

DAUGHTRY HOUSE

18



REBEL HEART

BETH WHITE



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For Jan Johnson, who listens
and makes me laugh and think harder.

PROLOGUE

April 20, 1863

Ithaca Plantation

Selah could hear the horses thundering closer, oncoming hell and destruction. Cowering in the darkness under the porch with her arms around Joelle, she felt her sister's body heave with great, gulping, silent sobs. She had no idea how Mama had known they were coming, but thank God they'd had time to hide.

“Get under the porch, girls!” Mama had screamed, cloak billowing as she ran up the path from the gate.

Mama, who never ran, never raised her voice.

Dropping their books and sewing, Selah and Joelle ran down the steps and scuttled backward into the hidey-hole they'd loved as children. Their full skirts took up most of the space, and the thought of mice and spiders made Selah's scalp crawl.

“Mama, aren't you coming in too?” Joelle asked as their mother replaced the latticework and pushed at it to make sure it was secure.

“I have to warn the servants, make sure they get somewhere safe. Now back up out of sight, pray hard, and don’t make a sound no matter what you hear. If something happens to me, I want you to go to Grandmama and Grandpapa in Memphis.”

“Mama!” Selah burst out. “What—”

“Do what I say!” Mama’s eyes blazed. “Promise me, Selah!”

“Of course.” Selah wasn’t going to cry. She was nineteen years old—a grown woman, for mercy’s sake. But she wasn’t going to Memphis like her little sister Aurora had either. Papa had left her in charge of Ithaca, made her promise to watch out for Mama and Joelle.

Mama’s mouth relaxed a bit. “This will be over soon, and we’ll have a silly story to tell over tea this afternoon.” She stood, and her skirts had whisked out of sight.

Now the horses galloped closer until they pulled up at the hitching rail near the porch, snorting and blowing in the cold air. The riders dismounted, hooting and hollering, and Selah knew they must be drunk.

“We’re free, boys,” one man said, chortling. “Let’s see what we can find to juice a celebration.”

Through the lattice Selah saw butternut uniform legs and leather boots, heard the jingle of spurs and clank of sabers. If they were Confederate soldiers, why had Mama made her and Joelle hide? They’d entertained Rebel officers here before—two Christmases ago, in fact. Why would they hurt the women of this house, whose master had sacrificed everything to fight the Yankees up in Tennessee?

Maybe Mama was confused—

“These big plantations always have good whiskey.”

That was a different soldier, and Selah noticed something

funny about his accent. He didn't sound Southern at all. Come to think of it, the first one hadn't either. Northerners in butternut? She'd heard about the spies riding with that devil Grierson. Tricking Confederate outposts into delivering false messages, and taking over rail depots and tearing up track.

Joelle whimpered, and Selah clamped a hand over her mouth. "Shhh!" They sat rigid, until Selah heard boots clomping across the porch overhead. She thought she counted four sets of boots going up the steps, then got confused. How many were there? Was it a whole unit? She let Joelle go and whispered, "Not another sound. They're Yankees—no telling what they'd do to us."

Joelle nodded.

The front door opened, then the voices and noise of boots faded into the house. Apparently they'd left the door open. Selah and Joelle sat there for a long time, cramped, sweating, shuddering, listening to the sound of glass breaking and furniture being dragged around in the parlor. If they found Papa's liquor cabinet—

Where was Mama? *Oh, God, let her be safe.*

The men were laughing now, the voices growing louder and the jokes more off-color. Selah didn't understand half of what they said and prayed Joelle didn't either. "Jesus, have mercy," she whispered into the top of her sister's head. Maybe they'd get so drunk they'd pass out. Then maybe she could sneak out and get Papa's hunting rifle from the office—

She jumped when a woman's shriek ripped from inside the house. Seconds later, a gunshot cracked, and Selah pressed Joelle's head into her shoulder to stifle her scream. What had just happened? That might have been her mother screaming,

but it was hard to tell in the chaos of scuffling, furniture hitting walls, another gunshot.

“No, stop! Oh please, you cannot—” The frantic voice choked on muffled squeals.

The men burst into raucous laughter and cheers, while bumps and thumps shook the floor.

The noise went on and on, until Selah thought she might suffocate from rage and terror. Papa had taught her to shoot, and if she’d had a weapon she could have gone to her mother’s defense. But she didn’t, and anyway, she couldn’t leave Joelle alone. They had to stay here, listening to the horror above their heads. The tiny space seemed to shrink around them.

Eyes squeezed shut, breath caught high in her throat, Selah prayed for it to end, prayed for rescue.

God, where are you? Strike them dead. I know you have the power.

He did, didn’t he? Wasn’t God able to annihilate entire armies? Maybe she wasn’t praying in the right way. But Mama—or whoever that was, even one of the slaves—didn’t deserve this. It was horrid. It was demonic. And if Selah ever got out from under this porch, the first Yankee she saw, she’d shoot him dead without a thought.

“Selah,” Joelle whispered, “I hear someone else coming. You hear it?”

Selah listened. Horses galloping closer? “Maybe.” It was hard to tell with the racket going on in the house. The woman had gone quiet, but the men were still laughing and crashing around. She’d heard boots going up the stairs to the second floor too. “Yes, you’re right. Hush, honey, we’ve got to be quiet, so whoever that is won’t find us.”

In moments, the horses thundered to a stop, and the first

rider jumped to the ground, followed by the rest. Selah saw the leader's boots as he hurried past their hiding place. Blue pants this time, big spurs, clanking sword. An officer?

He ran up the porch steps, shouting, "Ho, you men! Form company! On the quick!" The voice was young, firm, with an edge of anxiety. He stopped somewhere close to the doorway above Selah's head, apparently encountering the brawl inside the parlor. Disjointed orders joined the shouting of the men, and even when the door slammed, Selah could still hear the young officer roaring above them. "I said halt! Stop that, you—" A gun fired.

Selah and Joelle both jumped, but the melee suddenly ceased. Eerie, uneasy silence fell.

The girls waited, clinging to each other, shivering. Selah knew that at any moment the officer or the rest of his unit could search the house, find them under the porch, and do anything they wished to her and Joelle. But at least he had stopped the horror that had been going on.

She heard the officer issue a series of curt orders, sending one of his men to bring a surgeon, their muffled and indistinguishable replies. The woman's groans faded, and Selah thought they must have moved her to another room. Maybe she had been injured by one of those gunshots. Selah couldn't stand not knowing if it was her mother or one of the slaves. All she could do was hold Joelle and pray.



At last they were gone, all of them. Darkness was falling, and the Yankees weren't likely to come back. But what if they did? What if this was a trick to coax survivors out of hiding?

Selah had sat under the porch with Joelle for another hour

or more before the doctor arrived. During the long wait, someone began to play the piano—someone very talented. The bizarre concert somehow exacerbated her anxiety, but it mercifully broke off with the arrival of the surgeon. Selah had no idea how much time passed before the young officer and his men got the looters bound and mounted and took them back to camp, but it seemed like forever.

“Selah,” Joelle whispered. “Can’t we come out now? I’ve got to . . . you know.”

Selah herself was beyond uncomfortable. In fact, her muscles were so cramped she wasn’t sure she’d be able to move at all. But they had to. She and Joelle couldn’t stay here under the porch indefinitely.

She shoved away her terror, drawing on some reserve that hadn’t been there before this morning. “Yes. Let’s go.”

Selah pushed at the latticework with her foot, put her hands on the ground, and crawled toward the opening, fighting skirts and short breath. She cautiously stuck her head out.

She didn’t hear or see anything to indicate soldiers lingering on the property. No noise from the house or grounds. All was dead, ghostly silence, as if the Judgment had come and left her and Joelle behind. She wrestled her skirts out behind her and stood up on shaky legs, then bent to help Joelle.

They ran to the outhouse, took care of that business. Hand in hand, they climbed the back porch steps and stood looking at the door.

“Mama didn’t come for us,” Joelle said finally.

“I know.” Selah swallowed. She knew what it meant, and her heart failed.

“Where do you think the men went?” Joelle whispered.

“I don’t know.” Selah shrugged. “Back to camp, maybe.”

“Did you hear that man play the piano? Wasn’t that strange?”

“Yes, very strange.” Reluctantly she added, “But he was also good. Better even than Mama.”

“Certainly better than me.” Joelle gave a nervous giggle. “I don’t practice enough.”

“I’m afraid that piece would be over your head, darling.” Selah sucked in a breath. “We’ve got to go in and see what the damage is. Clean it up before Mama—” She swallowed. “We need to look for Mama.”

She reached for the doorknob.

Meekly, Joelle followed Selah into the house. “Oh, Selah.” Joelle’s voice broke.

The girls stood gawking at the mess in the breakfast room. There was just enough daylight left to see the broken table, chairs upended, smashed mirror over the sideboard, curtains yanked half off the rods. The two house servants must have run out the back to the slave quarters.

Selah pulled herself together. “We’ll clean it up later. Let’s look for Mama.”

Together they walked through the breezeway into the rotunda. Joelle kept uttering little whimpering sounds as they encountered damaged furniture and floors and walls, but Selah tugged her grimly toward the stairs.

“Mama?” she called as they reached the second floor where the bedrooms were. “Mama, where are you?”

There was no answer.

At the top of the stairs, Selah stopped Joelle. “Stay here while I look around.”

“Why? I want to come with you.”

“Just mind me, Jo.” Selah dreaded what she might find upstairs. She gave Joelle her fiercest glare.

“All right.” Joelle sighed. “But hurry.”

Selah headed straight for her parents’ bedroom. The door was shut, and everything was utterly still. The fact that Mama hadn’t come to get her and Joelle when the soldiers left could only mean that she had been taken by the soldiers or she was injured too badly to walk. Stomach roiling, Selah jerked the door open.

With the curtains pulled, the room was nearly pitch-dark, and Selah didn’t have a candle or lamp. She closed her eyes for a moment to let her vision adjust to the darkness, then opened them. There was a dark form on the bed. “Mama?” She sounded childish to her own ears. Clearing her throat, she repeated more firmly, “Mama, it’s Selah. Are you all right?”

Still no answer.

Then she knew. Everything she’d dreaded was true. Her mother was dead. They had killed her—those rotten, heartless Yankees with their loud, drunken voices, their crude boots and swords. They had taken and broken Selah and Joelle’s one remaining anchor in life, their precious, beautiful, gentle mother.

The world upended, and she fainted.