A LETTER TO CHUCK

Dear Chuck,

It was good to hear from your inquiry regarding my current status, and I must say there have been many challenges. Last spring, my wife and I were supposed to go to Hawaii. I prepaid the room and airline, but because she was having intestinal issues, I suggested she visit a doctor for some temporary relief.

The GI doctor performed an endoscopy and informed her she had Barrett's esophagus and that we should consider canceling the trip. "What's Barrett's Esophagus?" my wife asked. The doctor said it was pre-cancerous due to acid reflux. My wife argues she never had acid reflux, and he replied that it was silent reflux, a significant factor leading to esophagus cancer and a leading cause of women's death.

In April 2016, my wife entered a hospital for an esophagectomy (a total removal of her esophagus due to Barrett's disease, a pre-cancerous condition). The surgery was successful, but the subsequent series of events were not so much:

During the post-surgery recovery period, I assisted in helping her walk around the perimeter of the hospital floor. During one of the walks, we followed another patient, with two nurses assisting. He was recovering from stomach surgery and had a bad case of loose bowels: right on the floor, I might add. Having not noticed the accident on time, we both slipped and fell into the mess before they could clean it up. Nancy broke her hip, and I broke my arm in three places.

The wing was short of beds, so they put me in her bed, which was quite cramped with the casts. In addition, we had to be in traction. That was OK, except the traction messed up. Each time they moved my traction, her leg somehow moved. She hollered out in pain.

So they gave her a morphine pump, but the pump was not working right. Somehow, it got reversed, and I got a hefty dose each time she pushed the button instead of her. It was pretty good for a while, as I was not feeling any pain, but apparently, the computer messed the dosage up. I woke up a week later. The Doctors said something about an overdose.

So when it came to Nancy's release time to a local rehab facility, there were problems with paperwork, such as a third-party approval from Medicare. To complicate matters, the hospital was short-handed with the Orderlies. They could not turn her over as they should have, so she developed terrible bedsores. The hospital was on a tight budget, so they cut back on the nurse's radios and used a bullhorn at the nurse's station. That wasn't very comfortable because everyone on the floor knew your business. For example, Nancy had some bowel issues, and she would call for assistance. The nurse at the station would yell out, "We need assistance for the patient in room 501. She messed up the bed, and we need someone to change the sheets."

Everyone in the wing heard it. There were also mix-ups with the charts in the nurse's stations. A doctor entered her room and said, "how are you doing, Mrs. Hormek? I understand you had colon surgery."

She looked at me, confused. "Well, no," she replied. "I had my esophagus removed." He looked at the chart confused and said, "OH, OK, well, anyway, how are you doing?"

We finally got into rehab, but her bed sores were worse. The hospital said the rehab people would take care of them. The doctor was from out of town and only came in once weekly, so he had to write the order to take care of bedsores. Shortly after she got there, the doctor had a heart attack. Something about being significantly overweight: her bedsores worsened, and we had to get her back into the hospital. We found a different hospital that could treat her.

Since she could not get rehab on time for her hip, it stiffened to the point where she could not walk and needed a wheelchair. There was a disconnect with Medicare. I received a bill for 2500.00. They said she could make payments. The shock of this was so great she had a stroke. Her right hip stiffened, and her left side paralyzed. Quite a sight to behold when the orderlies were trying to get her to walk.

We found a new rehab facility where she remains today. Incidentally, we are still paying for the wheelchair, but the quality was poor, and the wheels started falling off. Someone suggested we put it on eBay for parts. So we did. It was not long after we received a bill from the state Department of Revenue for taxes. Something about the sale of medical equipment: I received a letter from the Feds a while later. Something about I violated interstate commerce for selling medical equipment over state lines. My lawyer is dealing with that. He says my bill may be in the thousands.

He thinks I may need psychological counseling and rehab. Regards,

Mike Hormek

THE SECRET OF THE OLEANDER BLOSSOM

Chapter 1

Thomas, a tall, lanky character with a flat Cajun accent, wore comfortable cloth bib overalls called "slops." By every account, he should have been a field laborer, not a successful nineteenth-century South Louisiana plantation owner. His family immigrated to the Atchafalaya Basin during the exodus from Nova Scotia, circa 1765 to 1788, when 3,000 Acadians settled the tangled swamps during a fabled diaspora, chronicled in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's love-starved, epic poem, "Evangeline." Living conditions were deplorable, but who else but Cajuns would want to live in a mosquito, alligator-infested swamp doing work no one else wants. The resilient Acadians were impoverished, enslaved, imprisoned, and exiled—yet they thrived.

Their language, a mixture of French and Canadian English, was challenging, misunderstood, and difficult to understand. Illiteracy was rampant, and their children were sometimes removed and forced into fieldwork. The Cajuns relied on their kind for survival, including marriage, as French settlers rejected them. Thomas was an only child. He never married, though Cajuns began marrying outside their own during the Civil War.

Thomas had no known heirs. His parents, Joseph and Marie Thibodeaux, were in their early thirties when they arrived at the vast Atchafalaya Basin in 1788. He recalled a constant early struggle to survive. Their shelters were placed on the water's edge, as road travel was non-existent. Transportation was by boat. The heat and humidity were overbearing, and the regular impromptu thunderstorms mesmerized the displaced, hearty population.

Their canoes were cypress bark. These were sturdy, dugout pirogues, essential for survival. Meals of alligators and other swamp creatures were on the menu. White-tailed deer bore essential furs and meat, as did other abundant swamp critters like nutria, rabbit, raccoon, and squirrel. Corn and vegetables grew on cleared fields, and life became more manageable, though a strict reliance on each other was critical for survival.

The Acadians became expert hunters and trappers. The Cajun colonies were self-sufficient only after many families settled, and no one was allowed into their realm except for traders, sailors, soldiers, artisans, and missionaries. Their heritage grain crops needed to be more sustainable in swampy Southern Louisiana. They were grown only in the North and transported south to the colonies. Fish, fruit, and cattle were traded surplus. Some Acadians obtained jobs on tobacco and sugar plantations outside the black slave community.

It was uncommon for Acadians to enslave people, as few Cajuns accumulated wealth during that period. However, Thomas did, although how remained a lifelong mystery. In the early days of their settlement, his parents worked on the plantation as overseers of the field workers. They were farmers when they lived in Canada, so they had basic agricultural knowledge.

Thomas and his parents learned that the plantation owners had no heirs, were of retirement age, wanted to preserve the plantation, and were distrustful of anyone buying it and honoring their wishes. Nevertheless, they offered the place to his parents. The sale was for little money, as they were poor. However, the plantation owners no longer condoned slavery. Joseph and Marie could not afford em-

ployees to replace the enslaved people and were afraid to free them for fear they would flee altogether. So, against the wishes of the former owners, the enslaved people remained in place. Several landowners during those periods experienced slave uprisings, and they formed a coalition to protect one another from the nuisance of enslaved people. Hangings were a common, if not an unsightly remedy.

Boro, an enslaved person, was a known area troublemaker who frequently escaped. A vigilante group chased and rounded him up and lynched him on the Thibodeaux plantation. Thomas was 15 at the time, 21 when unknown assailants murdered his parents. The enslaved people resented Boro's lynching, considering it unjust. Joseph and Marie were respected among the enslaved, as they treated them well. Thomas's parents respected the French custom of Code Noir. The Black Code that protected enslaved people from abuse.

It was instead the vigilante group that instilled fear among blacks. Mutilated and hanged enslaved people set a powerful example of the high price paid by a troublemaker. The vigilantes did not believe in nor did they follow The Black Code, which gave enslaved people a semblance of rights, including the right to marry and the right not to be tortured by their owners, and forbade the separation of married couples and children from mothers.

Missionaries instilled the among the enslaved people. Mixed marriages were strictly forbidden, enslaved person punishment was allowed, and the coalition did not tolerate free enslaved people. Thomas hired an experienced white overseer, John, and promoted a black driver, Moses, to handle the 20 or so field workers and three inside help at the place they called "The Big House".

For the next several years, Thomas and his overseers farmed tobacco, cotton, and sugar, and Thomas promoted another black driver, Adam. He took an occasional fancy to the mature slave girls, remembering not to solicit those who were married, as his father did, as the mistake cost him and his mother their lives.

Joseph, Thomas's father, solicited a married slave girl, N'Tumba. In the course of the affair, the woman's husband, Gess, discovered them entering the sleeping bedroom. The next day, the overseers found the bodies, their throats cut. The staff was afraid and did not respond to the sound of the incident when it happened. Thomas was asleep and did not hear anything. Gess escaped but was caught in the Atchafalaya swamp days later by the Vigilantes. He was hung by his feet, upside down from a cypress tree branch hanging over the water, and left to die. Mosquitoes and water moccasins writhed around him until he succumbed. They untied him., and he became alligator food.

Lydia was Thomas's lover of choice, though no love was involved. She was a tall, slim woman with broken English, though she spoke Cajun French well.

She was of light complexion, almost mulatto. Still, he did not think there was anything other than black in her heritage, as her paperwork contended she was of strict African origin. Her family entered the U.S. from the Congo via Haiti. Like many enslaved people that came from the Congo, Lydia practiced La Voodoo, or ancestry worship, derived from Syncretism and Roman Catholic influences in Haiti. Thomas tolerated the Voodoo out of respect for his parents., who were proponents of The Black Code.

After many overnight stays, Lydia became pregnant. She never fought against his advances, as Thomas was known to deliver as many as 20 lashes for insubordination. Lydia, along with an accomplice, ran to New Orleans. There was a group there that protected runaways, disguising them as formerly enslaved people.

Thomas had a bull terrier he used on deer hunts. It was a good tracking dog. He and the overseers tracked the couple through the swamp and caught them. Mosquitoes, gnats, and the elements took a toll on their bodies, but they were okay. Because Lydia was pregnant, Thomas did not want to harm the baby when he delivered her punishment. He dug a hole in the ground and forced her to lie face

down with her stomach in the hole so as not to put any pressure on the baby. He delivered 20 lashes to each woman. The healthy baby girl, a Mulatto, named Sally, was born 30 days later in the year 1860.

The disagreement about the institution of slavery came to a head when eleven Southern states, beginning with South Carolina, left the Union in 1860, leading to one of the most misunderstood events in American history. Louisiana seceded on January 26, 1861. Jefferson Davis, a former U.S. senator and Secretary of War, was elected President of the Confederate States of America by the members of the Confederate Constitutional Convention. When President Lincoln became president in 1860, Louisiana possessed over 331,000 enslaved people or 47 percent of its population.

Louisianians prepared themselves accordingly. By the time the war began, Thomas had his plantation well positioned. The sugar, tobacco, and cotton crops flourished, and corn, potatoes, and vegetables were plentiful.

Fort Sumpter, S.C., was considered a Union stronghold and was fired upon by the South Carolina militia on April 12, 1861. The Confederate Army did not exist. The U.S. Army stationed there surrendered, beginning the Civil War. While many male Lousianians volunteered to fight, the men of New Orleans were not as enthusiastic and more skeptical. Thomas cut a deal with the newly-formed Confederate Army to provide food from the plantation to support the war effort. In turn, he was made exempt from military service. Plantation crops were deferred to New Orleans when General Mansfield evacuated the city without a fight after 5000 men left the Crescent City to join the Union Army.

As the war progressed, Louisianans embraced Guerrilla warfare and relied only on the militia and themselves for protection from Union soldiers. The locals violently rebuffed attempts by rogue Union soldiers to pillage plantation crops and supplies, as they preyed on local civilians and businesses for survival. These miscreants comprised draft dodgers, deserters, and outlaws. The war in Louisiana was confusing, at best. No one knew what was going on. The Union controlled the entire lower Mississippi River, dividing the Confederacy into two parts.

Discord among the enslaved people increased as word spread about New Orleans protecting runaways and free enslaved people. "Maroon" communities proliferated in the swamps, aiding and abetting runaways. They had access to food and supplies, and Native American Tribes assisted them. They provided safe passage to New Orleans, where a safe Camp, Parapet, was established upriver by a General Phelps. The Confederates believed they were in charge of the destiny of the world, ignoring the chaos created by slavery. A considerable struggle prevailed between enslaved people, enslavers, and the Union.

Chapter 2

Baby Sally was more white than black, but her childhood was anything but happy. She was bullied and shunned by other black kids because she was different. The Black Code did not allow blacks to become literate for fear they would cause problems. She was a fast learner. Although most blacks were illiterate, some secretly taught others to read and write. She quickly learned to read and write English. She also spoke Acadian, which she learned from the elder enslaved people. She noticed scars on her mother's back and often asked who whipped her, “ton pere ma battue.” Translated as “Your father beat me!” she answered.

“Pourquoi?” Sally asked.

Lydia's English could have been better, but Sally preferred to speak in English rather than French Canadian, so she asked her mother to talk in English.

“Because I tried to run away and protect you from that bad man.”

“Will we ever be able to leave?”

"I hope so when Mr. Lincoln frees us," her mother replied.

“When will that be?” Sally asked.

"I don't know, child, maybe when the war ends."

Sally was fifteen when Thomas brought her into the big house. She was beautiful, with light skin, black hair, and blue eyes. Like her mother, she was tall and thin, and her body was well-proportioned, one that would make a bulldog break his chain.

Although most black girls her age had experienced intimacy, and some were already with children, she remained a virgin under the watchful eye of her mother. In the big house, her duties in the kitchen were to prepare meals for the master and his overseers, as well as those of the servants, under the guidance of a middle-aged servant named Kittie, who had worked there since her teenage years.

"Well, child, you will be sleeping with me in the back room and eating with us on the back table on the back porch,” Kittie said. And we need to get you out of those rags you are wearing. I will make you a new dress."

"Thank you, Miss Kittie," Sally replied. "Will you teach me to sew?"

"Yes, child," she answered.

"In return, I will teach you to read and write. Then you can read some of the master's books."

"Yes, but we must be careful, as we are not allowed,” Kittie reminded.

Several months went by as Sally kept her promise to Kittie to teach her to read and write. Although she needed more tutoring, she could read some of Thomas's books.

It was 1863, and the war raged. Gunfire was abundant, and soldiers visited the plantation for supplies as per the agreement between Thomas and the Confederacy. Some sacrifices were necessary for the big house, as supplies were not as plentiful as before. Problematic was the fact crops were burned by Union soldiers if they suspected plantation owners were aiding Confederate soldiers.

Sally's possessions were meager, so she was in awe of the amount of things accumulated in the Big House. Kittie told her she must not plunder and get caught, as a female servant got whipped for touching valuable articles.

“Who whipped her?” Sally asked.

“The master,” Kittie replied.

“You know he is my father,” Sally said.

“I knows miss Sally.”

After minutes of silence, Sally asked, "Is my father a bad man?"

“My mother says he is.”

“But the master is fair,” Kittie answered.

They did their business, and there was no more conversation about the master.

The time spent in the kitchen preparing meals was fun for Sally as it was a welcome change from working in the fields. She saw the graceful degradation
of her mother each time they visited. Time took its toll on the field workers: They endured long hours and hard work, notwithstanding the mental anguish of knowing that free-slaves were becoming more prevalent, especially in New Orleans.

It had been six months in the big house when Sally noticed her father was paying more attention to her than usual. One day, in the slave quarters at the back of the house, she was bathing in the round tub specific to the servants. When Thomas entered the room, Kittie and the others were already in bed.

"Hello, child, I'm going to wash your back," he said.

"No, please, you can get out," She replied. Thomas picked up a soap bar and began washing her back. She covered her breasts with both hands when he reached around, grabbed her hand with his left, and caressed her breast with his other hand.

“Stop, no, stop!” she pleaded.

"What's the matter, child?"

"Your mother likes it; so should you," He said. Sally began crying.

As he left the room, he said, "You will learn to like it someday."

Sally dressed herself and went to bed. Her crying woke Kittie.

"What's wrong, sister?"

“My father touched me,” she exclaimed.

“My poor child!” Kittie replied.

“What should I do?”Asked Sally.

“Don’t know.”

Thomas struggled with what to do with Sally. He wondered if he should put her in a school, but his interpretation of The Black Code instructed never to separate the mother from her child. There was also the contention it would cause if Thomas would send her to school and not another. The decision to let it be was his final one and let fate take its course. On the one hand, he knew she was his blood; on the other, she was the result of an encounter with an available enslaved person. There was no time or reason to fret over a bleeding conscience.

It was again necessary to travel to New Orleans for supplies. It was a dreary day, balmy like it was before the last major storm. The humidity was high and sweat-drenched her skirt. Kittie and John, the overseer, hitched a team of horses and were on their way. Sally requested to go, but her father refused. She thought it was odd, as she regularly accompanied the pair on shopping trips.

That morning, Sally prepared a breakfast of biscuits, honey, eggs, grits, and crawfish tails. She washed dishes when Thomas entered the kitchen, picked her up, and carried her into his bedroom.

“Why are you doing this?” she implored.“You are my father.”

Thomas replied, “Because you are my daughter in name only. You will enjoy this. Take off your clothes and get on the bed.”

He picked her up and carried her to her room when he was through. She sobbed. After he left, she felt dirty and scrubbed herself raw with soap and water. The abuse continued for several months. She cried and cried about her father's actions. In all her years on the plantation, she never heard of a father harming their daughter.

"Why is he doing this?" she cried out loud. "I don't know what to do; he doesn't love me."

She asked her mother what to do while crying on her shoulder. Her mother consoled her but had no further advice. Kittie and John, the overseer, made their way back from shopping in New Orleans. The sky darkened, and the wind howled. It was so bad they sought shelter, wondering if it was a cyclone. They unhitched the horses to prevent injury. Just as they did, a gust blew the wagon onto its side.

They huddled under an oak tree and clung for dear life. It was indeed a hurricane. Trees blew sideways, and boughs and limbs snapped. The supplies were scattered. They tried to save what they could, but the rain and wind overwhelmed them. The storm lasted into the night, and they stayed close to the wagon for safety.

The following day, Thomas, a driver, and enslaved people formed a search party and set out to find them. Kittie sat with her back against the wagon. The overseer was lying on the ground, pinned by a tree trunk across his torso. When the rescuers removed the tree, he passed.

The tree pinned Kittie's leg, and the femur broke before she escaped from underneath it.

"Don't move!" Thomas instructed Kittie to secure her leg with a splint.

“We’ll take her back to New Orleans and get her leg set,” he told John the overseer.

They turned the wagon over. The horse team was nearby. They re-hitched the wagon. Thomas told the driver, “I will take her to New Orleans. You take the wagon back to the house.”

Several days passed, and things returned to normal on the plantation. Thomas had to replace the overseer, who died in the storm. He contacted for burial arrangements. The new overseer, John and Sally, were sent to New Orleans to replace the supplies lost in the storm. While shopping in town, Sally recognized enslaved people from adjoining plantations she met when she visited the Maroons, a band of fugitive enslaved people living in their communities.

Sally gained more freedom to move freely since living in the big house. She made meals for the Maroons, who would slip into the big house under cover of night. Maroons made money selling crafts to settlers and logs to sawmills. While on this shopping trip, Sally was shocked to see so many blacks living free. New Orleans was now a haven for free blacks, runaways, and other outcasts with nowhere to go. She heard about General Phelps, who established an outpost called Camp Parapet, known for sheltering blacks seeking freedom.

Sally approached a formerly enslaved person she knew and asked, "Do you know about Camp Parapet?"

"Yas'm it up river by boat a mile or so," he said. She had to be careful who she talked to as the overseer watched her. Nevertheless, she was able to speak to them when he was shopping. The trip proved successful, and they returned to the plantation.

The overseer killed by the fallen tree was a black whom Thomas's parents had granted his freedom. A Minister performed the funeral at a local black church in the community. The religion of the enslaved people depended on their master's wishes. Like his parents before him, Thomas allowed the enslaved people to attend church and hold prayer meetings in their cabins. Thomas was agnostic and did not attend church.

Masters hired preachers, but if their master forbade worship, the enslaved people were subject to flogging if they rebelled. A secret verbe overseer was greeting, "Steal away to Jesus," signaled a secret prayer meeting at a clandestine, remote swamp setting. Song and prayer sometimes lasted all night. Sally attended regular church services but sometimes slipped away to the secret services when she could, allowing her to spend more time with her mother. Although not religious, Kittie did not blow the whistle when Sally slipped away.

Some churches were sponsored by the masters, along with their preachers. Enslaved people grew tired of hearing them say, "Obey your master. Don't steal from your master. It's a sin to run away."

The enslaved people found their preachers and held underground services.

The sexual assaults on Sally were frequent and severe. Not knowing what the repercussions would be against her and her mother, she tolerated the pain as best she could. However, the fear of pregnancy was foremost on her mind.

The herbal remedy Pennyroyal and other herbal mixtures aborted babies, sometimes known as "negro remedies" by Southern whites, but she had no idea where to get them, if necessary. In their absence, she knew enslaved people sometimes used metal rods to kill the fetus. Abortion was forbidden by the Masters as newborn children were valuable commodities. Sally was terrified if she became pregnant.

“What would happen to the child?” she thought.

“I cannot let it happen.”

She knew what she must do, remembering when she was a child, someone in the black community accidentally died of Oleander poisoning.

Oleander plants can be traced to Pompeii, Italy, in 79 A. D. First introduced to the U.S. in 1841, in Galveston, Texas, by Joseph Osterman from Jamaica, Oleander is a floral called "a deadly beauty," they found their way to Louisiana, where they thrived on the plantations and were everywhere amongst shrubs and trees. Enslaved people knew not to ingest the deadly leaves and flowers. Parents not to eat them. Napoleon ordered meat cooked and served on Oleander sticks, and one hundred men were poisoned and died, as per a historical account.

It was a pleasant July 4, 1863. Thomas invited other plantation owners and friends to a long-standing traditional celebratory cookout. Sally assisted Kittie in the kitchen. The menu included pork, beef, chicken, vegetables, and a pastry. Sally cooked the meat and served guests.

The previous day, she broke off an Oleander branch, ensuring ample leaves remained on the stick. She placed two pieces of meat on the stick and cooked them along with the other portions, careful not to contaminate anything but the beef with the Oleander. She prepared the meal, rubbed leaves on the meat, and fed Thomas the tainted portions he ate. Before the guests left, he complained of stomach pain and headache. Nauseated, he began vomiting.

"You must go to bed and lie down, Master Thomas!" Kittie said.

“Yes, yes,” he replied.

Kittie brought him a glass of water, and he retired to his room. The guests thanked the staff and left. The following day, Thomas was not at the breakfast table, which was the norm. Kittie entered his room.

"Miss Sally, Miss Sally, Master Thomas is dead!" she cried.

Later that day, Sally gathered her meager belongings and informed Kittie they were leaving for New Orleans. She told the overseers that Master Thomas was not feeling well and was not to be disturbed. She contacted her mother, who was working in the field.

"What are you doing out here, child?" she asked, noting Sally was visibly upset.

“Master Thomas is dead," Sally replied. "And we must leave for New Orleans."

“How did he die?” Lydia asked.

“I will tell you later.”

Sally never did fully admit to her mother what she had done. Kittie's leg did not heal thoroughly, so they knew the Journey would be slow and painful for her. But she decided freedom was more important than any pain she might endure. "Who will tend to the crops, Ms. Sally?"

“I reckon it will be the overseers,” Sally replied.

Sally worried about what would happen to the plantation. She was the only descendant who knew about the family and its business. Sally hoped a paper would appear, leaving the plantation to someone responsible. Although no one knew what would happen after the war ended, She knew it would be a mess. The enslaved people would flee for freedom. The remaining overseers would con-

tinue to run the plantation as long as they had help, as the Confederacy relied on it for rations. Sally left without notice, hoping things would work out. She thought no one would suspect her of murder. Because guests heard Thomas say he was not feeling well.

Now that the ordeal was over, she had time to reflect, and grief and remorse overcame her. She constantly cried and tried to hide it from her mother and Kittie, who felt sorry for her.

"Did I have a choice to live a life of abuse for myself and my mother or become free of my father's hold on me?" she thought, "What's to become of us now?"

They were on their way. It was Sally, Kittie, Lydia, and two drivers whom Lydia befriended. The word was out regarding the death of Thomas. There was chaos and confusion, coupled with cheers and some sadness by older enslaved people who knew and respected their parents. The enslaved people were free, they assumed, But were they? What were they to do? They were like crippled young hawks, fed by hand until adulthood but eventually released into the wild. They soon starved because their mothers did not teach them to hunt; it was a reminder that freedom is not always accessible. Sometimes, there is a great cross to bear.

Sally remembered speaking with a free enslaved person regarding Camp Parapet, established by the Union upstream of New Orleans. Free enslaved people and runaways were protected there and sponsored by groups utilizing the Underground Railroad that brought free people of color to the North. It now operated overtly and was part of the growing, successful Union effort against the Confederacy.

Chapter 3

They traveled in the safety of night. The route to New Orleans was easy as they had traveled it many times for supplies. The trek up the "right bank" was a challenge. The terrain was unrecognizable, and they needed to learn how to get to the camp. On the way, they stopped to ask for directions.
“Just follow the river bank about a mile or two,” they instructed.

At the camp, a black man approached them and introduced himself as a "conductor" who was part of the Underground Railroad. He gave them food and lodging.

“Where do you want to go?” The Conductor asked.

Sally learned from discussions with other blacks in New Orleans that many of their peers escaped to Pennsylvania, and formerly enslaved people found jobs.

“Pennsylvania,” she replied.

The Conductor explained the Underground Railroad. It was exposed and operated above board by the Union. It was the network used by enslaved blacks to obtain their freedom during the 30 years before the Civil War. The Railroad used many routes from states in the South, which supported slavery, to states in the North and Canada. Pilots were people who went south looking for enslaved people. Guides who brought people north were called conductors. Enslaved people were passengers. Shelters were stations. There was also a "reverse" railroad. Whites would kidnap blacks, ship them south, and sell them into slavery.

The most treacherous path of their Journey was from New Orleans to Savannah, Georgia, where a single station, a Baptist Church, was available for temporary lodging. Several stations were available between Savannah and Philadelphia along the Underground Railroad, and there was another possibility: a sea route to Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia.

Sally had a plan. She passed for white, so she acted as an enslaver fleeing to live with relatives because the war killed her husband. She remembered she was a slave girl and needed to act and dress like an enslaver. Sally knew where Thomas kept his petty cash drawer. Before she fled, she helped herself. The challenge was to find and purchase good clothes.

"Where can I buy some good clothes?" she asked the Conductor.

"There is a dry goods store not too far from here on the right bank. Tomorrow, I can take you there."

The Conductor was formerly a Union soldier who was severely wounded and unable to serve on active duty. He developed a fondness
for Sally, but Sally only had one thing on her mind: she was going to Philadelphia.

Supplied with food, water, and blankets, if Union soldiers stopped them, they were transporting enslaved people to the North. If Confederate soldiers stopped them, they would move to Savannah because the war killed her husband and destroyed their home. The Journey to Savannah was 640 miles, and the Conductor estimated the trip would take 45 days. He gave them a list of safe houses from Savannah to Philadelphia, but none between New Orleans and Savannah. Travel would be to Mobile, Alabama; Montgomery, Alabama; Macon, Georgia; and Savannah. They would do the best they could until they reached Savannah. Equipped with everything they needed for the trip, they would camp and rough it.

There were a few skirmishes in Alabama around July 5, 1863. Pemberton surrendered to Grant at Port Hudson, and the Mississippi River fell to Union forces. Hence, things were calm, but there was an incident where they were stopped and questioned by Confederate soldiers in north Alabama but were allowed to proceed. They arrived in Savannah 45 days later.

Posing as an enslaver helping the enslaved to freedom, Sally hid with them in the Baptist church in Savannah inside a dugout in the vestibule. Holes were cut into the floor, allowing the enslaved people to breathe. Sally and her crew sought refuge there until the conductors could find safe passage north via a steamer to Charleston, then Wilmington, N.C. From there, they traveled by train to Grey's Ferry outside Philadelphia. An omnibus took them into the city. During the active years of the Underground Railroad, an enslaved woman named Araminta Ross took the name Harriet Tubman, as Tubman was her married name. In 1849, she escaped a plantation in Maryland with her brothers and returned two weeks later, but Tubman left again shortly after, making her way to Pennsylvania.

Tubman returned to the plantation several times to rescue family members and friends. She claimed God compelled her to join the Underground Railroad, helping other enslaved people escape to Maryland and Canada, where she felt they would find better treatment. Another prominent Philadelphia citizen, William Still, preserved the actions of The Underground Railroad. Still was born in New Jersey to fugitive enslaved parents. He was also an associate of Tubman's and published his records of formerly enslaved people after the Civil War.

Tubman played a vital role in the Underground Railroad until it ceased operations in 1863. Then, Tubman became visible as part of the Union's campaign against the Confederacy, continuing to rescue emancipated enslaved people by conducting intelligence operations for the Union Army.

Before leaving the big house, Sally took all the petty cash and coins. The trip was less costly than she predicted, as conductors and station managers provided food and shelter along the way. She still had money left.

In Philadelphia, they found people on her list who took in enslaved blacks and placed them with families in need of servants or laborers. The enslaved people were now considered free and would paid for their services. The Philadelphia conductor found them temporary shelter. Lydia and Kittie were separated and placed with wealthy families needing servants. Sally's success in using the Oleander plant for poison encouraged her to develop an interest in other pharmaceuticals. She gained employment in a dispensary in a medical college in Philadelphia.

Before their arrival, the Confederate Army attempted to invade Philadelphia, but they turned back at Wrightsville and The Battle of Gettysburg. Pennsylvanians became more interested in the war, and more volunteer recruits signed with the Union, although a limited draft had been in place since October 1862. After their arrival, the two black overseers announced they would join the Union Army.

During the Civil War, Philadelphia hosted many social functions. Sally was a young, energetic lady eager to date. She attended museums, concerts, and other social functions where eligible men gathered.

While at the Mutter Museum of Medical History, she met and talked with Jacob, a tall white man who was a professional.

"Hello, my name is Sally. It's my first time here."

"Hello, my name is Jacob. It's my first time here," he answered.

“Is this building new?” she asked.

Jacob seemed to know about the museum, which interested Sally.

"American Surgeon Thomas Dent Mutter donated 1700 objects and 30,000 dollars to the museum, stipulated a curator be hired, along with the construction of a fireproof building to house the collection. This building is the museum," he added.

During the conversation, she asked, "Do you live in the area?”

"Yes, I do not live far from here with my family," he answered.

“So you are married?”

“I have three children,” he replied.

They spent the afternoon together in the museum, examining the numerous medical artifacts.

Sally had not been recognized as a Mulatto and was well versed in English. Jacob had no idea she was of Black origin. She told Jacob she worked in the pharmaceutical field.

“What do you do?” she asked.

"I work at the Pennsylvania College Library. You should visit sometime," he added.

“I will,” she said.

The following Friday afternoon, she got off work early and went to the library, hoping Jacob would be there. The attendant told him that someone was there to see him.

"Hello, my name is Sally. We met at the museum."

"I remember you," he said. "What can I show you?"

"I am interested in medicine. Do you have any books on that topic?" Sally replied.

"I have some!" he replied. He found them and checked them out for Sally. Before she left, Jacob asked her, "Would you allow me to accompany you to accompany me to a picnic on Saturday?"

The picnic menu included fried chicken, potato salad, apple pie, and wine. The group met in Clark Park in West Philadelphia, the site of Satterlee Hospital, which treated over 120,000 sick and wounded soldiers during the Civil War.

The picnic went well. Jacob was at arm's length, and Sally sensed his motives were not so much that he liked her but instead was more interested in a mistress.

“Tell me about your family,” she said.

"My wife is not well," he replied. "We have not slept in the same bed for quite some time."

"I'm sorry," she said. Sally did not feel comfortable with the direction of the conversation, so she feigned a headache. "I must go now.”

She drew her horse and buggy and said goodbye.

"Where do you work?" he asked.

"I work at the Medical College," she said before departing.

Weeks went by. One afternoon, Jacob stopped by the Medical College and asked for Sally.

"Hello, Sally."

“Hello,” she replied.

“Would you be interested in accompanying me to a concert at The Academy of Music on Saturday?”

“What about your wife?” she asked, thinking out loud.

"We are discussing divorce. Our marriage is over."

She agreed, and he picked her up Saturday evening. Sally was concerned. She had no dress for such a function; she needed to go shopping.

Sally went to the house where her mother worked as a kitchen servant. She visited a week prior and was not feeling well.

“How are you, Mother?” she asked.

"I am better," her mother replied. "The fever has passed."

“Can you help me buy a dress?” Sally asked.

"Why?" Her mother asked."The ones I have seen you with look good."

“It’s a special occasion,” Sally added.

That evening, Sally picked her mother up and went to the mercantile store. She purchased a well-made 1860s Marie Antoinette Victorian dress with a hoop skirt, braid trim, and long sleeves. An A-line 6 hoop petticoat maintained fluffiness. The dress was blue and had a shoulder-drop design.

The Academy of Music's first opera performance and grand ball were in 1857, featuring works by Verdi and other noted composers. Sally was overwhelmed, as she never had access to social functions besides picnics and invitations to friends' houses for conversations and meals. Her introduction to the upper class of living was stimulating, making her think it was where she should be.

Sally possessed beauty and knew she could fake a classy background to fit in with the Philadelphia social class. She was versed in medicine, studying every night and even dabbling in classical music to become more socially refined. However, it was quite a switch from the Zydeco or Cajun music played in Louisiana.

She looked like the queen of the ball. With the help of her mother and Kittie, along with her hair and accessories, she passed as a member of Philadelphia society.

The problem was that she would have to conjure a believable story if asked about her family. Fortunately, everything went well. The music was good, and she did not have to mingle or answer questions. Afterward, they went to Sally's house, and she invited Jacob in for tea. Sally excused herself to go to her bedroom to change her dress.

"Make yourself at home," she said. "I won't be long, and then we can have some tea."

“Okay,” he replied.

Minutes passed, and he entered her bedroom. She had removed her dress and was in the process of removing her petticoat. He moved toward her and put his arms around her waist.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

"You are gorgeous. I want you."

“No, please, get out!"

Sally covered her breasts. He moved her hands and massaged them. She shook him loose and ran back into the main room, covering up with the dress.

“Please leave now!” she insisted.

“I'm sorry.” she said

He stood silent as if he had something to say, but nothing came out. He left Sally to burst into tears. She needed her mother. There were so many memories, All those years of sexual abuse.

"Maybe I am frigid, or are all men alike?" she thought. She cried herself to sleep and awoke not with a feeling of remorse but one of revenge. She hated feelings like that.

*“*Is this my legacy*?"* she wondered, "Why do men want to harm me? Will I always be afraid?"

Sally needed her mother, so she went to see her. Lydia said she had not been feeling well.

"Have you seen a doctor?" Sally asked.

“No, my child.”

"Come spend the night with me, and I will take you tomorrow."

They went to Sally's place. Sally noticed her mother had gained weight since their last visit but said nothing. Sally told her employer she had to take her mother to a doctor.

The doctor was a big man with a graying beard and hair who appeared optimistic. He reminded Sally of a cartoon she saw in Harper's Weekly about a jolly old elf called Santa Clause.

“How can I help you?” he asked.

“Mother has not been feeling well and has gained weight lately,” Sally said.

“Has she been short of breath?” he asked.

Lydia nodded. The doctor listened to her mother's heart.

“I will be back shortly,” he said.

He returned with notes and medicine bottles.

“My diagnosis is Dropsy, an accumulation of fluid in soft tissues.”

"I am giving her a diuretic to eliminate fluid. Drinking tea and coffee will help. I feel it is heart-related, so I gave her Digitalis to stimulate the muscle. Come back in two weeks."

Sally visited Kittie, as she had not seen her in a while.

“How are you?” Sally asked.

“I miss the South and the plantation, Miss Sally.”

"I know I do, too. It's not the same. We can return when the time is right."

"I hope so, Miss Sally. What do you think happened to the plantation?"

“I don’t know."

Kittie did not know the circumstances behind Master Thomas's death, Sally did not know, and Lydia did not know.

Sally could not sleep nights for fear Jacob would return and attempt to harm her.

“What should I do?” she thought.

Then, she remembered the Oleander leaves she had brought from the plantation. She enjoyed picnicking in Philadelphia's beautiful parks and invited Jacob to join her on a Saturday outing. He agreed. They met in a remote park area, which he thought was odd.

“Why are we here?” he asked.

“So we can be alone."

Sally stirred his imagination. Southern fried chicken, fruit, bread, and stuffed eggs were in the basket. Unbeknownst to him, he would have tea made with tea leaves mixed with dried leaves of the Oleander plant she brought from the plantation. Sally laced the remainder of the food, but she took care so the 15 leaves and dried flowers were finely crushed into a powder so as not to be visible. She also did not cook the leaves as they would lose their potency. She was worried about the taste, so Sally added extra sugar. The food was in marked containers so she would not eat the poisoned food. The tea was also in separate containers. Jacob had no clue as to what was coming.

Sally knew no one was in the area that could place her at the scene. She told Jacob she wanted to talk before they ate. Jacob was quiet, not his usual talkative self, and suspected of her intentions.

“What do you want to talk about?" he asked.

"What are your long-term intentions with me?"

“I am married.”

“Will you divorce her?"

“I don’t know."

She made small talk for 30 minutes, hoping he would become hungry. She handed him his tainted food and his bottle of tea. They both began eating. He appeared hungry. Based on experience, she knew that symptoms would start 30 minutes after ingestion.

“Why did you attack me?” she asked.

He glared at her as his stomach cramped.

“What have you done?” he asked.

"You will never hurt me, another woman." she asserted.

He stood and yelled.

"Help me. Somebody help!"

He staggered and fell to his knees. He had diarrhea and held his stomach as he vomited.

“You will pay for this!” he promised, weakly, falling into a fetal position.

Sally remained calm until she was sure he was gone. She gathered food and the blanket and left. Sunday was the following day, and it was non-eventful. Sally expected the authorities to contact her because someone may have seen her with Jacob at the concert. A week went by before they knocked on her door. She was scared, but she knew they could not prove she had anything to do with his demise. She answered the door.

"Are you Sally?" the cop asked?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Did you attend a concert with a man named Jacob last week?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"We found him dead and think poisoning was the cause."

They asked if she had any relatives in the area. She gave them the information, and they were on their way.

Sally did not hear any more about the death. The authorities interviewed her mother, who lied about her whereabouts that Saturday at her daughter's request.

"What have you done, my child?" her mother asked. "I will tell you later," Sally replied.

After the death of Jacob, Sally fell into a state of depression, which took a toll both mentally and physically.

“Why can’t a person like me lead a normal life?” she thought.

“Why have I been abused?”

“Will it continue?”

“What can I do to find someone who will love me?”

"I am not a bad person at heart; I just do not want to be abused."

“Is that too much to ask?”

It was a dreary Sunday afternoon when Sally heard a knock on her door. It was Lydia's employer.

"We took your mother to the hospital this morning; we think it's her heart," they said.

Sally rushed the buggy to the hospital. Lydia had regressed into a coma and was non-responsive. Sally buried her mother in a Philadelphia cemetery, wishing it would have been in a Louisiana cemetery. Her life was non-eventful till the war's end. Healing was a slow and painful process.

Chapter 4

She met James at the library where Jacob worked. They hit it off, although he was reluctant to commit. The times did not accept mixed couples. He changed his mind once he discovered her true heritage. James was black, single, and a doctor with his practice. Before his graduation, only 22 Black doctors in the U.S. Twelve were in the U.S. Army. Although free, his family had also left the South to escape the war.

He managed to go to medical school with donations and loans from friends and family he vowed to repay. Members of his family became wealthy from the war. His skin was dark black, while she passed for white, so a mixed marriage would be a challenge. They dated indiscreetly, developing a relationship under abnormal conditions. She did not disclose her past, and he did not ask.

One day, Sally asked, "Now that the war is over, I want to return home. Would you go with me and set up a practice in Louisiana?"

James agreed, but he said the timing had to be correct. The four-year martial law imposed on New Orleans ended on May 12, 1866. President Andrew Johnson's reconstruction policies were vehemently opposed by Southerners, triggering riots in Dixie. Many whites were ex-Confederate soldiers, while many blacks were ex-Union soldiers.

On July 30, 1866, a race riot occurred. The Louisiana Constitutional Convention reconvened to address the issue of black voting rights. A delegation of approximately 130 blacks marched to The Mechanic's Institute, where the riots occurred, and a mob attacked the blacks, killing over 238, some of whom were ex-Union soldiers. As a result, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act in 1867, imposing Martial Law.

Sally, James, and Kittie waited before leaving, as travel was challenging. Railroads were available, but carriage travel was sometimes necessary. Sally notified her employer while James found new doctors to take his patients. Kittie kept inquiring about Jacob's death, as she knew they had been seeing each other, but Sally refused to discuss him. Sally worried about what she might find on the plantation. Did the Union burn the place? What happened to everyone? Would she have to explain her sudden departure? What about the overseers? The two black drivers, Adam and Moses, joined the Union. What happened to them? What happened to the white overseer, John? And she had difficulty shaking them. Almost three years passed, and it was time to face the music. It was approaching the end of the year, and it was time to go.

Travel between Philadelphia and New Orleans was uneventful, although the unlikely trio—a black man, a white woman, and a black woman—got many stares. James would dress down and pretend he was a servant to Sally, a free black man she employed.

Once in New Orleans, Sally knew the area and was careful in the city as the riots had raised concerns. A powder keg could quickly go off as hard feelings abounded over the black massacre as well as resistance to black citizenship. Issues over streetcar segregation also triggered non-violent protests. After the war, New Orleans was instrumental in developing tools used by black activists around the country, including marches, sit-ins, rallies, and boycotts. Blacks were allowed to board streetcars marked with giant black stars. White gang members crowded those cars to prevent and humiliate black riders.

They purchased a horse and buggy on the outskirts of New Orleans. Only Union money was accepted, as the Confederate dollar was worth six cents to one Union dollar at the end of the war. The Confederacy printed paper money traded for gold or silver should the South win the war, proving worthless. These were known as "promissory notes." The notes were also brown after age and were not

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