Opening Extract from...

# THE CONFESSIONS OF FRANNIE LANGTON

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*The Old Bailey,*
*London,*
*7 April 1826*

*I never would have done what they say I've done, to Madame, because I loved her. Yet they say I must be put to death for it, and they want me to confess. But how can I confess what I don't believe I've done?*

# *Chapter One*

My trial starts the way my life did: a squall of elbows and shoving and spit. From the prisoners' hold they take me through the gallery, down the stairs and past the table crawling with barristers and clerks. Around me a river of faces in flood, their mutters rising, blending with the lawyers' whispers. A noise that hums with all the spite of bees in a bush. Heads turn as I enter. Every eye a skewer.

I duck my head, peer at my boots, grip my hands to stop their awful trembling. It seems all of London is here, but then murder is the story this city likes best. All of them swollen into the same mood, all of them in a stir about the 'sensation excited by these most ferocious murders'. Those were the words of the *Morning Chronicle*, itself in the business of harvesting that very sensation like an ink-black crop. I don't make a habit of reading what the broadsheets say about me, for newspapers are like a mirror I saw once in a fair near the Strand that stretched my reflection like a rack, gave me two heads so I almost didn't know myself. If you've ever had the misfortune to be written about, you know what I mean.

But there are turnkeys at Newgate who read them *at* you for sport, precious little you can do to get away.

When they see I'm not moving, they shove me forward with the flats of their hands and I shiver, despite the heat, fumble my way down the steps.

*Murderer!* The word follows me. *Murderer!* The Mulatta Murderess.

I'm forced to trot to keep up with the turnkeys so I don't

tumble crown over ankle. Fear skitters up my throat as they push me into the dock. The barristers look up from their table, idle as cattle in their mournful gowns. Even those old hacks who've seen it all want a glimpse of the Mulatta Murderess. Even the judge stares, fat and glossy in his robes, his face soft and blank as an old potato until he screws his eyes on me and nods at his limp-haired clerk to read the indictment.

*FRANCES LANGTON, also known as Ebony Fran or Dusky Fran, is indicted for the wilful murder of GEORGE BENHAM and MARGUERITE BENHAM in that she on the 27th day of January in the year of Our Lord 1826 did feloniously and with malice aforethought assault GEORGE BENHAM and MARGUERITE BENHAM, subjects of our lord the King, in that she did strike and stab them until they were dead, both about the upper and middle chest, their bodies having been discovered by EUSTACIA LINUX, housekeeper, of Montfort Street, London.*

*MR JESSOP to conduct the prosecution.*

The gallery is crowded, all manner of quality folk and ordinary folk and rabble squeezed in, the courtroom being one of the few places they'd ever be caught so cheek to jowl. Paduasoy silk next to Kashmir shawls next to kerchiefs. Fidgeting their backsides along the wood, giving off a smell like milk on the turn, like a slab of pork Phibbah forgot once, under the porch. The kind of smell that sticks your tongue to your throat. Some of them suck candied orange peel fished out of their purses, jaws going like paddles. The ones who can't stomach being caught in any sort of honest smell. Ladies. I know the sort.

Jessop hooks his gown with his thumbs, pushes to his feet. His voice laps steady as water against a hull. So *soft*. He could be gabbing with them at his own fireside. Which is how he wants it, for that makes them lean closer, makes them attend.

'Gentlemen, on the evening of the twenty-seventh of January, Mr and Mrs Benham were stabbed to death. Mr Benham in his library, Mrs Benham in her bedchamber. *This* . . . woman . . . the prisoner at the bar, stands accused of those crimes. Earlier that night, she confronted them in their drawing room, and threatened them with murder. Those threats were witnessed by several guests in attendance that evening, at one of Mrs Benham's legendary soirées. You will hear from those guests. And you will hear from the housekeeper, Mrs Linux, who will tell you the prisoner was observed going into Mrs Benham's rooms shortly after she had retired. Mrs Linux went upstairs herself at around one o'clock that morning, where she discovered her master's body in his library. Shortly thereafter, she entered Mrs Benham's bedchamber and discovered her body, and, next to it, the prisoner. In her mistress's bed. Asleep. When the prisoner was woken by the housekeeper, she had blood on her hands, blood drying on her sleeves.

'All through her arrest and incarceration . . . to this *day*, she has refused to speak about what happened that night. The refuge of those who are unable to offer a plain and honest defence. Well, if she can *now* offer an explanation, I am sure you will hear it, gentlemen, I am sure you will hear it. But it seems to me that a satisfactory explanation is impossible when the crime is attended with circumstances such as these.'

I grip the railing, shackles clanking like keys. I can't hold on to what he's saying. My eye swings around the room, catches the sword hung behind the judge, silver as a chink of moon. I read the words hammered in gold beneath. 'A false witness shall not be unpunished, but he that speaketh lies shall perish.' Well. We're all going to perish, liars and truth-tellers alike, though the Old Bailey is meant to speed a liar's progress. But that's not what frightens me. What frightens me is dying believing that it was *me* who killed her.

I see you at the barristers' table. You look up, give me a quick nod that settles on me like a horse blanket. There, laid out like china on a buffet, is the evidence against me: Benham's cravat, his green brocade waistcoat; Madame's lavender silk, her chemise, and her bandeau with the swan feather dyed lavender also, to match her dress. And there is Linux's butchering knife, which, so far as I knew, was in its scabbard in the kitchen the whole time I was in Madame's room.

But it's the thing beside *them* that you're frowning at. When I see it, worry curdles my guts. It's curled inside an apothecary's jar, tight as a fist. The baby. Someone joggles the table and it flattens against the glass, like a cheek. There's a question in your raised brows, but it's one I cannot answer. I didn't expect to see it here. *The baby.* Why is it allowed here? Will they ask me to speak about it?

When I see it, my knees start to quake, and I feel all the terror of that night again. But the mind is its own place, as Milton said, it can make a Hell of Heaven and a Heaven of Hell. How does it do that? By remembering, or forgetting. The only tricks a mind can play.

A wave of memory breaks. She's lying in bed, up on her elbows with her toes pointing into the air, in her hand an apple I'm trying in vain to coax her to eat. 'Listen! Are you listening?' She kicks one of her heels.

*'I met a traveller from an antique land,*
*Who said – "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone*
*Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand*
*Half sunk, a shattered visage lies . . ."'*

I'm only half listening, because it is impossible, this thing that is happening, my mistress lying with me in her bed and reading me a poem! But also because it was one of those times,

when it fell to me to watch what they called the balance of her mind, like a pot I had on the stove. *Is she well?* I'm asking myself. *Is she well?*

She turns to me. 'Do you like it?'

'Who is it?' I ask, stirring her hair with my breath.

'Shelley. Though I like Byron better, don't you? The prince of melodrama.' She turns over suddenly, onto her back, and closes her eyes. 'Byron is proof, if ever it were needed, that a man is merely spoiled by his vices while a woman is soiled by hers. Oh, Frances, *Frances*, don't you think everyone should be prescribed a poem a day? Woman cannot live on novels alone!'

She was right about that. A novel is like a long, warm drink but a poem is a spike through the head.

I told you that story yesterday when we first met. I don't know why, except maybe I wanted you to know something about me and her other than the terrible things that are being said. You lawyers are as squeamish about hearsay as a planter about cane-rats, yet a trial boils a whole character down to that.

'John Pettigrew,' you said, holding out your hand, with your brief still in it so the ribbons dribbled down your wrists. You peered out through all your dark hair. I could see you were even nervier than I was about what lay ahead of us.

Then you said, 'For God's sake, give me something I can save your neck with.'

But how can I give you what I do not have? Remembering is a thing that happens or doesn't, like breathing.

So I told you that story. I suppose I wanted to show you there was love between me and her. Though what good does that do? Whatever she and I were to each other is not a thing you men would care for. At any rate, love is no defence to murder, as you said, though, more often than not, it's an explanation.

But this is a story of love, not just murder, though I know that's not the kind of story you're expecting. In truth, no one expects any kind of story from a woman like me. No doubt you think this will be one of those slave histories, all sugared over with misery and despair. But who'd want to read one of those? No, this is my account of myself and my own life and the happiness that came to it, which was not a thing I thought I'd ever be allowed, the happiness *or* the account.

I have the paper you gave me, and a fresh quill, and your instructions to explain myself.

Any gaol-bird could tell you that for every crime there are two stories, and that an Old Bailey trial is the story of the crime, not the story of the prisoner.

That story is one only I can tell.

# *Paradise, Jamaica, 1812–25*

# *Chapter Two*

I used to be called Frannie Langton before I was taken from Paradise to London and given by Langton as maid to Mr George Benham, who then gave me to his wife. It wasn't my choice to be brought here, but very little in my life ever was. I was Langton's creature. If I pleased him I pleased myself. If he said something was to be, it was. But Langton was a man who'd named his own house Paradise despite all that went on there, and named every living thing in Paradise too. What more do I need to tell you about him?

Where I come from, there's more than one way a man gives you his name. He marries you or he buys you. In some places that is the same thing, and they call it a dowry, but it's a truth everybody must savvy that in some places a man has no need to marry what he's bought.

This isn't going to be the story of all that was done to me at Paradise, or of everything I did. But I'll have to include some of it, I suppose. I've always wanted to tell my story, even though one person's story is only a raindrop in an ocean. But if you've ever stood in the sea when rain's coming then you know they're two different kinds of water. Seawater is nothing like the first cold drop springing fresh on your face, then another on your tongue, then another, pat-pat-pat on your closed eyelids until all around you rainwater's slapping at the sea.

The difficult thing is to know where to start. My life began with some truly hard things, but my story doesn't have to, even though nothing draws honesty out of you like suffering. The receiving of it, but the giving also.

I was born at Paradise and I was still a small girl when they took me from the slave quarters up to the house. For a long time, I thought that was a stroke of luck, but it was nothing more than the liar's habit of trying to make fact better than truth.

Some nights, if Phibbah had left the shutters open and the candles lit, I could creep along the river through damp grass, hide behind the sugar mill, gawp at the house. Yellow light shivered at the windows like church glass, and Miss-bella's shadow stretched grey and tall as she drifted past them. I pictured her inside, getting ready for bed, rolling towards Langton. The syrupy way white women move. Not like the cabin-women, who were quick as hens.

The house was a sight come morning too. Sun shining like Langton's church shoes. Heat already gripping my throat but still a cat's tail of mist. I'd walk the track through the guinea grass up to the front porch. Out in the cane-piece, the men waiting for their bowl of mash. Lime-washed walls, porch wide as shoulders, the logwood shutters Miss-bella made Manso put up to shut out the bad air. I liked the idea that the house was as new as me. Langton used to brag about making Manso and the hired-on stonemasons and carpenters work like clocks for three years getting it plumb.

Then I'd smooth out my brown calico, walk round to the back. Everything, all the way to where the river cut north, black, slow and mud-clogged, belonged to Langton. I'd sit right on one of Miss-bella's campeachy chairs, listen to the floorboards creak, lift my own arms out of the sun the way I'd seen the white ladies do, push my toes down to set the chair rocking. Just close my eyes and wait for the day to crawl towards noon.

Before they took me to live there, I only ever did that in my head.

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Then one afternoon Miss-bella told Phibbah to fetch me, and Phibbah found me in the lower field with the third gang, where we'd been set with our little baskets of dung to throw into the cane holes. She took me through the cookhouse and washed my feet in the mop bucket, her kerchief fluttering like a yellow moth over her eyes and the heat from her grill slapping at my legs. She spent a long minute grousing how Miss-bella wanted her enemies near, which had given *her* the work of chasing niggerlings all morning, and then a short minute dragging me inside. I asked what Miss-bella wanted me for, but Phibbah was caked in the kind of spite that will not hear.

Miss-bella was in the room that belonged to her, and looked like her also. Both covered in silks and velvets, smooth and cool as lizards. A room so vast I was struck mute when I passed into it, and so wide I felt it was gobbling me whole.

*Kiii! This place endless like outside*, I thought, *but with a roof over you and windows that decide how much light can come in!*

Miss-bella sat in the middle on her stool, skirts spilling all around her. I might have thought her a spider in a web, but with her small, shining eyes, she put me more in mind of a fly. She had a pitcher of goat's milk set in front of her on a low table, which also had bits of johnnycake strewn across it as if put out for birds, or rat-catching. She picked out a piece of johnnycake. I took a step, which clanged like a bell and frightened me to a halt. There she was, rising towards me on an ocean of black satin. She had to reach for me and pull me all the rest of the way into the room. I remember now there was a looking-glass in that room, right behind her. It was the first time I'd seen myself properly – there I was, stamping towards myself, like a wild creature, my own face darting about on the surface, like a fish I couldn't catch. I got another fright so I stopped again, had to be tugged once more.

The johnnycake had cooled and the milk was warm. Both

must have been sitting out for a long time before she sent for me.

'So,' she said. 'You are Frances.'

I made a curtsy.

'It's the name I gave you myself.'

That startled me. I hadn't known Miss-bella to take any interest in me before that very moment. I lost my curtsy and almost slipped and fell. I didn't know how to answer except to thank her. She shook her arm to remind me of the johnnycake she was holding. By then I'd grabbed myself a hunk in each hand from the table, but I took that piece straight from her own hand with my teeth.

She puffed out her cheeks, then plunged her fingers into her mouth as if to lick them clean. 'You *are* a little savage.'

I bit my tongue.

'It is my husband who has decided you should live in this house, Frances.'

'Yes, missus,' I mumbled around the bite I was trying to gulp down before she took any of it away.

'What you and I have in common is that neither of us had any say in the matter.'

'I happy to be here, missus.'

'Well. Seems I must be some sort of mother to you now.'

What to say to that? I never knew my mother but here was the plain fact looking us both in the eye. Miss-bella was white and a very high lady. None such as herself had ever birthed the likes of me in the history of our hot little part of the earth. Brown and thick and strong as a horse I was then, though, being a mulatta, I was paler than any of the other blacks on that estate. With a great frizzled mess on top of my head, not like her own pale hair, which was so feathery the breeze stirred it and lifted it and played with it while it shunned mine.

She said something else, which I fancied was about her own

life and therefore not my concern. She was gazing out the window when she said it too. 'I've lived too many years in a place where the snakes lurk in the house as well as the grass.'

Because she had said she was to be my mother, I chanced a question. 'How long am I to stay?'

She had a high colour on her throat, her hands flittered like a frog's legs, and she looked at me and then away, as if I was the sun and gazing at me too long would hurt her eyes. I thought it strange that she should be so overcome when *I* was the rough creature brought up to her from the swamp and she the great lady of the house who was giving me pity surely as she was giving me johnnycakes. Miss-bella was frightened of *me*.

But then she said something that turned my attention sharp in another direction, as if a john crow had just flown into the room. 'However long it is will be too long in the end.'

# *Chapter Three*

That was 1812. Nobody told me why I'd been brought to the house and I was too busy burying my nose in clean cotton and kitchen scraps to puzzle about it. They said I was seven years old, or thereabouts. No one ever stirred themselves enough to be sure. I never had a birthday, or a mother. When I asked her, all Phibbah would say was my mother had run off. 'You won't magic one up by asking,' she said. 'You going learn. We not the ones ask the questions, we the ones answer them. And the answer always yes.'

When I close my eyes now, I see Phibbah swiping her cloth at the cane settee in the receiving room, tilting it to sweep under. I see the campeachy chairs put right in the middle to catch a breeze, the carpets sent to Miss-bella by her sister in Bristol that curled up in our heat like they were trying to rest. The dining room where the porcelain cups and platters and the blue and white teapot rattled in the sideboard. I hear Phibbah hissing, *'Ga-lang*, pickney, just get out of my way. Why you can't just leave me be?'

It was my job to polish the brass and put the flowers out on Miss-bella's breakfast table, fan the flies off her food. But mostly I trailed the house, thinking of ways I could stick to Phibbah, like an apron. She grumbled while she worked, complaining that her old bones were rattling like stones in a calabash, that whoever dreamed up the colour white never had to be somebody's laundress, that white people's furniture never did nothing except breed more furniture. I liked the way her every word was birdsong, through the space in her teeth.

Four of them missing right where my own new ones had just come in.

She'd been the one to pull mine out, so I asked her, 'Phibbah, who pulled *yours*?' Oh, I worried at her like waves on sand. Children are all blindfolds and hammers. Cruel because of what they don't know.

She told me it was none of my business. 'You don' remember it,' she said.

'Why?'

'It happen before you born. Nobody remember a thing from then.'

Most days she did nothing but curse, but in the right mood she fed me scraps of hominy straight from the pot, or a slice of one of her corn cakes. When she sat outside the cook-room in the morning picking peas, and tapped her hand beside her in the dirt, it meant she'd set a few there for me, beside the washbasin. I'd creep over and scoop them into my palm, her arm tickling right beside mine. But she'd never turn, never look at me.

Peas snicking into pewter, Phibbah's smell of coal, and the ley ash and aloe she mixed into soap. If I kept quiet, she might tell a story. But she had to work up to it, like a wave you can see coming from far out. First, she said, she had to find her story breath, which wasn't the same as her living one.

My favourites were the ones about the house.

'Only one reason white man ever build pretty-pretty house like this,' Phibbah said. 'You hooks worms to catch fish. After him come from England and finish him house, Massa send him letter to Bristol. We sabi sure as night going come, white woman going come. Sure *enough* Miss-bella come running – *bragadap!* – same way guinea fowl come running when corn drop.'

Then Phibbah had a new mistress to learn. And she had to watch her the same way sailors watch the sky. *Red sky at morning,*

*sailor's warning; red sky at night, sailor's delight*. Miss-bella came riding high on the driver's bench in the mule-cart, as out of place as a white glove on a drying hedge, a teapot clinking on her lap, the blue and white pattern flocking the rim, like birds on a branch. She'd ripped up the cart cushions to make a little throne. Three nights Phibbah had stayed up sewing those cushions, finishing them off with a brocade leaf pattern good enough for the receiving room. Langton had said he wanted it to be like sitting on a god-damn cloud, the day he went down to get his wife. And here was Miss-bella, using them for her teapot instead of her backside! Oh, but she'd soon learn. This was Jamaica. Things were bound to crack.

Believe it or not, Phibbah said, there was a time Miss-bella and Langton used to ride out together, before she knew Jamaica was a thing she was supposed to be frightened of. Wearing her riding skirt that looked like a cut lemon and her straw hat with the blue feather, grey eyes shining with excitement and Langton mounted up beside her showing her everything he owned. Phibbah was supposed to keep watch, run down to swing the door the very minute they returned. She knew she'd pay if that door stayed closed even a minute longer. But there was a way of knowing when they were coming long before she could see them. 'How?' I'd ask her.

'Same way you track him for any reason. Look out into the fields.'

'Watch the bucks?'

'Mm. Them all do the same thing when him draw near.'

'They look up?'

'Cha! Pickney!' She kissed her teeth, air making its music through her gap. 'Them heads go *down*. Watch. You see it every time, like a wave through grass. Whichever way that wave coming from, is *there* buckra coming from.'

Miss-bella had to be tended like a rose. She had the palest arms I ever saw. Her whole morning's work was keeping them out of the sun. To top it all, she had a waist as narrow as a ching-ching beak, which she made narrower still with a whalebone corset that hooked around her, like ribs. Her bottom billowed under all manner of bustles and hoops her sister sent from the ladies' catalogues. She said life in the colonies could only be survived by prayer and endured with tea, so Phibbah served it every afternoon on the back porch, grumbling: 'Why *we* got the lone white in all of Jamaica mad enough to drink tea outside?'

We set out bowls of sugar water and cobalt poison to catch flies, brought out the orange-bough fan and the porcelain foot-bath. I hated that I had to wear my calico dress instead of my muslin (soft and white with a lace collar that always made Miss-bella's guests look me up and down). But the muslin was for waiting at table, the calico was my foot-washing dress.

Phibbah stood behind her with the fan. I pushed up the hem of her grey skirt. Her toes flared like little eyelashes. I looked out towards the cane-piece. Scraps of osnaburg and muslin flapping, field-hands moving out of line to dip rags in buckets of water, tie them around their brows. The nigger-drivers high on their horses under the tamarind tree, watching. I wiped the washcloth between Miss-bella's toes. Her feet looked like something dug from a fire after it had died down. Dry, scratched. Not pretty like the rest of her. As the afternoon wore on she grew more and more red-faced. The fan turned a breeze, ship-sail slow. Her words sloshed around us, like the water in the tub. She bent forwards over the cup, and sighed.

'This whole god-forsaken place was *designed* for killing Europeans,' she said.

Phibbah let the fan slap against her hip. '*Kiiii!* If it killing *you*, what it doing to us?'

Miss-bella stopped dead with the cup kissing her bottom lip. Then she laughed. 'Well, it's the Europeans I'm worried about, girl. Me in particular.'

Let me tell you, I saw Phibbah whipped for all manner of petty things: whenever a piece of china-ware went missing, after she let one of Miss-bella's teacups slip and break, once when she was late bringing in the salted cod at breakfast, but never once did I see her whipped for talking back. I asked her about it once. '*That* the only entertainment the woman ever gets,' she replied.

When you look back at anything, time caves into itself, like dirt running into a fresh hole. I see the three of us – the women of Paradise – like figures etched in glass. And it's as if no time has passed, as if that girl knelt at Miss-bella's feet, blinked, then woke up to discover she was the Mulatta Murderess.

From where I crouched, I could see out to the river. Oh, it would be a miracle to feel something soft as that water against my skin again, though I'd settle for lying on fresh-cut grass, or even just the chance to rub my fingers along a fresh-laundered shift. The air was sharp with the smell of cane trash burning out near the river, and the orange oil Phibbah used for polishing. 'Go on in now, girl,' Miss-bella said. 'Fetch some of that pineapple tart you made yesterday. And is there any orangeade?'

Phibbah set the jug by the door. I'd kept my head down all that time, scraping at dirt under Miss-bella's nails with the toe-picker, lifting first one foot, then the other. Heart still hard as a drum, but the rest of me gone soft as butter in a skillet. It was an ivory-handled picker I used, as if that could magic some dainty into Miss-bella's feet. I lifted one out onto the towel beside her chair, to dry, and she and I both leaned back and admired it. Like it was marble in a museum. We used to

pretend those feet were pretty as the teacups, same way we pretended the teapot wasn't half full of rum.

She wasn't done complaining. 'I'm so tired of forever staring at these same old no-account hills.'

'We could set out front, sometime,' Phibbah said, 'if you wasn't so stubborn.'

'Oh, no. I couldn't.'

'Get a view of the sea.'

'That's precisely why I could not.' She flicked her a look, sharp, over the shoulder. 'But you'd know about that.'

'About what?'

'Wanting a thing so much you can't bear looking at it.'

Phibbah stabbed and stabbed with the fan, murdering air. 'I thought it was the hills bothering you. Now you say it's the sea.'

Miss-bella laughed into her cup. Then she paused, like she was giving thought. 'Seems I can look neither ahead of me nor behind.'

'Well, then, you can' make no palabber about sitting where you put you-self.'

She waved her hand. 'Do you really think I chose to put myself anywhere on this estate?' We watched her slurp at her tea, set it aside. 'If only my father or my husband would see sense, I'd be down *there*. On the next fast clipper to Bristol.'

Manso swung past us with his tin pail, crying, *'Sook! Sook!'* calling in the cows, lifting his feet across the yard like the mad rooster that had only one rolling eye. Near the shed he shook salt into little mounds. The cows shambled over and licked at it with slow tongues.

To this day, I remember what happened then, because what happened then changed my life, for better and for worse. Miss-bella closed her eyes, rested her book on her knees, creeping her fingers across the leather cover. I saw a *D* nestled into it. A

breeze tussling with the pages. Manso whistling his commands to the cows. *Come in, come in.* The book lay there, just another thing I wanted. Pages white as peeled apples. White as cleaned sheets. There came a wildness in me. How can I explain it? All went quiet, like when an owl flies overhead. Not even the ticking of the fan. I reached up for it, my hand flooding her lap, then realized what I had done, jerked back, snagged myself on Miss-bella's skirt, scrabbled to my feet. She leaped up also. The book tumbled off her lap and into the water. My stomach pitched, like something tossed onto an ocean.

'*Frances!*'

The fan stopped.

'I'm sorry, missus,' I said. 'I'm sorry.' I fished it out and swiped at it with a corner of my frock, fright rattling inside my head. She slapped me. My head like a fish on a line, her hand the hook. Legs flowing to the floor.

That whole island was sun-addled. Heat like biting ants. Light like blades.

I wiped and wiped and wiped. I used my hands, my skirt, shook that book like a mop-head, trying to coax it dry. I wanted to cry but dared not, not while Manso was watching. When I was small he might have given me one of his skewed winks as he passed by, or let me hold the salt on my palm, feel a cow lick, but not any more. House-niggers were the one thing they all hated worse than cane.

I sat by the stables, wiping. I could hear the horses and their whining breaths. Even after the others had gone in from the cane-piece and there was only the mockingbird's *kee-kee-pip* to tell me I wasn't alone, I was still there, wiping. My shadow in the dirt. She'd said I must sit there. 'Make sure you don't try to crawl into any shade. I'll be watching.'

Would she?

She and Phibbah would be in the receiving room, Phibbah setting out the rum. Who knew where on that estate her husband would be?

Early on, in the days when she still rode out, Miss-bella had Phibbah make up the basket with breadfruit and cold turkey and shaddocks and some of the mangoes they'd picked that morning, saying she would take them out for her husband's lunch. It was when she was trying to pour a pint of wine into a flask that Phibbah told her it wasn't a good idea, and when she wouldn't take no for an answer that Phibbah decided to go down with her. She felt sorry for the woman, with her corn-yellow hair and her wrong expectations. They found them under the cocoa-tree, the only place to get good shade that far from the house, Langton sitting like a cocked gun, back to his wife, facing the two girls he had out there. It was lucky he only had them dancing, Phibbah said. They moved easy as water, those two. Dark bodies, bright eyes. Nutmeg nipples waving like streamers. They cut their eyes at the new mistress, and went right on singing:

*'Hipsaw! My deaa! You no do like a-me!*
*You no jig like a-me! You no twist like a-me!*
*Hipsaw! My deaa! You no shake like a-me!*
*You no wind like a-me! Go yondaa!'*

They'd probably still be right there under that tree, Phibbah said, because for a long time it seemed Miss-bella couldn't move. Except that at last Langton heard the basket drop from her hand and finally turned around.

That had been the end of the riding out, the picnics, and the expectations. Though not the end of the dancing. Miss-bella just had to learn to do what everyone else did. Make sure to look the other way.

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I glanced up towards the house, where Phibbah would be closing the shutters, lighting the candles with the taper, pulling the mosquito netting from its hook. Miss-bella settling herself on one of her silk stools, putting her feet up.

*You will not leave that spot until my book is dry*, she'd said. After a time, I gave up, stared down at the letters, small and black and sharp, like little claws. I tilted my head, as if I could *hear* what they were trying to tell me. They seemed trapped, each one shackled to the next one. Line after line. I snapped the book shut, sat back on my haunches. The old carthorse strained up along the sea road, cart loaded high with Indian-corn, the pickneys running beside, yelling and kicking the geese that jostled the wheels.

The back door opened and Miss-bella picked her way through the grass, puffs of dust kissing her feet. She crumpled her face down at me. 'Dry yet?'

I shook my head, twisted my lips. I must have been the very image of misery, sure that now I'd be cast out. No more little head-pats, no more Turkish sweets, no more muslin frock. By then I must have been sun-struck, for I pointed to the *D*, asked what it was. She leaned over me. Her breath was hot and dry as the air. 'That? Dee. Ee . . . *Eff*. This spells *Defoe*.'

Only then did I notice Phibbah had come out too and was standing on the porch, staring.

Miss-bella straightened, gave her a long look. Her voice sweetened to molasses. 'I'll teach you.'

*Yes*, I thought. *Yes, yes, yes!*

'No!' Phibbah stepped off the porch, looked like falling. 'Miss's . . .'

'Why not?' She nodded, tilted her head.

'Because it's *enough*,' Phibbah said, tripping forward. 'Enough.'

Once, after Miss-bella went in, Phibbah spat a thick stream into the dirt near the rose bush. 'Where would I go? If I left

here? Straight up them hills, first thing. First thing. Take me a musket. Then just wait. Wait, wait, wait, for the hottest part of the day, when nobody outside but slaves and lunatics. Then look for that spot of blue.' The blue of a white woman's eyes, the blue they called Wedgwood. 'Then I be aiming straight for her heart.'

Now she just poked her tongue through her gap, stared at Miss-bella.

I stood looking from one to the other, dumb as one of the cows.

'Is a whipping she deserve,' Phibbah said. 'For spoiling you book.'

'A whipping? A *whipping*!' Her eyes sharpened, gleamed wet. 'What an idea. Do you want to be the one to give it to her?'

*Now* Phibbah took a step back. 'No.'

*Kiii*, how hate burned through me, then. How it made me wish that I'd never snatched at her dropped peas. Or craved her stupid stories.

Miss-bella looked around, as if deciding where to put a picnic, her eyes squeezing like brass tongs. 'You're quite right. We mustn't spare the rod. After all, we don't want to spoil the child. Tell Manso call the others.'

Phibbah shook and shook. 'What?'

'You heard me. Oh, you'll do it, girl. Or Manso will. Quick. Light's going.' She turned to me, her face dripping sweat. 'Phibbah wants you whipped, so whipped you're going to be.'

I don't know which was worse, that it was Phibbah who gave me my first whipping or that the others gathered to stare at the pair of us. They had to come when called, of course. But most people will take a dose of those things happening to someone else so they know it's not happening to them.

Phibbah waited so long it was almost a shiver of relief when

she started. It's always the moment before that's the worst. Your whole body waiting. Then I heard her shift behind me, heard birch whistling. Pain sank into my thigh like a claw. Cut hard grooves deep as nails. Whipped up a thin stream of blood, trapped my breath, buried it deep. Another high whistle. I pressed my forehead into the dirt and grass, tried not to cry, but she gave me ten, one for every one of my supposed years. She whipped until that whip was nothing but an echo in my own head, until, I'm ashamed to say, I screamed and screamed, and first the sky went black, then my mind did.

All through it, Miss-bella stood silent, arms folded, face as smooth as milk. When I looked up it was Phibbah she was watching, not me. Her narrow smile stretched between them, tight as sewn thread. She nodded, made her eyes go small. It was as if some inside part of her travelled across that dirt while she herself stood still, went right out across the yard, and spoke something to Phibbah. In the end, it was Phibbah who cast her eyes to the dirt, looked away first. Swallowing and swallowing, though there was nothing in her mouth. Slowly, the others drifted away. Only Miss-bella still watching.

But it was Phibbah who carried me to the cook-room, set me on my pallet, fetched one of the liniments she made with whiskey stolen from Langton's drinks cabinet. She clattered down a plate of johnnycakes, but I only stared at them, hunger wrestling pride, then pushed the plate away. I'd trapped my anger, like a bird in a cage. She bent forwards over the grill, shoulders going like bellows, held a slab of salted cod spitting into the flame. 'Harder for me than you,' she said. I said nothing. 'She dress you like a doll, now she want train you like a pet. But if Langton catch the two o' you at it, *reading*, it's *you* going feel it. You hear? Listen, Frances.' She spat out my name, like another loosened tooth. 'Listen to me. Not one thing in this world more dangerous than a white woman when she bored. You hear?'

I shrugged. Nothing in my world had been more dangerous than *her* that afternoon. I could see her fingers trembling on the cod's flesh, but she didn't lift them. She was going to blister her hands. Serve her right.

'But you don' –'

I got up.

'Where you going?'

She followed me out. The dogs leaped up, trailed over, their backs curved like ship's skeletons, looking for scraps. 'Go on!' she yelled at them. 'G'weh!'

She gripped my hand. There was a long silence between us while I let her hold me. When I looked up, I saw her cheek beating, like a heart. 'You never stop to think why is *you* get pick. You think is luck? Only you could think is luck.'

'What's wrong with wanting to learn something?'

'Learn to want what you've got.'

'What's that?' I asked. 'What I got?'

She stared and stared and I stared back. A smile cracked her face, she started to shake, and then the shaking crawled slowly over her whole body, like molasses on the boil. She threw her head back and laughed and laughed. And then I laughed too.