

CHAPTER 22

Magnolia Hill Plantation



DEMONS HAD A stronghold on just about everyone on Magnolia Hill, both whites and slaves alike. Flossie didn't know them by name, but she could see them in the dark shadows that hovered like a cloud of smoke over the white overseer wielding the whip while astride his big, black horse. She saw them in the disdainful looks she received from the same house slaves with whom she had once worked side by side. She could hear them cackling in the face of her misery and whispering profane words in her ear.

Today was going to be different from every one before it. She just knew it. The gods had told her so. Even though she'd armoured herself in prayer, the cloud of demons in the air was so thick they changed the colour of the sky. Their evil chatter was deafening.

It was the beginning of the fall season and hot as the fires of hell. The slaves had been working eighteen- to twenty-hour days, performing an endless cycle of planting, hoeing, weeding, harvesting, and grinding. It was time for endless, backbreaking chopping. Everything but the cane they chopped hour after long hour was burnt, blistered, and dried up. Flossie felt her spirit withering under the relentless rays of the harsh Louisiana sun.

It didn't matter that she was nearly eight months pregnant. Mr. Mike, the white overseer, was riding her especially hard, hollering and

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threatening to take the whip to her if she didn't speed it up. Flossie kept on swinging that machete like her life depended on it, pretending the cane was Masta Clidamont, Claude, and the stinking overseer. She kept swinging that machete because she had no choice.

The raggedy, sweat-stained straw hat Flossie wore did little to spare her from the torture of the blazing hot sun. Sweat trickled down her back, pooling in that place Ajuma loved to kiss, where the small of her back and her round buttocks met. The sweat left a dark stain across the back of her faded white calico shirt.

Jessy, a big-boned yella gal with funny-coloured grey eyes just like Masta's, tried her best to help Flossie keep up. They had something in common. Both had once been house slaves, and both had been booted out of the Big House to work in the fields. Try as she might, even Big Jessy couldn't cut cane for two.

The sugar cane was cut by gangs of slave labourers. Each gang was supervised by a driver who was usually a fellow slave specifically selected by the white overseer to ensure the slaves worked in tandem cutting, stacking, and loading the cane stalks onto nearby mule-drawn carts. The loads of cut cane would then be taken to the cane mill for processing. The sugar cane had to be juiced within twenty-four hours of harvest or it would spoil.

The slaves worked in silence. There was no humming or singing of Negro spirituals as they worked. They were too hot, too tired, and too beat down in spirit to talk, much less sing. The slaves performed their backbreaking task in a similar rhythm, so it was noticeable when Flossie began to lag farther and farther behind.

Flossie would have given anything to stretch her straining back a bit or have a cool drink of water from the creek. She dared not stop working, not even for a second. Even now she felt Koby's eyes on her.

Koby was the driver who supervised the gang Flossie worked on. He hated Flossie as only one black can hate another. It didn't matter that white folks hated them. Black folks on Magnolia Hill hated each other enough to surpass any hate the whites had for them.

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Flossie knew Koby would be more than happy to alert Mr. Mike if she slowed down again. Then he'd get a chance to whip the skin off her. Koby cornered her one night while coming back from the fields. It happened right after she'd had her son Jake. He told her he wanted her. That he didn't care if Masta put a hundred suckers in her belly. He would still want her. Everyone assumed Jake was the Masta's seed. Ajuma was a light-skinned black with green eyes and curly black hair. Her son Jake looked just like his father spit him out.

Not only did Flossie spurn Koby's advances, but now she was pregnant again. Flossie hadn't turned away from Koby because he was a field hand. She didn't want anything to do with him because he was flat-out mean. She'd seen him in action. He'd been known to beat a fellow slave more viciously than Mr. Mike, and he smiled while he was doing it. It seemed Koby's hatred for Flossie grew every day, right along with her swollen belly.

"Pssst," Minnie hissed when Koby finally rode ahead of them on his big black roan. Flossie looked around, frowning in confusion. None of the field slaves *ever* spoke to her unless they wanted something.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you, gal!" Minnie didn't even try to hide her dislike. It was clear in her facial expression and in her tone. "You best speed it up, gal, or baby or not, Koby gon' be up in that ass."

Minnie shook her head to silence Flossie when she opened her mouth to thank her for the unnecessary warning. Flossie knew better than anyone what Koby was capable of. If Flossie thought for a minute that Minnie's warning was generated from any concern she might have for her wellbeing, Minnie didn't waste any time disabusing her of that foolish notion.

"You keep fallin' behind and you gon' get us all whupped—or worse."

Well, there you go, Flossie thought. *I should have known Minnie didn't give a rat's ass about what happens to me.*

Minnie did have a valid point though. The Etiennes drove their slaves like mules to the market. You either kept up or you'd be beaten down and stepped over like the hot steaming dung the mules left in the

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sugar cane field. Flossie pulled on her last reserve of energy and picked up her pace.

It had been two years since Flossie had been unceremoniously tossed from the Big House by Claude Etienne, and still the field hands hated her. *What in the blazes do I have to do for them to accept me*, she wondered. *Die?*

The Willie Lynch theory was applied at Magnolia Hill with precision, separating the slaves in accordance with skin colour, hair texture, and facial features. The field slaves hated the house slaves. The dark slaves hated the lighter ones. The hate just kept on rolling in one big, growing circle.

“Don’t mind that old black heifer, Flossie. She just mad ‘cause her man left her for that gal who work in the dairy. She can’t take it out on her, so you the next best thing.”

Flossie laughed ruefully. “It’s kind of funny, Jessy. They always manage to forget their dislike of me when they need me to help bring their babies into the world or prepare a medicinal or potion for them to get rid of them.” Flossie shook her head in disgust.

Even though she’d delivered all four of Minnie’s children, Flossie knew that if she was to pass out right then and there, Minnie wouldn’t move to spit on the best part of her. The only thing that kept the field slaves from doing Flossie some harm was their fear of retaliation. After all, slaves were a highly superstitious lot, and Flossie *was* a powerful conjure woman.

Jessy’s scary-looking grey eyes were filled with concern. “How you doin’, Flossie?”

“How you think I’m doing?” Flossie snapped, running her shirt sleeve over her sweaty forehead. The pain in her lower back was getting worse by the minute. The herbs she had steeped earlier to ease her discomfort while she worked the field were not working. The baby was sitting low in her belly. If she didn’t know any better she would have thought it was positioning itself to leave the safety of her womb.

“I swear, Jessy, if I didn’t love this baby’s daddy so damn much, I would have prepared one of my special concoctions to spare this child

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the life of a slave. Better to send his or her little soul to be with the gods before it's born than to watch the baby suffer like this."

Jessy was barren and quick to chastise Flossie. "You hush now. It ain't right for you to say thangs like that about a little unborn baby."

They both knew Flossie wouldn't be the first slave woman to contemplate killing the seed growing in their body. She wouldn't be the last either. Hell, most of the time Flossie was the one who prepared the herbs to deliver the women in the quarter of their unwanted burdens.

"The fact of the matter is, Jessy, that I do love my baby's daddy—more than life itself."

For the next few moments all that could be heard was the rhythmic sound of their machetes slicing through the cane. Flossie's mind drifted to Ajuma. The father of my children is a beautiful black angel, she thought. *The gods sent him to me bleeding and wounded from a battle with demons during the darkest hour of the night.* She would bear and love his children gladly.

Jessy never let an opportunity pass to question Flossie about the identity of her children's father. Today would be no different. "Tell me this, Flossie, is he one of them yalla bucks from over Raveneau Plantation?"

Flossie pretended not to hear the question and kept on cutting. Friend or no friend, it wasn't anybody's business who fathered her babies. No one but her children would know that their father had deep golden-brown skin and eyes as green as the moss that crept up the side of the plantation guest house. He was a god amongst angels and men, so gloriously handsome that at times it hurt Flossie's eyes to look upon him. His name is Ajuma.

Finally, the sun was starting to wane. The slaves would be given a few minutes to eat and drink some water before they went back out into the field. Apparently Koby had spoken with the overseer about Flossie because now Mr. Mike had his watery blue eyes glued on Flossie like a hungry badger on a fat hare, waiting for the moment he would strike. Since the last thing Flossie needed was to feel the bite of Mr. Mike's whip across her already aching back, she stepped away from the line at the well

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and went to sit down under a nearby tree, hoping against hope that his attention would be drawn somewhere else.

She watched him with dread in her eyes as he and Koby walked toward the wagon where the cane her gang had cut was loaded. Now they were both focusing their attention on her. She wanted to run, but where would she go?

It felt like a million fire ants were marching across the surface of her skin with each step Mr. Mike and Koby took toward her. Her body was ungainly when she stumbled to her feet.

“You come up short.” Mr. Mike shot a mouthful of tobacco juice out of his mouth after he made his pronouncement. He raised his voice so all could hear. “All you nigras gather ‘round so I can show you what happens to sluggards.” He nodded a signal in Koby’s direction.

Koby had to drag Flossie away from that tree. The heels of her feet left runnels in the dirt as he pulled her kicking and screaming. The last thing she wanted to do was to appear cowardly before a bunch of folks she knew hated her, but she’d be double goddamned if she was going to take an ass whupping with a smile on her face. A quick blow to the side of her head from Koby effectively knocked all the steam out of her.

Koby took Flossie to a pre-dug hole on the other side of the field. The rest of the slaves quietly followed behind them. He ripped the back of her shirt open to expose her smooth slender back, then he made her lie face down over the hole with her protruding pregnant belly snugly fitted within the depression. Once he had her positioned just right, he checked to see that all the field slaves were assembled and turned to Mr. Mike for further instructions.

Flossie heard the whip whistle through the air just before it struck. A trail of fire landed on her back from shoulder to hip. She screamed, choking herself on a mouth full of dirt. The sound of the whip could be heard all the way to the Big House. Old Man Etienne came out on the porch to watch.

The overseer swung that whip back and forth until sweat dripped down his face. He put all his strength behind every swing, grunting in

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satisfaction each time a piece of her flesh came away from her body. He cursed Flossie as he beat her, calling her every name but the child of God with each swing of his wicked whip.

Jessy couldn't take it anymore. Her face was bright red with tears. She screamed, "Lord Jesus, help that chile!" as Masta Mike tried his best to beat poor Flossie and her unborn child into the sun-baked Louisiana earth.

Flossie was beyond feeling. She'd passed out after the third lash. Mr. Mike kept on swinging, watching Flossie's unconscious body jerk involuntarily with every swing of the lash. There was blood speckle on his clothing when he finally tossed the whip to Koby, his face flushed and his chest heaving from his exertion.

"One of you nigras get this piece of shit back to her cabin and get her patched up for work tomorrow!" he barked.

Then he turned his mean eyes on the assemblage. "Let this be a lesson to any one of you lazy bastards that think you are going to get away with not giving me a full day's work." He looked down at Flossie's shredded back. "The only thing that's keeping me from stripping all the skin off her back and leaving her to the buzzards is the sucker she's carrying."

He looked toward the Big House porch where Clidamont Etienne was lounging like a mediaeval king. "The Etiennes might not take kindly to me damaging their merchandise without their leave."

He tipped his hat to Clidamont Etienne, hopped on his horse, and rode away.