

Dream of Freedom

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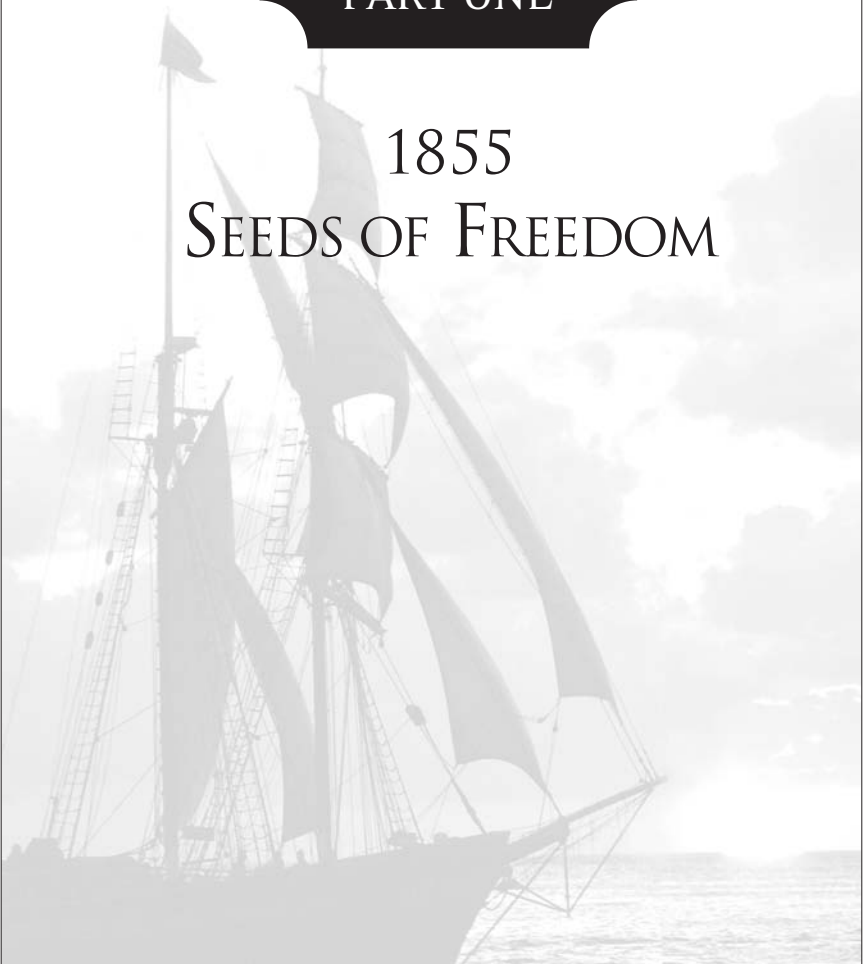
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PART ONE

1855
SEEDS OF FREEDOM



One



A woman with caramel skin, but the rest of whose features gave clear evidence of her African heritage, stole quietly from the hovel she called home and tiptoed away from the slave quarters.

The hour was late and the night quiet. A half-moon illuminated her steps, though she would have been able to find her way even had the darkness been as black as her husband's skin. The stream was less than half a mile away. She could have found it with her eyes closed. They carried their wash this way once a week, and bathed the children more often than that. But on this night all she wanted to do was let the cool water flow over the wounds on her back. It might only stop the stinging for a few minutes. But even such temporary relief would be worth it. The water, however, would not prevent tears continuing to rise, nor quiet the anguish in her heart from the day's events.

She reached the stream safely and paused. No sound other than the gentle gurgle of water met her ears. She glanced around nervously, though she knew from the deathly quiet that she was alone. Then she slipped her dress over her head, dropped it on the ground, and walked barefoot and naked into the stream. Moments later she sat on one of the large submerged stones of the washing pool, where the water reached about four feet, and slowly sank into its depths. The water gently rose up over her shoulders to her neck in wonderfully anticipated relief from the throbs pulsing across the skin of her back.

Twenty-four-year-old Lucindy Eaton was a slave. Whippings were part of a slave's life in South Carolina. She expected no different. But today—hearing that her husband had been sold and that, even as she carried his child, she would probably never see him again—everything had changed.

Today, for one of the first times in her life, she had become angry. Angry enough to speak up, to fight back, and inwardly to curse the white man. Today she had felt the injustice of this way of existence like never before. For today that injustice had suddenly revealed its harsh ugliness in her own life.

The master had ridden into the village while the men were in from the fields eating lunch.

“Caleb!” he called in the voice they all knew and feared. “Caleb Eaton . . . come out here.”

Lucindy glanced at her husband with wide eyes of silent terror. “What does he want?” she whispered.

“I don’ know,” answered Caleb, rising from where they sat on the floor eating. “But you jes’ wait here wif da young’uns.”

He walked outside, where a dozen or more black faces had already poked out windows, with a few emerging out of their own cabin doors to see what was happening.

“I’s here, massa,” said Caleb walking bare-chested into the sunlight.

“I can see that, Eaton,” said the white man, still seated on his horse, holding the ever-present whip, whose tongue had tasted the flesh of nearly all the men present more than once. “All right, then, get your things—you’ve been sold.”

The words fell like a sentence of doom on the ears of the listening blacks. Dumbfounded, Caleb stood as still as a statue. The number of watchers quickly increased as the master’s message spread like an invisible brush fire through the collection of shanties.

The overseer and another white man now rode up behind the master, the latter holding the reins of a riderless horse.

“But, massa,” said Caleb after two or three seconds, “I gots me a family, wif anuder chil’ on da way. Maybe you ain’t herd, but my Lucindy’s gwine hab anuder—”

“I know all about it, Eaton,” interrupted Master Crawford. “Why else do you think I waited till now? I figured I ought to get myself one more nigger baby out of the bargain.”

Low churlish laughter sounded from the two men behind him.

“But, massa . . . Lucindy, she need me. I’s work harder effen you likes, an I’s—”

A cruel lash on the front of his shoulder silenced him. He staggered back and fell to his knees.

“It’s too late for all that, Eaton! That’s the trouble with you—your tongue’s too long for your own good. I’ve put up with it long enough.”

Crawford turned and nodded to one of his men, who jumped off his horse and dragged the black man to his feet.

“Now either you get in there and get what things you want to take with you, or else we’ll take you as you are, without shirts or coat or anything else.”

Caleb shuffled back toward the house in a daze, where Lucindy now stood in the doorway watching in stunned disbelief. He could not look into her eyes, but walked past her inside.

Two little children, aged one and three, clung to her legs and dress. A minute or two later, Caleb walked back carrying a small handful of ragged clothes and an extra pair of boots. This time he paused and now sought Lucindy’s face. His expression was one of sorrow, grief, and apology for whatever might be his own part in this terrible turn of events.

“Caleb . . . ?” she said in a forlorn tone of question and desperation.

“Where Daddy goin’?” said a young voice at her side.

“Oh, Broan!” said Lucindy, suddenly bursting into tears.

The innocent boy’s question jolted Lucindy’s brain awake. Even as Caleb stooped to give a tearful good-bye kiss and hug to the three-year-old little boy and his sister—both too young to understand what was happening—she ran out toward the imposing presence of the master where he sat on his horse with growing impatience.

What went through the mind of such a man at sight of her—whether her light skin, or that of any number of his slaves,

roused the awareness anywhere in his being that this was his own flesh and blood, his own daughter—it would have been hard to say. If Miles Crawford even thought of that fact, he gave no sign of it. For the purposes of expediency in adding to his stable, in the absence of suitable men, he had fathered fifteen or twenty of his own slaves through the years, but he made no attempt to keep track of them. They represented mere inventory, value on his ledger. If he had paid nothing for them but a few minutes of his time, so much the better.

Lucindy had always been vaguely aware that the master was her father, a legacy or a fate, depending on how one looked at it, that she shared with a dozen of her fellow slaves who were still here. But the fact meant nothing to her. Pity the poor heart to whom the word *father* arouses no thoughts of tenderness and compassion. Before that day, in Lucindy Eaton's mind, it aroused no feelings at all. Ever after, the word filled her with hatred. She knew that some black fathers were kind. Caleb was a good father to Broan and Rebecca. But in her deepest heart, nothing more represented evil to Lucindy's ear than the single word *father*.

"Massa, please!" she cried, running forward and looking up at him with pleading expression. "Dese two young'uns, dey need dere daddy. I's work too, massa. I's do whateber you wants effen you jes' don'—"

"Shut up!" he yelled, as a shove from his boot sent Lucindy sprawling to the ground. "What good can you do me in your condition! Now stand back and get out of our way before you feel the whip along with your man."

He nodded to his overseer again, who now walked toward the house where Caleb knelt on one knee and was talking quietly to the two children. The man took hold of his shoulder and wrenched Caleb viciously to his feet. Keeping a tight grip, he now turned him and shoved him toward the waiting horse.

Lucindy scrambled to her feet and ran toward him. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Caleb . . . Caleb . . .," she sobbed, kissing his eyes and forehead and cheeks and finally his lips.

But another crack from the master's whip, this time on her back, brought an end to the tearful parting.

She screamed in pain. At her side she felt Caleb's muscles tighten in silent rage. He was a large and powerful man and in an instant could have put all three white men on the ground. But even outspoken slaves like Caleb Eaton learned that to yield to temper never helped, but always made things worse. To fight them now, even to protect his wife's honor, would only insure a worse whipping than the lash she had already received.

"Get up, Eaton!" barked the overseer. "You're not so dumb you need to be told what to put in that saddle!"

Caleb reached for the saddle horn and set his left foot up in the stirrup.

"No!" cried Lucindy, picking herself off the ground and again running toward her husband. But the overseer rudely pushed her away, then shoved the black man up the rest of the way onto the horse's back.

"Mama, Daddy?" babbled the little girl, who had waddled out from the house.

Lucindy swept her daughter into her arms and again approached the awful throne of judgment.

"Please, massa! Look at dis chil'!" she said, holding the one year old up toward her own grandfather. "Dis little girl need—"

"She needs to learn something her mother apparently never did," the white man spat back angrily, "and that is to hold her tongue!"

Again he shoved Lucindy away from the side of his horse with his boot, sending mother and child to the ground. At last his patience had been driven to the extreme.

"Get him out of here," he shouted to his overseer as he dismounted, "while I teach this tramp a lesson!"

"Caleb!" cried Lucindy as the other three horses turned and began clomping away. Caleb glanced behind him with tears blurring his vision.

Lucindy was silenced again by the master's hand. He did not stop this time until the back of her dress was sliced and ripped and soaked

with the blood of a dozen fresh lashes of the cruel leather thongs. When she came to herself, Caleb was gone and some of the women were tending to her wounds.

Tears stung Lucindy's eyes at the memory of the cruel parting. She splashed several handfuls of water from the stream into her face, but the coolness could not stop the hot burning flow of tears.

"Oh, Caleb . . . Caleb," she whimpered, then began to sob gently.

She knew that if the master or one of his men found her here, away from the slave quarters, and naked besides, she would probably be killed on the spot. But she didn't care. Today she had stopped being afraid. She had hardly felt the master's whip. Even with two small children to care for, and a third on the way inside her, at this moment she hardly cared if she lived or died.

She cried for a few minutes. Slowly the tempest of grief passed.

As she sat in the stream, thoughts of the songs they sang about the river Jordan came back to her. She didn't know how big the Jordan was. Probably it was a huge and mighty river from the way the songs told it. She knew she would never see the real river called Jordan because that was somewhere far away. She didn't even know where it was. But that river symbolizing the border where people, even blacks, crossed into the land where all people were free no matter what color they were—maybe she *could* cross that Jordan one day.

The water continued to flow, and as she sank into a reverie, the water of that stream became the water of the river Jordan in her dreams, and a determination rose in Lucindy Eaton's heart that she would not live the rest of her life only to die in slavery. Somehow she would make sure her children knew freedom, even if to give it to them cost their mother her life. Perhaps she would not cross into that land herself. But like Moses of old she would see them cross into it and enter into the land of promise.

Who would be her deliverer, she didn't know. How she would get them to that place where freedom lay on the other side, Lucindy didn't know. But she would not spend her days and die under the shadow of the taskmaster's whip. She would see the promised land,

even if she died gazing upon it from afar. But if she died knowing that her children would know freedom, it would be a happy death.

“God,” she whispered, “he’p me git ter dat ol’ riber, whereber it is, so dat I kin see my chilluns git crossed hit. He’p me, God, fin’ dat road ter freedom leadin’ ter dat Jordan.”