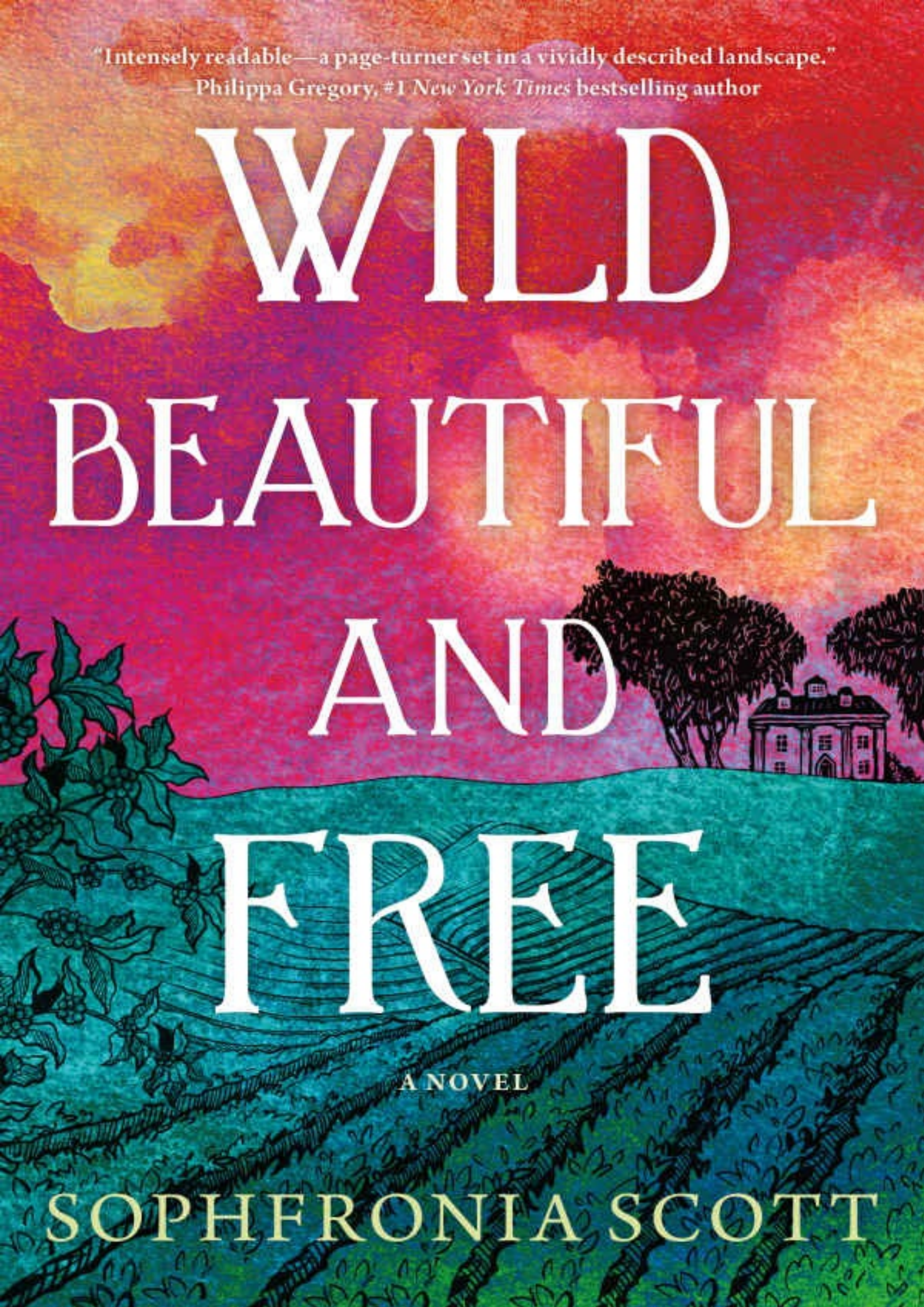


"Intensely readable—a page-turner set in a vividly described landscape."

—Philippa Gregory, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author



WILD BEAUTIFUL AND FREE

A NOVEL

SOPHRONIA SCOTT

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“Telling the story of a child of slave owner and an enslaved woman, *Wild, Beautiful, and Free* focuses on the individual heartbreaks of slavery and especially on the heroine, a courageous young woman who has to find her own route to becoming a free woman. It’s intensely readable—a page-turner set in a vividly described landscape.”

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All I Need to Get By
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This Child of Faith
Love's Long Line
The Seeker and the Monk

WILD
BEAUTIFUL
AND
FREE

A NOVEL

SOPHFRONIA SCOTT

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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First edition

*For my sisters,
Theodora (1967–2011), Denise, Jeanette, and Michelle,
brave daughters of a strong southern man*

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Prologue

My papa, Jean Bébinn, the owner of fifty thousand acres of the finest land in Louisiana, used to say a man falling down stairs was one of the saddest sights you could ever behold. Not only could you be certain the one falling would feel his body battered like the devil having his day on your behind, but there was also the fact that the person was surely humbled because he'd been unable to master this simple creation man made to overcome the ups and downs of the earth.

Mr. Christian Robichaud Colchester looked like that when I first saw him in the winter of 1860. He tumbled and spun like a hay rake falling down the front stairs inside Fortitude Mansion. His eyes caught me in one hot moment as he whirled. Black marbles they were, and they flashed with shock like everything he believed about the world had betrayed him with a snap of a twig—eyes that looked like they had been somewhere and had returned to find me and were asking, Would I help? Now I know I couldn't have seen his plea in that quick of time, but that was how it seemed. Papa's words came to me, and I felt sorry for the man rolling down those stairs. I rushed to the staircase and stood there. Never mind I was probably two heads shorter than the huge beast falling. I was and still am nothing but a bit of a soul in slight packaging. My body didn't have any sense of what my mind was making it do. I stood there and let him land on me.

Air fled my chest, and a tingling sensation sprang up and down my spine. I thought I'd never breathe again, but I heard him coughing like he was too full of air, like he had taken all my breath from me.

I think about that moment when I try to figure out when it all changed. When did he reach out like he was falling all over again and grab my heart with both hands and hold on like his life depended on it? When did I start holding on with him? He knows that I did, because that's what's making him so bold to ask what he's asking of me now. He wouldn't have done it otherwise. And by the same vein I wouldn't be sitting here thinking about saying yes. Because that's how much of me he has, and I'm thinking it wouldn't be a great thing to let the rest of me go too. It's just like

standing in front of those stairs again. Can I break this fall? Inside that man is every notion of what I know about myself. He stands tall, like there's a force inside him drawing him up to his full height, and that same force makes me feel large as well. Our eyes on the world are great and unyielding, like we've seen too much to close them now. We say the words we want to say and don't care about the consequences. I know a bigger hell comes of keeping your mouth shut. We're that much alike. And yet he doesn't know what he's asking of me. For what he wants, I'd have to deny myself in a way that would dismantle every aspect of my humanity. And his, too, but that doesn't seem to concern him, perhaps because he's already done it for so long. Maybe that's why I've loved him—he's burned himself down to this purity, and it's all I can see of him. I can't see anything else.

“Jeannette, the only people who would give a damn are the ones who give a damn for you,” he said. “You don't have people like that in this world.”

No.

Not in this world.

Because I do think of Papa. That's what gives me pause. That and the love of my Creator, my Alpha and my Omega. Anyone might look at me and wonder how, in all my strangeness, I could demand love of any human being. I know I'm unusual to look at, with pale skin telling one story about myself and tight coils of light-brown hair telling another. And I'm hard in ways most admired women are soft. I used to think my half sister, Calista, imprinted the world like a cloud. But my papa's my excuse for everything I'm about to tell you. I was born of great love, and Papa bore me well in that love for as long as he could. I was a beloved child. I think I knew that before I knew anything else. So now I can't settle for anything less than such love. That's just the truth of who I am.

Chapter 1

Within minutes of my birth Madame Bébinn tried to burn the bed on which I'd come into the world. If her husband, Jean Bébinn, with me in his arms, had not stood between her and my poor mama, her body still warm and soaked in blood from where the life had drained out of her, Madame would have set fire to everything: woman, sheets, mattress, curtains. It didn't matter to her the bed stood within the walls of her own home. What mattered was her husband loved a slave, loved her enough to bring her into his house, into a white person's bed, to bear his child. Is it any wonder that whenever I crossed paths with this woman, I wanted to see her hands to make sure she wasn't holding any matches? Forever I could sense her need to set my hair afire.

Madame Bébinn was the reason why, in the late afternoon of a late-spring day in 1851, I stood at the door inside my room, considering the wisdom of leaving it to go to the kitchen for some food. Dorinda knew I ate alone when Papa was away, but sometimes Madame kept her so busy with added chores—bleaching Calista's sheets—she would forget to bring a meal to my room. I knew I could take the back stairs and easily avoid an encounter with Madame. The house slaves used this route when they moved from room to room to do their work. But I was twelve years old, and by then my feet instinctively obeyed Papa's constant reminder that I tread the same floorboards as him, his wife, and their daughter. "This is your home, Jeannette," he said. "You don't need to hide your head here."

But he didn't account for his wife, his frequent absences for business, and how much she had to drink on any given day and by what time. I'd learned to stay more than an arm's length from Madame. If I got any closer, she was always pulling my hair or pinching my arms. I knew her hatred smoldered and all it took was a breath from me to make it blaze.

I'd spent the morning studying Papa's map of the area of Louisiana known as LeBlanc. He wanted me to understand the breadth of the lands of Catalpa Valley, his plantation, and to know the fifty thousand acres as well as he did. By sight much of the fields were familiar to me, as I had viewed

them from on high, on horseback, for most of my young life. Now he wanted me to know where the sugar mill, made of red brick, lay within our boundaries and how far out the largest field reached. Through Papa I learned what I know of the earth because our land had names. Sitting with the maps, I'd recite the names of the parcels as if they were the roots of my family tree:

Belle Neuve

Baton Bleu

Siana Grove

Chance Voir

Belle Verde

Mont Devreau

I haven't said these names out loud for years. Now they are marked on my heart.

"This earth belongs to you, Jeannette," he would say.

Not all of it. That would be impossible. But one particular section I knew was in fact mine: five thousand acres, called Petite Bébinn. It was land Papa had set aside for me, on which he planned to build me a house so I could be free and safe. It was land that would give me a living.

I suspected he thought I would never marry. As bright as my skin was, my hair would always have the rough texture of a negress. That's just a fact.

"Jeannette," Papa would say in our lessons, "tell me about the southwest parcel."

"It is Siana Grove, where the new-growth sugarcane gets planted and where the swamp meets the edge of the fields."

I liked looking at the map, but at times it was hard to listen without growing sleepy to all of Papa's words about how and when he'd acquired each parcel and how he'd used the word *valley* to name the estate because he liked the word. He didn't care that it didn't make sense because Louisiana's as flat as the bottom of a cast-iron pot. I loved sitting with him. His clothing smelled of tobacco and his breath of the sugarcane he chewed. The map's paper felt thick and satisfying between my thin fingers. I did wonder why Calista didn't have the same learning, nor did it seem required of her.

This thought of my half sister made me wonder where she was. Madame, when I was a baby, used to keep us apart, or she'd tried her best to. With no other children in the house, Calista, four years old when I was

born, was naturally drawn to me. Dorinda said she would find Calista rocking my crib if it took too long for someone to come see about me when I cried. I suspect our connection grew when I learned to talk and she realized we called the same man Papa. Once I was walking, she would help me climb out of the crib and go to her room, where we'd share her bed. Dorinda, knowing how Madame would rage if she discovered me in Calista's bed, retrieved me early in the morning and tucked me back into my own bed.

As girls we escaped Madame's scornful eye by playing outside. Our favorite game was to climb onto the thick branches of the oak that shaded our back lawn. Long, luxurious strands of Spanish moss curtained the whole tree, and we loved to drape the soft fronds over our heads like hair and pull it over our shoulders like shawls. We pretended to be old wisewomen, like Deborah in the book of Judges, who sat under a palm tree and provided counsel to the people who came asking for it. Only we sat in a tree, not under it, and no one came to me and Calista, so we made up the people and the stories of their requests.

There was the man who complained about a farmer having sold him a horse that was lame, and there were the brothers who couldn't agree who would care for their old mother. There was the old mother who accused these same brothers of neglect. As we judged the fates of our people, it became clear that Calista was more merciful than I. She was always looking for a reason to explain why the person acted the way they did.

My argument was always the same: "But they should know better!" Because that was what Dorinda always said when she scolded me—I was a big girl and should know better. If I, at age six, seven, or eight, should know better, why shouldn't big people older than that know the same?

One day Dorinda found us holding court in the tree and asked what we were doing.

"We are the old wisewomen of Catalpa Valley," Calista said. "Do you need counsel?"

Dorinda laughed. "Older than me?"

I nodded. "And wiser too!"

"Oh, I don't know about that." Dorinda leaned against the tree's fat trunk and looked up at us. "I can tell the future. Can you all do that?"

Calista looked at me, and we looked down at Dorinda. "All right," Calista called down. "What's our future?"

"Now that depends. Whatcha want most?"

“Want most?”

“Uh-huh. Most out of the entire world.”

The day was so hot that it seemed the moss could drink from the sweat on our skin. Calista smiled and took my hand.

“For me and Jeannette to stay here always.”

“How you gon’ do that, Miss Calista? You don’t think you ain’t gonna marry? You don’t think the men won’t come after you when you grown?”

She didn’t say this could happen to me.

“They won’t find us,” Calista said. “We will stay here, and this moss will grow over us, and no one will see us again.”

I draped more of the Spanish moss over her head. Her words made sense because I believed the moss could support and sustain us, though I didn’t know how. Everything about Catalpa Valley felt that way, full of life and growing—the water over our bare feet when Calista and I waded in the creeks; the air when it seemed to soak up all the water until it felt so thick we could grasp a breeze in our hands and squeeze it to our hearts; the ivory-breasted kites who built nests from this moss and lived in the branches over our heads; the low bellow of bullfrogs searching for mates in the swamps. Why wouldn’t we stay here, on Papa’s land, and grow season after hot season along with everything else?

“Girl,” said Dorinda, “you’ll leave this place when it’s time. Even the sugarcane does that.”

But now Calista was doing a different kind of leaving. Ever since Dorinda had started bleaching Calista’s sheets, she had grown distant, and I missed her. When Papa wasn’t home, we often became islands floating solo about the great house. Calista stayed in her room, sorting through her dresses and staring into her mirror, until her mother, who didn’t like to sit alone, called for her. She made Calista play piano while she sipped her sweet wine.

Madame never drank enough to get drunk, but she drank enough to make her bolder, enough to say or do things I don’t think she would have said or done otherwise.

That afternoon I felt bold too. I can only think the wrongness of being forgotten came over me, and I was hungry, annoyed, and tired of being afraid. So I left my room and went to the main staircase.

My luck was bad, for Madame was already on her way up the steps, most likely in search of her daughter. When she saw me, she started like

she'd seen a rat scurrying across the floor. She grasped her skirts higher and flew up the last of the stairs to where I stood on the landing.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

She always sounded like I was about to steal something or set fire to the house. But burning things was her notion, not mine. Her eyes flew up and down, looking me over, and her blonde curls bounced against her cheeks. I wore a simple fern-colored dress with soft ivory petticoats underneath. Papa always made sure I had nice clothes, but they were not the bright silk dresses Calista wore. Still, I knew every aspect of me looked wrong in Madame's eyes.

I meant to tell her I was going to the kitchen, but the craziness in her eyes provoked me and made me lie.

“To Papa's study.”

The shock on her face satisfied me.

“I want a book we have been reading together.” I felt my tongue slow as it touched the roof of my mouth to form the word *together*.

She reached out for my shoulder, but I stepped away. She shook her empty fist at me.

“There's nothing in there for you.”

“What is Papa's is mine. He said so. Because he is my papa.”

“What about Calista? He's her papa too.”

“But she has you, and she can have your things.”

Her lip curled upward, and half a toothy grin cut into her face. “Then by that reasoning, you should have what belongs to your mama—nothing but dirt.”

The mention of my mama made my chest swell. “Then Calista and I would be the same, because from what I see, you don't own anything either. Everything is Papa's.”

Madame's face glowed pink. “Why, you ugly little . . .”

She slapped me. The familiar stinging warmth flooded my left cheek. I exhaled.

“I'm going to the kitchen,” I said.

“That's where you'd stay if I had anything to say about it.”

I thought the words *And you don't*, but I didn't speak them aloud. She must have seen them, though, in the way I met her eyes and didn't turn away, my lips a mute straight line. That was when she grabbed my arm and dragged me across the wood floor.

“And take the back stairs! I won't put up with this when Jean is

away! I've had enough!"

I kicked her and tried to scratch at her arms. She lifted me—I was small for my twelve years, so this was easily done—and threw me away from her. My back hit the wall near the staircase. My left foot slid down to the next step, and my arm flailed out to grasp the handrail, but it was too late. I fell sideways onto my right hip, then rolled down the rest of the stairs. My ankle and hip bone were sore, my wrist bleeding where it had scraped against the metal handrail.

A door upstairs opened.

"Mama! Stop it!" Calista rushed down the stairs and took me by the hand. "What if Papa saw you?"

Madame's eyes widened. Of course, he wouldn't stand for what she'd done. I didn't know how he might punish her, but Madame was well aware of the consequences, because she flew toward me and shook a finger in my face. "If you say one word to him . . ."

"She won't! Will you, Jeannette?" Calista, tall for her sixteen years, placed herself between me and her mother. I put a hand on the small of her back and shook my head.

"No," I whispered.

Calista stood her ground until Madame turned and climbed the stairs again. Then she moved down the hall to the kitchen and pulled me with her.

Calista was right. I wouldn't tell because I didn't like seeing Papa angry. The noise he and Madame Bébinn made when they argued sounded so loud it seemed to make the floorboards tremble beneath my feet.

"Why does she hate me?"

"I could ask the same thing about Papa."

"Papa doesn't hate you!"

"No. He doesn't." She gently tugged one of the coppery curls hanging near my shoulder. She used to pull my hair this way when we were younger, thinking it would straighten eventually. "But he doesn't love me like he loves you."

Calista pushed open the wide wood door. "Now go. Show Dorinda your wrist. I will soothe Mama."

When I had crossed the threshold, she closed the door behind me.

Dorinda had midwived my birth. She's the one who told me of Madame's fire and my mama dying. I believed her because I could see the heavy

sadness that pulled down her face when she talked of how she couldn't stop the blood. I would sit in the kitchen listening to her and chewing on the pork crackling she had given me. She went back to kneading bread dough, her work punctuated by heavy sighs.

"I seen many babies come into the world, and I know one or the other, mama or baby, don't always make it. But I prayed for Lindy. Knew your papa might go crazy for losing her. Didn't matter what she was. I know love when I see it.

"He loved you right off too. Didn't matter you was the ugliest baby I ever did see—all that orangey-brown hair, just like his, and a face pinched up like a pomegranate. But he saw himself in you right away, like he done spit you out. Light skinned, too, almost white. I said, 'Can't call her nothing but Jeannette because that's just what she is, a little you.'"

She had warned Papa not to let me out of his sight until I was old enough not to get smothered or bagged up and dropped in a river. Dorinda knew Madame felt me under her skin like a nasty itch and would do anything to get rid of me. Dorinda fashioned a sling and bound me to Papa so he could ride with me daily into the fields. That was my first sense of infinity: an endless ocean of sugarcane flowing beneath me and growing high enough for the fronds to sweep against Papa's thighs.

He was the talk of the parish—Jean Bébin and his nigger baby. So many landowners sired children with their slaves. Only Bébin made anything of it, of one of them. Me. They made allowances for both his wealth and being mad with grief. He also had a wife crazier than him, and they pitied him for it.

I had my questions. Riding the fields with Papa, I saw how the women were made to work as hard as the men. I didn't see how it could be possible for someone forced to work under the blazing sun to love the ones riding above them and wielding whips. Made no sense to me.

But whenever I asked Dorinda about this, she'd only say, "You can't know your mama's mind. You can only know what you know. Does your daddy treat you with love? Ain't you treated like you matter?"

Of course, I could only say yes, despite sensing that Dorinda probably did know my mama's mind.

"Then you got something most slaves will never have. Whatcha gonna do with it, Jeannette?"

"Everyone at Catalpa Valley matters, Dorinda."

"No, they don't. Not in the way you think. But you keep saying that

to yourself. And keep the land on your heart and on your mind. Maybe one day you'll make that true. Make it true for us all."

I didn't understand, but I trusted her, so I said, "I will."

That afternoon Dorinda gave me biscuits and jam, and I went out to the gazebo on the far edge of the lawn near our wisewomen tree to eat them. I could smell water in the swampy air. It made the air feel like a soft blanket on my shoulders. I was happy then, and the only thing that could make me happier came next: the sound of Papa's voice rolling to me from across the yard.

"Jeannette!"

"Papa!" I ran to him and pressed my sticky jam fingers to his cheeks. "Where have you been?"

He kissed my forehead. "Oh, I had business. But look—a gift! I ordered it for you long ago, and at last, here it is!"

He returned me to my seat in the gazebo and wiped my hands before taking a small box of blue velvet from his pocket. Inside shone a small locket made of a burnished brown metal.

"Here, Jeannette. Open it like this."

He took the small oval between his fingers and pried it apart until it became two ovals. I gasped. Each one contained a tiny painting. The face on the left I recognized at once—Papa, his red hair combed back from his blockish forehead and growing down the sides of his face in bushy muttonchops. He wore the sour expression that made him repugnant to others but Papa to me.

On the right, a face I didn't know but found familiar. Her brown hair was not ringleted like Madame's. She wore it pulled back from her face, a small dark bun visible at the base of her neck. Her skin was the color of sand except for a whitish blotch like a cloud on her lower right cheek and chin.

"This is Mama?"

"Yes. Your mama. I had it done long ago."

He ran a finger along the curve of the metal frame. "I couldn't bear to look at it for some time. Not since she died. You see the scar?" He pointed to the cloud, and I nodded.

"I told the painter not to include it, but your mama insisted. My wife . . ."

Papa's eyes filled with tears. I moved closer and put my head on his

shoulder.

“My wife had burned her there. Threw boiling water on her. I shouldn’t have tried to forget it. I’m ashamed I asked. But she was still so beautiful. *Ma belle!*”

And she was. There was a calmness in her face and a glow that felt like staring into the full moon on a summer night.

“I wish I looked like her,” I said.

“Ah, but you have her strength, Jeannette. You have her gentle soul.” He took me by the shoulders and held me in front of him. “You are beautiful in your own way, and it’s good that you don’t look like her. When you become a grown woman, it will be important.”

“But why, Papa?”

“There may come a time when you’ll have to pretend Mama was not your mama. That’s why I wanted you to have this. Even if you must pretend, you don’t have to forget.”

“I don’t understand.”

Before he could speak again, Calista called out, “Papa!” and ran to join us in the gazebo. Papa caught her up in his arms.

“Calista! Oh, look how tall you are! One day I’ll return to find my little girl all gone, and you will be a woman.”

“Almost, Papa,” she said. “Almost!”

“Look, a present for you too!” He reached into his pocket and pulled out another locket similar to mine. Calista knew how to open it, and she smiled even wider when she saw the portraits. The one of Papa was the same. Madame’s portrait looked recent, and I guessed it had been done when she’d gone to New Orleans last summer. She wore a midnight-blue gown that made her yellow hair bright. Her shoulders seemed stiff with pride.

I held out my palm and showed her my locket. We sat close, examining the portraits.

Papa said, “So you and Jeannette will remember us when we’re gone.”

“Oh, Papa, we will never forget you!” Calista threw her arms around his neck.

“Yes, but you both need to remember that you are my blood. Catalpa Valley is my blood and sweat, and it’s all I’ve got to give you. Calista, you will have what the law won’t allow for Jeannette. You must make sure she gets the land of Petite Bébinn.”