

Chapter Four

One day was swallowed by the next and then the next. The swaying, jogging wagon became a home for Julilly and the little children. Its scraping, clattering noise was a wall closing out the fat man's shouts and the clanging of the torturing chains. Sometimes it was cold when the night came and the wagon stopped on a tall hill with black trees and silver stars and a biting wind that never stopped. The children clung to Julilly and she warmed them as best she could in her thin, strong arms.

When the day came with white-hot sun that baked the road into sifting dust, Julilly cooled the children's mouths with water from the drinking gourd that the free black boy had given her. She always filled it now when the wagon stopped beside a stream and the fat man threw each of them a cold hoecake with a sop of grease on top. She used the gourd, too, for pouring water over the swollen, bleeding ankles of Lester, Adam, and Ben

when the white men left them to fish along a river bank.

Julilly seldom spoke. There was nothing to say. But she shared the others' silent fear and anger. Sometimes when the red-necked driver slept, and the fat man strolled off to fish, Julilly thought of jumping from the wagon and running into the woods. But if she did, who would care for the babies in the wagon? Who would pour water over the torn ankles of Lester, Adam and Ben? She was the only one strong and free enough to help them. She was held, too, by Lester's sullen, glinting hatred and lifted head. His pride brought swish after swish of the fat man's whip across his back. The children cried and the whip poised high above their heads with a threat.

"You shut your little black mouths or this whip comes down on you," the fat man cried.

In response Julilly would sing, slow and soft and deep, and the children listened and remembered their mam-mies and their cabins at Massa Hensen's. Julilly yearned for Mammy Sally and she sang the songs that she had heard Mammy sing:

I am bound for the promised land.
I am bound for the promised land.
Oh, who will come and go with me?
I am bound for the promised land.

Julilly didn't know why, but somehow she drew strength from Lester's high-held head and angry eyes. When she woke up cold and frightened during the night on the rough floor of the wagon, she felt better knowing that Lester was close by. He helped her to remember

the free black boy and the tall, gentle man who paid him for his work. Most of all, he helped her remember Canada.

One day the wagon slushed through a cypress swamp. The muddy water lay as quiet as a flat, smooth mirror. The trees rose out of it straight and tall and their soft green needles strained the sun like spreading sieves. Flicks and specks of sunlight sparkled on the water. A heavenly sight, Julilly thought, and held her breath with wonder.

But the wet swamp mud sucked down the heavy chains and pulled at the legs of Sam and Adam. They fell splashing and gasping into the water. Lester tugged at their arms, biting his lips against the pain in his own bruised legs. He pulled them out with the bulge of his great muscles. The fat man's whip slapped through the water and onto the wet, muddy backs of the slaves.

A sudden shower of rain splashed through the needled trees. The driver of the wagon hunched his shoulders up to the rim of his wide hat until it made an umbrella over him. The fat man urged his horse ahead of the wagon and huddled under a low branched tree. There was no protection for Julilly and the children or for the struggling men trying to pull themselves from the sucking swamp mud.

With the same suddenness as the onset of the rain, Julilly lost her fear. She had to help the men in the water. Maybe it was like Mammy Sally use to say, "The Lord has made you strong and tall for a good reason." She slid to the end of the wagon and began climbing over the side when she saw Lester standing still and staring at her. His head shook slightly—a warning for her not to come. But his face shifted from anger to a quick smile and his

eyes held hers with a look of pride and approval. Lester was proud of her!

Julilly waded into the swamp and pulled up the mud-covered chain. Without its heavy weight the men could lift their legs. The horse tugged at the wagon until it rolled out onto firm, dry ground, and Julilly returned to the little children.

The rain stopped and a gold sun poured a warm circle of light over all of them. Julilly began to sing:

Jenny crack corn and I don't care,
Jenny crack corn and I don't care,
Jenny crack corn and I don't care,
My massa's gone away!

The children smiled and asked her to sing it again.

Chapter Five

One day the land became flat again and on either side of the wagon, green fields dotted with cotton plants appeared. Up and down the rows, lines of slaves chopped the rich, black soil with their long-handled hoes.

"Looks like we've made it to ol' Mississippi," the fat man called out to the driver who jolted about on the wagon seat.

"Won't be long now." This was one of the few sentences the driver had spoken on the long trip.

Julilly felt both relief and uneasiness. This must be the dreaded "deep South" that Massa Hensen's slaves had all talked about. But it did mean that the wagon would finally stop. Might it even be that Mammy Sally was here?

At a jog in the road, the wagon turned into a lane that seemed to lead straight into a field. The driver and the fat man appeared tense and nervous. They smoothed

their hair and tidied their rumpled shirts and stained trousers as best they could.

Then the wagon stopped bumping, as the road became smooth and hard. Instead of brambles and shaggy bushes on either side, there were rows and rows of tall, wrinkle-barked oak trees. Julilly's eyes widened, for hanging from the branches and floating back and forth in the summer breeze, were silent cloud-like drapes of swaying gray moss. It was cool and soft and beautiful and Julilly wanted to catch it in her arms. But the row of trees ended in a stretch of thick green grass. Shading it from every ray of sun were three wide-spreading magnolia trees. Fresh, white blossoms sprang from the heavy waxed leaves. To Julilly they looked like the white linen napkins from Missy Hensen's Big House hanging up to dry. A gentle fragrance filled the air.

Then, Julilly saw the Big House. She stared. It was not at all like Massa Hensen's. Clean, white pillars rose in front of the largest house she had ever seen. They looked as though they sprouted from the earth. And between them, in glistening white, were rows of steps fanned out like a peacock's plume. Two white folks sat on the green lawn in wide frame chairs. The man was tall and thin. Julilly especially noticed that his hair was copper red and that his sharp, trimmed beard matched it exactly. His knees were crossed and his high riding boots shone like pools of muddy water. He flicked a riding whip and laughed at a row of white geese parading over the lawn. The woman was frail and sank back in her chair into the fluffy billows of a pink dress. Neither of them looked in the direction of Julilly's wagon. They barely noticed the fat man who walked towards them until he said, "Mornin' sir." The fat man bowed slightly and waited.



"I see, Sims," drawled the man in the chair, "you've bought us a sorry lookin' parcel of slaves." He glanced briefly at the chained Adam, Ben, and Lester.

"Get them back to the nigger quarters and see that they're ready for work in the mornin'."

"Yes Sir." Sims bowed again. "Good day to ya'all, Miss Riley—Master Riley."

The fat man backed away towards the slave wagon.

"So," Julilly thought to herself, "this is the Riley plantation and he's the Massa same as Massa Hensen." Then with a shock she realized that the fat man, Sims, was the overseer. He was boss of all the slaves.

The wagon pulled back to a thin road behind the Big House. Weeds and tangled brambles took over between the trees. There was a wide space at the end of the road, but no grass grew on it. The stomping bare feet of hundreds of black folks had packed the earth into a hard, bare floor.

It must be Sunday, Julilly decided, for all the slaves were at home. She wondered if Sunday here would be the same as at Massa Hensen's when field work was put aside and washing, cooking, and visiting were done. And maybe, as at Massa Hensen's, a banjo would be scrounged up and dancing and singing would start.

The little children in the cart leaned eagerly over the sides, perhaps expecting to find home and their mam-mies.

But Julilly drew back into a corner. This wasn't like Massa Hensen's slave quarters. There was no laughter and almost no talk. The old folks leaned idle against the doors of two long rows of tattered huts. The children, with legs scrawny as chicken legs, sat scratching in the dust with sticks and feathers. They had caved-in cheeks

that sucked the smiles off their tiny faces. At Massa Hensen's there had been gardens around the huts and a hen scratching here and there. But here the huts were low and ugly. Their doors sagged on broken hinges and the walls of logs spread wide where the mud chinking had fallen out.

There was fear and a set, unspoken hatred in the eyes of the slaves when fat, red-faced Sims strode near them. He stopped between the cabin rows and ran the pudginess of his hand over his oily-wet hair.

His jay-bird voice screeched. "Some of you lazy niggers take these boys to the tool house and unloose their chains. See that they're ready for work in the mornin'." He kicked his heavy foot in the direction of Adam, Ben, and Lester.

Julilly's wagon stopped before a low building. It was longer than the other huts.

"Take these babies, grannie," he sneered at a sullen old woman—dried up like a crinkly brown leaf. She sucked at an empty pipe. A younger woman came forward and carried them one by one into the low house. They whimpered, and reached after Julilly but the woman closed their mouths with her wide, black hand and hurried them through the sagging door.

Julilly began climbing off the wagon to follow them. They were almost like her babies now. Little Willie Brown broke loose from the wrinkled old grannie and grabbed Julilly's skirt. "Julilly," he screamed.

Sims scowled at the two of them with sudden anger.

"Shut that baby's mouth, Grannie," he shouted at the old lady.

She grabbed Willie with one claw-like hand and shut his mouth with the other.

Sims' small eyes appraised Julilly.

"She's big for her age and strong. Put her with the field niggers that ain't got families."

He stretched his whip in the direction of another long cabin. Julilly walked away from the children towards an ugly, long shack and went inside. There was light and air only from the open door and the cracks in the wall. The small space of hard dirt floor seemed packed with girls, each one clinging to a pile of filthy rags. Julilly didn't look for Mammy Sally. She didn't want to find her here.

There was an empty space beside a sullen, hunch-backed girl. Even in the dim light, Julilly could see ugly scars running down her legs and across her cheeks.

"I'm Liza." A soft voice spoke from the deep shadow against the wall.

Julilly sat down beside her.

Chapter Six

Liza was the only one in the long room of slave girls who offered Julilly any kind of welcome. There was a listlessness about the others that was like sickness.

Liza reached up and touched Julilly's hand. She pulled her down beside her.

"You been snatched from your Mammy?" she asked.

Julilly nodded. Then, for the first time since leaving the Hensen plantation she began to cry. Fat Sims couldn't watch her here. The others in the cabin didn't care.

Liza sat quietly. Julilly's sobs were the only sound in the dark room. The hunch-backed girl drew closer to her and waited. It seemed a long time before Julilly wiped her eyes and was still.

"This is a no-good place," Liza muttered.

Julilly agreed. "You been here a long time?" she asked. It was good talking to someone. In the jogging

wagon, she mainly sang to the little children. Fat Sims didn't mind this, but he had scowled when she tried talking with Lester or Adam.

Liza looked at Julilly closely before she answered.

"I came at cotton pickin' time last summer," she said, "sold and bought and throwed in here to live like a pig." Her words were low and soft. Julilly had to strain forward to hear.

Julilly wanted to ask more questions, but she held back: she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answers.

"You been lookin' at my bent-up back and beat-up legs," Liza said bluntly. She seemed to read Julilly's mind.

"Old Sims likes to whip me," she went on. She looked weary and rested her head on her drawn-up knees. "I tried runnin' away. I got caught. Old Sims whipped me until I thought I was gonna die."

Julilly felt a coldness creeping over her. It squeezed her throat and made her breathing come in jumps.

"The slaves at Massa Hensen's place feared it here in Mississippi," she answered her new friend.

Liza suddenly relaxed.

"You know what my Daddy said to me once. He was a preacher where we used to live.

"He said, 'Liza, the soul is all black or white, 'pending on the man's life and not on his skin.' I figures old Sims got a soul like a rotten turnip."

Both girls smiled.

A bell rang, startling the listless girls in the cabin to action. They began wandering out of the door. Julilly and Liza followed.

The bright sun was blinding after the shadows of the

cabin. Julilly squinted her eyes and then opened them wide. She wondered if she was really seeing the sight before her. Little children, naked and glistening in the sun, were running towards a wooden trough in the yard. A man poured corn meal mush into the trough from a dirty pail. The children pushed and shoved on hands and knees—sucking and dipping in the yellow grain until there was nothing left.

Julilly stared with disbelief. She began looking for little Willie and the other children who had travelled with her in the wagon. But they weren't there. They hadn't yet learned how to suck their food from a trough like pigs. But Julilly knew that they would soon or they wouldn't eat. She felt sick. Now she understood why the slaves in Virginia dreaded this place called "the deep South." Liza was right. This plantation was a no-good, rotten place to live.

Liza yanked Julilly into the line of older boys and girls. They gathered around a black washpot where collard greens bubbled and steamed, and bits of fat pork pushed to the surface now and then. Each person carried a gourd and dipped it in. Julilly shared Liza's until an old woman came along and handed her one.

There wasn't much talk. There was too much hunger.

Julilly's gourd was empty and there was nothing more to fill her aching stomach but a dipper full of water.

There was no gaiety or bounce in the walk of anyone around Massa Riley's slaveyard, Julilly noticed. At Massa Hensen's, on a day off from work, folks collected in little groups to laugh and sing. Here it was like ghosts being pushed around. The slaves were as thin and frail as shadows.

Again Liza yanked Julilly by the arm. This time she pulled her back to the cabin to take off her ragged tow shirt and put on a crocker sack full of holes.

"What's this for?" protested Julilly.

"On Sunday we wash any ol' rags that we wear for the rest of the week." Liza became sullen again. She could have been taken for a bent old woman if one forgot to look at the smooth, black skin of her face and her young, hurt eyes.

The girls dropped their dirty clothes into one of the washtubs in the slave yard and punched them up and down in the steaming water.

"Here's your 'battlin' stick'," Liza said, handing Julilly a hard solid stick. "Now we just put our shirts on this big ol' block of wood and hit and battle the dirt right out of them."

At last the miserable beaten rags were hung on a rattan vine to dry.

That night Julilly crept into the long, shabby cabin that housed the slave girls who had no parents. She lay down beside Liza who shared her heap of rags. There was no talking; everyone slept. Julilly looked into the dark. She was fearful of the morning, when Sims would be back: Liza said the cotton in some of the fields was ready to be picked. She thought about the little children, about Adam, Ben, and Lester; and she wondered where Mammy Sally was sleeping tonight.

"Lord, help us find each other again," she prayed and went to sleep.

It seemed only a few minutes later to Julilly when a piercing bell clanged through the darkness. Liza pulled

her up by her arm and led her out of doors, where a fire was crackling below the black-leaved trees. A line of slaves passed before it. Julilly followed. Each one was given a corn cake and a gourd of water for breakfast. Silently the line continued. This time hands reached out for a pail. Looking inside hers, Julilly saw that it held another corn cake and a cold strip of bacon.

"It's your lunch," Liza whispered; "don't eat it now."

The line went on—women, men, and children all mixed up together. Next they all got crocker sacks—low and baggy—to fasten around their necks. Julilly knew that before the day was done she'd fill more than one bag full of white cotton bolls.

Julilly had been picking cotton for three years now. The overseer at Massa Hensen's always said how good she was—not breaking the branches off the stalks when she pulled off the blossoms. She could use both hands to snatch at the bolls and put them in the swinging sack around her neck without dropping one upon the ground.

The line of slaves seemed endless to Julilly as they strung along the field behind fat Sims. He swayed back and forth on his horse, flipping a cat-o'-nine-tails whip into the pink sky. Soon the sun would rise and burn up all the pink and coolness of the dawn.

Julilly followed Liza. She saw that the girl limped and that she bent forward, as though her back was trying to push away the burden of her crocker sack.

"Too many whippin's," a slave woman behind Julilly said, pointing towards Liza.

The sun still hadn't risen far when the picking started.

A sharp cry at the far end of the cotton row, froze Ju-

lilly's hands in mid-air. Fat Sims had dismounted his horse and was flaying his whip over the back of an old, white-haired man.

"He likes to beat at old folks and cripples like me," Liza said in a low voice without lifting her head.

Julilly saw that Liza couldn't reach the high branches with her bent back, so she began pulling the open bolls from the top branches—letting Liza take all those at the bottom. Her new friend gave her a grateful smile.

The sun rose, white and hot, burning at the nakedness of the ragged slaves. The face of Sims glistened with sweat. It dripped down from the wide brim of his hat. None of the slaves wore hats. There was no shade for their heads.

Sims' anger rose with the sun. When the work slowed, he used his whip. Julilly's fear of the man turned to despair, and then to intense dislike. She had never disliked anyone as much as this fat, squint-eyed Sims. She avoided looking at him. When he came near her she worked steadily and tried to overshadow Liza, who crouched beneath her, pulling cotton from the lower branches.

Once Liza said after Sims had safely passed beyond them, "That man thinks a slave is just like a work-horse. If you acts like a work horse, you gets along just fine. If you don't—it's the cat-o'-nine-tails on your back."

The work went on—picking, filling the crocker sack—emptying it into baskets—stamping it down. The small lunch and fifteen-minute rest seemed no longer than the time it took for a mosquito to bite.

The slaves still picked when twilight came, and the red sun had slipped away to cool its fire under the earth. The long walk back to the slave quarters was silent, except

for the shuffle of tired feet dragging through the dust.

That night it was as dark as a snake hole in the long, low cabin where Julilly and Liza lay on their heap of rags on the hard dirt floor. There wasn't a wisp of wind and the heat of the day stayed inside like a burning log.

Julilly ached with tiredness and hunger gnawed wildly at her stomach. There had been only turnips and a little side meat served for supper. The other slave girls along the floor slept heavily, but Liza was restless. Her hand reached out in the dark and touched Julilly.

"You is a friend," the crippled girl whispered; no-one else ever picked the high cotton that my poor ol' back won't stretch to."

Julilly felt a strong urge to protect this beaten, crippled girl, who had once tried to run away. All alone Liza had run into the swamp—waded into the sticky water and slept with no covering until Sims tracked her down.

Julilly moved closer to her and began whispering to her about life at the Hensen plantation and the sale to fat ol' Sims.

Eventually she repeated her mother's words about Canada and the freedom that country held for every slave. To her surprise Liza had heard about Canada too, and the two girls talked dreamily before drifting into sleep.