

## CHAPTER ONE

March 1830  
Philadelphia

James

**R**OBERT'S FAMILIAR RAP on the door came as I was studying a miniature portrait of myself. The small painting, meant as a parting gift to my beloved, had just been delivered, and I was debating the artist's interpretation. I had to admit that Miss Peale's suggestion to paint my face in profile, and thus avoid the black patch covering my left eye, was a good idea. Too, she had captured my features well in this, my thirty-third year: the length of my oval face, my aquiline nose, and the cleft in my square-cut jaw. But I disliked the distinct set she had given my mouth.

Robert knocked again.

"Yes," I called, and my butler entered.

"A letter, sir," he announced, coming forward. I lifted the letter from the tray and noted the familiar script. Robert gave me a concerned glance, but a bell above the mantel clinked once, signaling that he was needed elsewhere. Fortunately, he made a quick exit.

Alone again, I slit the seal. Caroline's simple words were so potent that the paper vibrated in my hand.

*Darling, I will see you this evening.*

*Your C.*

I had avoided her for weeks, but my presence at the event tonight was mandatory, and now Caroline meant to attend.

Though I longed to see her, I was filled with dread. Time was running out, and I could no longer escape. Tonight I must tell her the truth, though in the telling I would almost certainly lose her. And to lose her was to lose my life.

Again Robert was at the door, but this time, after a sharp rap, he entered on his own. He looked about uneasily, as though unsure how to deliver his next message.

“What is it, Robert?” I finally asked.

“Sir, there is someone here to see you,” he said, his eyes scanning my person and for only the briefest moment settling on the letter. “The caller is . . . at the back door,” he added, indicating that my visitor was likely a man of color. Robert paused as though looking for words, an unusual thing for this sophisticated man who ran my household. “His name is Henry.”

I stiffened. Surely it could not be Henry! We had an understanding.

“He said to tell you that he is Pan’s father,” Robert added carefully.

So it was Henry! I rose suddenly. Then, to cover my distress, I brushed at my jacket sleeves. “Have him wait in the kitchen,” I ordered, until I remembered I would want complete privacy. “No. Take him to my study.”

“Your study, sir?” Robert’s eyes opened wide. My study, my private workroom, was seldom open to anyone but Robert, and that was only for cleaning. It had been that way for years.

“Yes, my study,” I said with some irritation, and my butler quickly took his leave.

HENRY WAITED JUST inside the study. I closed the wide double doors firmly behind me and carefully made my way past both drawing tables to my desk. The three tall windows in this room shed enough of the darkening light for Henry to follow. I sat and nodded toward the chair across from me, but the visitor ignored my request as his dark fingers nervously circled the frayed brown hat that he held. I was momentarily startled to see his gray hair, then remembered that years had passed since I had seen him last.

He wasted no time with polite discussion and burst forth, "My boy gone! My Pan gone! They take him. I know they do. You got to help me!"

"Please, Henry! Slow down! What are you talking about? Where is Pan? What do you mean? He is missing?"

"This the third day. All along, I'm thinkin' he here working in the kitchen. When he don't come see me Sunday like always, I'm thinking he needed here, but then I hear that two more boys get took from the docks. Las' time I see him, I say again, 'You stay away from that shipyard, those men snap you up, put you on a boat, an' sell you down south.' That's why I come here to see him for myself, an' now Molly say she don't see Pan for two days an' was thinkin' he was with me."

My cook had said nothing. "Why didn't Molly come to me with her concern?"

"She say you got so much goin' on with sellin' your business and your trip comin' up that you don't need to be lookin' out for your help."

"Pan is more to me than help, you know this, Henry."

"I knows this, Mr. Burton. You treat him real good. He gettin' book-smart like you, and he learn how to work in the white man's house."

"He is a quick student," I said.

"My boy never go off like this on his own. He comes see me direct every Sunday, then goes back Monday mornin', jus' like always."

I tried to recall when I had last seen Pan. Wasn't it just yesterday that he had requested permission to take a book from my library? Or was that already two days ago? I had been so distracted with my own doings . . .

"He a good boy, he don't believe nobody mean him no harm. I tell him all the time, 'You got to be careful of those nigga traders.' At twelve years, he jus' the age they lookin' for. They get him on a boat, take him down the river, and sell him for a slave. You know what I's talkin' 'bout!" Henry's voice grew loud and I put my finger to my mouth. Henry leaned toward me and whispered loudly, "You know what I's talkin' 'bout!"

I did! I did know!

"There's word that two more boys is missin' from the South Ward, and they say that a schooner leave for the Carolinas this mornin'. I jus'

know my boy's on it! You got to go get him! Pan's been tellin' me how you goin' down there on that 'scursion. You got to bring him back!"

I stopped him. "Henry! I don't leave for another month! If it is true that he was taken, how do you know that they would sell him in the Carolinas? In all likelihood, they would take him farther down." I spoke without thinking and, too late, saw the effect of my words. The man's shoulders dropped. It had grown dark in the room, but I could see well enough when he wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his coat. Then he fell to his one knee.

"Please, Masta James, please! I only ask for help one time, an' that's when I firs' bring my boy to you jus' after my Alice die. Our Pan come late to Alice and me, an' now he all I got left of her. I gets you the money, you go down, get him back." His voice caught as he choked back sobs. "I know what they do to him. I's been a slave. I'd soon see him dead before I see him sol' for a slave. Please, Masta James, he my only boy!"

"Stand up, Henry!" I said. "Get ahold of yourself!" How could he call me by that hated title? And to be subjugating himself on his knees! Had he no pride, no sense of having bettered himself? He was no longer a slave. And neither was I.

I HAD MET Henry twenty years earlier, when, at the age of thirteen, I arrived in Philadelphia, ill and terrified and fleeing for my life.

On the journey from my home in southern Virginia, I spoke to no one, mute from fear of discovery. I traveled with two secrets, one as damning as the other. The first was that, just weeks before, I had discovered that I was part Negro, a race I had been taught to loathe. The second was that I had killed my father, for though I was raised by his mother as one of her own, and was as white-skinned as my father, he denied me my birthright and was going to sell me for a slave. Because of his murder, patrollers were searching for me and would hang me if I was found.

I should have felt relief as I boarded each new passenger coach that took me away, but instead I became more fearful. The question of what I was going to do next loomed before me. Where would I go? How

would I support myself? In my thirteen years, I had never been away from home. I had been raised as a privileged white child, cared for by servants on an isolated plantation. My doting grandmother, the woman who raised me as her son, had provided me with a fair education, but she had not taught me the fundamental skills of providing for myself. Now she was dead, my home was gone, and I was alone and in great danger.

When I arrived at the tavern outside of Philadelphia, I was so ill, frightened, and travel-worn that I scarcely knew to make my way inside. It wasn't until the coach horses were led back to the stables that I roused myself enough to walk into the noisy inn and ask for a bed. My head ached so that I was careless and withdrew my full purse. Then, before the transaction could take place, the smoke-filled room began to spin and my stomach heaved.

I just managed to stuff the purse back into my carrying case before I hastily made for the door; once outside, I ran for the back of the stables. There I leaned against the building as my stomach violently emptied. Then, before I could recover, I was struck from behind. I fell forward, though instinct had me clutch my traveling bag to me during the whaling that followed. In the end, the bag was wrestled from me, and with a last oath and some final kicks to my body, the thief was off. I tried to raise myself up to follow the man but, in the effort, lost consciousness.

When I awoke, I was looking into Henry's dark face. "You got to quiet down," he said. "You yellin' too loud."

Painfully, I raised myself on my elbow to look around. I was on a pallet on the dirt floor of what appeared to be a hut. I attempted to lift myself farther, but my head throbbed so that I lay back down. "How did I get here?" I asked.

"I find you out by the stables," he said. "Somebody work you over, but look to me like you sick before he got to you."

"Who are you?" I asked, squeezing my head to stop the throbbing.

"T's Henry. I work the stables back at the Inn. I's a runaway, like you." He stopped, then looked at me to see if I understood what he was trying to say. "T's a slave, like you," he said, as though to finalize a pact.

His words struck me like a blow. "I'm no slave!" I protested. "What makes you say that? I'm white!"

He looked at me sideways. "Maybe you is," he said, "but that not what you say when you outta your head."

"What did I say?" I struggled again to sit up. "Tell me! What did I say?"

"You say you is runnin', that somebody comin' after you."

Who was this man? Had he already alerted the patrollers? Suddenly I remembered my few belongings. "My traveling bag!" I said.

"Fraid they got it," he said.

"Oh no!" I said, and defeated, I lay back down. There was nothing left! The money, the clothes, all were gone. Then another thought. "My jacket!" I cried out. "Where is my jacket?"

"You mean that coat you's wearin'?" Henry asked. "Even when that fever got you sweatin' it out, the one thing you don' let me take off a you is that coat a yours."

When Henry turned away, I reached down to feel the padded interior of my jacket where the jewelry had been sewn in. I sighed when I felt all the bumps and bulges, then I fingered the pockets, and when I felt my sketchpad and my small silver knife, I closed my eyes in relief.

"Here, it bes' you drink this down," he said, returning to me with a mug.

He was on his knees beside me, and when he handed me the drink, both he and the water smelled of the earth. I drank deeply.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. "Why are you helping me?"

"Somebody help me out when I was runnin', like you," he said, while looking me over. "You got a bad eye, or do it come from the beatin' you took?"

I touched my useless left eye instinctively. "I was born with it."

Henry gave a nod.

"How long have I been here?" I asked.

"You bin here four nights," he said.

When he went for more water, I looked out on the dark night through the open door, then listened to the night sounds. They were not what I had imagined I would hear in a city. "Where are we?" I asked.

"We outside Phil'delphia," he said. "Far 'nough away that nobody comes out, but close 'nough that I get to my work."

What did this man intend for me? Had he already turned me in?

“What are you doing out here?” I asked. “Why don’t you live in the city?”

“How ’bout you tell Henry more ’bout you?” he said, but I closed my eyes at the thought, and before long, I fell asleep.

THE NEXT EVENING I awoke to the aroma of a roasting fowl. Outdoors, I found Henry leaning over a fire and rotating our meal on a makeshift spit. When he glanced over and noticed me, he spoke. “You feelin’ better?” he asked.

I nodded and tested myself by moving about. Though my arms and legs felt weak, my head did not throb as sharply as it had before.

Henry lifted a stick and poked it twice into the hot coals. When he raised it, the spear held two crusty roasted potatoes. He set each one in a wooden bowl, then removed the perfectly browned chicken from its spit onto a slab of wood.

“Sit,” he said, waving me over with a dangerous-looking knife. Driven by my newly awakened hunger, I overcame my wariness and sat down across from him, watching as he used the knife to split the chicken in two. After he placed half a fowl in each bowl, he handed one to me, then set the large knife down on a flat rock between the two of us, putting it easily within my reach. The gesture gave me some relief, for I hoped it meant that he did not see me as a threat.

Then I could wait no longer. I used my teeth to tear the tender meat from the bone, slurping and sucking the juice off my fingers. The potato crunched, then steamed when I bit into it, and I sputtered an oath when I burnt my mouth, causing Henry to laugh, a solid sound that came from deep within.

“Boy, you somethin’ to see when you eatin’,” he said, shaking his head.

As my stomach filled, my worry about trusting this man was slowly replaced with curiosity. Although of average height, he was powerfully built across the shoulders. I guessed him to be close to thirty-five or forty years of age. His hair grew out wild from his head, and his skin color was of the darkest I had ever seen. He was a fierce-looking man, and under ordinary circumstances I would have given him a wide berth.

When he speared another potato and handed it to me, I noted he

was missing a thumb. He saw me looking and held up both his opened hands, wiggling stubs where his two thumbs once were. "They take 'em before I run."

"Who did?" I asked, though I wasn't certain I wanted the answer.

"The masta, down Lou'siana," Henry said. He looked out into the dark, and speaking in a removed voice, he told me about himself.

Born into slavery, he had grown up with his mother and younger brother on a large cotton plantation. The master was brutal in his handling of his slaves, and when he learned that Henry was involved in planning a revolt, he punished Henry by cutting off his thumbs and forcing him to witness his mother's flogging. She died as result, and that was when Henry and his brother decided to make their escape. "We out by two days when he get shot down. Nothin' for me to do but run." He shook his head.

Somehow Henry eluded his pursuers, and after months of indescribable trials, he found himself in Philadelphia. Now, though free for two years, he remained on constant alert.

"If that masta get ahold a me, he finish me off. That's why I stay hid. Every day I's lookin' out. I ain't never goin' back to bein' a slave. They got to kill me first!" He sat quiet, as though exhausted from telling his story. Finally, he roused himself. "And what 'bout you?" he asked.

I was startled by his direct question. I had not expected to have him share his past so openly, and now he wanted the same from me. But how far could I trust him? Negroes were liars and thieves and always ready to take advantage of a white man. Yet so far, this one had only helped me. Dare I tell him how alone I was? Was it safe to tell him that when I fled my home, I left behind everyone and everything I cared about, knowing that I could never return?

"I knows you runnin' like me. Why you got to get away, it don' matter none to me."

"I shot my father," I said quietly, hoping that he heard me, for I did not want to repeat those words.

"We do what we got to do," he said.

"I hated him. His name was Marshall. I always thought he was my brother, but only a few months ago I found out that he was my father."



“Why you thinking he your brother?”

“My grandmother told me that I was her son and my dead grandfather was my father.”

“And what ’bout your mama?”

“At the same time I found out Marshall was my father, I learned that my real mother was a Negro.” It was difficult to believe my own words, for I still loved my grandmother as my true mother.

“So you take a gun to your daddy?”

“He was going to sell me for a slave,” I said.

“You kill him dead?”

“Yes.”

“And you a nigga?”

“My mother was a mulatto,” I said. “Her name was Belle.”

“Was she a light cullah?”

“Yes,” I said.

“And your daddy was white?”

I nodded. “I look just like him. I’m as white as he was.”

“That don’ matter. You still a nigga. But you can pass. That’s your bes’ bet.”

I had nothing to say.

“You got a family name?”

“Pyke,” I said. “I’m Jamie Pyke.”

“Not no more,” he said. “You got to go by somethin’ else.”

I stared into the fire. How could this be? Until a few months ago, I had thought of myself as white, and now, unbelievably, I was a Negro without a name, running for my life.

As MY HEALTH returned, Henry’s manner toward me remained genial, and because I felt no judgment of my character, I ceased judging him. In fact, I came to rely on him so much that I disliked it when he left for his work at the tavern. When I was alone, any unusual noise startled me, and I would leave at a run to hide in the trees. My heart pounded as I hid, watchful and terrified, until I would emerge, weak with relief to realize that the disturbance had come from deer passing through or squirrels chasing one another. Daily I feared that Rankin,

the treacherous overseer from our plantation, and his son Jake, two of the most ruthless men I knew, would find me. It was almost certain that they were still searching for me, and though they were known for their dogged determination in locating runaway slaves, their notoriety came from their merciless treatment of their captives.

Then gradually, as I became familiar with the particular sounds that came from living in the woods, I adapted to Henry's primitive lifestyle. By the time we were well into the pleasant season of autumn, each morning after Henry set out for work, I quite happily spent the day in the outdoors. There, while gathering wood for our evening fire, I had the time to observe the wildlife around me. Birds were in abundance, and my childhood fascination with them grew.

My interest stemmed from a large book of bird illustrations that I had been given as a child. Kept indoors for most of my early years, when I was not reading the book, I used the images to teach myself to sketch and paint. When I grew older, I used a penknife to carve birds and woodland creatures out of wood. Now, alone in this forest, I often busied myself whittling and sketching, and for those hours I was free of worries.

I decided that I might remain with Henry indefinitely, but as colder weather approached, he began to suggest that it was time for me to consider my future. "You got to get into town, find some work an' someplace to stay," he said. "Snow comin'. It ain't nothin' like you see before. Snow here gets deep. Hard livin' out here."

"But what will I do? Where will I stay?" I argued, fear causing a high childish whine in my voice.

"You get a job easy enough if you go in passin' for white. Thing is, you do that, you got to be careful," he said.

I didn't tell him that I had never considered anything other than presenting myself as white. I had never and would never consider myself a Negro. In fact, the idea disgusted me.

Henry thought awhile before he continued. "You pass, you got to cut ties with any niggas that you know."

"I don't know any," I said.

"There's me," he replied, but it took a while before I caught his meaning.

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AFTER I FOUND work in Philadelphia, I took Henry's advice, and we cut ties. My life progressed and I did well for myself, establishing a place in Philadelphia society.

I was alarmed, then, when Henry sought me out some fifteen years later; he was a link to my past that could ruin me if it were exposed. I was living as a white man, in white society, with no affiliation to any Negroes other than those of my household staff. Yet suddenly, he appeared with the request that I give employment to his seven-year-old son.

I might have refused him, but after I saw his desperation, and faced with the debt I owed him, I could not refuse. Thus I agreed to take in Henry's son, Pan, so he might be taught to perform the domestic duties in an established house.

On our first meeting, the young son struck me as rather delicate, with his slight build, dark skin, and ears that jutted out from his thin face. Pan's unflinching brown eyes met my own, an unusual habit for one of his race. And it was there, in the boy's eyes, that I recognized something of myself. For all of his bravery, they held something of the fear that I had felt when I first came to Philadelphia.

I agreed to provide for the boy, but I had no intention of becoming involved with him, and turned him over to Robert, my butler, and Molly, the cook, for use in the kitchen. A few weeks after his arrival, Molly reported back to me: "That boy, he's something! He work like I tell him to, but you never see nobody ask questions like he do. 'Why you do this? Why you do that?' He even ask if I show him how to write down his name."

Eventually, as Robert gave him more chores, I began to see Pan around the house more frequently. He was an uncommonly cheerful child, and when he saw me, he'd enthusiastically call out, "Hello, Mr. Burton!" And he didn't leave it at that. Almost always his greetings included other comments, such as "Did you see my new shoes?" or "I'm sure gettin' plenty to eat." His demeanor was so winning that in spite of myself, I began to take notice of him.

Then came the day he found me cleaning the cage of my much prized

cockatoo, Malcolm. When Pan opened the door to my upstairs room, his eyes opened wide. "What you doin' with that bird?" he asked.

"I'm caring for him," I said.

"Ain't he supposed to be outside?" He looked back out the door. "Does Robert know you got him in here?"

Malcolm flew to Pan's shoulder, and though the boy stiffened, he stood his ground. When the bird began to nose Pan's ear, the boy did not move but rolled his eyes up at me. "He gon' hurt me?"

"No, I rather think he likes you," I said.

Malcolm leaped onto his favorite perch with a questioning squawk. Pan stared. "I sure never do see somethin' like him before."

"His name is Malcolm, and he is a salmon-crested cockatoo."

"Where did you get him?"

"He was my first friend when I came to this house," I said, surprising myself with my open answer.

"Your—"

"Naughty boy!" Malcolm interrupted, using his favorite phrase.

Pan gaped, then gave a nervous laugh. "That him talkin'?"

"It is," I said.

"That bird was talkin'?"

"Yes, he mimics very well."

The boy clapped his hands. "Make him talk again!"

His interest in the bird reminded me of myself as a child, and I decided to give him an opportunity. "I'll tell you what. You have Robert send you to me every day at this time, and I will teach you how to take care of him. Then you can hear him speak every day."

"You sayin' you let me help you out with this bird?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"Won't be no work for me!" he said. "But Robert don't want me foolin' 'round the house outside a the kitchen, 'less he say so."

"I'll speak with Robert," I promised.

IT WASN'T LONG before Pan was supplying Malcolm with the sycamore and dogwood branches that the bird loved to gnaw, and after the

boy discovered how to keep Malcolm occupied, I often found the bird happily nipping at a swinging ear of corn or pecking at a carrot that hung above his perch.

Pan continued to surprise me with his quick mind, and because of his keen desire to learn, in time I began to teach him to read and write. One late afternoon, less than a year after his arrival, he stood beside my desk while once again I attempted to correct his use of the English language. As I was doing so, he leaned over to catch my eye. "Mr. Burton, why you doin' this for me?" he asked.

"Why *are* you doing this for me?" I corrected.

"Yes, Mr. Burton. You right. Why are you doing this for me?" he repeated my correction.

"You *are* right," I corrected again.

"I know I's right," he said. Then he repeated himself again: "I say, 'Why are you doing this for me?'"

"Can you be more explicit?" I asked. When I saw the confusion on his face, I worded the question another way. "What do you mean to ask when you say, 'Why are you doing this for me?' What do you think that I am doing for you?"

"You a white man helpin' out a nigga chil'. You teachin' me how to talk white like you. Why you doin' this? Why you foolin' with me?"

His earnest gaze touched me, and I was stung by his honest question. I turned away and felt for my handkerchief, then blew my nose. After folding my handkerchief, I was about to replace it when, without asking, Pan took it from me.

He leaned forward. "Look at me," he said, and with his small hand, he reached over and pulled my chin to face him. Then, with supreme care, he used the cloth to dab away a droplet of water that had slipped from under my eye patch. "That eye weepin'," he said. I was so touched that I rose and went to stand before a shelf of books, feigning interest while I composed myself.

He waited until I was seated again. "That eye hurt you much?" he asked.

"Does your eye pain you?" I corrected.

He gave a deep sigh. "Mr. Burton. You keep stoppin' me, tellin' me

how to talk, I don' ever get a chance to hear what you got to say," he protested, then looked puzzled when I chuckled.

AS TIME PASSED, Pan continued to help Robert around the house and Molly in the kitchen—Molly's only complaint now was his constant correction of her grammar—but increasingly, I called on him to assist me with my many projects. In his eagerness to understand, he was filled with questions and freely shared his observations. His carefree countenance broke through my guarded reserve, and over the next five years I came to care deeply for the boy.

But now he was missing! Could it be that he was stolen for a slave? It was a constant fear among the Negroes of Philadelphia, for it happened often. I imagined how desperate Henry must feel, as I recalled his own terror at being taken again for a slave. The thought of Pan meeting with this fate filled me with dread. He was quick-witted but had always been frail and surely could not survive the hard life of a slave.

If he had been stolen, he must be retrieved. And since I was traveling south for my work, could I not do so? Yet, the thought of it—the idea of deliberately exposing myself to people who bought and sold Negroes—terrified me. I had worked hard for the last fifteen years to move away from my past toward safety, and now the leaden ball of fear, one that had receded but had never truly left me, began again to grow.