

Chapter 1

From a plantation love story, a baby is born

This story begins as many great stories do, in a love affair; a love that existed in the very darkest of times. Just as the sun is brightest after a storm, this love shone bright as the North Star calling her people home. Somewhere down south in the heart of slave country where plantations sprinkled the landscape like dandelions on a summer's day is where this love story begins. In the fields there was a mighty man named Jerome. He could fill his daily quota of cotton in the wink of a southern eye. So fast and strong was he that when his work was done this gentle giant of a man would help others to do what the slave master, Big Jim, demanded of them. Meanwhile, in the house there worked a beautiful young woman named Mary. She could cook, clean, polish, button-up, turn-down, sew-up, and bake a cake as fast as a firefly zipping through a humid southern night. There also lived Miss Polly who was the oldest worker in the house. Miss Polly saw a lot of herself in young Miss Mary. Polly took a shine to her like nobody's business. Soon word got around to Polly that while Jerome was fixing a wall in the back garden, he would sneak a peek and give a wink to Miss Mary when she was baking in the kitchen. Mary took a keen liking to baking and asked Polly if she could be put on permanent baking duty. At first Miss Polly enjoyed observing these seeds of romance, but she knew that if the master caught wind of it, he would sell one or both of them to someone down the river. Miss Polly soon put an end to the baking, the wall fixing, and the rumor spreading about them two young slaves.

It was around this time that the Civil War broke out. The master, Big Jim, saw his duty and so signed himself up and headed off to battle. His daughter, Sally Jane, a much kinder person, was left in charge. She was the only child, the master's wife having died in childbirth. Upon Big Jim's departure, a calm settled all over the Homestead. Where the master pushed and was mean, Sally was sweet and kind. This air of ease, however, began being punctuated by the distant roar of far-off cannon fire which at first sounded like a raging storm in the neighboring county. Just as a storm becomes louder and more intense the closer it gets, so did General Lee and his rumbling bumbling gang of Confederates as they advanced closer and closer to Big Jim and Miss Sally's farm. It was about this time, many months after the master had left, that Miss Sally received word that her father had been cut down during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Around the plantation, however, the drum beats of war drew closer and closer. The master's daughter saw the writing on the wall. For fear of her life and the lives of all the servants, farmers, and slaves, she made the decision to free them all. Drawing up papers, she sent each of them off with a horse or cow or some other livestock, plus a bit of money and papers that declared them to be free.

Her last words to them as they departed in the night were, "Follow the North Star."

Prior to that, over the months and years, Sally Jane had grown very fond of Polly and Mary, often taking time with them in the kitchen, watching them work their magic. Polly always had a tale to tell or gossip to share. One day Sally Jane was missing her papa something fierce. Polly had her sit a spell in the kitchen while she and Mary fixed a nice apple pie to pick up the young girl's spirits. Polly got to telling her a bit of gossip she'd heard.

So, Polly said, "I heard last night that Mary's Jerome was finishing up in the field with young Jo-Jo Congo and Sebastian Rodriguez; you know . . . them new young bucks?"

"Of course, I know of them, Miss Polly."

"Well, a goose the size of a full-grown pig comes along and lands in the field. Mary's Jerome sees it and thinks that it would make a fine supper. She tells Jerome, who, with his lightning speed, runs over to it. Of course, that spooks that big old goose and she flies off into the sky. Jerome, with his strength, jumps up and grabs that big old bird by the wings. Well, that giant of a goose took him for the ride of his life, sweeping and diving and carrying on. It was just when Mary's Jerome had nearly tackled it to the ground that he lost his grip and smashed down feet first. That tremendous sound you heard at dusk that we all thought was cannon fire was actually Jerome slamming onto the ground."

"Oh Polly, I do so love your stories," said Sally Jane, laughing.

"Wasn't a story. Was the truth. Jo-Jo and Sebastian swear by it and I think two other folks saw it as well."

"Oh, go on," said Sally Jane. What Sally Jane didn't know was that there was a nugget of truth in Polly's story, but we will get to that later.

"Polly? Why do you call him Mary's Jerome?"

For a brief few moments, silence fell between the three ladies. Mary looked at Polly. Polly looked at Sally. Sally looked at them both with a very confused look on her face.

"Oh no!" Polly exclaimed, suddenly embarrassed. "I done let it slip! Please, Miss Sally Jane, don't sell Jerome or Mary! Please!"

"Sell them? What in tarnation are you talking about?"

"Them two are smitten with each other. I know old Big Jim, God rest his soul, would sell slaves who were in love. He thought it made them lazy. Love that is. He told me himself. Please don't sell Jerome and Mary. Please, please."

"Are you kidding? I would never—"

And with that Sally stopped for a second, thinking about the power of love. After a time, she said, "Well, on this day when I am missing my pa, it's high time I make amends for his sins." She slapped her thigh, stood and exclaimed, "Not only am I not going to sell them, we need them to be married!"

Now the local pastor didn't much like it, but Sally Jane held a lot of sway in the county. Between that and the offer of the right amount of money, he agreed. By the light of the candle under a midnight moon, they became man and wife. By the time Miss Sally Jane granted them their freedom, not only were they husband and wife, but Mary was also pregnant. Seeing as how Miss Polly had no family and Mary had become like a daughter to her, Jerome and Mary invited her to travel with them.