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Sweetsmoke

David Fuller

Published by Abacus

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SWEETSMOKE



DAVID
FULLER

ABACUS

Chapter One

July 1, 1862

THE big one closed his hand into a fist and took a step toward the smaller boy. He was tall and narrow, ten years old, and black; his joints bulged in rude knobs, his long bones had grown quickly and suddenly and the meat in between was strung taut like piano wire. A stiff muslin shirt, his only item of clothing, hung to the top of his thighs, barely covering his buttocks and the skin that stretched over his angular pelvic bones. Dust powdered his thin legs and turned his calves pale, and his bare feet left significant shapes in the dirt. The smaller one, the white one, should have been afraid. He wore a gingham shirt with soft trousers held up by suspenders and he had real shoes. But skin showed between shoe and cuff, and the trousers bagged at the knees, shiny there and thin.

Cassius had not noticed the worn material of the boy's trousers until that moment, and wondered if the condition of the white children's clothing was another casualty of the Confederate quartermasters. Then he wondered what the boy's grandmother thought about it.

The white one, grandson of the planter, stood his ground, hands open at his side; in that moment, Cassius remembered himself standing barefoot in the same yard, facing another white boy twenty years before, this one's father. On that day, Cassius had yet to understand that he was another man's property, and now the steam of humiliation flushed through him as if he was standing there again, reliving the past.

Cassius made no move. He had not witnessed the boyhood conflict that had brought on this moment, but he knew how it would end.

Andrew, the tall, black one, should also have known. He had older brothers in the field, and even if by their compassion they hesitated to warn him, he should have known he was alone and surrounded. None of the black children seemed to know, but the white children knew, and one of them ran to the kitchen for Mam Rosie.

Mam Rosie was out in an instant, humping down the steps, wiping her hands down her apron, an old woman lean as a rope twisted tight, coming on fast. Mam Rosie showed no fear, she was high yellow and had privileges, but she was also conscious of the precise limits of her power. She came fast but Cassius knew there was time—the two boys were there in the dirt, the other children were near the wilting camellias by the big house porch steps, and Nanny Catherine watched over her shoulder. No rush at all, thought Cassius, as his eyes drifted toward the work sheds behind the big house. The smokehouse was there, and the sheds for carpentry, blacksmithing, and shoe making. Then the barns and beyond them the shed for curing tobacco—the old woman still running—and Cassius's eyes slid to the low rise beyond which, out of sight, stood the Overseer's house and past that the quarters. Acres of fields rolled out in three directions where maturing tobacco grew tall. The children's gardening chores were done, the butter churn put away, and the air was soft with moisture and sunlight and insects sawing, plenty of time on most days, but not today, as Mam Rosie was quick but not quick enough, and Andrew swung. He opened his hand at the last second and slapped young Charles's ear.

Cassius closed his eyes at the sound. Every child, every adult, every creature in the yard paused, and the future came into Cassius's mind as clearly as he remembered his own past: Tomorrow Andrew would be obliged to work the fields with his brothers and parents.

He would learn about it that night in the quarters, and his heart would be glad because with the news would arrive his first pair of trousers and his first hat and something that passed for shoes. His parents would see his gladness and their eyes would meet in resignation. Their son, their little one, the baby, already going to the fields, two years early. In the morning before sunup, Mr. Nettle would ring the bell rousing Andrew from his place on the pallet between mother and father, torn from sleep with trembling stomach, expected to consume a full meal by candlelight with the sun barely a rumor. He would never again sleep between them. He would eat little and regret it later. Walking in the dark to the fields, his new shoes would pinch and the lower legs of his trousers would cling, wet with dew and cold against his shins. They would assign him a row to pick hornworms off tobacco leaves, the hands working quickly, quickly to save the crop. He was to inspect each leaf top and bottom, plucking hornworms as they grasped with their sturdy legs and strong tiny jaws. The sun would step into the sky and dry his trousers and the heat would gradually increase, unnoticed until he moved, when he would discover his body reluctant, leaden. He would beg for a rest. His mother Savilla would shift in her row to grant him shade from her thick trunk as she continued to pluck hornworms, but then his mother, his mother, would guide his fingers back to the work. Eventually she would yield to his complaints and pour hornworms from her sack into his, hastily attacking his section to deceive Mr. Nettle the Overseer. But Big Gus the Driver would know and when he came by she would be forced back to her row. They would not beat him, though, not on his first day. In time, when exhaustion, blisters, soreness, and sweat became routine, he would think back and remember that slap. Andrew would never return to play with the other children.

Mam Rosie cuffed Andrew on his ear, a loud and obvious blow that she hoped would satisfy the planter's grandson. Her gnarled fingers squeezed the back of Andrew's smooth dry neck and steered him aside. Mam Rosie pretended Charles was not there, but Cassius saw the boy's reddened ear and knew something would happen. He waited for Charles to order Mam Rosie to bind Andrew's wrists high to the ring on the whipping post, to order her to pull up Andrew's shirt and expose his back. Cassius knew Mam Rosie would

do what she was told, whispering to calm Andrew as she secured him to the post while he twisted and bucked in outrage. He waited for Charles to tell Mam Rosie to run fetch the whip. Cassius saw meanness in Charles's face as he controlled his tears, and then Charles's eyes found Cassius's eyes and when Cassius did not look away, Charles saw that Cassius knew, and Charles would have to do something. It was of no consequence that he was ten years old. This was white man's pride.

"Cassius, you git along now and fetch me some water," said Charles.

I don't think I hear you, said Cassius aloud but not loud enough for Charles to hear.

"What's that you say? What's that?" said Charles.

Beautiful day, said Cassius, again too quietly to be heard.

Cassius gripped the heavy hammer in his right hand, nails in his left, and pressed his leg against the fence post where his knee and the top of his foot held the stave in place. A tan and gray feral cat, kitten in her mouth, sauntered into the shade under the big house porch. Sweat coated his skin and fat oily drops clung to his nose, eyebrows, and chin. The air would not cool until long after dark. Mr. Nettle's wife came around the far corner returning from the privy, using her wide skirt to funnel her three small Nettles ahead of her, suddenly alerted by the tension, wondering what she had missed. A bantam rooster lurched with a high step in the yard, one eye warily on the shadow where the cat had disappeared.

"I said git, boy," said Charles.

Cassius probed his own facial expression from within, finding it locked into a blank, uncomprehending stare, reaching back to know it had been just so at the moment Charles had met his eyes. But Cassius still did not look away. His mind remained trapped in the past, barefoot in his own stiff shirt, not yet knowing who he was or what would come of his defiance. Charles's eyes reflected uncertainty; he knew there should be no hesitation. The yard by the big house was unnaturally quiet. Cassius became aware of the song then, the ever-present song that rose out of the fields, brought louder up the hill by a shift in the wind. He did not notice that the smell came as well.

Cassius turned back to the fence stave and expertly angled a nail,

bringing the hammer, driving it three-quarters home with one swing.

"I'll tell her, Cassius, I'll tell Grandma Ellen!" Charles said. He spit out Cassius's name and walked to the big house.

Mam Rosie stood with Andrew, looking at Cassius, a warning flashing in her eyes.

On the second floor, Ellen Howard read aloud to her servants a news story from a two-day-old copy of the Richmond Daily Whig, reliving General Lee's victory at Gaines' Mill, the third battle fought in as many days. She read dramatically, expecting her servant, Pet, and her daughter's personal servants, Susan and Pearl, to be properly moved. The early months of the war had brought a constant stream of terrible news that had spread a pall over the Confederacy. The newspapers bemoaned the inevitability of the war's rapid conclusion in favor of the Union, and Ellen had been deeply traumatized. The culmination of the bitter news came with the fall of New Orleans in April, and her natural gloom settled into depression. But soon followed the campaign in Virginia, and a series of victories over Union general George McClellan's enormous army brought unexpected joy to the populace. Ellen Howard, however, was slow to trust good news, afraid to emerge from her comfortable cocoon of dread and ennui. Already feared as a thin-skinned and distant mistress, she had grown unpredictable after the news of her oldest son John-Corey Howard's death at Manassas Junction during the first battle of the war. John-Corey had been named for her father, the late Judge Ezra John Corey, a man she had adored. Ellen's bitterness over her son's death grew when informed that the Yankees had ridden out from Washington, D.C. in their buggies with picnic lunches to enjoy the spectacle of their soldiers defeating the Johnny Rebs. She was little cheered to know they had been forced to flee in haste and terror when the South had answered the cocksure Yankees with blood. A number of John-Corey's belongings had arrived with a letter of condolence, his watch but not the winding key, his slouch hat and his precious collection of received letters, many of which were written in her hand.

She was not to view her son's remains. Perhaps because she could not picture him dead, a dreamy part of her was able to imagine the war as unreal, envisioning John-Corey alive on his own plantation outside Lynchburg, or here, in the big house, hiding as he had as a child. As long as she did not see his body, she could pretend that the war did not exist, certain that all this foolishness would soon be revealed as a test of character. On such days the house people would hear her humming, alone in a bedroom, through an open door down a long hallway, and they would look at one another and disguise their anxiety with covert, derisive laughter. Missus actin strange, Missus goin off in her head, Missus havin one'a them days so watch out. Reality would eventually intrude, in the form of the Daily Whig with war news, or she would see a soldier on the road or hear the sudden hum-rumble of cannon that sounded close but would actually have come from somewhere far to the north.

But nothing brought on the reality of her son's death as much as the arrival of his people.

Two weeks before, two of John-Corey's negroes had come to Sweetsmoke Plantation in a wagon. John-Corey's other people had been sold, but John-Corey had left instructions that these people were special family and should be kept together. He had neglected to mention his personal body servant in these instructions and so Lewis, who had been by his side when John-Corey died at Manassas and had returned to his plantation to bring to the family the news of his death, had been sold with the others to a cotton and rice plantation in Georgia. John-Corey's last two negroes had spent the winter and spring with John-Corey's widow closing up the big house at Howard Plantation. When Stephanie returned to live with her parents, John-Corey's people had been sent to Sweetsmoke. Two weeks now and Ellen had yet to meet them. Half a dozen times she had called them to the big house, but each time she had been overcome with nervous emotion. John-Corey's special people brought back the pain of his death, so each time she sent them away without seeing them. She even used the excuse she had heard whispered among her people, that the girl was bad luck, a contagion carried from her son's plantation. Ellen knew the girl had been a good house girl, and the man, her father, had carried the keys. Ellen had not had a butler in the house since her second son, Jacob, had taken William, the plan-

tation's butler, to be his personal servant when he had joined Turner Ashby's 7th Virginia Cavalry. Tomorrow, she thought. Tomorrow I'll feel stronger and I'll speak to John-Corey's people. In the meantime, they went to the fields with the others.

Perhaps it was no surprise that Ellen was incapable of meeting her son's people, as her life was now a series of superstitious gestures designed to keep Jacob safe and alive. She had let down her guard for John-Corey. Now she was afraid to alter any of her activities in case doing so should endanger her beloved second son.

In the afternoons she sometimes worked with watercolors, upstairs with the windows open to catch the breeze. Before the war, her paintings had been of flowers and landscapes, but once her oldest son had gone off to fight, she began to create fanciful scenes of the Garden of Eden, incorporating many of the flowers and plants she had painted before, as if her previous body of work was but a premonition. Lately, purple storm clouds crowded the edges of her paintings, and more reds were evident in the trunks of the trees and branches, as if their inner cores were heated, athrob with light. In fact, amid the shortages brought on by war, she was low on blue and green paint and had an abundance of red. Her husband fretted over her work, but the new red pleased her and she reached for it willfully.

Ellen paused in her reading to her people after the pleasure of speaking the words "Gaines' Mill," feeling the syllables in her mouth as her tongue formed the final l with a rubbery push off where the top of her mouth met her teeth. The wind changed then and brought the new smell through the open window and she lost the track of the sentence. Her body servant Pet smelled it as well, and unconsciously imitated Missus Ellen's rigid pose. Ellen recognized the smell and envisaged field dirt and sweat, moist body crevices and hidden hair and oil and blood and feces. She waited for the odor to pass. She closed her eyes, her upper lip pronounced, nostrils arched.

"Pet, in my dressing table, bring the bottle."

The bottle from Paris, Missus? said Pet.

Ellen nodded slightly and Pet went to her table. Pet was darker than the others in the big house, thus Pet was anxious about her position, even though she had worked there for four years. When Pet was out of her missus's sight, she opened the drawer and took up the

bottle of perfume. But she moved Missus's best petticoat and found the other bottle, the one that held the laudanum, the bottle Missus was using just a little more every day. Pet looked at that bottle longingly, then covered it over with the petticoat and with her hip pushed in the drawer. Pet had yet to connect her missus's humming with the laudanum. She returned to Ellen with the Parisian perfume bottle in both hands.

So little left, said Pet.

Ellen took it. She hoarded the precious liquid, chose carefully the occasions to wear it, and even then was miserly when applying the scent as the bottom of the bottle came into sharp focus. She tried not to desire the way she felt when wearing perfume—elegant, chosen, French—but this other smell created nothing less than an emergency. She put the smallest possible dab in the hollow of her neck between her clavicles, and when that was insufficient, tipped the bottle to her fingertip and brought it to her philtrum, just a touch of wet applied to her upper lip beneath her nostrils. Her grandson continued to call for her, using that tone, but she did not answer.

Cassius was not aware that his hammer drove nails in time with the field song. Even when the wind came around and brought the song, he heard it the way he heard the sun on his shoulders or the sound of his own breathing. They were in the near fields this afternoon, within a mile of the big house.

He heard the song change. He rested a moment and turned his head and listened to the new song that told of death. A surge of apprehension drove into his chest. He rested the head of his hammer against the dirt, and the surge pumped in his palms and fingers and made them weak.

He looked down the hill knowing there would be a rider on the road approaching the big house.

Cassius wondered why the rider had stopped in the fields to tell the Overseer. That was how the hands would have learned the news; that was why they changed the song. Big Gus the Driver would have been sure to stand by Mr. Nettle at the moment the Overseer was told. Big Gus, one of the lighter-skinned field hands, worked near

Mr. Nettle, and Mr. Nettle let him swing the bullwhip. Big Gus whipped harder than Mr. Nettle, to impress both him and the Master. Cassius pictured the moment, Big Gus bursting with the news, clearing his throat to show off his grand lubricious voice for the women—I'm comin on to meet you, Lord—drawing it out so the hands knew he was changing the song. The work would not stop, but the work song would abandon their tongues—I'm comin on alone—and spread across the field like a sudden wind spreading a small chop across the glass surface of a lake, and Cassius thought that the tobacco would grow tall humming the song, and those who chewed and snuffed it would taste death—I'm lookin for to see you, Lord, That me a comin home.

The rider was close now, pink-necked, flush with news. Cassius knew him, Otis Bornock, a poor white. That explained why he had stopped in the fields, Otis Bornock knew Mr. Nettle. Otis Bornock and other town trash sometimes traded with the blacks. They would trade for things made by the hands late at night, or for things that mysteriously disappeared from the big house. That did not make him a friend. Otis Bornock might benefit from the trading, but he was more likely to turn on a black man than to help himself. Otis Bornock had once sold Cassius a bottle of whiskey so vile and raw, that it had taken Cassius an extra day to finish the bottle. Otis Bornock rode the back roads at night with the other Patrollers, and until three years ago, Mr. Nettle had been their leader.

Cassius watched the man come. Who was dead, and how did this death relate to the plantation? Any death that touched the planter family brought on an anxious time of limbo for the blacks. When a white planter, his wife, or one of their children died, ownership of slaves changed hands. Even the smallest peccadillo in a white man, a gambling debt or an illegitimate child, could propel waves through the slave community. Families might be broken up, wives sold from husbands, children sold from mothers. If they were sold to the cotton states, they would not be heard from again.

The pounding of the hooves slowed, the heat and perspiration of the horse crowded the yard, and Otis Bornock swung out of his sweat-black saddle, the seat of his pants clinging to leather, peeling away. The horse was thinner, surcingle straps hanging long under its belly. Everyone was thinner now. Otis Bornock's pearl-handled

Colt Army revolver glinted momentarily in the sun, his sole proud possession that he claimed to have won in a poker game. Others said he found it on a dead man, and whispers that Otis Bornock had encouraged the man's condition before "finding" the gun added to his reputation. Cassius watched him hurry to the porch. Sweat rolled from his stained hat down the ends of his hair and dripped to his collar. Otis Bornock removed his hat at the door and ran his kerchief across his face. Pet came to the door, haughty and superior in the face of white trash, but Ellen came up behind her and greeted him graciously, even as Cassius saw terror in her eyes. Then she allowed him inside, a man like that, Cassius thought, allowed in her home. Cassius saw that she anticipated the worst possible news. Otis Bornock drew a letter from his back pocket and it was wrinkled and moist and Cassius imagined it stank of Otis Bornock's backside. Young Charles followed him in, quiet as a shadow. Charles understood the impact of the visitor, preceded as he was by the song. Cassius knew he would have to be careful about Charles. He had aroused an enemy, and the boy would not forget.

Cassius listened for the owl screech of anguish, but the silence inside stretched and he knew Master Jacob, Major Jacob Howard, was still alive. Cassius breathed. The planter's family remained intact.

Cassius straightened his shoulders to relieve the strain on his back, where the scar tissue was like a crust. He picked up a pail with fresh water and moved to the chuffing horse, which dropped its nose and drank loudly. While he knew not to water a sweating horse, this was Bornock's beast and Cassius was carrying out a plan. Cassius looked toward the door to Mam Rosie's kitchen. Once the horse finished, Cassius would walk to the pump by the kitchen to refill. By then, Mam Rosie would know the news.

Ellen came out of the big house onto the porch, the rider standing behind her in the dark of the room. She held the unfolded note in her hand.

"Cassius!" she called.

He set down the pail and stepped away from the horse into her line of view.

Yes, Missus Ellen, said Cassius.

"Mr. Bornock tells me the French gate leans."

That's so, Missus Ellen.

Cassius knew Bornock had said nothing of the kind, nor did he mention that the main gate had been leaning since the day it was built, that it had almost certainly leaned back in France on that vineyard.

"You go directly and straighten it out."

Yes, ma'am. Right after I finish this fence Master Charles knocked down.

"That will have to wait. You get on down there like I said. And do it right the first time, Cassius, not like your usual."

I will, Missus.

She nodded to the rider, dismissing him. Otis Bornock returned to his horse and remounted. Cassius was not to know the news. Ellen would wait for Master Hoke, her husband, to return from Edensong later that afternoon to tell him. Young Charles stood in the doorway, staring at Cassius. Cassius could not help himself; he looked directly at Charles, and saw malicious satisfaction on the boy's face. The identity of the dead was bad news for Cassius, and everyone knew who it was but him.

Cassius collected his hammer and nails and a coil of rope. He listened to the horse hooves fade down the hill. He did not fetch from his carpentry shed the tools he would require to complete the work. He went directly down the hill to the main gate. One of the house girls, probably Nanny Catherine, was crying in Mam Rosie's kitchen. But he could not go there to discover why. Ellen Howard had made sure that he would not find out.

The main gate was from a vineyard in France, bought off the property by Hoke Howard on a European visit back in the days when money was in season. The field hands often told the story, heard second- or thirdhand, of Master Hoke riding in the French countryside, pulling up when he saw the magnificent gate. Well, Ol' Massa Hoke, he used to gettin what he want and he knows that gate belong not in France but on his plantation in the Commonwealth of Virginie, so he do what any self-respectin massa'd do, he walk on up to that ol' Frenchy's door and offer up a big ol' sack a money like them burlap ones we got in the fields. The hands seemed to think it

was so much money—and with every recounting the amount increased—that Mr. Frenchy had been astonished, but when Cassius heard the story, he imagined the Frenchman suppressing a smirk as he allowed himself to be overpaid. Cassius knew that when Hoke was flush, he threw around his money the way he threw around his weight, randomly, in grand pointless gestures. So Hoke had hired people to systematically break down the gate, numbering each piece as a local man made a drawing. The crates were then shipped back to the Commonwealth in one of his merchant ships—before the blockade, when Hoke was still part owner of a fleet—but along the way, the numbered drawing was lost. Here the hands out-embellished one another, describing the Old Master in a comic rage dismissing ships full of careless white men.

The gate was made of cedar, an overblown trellis that straddled the narrow road leading up to the big house, a vain and solitary structure in a vast landscape. While performing his apprenticeship as a carpenter—and it was Hoke who had offered to take him out of the fields so he could learn carpentry—Cassius had helped reconstruct the gate as it emerged from the crates, piecing it together like a puzzle. Hoke had then painted the name of the plantation across the top: Sweetsmoke.

The wind shifted and Cassius heard it move above him, through the highest leaves of the tall oaks where it did him no good, and the immediate air around him went dead and he stood in a hollow of stillness. A sensation of dread came over him, one he had had before: He was living in another man's dream. The dreamer was like the wind rushing through the oak leaves above, indifferent and unaware of his presence. Cassius made no mark on either the man or the dream. The stillness crowded him and Cassius was afraid to move.

He believed he had already lived long enough. He thought he was over the age of thirty—Jacob Howard was thirty, and they had been born around the same time—and Cassius looked that and more. He now studied the land as if he would never see it again, and tried to memorize it as if he might need to describe it one day. Indeed the land was elegant and sculpted and green and fertile, yet he was so unconnected to it that its beauty did not move him. He believed that he made no mark whatsoever on the land. He memorized but did

not imagine carrying the memory with him to a better world. He could not imagine any kind of world that would come with death. He simply saw the end of his time, and in the quiet that followed, he found comfort. It would be an end to a life that had given him little pleasure, hope, or ease. He believed that he had turned his heart cold.

A hornworm clung to a long sprig of switch grass and he reached down and plucked it off, its stubborn legs letting go one at a time. The creature fit in his palm. Its head was thick and bulbous with grooves that resembled a series of folds, its flabby legs grabbed at his skin, its jaw chewing on the air. Cassius looked at the small white ovals that ran down its side, outlined in orange with an orange dot in the middle so that they appeared to be a row of miniature painted eyes.

It was early in the season, yet it felt late; the light of the sun seemed darker, older. He wondered if the field song was prescient and the death was his own. That would be a bit of good luck. He set down the hornworm without killing it.

Sounds of the plantation slipped in clear and bright, then were just as quickly muffled, a fragment of work song followed by a ghostly stillness, the drifting laughter of children, blown away by the rush of overhead wind. A deep ache built inside him as he listened to people living, working, and being together. A fierce and terrible melancholy gripped him and he did not understand why the feeling made him desire to live.

Finally, a breath of breeze passed under the brim of his hat and cooled the sweat, and Cassius was released from the moment.

He began to work. He tied a length of rope to the top of the gate and tied the other end around a stone and let it hang to make a plumb line. He secured one end of another piece of rope high on the opposite side, and pulled the far end around the trunk of a tree. With a steady pull, the gate came near to upright and the stone hung closer to the wood. He secured the rope around the trunk and moved to sit in shade. He hooked his hat over his knee to dry. No one wanted or expected this work to be done. Cassius was there to be separated from the big house until Hoke returned. He watched the road. The ruts were deep after the rains in April and early May.

Dust came off the road to the west in the direction of town, and

he watched the cloud grow larger. Not Hoke, as he would come from Edensong Plantation in the opposite direction. A neighbor perhaps, or a traveler.

Cassius smiled as he recognized Weyman driving the buckboard of his owner, Thomas Chavis. Cassius remained in the shade, and when Weyman drew near he pulled up the horse.

Woo, Cassius, you hidin out? said Weyman.

Hiding out?

What y'all doin down here, messin with that overgrown door frame? Must be in a heap a' trouble.

No trouble here, said Cassius. He noticed something off in Weyman's manner. Around the eyes, maybe.

Right, 'cause they always send you down here to rest your black backside in the shade.

Can't have the sun looking over my shoulder, said Cassius. Like to make me self-conscious. Could miscalculate and build a gate that leans.

Weyman laughed and Cassius was suddenly curious, never before having heard Weyman force a laugh. Cassius took note of something he might not have noticed otherwise, that he generally was at ease in Weyman's company. Right then Cassius felt like a dog whose fur had been shaved backward with a dull blade.

Coming from town? said Cassius.

Equipment in at the dry goods for Thomas, said Weyman, nodding to items in the back of the buckboard covered by a tarpaulin.

Taking the long way home, said Cassius.

Got a customer over at Edensong.

Cassius nodded and looked in that direction and wondered when Hoke would return. Then Cassius said, abruptly:

Tell me who died.

Weyman looked away and Cassius understood Weyman's unusual manner. Weyman looked back and shrugged.

Wouldn't know, said Weyman.

Cassius nodded and his insides twisted into a knot. Weyman knew and Weyman would not say. This was likely to be bad news indeed for Cassius. From the moment Ellen had shut him out, he had suspected the identity, knowing whose death was most likely to bring him grief, but much as he tried not to be superstitious, he

did not want to think of her at that moment, for fear he would make it so.

When you goin make me some more a' them little soldiers? said Weyman.

They take time, said Cassius.

The white children like 'em. Remind 'em of they daddies. I can sell 'em at a good price, people been askin.

See what I can do.

A real good price, Cassius, and you know I always share.

I know you say you do.

Now that's a fact, said Weyman, nodding in appreciation.

One day I'll make you hundreds of soldiers so you can be rich, said Cassius.

Rich. Can't rightly imagine what that be like.

Give it some thought, maybe you'll come up with something, like sitting down regularly to a fancy spread for supper or walking around in decent shoes.

No sir, tell you what I'd do if I ever was rich, I reckon I'd like to own that Colt sidearm of old Otis Bornock.

Maybe a new hat, that one got holes in the holes. You don't look out, pretty soon your hat'll be around your neck.

Got that sweet pearl handle and all, said Weyman, but he pulled his hat off his head and looked at it.

Bornock sooner cut his own throat than give up his gun, said Cassius, shaking his head, amused.

I seen somethin, said Weyman, growing serious.

What'd you see? I know, Bornock coming around to gift you that gun 'cause he's so doggone fond of you, said Cassius, enjoying himself.

No, this serious. Seen your ol' massa consortin with The Angel Gabriel.

Cassius felt a chill run up the backs of his arms.

Maybe you got mixed up, said Cassius, but his smile was gone.

No sir, seen it with my own eyes.

Gabriel Logue, said Cassius, weighing the significance of the name.

Cassius and Weyman looked at each other in silence, roasting under an indifferent sun. Gabriel Logue, nicknamed The Angel, was a smuggler, although he did not trade in human flesh. His goods

flowed both north and south, across a porous border. The Confederate Army would be particularly satisfied to have Gabriel Logue in their custody. If Hoke was doing business with Logue, then he was again suffering financial difficulties, and that was not good.

Your old master still lets you ride around in that thing, said Cassius finally, changing the subject with a smile.

Oh yeah, Thomas trust me, he even trust me out here on the road with y'all wastrels and vagabonds, said Weyman.

Now that's the second time you call your old master by his Christian name. Pretty soon he let you lay down with that pretty woman of his.

Weyman laughed naturally this time. He and one other slave, an older man named Bunty, were owned by Thomas Chavis, and they worked his small family farm side by side with Thomas and his wife Martha. The white family sat with their slaves at the supper table and ate the same food at the same time, like equals. For a slave, Weyman's life was good.

Pretty woman? Why, one time, that speckled old hen lean over to make a reflection in a pond and damned if that pond didn't pucker up and soak into the ground.

I heard that, said Cassius laughing. He had never met Thomas Chavis's wife, but Weyman always had a good story about her.

A skunk took one look at her and his stink peeled off his tail end and ran for cover.

Makes a man wonder how old Thomas got her belly rounded, said Cassius.

Some time after dark, I s'pect.

Cassius saw the first indication of a dust cloud to the east, from the direction of Edensong Plantation. He moved casually to the rear of Weyman's buckboard, testing the ropes that held the tarpaulin in place, forcing Weyman to turn his back on the cloud.

But you doin all right yourself, carpenter, said Weyman. Long as your old "secesh" master be loanin you out to other planters. Just keep hidin your half pay from them field negroes and you can buy your freedom by 'n' by.

A free man, Cassius said thoughtfully. Tell me something, Weyman, what does a free man do? Where does a free man go? I better know so I can make plans.