

PROLOGUE

April 1844

She birthed her first baby in the early afternoon hours, a beautiful boy who cried out once and then rested peacefully in her arms.

As the midwife cleaned up, Mallie clung to her son as if he might float away into the field below her window. For the first time in her life, she had something—someone—to call her own.

He looked up at her, his hazel eyes searching her face. It was as if he knew he had someone to call his own as well.

She would be a good mama to her child for as long as the master let him stay in the house. She would feed him when he was hungry. Sew him warm clothing to wear when he was cold. Teach him to use his strength for good instead of evil.

She wiped the birthing blood off his arm with her nightgown, his skin dark against the white linen. She'd been praying for months that her baby's coloring would be a beige hue so he could work in the master's house instead of the fields. God hadn't lightened his skin, but He had answered one of her prayers. The child was a boy instead of a girl. For that, she was grateful.

A female slave was expected to do unspeakable things in this house, things no one ever told her about as she worked for her former missus. It wasn't until after she turned thirteen that the new master called for her. Then she worked solely for him.

Her stomach turned. She couldn't abide by the thought of her child forced to appease the insatiable appetite of that man.

Mallie kissed her baby's forehead.

She glanced toward the door, waiting for the master to visit.

What would he do when he saw their baby? She prayed he wouldn't take him to the market or give him to a slave wet nurse. Mallie wanted to be devoted solely to him.

If she continued to please the master, perhaps he would let her keep their boy, at least until he was old enough to work in the fields.

If her son was sent to the fields—when he was sent—she would pray every day for him. That he would be strong. Courageous. That he would face the future with resolve instead of fear, knowing he was created to be exactly who God wanted him to be.

But she wouldn't think about leaving him now. All she would think about was loving him.

He squirmed in her arms, his lips pressing together.

Across the room, the midwife looked up from her work. The elderly Negro woman helped all the slaves birth their children—inside the plantation house and out in the slave quarters. She knew what babies needed. "Feed him," she commanded.

Mallie unbuttoned her gown, and the baby latched on to her breast. Milk flowed slowly out of her into him. Life-giving liquid to sustain. She smiled as she watched him,

knowing she could care for him on her own without the master or the missus. She was his mama.

The boy ate voraciously before releasing her. Then he looked back up, into her eyes, and her heart felt as if it might burst open, joy flooding onto the wooden floor.

The midwife reached for the baby. “I have to clean him, Mallie.”

“No!” She never wanted to let him go.

“We’ll just be downstairs,” the woman said. “I’ll bring him back to you when I’m done.”

Mallie kissed her son’s forehead and both cheeks. His eyes were closed now, and he was content with his full belly and the world around him.

If only she could keep him in this peaceful state forever, cushioning him from the realities ahead.

The midwife slipped her hands under the baby.

“I love you,” Mallie whispered to him. “With all my heart.”

The midwife lifted him and held him out in front of her as if he were a bundle of sticks or straw. Mallie watched him until he was gone; then she glanced out the window at the pine branch brushing against the glass. For her entire life, she’d longed for a family. Someone she belonged to. Someone to love who would love her in return.

Her mama was gone—she’d been sold almost a decade ago. Mallie remembered the morning Mama had left for the market. She’d waited and waited by the front door for hours for her return, but the master came home alone.

She didn't know the name of her father. As far as she could remember, Mama never spoke about him. Master Jesus, Mama had said, was the only father she needed to know. A master who loved his children.

But now she had family on this earth too, and she'd do her best, in the short time she had, to instill right and wrong in her son so he'd grow up to be a gentleman.

She didn't have a name for him yet. A name meant hope, and she hadn't allowed herself to hope until after he was born. She'd given him life, and now she could give him a name as well.

Her eyes grew heavy. Her body was spent. The midwife had said she must sleep, but she wanted to wait until after her baby was beside her again, safe in her arms for the night.

In the spring breeze, the branch tapped a steady rhythm against the glass. She closed her eyes, listening for the midwife's footsteps in the corridor, for the cries of her son. Sleep beckoned to her as she waited, the weight of exhaustion pressing down. She tried to fight it for only a few more minutes, but her body rebelled against her will, worn out from the labor of bringing a child into this world.

Hours later, she awoke when the chamber door flung open. Morning light flooded through the window and across her narrow bed.

Rising on her elbows, she expected to see the midwife holding her son, ready to be fed, but the missus stood at the end of her bed instead, wearing her cornflower-blue traveling gown.

"Get dressed," she told Mallie.

Mallie looked toward the door. "Where's my baby?"

The missus didn't answer.

Mallie inched her legs to the side of the bed, trying to ignore the lingering pain. "I must feed him."

"I'm sorry," the woman said as she opened the small dresser beside the window. "The baby didn't survive the night."

Mallie fell back against the wall, her body trembling as she tried to process the missus's words.

Her baby didn't survive? No—the missus must be wrong. Her son was fine last night. Healthy and strong.

"Bring me my baby," Mallie demanded, but when she looked into the eyes of her mistress, at the pity and disdain, her words ebbed into grief. A wail erupted from deep inside her, carving its way around her heart and up her throat, echoing across the room.

"Lower your voice, Mallie."

A whisper now. Begging. "Bring me my baby."

"I can't—"

"I want to see him."

"He was ailing," the woman said. "Abe buried him before daylight."

Mallie wrapped herself in her arms, sobs heaving from her chest. She rocked back and forth, her head banging against the wall. She never should have fallen asleep. Never should have let him go.

"We have no time for this," the missus said, pulling things out of the dresser.

She didn't understand the missus's words, didn't care what she was saying.

The woman turned toward her. "Get out of bed."

Mallie yanked the bedcover up, trying to bury herself in the quilt her mother stitched long ago. If only she could join her son in the grave. She couldn't bear to stay in this world a moment longer.

The missus took her arm. "You must get dressed. Right away."

She cried as the missus dressed her. Cried as the others watched her walk down the steps, into the black carriage.

It wasn't until hours later that she realized.

The master never came to see her at all.