

CHAPTER 5



By Bread Alone

“Now ain’t this a shame.” Hannah shook her head at the afternoon’s half-eaten dinner congealing on the dining room table. She marveled at the ingratitude of white folks.

Molly had lumbered ungracefully around the coop that morning chasing plumped-up chickens to cook for Zachary’s guests. Promise had shelled the peas with her usual painstaking diligence and insisted on dropping them one by one into the bowl to hear them go *plunk*. Young Martha had given the silver and crystal extra attention. Juno had set a beautiful table. And Hannah had strained her nerves—dividing her time between minding Gus and fussing at Jenny to get some gumption and stop plucking the chickens like they could feel it.

But it had all come to nothing. Zachary and his visitors had gone to the Planters Club on the Pee Dee for dinner, and they didn’t plan to return until after supper. Rebecca had been too consumed with thoughts of her brothers to touch her dinner. Gus had finished his creamed potatoes and apricot jam, then busied himself mixing the rest of his food into unpleasant looking piles until his mother became disgusted enough to excuse him from the table.

Hannah smelled the white gardenias that Jesse had picked for her. “Thought you’d be needin’ a little somethin’ today, Miss Hannah,” he’d said when he gave them to her.

Jesse had spent a lifetime nurturing the earth, and it had equipped him to properly love a woman. He understood that even the strongest patches of grass on Atterley's lawns would wither away and die without consistent fertilizing. He had learned that the fluctuations of Mother Nature's ever-changing seasons could not be subdued by force, but could be mastered through patience and adaptation. He could sense from the curve of a stem, the touch of a petal, the turn of a leaf, when his flowers were crying out for warmth or nourishment. So without a word of complaint from Hannah, Jesse knew she was having a bad day. The flowers' heavy fragrance made her feel better, and she abandoned the mess in the dining room and went in search of Promise.

She found her in the sitting room, curled up in her little pink satin sewing chair, practicing her stitches. The chair was last year's Christmas present from her missus, and it was tucked snugly beside the davenport so Rebecca could have company while she worked on her embroidery. Gus sat in the far corner, surrounded by his soldiers, looking miserable. He had struggled in vain to match his father's pace as he strode past him and out the door, walking and talking with the two men at his side.

Gus had wanted to show him the bit of wood that he had carved into a hunting dog. It was almost perfect. Yes, maybe he had cut the nose a little too thin and it had fallen off, but the rest was still good enough to tell what it was, good enough for his father to know what he wanted for his birthday, but he hadn't even stopped long enough to see it.

"Promise, you may as well carry the rest of that food out to your mama and them. Ain't no use in it all goin' to waste."

"Can I take the chocolate cake, too, Maum Hannah? Muley sure does like Molly's chocolate cake." Promise's younger brother had won Hannah's heart and earned his nickname with his boldness and complete absence of decorum.

Muley was creamy beige in winter, honey golden in summer, and beautiful all year round, and like most lovely children, he possessed a strong sense of entitlement to special

treatment. He thought nothing of loitering around the main house whenever he had a free moment, harassing Hannah for tidbits. Promise found that she could successfully negotiate the many sweets denied her on his behalf.

“All right. Tell Molly to pack it up with the rest.”

“Tell me *what?*” Molly’s voice echoed through the house. “I didn’t say you could give away my *damn* cake!”

“Stop hollerin’!” Hannah yelled back. “Miss Rebecca’s napping!”

Molly tore herself away from her frying fish long enough to make an appearance in the doorway. “I-ain’t-packing-up-*nothin’*,” Molly snapped. “And *nothin’* includes my cake.”

Molly looked like an overstuffed brown leprechaun. Her red hair was damp against her face, and her green eyes rattled as she glared at Hannah. The family’s desertion of her perfectly fine dinner had put her in a foul mood, and she felt very put out. “Why you tryin’ to give me extra work—fixin’ it so I gotta cook again? This food’ll keep just fine ’til tonight. They can eat it then.”

“You know good and well that if that food stays within easy reach of your fat fingers, not a bit of it’ll be around come suppertime,” Hannah said. “Massa could feed all of Atterley twice over on what you gobble up everyday.”

“I can eat as much as I please, Missus said so,” Molly shot back. “And how ’bout *you*, while we’re giving out blame? How ’bout you handing my suppers over to them free niggas that come ’round here scratching at the back door—beggin’ for scraps like Massa’s dogs? You ain’t fooling nobody—talkin’ ’bout we got leftover this and leftover that. You just wanna excuse to send that gal to the street to visit that white nigga mama of hers.”

Promise began to cry. “You stop talkin’ about my mama. My mama isn’t white.”

“Now see whatcha did,” Molly hissed. “You went and made her cry. Don’t cry, gal,” she told Promise in her sweetest stirring-pudding voice. “It ain’t no concern of *mine* if you wanna go out to the street and see your white nigga mama.

"Til Hannah starts lettin' you carry my good meals out there witcha."

Jenny had been standing in the hallway since the commotion began, watching the exchange wide-eyed, wondering if she should intervene. She was small for eleven, and had her mother Juno's modesty, but not her noble bearing. She weighed her fear of the two commanding women against the poignant message in Reverend Wickerson's sermon the previous week, "Blessed be the Peacemakers." At last, the reverend's preaching won out. With the broom trembling in her hands, she advanced. "The Lord's Word says that man shall not live by eating bread alone. That means we gotta share," she offered.

"Shut up, gal," Molly snorted. "You don't have no kinda sense. This is grown folks' talk."

"M-m-my mama isn't wh-wh-white," Promise sniffed.

As usual, Hannah got her way. Molly, grumbling, retreated to the kitchen. She packed the food snugly into baskets and covered them with cotton cloths to keep out roaming flies. "Jimmy, go get the seed wagon so that gal won't drop these baskets. Hang that woman. Givin' away my good dinner," she muttered.

"Go on and change out of your clothes, Promise," Hannah said. "Miss Rebecca don't want you smellin' up your good dresses."

"I wanna go, too, Maum Hannah," Gus begged. "Can I, Maum Hannah? Can I? Please, Maum Hannah. Can I?"

"No."

"Why not, huh? Huh, Maum Hannah? Huh? Why not?"

"You'll tire yourself out, that's why."

Dr. Needham had advised that Gus not overly exert himself. While Promise seemed resistant to colds and fevers, Gus had been continually ill since birth. The doctor blamed Gus's condition on Cora, whose milk nursed both children, explaining that some white children's stomachs were too delicate for nigger's milk.

The Fruits of Atterley

Rebecca had scoffed at the idea, but Dr. Needham's diagnosis that Gus's illness was the result of Cora's nursing was correct. When Cora was told to care for Rebecca's newborn, it seemed to her as if all the evils of slavery existed in the tiny form of the future master of Atterley, and she bitterly resented being forced to nourish her own captivity. Whenever she was left alone with him, Gus was painfully neglected. She ignored his cries and attended instead to the needs of her own child.

Only Hannah suspected the truth before it was too late and agreed with the doctor that Gus be removed from Cora's care. He still suffered lingering effects from the deprivation he had endured at her hands. He was painfully thin and several inches shorter than Promise. While she was allowed to run unrestrained over Atterley's grounds, Gus spent his days being schooled by his mother or following Hannah around the house.

"You can help Molly clean the fish if you want," Hannah suggested.

"I don't wanna help Molly. I wanna go with Promise."

"Didn't say you could help me no ways," Molly said, with one hand on her hip and the other turning the sizzling catfish.

Gus's shoulders slumped, and he studied the floor, crushing a small clump of dirt beneath his shoe.

Hannah began to feel sorry. "I'll tell you what. You can go with Promise if Jimmy goes with you—that way he can carry you back if you tire yourself out."

Gus pulled at Jimmy's pant leg. "Will you go with us, Jimmy? Will you?"

"I can't, Massa Gus," Jimmy said, hoisting the baskets into the wagon. "Massa wants me to meet him at the club. I would if I could—you know that. Don't cry now."

Jimmy, Tobias and Juno's youngest son, was a tall, strapping boy of fifteen. Zachary had moved him from his parents' home to a small room in the main house for use as an all-purpose errand boy. Jimmy was an unsettling combination of fire and ice. He was "near white," with skin as fair as Cora's

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and frigid blue eyes that didn't suit his good nature and warm smile.

He leaned down and whispered in Gus's ear. "Cheer up, now. I know it's real hard on you, havin' to stay cooped up inside like you do, but I'll bring you back the antlers from that buck I found last week. It should be picked clean by now. Bet you'd like that, huh?"

Gus brightened a little. Jimmy was always nice to him. He always made him feel like he was somebody important.

Jimmy mussed up Gus's hair. "Aw, why don't you let him go on and go, Hannah? He hasn't had a bad cold in nearly a month, ain't that right, Massa Gus?"

"Yeah, yeah. I ain't had one in nearly a month, just like Jimmy says."

Hannah took another deep sniff of her gardenias. "Fine," she said, defeated. "But you come straight back the moment you get tired, hear?"

Gus nodded happily.

"Promise, you remember to walk slowly, and rest if Massa Gus needs to. I'm expecting you to watch out for him."

And Promise gave Hannah her solemn pledge that she would.

