

## Prologue

Euphrates O'Shea, the black one, fled the tattletale ruins of her twin brother's secret strawberry patch. Sticky-sweet red berry juice stained her hands, mouth, and the front of her flour-sack dress. She was screaming like a bogeyman was about to get her as she ran zigzagging out of the stand of flowering dogwoods.

Angus O'Shea Jr., the white one, was on his sister's heels like one of Marse Henry's hounds chasing a runaway. "Damn you, Euphie," he shouted. "This time I'm gonna choke your skinny butt."

Euphrates knew her brother meant it, too. It was the hottest blessed day of July and Angus hadn't slowed none.

She made it out into the grassy open meadow and headed down to the river bluff. Ever since he had helplessly watched their uncle drown, two summers ago, Angus refused to go near water any deeper than his ankles. No way he was going to chance tromping along the crumbly cliff above the swiftly moving James River.

What did Papa call the river? A grave of shattered bones and stolen dreams.

Euphrates heard Angus yell at her again. He was gaining on her, darn him.

"You hear me, Euphie? I was gonna sell them strawberries. Would've got least fifty cents for 'em, too. Let's see how funny you is after I tell Mama on you."

Euphrates cut a look back at her brother, but didn't dare answer. They might have been born twins, only no stranger would have ever guessed.

She had Mama's midnight-black eyes and high cheekbones, and the same long legs and deep cocoa skin.

Her one sign of being Papa's daughter was her flaming red hair.

But looking at Angus was like seeing back in time. Like seeing Papa when he was a young boy growing up in Ireland. Leastways, peoples always said so.

Same wild silky hair and pale skin. Same green eyes and keen nose. Same tallness. Same muscles.

Side by side their shadows would be twins.

Angus acted like Papa, too. Kind one day, mean as a demon the very next. Now, his face was glowing, red as hot coals. Just like Papa's when he took to lashing somebody.

Euphrates reconsidered her dash to the bluff. Maybe it was better to go up to the big house and find Mama before Angus did. That is, if she wanted to save herself from one of Mama's "not puttin' up with any more foolishness" scoldings.

With a glance backward, Euphrates saw that Angus was gaining on her. She quickly changed her plan and veered, instead, up the hill to the big house. To Marse Henry's.

She'd run around to the back of the house, go in through the kitchen, then take the servants' stairs up to the floor Mama likely was on, the third floor. The floor with the chillun's rooms.

The sun was still in its afternoon arch.

Marse Henry wouldn't be back from Richmond till nightfall and Ma'am would be in her parlor, on the second floor, playing solitaire and drinking lemonade toddies, till dinner.

Euphrates was only allowed in the big house when Marse was away, 'cept more and more that was most days. On those days Mama let her come in and help with the chores.

Mama made it their special time, a time for recipe secrets, for stitchin' Baby Sister's rag doll a new dress, and, best of all, sneakin' looks inside the books in Marse Henry's library.

She huffed and puffed up the last few steps to the crest of the hill, then darted across the gravel path that divided Marse Henry's big fancy white house from the quarters, the rows of one-room shacks where everybody else lived, including her, Mama, Angus, and Baby Sister.

Papa lived in his own cabin, on the other side of the big house.

She was out of breath and beads of sweat were running down her face. She took refuge in the shade of a weeping willow and spied down the hill, wondering what had happened to her brother.

He had stopped, too, at the bottom of the hill, and was bent over, with one hand on a knee, and the other hand to his chest. Laughing.

When he rose to his full height and waved Euphrates on, she sighed with relief but quickly realized that now she had an even worse problem.

If Angus let her escape he might go home to their cabin and find out she had gotten into his cigar box that he'd hidden from her in Mama's quilt chest.

The box had been brimful of silver coins and federal dollars.

She knew Angus had been saving for his almighty freedom day, only she decided their friends, Clara and Lawrence, needed the money more.

The morning they disappeared, Papa drug Lawrence's daddy out of the barn, where he was tending the horses, and kicked and kicked him, yelling, "Anybody else got big ideas?"

He left Lawrence's daddy right there, for two whole days . . . until the man died.

Euphrates waved gleefully back at her brother. He never could stay mad at her long.

Mama says they's closer than most brothers and sisters 'cause they's shared the womb; they's got a bond couldn't never be broken.

That was probably true, 'cause even now that they is fourteen, they's still each other's best friend. Leastways they were until Angus discovered his empty cigar box.

Euphrates took a deep breath and cupped her hands to her mouth and called as loudly as possible, "Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, you can't catch me."

As she watched Angus walk away, Euphrates suddenly understood something for the first time. How he got away with going into Richmond and passing himself off as Papa's younger brother. How he was able to fool peoples into thinking he was white.

Shoot, Aunt Pearl said he was whiter than a whole lot a white people.

Aunt Pearl was right, but Angus wouldn't never turn his back on his own people. Others might, but never Angus.

Euphrates cupped her hands to her mouth again, this time to mimic the supposed sound of a ghost, and bellowed with all her might: "*Oooooooooo. Ooooooooooooooooooooo.*"

That would get Angus's blood up. He hated when people teased him for being so light skinned . . . and sure enough, he bolted around and lit up the hill after her.

"I ain't kiddin', Euphrates. You's messin' with my plans. 'Cause of you, I ain't got no strawberries to sell. And 'cause of no strawberries, no damn money."

Euphrates resumed her escape by skipping rapidly backward along the gravel road, away from the big house, bravely taunting her brother on by calling, "*Ooooooooooooooooooooo.*"

Finally, when he, too, made the crest of the hill, Angus started walking to catch his breath. He was about to call to her again when he realized the danger ahead.

They had gone so far down the plantation's main road that when he turned around to look, the big house was barely visible.

As he turned back to warn Euphrates not to go any farther, she was already well past the archway of roses, Bellegrove's entrance, standing on the road to town.

Marse Henry didn't allow any of his property to even go as far as the plantation's stone boundary wall. Angus only got away with leaving 'cause Papa convinced Marse to let Angus drive the wagon into town to pick up the household's orders and supplies.

Anyone else who disobeyed found out just how mean Marse Henry really was. Mama's sister, Patsy, had learned the hard way.

"Euphrates O'Shea," Angus shouted, "stop playin' and get yourself back here, now, else Mama's really gonna take a strap to you."

Euphrates wasn't studdin' her twin. She was gazing up and down the unfamiliar road, amazed that there was suddenly more to the world than she had ever imagined. Instead of her brother's voice, now all she could hear were the chirps and calls of wildlife hidden in the unexplored forest.

"Hey!" she said, as if startled out of a dream.

For the first time in her life, she was taking in air that didn't belong to Marse Henry. Maybe, outside of Marse Henry's darn old wall, even she didn't belong to him.

She wondered, is this how Angus felt when he goes into Richmond? What he means by "free"?

Euphrates glanced back at Angus, then back around at the road's choice of directions.

She'd never had a choice of anything before. She'd never noticed that a breeze blowing through a tree's leaves caused the sunlight to dance.

She took off running up the road where the sun danced most. And ran and ran.

Ran until, amazingly, she was at another choice of diverging paths, again bounded on every side by thick forest.

Were these trees truly taller? Or greener? The air sweeter?

A daring notion seemed to speak to Euphrates. Maybe, if she just kept going, she could escape, too. Like Clara and Lawrence.

She doused the spark of hope quicker than it had ignited. She could never do that to Mama and Baby Sister. Or, to Angus.

Papa had another family—his white family—so she wasn't so worried about him, but her mother, sister, and brother needed her.

Yet, if this was as free as she was ever going to get, she somehow had to see a little bit more of this strange new land, this heaven, before she hurried back home.

And she did have to hurry. Without her noticing, the morning had suddenly turned into late afternoon. If Mama had to look for her, it would mean a switch to her bottom.

Euphrates ventured the path to the right.

Along the way, she admired every bush, branch, and bird.

Before long, she came upon a stretch of open land. A meadow, its bounty of wildflowers brilliant with color. She had never seen such beauty.

A red-tailed hawk dipped low enough for Euphrates to almost touch, then, just as quickly, it flew out of sight. If only she could do the same.

She ran to the red flowers, the blue flowers, the yellow flowers, gathering bunches of them all to take home to Mama. Choosing made her giddy.

She wished that she could take all the flowers home, but now it was even later, and her arms were full. She surveyed her surroundings, searching for the path back.

Only, in the fading daylight, everything looked the same. Had the path disappeared right before her eyes?

A bolt of panic ran up Euphrates' back as she chanced measured paces, first one way, then another, then another. There were only so many possibilities, weren't there?

She stared up at the emerging stars for guidance.

From some mysterious place, far away, booming cannon fire echoed.

Yanks?

Yanks!

Her stomach knotted and her heart raced. Where, oh where was Angus? He always rescued her.

"Angus," she cried as tears welled in her eyes. "Help me."

But Angus couldn't answer her because he wasn't anywhere near. She was lost. And completely alone.

A sudden cool breeze carried a hint of smoke. And something worse. Much worse. Death.

From a torched plantation?

A sprinkle of ash and embers floated through the air.

A hot cinder burned one of her eyes.

"Aghhhh," she belted out, blinking furiously with pain.

Her lungs began to hurt, too. She was choking on the grayish haze that had settled all about her as the cannon fire continued to echo, again and again. Her bare feet absorbed the earth's trembling.

She tried to reason aloud with herself.

"I's got to get to the river bluff. I's can make my way home from there."

Her stomach grumbled. How she wished she hadn't turned up her nose at the two-day-old square of cornbread and the soured cup of milk Mama had offered her for breakfast.

Though her eye hurt and weeped, she pushed on, only to trip over a fallen tree limb.

The branches of the limb raked her arms and legs as she sprawled on the ground. Her cuts and scratches stung.

Thankfully, the light of the nearly full moon allowed her to see the trickles of blood from the deepest wound.

Standing up and brushing off, Euphrates reclaimed her determination to seek the river bluff.

She called on the Lord, then began humming one of the lullabies Mama sang to Baby Sister.

She stumbled on and on until she came to yet another clearing.

In this one, a small brick structure stood in the center.

Curious, she ran around to the building's front.

It had a wooden door that she didn't dare pull open and looked to be a washhouse; anchored into the outer wall, at about the tallness of Papa, were three long clotheslines, each extended out and held up at opposite ends by wooden poles.

All three lines were flung over with freshly laundered white sheets, still damp and pungent with the aroma of lye soap, and clamped with clothespins.

Two well-trod paths ending at the washhouse's doorway formed a right angle and veered back into the forest.

Despite the swath of moonlight, dense foliage shrouded the paths, making it impossible for Euphrates to see where either path ultimately led.



On nothing more than a gamble she chose the narrower of the two paths.

She was afraid, but not so much so that a burst of playfulness couldn't break through.

She dashed back to the clotheslines and sprinted up and down the rows of sheets as if running in a maze.

It was a typical Virginia summer night. Hot and muggy, and the cool, damp sheets refreshed her arms and face.

She stopped to hold one of the sheets to her cheeks. The scent of the lye soap tickled her nostrils and caused her to sneeze.

Upon reopening her eyes, Euphrates discovered the strawberry stains she'd imprinted on the sheets. She'd forgotten that her hands and mouth were painted with the juice of her feast in Angus's garden.

"Uh-oh!" A flood of guilt washed over her at seeing how she'd ruined someone's hard work.

Though no one was there to hear, she clasped her hands and pledged aloud, "I is so, so sorry. Someday, my word to God, I's find my way back here, and help you anyway I's can. I's hope I's hasn't got you in trouble."

For the first time ever, Euphrates would have almost rather endured one of Mama's whippings.

Pursuing her chosen path once more, she ran along it until she tired. She thought it curious that there were no big houses, or even cabins, along the way, but soon enough all she was thinking about was how to reach the river bluff.

The cannon fire had ceased.

An owl hooted from an overhead branch and fireflies darted about. Other than a chorus of crickets, all seemed peaceful despite the lingering stink of gunpowder.

She was so sleepy. Mama must be worried sick, she thought. She began to repeat Mama's favorite saying.

"Fear is not faith. Fear is not faith. Fear is not faith."

The North Star twinkled overhead.

At last, she heard the faint sound of rushing water in the offing. With a new hope, she began singing Mama's favorite hymn.

*Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. I looked over yonder and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home? A band of angels comin' after me, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me . . .*

The unexpected sound of marching—a steady *whomp, whomp, whomp*—startled her quiet.

Whoever they's was, they's was coming toward her. She had to hide.

She dove into a thicket of wild roses and crouched low, trying not to cry out from the pain of the thorns.

She peered out at a platoon of Yankee soldiers coming from around the bend. A whole mess of them.

Fifty. A hundred. Maybe more.

Each one carried a musket on his shoulder.

She remembered the disappearing trick Angus used to play when he would stretch out facedown in the tall grass so that no one could see him. She did the same, now, only her heart would not stop its awful pounding. All she could do was try desperately not to move or breathe.

“Lord Almighty,” she prayed in the slightest whisper, “please, watch over me, else them northern devils gonna string me up just like Marse Henry say they did Big Sam and Moses. Amen.”

As the soldiers paraded by, the thud of their boots caused the ground to rumble.

It seemed an eternity before all was quiet again, but something in her soul was telling her to stay put awhile longer.

As she lay there, her eyelids became unbearably heavy.

By the time she awoke, the sky was brushed with the very faintest blush of dawn.

She stood, brushed the twigs and dirt from her dress and hair, and tried to believe that all was well.

The sound of the river’s rushing water was suddenly more distinct, so she hurried toward it.

Euphrates hadn’t gone far when she stumbled out into yet another clearing; this time, one with a windowless shack in its midst.

As investigation proved, twenty or so feet beyond the shack was the river bluff.

She stood at the edge of the bluff and looked down just in time to witness the helplessness of an old buckboard being tossed and churned by the river’s ferocious current.

Any living thing would have suffered all the more.

The shack’s banging door also unnerved her. Best she be on her way.

As she backed away from the ledge, the gravelly voice of a man stopped her heart cold.

“Over here, missy.”

Terrified, Euphrates turned in search of the person who had spoken.

“Uhhh,” she cried, at the sight of the monstrous ghost-like creature staring down into her face.

“Get inside,” the creature demanded.

Suddenly, Euphrates realized that the thing wasn't a monster, or even a ghost. It was a man hiding his face and body under a sheet.

The sheet had the same lye soap smell as the sheets outside the washhouse, and jagged holes were cut in the sheet large enough for Euphrates to see the man's eyes, nose, and mouth.

The man was aiming a musket at her. He grunted, and limped closer. His eyes were bloodshot.

“You ignorin' me, gal?” he said, and leaned even closer. “I ain't gonna tell you again.”

The man's stale, sour breath made Euphrates gag. She had to turn away.

“Oh yeah?” the man said, then jabbed the butt of the musket into Euphrates' stomach.

The jab caused her to fall to the ground, onto a sharp-edged rock that cut deep into her thigh, causing her to cry out in pain.

Before she could move, he put the musket to her head.

“Listen, gal. Either you do what I say or I'll shoot you dead right here. You choose.”

Euphrates' thoughts were muddled, but she was aware enough to know that if she ever wanted to see Mama and Papa, and Angus and Baby Sister, again, she had better do what the man wanted.

Ever so slowly, she rolled onto her knees and, in spite of the pain shooting through her leg, managed to stand.

The man pushed his massive hand against her shoulder and forced her into the shack. She stumbled but willed herself to remain upright.

He followed her inside and slammed the door closed. All was as black as Mama's cast-iron skillet.

She heard the man move toward her, then felt his calloused fingers on her face.

"You're a real pretty gal, you know that?"

Euphrates didn't know what to answer, but it didn't matter. The man grabbed the front of her dress and ripped it open.

She felt her face burn with shame and tried to cover herself with her arms.

"Uh-huh! You one of them uppity nigras. Well, I'll teach you," the man said, and knocked Euphrates' arms away.

He squeezed her small breasts until they hurt.

No man or boy had ever touched her, except for Papa when he hugged her, but she could feel that this man's hands were sweaty and filthy.

His breathing went to shallow heaves as he moved his hands over her body.

Then he reached for the sacred place between her legs.

She felt sick to her stomach and, not thinking, stepped back.

He slapped her, and then he gripped her throat.

"I can't breathe," she pleaded.

When he finally opened his hand he let her fall.

He laughed as Euphrates gulped for air, but her relief was only momentary. Without warning, he was down on all fours with his mouth pressed against hers.

As he mashed the full weight of his man's body against her girl's body she was crushed into the dirt floor.

She tried to struggle from underneath him, but a sudden pain between her thighs made her want to die.

Something awful was trying to crawl its way out through her screams.

"Shut up, you little darkie. Shut up," he spewed, as he thrust himself into her again and again. "Shut up."

\* \* \*

Angus flattened himself against the outer wall of the shack. He grimaced as he listened to a man's steady grunting tangled with Euphrates' scattered whimpers.

He gripped his spade tighter, flung the shack door open, and without hesitation, hurled himself inside. He felt his way to the nearest corner, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

A shaft of moonlight through the open door helped.

In the middle of the floor, a man wearing a sheet was hunched over Euphrates. The man was hurting her.

Angus held his spade high and crept closer.

The man stopped moving and grabbed for his musket, but Angus was faster and brought his spade down with as much might as his gangly fourteen-year-old body could manage.

The man hollered, dropped the musket, and bolted upright. "Goddamn it," he screamed as he cradled his head.

Angus reached for Euphie, pulled her up, and shoved her behind him. He had to be ready to deliver another blow.

The man stood, then staggered toward the children.

Euphrates cringed, but Angus did not flinch. Both of them saw the gleam of the man's bowie knife as he pulled it from somewhere under the sheet.

As the man staggered closer and closer, he cursed and slashed at the air.

"Euphrates," Angus shouted, "get out of here. Now."

"No, Brother, I'm not leaving you," she cried back.

"Then stay behind me, against the wall."

For once, Euphrates didn't smart-mouth Angus.

He dodged the man's lunge, then swung the spade at him with determination. This time, though, Angus caught nothing but air.

The man took advantage of the opportunity and pointed the knife at Angus's heart, backing the children into an opposite corner.

He towered over them.

What the man couldn't know was that Mama had raised them on the scripture of David and Goliath.

Angus summoned all of his will and jabbed the handle of the spade into the man's stomach, then over and over into the man's crotch.

The man cried out in pain.

Angus jabbed him again, but this time the force of the hit knocked the spade from Angus's hands.

The man doubled over and fell to his knees, nearly landing on top of the spade.

All Angus could do was stare helplessly as the man bobbed forward and backward, hissing like a snake.

With no other choice, Angus finally made a grab for the spade, but the man leaned out and caught the handle, midair, yanking it out of Angus's grasp.

Pain unlike anything Angus had ever felt shot through his fingers and hands. His fingers felt broken, and the flesh of his palms was torn wide open.

The man got up and came at Angus again, but Angus could barely hold his throbbing hands chest-high. He felt the knife slice down the whole left side of his face.

Angus yelled as a searing agony raced from his temple to his chin. Warm blood dripped onto his shirt and hands. He was stunned and dizzy, and felt like he had been set on fire.

In the confusion of it all, he heard the spade wham against the man's body.

Angus looked up just as the man wobbled and fell.

Euphrates was standing over him, trembling, still holding the spade high above her shoulders. But somehow, the man clamored back to his feet.

This time, Euphie was either too exhausted or too scared to move, and only watched as the man bent to reclaim his knife.

Angus wasn't about to allow the man to hurt his sister anymore. Instead, Angus ran and pulled the spade out of Euphie's grip, then got between her and the man just as the man raked the knife through the air.

The blade of the knife nicked Angus's forearm, but Angus managed to keep hold of the spade and raised it as high as his injuries would permit.

"You shouldn't have hurt my sister," Angus said, and brandished the spade as if it were a sword.

The man guffawed, enjoying himself so much that he threw his head back and tilted up on his heels, losing his balance.



He swirled his arms to try to stay standing.

Angus, now a gladiator, seized his chance.

He batted the metal edge of the spade into the man's waist.

Blood seeped through the man's sheet.

A deathly quiet followed as the man looked down at the stain, pawed at it, and then silently crumpled to the ground.

For a long moment, both children held their breath.

Finally, Euphrates asked, "Is he dead?"

"I don't know," Angus said, and then added, "but I sure hope so."

The twins waited, ready for anything.

Their fears were justified.

Before either one of them could react, the man rolled to his side and got to his feet, growling like a rabid dog.

Worse, he still had the knife. "I'm gonna kill you nigras once and for all," he said, and slashed the air.

Angus blocked the knife with the head of the spade, and remained focused. "Euphrates, move."

Angus's body was in excruciating pain, and his senses were dulled beyond measure, yet there wasn't time to hesitate.

The man tried to turn and face Angus, but the man's feet tangled in the hem of his sheet.

At last, with one bash, then another, Angus obliterated the back of the man's head.

The man's blood spurted in all directions, on the children's faces and clothes.

This time, though, the man fell with such a thud that the earth shook.

Euphie and Angus waited for him to stir, but at last, he had gone to his just reward.

With measured caution, Angus finally spoke. "I think he really is dead now, Euphie. He can't hurt you anymore."

Euphrates answered with only a deep sigh. She felt a need to see the face of the man who had mauled and shamed her, and went over to his body.

She lifted the bloodied sheet to look. The shock of what she saw told in her voice. "Brother, it's . . . it's . . . a white man. A Yankee soldier. What we gonna do?"

Angus stared at the spade, and then threw it against a wall. "There's nothing we can do. I's got to get out of here, or when they's find me, they's gonna string me up."

"No," Euphrates cried, and threw her arms around Angus's neck, clinging to him with her last bit of strength. "No, no, no!"

Angus loosened his sister's arms, and gently pushed her away.

Then he knelt, unbuttoned and removed the soldier's shirt, and handed it to Euphrates for her to put on.

Next, he removed the man's pants, and stepped into them.

"Brother, what is you doin'? You gone daft?"

"I got to get out of Virginia, Euphie," he answered. "With this half a Yank's uniform, I at least got a chance. And look at these boots. They's even better than Papa's."

Angus put the boots on, and they walked out of the shack into the fresh air.

Both children breathed deep.

Pink and yellow light streaked across the horizon trumpeting the arrival of morning.

Euphrates could see that her brother had been badly injured. A flap of skin hung open on the left side of his face.

By the time such an injury healed, it would probably make a big ugly scar for the rest of Angus's life.

On their walk to the bluff's edge, an urgent concern pressed on Euphrates' heart. "Brother, the river's too dangerous," she said. "Besides, you can't swim."

"I's don't have a choice, Euphie," Angus said calmly.

They reached the look-over and stared down at the James River's relentless current. Even with the dawn reflected on its surface, the water looked secretive and angry.

Euphrates turned toward her brother and studied his face. She didn't want to ever forget what he looked like.

Tears of love and sorrow welled in her eyes.

She reached to touch her brother's face once more, but he held her hand back.

"I'd better bury him first," Angus said with a nod toward the cabin, then turned to go toward it.

Euphrates caught him by the arm. "No! I is gonna do it. And hide the spade, too," she said.

Angus stared back at his sister, then, after a moment, kissed her on the cheek. "Tell Mama I will always love her," he said. "And you. You be good. Help Mama take care of Baby Sister."

Euphrates nodded, and cupped her hands over her face to keep him from seeing her cry. The smell of lye soap and the sight of the man's blood on her skin made her want to retch.

She didn't want Angus to run away. She loved her brother and couldn't imagine life without him. Her eyes were still squeezed shut when she heard a splash.

She quickly dropped her hands and looked to see what had happened. Angus was nowhere to be seen, but he couldn't be gone. He just couldn't be.

Only he was.

Euphrates resisted looking down at the river for as long as possible, then gave in. The water was dark and swift.

A large dogwood branch floated along at the river's mercy, then was swept under.

She remembered again what Papa called the river. A grave of shattered bones and stolen dreams.

Euphrates' tears spilled and wouldn't stop.

"Angus," she called out across the river's vastness, "please, please, come back!"

She waited on the bluff the whole day, her gaze fixed on the river for any sign of her brother.

The sign never came.