seeing Pinder kiss his mother's tombstone was not something Nathan could ignore. "Was you saying respects to my mom?" Nathan asked.

"Oh, yes," Pinder said. "But she ain't the only one." Pinder pointed at graves behind Nathan. "That one's my ole missus," he said. "She Sally. Over there is Old Ben. And Jesse. And Jacob." He put away the violin and pulled out a leather pouch. "*On apprend en faisant*," he said. Nathan had heard the phrase several times but he didn't understand Cajun since Abbie thought it unnecessary for him to learn the language. She was one of the few among Larawood's hundred slaves who equated white manners and white ways with sophistication.

Pinder translated: "One learns by dying." He bent down and collected a sampling of dirt from Nathan's mother's grave, allowing some of it to slide inside the leather pouch. "What's that supposed to mean?" Nathan asked.

"Ha!" Pinder blurted. "If you don't know, I can't tell you. 'S one of them unexplainables, like the mystery of life. Only youself can answer that kind of thing."

Pinder crossed himself three times and placed the pouch in his pocket. "This one belong to you?" he asked.

Nathan nodded.

"You the son she left behind here," Pinder said. He picked up his violin as if he were about to play. "Your mamma was a looker, yes sir. She have the sweetest voice I ever heard. And I heard a lot of voices. She could go high, high, could hit notes a

nightingale couldn't barely touch." Nathan pulled his legs next to his chest. Of all the instruments played in Assumption, Nathan liked to hear the violin the most. "You never had a chance to hear her sing, did you? She used to hum the same tune all the day long, like this." Pinder hummed a few bars that sounded much like the song Abbie often sung.

"Some of the misses sing it around here."

"That's her," Pinder said. "That's what your mama left for Larawood." He glanced down at Nathan. "That and you."

Pinder asked about Abbie and the kitchen slaves and what was required of Nathan in his job in the pantry. He warned Nathan about the sugarhouse, where slaves working the kettles were often scalded pouring syrup from large iron pots into smaller ones. Before Pinder left, he put his hand inside his cloak and pulled a talisman from a pouch. It was a cross made of jet.

"This make the bad things good, and good things better," Pinder said. "It comes from the Old World, where they still teach freedom and respect, where men don't live in fear of men. Use it if you can, or, if you have to, give it to someone you like."

From then on, Nathan visited with Pinder every so often, sometimes days or weeks in a row, sometimes not for a whole month. Pinder offered food to Nathan, or advice, or news about maroons in the swamp. He told Nathan stories the young boy wanted to hear, some true, some not so true. But every one of them was about some place other than Assumption Parish, and for that reason alone, Nathan listened intently.

Pinder's former master, Thomas Beauregard, a banker who speculated in cotton futures, had permitted his slave to play violin for extra money. The Friday Night Band boarded the sidewheeler *Coosa* out of New Orleans every Saturday afternoon and performed three hours for young couples and visitors from Europe. They requested songs like Get Along Home You Yellow Gals and They Jim Along Josey, then unboarded the *Coosa* and walked through the Vieux Carre to hear Massa Quamba's one-man-band or William Martin's trombone, requesting of these Negro musicians the very same songs they requested of the Friday Night Band.

Nathan began to think of the band he'd form, the musicians he'd play with, the name of his band. Nathan didn't have to beg long for Pinder to give him his first lesson. The first time Nathan held a violin it felt clumsy in his hands, precious in the same way china feels precious. It was heavier than Nathan expected. "Don't put your hands all over it," Pinder warned. "Ruins the sound."

Who knew Pinder would be a good teacher? Being a blacksmith had made his fingers thick as sausages, unable to move smoothly from G string to A string. His trills were a bit wavy and he had never learned the longbow technique. But Pinder was nothing if not patient. Nathan's fingers were long and he seemed to possess the gift of rhythm from his mother. He had little trouble learning the violin, which made teaching him enjoyable to Pinder, who began to think of him something like a pupil.

If Nathan was a natural with the violin, he was even better as a composer, surprising Pinder by stringing together chords and notes into phrases, inspired by animals around the plantation—the loping of calves in the paddock, the back-and-forth strut of the henhouse, a horse's hoof in gravel, the cooing of pigeons in the barn. All the

sounds of the farm consumed him, played tricks with his mind, confusing him as he tried to mimic the tone and feel on the violin. Many of those idle hours in the pantry were spent working through musical riddles, his fingers subconsciously moving to chords and notes. Frustration gave way to brief moments of joy and ecstasy, followed by despair when he realized his muse had tricked him into non-lyrical dead ends. At night, tucked into bed alongside Abbie, he had a recurring dream of playing to a large audience, mostly white people dressed in Sunday clothes; he'd play so well they'd throw flowers and money onto the stage. It was this dream Nathan summoned to memory whenever despair overwhelmed him, whenever he thought his songs would never amount to anything, and neither would he.

Eventually Nathan joined Pinder in the downriver parlor, where Captain Aucoin awakened from afternoon naps. The Captain liked the slaves to play for him as he watched boats on the bayou drift by, the smokestacks of the steamers blowing white clouds over the water. Nathan and Pinder played songs they'd learned by heart, sometimes by a field hand keeping rhythm on harmonica or spoons. The songs lasted about as long as the clouds hung in the air; then it was time to break, stretch the fingers, wipe sweat from the lips and forehead, and agree to play another tune at the Captain's insistence to "strike up the band."

The Captain was a fortunate man, having survived battles with the Indians in Florida and forcing surrender of a thousand Mexicans at Molina Del Rey. He lost three fingers at Cerro Gordo, earning a place on Zach Taylor's commendation list and three thousand acres of fertile Assumption soil for his retirement. Though he'd lost a wife to the fever,

he still had Lara, his daughter, and a prosperous life by Assumption standards. He had the reverence typically given to war veterans but everything he owned was tied up in slaves and property.

Captain Sydney Aucoin wasn't so much lucky as he was loyal. His fealty to the Union when the war broke out was what saved him from ruin. Throughout the war, he traded in Union dollars and since Assumption remained in the hands of the Yankees from start to finish, he never had to have his loyalty tested. Not to mention the Union gunners, who never trained their cannons on the Larawood mansion as they did on plantations along the Mississippi for no other reason than to disrupt commerce.

Among Assumption planters, Captain Aucoin was known as a Negro spoiler. For added income, he permitted slaves with a trade, like Pinder, to hire themselves out but prohibited their buying their freedom, as was the custom in Virginia, Kentucky, and other points north. Pinder had played on many party boats on the LaFourche and expected the same for Nathan in time. Yet the Captain was known to provide better food and board for his slaves than other planters, gave his servants Sunday and half of Saturday to themselves, slaughtered hogs and cattle at Christmas, and allowed a young slave like Nathan the luxury of playing the violin most afternoons, and at Larawood's many festivals.

Every six months, it seemed to Nathan, Captain Aucoin hosted parties at the mansion, whose large, white, fluted columns greeted gentlefolk from as far away as New Orleans, only a two day's journey down the Mississippi. Nathan was usually part of a trio instructed to play "*les haricots sont pas sales*" in a slippity-slap rhythm that brought to Nathan's mind the image of a train chuffing down the tracks. Old gentlemen

liked to skip up the path to the song, beckoning young girls to dance with them, "*Allons dancier, Colinda. Allons dancier, Claudelle.*" The Captain, in full uniform, including sword, greeted each guest in the downriver parlor, repeating "*viens ici*" and "*allons, allons*" while offering ladies and men a place on the couch and children a swig from his brandy glass. An hour before dusk, Lara would lead a chorus on her Steinway in the main gallery, where most of the group had retired to catch what little breeze passed through the unshuttered windows.

The mansion's perfect hostess, Lara was approaching nineteen, the same age of her mother when Mrs. Aucoin sat for the portrait hung over the hearth. Guests liked to appeal to her vanity by comparing the two, mother and daughter, saying Lara was blessed with Mrs. Aucoin's chin and high cheek bones. "*Mon Dieu,*" Lara said, pinching both sides of her face. "I should be so blessed." Many Assumption planters assumed she would never marry because of the simple way in which she viewed the world. The confidences she kept were mostly with those much younger than she, as if intimacy were a game between children. Lara delighted in touring the estate with groups of children, who were equally happy to have a grown-up treat the mysteries of childhood with as much awe as they did. The children journeyed to the many places children like to go: the attic, where she lifted a lantern for everyone to inspect the copper cistern; the wing of the mansion where they might admire her rosewood bed, pushed to the middle of the room to better catch the evening breeze; Larawood's cypress pillars, handbrushed with feathers to emulate swirled marble. And the bowling alley, located in the raised basement, where more than a few grownups were known to catch their foreheads on cobwebs and exposed beams.

It was on one of these trips into the depths of Larawood that Lara dimmed the lantern and hushed the other children. She was in the mood to tell stories, she said. She had inherited much of her father's *jouie de vivre* regarding fairytales and myths of the swamp, like Jean Sot, a boy so foolish he mistook a bull for a cow, and a cabbage for a brain. She liked to hear Negroes tell of B'rer Rabbit and how, when he hit the Tar Baby, he learned the lesson of the dangers of carnal desire and knowing one's place in society. The deep impression these frivolous stories left on Lara was among the reasons the Captain did not permit her to stray far from Larawood, not even to New Orleans to visit Claudelle and the rest of her cousins. She was too childish for the adult world.

In the bowling alley, Lara asked Nathan to reenact the tale of Gros Lou Lou, the big wolf known to eat children. "There's no such thing as Gros Lou Lou," protested Antoine, whose mother still dressed him in Fauntleroy pants.

Lara offered the boy a handful of figs. "Hush or I won't let you outside to see the goldfish and the colored quarters."

The story of Lou Lou the wolf was an easy one to tell as it was told in most every hollow and turnout along Bayou LaFourche. Black or white, Creole, Indian, German—all were equally familiar with the tale.

The wolf, dressed as a nonna, infiltrated a home in which children prepared for bed.

"What for you got big ears?" Lara asked.

"So I can hear you," Nathan said.

"What for you got big feet?"

Nathan swung suddenly upon one of the boys, who was two years younger and half a head shorter than Nathan. The candlelight cast a large shadow against the wall. "Because I want to catch you." The children leaned forward in expectation. "And what for you got a big mouth and them big teeth?"

Nathan twisted his arms into the image of a large set of jaws. "Because I want to eat you up!" He growled and lunged after the seven children, who jumped from their places and ran up the stairs. Even Lara was terrified, though she'd heard the story many times before. Nathan was left with nothing but candles and the empty bowling alley.

Overhead, feet scrambled, first the lighter steps of children running toward their parents, Nathan supposed, then heavier steps marching toward the basement, toward him, responding to the commotion. In seconds he was surrounded by white men, led by Captain Aucoin.

"That darky scared us," Antoine said from behind his father. "He did it on purpose."

Antoine's father examined the basement as if surprised to discover nothing more harmful than words had frightened his son.

Captain Aucoin pulled on his mustache. He felt he had to do something or he'd look small in the eyes of his guests. "You can't do bad and good too, can you Nathan?" he asked. This was the type of questioning the Captain pursued when he wanted one of his slaves to think about a punishment. Nathan fingered the jet cross. He hoped it would do as Pinder promised. He hoped it would do good even if he had failed to.

CHAPTER TWO

How easily was an Assumption Parish slave whipped? It took no more than a scary story in the company of the wrong people. Or a washload with too much ash soap left in the clothes. Could it happen for no other reason than an urge to go fishing without a written pass from a slaveowner to get there? Yes, it happened many times for just that reason. With few exceptions, Assumption's cutters, loaders, haulers, and kettle hands were as familiar with whippings as with hearing the evening supper bell. Maybe it was an off-hand comment. A cross stare. Malingering work habits. Unfortunate accidents were more often than not likely to cause a whipping. Even a child's hand slammed in a door. Lying, boasting, stealing of any kind. Any slight of hand might send a slave to the smokehouse, the typical place of torture chosen by Assumption planters. Tobacco stems were fed to the fire, producing a thick gray smoke designed to make a Negro believe he was suffocating to death. It was universally held in Assumption Parish that a slave worked harder, sassed less, and adopted a more conciliatory disposition given a sufficient allotment of whippings per year.

After the commotion in the basement, Benjamin was summoned to lead Nathan to the smokehouse. Nathan never had a reason to go there before and was surprised to find several pink hogs tied to the ceiling, mouths agape, a slit running the length of the abdomen. In the back corner was the whipping post. Not much of a post, more like a decaying tree log with iron rings bored into it. Benjamin hog-tied Nathan to the stump, wrists pulled tightly to the log. From this position, Nathan couldn't see much except the chafed tops of Benjamin's boots and the jet cross dangling by his chin. Dry, thick

tobacco smoke forced Nathan to emit a hoarse cough. He thought it odd how calm the room was, hazy, mellow, and tranquil. Benjamin warmed up on the log with a strong display of cracks and lashes, which crackled like sparks out of a fire. Benjamin next turned his attention to the task at hand. The first stroke stung the middle of Nathan's shoulders like a shot of lightning. The second blistered like a thousand hornets swarming at once. The third, a prick of a knifeblade. The next, a sharp pinch of the nippers. It was only thirty lashes but it seemed like a hundred or a thousand. The knot at the end of the cat-o-nine ripped pieces of skin from Nathan's back, tossing spots of blood onto the ground.

It was an exhaustive and painful whipping that took the breath out of Nathan's lungs. He was escorted gasping from the smokehouse, his chest taking air in short huffs. His entire backside was on fire. He was led into his bunkhouse and plopped face first on his bed. There was no way for him to avoid the pain so he buried his face in one hand and agonized over the wrongness of things.

The Captain soon regretted having Nathan whipped. The afternoons were less joyful since Nathan refused to play for the Captain. Not an outright refusal. No affront to authority. But enough excuses, from stomach aches to tooth pain, for the Captain to know Nathan did not wish to entertain him. The few times Nathan answered the Captain's call he played poorly, out of tune and tempo, coasting through songs the same way a rudderless packet drifts toward a sand bar. The Captain accepted the resignation of his violin player with a combination of sadness and hostility. "Get out of here you pickaninny," the Captain yelled at him. It was the most vulgar word Captain

Aucoin used against his slaves since he was one of the few in Assumption of a mind that “nigger” was too common a term for a gentleman to use. The Captain had allowed a hint of sentimentality to ooze into his older years, and he was peevish, realizing Nathan would no longer attend to him in the afternoons, livening his spirits with one-step numbers and swing dances. He was often in a merry mood by the time Nathan ended the day’s repertory. Yet the Captain felt it was he who was put upon most by Nathan’s careless actions in the basement. He was no less amused by the refusal to play the violin, a final straw that quickly dried up whatever sentiment the Captain held over for the boy. “Too much sugar for a nickel,” the Captain said, shrugging off his emotions. If Nathan wanted to play games, the Captain would play them. He ordered that Nathan be transferred to the fields, and later into the sugar mill as a kettle hand, stirring boiling molasses with a canoe paddle.

The mill was nothing more than a giant tin shed under which a steel crushing machine had been built. Each hour three thousand pounds of sugar cane were fed into the ox-driven mulching machine, three large wheels that grinded against each other, squeezing juice out of the thousands of cut, spindly reeds. The cane produced about a hundred gallons of syrup boiled in a series of iron pots until a crystallized powder was formed.

In the sugar house Nathan was reacquainted with many slaves he’d rarely ever seen. They were hardened by the work and the routine and the monotony of the plantation. Most of their days were spent in conspiracies to free themselves, but the schemes never amounted to much. The problem, Nefs told Nathan, was that none of the slaves had faith in each other, so they could have no faith in a leader. “They got no

religion,” Nefs told Nathan after he’d been in the sugarhouse a week. “Their beliefs are the beliefs of the weak, the sick, the cowardly. Cain’t none of ‘em take care of themselves.”

Nefs was the main kettle hand, the surgeon of the quarters, and resident root doctor. He spent his days adding lime to the molasses, scooping out twigs and stems, checking and rechecking the syrup’s composition. He wasn’t the mill’s engineer but he was as reliable as one, which was why the Captain wouldn’t think to part with him, though Nefs was the one slave who gave the Captain reason to fear, for he was bewitched by black magic, witchcraft, hoodoo or voodoo as it was known in Assumption Parish. Nefs was well-schooled in the ways of the root doctor, having learned the trade from plantations he’d been sold from. He always carried the tools of his trade in a cow bladder: feathers, a brass rotator, conjuring tongs, charms the shape and color of medium-sized marbles, and a wooden voodoo jack. His treatments were a thing of wonder: rusty nails in vinegar for intestinal worms, castor oil soaked in cotton for hoarseness, a lukewarm glass of sassafras tea for measles, warding off demons of the night by covering the head with a bowl while sleeping, and warning about blindness caused by cutting a child’s hair too soon after birth.

Word went around Nefs was a child of Charles, a Negro carpenter on the Deslonde plantation, fifty miles upriver from New Orleans. Charles was a saint to most slaves because he led the biggest slave rebellion in America. Bigger than Nat Turner. Bigger than Harper’s Ferry. But Nefs would always say the same thing when Charles was brought to his attention. “I never knew the man.” When someone asked him about the 1837 uprising in Alexandria—five days travel from Baton Rouge—Nefs denied

knowledge of that, too. "Only revolting I knew about was New Orleans, 1853. I cooked for the mayor there at the time and too hung up to be a part of anything like I should have been. It never took off like it supposed to. White man from Jamaica said he was going to set all the coloreds free. His own slave told on him. His own slave!"

Nefs knew the secret history of hoodoo but he would only whisper it to the most trusted of associates. Revolution had happened in Santo Domingo and it would happen here, Nefs believed. "Should happen here, juss like it happen there," he said. Back in Santo Domingo, slaves armed with the hoodoo, the power to hex and entrance, rebelled against their masters and won back their own country. Larawood was no different than dozens of plantations up and down the LaFourche: more slaves than masters. "Wouldn't take much to turn the tables," Nefs preached.

Nefs wanted to convert every soul he could to his way of thinking. He went to Nathan's cabin the week after Nathan started in the sugar mill. He showed Nathan the scars on his back and the brand of a crescent on his neck, near his skull, which Nefs usually kept hidden with a scarf. He made no mention where they came from. But Nathan knew. The crescent was the Captain's brand.

Next to the bed Nefs saw a fiddle bow Pinder had given to Nathan. "I hear you a mighty fine violin player," Nefs said.

Nathan swatted a mosquito away from his ear.

"How come you never play for us?"

Nathan rubbed his fingers over the horsehair on the bow. "I did. Juss not enough, I guess. Not enough for it to matter. I was always supposed to play up at the Captain's house."

“You come into the swamp this Sunday and I show you how I spend some of my days.”

“The swamp?”

“You a stranger to it, I know, all them days fiddling for the bossman. But some of us have a second home out yonder. ‘S peaceful.”

“Abbie says that’s where Negroes go to disappear.”

“Heh, heh,” Nefs laughed. “Your mama don’t know everything. She afraid of her own shadow.” He fingered the crescent on the back of his neck. “I’m having a gathering for the peoples. I’ve got to talk to folks.”

Nathan thought the crescent might actually be a “C” for Captain. “Can I bring Pinder?” he asked.

Nefs tied the scarf around his head, concealing the crescent brand. “Why don’t you leave him at home? It’ll be fine without him. I promise.”

The clearing was dark except for two lanterns placed next to a stump. Nathan left Pinder in the quarters but brought Abbie, since she wouldn’t have let him out of the cabin otherwise. She insisted on escorting Nathan around any time he ventured out at night. She had a son who ran off in the middle of the night, never said shucks to anyone. Had won a marksmanship contest in Donaldsonville and thought he could earn a living shooting the center out of half dollars. From the moment Abbie saw his empty bed the morning he left, she would never again trust the things people kept hidden in themselves that had the ability to make her miss them so terribly.

Abbie seemed as agitated as Nathan had seen her in some time. "I know what that old fool gonna say," she muttered. "He always yapping out in the woods." She took hold of Nathan's shoulder to slow him down and steady herself a little. "I want you to pay him no nevermind, now. He all talk anyway. He juss likes folks to have to listen to him."

Everyone gathered in a semi-circle waiting for Nefs, only he wasn't there. Patty was the first to speak, welcoming everyone from the cabins. "Most of you know why we here," she said. "Those that don't will learn soon enough."

Patty stepped down and everybody waited. The glow of the lanterns cast a halo around the stump and center of the clearing. It looked very much like a stage. The slaves wrapped themselves in shawls and blankets in nervous anticipation. "What the holdup?" someone whispered.

A man stepped forth but it wasn't Nefs. The man's steps were choppy and unbalanced. His cheeks were long and flaccid, spittle forming at the bottom of his concave mouth. When he stepped into the clearing, the crowd could finally see who it was. It was Benjamin, the overseer, the Negro who had whipped Nathan. Or rather, it was the man they knew as the overseer, for it was obvious Benjamin's countenance had undergone a strange and wonderful transformation. No longer was he stern of face, a harshness formed from years of delivering beatings and brandings and various other tortures. "Behold," Nefs said, stepping from the shadows. "This massuh's boss I give to you, sweet as a lamb."

The crowd of slaves was mesmerized. Some of them ran to the rear of the group, frightened. No one was certain whether Benjamin might suddenly come out of it,

showing all of them to be fools. Yet it was fascinating to see this once vicious man rendered as harmless as a housecat. Some of the slaves inched closer; one brave boy touched Benjamin's pantsleg and ran away. "Don't trouble yourself about him no more," Nefs said. "He juss a loony now." He waved his arms wide in the air, as if summoning the dead. He was a great showman, with an eye for costumes and instinctively daring in front of crowds. He rubbed his palms together and looked toward some scrub pines. Out from behind the trees stepped Old Hank, a wagon hand who had disappeared from Larawood under mysterious circumstances three months before.

Upon seeing the fugitive, the group of slaves descended upon him, joking and pushing each other, such was the delight of seeing somebody long given up for dead. "Hank Speed, where you been? Whooooo, you a mess!"

"This swamp ain't Cincinnati," said Tessie, who lived one cabin to the north of Old Hank. "No sir. This Louisiana, man. This the deep, deep south. The deepest, darkest south."

"Now go get cleaned up, boy, so we can take you to see the man!" said Mary, whose son, like Abbie's, had run away in the night. "He'll sure want to take a look at you!"

Eventually everybody quieted down and turned once more toward Nefs. In the glow of the lantern, he took on the aura of a preacher. *What did he want*, Nathan thought.

"I'm happy each one of you could come tonight," Nefs said. "I'm thankful for it 'cause I got a lot to say. I got a lot to say 'bout the black man. 'Bout us. I got a lot to say

'bout the white man. 'Bout them. 'Bout us I got to say it takes a particular breed to love its own kind the way we do. A special bond."

Benjamin sat down on the stump next to Nefs.

"When you look at all the whitefolks have, all the plantations, and railroads, and pretty fields, and heap o' good meals, you can't help but think of them who provided these things," Nefs told the gathering of slaves. "That what the Negro man contribute to the white man. That what the colored man contribute to the world. Yet, come the end of the day, the Negroes always the last one to feed at the trough. Always the last one. Thass how it's always been, but yet, not how it always has to be."

Since Tessie and Mary agreed, they screamed out, "Tell it, preacher man. Tell how it's gonna be!"

Nefs continued: "Slaves was born to do two things: to work and to die, to be the backbone and be the skeleton. Been said nothing in heaven nor of this earth can save us except for the returning of Moses and the heavenly march. He supposed to march us out the darkness. He the one powerful enough to draw the good out of the bad. But there is another way. I believe there is another way. We can rise up ourselves and conquer those who have conquered us."

Nefs paused to pull the voodoo jack from the cow bladder. He mumbled some words then sprinkled the crowd with ash, water, and encomiums as he swung the jack to and fro. "This jack give each of you the power," he said. "It's up to you to use it to free yourself, as they done in Santo Domingo. We can create a free colony right here, with all free rights the white man gives to hisself."

Abbie became disgusted at this kind of language. She considered root doctors to be on the same level with vultures. "Don't you think them Yankees will come a'shooting at you juss like they done in Harper's Ferry and Rapides Parish and Richmond?" Abbie yelled from the crowd. "Haven't you seen them officers come a'gallivanting around here every time the Captain break out the bourbon? They got armies and cannons and horses. What we got besides each other? Fighting ain't for our little group here. No sir. Uh-uh. We should do nothing 'cept wait for providence and Moses, like the Bible say."

Nefs shut her up by telling the slaves the time had come for them to do for themselves what couldn't be done otherwise, providence notwithstanding, and that he had thoroughly thought out everything. He said Larawood was isolated enough to give slaves time to fortify themselves so that when the white masters on the LaFourche or further up the Mississippi discovered there had been a rebellion in tiny Assumption Parish, and subsequent peace restored, they would recognize Larawood as its own town, its own oasis, and be left to itself as an aberration of once-and-only Negro governance.

"Because we was raised together, I'll do nothing to hurt you," Abbie told Nefs, "But because your way of thinking ain't my way of thinking, I'll do nothing to help you. Plan and scheme and plot. But I'll still hold out hope in what Moses taught us."

"We decided," Nefs responded. "And that's as much as we can do at this point."

For the next month, Nefs caused much commotion around Larawood, with a majority of slaves under the impression that something important would soon happen, something that could change their lives forever. Rumors were whispered around the

quarters and children were told to remain close to the cabins. But Nathan had already decided what he would do. He wanted nothing to do with fighting, not because he was a coward, he told himself, but because remaking Larawood into a haven for black citizens would never work. Nefs could rebuild Larawood into anything he wanted. But it would still be in Assumption Parish, Louisiana, and for that, Nathan would shed not a drop of blood.

Abbie wasn't like the rest of them. She never needed anything like the hoodoo because she already knew how to read the signs. Change would come in due time. She had tried to instill a feeling of patience in Nathan but he never seemed to listen. There was a ticking clock in that boy's head. He had the mistaken notion, based on fantasies Lara dreamed up, that she would someday escort him to St. Louis and New Orleans to play music in front of a large audience. "I bet you could ask two dollars per person, the way you play," Abbie heard Lara say more than once. "I bet you there's lots of white folks who would pay that much. Rich, white folks paying to see a young slave boy from the Louisiana swamps play beautiful music. What a sight that would be."

Pinder himself was no better. He egged on Nathan with dreams of playing on the *Coosa* as Pinder had done, filling his mind with all the opportunity a musician on a paddlewheel was afforded. "You'll never go home hungry," Pinder told him more than once. "And you'll never go home alone. No lady who loves music would let that happen."

Why the two of them would torture Nathan that way was beyond her. She didn't like the thought of him out there with nobody to protect him. Larawood was as good a

home as any until the war was over. *Please, Lord, don't let him be a runaway, she thought. Don't make him like my other one.*

Pinder knew better than to think of Nathan that way. There was no reason to stave off what would eventually occur, what was destined to be: born to a life of flight. It was as much in Nathan's blood as playing a waltz or ballad. How many times had his mother fled Larawood? Seventeen, last he could remember. Gone so much Nathan's father could take it no longer, got sick, and died. Gone so often folks in the quarters started calling her So Long Sadie. There was nowhere to go but she ran just the same. She packed herself in crates, hid in wagons, stowed away on steamers. Sometimes she'd announce to the whole quarters when she planned to escape next and everybody would have a good laugh. *This Louisiana, woman. The deep, dark South. Where you off to? Whereabouts is that? Well, So Long Sadie.* The Captain, of course, took notice and that was the end of that. Brand marks and lash strokes covered her back from neck to rump. She died same as her husband—of a crushed spirit, a broken will, which permitted the pneumonia to enter and wear down her body until there was nothing left but hallowed eyes, skin and bones, and a shiny, impure sweat.

Pinder pulled two violin cases from under his bed and removed the violin. One had been given to him by his father. So he could never part with it. The other, his uncle had worked evenings tiling roofs to get enough money to buy for him. "In case something happen to the one your daddy give you," his uncle said when he first brought it home. Pinder learned to play in Congo Park, where all New Orleans musicians wound up Sunday afternoons. Where he fell in love for the first time with a fine mulatto woman who painted a red rose on the body of his violin even though he'd

been told it would dampen the sound of the instrument. This was the violin he packed in its case and tucked under his arm as he walked through the quarters.

Many of the slaves, sitting on their porches having a smoke, nodded to him as he passed. When he found Abbie and Nathan's cabin, Pinder took a seat on the steps and put the violin underneath his chin. No one was home. The cabin was dark and idle. But Pinder played anyway because that's what musicians do. Several barefoot children ran in circles in front of him, self-conscious that the violin player might be watching them. The songs were nothing more than musings, bits and pieces of music Pinder spent off hours working on. To the children, they were a piper's signal to play and be cheerful.

At the end of the songs, the children ran away and several Negro women on the porch adjacent went back inside their cabin. Down the row of cabins a man's voice yelled and cursed at someone. Nathan was probably still at the sugarhouse, Pinder thought. He decided to do something he was going to do all along. He pulled open the screen door and found Nathan's bed, which was a mattress on the floor in the room opposite Abbie's. The cabin was dark except for moonlight shaped like a cross coming through the window. In the dark the bed looked like a giant white tongue. Pinder ran his hand over the smooth body of the violin, then laid it delicately on the pillow, and left the cabin.

CHAPTER THREE

When Nathan began playing the violin again, he told no one. It was not a joyful return to the instrument, not at first. Callousness had disappeared off the tips of his left-hand fingers and his neck muscles were sore from relearning how to hold the violin under his chin. At first, everyone in the quarters assumed Pinder was playing in his cabin, even when they knew he should have been at the blacksmith shop. Then they got wise as they detected the sound coming from Nathan's cabin. Nobody bothered to interrupt him because they were too busy enjoying the cheerful melodies he was practicing, swirling pieces of music with notes that seemed to circle back on themselves, and then circle again. Old women returning from the field shuffled their feet in time to the seesaw tempo.

Nathan brought a good feeling to the sugarhouse each morning after playing the violin. It had a carry-over effect he forgot was possible in the months since his whipping. He had an easier time greeting everyone he met along the way and he liked to break out in a whistle from time to time, much to the displeasure of the sugarhouse workers. Being cheerful was acceptable in the quarters in the evening but in the heat of the day, slaves were accustomed to a slow, monotonous torture. Nathan's arrival each morning in high spirits struck a sour chord with many of the other dippers, woodcutters and carters. It signaled to Nefs a lack of focus he did not want to see. Now was no time for whistling and grabassing.

Nefs caught up to him one morning on the way to the mill. Nathan, drawn to new interests by his change in mood, had tucked a bullfrog inside the pocket of one of

his overalls. As Nefs began to speak, Nathan reached down to check on the frog. He showed its face to Nefs. "That's none of my concern," Nefs said. "I got more important things to figure on than frogs and fiddles and carrying on around here. Where's your sense, boy?"

Nefs led Nathan away from the mill under pretext they would haul a sack of lime from a storage shed. When they had walked halfway between the fields and the sugarhouse, Nefs turned to Nathan. "Ain't you forgetting something?" Nefs asked. "You seen what these people are capable of. Your backside remember what that feels like. Feel like they taking you apart bit by little bitty bit. Juss a small pinch of you being yanked but being yanked out a thousand times a day, every day of the year. Ain't nothing you can do about it, neither."

All around Nathan Negroes were moving under the hot sky, their skin glistening with sweat. From field to mill and further on toward the blacksmith shop, Negroes were hunched over, struggling with the labor of the day. He tried to, but Nathan didn't feel a kinship with any of them.

Nefs glared at Larawood's mansion. "You don't belong up there with them," Nefs said. "You belong down here with us."

"The Captain don't want me up there no more."

"He will. You and me and everybody know it's juss a bit of time before he calls you up there. He a fool for music. He worse than you that way. And you'll come running when called. I know how it is. The fine dining, the cool breeze blowing, none of this here to wear a body down, make you sick. But remember there's only you and a

few others, like your old Auntie Abbie, allowed up there in that big house. The rest of us down here doing the dirty work. *Your* dirty work.”

Nathan pulled the frog out of his pocket and let it hop on the ground. “The Captain is my master same as he yours. Neither one of us can ever say no to him. About anything.”

“No one has to say nothing. But you don’t have to say yes neither.”

Nathan was surprised at Pinder’s reaction when the old blacksmith was told of Nefs’ plan to found a black colony. “Old news,” Pinder said. “That plot’s as old as Nefs is. He been plotting and scheming and conniving since he was in diapers. He came into this world wanting to kill a white man.”

Nathan sat with his back against a tombstone Pinder made for his wife. Migrating birds had left a mess all over the cemetery and both Nathan and Pinder were careful about where they sat. “Why would he want to kill anybody?” Nathan asked.

Pinder closed his left eye as if he were eyeing a target. Explaining things to a boy was not always easy. “I’d do it. I’d kill any white man I could to escape this life. You young. You’ll see.”

Nathan wished they could play music or hum or sing or do anything other than talk about killing. The more he thought about battle, the more he thought about what might happen to him, and how little he knew about killing. “If you got religion,” he said to Pinder, “you wouldn’t need to do all that killing.”

Pinder laughed. “Good people kill, too. You heard what Nefs said. Santo Domingo is where that whole thing began. Bunch of maroons filled with the spirit took

over the gove'ment of an island nobody ever heard of. Out there in the middle of the ocean. Us blacks been running the show there ever since."

Nathan said, "I mean, the real religious people, not like Nefs or nothing. The people who believe nobody should do no killing. The people who juss want to enjoy a little piece of earth."

"Whooooeeeee," Pinder said. "You still a baby, ain't you?"

"People who juss want to entertain theyselves and eat a good meal once in a while."

Pinder closed both eyes this time. Then he shook his head as if he were shaking off a shot of bourbon. "You cain't understand. You too young to be talking about this here any which way."

Nathan stood up and wiped his pantsleg. "What would you do?"

"Listen to me," Pinder said. "I don't agree with Nefs but hardly ever. Yet if it's push come to shove, I'd fight alongside him. I agree with him on that. It took them peoples in Santo Domingo twelve years to do it but they overthrew their masters. The likes of an uprising had never been seen before. That a mystery right there. Something was on their side. Something powerful."

"You sounding like Nefs."

"Nefs?" Pinder removed his violin from its case. "Oh no. I got no religion, boy. No religion but kindness."

At first Nathan thought a regiment of the Union army had arrived at Larawood. Fifty white men on horses rode toward the quarters, with barely room for a single person to

squeeze between mounts. Their horses were big and proud, black stallions and roans and chestnuts, bred for running long distances, not plowing fields. Such a pageantry of horses had unmistakable power and strength. Nathan could see children running to their mothers and old men under the oak tree turned over their cards and waited for the procession of white men's horses to find its inevitable way to them.

Nathan came to recognize the men as a mishmash of Union soldiers and boys in civilian dress from plantation families in the area, mainly teenagers whose horses bucked and cowkicked now and again with excitement. It was late afternoon and many slaves were returning from the fields, hoes and cane knives slung over their shoulders. Some of them stopped in their tracks when they saw the line of horses. If there was a thought that went around at this moment, person to person, slave to slave, it was this: *Somebody must have told Old Man Aucoin.* Nothing was spoken but the thought was communicated just the same as if it had been shouted from the balcony of the mansion. *Somebody must have told what Neffs was up to.*

The horses stopped in front of the cabins. Nathan could barely make out one of the slaves talking to the men, talking to the Captain, it looked like, surrounded by men in blue uniforms Nathan did not know. The slave pointed toward the swamp and then the fields and then the sugarhouse, which prompted several riders to quickly gallop toward the mill. Nathan thought he should do something, but what? The violin felt light and tiny in his hands, the neck easily crushed, the body easily broken. The sun came through the window as a white hot flash and Nathan had to cover his brow to investigate a sound coming from below him and to the left. It was a band of men wheeling a cannon out of a shed.

Nefs was hustled out of the mill and brought to the quarters. He was made to stand in front of the Captain a good long while until the Captain reached back and struck him across the face. The slaves crowded in closer to view this spectacle. Several men and a large horse pulled the cannon in front of the mansion and stopped. They pointed the muzzle in the direction of the quarters. The Captain's blow had knocked Nefs to the ground, where he rolled over and rose to his feet. It looked to Nathan as if he wanted to explain himself, as if he were pleading to be heard. Let him be heard, Nathan thought, because maybe if Nefs got to talking, that would be all there was to this day. Maybe nobody knew anything or would ever know anything. Instead, Nefs turned away from the Captain, and pointed at the slaves. As he was talking, one of his hands eased inside his shirt. When it came out, Nefs was holding a pistol—where he got the gun Nathan would never know—and fired it at the Captain. Nathan could not mistake the orange flash as the bullet exploded from the barrel and a second later the sound of the gunshot reached the parlor where Nathan was standing. If Nefs had intended to kill the Captain he picked the right angle and depth since the distance from the gun barrel to the Captain's heart must have been about a dozen feet. It would have taken a miracle for Captain Aucoin to survive. The Captain's horse reared up and ran off with the Captain still holding clumsily on to it. All at once the quarters was a confusion of running bodies and horsemen firing guns and black men fighting with white. And at the center of the scene was Nefs holding the pistol.

It was all too much for Nathan to take. He ran from the parlor into a bedroom, where he stood in a closet, hiding. He pushed himself through hanging clothes and bonnets and slid his back down the wall. Now and again the crack of pistols reached the

closet. There was a small rim of light around the edge of the door and Nathan imagined a group of rabid men running up the stairs and jerking the door open, flooding the closet with light and putting their hands all over him. He felt ridiculous and cowardly squatting alone in a closet but he did not know what else to do. He heard very little in the closet except for the gunfire and the sound the cistern made creaking in the attic. Far away a lady's voice screamed "help us Lord" and Nathan felt like running to it, thinking it might be Abbie. Maybe, he thought, maybe this will all blow over soon the way a hellacious lightning storm blows through quickly.

A quarter hour after the shooting started Nathan could no longer hear it. His eardrums went numb from struggling to listen. He pushed his way to the front of the closet, opened the door, and looked around the bedroom he had been hiding in. He did not wish to be seen. A four-poster bed sat in the middle of the room covered in a fine, translucent cloth. He had, quite unexpectedly, thrown himself into Lara's room. If anybody caught him, he'd be done for, Nathan thought. He pushed his way into the dining room, where the table was set for supper, forks on the left, spoons and knives on the right. As Nathan reached the middle of the room, a giant explosion rung out and Nathan fell to the rug on the floor. Some of the knives and spoons rattled off the table and landed next to him. Nothing Nathan had heard in his life up to that point had made a noise quite that loud. A halo of sound remained in the air to remind him he hadn't imagined it. Then, as Nathan pushed himself up, another crack rang out, this one followed by a distant explosion. It was the cannon, no doubt, shooting at what? The quarters, of course. All the people he grew up with, children and mothers and the men

who worked the sugarhouse. What had they done but been swayed by a root doctor and dreamed a foolish dream?

Nathan heard a familiar voice yell out to stop firing. "Look'it what you're doing," the voice said. "Some of them are worth a thousand dollars. You'll drive me into bankruptcy!" Nathan recognized the voice as the Captain's. He lifted his head to look out the window. The Captain was stretched out alone on a blanket next to the cannon. He propped himself on an elbow and yelled at the artillerymen: "Cease fire! They're in full retreat." But his command had no effect on the gunners. The cannoneers loaded for another round.

Kneeling at the window, Nathan watched. Horsemen clubbed several slaves from behind while two soldiers were yanked from their mounts by strong-armed Negroes. A group of slaves rushing forward were shot at point blank range. There was a great confusion of running and yelling and the sound of bullets ricocheting into flesh and bone. Nathan's eyes affixed to a single slave man in the middle of the yard, directly below him, fighting off a group of riders, and then legging onto an unoccupied horse. The man barely dodged bullets fired at him from a short distance but he dodged them just the same, riding between militiamen and planters' sons, swinging and hacking with a cane knife. The Negro rider seemed heroic for a second, riding between everyone on the battlefield and interrupting the firing of the cannon. Nathan was urging him on even as he recognized the rider to be Pinder, which gave Nathan a fright, because no one could keep as torrid a pace as Pinder was keeping for very long, even if he was only trying to stay alive. No sooner had Nathan realized this than Pinder was wrestled off his horse and surrounded by horsemen. "Leave him," Nathan yelled from the window.

He flew down the stairs and out the front door but Larawood's yard looked much different at ground level than it did from the parlor window. Large horses flew past him, making such a blur Nathan couldn't tell where Pinder had been. Then the cannon let off another thundering explosion.

"Come here," one of the men on the cannon said. He was tall and lean and his black felt hat was tipped back on his head. "Over here," the man said, "and bring the violin."

"Lookee," another soldier, said turning toward the cannoneers, who were busy preparing another round. "We got ourselves a good-time guy here. Play something for us, little merry-maker." Nathan didn't know what to play. "Go on, now. Play a little number while we fire this cannon." Nathan decided to play Moses by the Rushes, which was a quick-tempoed song about some golden maidens finding baby Moses. His fingers automatically found their position on the fretboard but his timing was off and he missed several notes. He hesitated before playing Amazing Grace and Johnny Come Down the Hollow, which barely sounded like the intended compositions. It was like trying to sing with a mouthful of feathers. Horsemen whooped and shot their pistols and the Negroes ran away. The bodies of the dead were strewn from the mansion to the quarters, a distance of a third of a mile.

As he played and scanned the lane leading to the quarters, Nathan's eyes misted over at the horrible scene. Black smoke smoldered into the sky. The artillerymen finished their last shot and began scrubbing the muzzle of the cannon with a large, wire brush while the man who told Nathan to play the violin scanned the horizon for more targets. Nathan's feet followed his heart. After each song, he took two steps away from

the cannon and toward the cane fields. The fighting of the day was over. It was twilight. The militiamen walked among the bodies, looking for survivors, calling out every so often to the Captain, who was still lying next to the cannon. After a dozen songs, Nathan was near the guesthouse. He stopped playing, looked over his shoulder, then walked toward the head-high sugar cane. After his first few steps into the muck, both shoes were missing. About twenty yards in, the cane-reeds made little scissor cuts on both Nathan's arms. He held the violin and bow above his head. From the mansion, Nathan could hear men yelling back and forth, asking Nefs' whereabouts. "He ain't among them, Captain," one of the men said. Nathan kept going. The stiff reeds barely gave as he hobbled over and around the long stalks. Instead of heading straight for the nearest part of the swamp, which was known to have alligators big enough to eat a full-grown Negro, he angled for a farther point where the highlands extended for miles northward.

To his right, he caught a flash of something he couldn't quite see. He was breathing like a chimney and felt as if he could choke a horse with his bare hands. He trundled up a small embankment to see Abbie in the distance, running from the mansion to the quarters. She was running as if she'd left her stove kindling overnight.

Nathan walked until he reached the edge of the swamp, and found his way to the colored cemetery. In the darkness it was difficult to find his father's grave, and next to him, his mother's. Nathan had never been there at night. Yet he located the handmade cross under which the bones of his parents rested. He wanted to pay homage because he did not know if he'd ever return. He wanted to promise he'd visit

again, to sing to them again, but he figured he should make no promises he couldn't keep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nathan walked the rest of the night and into the next day. Commotion from Larawood traveled deep into the woods. He heard the crying of babies and the braying of an ass until he'd walked far enough into the woods that his ears only imagined hearing those sounds. Nathan walked for two days afterward, subsisting on roots and eggs he stole from bird nests. The combination worked a devil through his intestines, driving Nathan to the edge of the water to clean himself up. Eventually he found it most comfortable to remove his dungaries and walk barelegged until the urgency in his bowels diminished.

Weeks passed. A month. A season. Nathan moved from one makeshift camp to another. He heard the sounds of men moving through the swamp but he hid himself well. Nathan became familiar with the swamp, with its sounds and patterns. He prayed to stay alive and sane until he could find a better life for himself. He passed the hours by looking for ways to conceal himself. Mostly it was too quiet. Nathan was unused to the quiet, the times of the day when, for no reason, not even the squirrels bothered to chatter. He found himself daydreaming about returning to Larawood, about sitting at the table with Abbie, about going down to the cemetery. He bit into things just to see if he could stand the taste. He found a burlap sack and lined it with large soft leaves to protect his violin. Water was plentiful but tasted like dirt. He became so used to the taste he put mud in his mouth those times when he could not capture food. It rained often, and when it was cold it seemed he would never know heat again. His clothes ripped. His shoes unraveled. For months this went on, long into summertime and into fall. The solitude began to overwhelm him. He was free and yet he was not. He called

himself Gros Lou Lou, covered himself in animal fur and leaves, and lusted after raw meat. His mind was delirious and for no reason he sang and whistled loudly, his loneliness driving him to desperation, hoping anyone within earshot would hear him. He slept through large portions of the day, awakened by the putrid scent his own body produced.

He happened to catch his reflection in a pool of water. He looked like the devil, he thought. His hair was a patch of confusion and his eyes were disoriented. He recognized himself as a desperate young man. He ought to have floated off instantly upon some wave of sympathetic expansion. If only he could be lifted up and lifted out, like his mother must have done after she died, after his father, when he died, like Jesus' mom was supposed to have done, like every person in spite of their race or age or religion. Every poor person deserved to go to heaven. Because otherwise life would be too cruel. Because otherwise there would be no point. He didn't need a preacher man to tell him that.

"Hello there, young person," a voice behind him said. "Are you lost?"

Nathan turned around to find a group of women huddled around the burlap sack, holding his violin. "No'm," Nathan answered. "I'm fine."

They were sisters of the holy order, who sometimes traveled the LaFourche by skiff, heading to a plantation the Jesuits owned several miles downstream. "I don't believe you," one of the sister said. "This isn't a very good place to be lost, young man. There's federal troops and rebel troops all around us. A young man like yourself might be mistaken for a fugitive." Her eyes scanned the swamp. "Or a spy."

"No'm," Nathan said. "I'm none of those things."

One of the sisters held out a blanket for Nathan to cover himself. "Very well," the sister said. "We'll take you to safety, to a place where your master can come claim you. Follow along."

Nathan couldn't quite come to his feet so he sat up and accepted a long cool drink of water. His body shook in little uncontrollable fits and his mind wouldn't let go of the idea that he was about to be lifted up.

"We have no food just yet, young man," the sister said, "but I can give you one of these." She opened a small cloth sack at her side and took out a couple of pieces of peppermint. Nathan took them with trembling hands and allowed them to dissolve in his mouth before crunching them with his back teeth. They weren't much for his stomach but made his tongue feel alive.

Another sister helped Nathan to his feet and the group began walking slowly, taking into account Nathan's tender condition. The path they traveled was forged through the woods by many travelers on foot. It was quiet but somewhere in the distance Nathan thought he heard lumbermen sawing wood. Every so often the low of an alligator sounded over the water.

Nathan wasn't sure in whose company he'd landed. He had been raised by no religion, no church, not counting Nefs' teachings about the hoodoo, Moses, and the Bible. The women seemed kindly, though somewhat detached from his presence. They carried themselves as if their own burdens far outweighed his.

After the group had walked some distance, Nathan sidled up to the sister he believed to be in charge, the one who'd handed him the peppermint. She was younger than the other sisters, shorter and more stern of face.

“Missy,” Nathan said, for he was unfamiliar with how to address sisters of the order. “I want to ask you something. You see, I lost my master hunting, and now I’m no good to nobody. I can cook and clean a little until the war’s over, if somebody would have me. I don’t ask for much for myself.”

The sister seemed to measure the weight of Nathan’s request. “Young man,” she said. “Have you thought about what your disappearance from your master’s farm might mean to him?”

“No’m.”

“You’re likely to mean a great deal to him. Farms don’t run on their own.”

Nathan shifted the sack carrying his violin from his left shoulder to his right.

“We’ll be happy to bring you to safety,” the sister continued. “What you’re permitted to do from there is between you and the Yankees.”

This was the time, Nathan knew, for him to make a brave decision. The sisters of the holy order would not lead him where he wanted to go. But he was too tired to run. He had nothing left. No reserves to survive the swamp. So he followed along numbly, certain his fate was doomed to these strange-looking women.

The camp the group came upon surprised Nathan because it wasn’t set in a clearing. They stumbled into it as the path widened briefly from the narrow lane forged through the woods. Suddenly, it seemed to Nathan he was immersed in a busy town, with tents, tethered horses, men and dogs around a campfire, the smell of stew in the air, and muskets and cannon gathered in a small circle. Nathan settled down when he saw other slaves among the soldiers. Near the fire, a man beat a rhythm on a pair of spoons.

The soldiers took little notice of the group. One of the Negroes approached the sisters and directed them to a place where they might sup. The sisters and Nathan ate in relative peace, the sisters on one side of the tent, Nathan on the other. How many lies would he have to tell to convince them not to send him home? Would they believe him? As Nathan was brought a second helping of beans and okra, the sisters brought news to the soldiers. Nathan's body slowed and ached as his stomach filled, and fatigue began to drag him down.

When he finished eating, Nathan was taken to a tent where he could wash his face, hands, and neck. A corporal handed him new clothes and led him to a quiet place on the edge of camp where he lay down. He was unsure how long he dozed when he was nudged awake by one of the soldiers. With him was the head sister. "Come, young man," she said. "The major will see you now."

It took Nathan a few moments to work out the aches that had crept into his sleeping body. After stretching his shoulders and arms, he got to his feet and followed the soldier and sister into a tent. A plump man in a blue uniform sat behind an organ, singing about dead relatives he was destined to meet on the other shore. When it didn't appear the man would finish the song any time soon, the sister piped up her vocals, assisting him on the chorus.

The two finished in off-key harmony, looking awkwardly at each other, as if they'd seen the forbidden in the other's face. The major delicately pulled the cover over the keyboard and returned to his desk. Nathan could not take his eyes from the organ.

"It's an Estey," the major said. "Brought it from home. Vermont. That's where it was made." Nathan pictured a church along a bayou for that was the only reference he

had of the sound of an organ. "It has four octaves," the man said, though the information failed to help Nathan mentally locate Vermont.

"The major would like to know where you're from," the sister said.

"New Orleans," Nathan replied.

"You don't look like a city Negro," the major said.

The major was a red-haired man, the first red hair Nathan ever witnessed on a human being. Red fuzz covered the major's head, face, and, Nathan couldn't help but notice, the tops of his knuckles. "That's quite a journey, young man," the major said.

"You say your master was hunting in this part of the swamp?"

"We was hunting when I was separated fetching a coon," Nathan said. "When I come back with the kill, master long disappeared. Dogs too."

The major was unconvinced. "You say your master came all the way from New Orleans to hunt out here where there's troop movements and dangerous operations?"

The major's red hair was more like bristles, angling out from his hair, hands, and chin like wires in a brush. "Unlikely," the sister said.

"Yes," the major agreed. "Isn't it more conceivable you came from the LaFourche area? It's the closest settlement to here."

Nathan combed the hair on his wrist down, smoothing and patting.

"That must be it," the sister said to the major. "All the Negroes are running from there."

"Well, fortunately for you," the major continued, "we can get you home since we control the portion of the state where you're from. It is Ascension? Is it Assumption? Is it St. Martin? I want you to forget the lies and tell me the truth."

The red-haired major pointed to a map spread over an easel next to his desk. "You see this shaded portion," the major said. "We control all this territory. The Rebs control, more or less, the rest, though certainly not for long. I suspect we are in the final days of this war, my boy."

Nathan looked again at the organ. He hoped the major was right. But he'd never seen a map and was unsure how the large piece of paper corresponded to the giant piece of land he'd just struggled through. "Where is this camp on your map?" Nathan asked. "I'd like to stay here."

The major reluctantly allowed his pointer to slide to the bottom of the map. "Quite a popular place for your kind, ever since it fell into our hands early in the war," the major said.

"Now that my master took up and left," Nathan said, "I was hoping I could have a place with the freedmen here. My master don't want me no more."

The major sat back in his chair, as if he'd expected this news to reach him. "I'm afraid that's impossible," the major said.

"Impossible," the sister agreed.

"If you had escaped from one of these parishes," the major continued, pointing to a section of the map still in the hands of the Confederates, "we could accept you as contraband of war. If you'd had the good fortune to be employed in any of them—any, mind you—I would have been delighted to put you to work for wages in one of our camps till this whole mess blows over. This whole mess. But you came from one of the parishes we control. Planters in these parishes have shown remarkable loyalty to our

cause. We wouldn't want to upset them by stealing their Negroes to work for us, would we?"

"That wouldn't be very civil of us, now would it?" the sister offered.

"I'm afraid my orders are to return you to Bayou LaFourche," the major said.

"Begging pardon again," he said, "but what about the Proclamation us slaves have heard about?"

The sister and the major seemed surprised Nathan had heard of the Proclamation. It was the sort of information a Negro kept tucked away, never mentioning in front of white people, for no slave wanted to be considered knowledgeable or uppity. The sister said, "President Lincoln was gracious enough to put that document into effect."

"But I'm afraid it doesn't apply to you," the major added. "Until I hear differently, the Proclamation applies only to Negroes in parts of the state controlled by the Rebels." He leaned into the large arms of his chair and looked at Nathan. His big blue eyes indicated the delight the major took in being able to answer Nathan's questions. "If you think there's any reason for me to reconsider, please let me know."

Nathan's eyes scanned the room for a reason but nothing jumped out at him.

"Now," the major added, "what is it you have there in this sack?"

Nathan carefully leaned over and snaked his hand into the leaves and pulled out the violin.

"Oh, she's a beauty," the major said, stretching out his hands to receive the wooden instrument. He took it and flipped it over in his hands and plucked at the strings with his fingers. "I had a cousin who could play one of these things even though

he was missing his middle finger." The major examined the violin some more, then returned it to Nathan. "Would you like to try the Estey?" the major asked.

The major led Nathan to the organ bench and lifted the keyboard. Nathan sat and let his fingertips rake the ivory keys. He worked the pedals to see what might happen. He allowed a finger to tease one of the keys as if he were caressing a baby's foot. The organ let loose a cold sigh. The sound caught him off guard even though he'd heard an organ sound many times outside the white folks' church. The sound was not precise and harmonious like a piano, but deep and somber, like the echo in a tomb. Nathan tried a few notes but the organ produced only a whine. "Such a sad, sad sound," the major said, closing the keyboard. "Reminds me of home."

Nathan was led outside and put into wrist and legchains. The head sister walked out of the major's tent and stood at the back of the wagon. "I hope you're not disappointed," she said. Nathan lifted his handchains as if to show her how he felt.

She said, "The major did what he could. He's a good man. He's had to overcome so much to survive in a land like this. He's only recently adjusted to this heat, you know."

The wagon rattled away, leaving Nathan with one last image of the sister standing in the middle of camp. In the squalor and solitude, she was joined by the major who looked at her with the same passion Nathan had seen when they were singing. Nathan supposed they would be singing together again shortly, and the sounds they produced would probably be off-key.

Nathan was sent to a camp on the Mississippi, about a half day's journey downriver from Donaldsonville, which was another half day north of Larawood. The camp wasn't much more than a trading place for farmers who might claim a runaway from a holding pen. Nathan waited here three months. At every opportunity, he told his guards he was not from the LaFourche area.

He would have been sent home immediately if not for Rebel cannons on the bluffs sinking Union schooners outside Donaldsonville. Boat captains ferrying supplies, feeling the war winding down, were not interested in testing the gunners.

Nathan thought it was these gunners he heard one evening in May 1865, cannon fire that startled him even as he realized the horrible rumble had erupted some distance from camp. Several flares were launched in the distant sky. Like the other contraband, Nathan pressed his face to the bars of the holding pen. He didn't know what to make of the cheers and gunshots going around camp, drowning out an unrehearsed version of "Yankee Doodle Dandy." Gunpowder filled the air. A soldier, drunk with excitement, grabbed Nathan by his head. "Don't you know what this means," the soldier asked, his mouth practically touching Nathan's, filling his ears with a glorious sound: The war was over.

CHAPTER FIVE

“What’s the matter darky?” the man asked Nathan.

The movement of the wagon rocked Nathan side to side, rattling the shackles around his wrists and ankles.

“Don’t you like the ride?” the man asked. He was a handsome Creole, though time had leathered his skin rough as cowhide. His hair was cut close to the scalp and greased with pomade, which made him look smarter than he probably was.

“This prosperous land, boy,” the man said. “This Assumption.” His name was Rice Watson, a small-time sharecropper, half Chawasha Indian, half French who understood legal matters much better than many stragglers traveling through Assumption Parish. At least the kind of legal matters that involved unemployed Negroes, which is to say, after the war ended, illegal vagrants cluttering the roadside. Nathan learned soon after being released from the Union camp that freedmen were only free as long as they were working for a white man. He was in route to New Orleans to board a steamer northward when Rice Watson, out scavenging junk, found Nathan on the side of the road and asked if he wanted a ride to the next outpost. Nathan accepted, lay down in the back of the wagon, and slept. When he awoke, there were shackles on his ankles and wrists.

“It don’t matter the war is over, don’t you know,” Rice Watson said. “We got the Black Codes in Assumption Parish. You’re right proper to me now.”

Nathan was unsure how far he was from the Union camp, from New Orleans, or Larawood. The wagon cut through piney woods, which sometimes opened into large

fields, then back into dense woods, where the sun disappeared and the breeze picked up. After miles of such terrain, Rice Watson navigated the mule-drawn wagon down the lane of a small farm. A dilapidated shack, no bigger than a slave cabin, sat in one corner. Tiles on the roof had buckled and the front door was completely unhinged. It had only one window.

The first thing Rice Watson did for Nathan was introduce him to his pack of tracking hounds corralled near the barn. To Nathan, they looked more like wolves—their snouts were long, their pointed ears set high on their heads, their mouths clean and thin, skulls neither pronounced nor defined. Upon seeing Rice and Nathan, the dogs charged and yapped in the mistaken assumption the day had found work for them yet. Their blue eyes were eager and their teeth flashed with excitement. “Shut up,” Rice Watson yelled at them, swatting with his hat. The dogs backed away, distressed and confused. “These dogs nicest dogs in the world,” Rice Watson said. “Real friendly. So friendly you could get in that pen and sleep tucked up with the whole pack of them. Dogs like this only good for one thing—tracking. Track a colored through the darkest, deepest, most infested part of the swamp. Like having a pack of ghosts following you.”

Rice Watson escorted Nathan into the barn, where he removed the chains on Nathan’s wrists and ankles and clasped a collar around Nathan’s neck. The collar was made of leather and fit so closely it cut off part of Nathan’s breathing, pinching his skin near the windpipe. Attached to the leather, wound by metal coil, was a shiny copper bell. “I can hear this bell for a quarter mile,” Rice Watson told Nathan. “I can see this bell, bright like it is, at two hundred yards. That makes quite a target.”

"You know what you call a bell like this?" Rice Watson asked.

A warning, Nathan supposed.

"Insurance," Rice replied.

Despite the collar and the dogs, Nathan planned to run from Rice Watson's farm. It was wintertime and the Louisiana swamps had become soulless and deep. What was once, in the time before he met the sisters, a place that drove him to suicide, now looked like a refuge of sorts. An impenetrable canopy of branches and briars and boogies few coonhounds could sniff through. Everywhere in that winter of 1866 Nathan saw the passing of freedmen on the road that ran past Rice Watson's acreage. It ate at him that he was not migrating with them, somewhere. He had been one of them not too long ago and now he was captive again. He was almost moved to tears, such was his self-pity. How fast they seemed to move; how rooted he seemed to be. They were transformed. He was mired. The steady stream of ex-slaves moved from upland by the Carter plantation, where Rice Watson had bought his freedom before war's end, down to the swamp, where the muck had become an endless repository for joyful Negroes. Where were they headed? To freedom? But what kind? The kind of freedom Rice Watson knew? Or maybe what Nefs had imagined, a Negro city, with Negro mayors and Negro ladies dressed in bonnets and corsets and evening gowns. A Negro sheriff and postmaster. Maybe a Negro symphony, playing the beautiful, melodic music Pinder had explained to him, like all those beautiful Negro musicians in New Orleans. They were among the best musicians in the country, boy, and they were only sixty miles away from him!

A shawl pulled over his shoulders, Nathan shivered as he grabbed the prickled leaves of a cotton plant and hacked at it with a machete. The wind blew across the field, making a rushing sound across Nathan's ear, a constant, persistent wind that whispered to Nathan things about himself. He looked at his hands, cracked and whitened and hardened from work and nature's terrible course. The wind told him the truth. He looked at his hands and knew he'd never play music like those men in New Orleans. How could he? His brittle hands would never be the same as they were at Larawood. He was only seventeen but his hands were already as disfigured as an old cane cutter's.

Nathan's salvation was the evenings when Rice Watson pulled out an old violin from a trunk he kept at the foot of his bed and the two pulled up chairs underneath a large oak. Rice was still a beginner on the violin but he fancied himself a better player than he was. His left-hand fingers were sluggish, Nathan noticed, so the musical notes he produced squeaked like a wet cloth on glass. Rice didn't anticipate well, so he tended to over-accent slurred notes or abbreviate their time value. He was not diligent about changing the bow hair so it lost elasticity, which forced the violin to emit a hazy, muffled sound. And Rice Watson preferred chin rests on his violins rather than a folded piece of cloth, which prevented the full flavor of the violin from reaching Nathan's ears.

All this notwithstanding, it was a pleasure for Nathan to play the violin again. He was limited in the kinds of songs he could play because Rice Watson's repertoire contained eleven songs he knew by heart: Johnny Come Down the Hollow, Long Tail Rat, Old Kentucky Rag, Rock of Ages, Over in the Glory Land, Daybreak in Dixie, Finger Popping Time, Train 45, The Wicked Path of Sin, The Angel of Death, and Man

of Constant Sorrow. Rice Watson wasn't keen on learning new things but Nathan was able to show him how to do the flying staccato, the portato, and the short détaché. With this last technique, which involved shorter, faster strokes played with the middle of the bow, Rice Watson was truly perplexed. He tried several different exercises but failed at all of them. "That's a stumper right there," he said. In time and with practice, he was able to play dexterous enough that Nathan could fill in with the long détaché, similar to the short détaché but requiring Nathan to play near the nut of the bow.

Rice and Nathan were usually joined by two bound boys, one on spoons and another on the mouth harp, during the journey into Rice Watson's limited repertoire. One of these boys, barely into puberty, was Enoch, short and skinny, who had a habit before bedtime of attacking his scalp as if his head were infested with lice. He reminded Nathan of the children taken from their mother's breast and sold as weanlings. Enoch was prone to fits of crying and sometimes walked around the barnyard making strange sounds, somewhere between a moan and a grunt, eyes tucked inside his head. At night Enoch surprised Nathan by trying to climb into his bed, or he'd push his way onto Fella's moss-filled mattress, and suckle at the meaty part of his shoulder.

Fella was a thin-haired, light-skinned, freckled-faced adolescent who, Nathan imagined, must have had some Negro blood to have become mixed-up with the likes of Rice Watson. Fella was not much older than Enoch, but he acted like the farm's foreman. He spoke down to Nathan and lorded over Enoch in such a way that caused bickering and despair.

The two met each other on a riverboat when Fella's master, a musician, lost a card game to a gambler named Tex Cauthon, who had purchased Enoch for ten head of

cattle. Fella's master was drunk at the time. When he sobered up two days later to find his musically gifted slave a hundred miles upriver in St. Louis, he followed on the next packet out. Landing in St. Louis, the master found Tex Cauthon in a saloon near the river. A duel ensued, and after Enoch helped Fella bury the musician, Tex Cauthon claimed him as bounty.

But Tex was also wounded in the duel. When he died seven months later of a lacerated kidney, Enoch and Fella had no idea what to do with themselves. They spent the rest of the war trying to evade the many slave traders roaming around St. Louis. They thought their fortunes were safe when the Confederacy fell. So they began playing music up and down the Mississippi, hustling chickens and other farm animals whenever buskering failed to provide a hearty supper.

Rice Watson caught the two sleeping in a stall of old man Reyburn's barn. Up to that point, Rice had been one of three Reyburn foremen, until the war's end put him out of work. Rice Watson was no student of the law but he knew enough to take advantage when he needed it. And he needed workhands badly. The two boys became permanently indentured to Watson's ninety-seven acres, whose topsoil was more like clay than peat, when the sheriff failed to respond to a hand-delivered letter Rice Watson paid a dollar to have written. They were coloreds, Rice said in the letter, and had been without labor for more than one week, a clear violation of the law. The boys became his property.

He stumbled over a cotton row, regained, then fell into the brush as if he were falling into a womb. Pine needles, moss, and leaves covered his body. Nathan lay there panting and struggling to move.

Something must have struck Rice Watson for him to look up from lovemaking with the woman he paid five dollars every two weeks to pleasure him. It could not have been the sound of Nathan's collar bell. Nathan had twisted off the arm.

What Nathan did recognize was the tracking dogs loosed from the pen, yelping through the swamp in undulating patterns as if there had been a call to arms. Rice appeared shortly afterward at the edge of the swamp on horseback, easing into the swamp in the direction of the dogs. Nathan could see what looked like his shadow to the east. Rice Watson seemed to be racing to get beyond Nathan and come looking for him head up, an approach Nathan had not expected.

Instead of running to the creek, where Nathan had planned to escape, he hurried toward old man Reyburn's barn. It was no use trying to outrun Rice Watson's pony. The woods played tricks with sounds and Nathan was startled to hear the braying of dogs very near him. Were they already closing in?

Nathan did the only thing he could think of. He climbed up in the loft of the Reyburn barn and waited. In minutes, the dogs were upon his scent, yelping and scratching frantically at the old wooden doors. Two of the smarter dogs found a way inside. Rice Watson rode up with his woman, Alice, double-mounted, pointing his shotgun at the loft.

"I'm not a slave no more," Nathan yelled down. "I'm a freeman same as you. Same as any other person."

Nathan was hogtied and drug through the swamp and across the cotton field. The sticker bushes and roots tore his clothes from his back and then ripped grooves into his skin and tissue. Alice helped Rice tie Nathan. His hands were slid over his knees and a stick fastened between his legs so he couldn't move from a curled-up, fetal position. Then Rice Watson removed the silk cracker from a peg on the wall and lashed Nathan fifty times. Alice counted each stroke.

Nathan was locked in the stall of the barn where he slept two days. Fella dressed Nathan's wounds in tobacco juice and brine, rested his head on a cedar block, picked chigger maggots out of Nathan's toes and left a rusted can of water for Nathan to drink from. Nathan sweated and dreamt of reptiles slithering out of wetlands and Pinder, with a flowing long mane, riding a gold chariot. In the delirium voices whispered foolish instructions about capturing whitefolks.

When Nathan came out of the delirium, Enoch stood over him, looking extremely fretful, as if they were lifelong friends. "You was talking about some Pinder fella," Enoch said.

Enoch offered Nathan a piece of apple. "We knew each other long ago," Nathan said.

Fella said, "You also said something about Gros Lou Lou."

Nathan shrugged.

"It's the children's story," Fella said. "The wolf goes, 'What for you got big eyes?' Every son of a coon-ass knows that one."

"I used to like that story," Enoch said. "I liked being scared."

“Not me,” Fella said. “I didn’t like it. The thing that scared me about Gros Lou Lou is that wolves never travel alone. Always in packs.”

Nathan returned to the fields under Rice Watson’s watchful eye. It was still cold and the road was as busy as ever with happy travelers. Nathan refused to play with Rice Watson any longer and in retaliation Rice made Nathan sit and watch and listen as Rice played solo all the songs they’d played together. Enoch and Fella could see it wouldn’t be long before Nathan would run again. So they hacked cotton plants, Enoch and Fella took turns whispering how two others had escaped. “They all run when Rice was busy,” Fella said. “He was distracted.”

Rice Watson sat on a white mule, an Enfield rifle across his lap. “He was rutting on Alice last time I run,” Nathan protested. “Can’t get more distracted than that.”

“There will be a tell-tale sign when you know there’s nothing Rice can do if you were to high-tail it,” Fella said.

“But when you go,” Enoch said. “Be sure to take us with you.”

Nathan watched Rice Watson flick a gnat off his ear. “It’s just as easy you take me when you’re ready to go,” Nathan said.

“Awww, shoot,” Enoch said. “We don’t know nothing about finding our way in the swamp. You lived out in it. You can guide us.”

“Promise,” Fella said.

Nathan wiped sweat from the end of his nose. There was something between the two that he couldn’t put his finger on. Either they were too similar or too different,

Nathan hadn't decided which. And because he couldn't decide, he felt he couldn't trust either one. Not right now. Not at this moment.

They passed the time talking about St. Louis and New Orleans and other cities Fella and Enoch had visited when they were musicians. Nathan offered to form a musical trio with them as soon as they reached a city like New Orleans, where they could count on freedom. He taught them to anticipate signs of change, signs of departure: the cows lowing in the evening which meant somebody would die by next sun fall, a persistent large shadow at the edge of the swamp, a constant eastward wind. A squirrel gizzard at the head of a cotton row. A raccoon carcass lit on by a blue jay—all signs of abrupt, unexpected endings.

Being half Chishawa left Rice Watson in a strange situation. He was white enough to be paid for his labor but Indian enough to face harassment from nightriders. Throughout the war, they left Rice Watson's farm to itself. He knew his place, stayed on his property, and alerted them to the presence of runaways heading through the swamp. But as it looked as if every colored in Louisiana was taking to the roads in the winter of 1867, the nightriders began appearing more and more in this section of the parish, taking liberties on Rice Watson's property, staging their horses in a corner pasture, unannounced and uninvited.

Then one Sunday night, they came to Rice Watson's household, white sheets covering their heads and bodies. Nathan was jolted awake by the squeals of Enoch and Fella. Alice, who'd stayed the night, came from the bedroom. "They want to scare us," she said. "They been up to the old colored quarters twice already this week." She stood next to Rice at the front door. His Enfield rifle was pinned to his waist. Nathan looked

from between cracks in the wooden shutters and saw hooded men gathered around a burning cross. The cross was positioned between the house and field.

“Oh Lordy,” Enoch cried. He folded his fingers together in prayer position.

“Let me be, men,” Rice Watson yelled from the open doorway. “I’m the same fellow you’ve known since we was all little.”

It was a chilly night and Nathan could see the men’s breath escaping from underneath their hoods. One of the nightriders dipped a tree branch into the fire and rode across the small barnyard. “Don’t kill us mister,” Fella yelled. The nightrider stopped in front of the farmhouse and the empty eye pockets looked directly at Rice Watson. Then he flung the branch on top of the house and spurred his horse away. The nightriders fired their guns in all directions and raced out of sight.

Then nothing happened.

“Must not have lit,” Rice Watson said, watching the ceiling.

Slowly, a trail of smoke from overhead began filtering into the room. A large flame appeared above the wash basin. Enoch and Rice flung a blanket at it. Alice grabbed two pails and headed for the pumphouse.

“Let’s go,” Fella said. “Outside.”

Nathan raced out the door but realized he had nothing to carry water in. Rice and Enoch were still inside. In the other direction, Fella and Alice were at the pumphouse. That’s when Nathan decided. Rice Waston would never be more distracted than he was at that moment. Nathan ran past the burning cross into the field, his copper bell dangling and ringing.

Fifty yards out, he heard the crack of a rifle and the explosion of bullets into a cotton plant near him. When he turned to look, Rice Watson was standing at the edge of the field, firing at Nathan, the Enfield on his shoulder. Next to him, in the glare of the fire, was Alice, lifting a Springfield to her shoulder. That rifle shot will never reach here, Nathan thought. But bullets began to whistle past him, exploding into cotton leaves and twigs.

Nathan fell into the swamp as if he were entering another planet. The woods were black and damp. He was surprised to see he was already sweating underneath his shawl. Nathan wanted to waste no time as he foolishly did during his last escape. The bullets kept flying. As he stood to run again, Nathan was tackled from behind, tumbling as something else smacked into him.

By the time he regained his bearings, Nathan realized Enoch and Fella had followed him into the swamp.

“You promised,” Enoch yelled. He caught up to Nathan and handed him something in the dark. It was Nathan’s violin wrapped in the burlap sack. Nathan felt a sense of guilt. He had left the violin behind and he had been wrong after all about Enoch, if not Fella.

The three young men fled through the woods toward Old Man Reyburn’s barn, dense weeds and pine needles clinging to his arms and legs. “Wait for us,” Enoch yelled. “Goddamn it. Wait.” He ran faster through the woods, zigging and zagging between trees until he passed the barn and turned sharply for the creek. A sharp noise caught his ear and he stopped, panting and straining to listen. In the deep distance he heard loose hunting dogs, woods filling with their echoes.

Into the creek they went, Enoch and Fella splashing at Nathan's heels. The water was cold but came only up to his knees. He was just beginning to get used to it when Enoch and Fella leaped ahead of him into the creek, causing water to splash over Nathan.

The sound of dogs barking was suddenly louder, though it was difficult to tell if the dogs were closer or the wind had shifted. The three stopped and listened. Nathan considered how he would try to fight Lucy and Rice Watson by clubbing them with his violin if need be, kill or be killed. He would be nobody's slave any longer. His heartbeat pounded in his ear. The sound of dogs lapping water was heard just around the bend.

Then, it broke. Rice Watson, the Chawasha tracker, sniffed at the trickling waters of the creek. He pointed north, the way any sane slave would run out of Dixie. Dogs led away, yapping. Nathan and the boys turned south for the moment.

CHAPTER SIX

Nathan and the boys walked out of the stream and fell exhausted against a downed oak. The water and the fatigue made Nathan's skin turn to ice and if it hadn't been for the warmth of Enoch and Fella, Nathan probably would have frozen to death that first night away from Rice Watson's farm. In the morning his bones ached from the damp and from the cramped positions his body was forced into. He was happy to see the woods were clear where the sunbeams shone through. A woodpecker hammered in a tree overhead.

The boys shook themselves awake, walking into the woods parallel to the creek. The woods eventually opened into fields of wild grass the color of mustard. Here the young men heard cows lowing, though they could see no cows. From the sound alone, Fella guessed it was a herd of more than a hundred. "Lookee," Enoch said, jumping to one side. They had been standing among the bones of a large dead animal, weeds growing through the yellowing rib cage.

"Bad sign," Enoch said.

Nathan absentmindedly kicked dirt at the bones. "Come on," Fella said. "He who don't hunt, don't eat." He jerked a thumb toward the cows and instinctively he and Enoch began to crouch and trot in the direction of the herd. Nathan walked behind with his head held down. He was dizzy like children sometimes get when they are spun around by the arms. All around him was movement. He moved and the world moved. He was unable to tell where the earth ended and he began. He kneeled down and it

passed. It was nothing, he told himself. But he realized what it was. Hunger. He needed nourishment. Out of desperation he took a handful of earth and put it in his mouth.

Fella and Enoch were ready to hunt and Nathan thought they were smart for it. Where they found the energy, Nathan did not know. They zigzagged their way through the herd, crouched like tigers. They snuck up on a lean calf, a Holstein whose mouth was dripping with slobber, which had somehow slipped out of sight of its mother. The calf bleated as Fella and Enoch flipped it on its side and Enoch tugged at his dungeries for the penknife he'd use on the neck artery. Nathan could taste veal in his mouth. But no sooner had Nathan tasted that veal than some of the cows had come up on Fella and Enoch. They formed a compact circle, and a stiff-legged bull lowered his shoulders at them. Nathan didn't know what he'd do if they returned without a dead calf.

Enoch stabbed at the calf and struck it in its throat, bleating and kicking. He was socked in the face and fell over backwards, leaving Fella to lunge at the calf as it ran away with the knife. It was a comical scene except for Nathan's sour stomach. He mumbled curses at Fella and Enoch, who were chased away by the bull.

"What about the knife?" Nathan asked.

Fella shrugged.

Enoch watched the calf nuzzle up to its mother. "It was your knife," he said.

Fella looked at Nathan's mouth stained with mud. "Crimeney," he said. "You need to wipe that off of there."

Nathan used the back of his hand to wipe his lips.

"Now we ain't got no knife," Fella said. He sat down next to Nathan and watched the cows.

Nathan walked away, through the herd, and circled up on the calf, which hobbled near its mother. The bull snorting nearby did nothing to deter him. Nathan was still dizzy but the dizziness bore out his desperation. His muscles trembled from weakness. The calf snorted one time and looked away. At that moment, Nathan lunged and threw himself on its neck. The suddenness of the movement startled the herd and the few cows closest to Nathan scattered away, including the calf's mother. In a minute it was over but not without a struggle. The calf fell over. Nathan tugged at the knife and wiped it against his dungarees.

Nathan built a fire with flint dug up from a creek bed and the boys roasted veal on the end of a stick. No one said anything. Nathan ripped a piece of pink meat away from the bone and stuck it in his mouth. It had a wild, front-of-the-mouth flavor but Nathan didn't care. It tasted like life to him.

The three fugitives came to a piece of land where the creek gave way to brown murky water lost in the shadows of the swamp. There was nowhere to go but straight ahead and Nathan waded into the water, his body tightening from the chill, his breath escaping his mouth in short, sharp huffs. The boys followed by placing their chests on a piece of log and kicking their feet.

Alligators would have a tussle with a tall, strong man like Nathan. Fella and Enoch, on the other hand, were small and skinny enough for a full-grown alligator to drag beneath the water and drown.

Nathan carried his violin over his head. He could have very easily wished at that moment he were back at Larawood, in the parlor playing the violin as always. He could

smell the Captain's tobacco and see the mansion's fluted columns through the window. He felt he shouldn't linger in this moment too long. That would be a betrayal. To the memory of Nefs and especially to the memory of Pinder. They would have never allowed themselves to grow melancholy while thinking of Larawood as he had done more than once. But Pinder was dead, though if he were still alive, Nathan asked himself, would it be wrong to wish he were home? If Pinder still existed, would he be able to tell Nathan the answer? Was slavery at home better than life on the hustle, always watching for the next person ready to corner you? That wasn't the way he wanted it but that was the way it was. The Captain, the major, and Rice Watson had taught him that lesson and he wouldn't soon forget it. Nathan shivered as his foot slid over an invisible log. He only wanted to play music, following the melody he'd known as a child, following what he came to know as a certain order and logic of the world, which put him above or below no man, but which certainly didn't mean he was a step-'n-fetch or an uncle or any other names Nefs might want to call him. He would have fought alongside Pinder, proudly, but he'd been caught off guard and reacted as any young man caught off guard would have, at least that's what he told himself, and he was glad to say he was still alive for it, which at least fifty slaves at Larawood could no longer say. It wasn't his time but one day it would be. He would play to a crowd of a hundred or to a crowd of a thousand. Black and white. And he'd hire an old Negro orchestra who'd play so splendidly nobody would go home dissatisfied. That was the way music should be made, after all. It was the way things got done. Nathan's thoughts were bearing down on him. He reminded himself that he was not alone but when he looked over his shoulder for Fella and Enoch, he could locate neither one. In the trees

above, there was a loud screeching—like a knife sharpening on wetstone—of jays fending off a white-faced owl as it hovered over their nest. It was just the sort of ghastly screeching Nathan expected in the swamp and it almost calmed him to hear it, as much as it frightened the other two, who, Nathan could now see, were kicking and splashing far to Nathan's right.

"Listen," Enoch said, "I can hear music." Nathan listened but the jays were desperate in their shrieking. He waved at Enoch and Fella to come closer when a thought came to him in his heart of hearts. He had survived Rice Watson's farm and inherited two fine brothers. Enoch and Fella. They were silly and raffish and tended toward limited insight, but Nathan felt in this water as they swam, that he was one of them and they were all part of the same group of survivors, and that was more binding than blood.

"Listen," Enoch said as he stopped kicking the water. "Can't you hear the banjo and fiddle?" Nathan stopped moving. Fella quit kicking. There was complete silence. Nathan strained to hear the belly of the swamp, closing his eyes until he convinced himself he heard a piano playing a waltz.

"I heard it," Fella said. "I heard a tambourine."

They listened some more but the jays started up again as the owl returned. "There ain't nothing there," Nathan finally said. He clung to his violin sack and shivered, leading Fella and Enoch out of the water and onto dry land, resting his back against a downed oak, allowing his head to tilt back and skyward. Gradually Nathan's feeling of fellowship subsided and he was happy he could think clearly again. He was surprised to see that it was almost dark. The evening was a solemn pink. Crickets were

busy in a high-pitched squeal. The boys stretched on the ground and each of them fell into a half-slumber.

Voices came into Nathan's head, busy, jumbled voices, like the braying of a white mule, and images of Pinder and the Captain coming to lead him out of the swamp to Larawood, all of which came and went as they pleased. He could no more stop them than he could prevent his own breathing. Gradually they gave way to a melody, a swirling, bouncing familiar tune Nathan hummed to himself, like a fairy-tale rhyme: "Wheel about, turn about, do just so, and every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow."

Nathan opened his eyes when he realized somebody was playing the banjo, harmonica, and violin while voices sang in a hymn-like chorus. He crouched down but could see nothing in the fading light. Fella and Enoch joined him and the three scoured the woods in the direction of the faint music.

"Sounds like somebody having a jubilee," Enoch said.

Fella said, "I told you I heard music."

"Might be fugitives like us," Enoch said. "Might be patrollers."

"No patrollers this deep in the swamp," Fella said. Enoch stood up to walk toward the music but Nathan pulled his arm back down.

"Don't take his word for it," Nathan said. "Let's make sure."

Crouching, the three trotted toward the music and laughter and loud conversation. A group of Negroes fanned out underneath lanterns hooked onto tree branches. Mothers sat on quilts with their babies. Musicians sat on pine boxes; dancers—barefoot men, women, boys, and girls—took turns dancing in the black mud.

An old Negro woman lent her sweet voice to the songs, accompanied, at times, by members of the audience.

*My old mistress promise me,
before she die gonna set me free.
Now she dead and gone to hell,
hope the devil burn her well.*

Nathan, Fella, and Enoch rose and walked to the camp, standing just under the lamplight until first a woman, then everybody in the group, saw the interlopers. The music stopped and for a moment there was silence.

“Where ya’ll come from,” a large woman asked. She had been dancing but now walked toward the boys with her hands holding her skirt above the muck. “What ya’ll want here?”

“Came through the swamp,” Nathan said, pointing behind him. “We’re running from nightriders.”

“We just want some food,” Enoch added.

The woman uncrossed her arms and put her hands on her hips. “Ya’ll running like we all running, ain’t you darling,” she said.

Several of the men came forward to check on the arrivals, looking for anything obvious that might prevent the boys from joining the group. Seeing none—the boys had the same appearance as the rest, soiled ragged clothes and weathered, famished expressions—the men gave up and walked away.

The woman said her name was Darla. "Ain't nothing in that swamp for miles except alligators and moccasins," she said. "Ya'll sure ya'll all right?"

"Tolerable ma'am," Enoch said. "Just tolerable."

"Didn't see no moccasins," Fella said. "But gators were all around. Made it out juss the same. The worst of it was the jays fighting for their little ones."

"There was an owl," Nathan tried to explain.

"Ya'll poor dears," Darla said. "Come up here and get some mashed cowpeas and rice. We just getting started with our little jubilee."

The boys sat and ate two helpings of cowpeas with a desperation common of the nearly-starved. Nathan was sure he hadn't been this hungry in his life, not forgetting the hunger that possessed him just that morning. He would have eaten a third helping but when Darla asked the group if they wanted more, Fella pushed aside his bowl and said no. Darla took that to mean they were all finished. Fella pulled a mouth harp out of his pocket and looked toward the band. "Think they'd mind if I join them?" he asked.

"Go on ahead," Darla said. "Them mens would probably like it."

"Aren't you worried about the patrollers," Nathan asked.

Darla looked at Nathan as if she felt sorry for him. "Oh, son. You can't stop people from being happy. This the best time of our lives, this freedom. It's like nothing we ever knew before and we can't help ourselves. It comes out of us like a good sweat."

The group of musicians ran through "Old Dan Tucker," "Yankee Doodle Dandy," and the "Juba" song, for which Darla took the lead voice, singing, "Juba this and Juba that, Juba killed the yellow cat." Each time the word Juba came up, Darla thrust her large hips out for extra emphasis.

Nathan would have loved to play music but he felt fatigued since his stomach was once again satisfied. He looked for a place to stretch out where he wouldn't be trampled by the crowd when he noticed an old man away from everyone. The man lay underneath a couple of blankets, smiling at the revelry in front of him. He laced his hands behind his head and gazed at the party. A chocolate-colored girl sat next to him on a stool, holding a bowl in her lap. At her feet was a baby whose bright face stared out of a wicker basket.

"This looks like a good spot to be," Nathan said.

"I reckon it is," said the old man.

The girl looked at the musicians with contempt. "Wish they'd pipe down. It's foolish to play music in a swamp."

"Hush girl," the old man said. "They can't help but play."

"Which way ya'll headed?" Nathan asked.

"North, of course," the girl replied. The girl thought for a moment. "Why? Which way you going?"

"North, like you say. Maybe to New Orleans first."

"New Orleans south."

Nathan sat down next to the old man.

"I know some peoples who stayed back on Old Master's place," the girl said. "Weren't many, though."

"I suspect they had reasons."

"Yeah. Been addled since childhood."

Looking at the old man, the girl said: "He won't move from here."

"Wouldn't neither if I were him," Nathan said. "This the sweet spot. Best in the house."

"Stop flapping your gums," the old man said. "I can't hear the music."

The baby sat in the girl's lap but looked at the old man and giggled.

"That's grandpa," the girl said. "Say he never gonna move from there."

"I've risen for the last time, young fella," the man said. "Old Master Thomas used to beat me fierce some mornings. But not any more. War's over. Ain't no man supposed to make me get up any longer. Not even old Master Thomas. I have a right to lay down any place I choose. So here I am and here is where I die."

"He got soft bones," the girl explained. She put the baby on her shoulder, where it licked at her skin.

"No softer than any other Negro's," the man said. "My bones is soft, my mind strong."

"Maybe in the morning you'll feel different," Nathan said.

"No sir," the man said. "Thankee but no siree. I'm finally in my resting place and I am content."

Nathan turned to the girl. "Do the night patrollers ever come round here?"

"That's what I ask. Everybody say this as safe as it gets. So unless there's a better idea, this is where we sleep tonight."

Nathan turned back to the old man. "You'll feel different tomorrow. We'll get you out of this swamp. Bet there's a farm some place where a man can do some farming for himself, make himself a living."

"I ain't leaving this swamp tomorrow," the man said. "Or ever, I reckon."

Nathan wandered around before deciding to lie down on the damp ground close to the dancing. Darla draped a blanket over his shoulder. Nathan felt a warmth he couldn't remember feeling since summer. He tried to forget the old man in the blanket. He let the problems of the world dissolve and gradually he drifted off to sleep.

He was startled awake by a young girl's scream: "They're here, they're here, they're here." The girl tripped over Nathan, picked herself up, and ran away in a terrible fright. Everybody was running. It took a second for Nathan to gather his wits. On the edge of the lighted camp stood a row of horses. On their backs were a dozen nightriders, wearing white robes and matching three-pointed hats. Some of them carried guns, some torches.

"This is an unlawful assembly," a nightrider yelled. "This is an assembly for the purpose of stirring discontent and revolt and will not be tolerated."

The horsemen nudged their mounts forward, not so much in a charge but as a procession aimed to sweep through the heart of the camp. Negroes ran for the woods without collecting their belongings. Nathan scrambled among them, finding himself next to the girl with the child in the wicker basket. On impulse, he took the child as the mother struggled to find footing in the leaves and muck.

Once he was out of the camp, Nathan could see nothing more. A wall of blackness surrounded his eyes. With the child in one hand, he instinctively reached with his other to feel for whatever he might run into. He went blindly, the mother of the child bumping into him, so close did they flee together.

When they reached a felled tree, a hand grabbed Nathan. "Over here," a voice said. It was Enoch, watching the nightriders from behind the log. "Lookee," he said, pointing

back toward camp. The hooded nightriders had circled around and were closing in on the old man in the blanket. Slowly they came at him on foot, long machetes drawn. The old man's head was barely visible sticking from the blanket. Nathan imagined his eyes were closed and he was peaceful for he made no movement or sound. In this way, he was finished.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lucy was her name and she had no intention of becoming entangled with Nathan or any other man from camp. It was a mystery of fate that the night of the raid, they ended up escaping together. In fact, she wasn't sure which man carried her baby. Didn't matter as long as he was strong and as eager as she was to escape Assumption Parish. She moved quietly, stopping to listen for anyone following them. He was bullish, the way he snorted rhythmically under the labor of her child on his hip. She followed Nathan closely, steadying a piggin on her head, gliding through the pitch black between scrub pines and ankle-deep mudholes.

It wasn't until the first purple and orange flickers of light glowed over the eastern horizon, when Enoch returned pointing toward the west, that Nathan realized how beautiful she was. Exhausted from wandering through the night, they slept in a canebreak in a field for most of the day. Nathan thought about taking turns playing the lookout, but no sooner did they hit the ground than each had fallen fast asleep, Lucy pulling Nathan close to her so that he could feel the weight of her body pressed into him. They covered themselves with a thin cloth to block out the sun. Nathan slept a powerful sleep. He discovered that everywhere he turned he found the comfort of Lucy's skin, her baby's breath, the flap of her petticoat on his leg, the kiss of her brow resting upon his. Nathan hugged Lucy and Lucy hugged her baby boy. (Enoch curled up by himself, making sucking noises in his sleep.) In this fit of dreaminess, Nathan slid his hand over her stomach to her breast, his fingers nudging underneath softness. He soon discovered, though, that if his hand roamed much higher or lower than her

stomach, Lucy quickly shimmied her body away; she was an expert at evading him, even in her sleep.

As the day wore on, and Nathan's sleep was interrupted several times, he became aware that something was approaching the group, something more than a presence but less than a shadow. But when he sprang to his feet, the canebreak was empty. There was nothing except the long stalks of sugar plants all around. Enoch was asleep, and Lucy irritated at the disruption. Nathan had a small laugh at himself, but when he returned next to Lucy, a rustle in the cane caught his attention. Out of an opening sprang Fella, toting a brown guitar.

"Lord Jesus," Fella said, "I been looking all over for you."

While the others slept, Fella sat admiring the guitar, telling Nathan the story of how he escaped camp as the nightriders swept through. Nathan was still sleepy and had trouble focusing on the tale Fella wanted to tell. He drifted off, the sunlight lulling him into an apathy so stifling he felt paralyzed, though his mind was active as he slipped into a dreamstate, and the comfort he found lying next to Lucy produced a feeling in him of home, and he remembered a rhyme he hadn't heard since childhood:

*What you gonna do when the meat gives out?
Set in the corner with my lips pooched out
What you gonna do when the meat come in?
Set in the corner with a greasy chin*

By all rights, Nathan should have been hungry. He should have woken up wishing for grits and bacon and hotcakes the way any half-starved Assumption man would. But as

Nathan rubbed the sleep from his face, he realized Lucy was still with him, sitting cross-legged nursing her baby, and instead of his mind racing through all the assortments of breakfasts available in the world, it raced through all the ways he could convince Lucy to remain with him throughout this day and many others. If she was anything like the Assumption girls he knew, she'd like a song dedicated to her, something soft and sad that would make her long for reassurance and sympathy.

She was about his age but appeared older to Nathan, wiser, more aware than he was. She showed no signs of embarrassment as she nursed her baby, Nathan staring down at her chest, lost in thought. If his concern was not food, it surely was Lucy's. For her baby, for herself, for their stomachs later. She was uncertain if either of these boys, these haggard-looking boys who'd stumbled in from the swamp, were much use finding food. She understood Enoch for an idiot. Nathan seemed quiet, which was fine with her, and curious in a way that suggested he knew nothing about women. His violin playing was of little use to her.

Enoch came running up, excited. "Water," he said. "I seen water. Over here."

Lucy took the baby away from her breast and rested it on her shoulder. "We can't be near the bayou," she said. "I thought we were headed in the other direction, toward the Mississippi."

Lucy sent Nathan with Enoch to see the water. They walked through the cane to the edge of the bayou. The brown water glistened with a wintertime shine. Pelicans floated in the breeze, looking for the first meal of the morning. In a minute Fella came through the break and examined the river. "Let's try down thisaway," he said, eyes squinting at the sun.

“That ain’t the way,” Enoch said, stubbornly. He had already started walking downriver.

“Current runs south,” Fella said. “More south we go the further we are into the thick of them.”

Enoch watched the water drift passed him. “Maybe we can get to the Gulf and then out to New Orleans,” he suggested. Nathan sensed that both the boys wanted a standoff. Enoch walked several paces into the bayou to investigate the direction Fella wanted to go. “Why, there’s houses and such up that way. Be smart, wouldn’t it, not to run into strangers?”

Fella mimicked him. “Hardhead says this way so I guess it’s this way. Are you going to listen to this nigger?”

Enoch thrashed to the edge of the bank, slipping back into the water as he struggled to get at Fella. “Don’t call me that. Don’t you call me that. I’m as brown as the next guy. You got no need to be calling me that.”

Nathan helped Enoch up on the bank and stepped between him and Fella. “No point in fussing with each other,” he said. “Doesn’t matter which way we go since we don’t know where we are.”

“Or where we’re going,” Fella said.

Lucy rustled through the cane. “I could hear you way back yonder,” she said. “What’s all the dick and grinning about?”

Nathan took the baby from her. “If ya’ll don’t shut your mouths we’ll all wind up like my old pappy back there in the swamp,” she said. Lucy walked down in the

water where Enoch had been and surveyed the landscape. "This don't look like no Mississippi to me. This the LaFourche."

"I could ask where we are," Fella volunteered.

"Ask what about who," Enoch said.

"From those folks over there," Fella said, pointing.

"We don't want to meet no new people," Enoch said.

Lucy waded out a little further into the water. "Yep. He's right. There's a chimney a-going and everything. Might have chickens in the henhouse."

Enoch volunteered to go with Lucy.

"No, I'll go," Nathan said.

"A big buck like you?" Lucy asked. "You'll scare them plenty. Watch the baby," she said.

Nathan sat for a long time while the baby slept. He tried as best he could to keep the baby in the shade and keep it happy but he largely felt helpless. The baby, when it woke, turned out to be a crier, yelping in uncontrollable spasms, and Fella was pacing up and down the bank in a fit of gloom.

"Why don't you sit over here and stay out of sight?" Nathan asked.

"Goddamn pitiful," Fella said.

Nathan offered the baby a knuckle to suck on.

"There's something about that boy that always makes him try to trump me," Fella said. "No matter what. Whether we're playing cards or working the fields or trying to get to New Orleans, he always thinks he knows better'n me."

“He don’t mean nothing by it.”

“Well, we ain’t the same. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

Fella placed his guitar on the ground and stretched out next to it. It was ridiculous, Nathan thought, to make enemies out of friends at this particular time. Fella was too filled with pride.

Lucy and Enoch paddled up in a pirogue, a long, thin, wooden boat that looked like a floating log. In the bottom were four dead chickens, their necks wrenched, their eyes lifeless.

“We stole every bird that farmer had,” Enoch said.

“Donaldsonville about ten mile that way,” Lucy reported.

Which meant Larawood was close, Nathan thought. He’d run all this way only to land within miles of the old plantation.

Fella adjusted the strap on the guitar so it rested on his back. Nathan wasn’t certain he even knew how to play it.

“Hold up,” Fella said. “I been thinking ... it might be time for me to jump off this train. I don’t need to follow you north or south or east or west.”

“Less stick together for a while longer,” Nathan said. He didn’t take Fella’s protestations seriously. He walked to the pirogue to hand Lucy the baby. Before they could get too far, the barking of hounds came from the direction of the farm where Lucy and Enoch took the chickens. The dogs sounded as if they’d picked up a scent.

As Enoch ran up the path to investigate, Nathan handed Lucy the baby. He hurried to help Enoch shove off but Fella stood on the bayou bank. “Stop your playing around, boy,” Enoch said. “Don’t be no gump. Get in the boat.”

“Ya’ll go on,” Fella said, looking at Enoch. “I got other plans.”

Dog-hollering rang off the banks of the bayou. Nathan wasn’t sure whether they were on his side of the bayou or if somebody on the other was after them as well. “We all got the same ideas,” Enoch said.

“Naw, ya’ll go on,” Fella replied. “I’ll make it alone.”

“Don’t be foolish boy,” Nathan said, grabbing Fella by the arm. “Nobody can make it alone in this parish.” But Fella shrugged off Nathan’s grip and backed away.

Enoch launched the boat with a mighty heave of his leg. The pirogue slipped into the current with a jerk. Fella slung the guitar over his shoulder and trotted down the bank, away from the sound of the dogs, disappearing into the cane field. Nathan watched him go, then settled into the bottom of the pirogue. After a few pulls on the oars, the long, thin boat was a quarter way into the bayou. Each side of the vessel lay low in the water. There was no sound except the slap of the water by the oars until, on the opposite bank, a lone horse rider feverishly tore up the road, hooves clapping against the hard dirt. The rider was an old man with a long flowing beard, overalls strapped to his white, tender shoulders. He held up at a point where Nathan had pointed the pirogue, as if to intercept the boat’s advance, his black stallion kicking dust in the air. He said nothing but glared at the boat, at Nathan, and at Lucy. Nathan, not knowing what to do, simply stopped rowing. The current caught the skiff and it drifted downstream. The farmer pulled a Winchester from the horse’s shoulder holster and aimed it at the skiff. He fired off several shots into the bow, exploding splinters of wood and sending Enoch and Nathan into the frigid bayou for cover. Nathan took in a nose full of water before he recovered to the surface. He was as bad a swimmer as Enoch.

The boys paddled with their hands and feet trying to reach the boat, coughing and gasping, Nathan on one end, Enoch on the other. Nathan grabbed at the bow when one of the bullets smashed into his hand.

The pain was intense and the red blood trickled down the side of the boat and into the bayou. "Paddle to shore," he yelled at Enoch, who clutched desperately to the stern of the boat. He kicked and Nathan pulled. The farmer sat watching them. As the boat drew near to shore, he yelled, "There's nowhere to run in Assumption Parish."

Fella reappeared from the sugar cane, hands in his pocket and a twig in his mouth. He was in no hurry to help Nathan to shore. He acted as if he didn't see his bleeding hand. Fella walked by and knelt near the edge of the water, staring at the farmer.

The farmer pointed the Winchester at Fella but did not pull the trigger. He only wanted to scare him. "Chicken thief don't last long in Assumption," he yelled.

Enoch stumbled from the water and fell at Fella's knee, coughing. The barking of hounds came closer, from near a place where the bayou dipped around the bend, about three hundred yards upstream. The sound caught Nathan's attention momentarily and as he was preoccupied, the edge of the pirogue held under his foot dislodged and the boat separated from him. The persistent current pushed the boat broadside out into the bayou's main channel, where the chop of the water lapped against the sides, Lucy still lying inside. After a moment, she raised her head and found one of the two oars. She did not row to shore. Instead, she gave a pair of mighty strokes that righted the canoe toward a downstream path and advanced the pirogue even farther away from Nathan, who stood on shore dumbfounded. He did not want to believe Lucy was leaving. The

feeling of lying in the canebreak was still with him, the feeling of her stroking his skin. Maybe she would have been the one he jumped the broom with. Nathan ran along shore, at the same pace as the canoe, but Lucy would not look up. She pretended not to see him. She pretended not to see Enoch or Fella or the man with the rifle. From the bottom of the pirogue yelled her baby boy. "Hey," Nathan yelled, as if this must be some mistake. "Hey, hey, hey." Still she rowed away from him, the old farmer waiting in the saddle for the results of this newfound drama. She stopped for a moment and tossed out the burlap sack with Nathan's violin inside. It bobbed on the surface like a wooden duck. "Hey," Nathan said one more time. He waded out to retrieve the sack. Lucy continued to row, gaining momentum, speeding down the middle of the bayou. Nathan stopped and watched, his hand still dripping blood, until Lucy rounded a bend and disappeared from his sight, the pirogue's small wake leaving a slight disturbance behind her.

Later that evening, after hiding in the swamp all day, the boys found a clearing in the woods where they set up camp. This section of the parish must have been lowlands, for the ground was damp without rain. They sat and rested and listened to the encroaching darkness for the sound of dogs. Nathan felt tired and lonesome and his hand throbbed where pieces of bone had been shot away. It still leaked ooze into a piece of shirt he wrapped around it. Nathan was resigned that his hand would hurt for a long time.

The thought of Lucy's desertion remained with him—he could not escape the memory of the pirogue floating out of sight—but he realized Lucy's interest was to protect her baby. The more he thought about Lucy, the more lost Nathan became, until

his stomach forced him into another realization, that Lucy had not only rowed her baby to safety, but she'd also taken the four dead chickens with her.

Fella tapped Enoch with his foot. "Get wood," he commanded.

"Firelight will attract the patrollers," Enoch said.

"Besides, we got nothing to cook," Nathan said.

"I got the taste of chicken on my mind," Fella said. Fella crawled from one edge of the clearing to the other when he reared up, staring deep into the swamp. "Well I'll be," he said, pointing toward the east.

In the distance was a blue-orange glob of plasma bouncing through the tops of the trees. "It's the fifolet," Enoch said.

The fifolet was a legend in the quarters; it was said to give everlasting life to whoever was fortunate enough to touch it. The ball hovered around a large oak as if waiting for something to board it, then descended about eye level. Fella was drawn toward it, followed by Enoch and eventually Nathan. As they neared the swamp gas, it moved away in little wispy motions. "It's running from us," Fella said. He began running after it, as a child chases a balloon. Each time he moved closer, the fifolet moved just out of reach, and just out of the reach of Enoch, until it finally hovered above Nathan's head. He wasn't scared. He reached his hand directly into the middle of the gas ball, which gave his skin a mild, warm electrical spark.

The ball floated up and zigzagged through the trees and disappeared. Except for the mild tingly feeling in his hand, Nathan felt no different. The gas came and went without the benefit the fifolet supposedly offered. Nathan was certain it would not alter the length of time he would stay alive. It served no more purpose than to give him

further proof that the mystery of life was not something that could be preached upon, that only something as profound as music could hope to reveal the underlying quality of all things, if only briefly, and that, failing all else, Assumption Parish was no place for eternal life anyway. "No such thing as magic," Nathan mumbled.

"I tell you what I believes in," Fella said, looking slightly melancholy. "I believes in singing. Singing to me is like a man's appetite. When a man hungry he want to eat and when he joyful he feel like singing. He hungry for it, in a way."

At about that time, a red wolf let loose a lone howl, which to Nathan's ears sounded as if it were being squeezed from the hound by a tremendous force. The howl was followed by an empty pause, a silence not even cricket chirps cared to disturb. Then another howl followed by a long silence. Nathan gathered his raggedly clothes tighter around him. The cry of the lone wolf was a sound to be respected. It was one of the signs he feared the most. It was the sound of dread. It was the call of the hopeless.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Freedmen in South Louisiana had few options after the war ended. Not only were the Black Codes in effect for opportunists like Rice Watson, but the planters who whipped and branded slaves before the war were the same ones to defend their inheritances with guns and nooses at its conclusion. Many slaves were afraid to travel the roads leaving the South, and those who weren't, found many obstacles on their journey north.

Then there were freedmen like Nathan and Fella and Enoch, who simply walked circles in the swamp, subsisting on berries and fish, because they knew no better. Of course, the boys thought they had a plan, like all boys do. But they were like pigeons in a cage who think they have a patient master. When they peck a certain way, or scratch a certain way, the master is good to them and feeds them and gives them life. So they peck and scratch exactly the same way day after day because they want to be fed well, never realizing they could have pecked and scratched any way they felt and the results would have been the same.

Nathan and Fella and Enoch thought they were wolves but they were really pigeons. They thought there was a hand to guide them, but nothing could be relied upon. Early on, during the idle hours running from the patrollers, they had discussed any number of cities they'd rather visit than exist in the swamps of east Assumption Parish. They had fantasies of traveling upriver to Vicksburg, Memphis, St. Louis, Davenport, and into Minnesota. They were under the impression there would be many opportunities for musicians who wanted to inspire and uplift a war-ravaged nation.

But as the three kept walking, there was less and less to look forward to. Every day seemed no better than the day before. Enoch had a bad habit of calling out false

alarms—a patroller here, Rice Watson there—which made Nathan and Fella distrust him. Fella kept wishing he'd disappeared into the woods when the farmer was shooting at the pirogue. Nathan was worried because he started noticing familiar signs—clearings of grass ringed by pine trees, logs toppled over at a certain angle—that led him to believe the boys were not headed in a straight line but a circle.

Soon they stood in the exact same clearing where Nathan touched the fifolet. He was disappointed to be back. So was Fella. And Enoch. They lay down on the ground and settled in for sleep without supper. The moon was a crescent and blue clouds marbled the nighttime sky. An owl cooed on a pine branch. As Nathan began to drift off, Enoch saw the blue ball of gas return. It was the same size and shape as a globe. Only this time the boys did not run after it. They dismissed it as an aberration, like the albino alligator in the swamp, which was, after all, just another alligator. The mysteries of the swamp had become, for the three, routine and tiresome. The fifolet hung over some weeds on the western edge of the clearing. “Maybe it’s here to spy on us,” Enoch said.

“Maybe the gods have indigestion,” Fella said, and laughed to himself.

Nathan rested his head on his hands and looked deep into the sky. A thousand stars twinkled at him in delight. Pinder had taught him to respect stars, for they were the embodiment of souls ascended into heaven. Nathan had to think long and hard about how the soul inside a person was able to generate enough light to be seen from Earth. He could not understand what it was that triggered such a wonder, and then once it was triggered and he was a soul in heaven for all eternity, would he become less

fascinated with what he'd become? Would he become as ordinary as the fifolet? Or would he be as spectacular as the sun?

The boys woke to the sound of hooves on the road nearby. It was well dark, with neither fire nor moon, which had slipped from the sky, to help the boys adjust their eyes. The riders held up their mounts at about the same point on the road where Nathan, Fella, and Enoch were laid out in the clearing. Nathan couldn't tell why the riders had stopped in the road. Either they had encountered a problem or were looking to camp for the night. He could not see the riders, only hear them. Fella, though, peered his face above the foliage to take a good long look. A moment later he snapped his head down and turned to Nathan. "It's the patrollers," he said. "They're dressed in them costumes, with hoods and such." Enoch made circles around his eyes with his fingers, indicating a ghostly presence.

One of the riders was off his horse, fanning the weeds in the woods with his hands. He looked like a blind man alone in an orchard. Nathan couldn't tell whether the rider was seeking a place to relieve himself or was worried about stepping on an alligator but he was aiming straight for where the boys lay down. The boys quietly gathered themselves and Nathan clung fast to his violin. Fella and Enoch started to crawl away and Nathan followed them. He had the feeling he'd gotten out just in time. The boys had crawled some distance when Fella surprised Nathan by reversing his direction and crawling past him, in the direction of the clearing. "Forgot the guitar," Enoch whispered.

Nathan and Enoch watched what happened in a fit of despair. Fella stood no chance. He made it to the guitar about the same time as the nightrider. Fella reached for the neck of the guitar but the hooded man stepped on his wrist, pinning Fella, who yelped in pain, causing the man to kick nervously in the air as if his pants were on fire. Some of the nightriders laughed from the road. "What you got there, Ed?" one of them asked. "A moccasin?" Nathan hid himself by sliding into the muck next to a log. But Enoch jumped up and ran toward Fella, hoping, Nathan guessed, to somehow save his friend. In no time the other riders were upon Fella and Enoch. They brought out torches and a noose and set about to hanging the boys.

"It is a great wonder how the Almighty in his magnificence favors the race with rank and scope and the gift of wisdom," one of the robed men said, stepping forward with a Bible.

Some of the riders spread out to explore whether more Negroes were hiding nearby. One of them headed down the path towards Nathan. He was taller than the other patrollers and his robe rode up almost to his knees. The man stopped not far from Nathan and looked around. He examined the trees and the bushes and the darkness. Yet the rider could not see Nathan, who had blended into the shadows.

Enoch began praying frantically as the nightriders located a branch above his head and measured the noose down to his shoulders. "Our father," Enoch said. "Who is in heaven..." Then he started over: "My father," he said, "who art in heaven..."

Fella tried to argue with his captors. "What did we do," he asked. "We were just sleeping. Right over there, that's all. Ya'll frightened us."

When Fella realized he wasn't getting anywhere, he said, "Look here. I'm white. Look here at my skin compared with his." Fella offered up his arm for inspection. "I got no Negro blood whatsoever."

But the men ignored it. On the count of three, after the rider carrying the Bible read a passage from Leviticus, the men hoisted Enoch in the air. He didn't die. His neck didn't snap. Instead, he dangled in the air for several minutes, strangling, his feet kicking wildly and at odd angles, his body swinging to and fro. Then he made something like a bleating noise. His face puckered. His eyes bulged. When his body finally heaved and sagged, water dripping from the crotch, Nathan realized Enoch was dead.

In seconds, Fella seemed to gather his wits about what was to happen to him. He let out a flood of words and sounds and a howl as if part of his ancestry was canine. He cried and swore and tried to run. The nightriders gently returned him next to Enoch's dead body. "Wait," Fella said. "Wait just a minute."

He continued, "I got something for you. I can tell you where the rest of them are. I can lead you to them. There's a whole passel of 'em right out yonder." He looked directly at the spot where Nathan lay.

The Bible-carrying rider shook his head. "Woods is full of darkies," he said. "We stumble up on them every time we climb off a horse."

Hearing this, Fella again tried to run. This time the riders grabbed him and wrestled him under the noose. "All right," Fella hissed. "All right. Enough." He gathered his shoulders about him and tried to straighten his spine. "Just grant me one favor," he said.

Fella looked at the rope going over the tree and then down at Enoch's body. "Don't hang me next to this nigger. Please. Don't do that to me. I don't want strangers to find me hanging next to him."

The riders complied with the wish, dragging Fella over to a tree by the river. Then, against his protestations and denials, they strung him up, horse-tying the rope around the trunk of a chinaberry tree. They gathered in a small circle and mumbled a prayer, standing spellbound as Fella's body surrendered to death in spasms and a loud evacuation of the bowels.

CHAPTER NINE

Nathan did not sleep that night. He gathered his knees under his chin and watched the woods with every ounce of energy he still possessed. He swung his head toward every sound the swamp made, thinking the nightriders had returned to catch him. He had many hours to think and the thoughts that came to him were not good. Fella's betrayal had been too much for him. It was a tipping point, as if he were the glass and Fella the edge of the table. There was something altogether unholy about the word Fella used, the attitude, the way he was willing to turn against his own kind, a suddenness of loathing rising to the surface. *It had been there all along*, Nathan thought. Obvious as a stain on a shirt.

At daybreak, Nathan used Enoch's knife to cut him down and buried the young man in sandy soil next to the chinaberry tree. Enoch's body was hard and rigid and unyielding to the narrow grave Nathan had dug for him. It was almost as if he refused to go. Nathan tried to smooth the lines and tension from the face so Enoch's lonesome sleep would be one of tranquility. He hummed a few bars of Jesus Is All Right With Me, then, without thinking, he found the trampled remnants of Fella's guitar and buried that too. He realized he'd never heard it play a note. Nathan wrapped the violin sack under his arm and set out toward a route he could still only guess at, the path leading to New Orleans. He had wandered Assumption Parish for many months and found no comfort to speak of. He turned around to look at Fella hanging in the trees. Though barely a breeze, his feet swayed slightly at the end of the rope. *It had been here all along*. A thought occurred to Nathan that isolation and selfishness were as much a part of the human condition as goodwill and socializing. Music had no effect on such instincts.

Neither did magic. Nor friendship. Nor love. Nor marriage. *It will always be with us.*

Nathan knew he was tired and hungry and lonely. But his thoughts were still real and apparent to him. With such a bleak perspective, it's no wonder his heartstrings, despite his best intentions, tugged toward his birthplace, to Larawood, wondering how Abbie and the rest survived. It seemed unlikely she might have weathered the seasons as well as he did, which was not well at all.

Nathan caught up with the LaFourche and headed north. The day was bright and sunny and still a bit chilly. A dozen swallows flew overhead, darting and heaving and finally scattering, as if they were a school of minnows. A sweat came over Nathan and he didn't quite feel himself. There was a soreness in the roof of his mouth and his body felt clammy against the air. At first he blamed the condition on lack of sleep, but then he started to miss Larawood more and more, as a place to rest his head and get some mothering, if Abbie were still capable of offering such a thing. He felt he needed tending to. His legs were heavy and they ached. So did the middle of his brow and inside both ears. He brought the violin sack to his cheek and rubbed his face with it.

Upstream a packet rounded a bend. A small band played a song Nathan thought he knew amid applause and cheer. Instead of running, Nathan dug in his heels. He told himself to stop being afraid. He'd been afraid too long. This parish was supposed to be his home, after all, and a person had a right to comfort in his own home. A person had a right to stand still, to be loved, to be mothered, to laugh with friends. The steamship emitted short whistle bursts. Nathan's shoulders grew heavy as he struggled more and more with stubborn thoughts. Of what use were imagined enemies, the hatred men harbored, the things they kept hidden, and then again, the things they revealed? It

made Nathan angry to think about it. Everybody seemed to be hiding something from him. And what he missed most was the truth. The truth about what made men men. The truth about the prosperous living off the backs of others. The truth about why he'd been scared for so long to show he was a man, with strength and thoughts and feelings like any man. He was tired of running and was ready to try fighting, killing in fact, if that were all that was left to him. The steamship pulled alongside him and a man with a trumpet waved to him. He wanted to wave back but there was bile in his throat and controlling his temper caused him to shiver. Soon his thoughts were ajumble. He dropped into the weeds on the side of the road, clutching his elbows and shielding his eyes from the sun, overtaken by the same burning fever that had caused his mother and father's death.

When he was ridden down the path in front of Larawood on the back of an ass, the evening was already gloomy. A slight mist flowed off the river, which wrapped around the great plantation's oak trees in a giant swirling motion. Riverboat horns sighed back and forth, warning of their passing. The fever played wonders with Nathan's sight and hearing. He could barely make out in the distance the large white columns of the mansion, the path leading to the quarters, the yard where a cannon once fired into wooden shacks beyond.

Two men wearing large boots dragged Nathan from the back of the ass to Larawood's doorstep. Arms pulled on him through an open door and he was placed on a dusty floor. Footsteps and voices filled his mind. He grabbed both his shoulders and pulled himself tight, unable to stop the tremendous shivering. He was rolled onto a

blanket and drug down a hall. Flashes of candlelight flickered in his eyes whenever he dared open them. He was carried step by step into the basement, lofted in the blanket, set down once as his bearers stopped to rest. The one comfort he could find was pushing the blanket into his face, as if to smother himself. In the raised basement, he was lowered into a tub of water, his head and neck unable to stop the spasms, unable to speak, the shock of the cool water immersing him into a strange, painful world.

He was placed on a stack of wool blankets on the floor, nodding off until late evening when he sensed someone walking near him, placing a towel on his forehead, delivering broth to his lips. It was Abbie. "I thought you was gone for good," she said. "I never thought I'd see you come back here. But here you are."

Abbie placed a bitter lump under Nathan's tongue, forcing Nathan into a deep slumber. The fever took hold of him, bringing the sweats and wild dreams of death and privation. Flashing through his mind were images of skeletons and lowing cows and teeth chattering and of Pinder playing the banjo on the back of a donkey. His mother beckoned in the sweet melody Nathan knew from his youth. None of it made sense, of course, until Nathan entered a dreamspot where nothing moved except small drops of dew falling from trees into swamp water. Shadows formed around the edges of his mind, closing in, and he felt as if his hands and feet were trapped in quicksand. This place he knew to be death because it was very, very still. Very quiet. The dewdrops made no sound. The water made no sound. No matter how Nathan struggled, he could neither propel himself nor shout for help.

"You know, I always kind of thought of you as my angel?" Abbie's voice was tender. She folded a napkin at his side. "All them days you was gone. I know you was a good boy. Lord Almighty, I wanted you to be free, son, but I always hoped you and I would be together. Because that was a kind of freedom to me."

Nathan propped himself on his elbows. The top of his face felt heavy and distorted. He thought about Enoch and Fella, the fifolet and Rice Watson, Lucy, the old man in the swamp, and the cemetery where the bones of his mother and father lay. Assumption was no place for freedom, he thought. It was a place that taught hard lessons, a place where meanness was as plentiful as sugar cane. If Abbie couldn't see that, he wouldn't be able to explain it to her. "Well that don't matter anyway because you're here now," she said. "Because I got you back and I ain't letting go." She put down a towel and cupped his face with her hands. His face was warm and swollen.

Abbie remained with him, telling all the things that happened at Larawood while he was gone. The rebellion had given many Negroes a chance to run from the plantation. Some were caught and hanged, others had joined up with the Yankees.

"Is that how come you never run?" Nathan asked.

Abbie held a cotton shirt up to his body as if measuring him for the fit. "I done left through those gates a thousand times," she said, lowering her chin to her chest, as if she were giving a confession. "In my own mind, that's what I done. But each time I come to my senses, I'm right back here."

Nathan adjusted his arms so his shoulders were buried deep under the blanket. "What of Nefs?"

Abbie continued on as if she didn't hear him. She told him how the Captain remained a wealthy man, as were many planters on the LaFourche, and armed patrollers were well paid to guard Larawood's borders. "No way to travel Assumption roads, day or night," she explained, forgetting Nathan had been on some of those roads. The only thing that had changed was the number of parties the Captain hosted, she said, and the number of guests he invited to Larawood.

"No," Nathan said. "I say what of Nefs?"

"Oh, he survived. If that's what you want to call it. He out there in the quarters, a reminder to all of us, I guess, though those of us still here don't need no reminders."

Nathan brought the blanket to his nose. He was sorry to hear Nefs was still living at Larawood. He thought he might have committed atrocious acts until he was captured, inspiring slaves to sally forth as he had done before. "You mean he's alive? All the coloreds I seen strung up in the parish, he alive out of all of them?"

Abbie picked up a bowl and began feeding Nathan. Her eyes crossed slightly out of concentration. "He a changed man, Nathan. Don't you fool with him none. He ain't the same as he was."

Nathan looked up the stairs to the open door. "You seen my violin?" he asked.

Two days into Nathan's recovery, Captain Aucoin and Lara visited him. He brought Nathan's violin case with his old, beautiful violin inside. It had survived the trip nicely. It fit the velvet lined case as if it were a bottle of fine liquor.

"Abbie says you're no longer sickly," the Captain said.

"We were so glad to hear it," Lara said.

Abbie brought a lantern and hung it on the wall and Nathan could see Captain Aucoin and Lara better. They sat on a trunk facing him. Despite his age, the Captain was still hearty. His chest was barrel-shaped and his legs were stout. Nathan could tell he would live a long time. Lara's eyes looked confused, as if she'd been fooled out of some money, but she had held on to her youth rather well. The two seemed hardly touched by the war.

"They was hoping you might play again for them," Abbie pointed upstairs, in the general direction of the downriver parlor. Nathan understood she meant the violin.

"For the longest we thought you was dead," Lara said. "Didn't we, papa? We even sent out a little search party, didn't we, after we buried all those Negroes, remember papa?"

The Captain chewed the end off a cigar. He thumbed his nose for a second, remembering. "You know, in my mind, the past wasn't that long ago. I remember how you played all them beautiful songs and being at peace with myself. Probably for the first time in a long time. Those were some nice days. Not a care in the world but a quiet life. Embers in the fire. Flowers on the mantel. Crops in the field." The Captain straightened his lapel and looked into the distance. "But these are no longer the times they used to be and we're no longer those people we were before. Gone and mostly forgotten, I would think. We were comfortable but we can never let ourselves get that way again. Too many traitors and cutthroats and thieves amongst us. We seen which way that can go." The Captain leaned in, as if he'd found a confidante. "I know you wasn't part of all that back there, Nathan, the misadventures and fighting and killing started by Pinder and Nefs and a few others. You probably know who they were. You

were scared, I suppose, and you run away. I can accept that." The Captain leaned back and took a deep breath. "I'd have run away too at that point in time. Things were no more hospitable here than they were on the moon. Or New Orleans or Donaldsonville, for that matter. But I got Larawood good and protected now and any sign of trouble will get dealt with double-time and with tremendous force."

"Papa's looking forward to your afternoon concerts," Lara added. Nathan looked away. On the far wall, the Captain and Lara's shadows shimmied with the candlelight. Nathan's eyes stung and teared up and he blinked to clear them.

The Captain lit the end of the cigar and took a deep drag. "We can still enjoy music, can't we?" he asked. "Life hasn't sobered us that much, has it? Music helps us to find our godliness, and our mortality."

A shadow appeared in the doorway, then descended the stairs. It was Nefs, carrying a tray of lemonade. He wore a suit buttoned all the way to the neck, with ruffles from the shirt hung over like drapery. He slid the tray on a small table and took a step back. Despite his dignified air, he did not look well. His eyes were dull and he was stoop-shouldered—as if his spine had been bent with a crowbar

"You look surprised, Nathan," the Captain said. "What's the matter? Haven't you seen a gentleman before?"

Nathan accepted a glass of lemonade from Abbie. He could not look Nefs in the eye. There was something about Nef's unspoken resolution that filled Nathan with horror. He felt that if he glanced up, he would see himself standing there in a suit. "I thought Nefs had been killed is all."

“Killed? Oh no. Not killed. Not Nefs.” The Captain accepted a glass of lemonade as well. “I liked to have killed him for starting all the commotion we had here. I had him taken to the smokehouse for his punishment and some vigilantes fixed a noose in the pecan tree out there. But something came over me. You might call it an epiphany, if you’d have been raised with religion. I figured there’d been enough killing around here. I lost fifty slaves. Cost me damn near twenty-five thousand dollars, all told. No. Nefs was worth something to me and I knew he had plenty of work left in him. Besides, what’s worse than dying? Tell him Nefs.”

Nefs stepped forward as if on cue. His hands were by his side and his eyes had the glazed look that had come over Benjamin the overseer two years before. “Ain’t nothing worse than that, boss,” Nefs said.

The Captain got up from his seat and emptied his glass into his mouth. “No sirree. Nothing worse than dying. We got to hang on to life as long as we can no matter the circumstances.” Lara handed Nathan the open violin case. “It’s for you,” she said. “A gift from papa and me.”

“Come see me when you’re feeling better,” the Captain winked.

But seeing Nefs like that made Nathan feel sicker yet. He couldn’t sleep or make the image go away. A loud voice screamed at him, *It is always with us. From the beginning to the end, it has always been with us.* But Nefs didn’t cause this hostility, Nathan reasoned with himself. Why blame him? If there was an answer, Nathan couldn’t hear it. Any response was drowned out by the impulse to find a pickax and hunt Nefs down and show his body to the parish as proof of how serious Nathan was. There was something

too cruel in his living. For Nathan it was more humane to put an end to the life. Maybe the Captain was wrong. Maybe there hadn't been enough killing at Larawood yet.

It took Abbie many trips to the basement for the cures to work, and even then, Nathan did not want to leave the room when he was well. He was certain he'd find nothing he liked outside the basement, nothing except the same dreariness he felt before he slipped into the fever and dreamed those horrible dreams. The inevitable day came, though, when Abbie pronounced him able-bodied enough to begin feeding himself and emptying his own chamber pot. He shuffled upstairs, out the front door, and into the bright, open light, a glare so strong Nathan had to cover his eyes as he stumbled down the lane to the quarters, over a lawn cropped short by a small herd of billygoats, which scattered away as Nathan strode between them. Abbie, of course, would not let go of his elbow. She guided him when he veered off course toward the few cabins that hadn't burned two years before.

"You gonna be all right," she said, soothingly. "You don't have to do all that running no more. Abbie's got you."

Abbie laid Nathan down in a bed much like his old one, though in a cabin five houses down from the cabin he grew up in. The others had been blown up by the cannon. Nathan then remembered something he'd forgotten he ever knew. "I saw you running," Nathan said. "When I was escaping, through the cane, I looked back and saw you running toward our old place."

Abbie remembered for a second. "Oh, child. I was running to catch you. I thought you was smashed up in the rubble."

"I just sort of melted away. I would have stayed melted, too, if not..." Nathan could think of no way to finish his sentence. "...if not for a lot of things, I guess."

"I don't know how you survived so long," Abbie said. "All that murdering and plundering. Black folk have no chance out there."

"Folks somewhere finding some peace of mind. In New Orleans we could make a life for ourselves."

"Don't bet too much on that there. A person lose what little money they got betting on peace of mind."

Not me, Nathan thought, permitting his head to sink into the pillow. He took a deep breath, feeling some strength return to his arms and chest.

That evening, hoping to escape the thought of Nefs, Nathan took his violin and snuck off to the cemetery, where the goats had migrated to eat vines off the rickety fence. Abbie had to tend to an upset stomach at the main house and the quarters were deserted otherwise. When one of the guards stopped him near the sawmill, Nathan pointed to the cemetery and the guard waved him on.

Even with twilight quickly approaching, Nathan found his parents' graves as easily as if he'd visited the graveyard yesterday, where he sat and thought about what to do. A purple band of light disappeared on the horizon, making it difficult, as he got up and began to scour the ground for the top of a violin that marked Pinder's grave. Abbie had mentioned where it was and, after several minutes of wandering, he located it across the yard from a decaying persimmon tree, under which some of the younger goats were now resting. The violin-marker was a piece of bark carved to look like the top of the instrument. It was a fairly good carving. One of the slaves had taken the time

to round off the edges and coat the bark with a layer of grease. The violin was a fitting monument to Pinder since it brought him firmly into Nathan's mind. He could still hear the way Pinder pulled the bow across the strings, the way he tapped his foot in time, the way his eyes danced with merriment. It reminded Nathan he should play something for his old friend. Then he remembered the way the way Pinder rode into battle, the any white man did, riding as if he had a right to be on that horse. He must have known his chances to live were gone. He must have known there was no way to survive. Yet he looked as determined as he had been doing anything in his life, including the times he played his violin. As if somebody depended on his riding. As if he had many lives to give. Nathan brought the violin down and delicately returned it to the case. It was funny, Nathan thought, standing up, tucking the violin case under his arm. Real peculiar how someone like Pinder could leave an imprint on his mind. Someone insignificant to almost everyone outside of Assumption yet so important to Nathan. Just then the faint sound of Lara's piano floated across the cropland and tickled the inside of his ear so that he slapped at his head to prevent the annoyance. He walked toward the big house. He would have to find a way to make that melody end.