

Prologue

1800, Edgefield Plantation

“Listen to him, calling his precious little angel!” Mrs. Edgefield mocked Mr. Edgefield because she could care less if the mulatto bitch never returned.

“Bell, bring another glass of lemonade.”

Mrs. Edgefield held her glass out to her side without acknowledging Bell's location, commanding Bell to obey. Rushing from the far corner of the porch where Bell stood in direct sunlight, she collected Mrs. Edgefield's glass.

“Yes, madam, right away, madam,” Bell said.

Mrs. Edgefield pulled her glass back. “Bell, how long has Abigail been away?”

“Come Sunday will be five days, madam.”

Mrs. Edgefield held her glass out towards Bell and flipped out her fan with arrogance without responding to Bell's answer. She taunted Bell for not expecting her need for a refill.

Bell barely made her way into the house before Mr. Edgefield stopped her. “Bell, please bring a glass of ice water?”

“Yes, sir, right away, Mr. Edgefield.”

It was not a secret. Anyone who has visited Edgefield's plantation knows Mrs. Edgefield's hatred towards her stepdaughter. Understand, she despised any reference to Abigail as her stepdaughter. To her, she was *that bastard child*.

From Abigail's first breath until now, Mrs. Edgefield has mastered the art of emotional deception. Unlike other days, today was a test of Mrs. Edgefield's resolve. Because today, Mr. Edgefield was searching for his Abigail.

Every call of her name, every conversation of her, or any deliberately prolonged gaze across the property only intensified Mrs. Edgefield's rage.

She mentally ventilated her bridled anger towards any slave within a whisper's distance. Her approach today would be no different from any other day. Today, Mrs. Edgefield's wrath was going to be harshly delivered.

Mr. Edgefield did not hesitate to stop anyone crossing the yard, black or white, asking if they had seen Abigail. He would receive the same answer: "No sir, we have not."

Towering oak trees surrounding the estate provided shade where Mr. and Mrs. Edgefield sat, but not where Bell stood. Sounds of cicadas fluttering their wings, attempting to escape the heat, filled the tops of the oak trees with thunderous buzzing. Periodically, buzzing cicadas would stop when Mr. or Mrs. Edgefield slapped off a mosquito. Tobacco and cotton fields were watered daily, leaving puddles of stagnant water scattered throughout the fields and providing havens for mosquitoes. Across the yard, mosquitoes hovered in spots, waiting for any unlucky person with the right body chemistry: salty sweat. Unfortunately for people during this time, salt was handily used, so mosquitoes and flies were unbearably harsh during the summer. Mrs. Edgefield continuously fanned off insects across her face.

"Robert!" Mrs. Edgefield only called Mr. Edgefield by his first name when she wanted to make a point, which is odd because Robert isn't his name. "When was the last time Steven been to the house?"

"If the name Steven is referring to Mr. Birch, it has been a spell," Mr. Edgefield said.

Mrs. Edgefield swatted a fly with her fan. "Yes, Steven, and he has not been around in the past five or six days. Isn't that about the same time Abigail vanished?"

Mr. Edgefield adjusted himself and looked towards the overseer's quarters. "Do you think...?" Mr. Edgefield waved off the thought. No, they could not be together.

Bell arrived with their drinks. Mrs. Edgefield reached her hand to collect her glass, but Bell stepped past her and served Mr. Edgefield first. "Here is

your glass of water, sir.” Bell hesitated, then turned towards Mrs. Edgefield. “And here is your glass, madam.”

Mrs. Edgefield collected her glass by sliding it across and down on the edge of the tray. The tray flipped out of Bell's hands, crashing against the wooden porch, rattling on its edge before spinning to a stop.

The sound broke Mr. Edgefield's track of thought. With little concern for what just happened, Mr. Edgefield regained his thoughts and continued. “That could not be. Steven knew better to fool with Abigail. Besides, he despised her just as much as you. So, if Steven ran off, that was his choice. My only concerns are for Abigail's whereabouts, not Steven's.”

Bell collected the tray and returned to her sunny perch at the corner of the porch.

Anticipating the direction of Mr. and Mrs. Edgefield's conversation, being careful not to cross over into the shady area of the porch, Bell inched closer. The consequences of Bell taking one step closer would be disastrous, especially after her lemonade trick. Bell did not want to take that chance. She listened the best she could over the cicadas.

Mr. Edgefield expressed his genuine concerns for Abigail's safety. It was hard not to notice the lack of respect Mrs. Edgefield displayed for Abigail, yet she was adamant about finding Mr. Burch. Bell heard enough of the conversation to realize the days to follow would be difficult. Mrs. Edgefield was rude in dismissing Bell. “Bell, leave so we can have a conversation.” Bell did not hesitate to rush off towards the slave quarters.

Ben sat on a falling stump stringing his fishing line to his cane pole at the entrance to the center yard. “Hey girl, what is the rush?”

Even though Ben was visible from all directions, Bell was surprised when he spoke because she did not spot him.

“Hi, hello Ben, has Abigail been around?”

“Nah, not in a month of Sundays.”

Adjusting her dress, Bell looked around the yard. “Okay, Ben, how about Mama Ester?”

“Yeah, she is over yonder, peeling peas.”

Bell thanked Ben as she rushed off. Ben watched Bell sashay away. He admired the way her walk complemented the sway of her hips. “Lord have mercy,” he said to himself. “That is right pleasant right there!”

“What is pleasant?!” A woman's voice came from behind Ben. “That pleasantry better be towards that knot in that fishing line, or I’m knotting up your testicles.”

Without looking around, Ben squared his shoulders. No, Bell's hips commanded attention. The way she walked away was entertaining! The unknown woman pushed Ben forward. The woman could not believe Ben dared to sit and disrespect her in such a way, but Ben did not care.

Ben confirmed her suspicions without acknowledging the woman before she came over to talk about knotting someone's testicles foolishness. Why sit here and deny visual pleasures? That ass is excellent, and by God, watching her walk, Jesus! Ben flung his arm from side to side. Anywhere Bell was in this range, old Ben will watch. Ben braced himself for another jolt from the woman from a kneeling position. Instead of giving Ben another one, she walked off.

“Mama Ester, Mama Ester,” Bell called out as she made her way around the dilapidated slave housing.

“Yes, right here, child,” Mama Ester said.

“Mama, I was wondering if Abigail has been around recently? Mr. and Mrs. Edgefield—well, Mr. Edgefield is searching for her something fierce.”

Mama Ester rocked casually in her chair, not missing a beat between peas. “Fetch you a pan and dig into this bushel and tell me how I can help.”

“Mama, but I need to hurry back before evil countess detects I am not in the house,” Bell said.

Looking over the endless rows of cornstalks, Mama Ester agreed with Bell. “Yes, you should, and no, that child has not been around since the boy Mochi was here.”

“Thanks, Mama, and his name is Moca, not Mochi.”

Mama Ester tossed a pea in Bell's direction. “Who gives a shit? It is a fucked-up name for a black man. His Mama needs her ass whooped for naming that boy like that. What was she thinking?”

Laughing at Mama Ester's reply, Bell excused herself and walked towards the house.

Purchase Book