

CHAPTER ONE

## *Sold Before I Was Born*

My mother's walk was heavy and lumbering, though she breathed deeply. Some days were filled with a complete and thorough silence that seeped into everything around me. Awed by this deep silence, I stopped moving. Other days, there was noise and activity. Still, my mother could not do much, other than repeat again and again, "Help me, Lord." In the slowness of her body, I could feel myself groping toward something new. I would leave my home of water and darkness. I would go into another world.

One early morning in May, I pushed myself into that world. My mother cried, and I did too. But she held me, hushed me and stroked my skin. The midwife bathed me in warm water scented with lemongrass and wrapped me up. My mother held me to her bosom and nursed me. The light hurt my eyes so I kept them closed. I was drowsy, lulled by my mother's cooing and the warmth of her body. Then I heard her say, "Listen, little one,

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I have a story to tell you.” I suddenly grew alert. “You are as beautiful as the sun.” Then she began, in a sad but sweet voice.

“Once a group of Africans came to America. They were Ibos. They came off the ship, their hands and feet shackled. As they came onto the land, they realized that a life of slavery lay in store for them. So they turned around, every last one of them — children, women and men — and walked into the sea. Even when their feet could no longer touch bottom, they kept on going until they reached Africa. Those Africans knew how to walk on water. One day, my son, you too will leave all this behind.”

I had no idea what my mother was talking about. Water I knew, because I had been living in it for nine months. But who were Africans and what was America? What was slavery? One thing I sensed, and it was that the Africans knew that in America their life would be unbearable. So they left. After the story my mother hummed and rocked me. She lay beside me on the mat and held me close. Soon, we were both asleep.



On 14 May 1814, I was born. My mother, Mildred, an enslaved mulatto woman, named me Henry. Her master, Richard Butler, added Walton as my middle name. My last name was that of my father, a free White man named James Bibb. According to the law, any child born of a slave woman was also a slave. I was born mostly White, but part Black and therefore a slave. When I was about eight years old, my mother told me that my father had died when I was three. Not that it mattered. He never claimed me as his child. White men had their way with slave women, their own and others, but took no notice of the consequences. My mother was one such woman.

Instead of a father, I had sorrow. My mother was owned by a man named Robert Hunter. When she became pregnant with me a planter named Richard Butler bought her for four hundred dollars. She was seventeen years old. While my mother worked in Butler's house and waited for me to be born, Butler's daughter, Sophia, married David White. By the time I was born and nursing, Sophia was pregnant, but died giving birth to a daughter. Richard Butler grieved for his beloved daughter and felt keen sorrow for his

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baby granddaughter. Motherless, Harriet needed someone to provide milk for her. In those days, it was common practice for slave women who were nursing their own children to nurse White babies as well.

Butler gave my mother to his infant granddaughter as a gift. He drew up a deed giving Harriet “one Negro woman named Milly and her infant son Henry, and the future increase of said Milly.” Harriet White, a baby, owned me and my mother. Should my mother give birth to other children, Harriet would also own them.

My mother lived in David White’s house and became his housekeeper. I lived with her. When I was older, she told me that she used to feel that both children were hers, not just the one she gave birth to. She would hold both of us at her bosom and nurse us. When I understood the vileness that was slavery, I realized that Harriet White not only stole my mother’s labor but also my milk.

Our master, David White, was a tall, burly man with a mop of red hair that kept falling in his eyes. His skin was pasty white. He owned a modest farm in Shelby County, in the bluegrass area of

Kentucky. The farm was blessed with a large expanse of prairie lands interspersed with undulating hills. The property bordered one of the principal county roads, and a sizable river ran at the base of the land. About twenty slave people grew corn, tobacco, indigo, hemp and various vegetables. They also raised pigs and goats for the slaughterhouses of Ohio and Indiana. Our nearest neighbor was about four miles away.

David White was a government lawyer and spent much time in the Kentucky state capital, Frankfort. Because he was away for long periods he hired a manager, a vicious, bowlegged man named Captain Barker. It was said that Barker had fought in the War of 1812. He took great pleasure in whipping the slaves, although when I was young I was spared because I was Harriet White's playmate. Yet, when he passed me in the yard, he would screw up his eyes, spew tobacco juice at me and mutter, "One day, Henry, I will get you."

Harriet and I, because we were the only children in the big house, grew up together. I cannot remember my early life without Harriet, and came to think that she was my sister. As we grew we

played outside under a huge oak that stood in the front yard of the house. Harriet and I would hold hands, and she would say, “Come on, Henry, my little nigger.” When I was about seven years old, I asked my mother what Harriet meant by “nigger.” She was peeling potatoes.

“Mama, what is a nigger?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Harriet called me her ‘little nigger.’”

My mother’s eyes filled with tears and pain.

“Never mind Harriet,” she said. “A ‘nigger’ is what White people call us slaves.”

“What is a slave?”

“A slave is someone that another person owns. You and me. Sister Dinah, Shadrach, Lucy, Old Trevor — all of us who work for Mr. White — are slaves. The Black people.”

“But I am White, Mother. You are, too.”

My mother laughed out loud. She pulled me to her and hugged me. “You *look* White. And I have enough White blood in me to look White, too. But the blood of Africa in our veins makes us Black.

“Henry, Harriet owns us. Her grandfather owned us and gave us to her. She is our owner, though this is her father’s house and plantation.”

I became quite dizzy. What I had just learned filled me with such surprise that all I could do was sit and listen to my breath going in and out.

“Listen, Henry,” my mother whispered. “When you were born I told you a story about the Ibos, the Africans, the Black people who could walk on water and how they walked right back to Africa.”

I did not remember such a story but nodded nonetheless.

“Africans could also fly.” My mother must have seen doubt in my eyes because she said, “It is true. My own mother told me. Once upon a time, Africans could fly.”

“Why can’t they fly now?”

“The White people threw salt at their feet.”

“What?”

“Those who never forgot Africa, who held it close to their hearts, whose spirits never gave in to slavery used to go down to the riverside. Some would beat rhythms on drums and, like magic, those who wanted to go home would rise up into the air and fly away. But others, those whose spirits slavery had broken, learned what was happening, and they told the White people. One day, as some Africans prepared to fly away,

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patrollers seized them and sprinkled salt at their feet. It is said that salt makes people so heavy that they remain bound to the earth. But even today, some of us still fly away. Every day, Henry, slaves vanish into thin air and massa never finds them. Don't worry about Miss Harriet. One day you will be like those Africans and fly away."