



LORIC C THOMPSON

# SALEM'S STORY

A DEGREES OF DARKNESS STORY

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## TALES OF FRIENDSHIP

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I stepped off the back porch of Nettie's cottage, the sun low in the sky. Nettie and Kat were clearing up the dinner dishes but refused to let me help, claiming I had not yet recovered enough for housework. Nettie shooed me out the door, saying the fresh air would do me good. I knew there was no use arguing with them, so I headed across the lawn toward the back of the property, hoping Salem would be there. But as I approached our usual meeting place, I could see he wasn't. I settled in the soft grass to wait, my back against the sun-warmed granite stone.

The view here was breath-taking. Nettie's land nestled into a thick pine forest, secluded from the rest of the world. The scents of fresh-cut grass and pine permeated the air around me and I relaxed. The angle of the evening sun cast deep shadows between the trees, concealing the forest's secrets. I found this comforting; I knew the forest would keep my secrets, too.

This was a place I could find the peace I needed in order to recover. I'd only been released from the hospital two weeks ago; I still moved slower than normal, and the healing stab-wound in my abdomen, courtesy of a man I'd once loved, caused me pain every time I moved. I rested my hand over it as I sat, soaking in the last rays of the sun. I closed my eyes and thought of Salem. Besides Kat, he was my best friend. I could always count on him—if not for Salem, the man who'd stabbed me would have gotten away.

"Salem, where are you?" I said out loud to the wind.

"Here, Miss Julia," Salem's rich, deep voice sounded from behind me.

My eyes popped open in surprise as he settled himself down beside me in the grass. "Don't sneak up on me like that, Salem, you're going to give me a heart attack!" I put a hand to my chest, trying to still my racing heart.

He smiled, his face more relaxed than I'd ever seen him; a warm glow emanated from him and a feeling of peace settled over me, as it always did in Salem's presence. I always felt so safe with Salem. I knew he would be there to protect me, no matter what. He had proven that to me time and again.

"What did I ever do to deserve you, Salem?" I reached out and took his cool hand, surprised at how solid it felt in mine.

"You're my friend, plain and simple."

Not so simple, I wanted to say. He was so protective of me. Why? He hadn't known me that long, and he certainly didn't owe me anything. It was the other way around; I owed him—

everything. *I wondered, not for the first time, about the life he led before we met. What made him the man he became.*

*“We’ve been through a lot together, Salem, but I know nothing about your life before Fort McAllister. Nothing about your family, where you came from ... not even how old you are.” It was a statement as well as a question.*

*Salem sat looking at me with those big, comforting eyes. Maybe trying to decide what he should tell me. Eventually, he said, “My age is simple enough: I’m twenty-one. But my story is not a happy one. Are you sure you want to hear?”*

*“Yes,” I whispered.*

*Of course, I knew his life was full of hardships before we met, the kind of which I couldn’t even image. Still, I was apprehensive to hear it first-hand. But he was my friend, and I wanted to know more about his life. So, taking a deep breath, I settled back against the warm stone once again and listened as the deep timbre of his voice filled the space between us.*

*“My earliest memories are happy ones, Miss Julia. I knew I was a slave, but I did not know what being a slave meant. I did not know we were poor. Mamma’s love surrounded me like a warm blanket, and that was all I ever needed back then. I remember sitting on her lap as she rubbed lanolin and honey into the dry, cracked skin of my feet. I didn’t own any shoes, you see, and went everywhere barefoot, making the skin on my feet thick and tough. Mamma used to make up stories to tell me so I would sit still long enough for her to finish.”*

*He smiled at the memory and continued. “She possessed a fantastic imagination and if she’d been taught to write, there was no doubt our small cabin would be filled with volumes of the stories she made up.*

*“Our home was a small, one-room cabin on a Louisiana cotton plantation. I was born in the cabin and so were my four older brothers and my baby sister Sophia. As kids, we used to gather ’round my mother and father after dinner to hear a history lesson or Bible story from Daddy, then a bedtime story from Mamma. Daddy always thought knowledge of the past was important, that we should know what came before us—what he called ‘hist’ry.’ He felt as strongly about our faith in God. The stories he told us had been passed down through our family, from one generation to the next.*

*“My life was simple, and moved along happily in the leisurely pace of the South. Before I was old enough to work on the plantation, I went with Mamma to the big house and while she worked I played with Patrick—Patrick’s father, Master Favereau, owned the plantation—and we spent all*

day outside making up games. On rainy days, we spent time in the parlor or Patrick's room, doing much the same.

*“Not knowing how to count or read, I didn't know how old I was, and didn't give it much thought 'til Patrick asked me one day. When I asked Mamma, she told me how many planting seasons had passed since my birth to determine my age. I reckoned it was as good a way as any to keep track of it. And Patrick and I were the same size more or less, so I guessed we must be the same age. Patrick told me when his birthday was and how old he would turn that year. No one in my family ever had a birthday, so not understanding what he meant, I just shrugged and figured mine was the same day as Patrick's. From that day forward, every time he became another year older, so did I. As we grew older, Patrick began to spend more time with his schooling and less time with me. When we were nine I started working in the fields picking cotton for Master Favereau. I guess you could say that's when our relationship began to change.”*

*Lulled by the sinking sun and the sound of Salem's voice, I felt as if I were being transported back in time. I began to relive the story with him, as though I had been there alongside him, all those years ago. As I watched, the familiar landscape shifted and changed until it became the place Salem described.*

*As I listened to his deep voice, a balmy heat enveloped me, causing my clothes to stick to my skin. Brushing my hair back off my face, I looked around. In the distance, I could see a large white plantation house, black shutters bracketing the windows. I now stood surrounded by cotton fields, the plants covered in soft white fluff, ready to be harvested. As I turned, I found a swamp filling the space behind me. The trees heavy with moss, the smell of stagnate water and rotting vegetation filling my nostrils. Tall, soft marsh grass swayed gently in the breeze. The landscape was hauntingly beautiful as I stood there taking it all in. It was like one of my visions; I watched the scene play out before my eyes like a feature film as he continued with the story ...*

## TALES OF THE SWAMP

---

Once, after a long, hot day of work, Samuel and his brothers were heading home for dinner—his father had gone home ahead of them—and, missing the easy days with Patrick, Samuel lingered behind. His brothers, impatient with his slow pace, left him behind, calling back to him that he'd best get a move on or Mamma would be mad. The sun was getting low in the sky, turning the clouds pink and orange. Samuel walked along the back of the plantation, close to where the property ended and the swampy forest began. The wind rustled the leaves of the trees, stirring up the stagnant scent of the water. Picking up a stone, he tossed it in a half-hearted attempt to make it skip across the surface of the water. It fell short and landed with a soft splash, disappearing in the deep, watery mud that wound between the trees.

His eyes followed the path of the stone, looking to see where it landed, a glint of light deep in the trees catching his attention. Standing still, he tried to spot the light again, but it was gone. The sun dipped lower in the sky, and not wanting to make Mamma too angry with him, he started home. As he took the first step back on the path, another glimmer of light drew his attention back to the forest. He stood watching the light wink in and out of the trees. Was someone out there?

Curiosity got the better of him and he started into the swamp, heading toward where he thought the light had been. He was comfortable in the swamp and walked with confidence, he knew precisely how and where to place his feet. He hunted and fished in there nearly every Sunday with his brothers; their father began taking them out there practically from the time they'd learned to walk. Patrick, he was always afraid of the swamp, kept telling Samuel it was dangerous and one day he would drown. Samuel just shrugged, told him you just needed to know where to step and what to stay away from. Samuel knew Patrick would never follow him out here—not that they spent time together anymore.

He continued in the direction of the light. And though he couldn't see it any longer, he watched for it to reappear. The light seemed so close while he watched it from the edge of the forest, but the swamp could be deceptive, drawing you in farther than you realized. His father told him this was how men disappeared. The swamp would draw them in—and keep them. So he began teaching us about it from a young age. His father said it was important for them to know how to navigate their way through and avoid the dangers that lay hidden behind the mossy trees, stagnant water and mud so deep it would suck you in, trap you as prey for the hungry predators roaming

the forest. Salem's father believed that knowledge of the swamp and its creatures could save a person's life one day.

*"So did it?" I asked, completely drawn in by his story.*

*Salem chuckled. "Keep listenin', Miss Julia," he said, and continued on.*

Looking around once more, Samuel realized it was almost completely dark. He figured he'd better start making his way out or end up spending the night in one of the damp mossy trees. The swamp is a place he never wanted to spend the night, and Mamma would worry if he didn't come home. As Samuel turned to leave, a stone hit the ground in front of him, thudding into the soft ground.

Stopping mid-step, he looked in the direction from where it came. "Who's there?" he called, fear tightened in his stomach as he prepared to run.

## JOHN'S TALE

---

**B**efore he could move, a tall, lean man stepped out from behind a thick screen of trees heavy with moss. He wore a long blue coat with light blue trim, metal buttons running the length of its front. His waistcoat and pants were white and flecked with mud. His black shoes had likely been shiny before he wore them into the swamp, but this was no longer so; parts of the gold buckles reflected in the fading light all the same. Dark red hair curled up around the edges of what Salem thought of as a funny-looking three-cornered black hat, and his eyes were so blue they seemed to glow in the fading light. The stranger held a lantern in one hand; its weak light shone from a candle burning so low Samuel feared it may go out any minute. This must have been the light that drew him in. Samuel did not recognize this man and took a step back, putting enough distance between them that the stranger would not be able reach out and grab him easily.

The stranger removed his hat, revealing wildly curly hair, and bent low at the waist, bringing the hat to his chest. "My name is Elliot, John Elliot. I traveled a very long way to find you, Samuel. May we sit and talk for a while?"

*I sat up and turned to face him, wincing in pain as I did so, and said, "John Elliot? You mean you met one of my ancestors? And he called you Samuel ... your real name is Samuel?"*

*Salem smiled. "You want to hear the story or not, Miss Julia?"*

*"Yes, of course, but—"*

*"No buts. This is a hard story for me to tell and one I've never told no one before. So just let me tell it and you can ask questions at the end, okay?"*

*I nodded and closed my mouth, trying to hide my smile.*

*Once he was sure I would stay quiet, Salem continued with his story.*

The strange man gestured toward a nearby tree. The tree leaned so far over into the marsh that at first glance it looked like one of the many fallen trees littering the swamp, only the green leaves on the ends of the branches giving away its secret.

Hesitating, Samuel looked from the tree to the path back toward home.

"Please," the man said, "there is something I need to tell you, Samuel. Afterward, I promise to escort you safely out of the swamp." He indicated the lantern, reminding Samuel that he had the

only light. Getting out of the swamp in the dark would be nearly impossible, no matter how familiar it was beneath Samuel's feet.

The way this man spoke sounded funny to Samuel, not like anyone he ever met. And the stranger bowed to him—no one had ever done that before. John must have traveled from far away; he certainly couldn't be from around here. So how did he know the boy's name? Samuel looked up into John's face; the man's gaze was gentle as he waited for Samuel's answer. Samuel nodded and, keeping his distance, walked over to the tree, climbed up on it, and sat. John sat beside him and Samuel waited to see what the man would say.

John's face creased, as if maybe he were trying to figure out what to say first, or perhaps where to start. A few minutes passed, then he blew out a breath, like he'd been holding it for a long time, and said, "Samuel, this is going to sound unbelievable, like a story I made up. But know what I tell you is the truth. Can you do that?"

Samuel nodded, fascinated by this stranger despite himself.

John continued, his voice smooth and even, as though he told the story often. "Sometimes I can see things that have not happened yet, things to come; it's a gift of sorts that runs in my family. I saw a vision of something happening a long time from now, when you have grown into a young man, and I need you to help me with it."

"What is it, sir?" Samuel asked, eager to help this man but not understanding why.

One day you will meet my many-times great-granddaughter."

*I couldn't help myself: I gasped.*

*Salem ignored me and went on.*

"You will know her when you see her because she will look a lot like me. She will have pale skin and dark red curly hair and blue eyes like mine. Her name is Julia Elliot."

John watched Samuel and once he was sure the boy understood, he continued.

"When she does come, she'll be trying to right a wrong done by a very bad man, someone influenced by evil. Some will call him the Phantom. Julia will be in danger from him the minute she arrives. I need you to protect her, to keep her safe from this man."

"Why does he want to hurt Julia, sir?" Samuel asked.

"Greed, son. Do you know what that word means, 'greed'?"

Samuel nodded. "But, sir ... why can't *you* keep her safe?"

“I have tried to find a way, but this is as far forward as I can travel. I broke the rules to come this far, and now, I’m afraid, I will pay a very high price for it. This is as close to her as I can get. I need you to go the rest of the way for me.”

“What rules? Where did you come from?”

“The question, Samuel, is *when* did I come from,” John said. The answer is from very far in the past. Do you know about the Revolution? When America won her independence from England?”

Samuel nodded, more vigorously this time. “Yes! My father told me the story of the Revolution. Daddy loves hist’ry, tells us all the stories he knows. He says the hist’ry stories is all true and are about things that happened before we were born. Mamma, though, she likes to make up tall tales,” Samuel said, a big grin crossing his face as he thought about how much he liked the stories she made up.

The man smiled as well, and continued. “Well, I am an American soldier fighting in the Revolution. I’m dressed like this because this is the uniform the soldiers wear in the time I’m from,” he said, gesturing at his clothes.

Samuel made a face. “Those are some funny-lookin’ clothes, all right. But I told you—Mamma makes up tall tales; I know one when I hear one.” He folded his arms across his chest.

*I smiled at this image of my Salem folding his arms in defiance. “Little Samuel was hard to please, no doubt.”*

*Salem smiled mischievously, but continued with his story.*

## A TALE OF TIME TRAVEL

---

“It sounds fantastical, I know,” the man said to Samuel, “but along with the visions, I also inherited another ability that seems to run in my family.”

He held out his right hand for Samuel to see. The lantern light reflected off a ring on his hand. Samuel leaned in for a closer look and could see silver vines twisting around black stones. The center stone was full and round with smaller, crescent-shaped stones on either side of the center stone. The crescent-shaped stones grew smaller the farther away they were from the center stone.

Pointing to the stones, John explained, “These represent the phases of the moon: the round stone in the middle stands for the new moon—the time when the moon is black and you can’t see it in the sky.”

Samuel nodded, eager to show he understood.

“These stones,” he pointed to the small crescent-shaped ones, “are the phases of the moon leading up to the new moon.” He pointed to the full, round stone in the center again. “Time travel can only happen during the new moon. This ring reminds me to keep track of the moon so I don’t miss it and end up stuck somewhere in time until another cycle of the moon passes. There is another requirement but it is not necessary for you to know that now.”

Samuel looked up at the sky through the opening in the trees. The sun had set and it was fully dark now. He could make out the shape of the moon, but it hung black against the dark sky, giving no light tonight. Samuel looked back at John and hesitantly touched the center stone.

The man nodded, smiling. “Right, tonight is the new moon. I will leave tonight after we are finished talking.” He drew Samuel’s attention back to the ring. “This ring is given to the traveler in each generation, passed down through the family to those who inherit the gift. One day it will be Julia’s. When you meet her, look to see if she is wearing the ring. If she is, you will know for sure it is her, and that what I’m telling you is the truth.”

“When will she come?”

The man’s expression turned grim. “Julia will come with the next war.”

Samuel looked up at him in confusion, and John continued. “Another war is coming, Samuel, one between the Southern states and the Northern states. The South will try to separate from the North and establish itself as a separate country. During this war, slavery will end and your people will be set free. I don’t know exactly when she will arrive, but when she does you will be working

for the South, the Confederate Army. You will be working to build a fort with high earthen walls and she will come to the fort during the time you are there. From that time on, you must do whatever is in your power to protect her. You understand?”

Feeling excitement and pride at being somehow chosen for such an important job, Samuel said, “I promise to do my best to keep your grand-daughter safe, sir.”

He laughed full-heartedly, perhaps in relief. “I knew I could count on you, Samuel. Now let us get you home before you get into too much trouble.” They stood and John, using the dim light of his lantern, walked Samuel back toward the plantation, stopping several hundred yards from the end of the tree line.

“Will I see you again?” Samuel asked, feeling an odd attachment to this man he just met.

“No,” John shook his head. Placing a warm hand on Samuel’s shoulder, he said, “You need to keep what I’ve told you to yourself, Samuel. People can have”—he hesitated—“unexpected reactions to predictions of the future. Often they react with scorn and ridicule, but some can be violent. Maybe driven by fear that what I’ve predicted will come true and somehow they can stop it. I don’t really know, but I have learned the hard way to be careful with whom I share my visions. Some people are not happy to hear what I have to say; I would spare you this pain. Keep it to yourself and wait for Julia to come to you. Understand?”

“Yes,” the boy said fervently. “Are you leaving now?”

John looked up at the dark moon. “Yes, Samuel, my time here is at an end. Will you be all right on your own from here?” He indicated the remaining distance left to exit the swamp.

Looking back over his shoulder, Samuel judged the distance from the swampy forest to the place where it opened onto the plantation. Even in the dark, he knew he could navigate this area without difficulty; they were close enough now that he could at least be sure of that much. “Yes, sir, I know this part of the forest like I know my own hand,” he said with pride.

“All right, remember what I told you—all of it! It’s important. Many lives will depend on Julia’s success. And you must make sure she has the opportunity to succeed. She won’t know it, but she will need you. Understand?”

“I will keep her safe,” Samuel said, vowing solemnly.

John smiled.

*“Such a kind smile,” Salem said to me. “Like yours, Miss Julia.”*

*I smiled in return, and Salem continued.*

“Thank you, Samuel,” John said to the boy. “Julia will be lucky to have you. You will be a good friend. Goodbye, son.”

John turned his back to Samuel, looking up to face the dark moon. He concentrated on it and held his arms out to his sides, the lantern dangling from one hand, its metal ring at the top looped around one finger. Samuel sat watching John as he closed his eyes and took one deliberate step forward—and disappeared, the air seeming to ripple where he’d been standing. The lantern dropped to the ground, extinguishing the low flame.

## THE TELLING OF TALES

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Samuel sat stunned in the dark, watching as the air settled once again, erasing any evidence a man once stood there. He went over in his mind everything he'd seen and heard. If there was any doubt in anything John said, that doubt was gone now—now that the boy had seen him up and disappear like that. When the shock of John's disappearance wore off, Samuel bent and picked up the lantern. It was heavy, made of black metal with glass on all four sides. Pulling open its door, he could make out the stub of a wax candle, still warm to the touch—not the wick of an oil lamp, as he'd expected when he first saw the light. No wonder the light was so dim and flickered so erratically. Samuel started home, taking the lantern with him; Mamma could use another lantern, and she preferred the ones with candles to the oil lamps used around the plantation.

Samuel made it home in record time, but he'd still been gone far too long. Mamma pulled him into a hug the minute he walked through the door, too relieved to see him to start yelling. Samuel was trying to wriggle out of her embrace when his father's deep voice sounded behind him.

“Where've you been, son?”

Mamma let him go, and he turned to face his father. “I thought I saw a light in the swamp and went to see what it was,” Samuel said. He wanted to tell his father everything about John, what he said and how he disappeared into thin air. But instead Samuel looked at his feet, avoiding his father's stern gaze, and said, “I walked in a ways but didn't see no one. I found this lantern.” He held it up for his father to see. “It's just an old candle lantern. Someone dropped it—the wax was still warm when I picked it up, so it must've been the light I seen. Whoever left it was gone, so I brought it home for Mamma.”

Never had Samuel ever lied to his father before, so being uncomfortable with it as he was, he rambled on. “I went farther in than I realized and it took me a while to get back out ...” He swallowed under his father's gaze. “That's why I'm late, Father.”

“It's natural to be curious, Samuel,” his father said, “but you know how I feel about you boys going out there after dark. The kind of men that walk through the swamp after dark are not the kind you ever want to meet. Those unlucky enough to cross paths with them usually end up dead. There's likely more dead men in the swamp than there is in the whole cemetery. I'm glad you didn't run into whoever the lantern belonged to.”

Samuel's father stood towering over him. "Promise me you won't go out there in the dark again, and the next time you see a light out there you'll go to other way."

"I promise. I'm sorry, sir ... I won't do it again." Samuel shuffled his feet, the guilt of lying to his father making him want to sink into the floor and disappear, just like John had done.

His father relaxed then, and Samuel could hear the smile return to his voice. "Go clean up. Your mamma's got supper on the table."

He did as he was told and joined his brothers at the table, digging in to the beans and cornbread. His brothers eyed him with suspicion, guessing correctly there was more to the story he wasn't sharing. They tried to work it out of him over the next few weeks—you can bet they did—but young Samuel told them nothing, and getting nowhere, they let it go.

## A TALE OF DEFIANCE

---

Life went on as usual for the next year or so, and Patrick—and, by association, Samuel—turned eleven. Samuel missed the old days when he and Patrick were friends, but the older they got the more Patrick changed toward him. Now Patrick looked at him in a way that made their stations in life clear. Any reminder that they had once been friends seemed to make Patrick angry. When they passed each other, Patrick looked at Samuel the way someone looked at their boot after stepping in a pile of manure. It hurt, but Samuel tried to ignore it as best he could, knowing nothing he did or said would change it, and any attempt would not end well for him.

One afternoon, Patrick rode out on horseback with his father and the plantation foreman to oversee the harvest and discuss next year's planting. Samuel knew this because they stood behind him talking as he worked and he could overhear what they said. Keeping his head down, he went on working and the men moved on, riding toward the next field, but Patrick stayed behind, watching him. After a few minutes, he turned to look at Patrick, to see if he needed something.

Patrick sat on his horse staring down at him, an ugly expression on his face. "Samuel," he sneered, "I don't think you are picking that cotton fast enough."

Samuel looked from Patrick's face to his own scraped and bloodied hands.

"And try not to bleed on it, either ... it devalues the cotton. We need a premium price at the sale this year."

Angry now and past caring, Samuel stood tall and looked Patrick straight in the eye. "I do my best every day. Everyone knows I'm one of the top pickers on this plantation," he challenged. They had once been equals—at least in Samuel's eyes—and not so long ago. The way Patrick looked at him now made him boil like a pot.

"What fantasies you tell," Patrick laughed. "We own much better slaves than you. Maybe I'll speak to Father about selling you. I can't imagine you'll amount to much."

"I'm going to amount to more than you ever will," Samuel snapped. "I've been chosen to protect a very important person, one who will come when the war starts."

*"Oh, Salem ..." I couldn't help but utter.*

*He smiled sadly at me, but went on.*

“ ‘War,’ ” Patrick mocked, “what *war*? And who would let you protect anyone?”

“There’s a war coming soon—one that will free my people from the likes of you.” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. The secret he kept for so long, blurted out in a fit of anger.

Master Favereau’s voice cut through him like ice, freezing him where he stood. Samuel’s attention turned from Patrick’s satisfied smirk to Master Favereau’s thunderous expression. Horrified, he realized too late that Favereau had ridden back over to see what was keeping Patrick, and had arrived just in time to overhear the worst of it.

“What did you say, boy?” Favereau demanded, the ice in his voice freezing Samuel’s heart. He knew better than to talk back—even to Patrick. He’d seen what happened to those who did. But it was too late to call back the words that betrayed his secret.

Favereau’s face turned black with rage as he climbed off his horse. He walked over to Samuel and punched him square in the face. Blood spurted from his lips and onto the cotton, and he fell to the ground. Holding his hand over his bleeding mouth, he looked up to see Favereau retrieving a whip from his horse’s saddle.

But before Favereau could reach Samuel, Patrick stopped him. He took the whip from his father and said, “I’ll handle this myself.”

## TALES AND THEIR PUNISHMENTS

---

Samuel watched in shock as his lifelong friend walked over to where he lay on the ground. He'd never seen Favereau treat any of them this way before, but *Patrick* treating *Samuel* this way ... he'd never dreamed it possible. Favereau handled troublemakers and runaways, yes, but not anyone in Samuel's family, and never him. He looked up pleadingly at Patrick, but the boy wore a satisfied, almost gleeful look in his eye that made Samuel shiver. Something evil lurked within his one-time friend. Patrick was taking joy in what was about to happen, taking joy in the act of inflicting pain. It occurred to him then that Patrick intentionally provoked him, hoped something like this would happen. What caused Patrick to change so drastically from the friend he'd once known and loved?

His thoughts were interrupted by Master Favereau, looming behind his son. "Samuel, I don't know where you got a notion like that, but there will be no war. And your *people*"—he spat the word—"will never be free." Favereau nodded to his son, and Patrick raised the whip and brought it down.

Pain seared across Samuel's back. He curled up, brought his arms over his head in an attempt at protection.

"This kind of talk cannot go unpunished. I won't stand for it on my plantation," Favereau screamed, as Patrick continued to strike Samuel with the whip as if punctuating the ends of his father's sentences.

"An idea like freedom can spread through a plantation like a disease and erode the very foundation of our society," Favereau went on.

Patrick's whipping continued underlining his father's meaning, tearing through the fabric of Samuel's clothing and cutting into his flesh with burning pain. Patrick struck every available surface—back, arms, legs, anywhere Samuel couldn't protect as he rolled away from him, trying to escape the bite of the whip. Each strike was more painful than the last, lashing at already torn and bleeding flesh. What was left of Samuel's clothes became soaked with blood and the whip continued to tear indiscriminately at fabric and flesh.

*"Oh, Salem," I choked.*

*Salem leveled a hard gaze on me. "Do not interrupt, Miss Julia, not now. Let me tell it true."*

*He went on.*

As if the whipping alone were not enough, Samuel heard his father's voice as he rushed onto the scene. His daddy screamed, argued, and then pleaded for Favereau to put a stop to it all.

Favereau turned his attention on Salem's father, and his fury seemed to grow. "He must have gotten these ideas from you, Caleb," he screamed at my father, spittle flying from his lips. "I know he didn't get them from me or mine."

Samuel looked up from where he lay, helpless, and watched as Favreau took the whip from his son and walked to where Samuel's father stood.

He heard the whip come down on his father, feeling the blow as surely as if he'd been struck, too.

He wanted to go to him, to help him, but every time he tried the pain became so intense he couldn't move. Samuel lay immobile, listening to the sounds of the whip and his father's screams.

"All my fault," he whispered to himself. "This was all my fault."

*"No," I told him.*

*But Salem ignored me and continued his tale.*

When it was over, they were loaded onto a flatbed wagon by some other slaves and taken to their cabin, where Mamma could tend to their wounds. The pain was so severe at times Samuel wished he would die. Death should have been the price for what he'd done, for what he brought down on his family with careless words spoken in anger.

Samuel remembered too late what John said about the way people could react to the things the man had told him.

*I tried to hide my tears from my friend. The knowledge of the pain my family caused Salem sat like a stone in my stomach, threatening to make my dinner come back up. I wanted to say something, to apologize for the harm we caused him. But what could I possibly say? I knew he wanted to get through the story without my interrupting. So I kept quiet, my heart heavy with Salem's pain.*

*He went on.*

## DESTRUCTIVE TALES

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**D**ays later when the pain became tolerable enough for them to hold a conversation, Samuel's father asked him why. Why he said those things to Patrick and where he had gotten such a notion. War? What in God's name was the boy blabbing on about, some war? Samuel started crying, and the whole story spilled out with the tears. He told his father everything about the night in the swamp. About John Elliot and everything he told Samuel about Julia. About how he was supposed to look for her and befriend her and protect her when she came. Samuel even told him about how he watched John disappear, about the ripple in the air where he'd been standing just a second before.

Samuel's family, who had been sitting around him listening, now stared at him in disbelief. His parents exchanged worried glances.

His mother spoke first. "I believe you, Samuel. You have never been one to lie or make up tall tales." She smiled gently at him; that was Mamma's way. "As a young child, you would come to me and confess what you done before I even had time to discover anything amiss."

She paused with a little laugh, then went on.

"I'm not sure what to make of all this ... it kind of sounds like one of my stories ... but," she met my gaze, "I believe you, child."

Relief flooded through him. Someone *believed* him!

But he could tell his father and brothers were not so sure.

Early the next morning, the foreman flung open the door of the cabin and stormed in. "Caleb, Favereau wants me to take you and your family to the auction house today."

Samuel watched as the color drained from his father's face. "Why? We have been punished, and I can guarantee that nothing like this will ever happen again. I talked with Samuel and he understands."

"Favereau wants all of you gone. Says talk like that must be cut out at the source. He has always been fond of you and your family, and you have always worked hard for the Favereau Plantation. So instead of sentencing your family to death, he ordered that you be sold off separately. Sparing your lives, but diluting any of those poisonous beliefs."

They all sat there looking at him, speechless, and Sophia started crying in her crib.

The foreman added, "The baby can stay. She is young enough not to have been corrupted. Sally has agreed to take her."

Sally lived in the cabin next to us. She lost a child about the same time Sophia was born.

“Get your things. The wagon is waiting,” he said and walked out, leaving the door open behind him.

The family sat stunned, knowing nothing they said or did would make any difference. Samuel’s brothers looked at him with angry, accusing eyes.

He’d ruined all of their lives.

Silently, Mamma crossed over to Sophia and picked her up to calm her crying. His father walked over to Samuel and laid a hand on his shoulder, but Samuel couldn’t bring himself to meet his father’s eyes.

“Samuel,” he said, “you are a person with great integrity. Whatever your destiny, stand up straight and meet it.”

In silence, his brothers gathered their meager belongings and went out to the waiting wagon with their father.

Mamma hugged him, careful of his healing wounds. “I love you, Samuel,” she said, tears streaming down her cheeks, then walked out the door.

Sophia watched him over their mother’s shoulder with large, worried brown eyes as they left the cabin. Though too young to understand what was happening, even she knew something was wrong.

Samuel walked out the door behind Mamma and Sophia, knowing he would never see his home or his family again. Sally walked over to Mamma and took Sophia. Still crying, wailing now, Mamma climbed up into the wagon and took a seat beside Daddy. Samuel followed closely behind her. As the wagon drove away, he looked back at their cabin and the crowd that gathered to watch the punishment be carried out. The crowd looked at them with eyes of gratitude. Grateful it wasn’t their own family.

Samuel sat on the auction block and watched as first his parents and then his brothers were sold to separate owners, one by one. Then his turn came. He was sold and loaded onto another wagon with the other slaves purchased that day. As he rode away, Samuel watched the faces of his family staring back at him.

Words caused this—*his* words. Samuel closed his mouth then, determined never to open it again.

*“But it wasn’t your fault! It was mine!” I blurted.*

*Salem narrowed his eyes at me and I covered my mouth to keep any more words from escaping.*

*He went on with his story.*

## TALES OF SORROW

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Samuel was bought and sold several more times before being sold in Salem, Alabama, and ending up on a Mobile plantation owned by a short, fat man named Jack Moody. Moody had a mean streak and Samuel often thought his name a fitting description of his behavior. Moody beat him regularly, usually for no reason but often in frustration with Samuel's silence. Moody would tell him it was to "keep you in your place," an ounce of prevention and all that. Moody believed a talkative slave was a predictable slave—it let you know how their mind worked. In his eyes, Samuel's silence made him a threat, not to mention his size; always tall for his age, and now a grown man, Samuel towered over every other man on the plantation, and he had a muscular build to match his frame.

*"Couldn't you have escaped?" I asked.*

*He smiled at me, piteously almost. "I could overpower Moody, sure, Miss Julia, but ..."*

He could overpower Moody or any of the foremen and escape, but what would be the point? He had no money, no way to find his family, and nowhere else to go. He kept to himself as much as possible, oblivious to the people and activities around him. Focusing on the work in front of him and nothing else.

One day a new slave was brought to the plantation, name of Josiah. He worked beside Samuel his first day there and never once stopped talking—Samuel guessed that was why Moody bought him. Preferring silence, he found it annoying and did his best to ignore the talkative man. He even moved over several rows to pick, tried and tried to put distance between them, but Josiah followed him.

*Salem laughed at the memory, and I smiled too, thinking of Josiah. I missed him.*

The slave housing on the plantation consisted of one-room cabins for families and bunkhouses for single men. They were constructed of rough-split logs with dirt floors. Each cabin had one door and two windows—if you could call them windows; they had no glass, really just framed openings with wooden shutters you could close on cold days. Thankfully, winters in the South were short. The bunkhouses were sparsely furnished, held anywhere from five to ten men

depending on the current population. There were only five men in Samuel's bunkhouse, so Josiah was housed with him, much to Samuel's silent dismay and Josiah's loudly expressed delight.

That first night, they sat around the table with the other men in the bunkhouse eating hoecakes and watery stew. Josiah carried on with his chattering. Samuel ignored him, but the other men sat listening, unable to get a word in. Samuel marveled at how he could talk and eat at the same time without choking.

"Son, don't you ever shut up?" one of the older men at the table asked in irritation.

Samuel smiled and Josiah looked over at him, maybe looking for some support, but Samuel wasn't saying anything. Josiah turned his attention back to the older man and gestured toward him. "Don't he ever talk?"

"Not that we've ever heard." The older man looked around the table and the others all agreed.

"How long he been here?" Josiah asked.

"Oh, 'bout nine or so planting seasons now," said the older man. "Got here when he was still a kid. Reckon he's 'bout twenty years old or so by now.

Josiah turned and looked straight at Samuel. "You dumb or what?"

Samuel shook his head no.

"Somebody cut your tongue out for talking back or something?"

Samuel stuck his tongue out at him, partly to answer his question, and partly out of irritation at his questioning. Everyone else got the message Samuel wanted to be left alone and obliged, so why couldn't Josiah?

"All right, then, so you *choose* not to speak." It was a statement.

Samuel shrugged and refocused on what passed for supper.

Jabbing his thumb Samuel's direction again, Josiah asked, "What's his name?"

The older man answered again, "Don't know. We just call 'im Salem, 'cause it's where Moody bought 'im. I guess he likes it okay. He responds to it well enough."

*"You do like it," I said. "More than just okay? Should I keep calling you 'Salem'?"*

*Salem just gave me a small smile and went on with his tale.*

## TALES OF HOPE

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Weeks passed and Salem got used to Josiah's chattering. They worked well together and he ended up being good company after all. When Moody came around, Josiah answered questions for Salem, always checking his expression to be sure Salem agreed with what he said. The beatings stopped, so Salem guessed Moody assumed he was talking to Josiah. Salem guessed that Moody decided, based on Josiah's answers that he was now less unpredictable. The truth, of course, was Josiah just learned to read Salem's expressions with amazing accuracy—that and the fact that he talked enough for two people.

At first Salem just tolerated Josiah's presence; his chatter was far more tolerable than the beatings, anyway. But over time, they became true friends. He trusted Josiah, that did not come easy to him. He had not trusted anyone since being separated from his family. Not since John Elliot—anger flashed through him at the thought of that man. If not for John Elliot luring him into the swamp that night, his family would still be together. True, John warned him to keep quiet, but he gave Salem the words that would ultimately destroy his life, and nothing John told him had come to pass.

At least not yet.

As he sat under a tree, cooling off and thinking of John Elliot and that night so long ago, Josiah came and sat down beside him. He started chattering about the things he'd seen and heard during his travels with his previous owner. Apparently, Josiah had been owned by an elderly Virginian statesman, and his advanced age required Josiah to accompany him to meetings and social events. Josiah stood in a corner of the room in case his master needed help with something; this allowed him to overhear much of what was discussed.

*"What happened to the statesman?" I blurted out.*

*Salem shrugged. "Deceased. Which accounted for Josiah's arrival at the plantation in Mobile. Anyway ..."*

Salem guessed that all those years of having to sit quietly and listen had taken their toll on Josiah, so now he was trying to get all those pent-up words out. Trouble was, they were all trying to get out at the same time. As they sat there alone, drinking water and trying to cool off, Josiah chattered on and on about one of the last fancy parties he assisted his owner to. Salem ignored

him as usual, until something Josiah said caught his attention. The topic changed from what the people at the party had been wearing to what they had been talking about. Salem looked sharply at Josiah, meeting his eyes and focusing on what he was saying.

Noticing Salem's reaction, Josiah lowered his voice so they wouldn't be overheard. "It's true. There *is* a war coming ... and it'll be here soon, Salem. It's what all the statesmen were talking about at the party that night."

Salem gaped at him, stunned—but not for the reasons Josiah might have thought.

"Believe it," Josiah said. "It's been all the talk up in Virginia for a while now. You're isolated out here on the plantation, so you never hear what's going on anyplace else. The talk was getting heated, too. Several times I seen fights break out between men with different opinions about what they think should happen. They say the North wants to keep slavery in the South by banning it from the new territories. Of course, the South won't hear of it, they say they have the right to move anywhere they want and take their property with them, no matter what that property is—namely, *us*."

He babbled on, but Salem stopped listening. John Elliot's words had come back to haunt him: *There will be a war between the North and the South; Julia will come during this war. She will come to stop an evil man. She must be allowed to succeed—future generations will depend on it.*

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. After all these years, it was beginning.

From that day on Salem became a model worker, and for once he started paying attention to the people and things going on around him. He had no plan, but he hoped his model behavior would lead to an opportunity if he bided his time. Eventually it paid off, too, and he and Josiah were moved from the fields to the stables.

Salem guessed Josiah was chosen because of his experience as a driver and assistant to a well-respected statesman. And him because he finally proved himself predictable, thanks in no small part to Josiah's speaking for him.

On stable duty, they not only kept the barn clean and took care of the horses but acted as drivers for Moody when he attended meetings and social engagements in town. They waited outside until his meeting or whatever ended, and this allowed Josiah to exchange information with the other drivers. Soon it became obvious that everything John Elliot told him was the truth.

A war ... and soon.

Salem listened intently to every conversation within his hearing, hoping to learn more about the coming war, and prepared for Julia's arrival. He knew she would come during the time when he would be working for the Southern Army, building a fort, but each time he saw a woman with

red hair he found himself looking at her face, studying it for features like John's, checking her fingers for the moon ring ... he had grown anxious. Impatient.

*Salem looked me in the eyes. "I was ready to meet you, Miss Julia."*

## TALES OF DESTINY ... AND JULIA

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Once shots were fired at Fort Sumter, things changed quickly. Many of the slaves he had known around town were given to the Confederate Army, while their owners went to join the fight. Moody was too old to fight, so the plantation continued on as usual, and with each passing day Salem became more anxious to leave. He was curious about how he would end up at the right fort at the right time to intercept Julia.

Could John have been wrong? Had Salem changed his own fate somehow?

Tired of waiting, he started plotting to escape, determined to go and find the fort for himself. As he prepared to leave, a Confederate Regiment rode up to the front of the plantation, saving him from taking such drastic action. Within a few hours, every able-bodied male old enough—or young enough, depending on the perspective—was loaded up and hauled away to join the Confederate cause. As slaves, they were not armed; instead they were assigned to different regiments to serve as laborers. Salem was going to be sent to a fort outside Savannah, Georgia, called McAllister.

*I sat up straighter. I knew this part.*

*The story was coming to an end.*

Salem and Josiah were always together, so much so, most people thought of them as one person or a set of brothers or something. Salem thought it had to do with his silence and Josiah's penchant for doing all the talking. For whatever reason, they were sent to the same fort, and Salem was glad for it. He had come to enjoy Josiah's company; he had become his friend; his family, even. Salem smiled broadly as they started on their way to Savannah.

"Why you so happy?" Josiah asked. "We're gonna spend all day digging up dirt and piling it up into walls as tall as a building. Don't sound like no kind of fun to me. You been drinking, Salem?"

Salem shook his head, but he continued smiling.

"Well, I don't know what else could make you grin like that," Josiah said, confusion rearranging his features. Then he turned back to Salem, a smug expression on his face. "It's a girl. You know a girl there in Savannah, don't you?"

Salem shrugged noncommittally.

“You know her,” he said, thinking out loud, trying to puzzle it out, “but she don’t know you? Somebody you like but never approached?”

Salem nodded—it was as good an explanation as any he could’ve thought up.

“You know they’re gonna keep you working the whole time, right? No way you’re going into Savannah and flirt with some girl.”

Salem frowned at him and shook his head.

“No flirting? Come on, now, it might work. She might like you back if you got the chance to see her.” He looked Salem up and down, taking him in and assessing the results. “I mean, what’s not to love?” Josiah laughed, leaned his head back against the side of the wagon, and closed his eyes.

Salem leaned back, too, settling in for the long ride, and thought about what it would be like to finally meet Julia.

*“Yeah,” I said, teasing, “besides, what’s not to love?”*

*Salem laughed, his deep voice vibrating in the soil beneath me, but then he continued his story. I could tell he was anxious to finish it.*

The days dragged on. Long hours of piling dirt to the height of a two-story building taking their toll on Salem’s back and his nerves. Josiah chattered on all day as usual, but since he didn’t know anything more than Salem did, Salem mostly ignored him. Sometimes Salem listened, nodding, shrugging, or shaking his head, and in that way giving his opinion about what Josiah speculated would happen.

They were under the command of the meanest man he ever met—and that was saying something, given his experience with Moody.

*I knew exactly who he meant; my blood boiled at the thought of him.*

*“You know him,” Salem said, looking directly at me for the first time in a while.*

*“Jensen,” I said darkly.*

*He nodded and looked away to finish his tale.*

Sergeant Jensen was much worse than Moody, much, *much* worse. Jensen would have beaten them all every day if not for the fort’s commander, Captain Hartridge. Hartridge was a good man and stepped between them and Jensen often. This stopped the physical violence Jensen would have

inflicted, but still left them to put up with constant verbal abuse. They had been there for months now and had come to expect it several times a day.

One day, as evening approached, Salem and Josiah stood there listening to Jensen's latest verbal attack aimed at them. Salem looked down at the ground while Jensen ranted on—he'd learned fast that looking straight at Jensen only served to anger him more and intensify the attack. While Salem examined first the dirt and then the grass surrounding him, he heard the approach of booted feet ... lighter than they should have been. It must be one of the boys who came to the fort with his father, Salem thought.

*I nudged Salem again, laughing. "I'm no boy, silly."*

*Salem chuckled. "You can imagine my surprise, then, when ..."*

The sound of a sharp female voice addressed Jensen. Salem snapped his head up, still careful to avoid making eye contact with Jensen, and almost let out a gasp.

It was Julia.

A woman stood there, toe-to-toe with Jensen. She had John Elliot's dark red hair, pale skin, and clear blue eyes. She was stunning, her hair escaping the loose braid and curling around her face. Her face, flushed with anger, had those light freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks. Her eyes shot daggers at Jensen. Salem looked down and found the moon ring resting on her hand, and it confirmed everything John told him.

It felt as if that ring confirmed everything in his whole *life*.

She was angry with Jensen about something, but Salem didn't know what. So caught up in the fact that Julia Elliot—the many-times great-granddaughter of the time-traveler John Elliot—stood before him, he hadn't been able to focus on what she was saying.

Hartridge walked up just then and Salem focused on what he said in time to hear, "Josiah, Salem, please go with Miss Elliot and do whatever she asks of you."

He couldn't believe it. Julia had finally come.

Salem looked first at Jensen—his face turned so red Salem thought he may be having some sort of episode—and then at Julia. Salem could tell by the look on her face, calm yet determined, that she was going to stand her ground no matter what.

He stepped forward because Captain Hartridge asked him to and because he thought he might need to protect Julia from Jensen. The man looked as though he were about to strangle her.

He and Josiah followed Julia toward the hospital tent. He couldn't believe it. After everything he had been through—the loss of his family, the years of anger and doubt—he was ready to meet the task that lay before him. His father's words came back to him:

*“Whatever your destiny, stand up straight and meet it.”*

He would. He instinctively knew his life would be forever changed from this day forward. No longer would he be a passive bystander in his own story. The prediction John Elliot revealed to him so long ago would now serve to provide an opportunity for him to help free himself and other slaves. A renewed determination filled him then, and he knew that by helping Julia he would be helping his own people. He didn't understand yet how the two were intertwined; he only knew in his heart that they were.

Maybe one day, after the war ended, he would look for his family. Find them and try to make up for what he'd done. He at least knew where to start looking for Sophia. Somehow he would find a way. But for now he would see that Julia accomplished what she came here to do. He gave John his word. And if nothing else, Salem was a man of his word.

This was the path God lay before him. The role he was destined to play.

Accepting the responsibility, Salem stood up straight and stepped forward to face his destiny head-on.

## THE END OF A TALE

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**I** sat quietly, trying to understand the surreal experience of watching Salem's life play before me. I felt the love he held for his family, the deep sorrow of his loss and all the things he suffered in his life. I also understood the conviction he felt to uphold his word to John Elliot, to protect me no matter what.

I felt the love he had for Josiah and for me, the only two true friends he'd made in his life. If it were possible, I had even more respect for Salem now that I knew his whole story. I was honored that he shared it with me. I was thankful for my visions and the role they played in allowing me to experience Salem's life in such an unusual way; experiencing it as if I'd been there with him.

I couldn't believe he had been waiting for me all along. It all made sense now, how protective of me he'd always been. I had so many questions for him. I looked up, only to see him walking away. Clearly he was done talking for today. My questions would just have to keep until the next time I saw him. I owed Salem so much, and one way or another I would find a way to repay the debt.

The sun had set while he told his story. As he walked away, I watched him until he was swallowed up by degrees into the dark spaces between the tall pines of the forest, his secrets safe with them, and with me.