



CHAPTER 1

I was born a slave. The year was 1813; the place, the coastal town of Edenton, North Carolina. The first six years of my life were happy, partly because my parents concealed from me that I was a slave.

My grandmothers were slaves, and my grandfathers were the white men who owned them. My parents were owned by different people, but their owners allowed them to live together in a comfortable home and to take care of my brother William and me. Willie was two years younger than I.

My father was an intelligent, skilled carpenter. His owner, Mrs. Jacobs, allowed him to earn his own money, but he had to support his family and pay Mrs. Jacobs \$200 a year. People hired him to supervise building construction. Father wanted to buy Willie and me from Mrs. Jacobs. He kept offering her all his hard-earned money, but she never agreed.

Edenton's residents called my maternal grandmother "Aunt Martha." She was the

daughter of a white man and a slave whom he owned. Upon the death of her father, Grandmother was freed. But on her way to live with some relatives, she was captured and sold to new owners, Mr. and Mrs. Nash. The Nashes found that Grandmother was intelligent, faithful, and useful: a valuable piece of property.

Mr. Nash was my mother's father. Three months after my mother was born, Mrs. Nash had a daughter, Ruth. Grandmother had to wean her own baby so that she could breast-feed Ruth. As children, my mother and Ruth played together and were almost like sisters.

Grandmother baked delicious cakes and crackers that everyone wanted to buy. She asked Mrs. Nash if she could bake them at night, after she had finished her chores. Mrs. Nash gave her permission, provided that Grandmother paid for her own clothing and her children's clothing. Each year, Grandmother set aside some money, so that someday she could buy her children.

When Mr. Nash died, Mrs. Nash kept Grandmother as her slave. My mother and three of her siblings each went to one of the Nashes' four children. (Each heir wanted an equal portion of Mr. Nash's property, whether in slaves or money.) The Nash children sold Grandmother's fifth child, Benjamin, for \$720, to Mr. Crawford. Ben

was only ten years old. From then on, Grandmother worked even harder, hoping to eventually buy her five children from their owners.

One day, Mrs. Nash asked Grandmother to lend her \$300 so that she could buy silver candlesticks. This was all the money that Grandmother had saved. Mrs. Nash promised to pay Grandmother back soon. No promise or written contract with a slave is legally binding, but Grandmother lent Mrs. Nash the money, believing that she would keep her promise.

When I was six, my mother died, and I learned, from the talk around me, that I was a slave. Everyone said that my mother had been a noble woman. I grieved for her. I was told that now I would live with Ruth Nash, my mother's white half-sister, and be her servant. When my mother was dying, Ruth Nash had promised her that she would take care of Willie and me and that we never would suffer or lack anything that we needed.

While I lived with Miss Nash, no one made me do difficult or unpleasant work. Miss Nash taught me to read and spell—a privilege given to very few slaves. She was so kind to me that I always was glad to do whatever she asked. I'd sit by her side for hours, doing her sewing and feeling as carefree as any

freeborn white child. When Miss Nash thought that the sewing was making me tired, she'd send me out to play. I'd run and jump and gather flowers to decorate her room. Those were happy days.

When I was eleven, Miss Nash became ill. Her skin paled, and her eyes became glassy. I prayed with all my heart that she would live. She had been almost like a mother to me. But she died. Day after day I wept at her grave.

I wondered what the Nashes would do with Willie and me. My mother and I had loved Miss Nash and served her faithfully. I hoped that Miss Nash had arranged for me to be set free upon her death. But in her will she left me to her niece, Emily Flint, who was only five years old. Emily's young brother Nicholas would be Willie's new master.

Emily's father was Dr. Thomas Flint, a gray-haired, gray-eyed man who owned a fine Edenton residence, several plantations, and about fifty slaves. His wife Cora was much younger than he was. Willie and I would belong to Dr. and Mrs. Flint until Emily and Nicholas were old enough to have their own property. When people learned that Willie and I would be living with the Flints, there was much murmuring.

When Willie and I arrived at the Flints' Edenton house, we were greeted with cold

looks, cold words, and cold treatment. That night, as I lay in my narrow bed, I wept.

It was even harder for Willie. He was free-spirited and hated having a master or mistress. One day, when Willie had been seven, Mrs. Jacobs and Father had called him at the same time. Willie had gone to Mrs. Jacobs. Father had scolded him, "You are *my* child. When I call you, you should come immediately, even if you have to walk through fire."

Like many Southern women, Mrs. Flint thought herself too weak to do any housework. But her nerves were strong enough for her to sit in her easy chair and watch a woman be whipped until she bled. Mrs. Flint went to church on Sundays. Afterward, if dinner wasn't served on time, she would wait until all the food had been served to her family and then spit into every bowl and pan that had been used. That way the cook couldn't feed leftovers to her own children.

At the Flints' house, slaves were allowed to eat only what Mrs. Flint chose to give them. Three times a day, she handed out small portions of cheap food. Fortunately, Grandmother regularly gave me additional food that she had prepared.

If Dr. Flint was displeased with a particular dish, he would order either that the cook eat the entire dinner in his presence or that

she be whipped. While the cook was breastfeeding her baby, Dr. and Mrs. Flint sometimes ordered her to leave the infant. Then they'd lock up the cook an entire day and night, leaving her baby with nothing to eat.

Once, the cook was ordered to make some cornmeal mush for the Flints' pet dog. The dog was too sick to eat. The Flints held his head over the food. Froth flowed from his mouth into the food. A few minutes later, he died. Dr. Flint said that the mush hadn't been cooked properly. He forced the cook to eat it. She became very ill.

One day, Dr. Flint had one of his plantation slaves, John, brought to Edenton. He ordered that John be tied up, in a shed, so that his feet were just above the ground. John hung this way while Flint had tea. Then Flint whipped John—hundreds of heavy blows. John kept begging, "Oh, pray don't, Master." The next morning I went into the shed. The walls and floor were covered with blood and gore. For months after, my ears rang with John's groans and pleas.

Why had John been whipped? John and his wife Daisy were black, but their newborn baby was very fair-skinned, so John had accused Dr. Flint of raping Daisy. (It's a crime for a slave woman to reveal the identity of a white man who has fathered her child.) Flint

sold John and Daisy to a slave trader. That way, no one in Edenton would learn that he was the baby's father.

When Daisy was handed over to the trader, she cried out to Flint, "You promised to treat me well!"

Flint answered, "You talk too much. Damn you!"

Another young slave woman, Hannah, delivered a baby who was nearly white. The baby died, and Hannah herself was near death. She cried, "Oh Lord, come and take me, too!"

Sobbing, Hannah's mother said, "The baby is dead, thank God. I hope that my poor child will soon be in Heaven, too." She believed that life as a slave was worse than death.

Hannah's mistress said, "Heaven? Heaven is no place for her and her bastard baby. She deserves to suffer all this and more. You *all* do!"

As Hannah lay dying, she whispered to her mother, "Don't grieve, Mother. God knows what happened. *He* will have mercy on me."