

A Novel
Based on a
True Story

THE AMERICAN QUEEN

There is only one
known queen who
ruled a kingdom on
American soil.
This is her story.

VANESSA MILLER

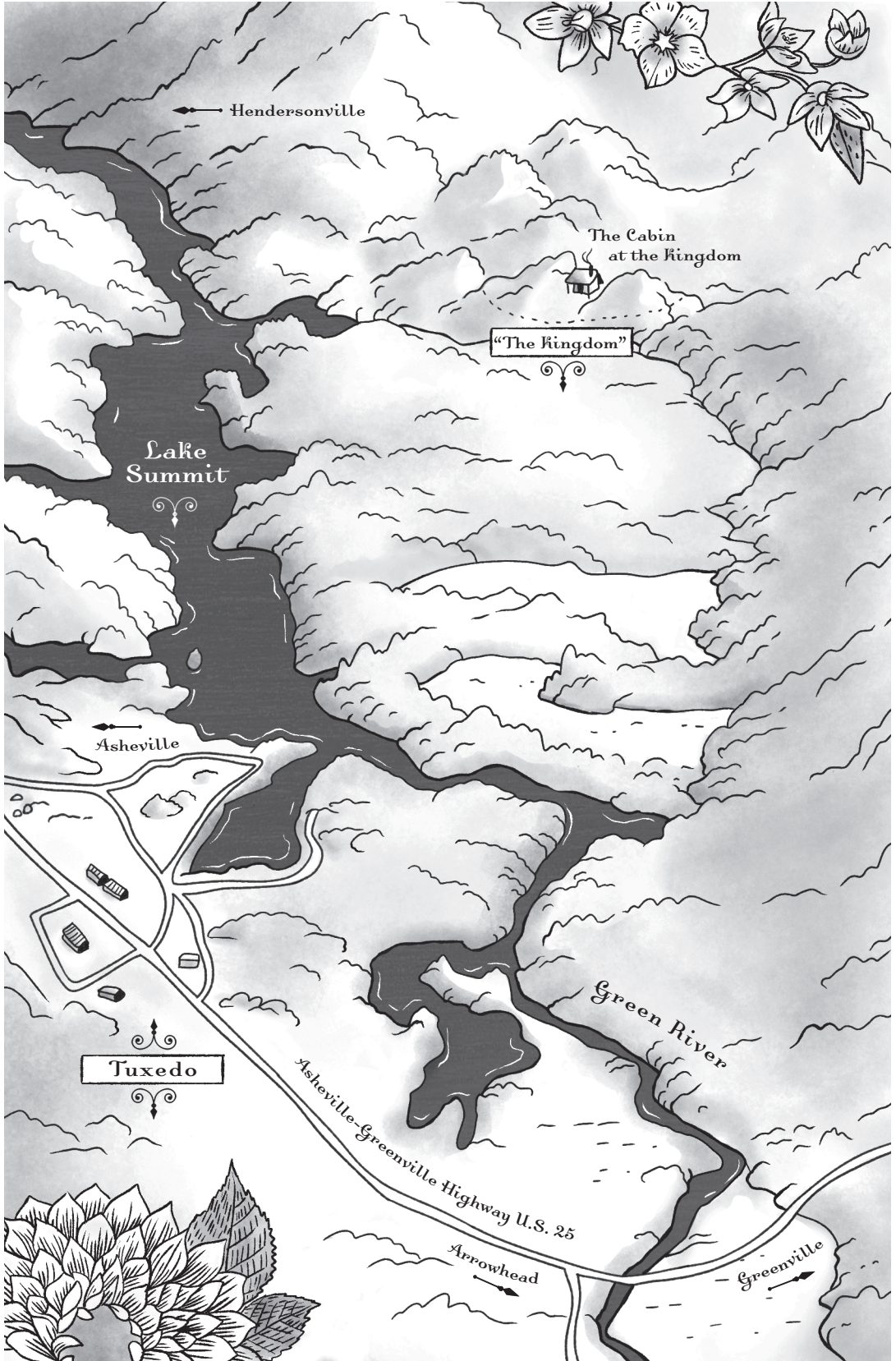
THE AMERICAN QUEEN

A Novel

VANESSA MILLER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



PART 1



THE HARD KNOCKS
OF EMANCIPATION

Mississippi

October 1, 1864



CHAPTER 1

With hands planted in the dust of the earth, Louella Bobo's lungs filled with the smothering air of bondage while she listened to her daddy wax eloquent about freedom.

"Now listen to me and listen good." Samuel Bobo stood a few feet away from the cotton field addressing the enslaved men and women on the Montgomery Plantation in Mississippi. "Y'all heard what them Yankee soldiers said as well as I did." Samuel shook a fist. "Freedom is coming, but we got to be ready."

Louella's eyes lit up. She'd been on this plantation for all her twenty-four years, and the happiest day of her life was when those soldiers trotted onto Massa Montgomery's property like they wasn't a bit worried about being shot dead for trespassing. But the news they brung was the same thing Reverend William been telling them for months. Enslaved people just too full of fright to fathom the notion that freedom was in reach . . . as close as their feet were to the ground.

Louella wasn't shaking from fear but wonderment. Would the air of freedom be different, or would it be as stale and unrelenting as slavery air?

"I hear tell that Lincoln emancipated us back in 1863, but we still sitting here like we belong to these devils who stole us from our homeland. I say it's time to rise up and fight our way out of here."

"That sounds good, Samuel." Ruby, the housekeeper at the big house, wiped her hands on her apron. "But I'm not trying to be no runaway slave."

"Don't y'all see?" Samuel waved his arms around, then pointed

toward his head. "You only enslaved in here. Once we free our minds, we can plan our way to freedom."

Later, after her father's speech, Louella found him. "Freedom has to come soon, Daddy. I'm nearly bursting with anticipation."

He patted her on the back as they walked home. "It's coming. We have to wait a little while longer." Rubbing his belly, Samuel said, "My stomach's grumbling. I hope your grandma cooked something good."

After the long workday ended, they were allowed to fill their bellies, then get some rest before heading back to that dreaded field and picking cotton with raw and bleeding fingers. The nighttime brought peace. It was usually so quiet in the slave quarters she could hear mice peeing on the cotton.

Louella wasn't thinking about peace or quiet tonight. She went to bed with revolution on her mind. Ready to fight for a new way of life. Ready to loose the chains that bound her to a place she wanted nothing to do with. But she woke to the *creak-creak* of the rickety old porch and the sad reality that she was still on the Montgomery Plantation. Still enslaved.

Most mornings, Louella woke with a sore back from picking cotton ten hours a day and then sleeping on a makeshift bed of straw and old rags.

The sun wasn't ready to brighten the new day yet. But no matter how early in the morning it was, Mama Sue had to do the washing. Louella's grandmother moved quiet like a house cat as she got out of bed. Louella normally didn't wake until she heard Mama Sue on the porch. Massa Montgomery's clothes had to be washed every other morning, rain or shine.

Only he wasn't their master no more. That's what them Yankee soldiers said last night.

Bang. Bang. Bang. "Gal, if you don't get out of bed and make your way to the field. That cotton ain't gon' pick itself."

Louella's makeshift bed was against the wall, next to the porch.

Her grandma's bangs against the wall not only shook the small cabin but sent waves of pain up her spine. She got out of bed, stretched, rolled her neck, then opened the door and stepped onto the porch.

Mama Sue sat on the stump between the rotted-out boards with the washboard in front of her and a soapy water tub beneath the washboard. The tub with clear water for rinsing was right next to the soapy one.

Mama Sue hummed the words to "Amazing Grace" as she worked. Louella had been blessed with a beautiful singing voice. Mama Sue said she got it from her. But Louella never sang or hummed while she worked . . . just seemed like Mama Sue was trying to find something enjoyable about scrubbing Massa Montgomery's britches.

Her grandmother had a rag tied around her head, with the same four braids she always wore. The hump in her back was pronounced as she slumped closer to the washboard. Mama Sue carried her grief in the slump of her back. With each endured loss, the slump became more pronounced and the hump grew.

Louella kept her hair in four braids as well. She had thick and wavy black hair. Silky and soft to the touch. But enslaved people didn't have much time for combing and brushing hair. It was easier to keep it braided.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Louella said, "Mama, you heard what them soldiers said the other night. We free. I don't have to scar up my fingers in that ol' cotton field no more."

Mama Sue laid the shirt she'd been scrubbing on the washboard, leaned her head back, and cackled so hard her belly shook like jelly. "These white folks don't care nothing 'bout Lincoln's proclamation for some enslaved people. If we wanna keep this roof over our heads, then we gotta work and thank the good Lord for what we have."

Louella glanced up at the moldy, leaky thatched roof no one had the time to clean or repair. She and her grandmother put pots on the

floor when it rained. Louella had been coughing up phlegm for almost a year now. So she wasn't thanking the good Lord and nobody else for this shack. "We need to be making plans to get out of here. Daddy said a bunch of folks setting out on their own."

Mama Sue's head swiveled, eyes bucking as she looked over her shoulder. "Keep your voice down," she whispered. "And don't go talking behind your daddy. That man's the reason your mama got sold off, and we haven't seen hide nor hair of her since."

Louella's eyes rolled heavenward. "Why you keep blaming Daddy for what Massa Montgomery did of his own volition?"

"Fix your face. Don't roll them eyes at me. Get dressed and do as I tell ya."

"I said we free." Louella stomped her foot. "Don't want to stay here no more. I can't take being on this plantation. Wanna be free, like them Yankees said."

"What you know about freedom? You was born a slave. The Confederate army still out there fighting to keep us in chains. You think they gon' let us pack up and go on about our way?" Mama Sue kept scrubbing Massa Montgomery's shirt. "I done seen too many just-wanna-be-free Negroes drug back to this plantation in chains. You think I want you stuck on this plantation for the rest of your life?" Mama Sue shook her head. "But I don't want you dead neither."

Louella wanted to argue her point, but as a child, Mama Sue had watched as her father was beaten to death for refusing to lower his head as a white man passed him on the street. Mama Sue's husband, a free man who was half black, half Indian, had been run off the plantation for refusing to pick Massa Montgomery's cotton.

"And what Reverend William gon' say about you wanting to be free more than you want to be betrothed to him?"

"Loving a Black man is like asking for a hole in your heart." Louella placed a hand on her hip. "Ain't that what you told me?"

“And now I’m telling you to marry the reverend. He a good man, and he can give you a better life.”

Long, deep sigh. What was the use in talking to her grandmother about better days when she was stuck in what had always been? Louella went back into the house, poured some water in the basin, washed herself, and then threw on a dress that had been patched so many times it was more quilt than dress.

Louella then stood in the doorway, listening to Mama Sue humming again. Rolling her eyes heavenward, she opened her mouth to tell her it was too early in the morning for singing when her grandmother started rubbing her knuckles. Every time she got to the washing, without fail her knuckles would ache her something terrible . . . terrible enough to bring tears to her eyes. “Have you been putting the liniment I made for you on your hands?”

“Mirabel got the rheumatism worse than me, so I let her have mine.”

Louella walked over to her bed, got on the floor, and lifted up the hay and the rags to locate the last tin of liniment she’d been holding for Mama Sue. Once she found it, she got off her knees, went outside, and handed the liniment to her grandmother. “Don’t give this one away. This is the only one I have left until I can rustle up more herbs.”

“Thank you, dearest.” Mama Sue put the shirt she was about to scrub against the washboard and rubbed some liniment on her hands. She flexed her fingers. “Girl, I’m so thankful you studied all them concoctions your mama was always putting together. Lord knows I could never figure any of it out. This liniment is a wonder.”

Louella’s granddaddy had taught her mother all about using herbs for healing. Louella learned as much as she could for as long as she could. Many on the plantation suffered from sickness and joint pains. The doctor only came around if one of the field hands was on his deathbed, so many relied on Louella’s knowledge of

herbs.

“We have to help ourselves ’round here. That no-count in the big house sure don’t care how much pain we suffer. We still got to pick the cotton, wash the clothes, and whatever else need doing.” Louella was tired of her lot in life. Needed God to show her that suffering don’t last always. Then maybe she would hum like a bird too.

She left their small cabin. Headed up the dusty road on her way to go pick cotton, same as she’d done every day. Only she normally walked to the cotton field with her daddy.

She hadn’t seen him since last night. Sometimes her daddy snuck over to the Bailey Plantation to keep company with some gal he had asked the master’s permission to marry.

She had been standing next to her daddy when Massa Montgomery said, “You can find someone to belly up to right here on this plantation.”

Daddy’s eyes sparked with fire that day. He told Massa, “I had somebody, but you sold her away from me and my kids.”

Louella had been seven years old when Massa Montgomery took over the plantation. Since he had brought twenty of his own enslaved people from South Carolina with him, he didn’t need all the enslaved people the former master had. The journey from South Carolina to Mississippi had been long and costly, so he was in need of money.

He lined his pockets by selling off her mother, a cousin, and three others to a plantation back where Massa Montgomery come from. She hadn’t heard from any of them since. Her daddy had said, “*Either the master gon’ set us free, or we gon’ fight our way out of this godforsaken place, where a Black man has to lower his head to white folk, thinking they better’n us.*” That was when Louella had learned to hate . . . and her grandmother took up humming.

Louella’s skin was dark like coffee with a little mix of cow’s

milk. But her skin color didn't make her any less than the lily-white women in the big house. That's why she lifted her voice and shouted "*Hallelujah!*" after them soldiers left the plantation. Then she and a few of the other enslaved people danced in the red Mississippi dirt, praising the Lord for finally coming to see about them.

As she rounded the trail that led to the cotton field, the light of day pushed its way through the darkness, and the big oak tree stood tall with its leaves, which were supposed to provide shade. But that was white folk's shade. So Louella was surprised to see about a dozen or so colored folks standing around that big oak tree. Their eyes were lifted and focused.

Louella never stared at that tree. Whenever she was near it, the scar on her left wrist throbbed, causing her to stop picking cotton so she could rub the sting out of her wrist.

But this morning enslaved people was standing under that tree staring up . . . at a man who hung limp with a noose around his neck. The man was wearing the clothes her daddy had on when he gave his eloquent speech last night—dark brown slacks and a white shirt with tan suspenders. From the distance, she could see the dark skin . . . like her daddy's skin.

Louella covered her mouth and screamed inside her hand. Adrenaline-laced fury propelled her toward the oak tree.

Rocks from the dirt road made way into her shoes from the holes in the bottoms. The rocks slowed her steps as they dug into her feet, causing her to limp, dread filling her belly with every step. Tears ran down her face like a riverbed flowing into an ocean as she stood in front of her daddy's lifeless body. His neck lay crooked against the noose.

She shook like a winter breeze swept by and chilled her from the inside out.

Her older brother, Ambrose, approached. He stayed in the small eight-by-eight shack with Daddy, while she moved in with

Mama Sue after her mom had been sold off. Ambrose put an arm across her shoulder. "Turn around, sis. Don't look at him like this."

Chest heaved back and forth, up and down. "I. Can't. Not. See. This." Louella shook her fist to the heavens. Glared up at the sky. "Why You hate us so much?"

Ambrose rubbed her back, then pulled her into his arms. "Woodrow ran off to get Reverend William. We'll get Daddy down from that tree."

Her heart beat fast like a locomotive, sweat beads gathered on her forehead. Mouth dry like cotton as it inched open with moans, groans, and then screams that escaped from the depths of her pain.

Someone said, "Cut him down, Overseer. His children don't need to see him like this."

But Overseer Brown snarled back, "He'll stay there as warning to the rest of you good-for-nothings. The South hasn't fallen yet, and y'all ain't going nowhere."

"Daddy was supposed to get us out of here." Eyes brimming with an ocean of anguish, Louella's heart kept break-break-breaking. "What we gon' do now?"

Then, as if she was tired of waiting on answers that never seemed to come, she kicked off her shoes and mustered the strength to plow between the field hands and was about to grab hold of a branch to begin her climb when Overseer Brown rushed over, snatched her away from the tree, and threw her to the ground.

"Leave me be, Overseer. This ain't right. My daddy don't deserve to hang on a tree like that."

Standing over her, he sneered. "There's more rope where that came from." He pointed toward the rope around her daddy's neck. Then the overseer pulled Louella off the ground by the back of her shirt. He dug his dirty fingers into her neck as he turned her head so she was looking up at her daddy's lifeless body.

She had believed every word her daddy spoke about freedom coming to them. About a day when enslaved people could hold

their heads up and be somebody. Louella blinked several times. Tears glistened in her eyes. She couldn't turn away from what they had done to a man who only wanted to be free . . . wanted some dignity in this life. "No!" she screamed as the field hands stood like statues with a mix of fear and fury in their eyes.

"Why'd you do this to him? He only wanted the freedom that's been promised to us."

Louella reached toward her daddy. Took a step. Overseer Brown held on to her neck. She took another step, inching forward. She'd get to that tree and pull her daddy down. Dignity . . . Her daddy deserved dignity, even in death.

Overseer Brown yanked her back. But Louella didn't care about the repercussions. What good could come in living to see the next day when the next day still allowed a no-count like Overseer Brown to treat her as if her life and her heart and the things that brought her pain didn't matter?

"Let me go!" Louella struggled against him.

Somehow, she managed to get away. With determined strides, she approached the tree again, but Brown tripped her. Louella's head hit the ground hard and bounced back up.

The overseer sneered as he took off the belt from his pants. He snapped it, and Louella tensed as it crackled in the air. He looped his hand around the belt. The buckle whipped across the distance of decency and pain, striking Louella with a loud I-own-you *whack* against her back, legs, and head.

"Stop! Stop!" The buckle tore through her skin. Louella grabbed hold of the belt.

"I'll kill you!" he shouted, taking his heavy booted foot and stomping her until she rolled into a ball from the sheer pain of it all. Her eyes bulged with unshed tears.

"You're nothing. You hear me? Nothing but a nuisance."

Louella stretched her hand out toward the tree, longing to go with her daddy. Death would be better than living out the rest of

her life as property that wasn't cared for or treated with any kindness.

His foot ground her face into the dirt. The blood and sweat of enslaved people filled her nostrils. Gagging, her throat muscles constricted, squeezing the breath of life out of her. She could hear others begging the overseer for mercy. But what mercy had they ever received on a plantation run by men who thought her kind was less than human? None.



CHAPTER 2

“Oh, Lord Jesus, don’t let it be true!” Mama Sue wailed out her sorrow.

William and Ambrose carried Louella into the cabin and laid her on the makeshift bed.

Louella moaned, rolled onto her side. Eyes like slits as she glanced around the room.

William took off his hat. Pressed it against his white cotton shirt. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to her sooner, Ms. Sue.”

“She’s alive?” Mama Sue’s eyes flashed with questions. Fear clung to her grandmother like black clings to the night.

Louella kept drifting in and out of consciousness. Every part of her hurt . . . hurt so bad she wanted to float out of her body and keep right on floating up yonder.

Through squinted eyes, Louella saw Mama Sue fussing over her. Grief rested on her grandmother’s shoulders, like they were built for the heavy weight of loss. “Don’t slump. We’ll be free soon.” Louella’s words were jumbled and mumbled, like molasses had thickened her tongue and was slapping against the roof of her mouth. Her body was letting go . . . taking her far, far away. Far from misery and despair. Far from fields that needed pickin’ . . . far from white folk that hated her without a cause.

She drifted . . .



Louella was now walking down a dusty road. She had on a silk frock with a blue-and-black striped petticoat and a bonnet to match. Everywhere she went, from the general store to the church house, she saw men and women who looked like her, dressed in their finery. They greeted one another with kindness and respect.

Where was she? She'd never seen colored folks act like this a day in her life. Heads were lifted, smiles, eyes bright. Heads bowed and frowns, with backs and fingers aching from the grind of the day, had become her norm. Not this.

A colored man trotted toward her, riding on a horse that wasn't pulling a buggy with a white man in the back seat being carted off for a day of leisure. Instead, it looked to her that the colored man was off for a day of leisure. Not a bit of hurry about his jaunt.

"Top of the day to you, Ms. Louella," the man on the horse said as he came to a stop in front of her and then took off his hat and bowed his head to her before putting the hat back on his head.

Louella pointed at herself. "You know who I am?"

His head fell backward as he laughed. "Of course I know you. The entire province had better know, or they'll answer to me."

She didn't understand why he would say something like that. She was nothing . . . a nobody. Why did it matter if the people in these parts knew who she was? "What is this place?"

Eyes gleaming bright, he said, "Why, my lady, this is a happy place. A place where the formerly enslaved have come to find peace and restored dignity, but you already know that, don't you?"



"Louella, my sweet girl, please wake up."

Wake up? Was she asleep? Was she only dreaming about this happy place? Eyelids fluttering, Louella wanted to keep them shut, but they defied her.

Mama Sue and William were standing over her. She wiped sweat from her forehead as her eyes adjusted. "Where am I?"

“You’re here with us,” William told her.

“Let me get you some soup.” Mama Sue lifted from her slumped position in front of Louella. She straightened as she walked away.

A tear drifted down Louella’s face. “But I don’t want to be here.”



April 1865

William’s first order of business most days was to walk to the gate of the plantation to pick up the *Mississippian* and bring it to the big house so Massa Montgomery could read the newspaper with his morning coffee.

William normally waited until Massa Montgomery looked over the paper before he read any of it, but the headline this morning was “General Robert E. Lee Surrenders to General Ulysses S. Grant.”

Surrendered? Was the war over? Although William was enslaved since birth, the fact that Massa Montgomery was his father was the worst kept secret on the plantation. He wasn’t allowed to address the man who had set his mother free months before she gave birth to his younger brother, Robert, as father. But William had been allowed the run of the plantation. Had been taught to read, write, and to count and subtract money.

He understood the ins and outs of running the plantation, for all the good that did him. It wasn’t like Massa Montgomery was going to leave the place to him in his will. But there wasn’t much left of the Montgomery Plantation after the soldiers rode through, taking anything and everything that didn’t bark or cry. There hadn’t been any money for repairs around the plantation lately either.

William hadn’t asked about it. He had eyes and could see that Massa Montgomery wasn’t bringing in the money he once had. The cotton was being planted, but piles of it was still stuffed into barns. No one had taken any of it to market in months.

His father read the paper, then snarled as he looked at William. "What do you tell your congregation in that church I had built for you?"

"I tell them that the Lord will make a way for us, sir."

"And you think the Lord wants me to lose everything so He can make a way for some ragamuffins?"

William stiffened. *Ragamuffins?* His lips twisted. "I think every man has a right to be free."

"That again." His father wiped his mouth with the napkin, then threw it on the table. "How long are you going to be jealous of your brother?"

"I'm not jealous of my brother. I'm thankful that he doesn't live a life of bondage. But I do believe that others would benefit from such benevolence."

Robert was a wanderer. He traveled whenever and wherever he pleased for two reasons: he was free, and his ivory skin tone helped him pass. William, on the other hand, had a caramel skin tone that could never be confused for a white man.

"Well, Lincoln has extended that kindness, as well you know, since you snoop and read my newspapers." Massa Montgomery pushed away from the table, stood, and stormed out of the room.

William picked up Massa Montgomery's plate, wiped the crumbs off the mahogany wood table. He folded the newspaper, placed it under his arm as he took the plate into the kitchen, and handed it to Mirabel.

Mirabel put the potato she'd been skinning on the table and looked at the plate. "He hardly ate anything at 'tal. Is Massa Montgomery feeling poorly today?"

William patted Mirabel on the shoulder. "Just got a lot on his mind is all."

"Well, eggs have been scarce around here lately. No sense wasting them." Mirabel wrapped a towel around the plate and placed it on the table. "Waste not, want not. That's what I always say. When

he gets hungry later, he can finish his breakfast.” Mirabel went back to work on her potatoes.

William started to walk out of the kitchen but then turned back to Mirabel. “Oh, and I wanted to thank you for giving Louella a few things to do around here. Anytime she can get out of that field is a godsend to her.”

“Happy to do it.” Mirabel’s voice got low. She shifted her eyes this way and that. “She’s been teaching me to read when we have a spare minute.”

“You couldn’t have a better teacher.” Louella was a quick learner and took to books like a fish to water. He’d started teaching her to read about a year ago. They’d also been keeping company. He was ready for marriage, but Louella’s mind was on other things. Or maybe she didn’t see him as a good fit since he was twenty years older. He’d pondered the matter and had finally decided to share his heart with her.

Mirabel nudged him. “When you gon’ wed that girl?”

He grinned as he stepped away from the counter. “You never know, we might be jumping the broom and needing your famous peach cobbler one of these days.”

“Don’t you lie to me now. I’m telling Sue that we need to get ready for a wedding.”

He was supposed to meet Louella and a couple of the other members at the church tonight for some much-needed cleaning. He hoped he would get a moment alone with her, but that was tricky. He didn’t want wagging tongues claiming he was taking advantage of a young woman. And he certainly didn’t want to tarnish Louella’s good name.

He made his way past the bare cotton field. He wondered how long the cotton from the newly planted fields would sit in barns with no timeline for delivery to the cotton gins. The war had been bad for business, and William wondered if the plantation would ever recover.

The small church had been built on the back end of the cotton field so the preaching and singing wouldn't disturb anyone in the big house. Some Sundays, it seemed like the Lord Himself came down from glory to listen to the praises they sent up. William was blessed indeed to pastor such a congregation of men and women who put their trust in God.

"Steal away to Jesus. Steal away home."

William's ears perked up. Someone was singing. It wasn't a song they normally sang during worship service. "Steal Away" was sung in the cotton fields as a sign that the Underground Railroad was back in business. "Steal Away to Jesus" sounded like enslaved people were singing about going to heaven. The song actually symbolized escaping to freedom.

"I haven't got long to stay here. My Lord, my Lord, He calls me."

William opened the church door, eyes scanning the pews, looking for the songbird who had the voice of an angel. He'd heard her sing in the choir on numerous occasions, but never with the lilt of determination that was in her voice today.

Louella had a rag in her hand, wiping down the pew seats as she sang.

She was thinking about leaving again—always thinking about leaving this plantation rather than thinking on making a life with him.

He walked over to her and took the rag out of her hand. William sat down and patted the seat next to him.

"Ruth told me to wipe these seats down. I best keep working before she arrives and thinks I been slacking."

"It'll be fine." He patted the seat again. "Sit with me."

Sitting down, Louella placed her hands in her lap and glanced toward the window.

William put an index finger to the side of Louella's chin and turned her to face him. "I know you have misgivings about our marriage, but if you give me a chance, I'll show you how to love

me.”

“This place.” Louella darted a finger in the direction of the big house. “These white folks have killed any love I ever had.” Her cheeks puffed out hot air. “I’m sorry, Reverend.” She lowered her head. “I hate so much, there’s no room in my heart for love.”

He handed Louella the newspaper. “God will remove the hate from your heart. Lean on Him.”

Eyes glued to the newspaper, Louella read, “General Robert E. Lee surrenders to General Ulysses S. Grant.”

Louella’s head swiveled in William’s direction.

“The war is over. Things gon’ be different now.”

With a wide grin, Louella stood and put a hand to her heart. “We can leave now, can’t we? No one can stop us.”

He stood, put her hand in his. Squeezed it. “Stay. Marry me, and make my dreams come true.”

She backed away from him. “What about my dreams?”

His heart cracked a bit at the thought that her dreams might mean more to her than all the love he had to give. William took hold of her hands again. They sat back down. “Tell me about your dreams, and I’ll do everything in my power to make them come true.”

Sighing, Louella turned to William. “Nobody understands me. Mama Sue thinks I should just marry and stay on this awful plantation, but I want so much more than this.”

“Tell me.”

The soft light of the setting sun shone through the small window as Louella expelled a long, deep sigh. She looked at him, and he winced as he caught a glimpse of eyes accustomed to pain mixed with the dimming light of the sun.

Her voice was calm and contemplating. “After Overseer Brown beat me, I dreamed about a place where people are happy . . . respected. That’s what I want.”

“I want those things for you as well.”

“But you’re content on the Montgomery Plantation . . . I’m not.” She turned from him, shoulders slumping inward as sadness seemed to envelop her.

William placed a finger under her chin and turned her back toward him. “You are my sunshine, Louella. I promise, you’ll be happy with me. Can you make room in your heart for love?”



CHAPTER 3

May 1, 1865—Freedom

The air was hushed with quietness as Louella stood on the porch of the cloth house, breathing in fresh, free air. The war was over. The shackles had been loosed. And Mr. Lincoln had been shot dead.

Lots of people on both sides bled and died for the cause of freedom. Overseer Brown found out yesterday that his son, Anthony, wouldn't be coming home from the war. And although there wasn't a man more deserving of a broken heart than Overseer Brown, Anthony had been decent to her while they were growing up. He'd just chosen the wrong fight.

"Gal, will you get off that porch and come try this dress on?" Mama Sue said.

She was free, and she was jumping the broom with Reverend William, a forty-four-year-old man, twenty years older than she, and loads smarter. Louella didn't so much mind that since he'd taught her to read. "I'm coming."

"We got work to do before we present you to that fine reverend."

"Mama Sue, you shouldn't be talking like that. William is a man of God."

Miss Saddle harrumphed. "He still a man, and he's gon' be right proud to see you in this here dress." She lifted the cream-colored frock from her mending table.

Mama Sue's eyes lit up like Christmas morning when she saw the lace on the arms and the waist of the dress. She waved Louella

over. "I can't wait to see you in this."

Louella had only laid eyes on a dress this fine on white women entering the big house for fancy teas and other social gatherings. "That's not the Negro cloth you normally make our clothes with. Where'd you get such finery?"

Miss Saddle ran the cloth house, making all the clothes for the plantation workers on the loom or with needle and thread. The only fabric Miss Saddle had ever been permitted to use was something the white folks had branded "Negro cloth." It was cheap wool or low-grade cotton that itched something terrible.

"Never you mind where I got it from," Miss Saddle told her. "All you need to know is you'll be jumping the broom in this fine frock today."

She wouldn't be jumping the broom at all if Mama Sue hadn't refused to leave the plantation. Her grandmother was convinced that Louella needed a husband in order to be safe outside the plantation.

"Undress down to your shift," Miss Saddle told her.

"I don't have a shift."

Miss Saddle pinched her lips together. "I didn't think of that. Should've made one for you."

Since she didn't have a shift to wear under her gown, Louella slipped the dress on and prepared to feel the scratchiness of the fabric. When no itch came to her, she relaxed in the dress, which draped around her ankles. The silk of the fabric clung to her waist as the lace covered the cuffs of her sleeves. Twirling around, Louella's eyes lit with delight. "I get to wear this dress, for sure and true?"

Mama Sue wrapped her arms around Louella. Tears rolled down her face. "It's yours, my sweet girl. You're going to be a beautiful bride—more beautiful than any other bride this plantation has ever seen."

Louella smiled at her grandmother, but she wondered how beautiful everyone would think she was if they knew that she wasn't

in love with William. She liked him . . . respected him. But too much hate was in her heart for love to grow for anyone else. She'd told William this, but he was determined to marry anyway. And her grandmother kept pushing her toward him, so Louella agreed to go through with the wedding.



Reverend Wallace, Mr. Montgomery's pastor, stood in front of Louella and William and pronounced them man and wife. They were standing outside the big house. Mr. Montgomery and his new wife, Mary, were sitting on the front porch with Mary's three kids from her first husband, who died in the war. Overseer Brown and his wife, Constance, were also seated on the porch, sipping lemonade and scowling at them. On the opposite side of the porch, Louella's friends and family stood on the grass.

As the reverend pronounced them man and wife, ole glassy-eyed Montgomery came down from the porch and placed a broom on the ground in front of them. William and Louella jumped over the broom and then shared a kiss.

The sun was like a bright light shining down on them. Louella lifted a hand above her eyebrows to dim the light as she came out of the embrace with William. Glancing around, people were smiling, cheering for them. Shouldn't she be happy, full of smiles and bubbly with joy?

But then she heard Constance say, "Is that darky allowed to wear such finery while white women in Mississippi make do with the rags we have left?" Louella then remembered why she wasn't happy and could never be happy as long as she was tied to the Montgomery Plantation.

"Wouldn't have dared wear such a dress before that dang Lincoln ruined our way of life," Mary said.

Deflated, Louella lowered her head. She turned from the porch to the grass where friendly faces greeted her. But Mary swept down

from the porch and demanded her attention anyway. “Gal, have you been stealing out of my closet?”

Louella shook her head. “I wouldn’t take nothing from you.”

Snarling at her, Mary pulled at the sleeve of her dress, tearing a piece of the lace. “This is my lace, and you stole it.”

Louella shook with rage. Her fist clenched as she debated the pleasure of knocking Mary on her coddled behind with being chained and imprisoned for the rest of her life.

William pulled Louella closer to him. “I’m sure all of your silk and lace are right where you left them.”

“We’ll see about that.” Mary harrumphed, then swung back around and stalked up the porch steps. “If anything is missing, you’ll pay for your thievery.”

Louella unclenched her fists, but her cheeks puffed with fury. She nudged William away from her. “I knew we shouldn’t’ve jumped the broom in front of the big house. Nothing good ever comes from mucking around with white folks.”

“You’ve got it wrong, Louella. We’re right proud to see you and William jump the broom.” Mr. Montgomery touched his hand to his chest. “I gave that lace to Sddie for your dress.”

A prickly sensation crept up Louella’s back. She lifted a shoulder as her hand dipped between the fabric and used her fingernails to scratch away the itch while Mr. Montgomery stared at her as if waiting on a thank-you.

Mary took her hand off the doorknob and swung back around. “You did what?”

“I gave Sddie the lace.” He turned those glassy eyes that held no emotion in Mary’s direction, then pointed toward the seat she had vacated. “Please sit back down and let William and Louella enjoy their day.”

Mary’s lips tightened, but she did as Montgomery bid her, then leaned close to Constance, and the two women whispered back and forth.

Louella ignored the hateful women on the porch because her hate was stronger. Mr. Montgomery could die waiting on a thank-you and that would suit her just fine.

Mr. Montgomery cleared his throat, patted William on the shoulder. "Thank you for letting us share in your day."

"Of course, sir."

Mr. Montgomery turned to the wedding attendees who were standing in the yard. He looked crestfallen as he said, "We thank you all for attending the festivities today. If times were better, we would have a nice meal out here in the yard for everybody." He stretched out his hands and let them drop to his sides. "The war hasn't been kind to us, so Mirabel and Sue have made a spread for y'all out by the cotton fields. Enjoy, and we'll figure a way forward from this debacle the North has gotten us in."

Louella didn't know what debacle Mr. Montgomery was referring to. The way she saw it, things were finally looking up. She needed to convince William and the rest of her family to get away from this plantation. Mama Sue was the only reason she stayed after the war ended. Her grandmother feared something worse than what had already befallen them would come and crush their souls if they left this dreaded place.

So, here she was, marrying the man of her grandmother's dreams. She prayed that William would love her enough to take away the pain that had lodged in her chest like a spreading sore.

William picked her up and carried her up the hill toward his church. A few of the men had gone hunting and came back with two rabbits and three coons. Mirabel pulled the collards she'd been growing in her vegetable garden. Mama Sue made corn muffins and grits.

The Montgomery Plantation had about forty workers—Louella refused to think of any of them as enslaved people any longer. All forty of the workers took part in the festivities. She even found herself smiling and enjoying the fact that she was a for sure and true

married woman now. Then she turned to the left and caught sight of that oak tree. Rubbed her wrist as an itch tickled its way up her spine, reminding her that Mr. Montgomery was responsible for the fine dress she wore today.

Mama Sue pinched the back side of her arm. "Fix your face, girl. You a married woman now."

"Be right back." Louella went into the parsonage. The few clothes she owned had been brought to her new home this morning. She slipped out of the wedding dress and put on her brown skirt with a tan button-down shirt.

Louella then took the dress that she had been so thankful for earlier in the day back outside. She walked over to the fire Mirabel and Mama Sue were using to cook the food and dropped the dress. As the embers of lace floated up from the fire, tears of misery poured from her soul.

William pulled her into his arms. "Louella, what's this? Why'd you burn that dress?"

She wiped the tears from her face. The flicker of flames danced in the air like they were in a hurry to get away from the ashes beneath, her lips tightened, and her nostrils flared with the steam of hate. "I never asked him for that dress."

In all her life, she'd only asked Mr. Montgomery for one thing. Her pleas had fallen on a cold-hearted master with a need to line his pockets rather than give a little girl back the mother she desperately craved.

William shushed her. "I'm sorry. I didn't know he gave Miss Saddle the material for your dress. I think he wanted to do something nice for you."

Too late for that. "It's too much for me, William. I wish my mama and daddy were here to see that I done married myself a good man. Wish they knew that no massa can tear me away from you."

"What's wrong with Louella?" Ambrose asked as he came over to them.

William rubbed her back. "She's fine. Let's give her a minute. Help me move the food inside the church so we can eat our meal without all these flies buzzing around."

Mama Sue walked back over to the picnic table. She kept an eye on Louella. Once William asked that the food be moved into the church, she stood, lifted the bowl of grits off the table, and yelled out to the people, "You heard the reverend. Let's move this food inside."

"That's too much fuss," Louella told him.

William put his index finger under her chin, grinned at her. "Never too much fuss for my queen."

"So now you gon' call me a queen, huh? Queen of what, is what I want to know."

"Don't doubt it, Louella. My mother told me about our homeland. Our people came from kings and queens. We were never meant to be enslaved or to know the kind of pain you sorrow with."

His words were lyrical, soothing her soul. "I'd very much like to hear more about your mother's homeland."

"Then I'll tell you more later tonight when we're alone."

After they ate, their friends and family went back to their homes, and Louella stayed in her new home with William just to the left of the church. William's small house was supposed to make her happy—it wasn't as run down as the shack she shared with her grandmother. But on her first night in the house, after she and William had consummated the marriage and her husband was asleep and snoring, she got up to get a drink of water.

She wrapped a shawl around her body to cover her nakedness, walked over to the keeping room, dipped the ladle in the bowl, and sipped the warm water. After quenching her thirst, she turned toward the window, staring out at the cotton field. That same rotten field that she'd worked in since her eighth birthday. The same day she'd asked her daddy why life was so hard for colored folk.

He sat her down on his lap and said, "I wish I could answer that

for you. Plain and simple fact is, I don't know."

There was sadness in her daddy's eyes, so Louella put a hand on his cheek. "What's wrong?"

He took the handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "To tell you the truth, I been dreading this day."

"Huh?" Her face scrunched as her eyebrow lifted. How could her daddy dread the day she was born?

"Thing is, Massa say you old enough to work in the field with me. I gotta show you the ropes today."

She didn't get a cake on her birthday that year. Didn't get a doll. She did, however, get her first blister. From that day on, she dragged her feet every morning as she walked up the hill with her daddy to the cotton field. As years went by, she listened to her daddy tell stories about freedom and about the war and how soon it would be before Abe Lincoln loosed the shackles off their feet.

She no longer worked in the field. William had gotten her a job at the big house as a maid to that hateful Mary about a week after the war ended. She was trying her best to endure Mary's contempt.

Now she was living in a house that caused her to see the field and that oak tree every day. Why such gut-wrenching cruelty was heaped on her was something she planned to ask the good Lord about when she finally saw Him face-to-face.

She went back to bed, but the minute her eyelids shut tight, she saw her daddy hanging from that old oak tree. She wished she could tell her daddy that slavery days was over. Wished he knew that old Abe Lincoln had come through for them.

Tears seeped through her closed eyelids and rolled down her face. The horror show going on in her head wouldn't loose her. Whimpers set her soul on fire as her eyes popped open. Her hands reached out to grab hold of her daddy and bring him back.

William jumped up, looking around as if something or someone was about to do harm to them. He rubbed his eyes and then

pulled Louella into his arms. “Beloved, stop crying. You’re safe. You’re with me.”

“I saw him. My daddy’s d–dead.” She was shaking.

William squeezed her closer to his chest. She clung to his warmth, but it was only a momentary balm. Eyes filled with buckets of pain. The overflow drenched both of them in a deluge of sorrow. “Why’d he have to kill my daddy? Why couldn’t Daddy live to see this day?”

“I know this is hard, but I’m here. Let my love take away your sorrow.”

Louella laid her head on William’s chest. A dark cloud of misery was following her around, making prey of her. “Tell me more about your mother’s homeland . . . about the people and how they cared for each other.” She needed to be bathed in the warmth of other lands, to know there was a place she belonged.

William grinned, wiped her face. “How many times do you need to hear the same old story?”

Sighing deeply, Louella told him, “If you can stand telling it, I need to hear it about a hundred more times.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Vanessa Miller is a bestselling author, with several books appearing on *ESSENCE* Magazine's Bestseller List. She has also been a Black Expressions Book Club alternate pick and #1 on BCNN/BCBC Bestseller List. Most of Vanessa's published novels depict characters who are lost and in need of redemption. The books have received countless favorable reviews: "Heartwarming, drama-packed and tender in just the right places" (*Romantic Times* book review) and "Recommended for readers of redemption stories" (*Library Journal*).



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