

CHAPTER 2

At nightfall they found a nice spot to camp. James built a fire while Bubbles got the blankets out of the wagon, as Flora Mae got the skillet and lard to cook the rabbits Bubbles and James had shot that morning.

They were all hungry and the rabbits seemed to taste extra good. Housemother had had a good day's rest and felt much better. Bubbles stood first watch, and he and James kept the fire going all night.

The next morning, Housemother, despite all their pleas to the contrary, got up and took the skillet and tin plates down to the creek to wash them. When she got back to the wagon, she felt like driving and assured Flora Mae that she could. The ground was level as the obedient horse began

moving at her first cluck of the tongue, with Bubbles and James lying in the back of the wagon with their legs dangling from the tailgate. They had their floppy hats over their faces to protect their eyes from the sun. Flora Mae was sitting on the seat next to Housemother.

About ten o'clock in the morning they had been traveling for three or four hours. James and Bubbles figured they should walk some so they could watch for some kind of game. They intended always to stay close to the wagon.

At a curve in the road, James stopped by a creek to look for a fish to spear. Bubbles saw some berries on the other side of the road so went over to pick some. James heard a noise in the woods and looked up. He saw a man so huge he looked like a giant. He was a tall black man about six feet five inches, and with him was another black man and a white one. All had the look of ex-slaves.

The other two moved into James' view. The big fellow asked James where did he come from and how did he get there. He had a hungry, suspicious, desperate look about him. James didn't answer and started to back up out of fear, hoping he had a chance to get to the wagon.

Bubbles was on the other side of the road. He heard voices and looked around. He then saw James backing up and the big man moving towards him. Bubbles started easing toward the wagon.

As they entered the curve, the big man saw the slow

moving wagon. His eyes got big with excitement and a smile came across his face. He saw women, a horse pulling a wagon full of food and other goods--all his for the taking. He reached behind him and pulled out a machete, paying no attention to the spear in James' hand. He started to run towards James. James turned around from walking backwards and also began to run, but realizing after a few steps that he couldn't out-run that long legged giant.

The other two men started chasing Bubbles, who being closer to the wagon, was not in as much danger as was James. Bubbles hollered out, "The shotgun!" Flora Mae turned and saw the three men. At that moment the old slave stopped, spun around and stuck his spear into the ground between his legs. He fell backwards to the ground.

The big man was swinging his machete and moving so fast that he couldn't stop in time to avoid falling on James' stick. He even started screaming a split second before he hit it. The stick caught him right in the solar plexus. The big man dropped the machete and with both hands grabbed the stick to lift himself off of it. But the shock and the weight of his own body going down wouldn't allow him to back up. So there he was, impaled on the stick, slowly going down with his hands prolonging his agony by holding on so tightly. He was screaming all the way down the stick. The sight made the other two men stop and watch their friend in horror.

Housemother's screams joined those of the screaming

man. "Mercy, Lawd, Mercy!" James had blood all over the mid section of his pants. He lifted one leg around the stick and rolled out from under the screaming black man. Flora Mae ran to the back of the wagon and grabbed a shotgun. She tossed it to Bubbles who was almost there. Then she pulled out the other shotgun. In the meantime, the white man had gotten his hands on the machete. James had gotten a few feet from the dying man when he got a mighty whack down his back from the machete. James fell to avoid being chopped again, but the man was over him, arm stretched out, coming down with another mighty blow.

Bubbles let go a shotgun blast that blew off the man's arm, his nose, and part of his lip. He fell limp instantly. James saw Flora Mae coming with his shotgun. He raised up and grabbed it, spun around at the last man and cocked the weapon.

"Now if you want to join your friends here, jes' try to follow us!" James told him. "Now get!" The man faded back into the woods where he had come from. The big man had slid all the way down on the stick by then and still had his hands beneath him, holding on.

Flora Mae was standing behind James when she noticed how badly he was cut. Housemother was near the front end of the wagon. Bubbles was across the road from James. Flora Mae started to say something about how bad James' back looked when he suddenly collapsed to the ground. The wound was both

deep and long, running from the top of his shoulder halfway down his back. Fortunately, James had passed out because when Housemother saw the terrible wound, she knew what had to be done. She tore off his shirt and told Flora Mae to wet a clean rag. When Flora Mae returned, Housemother told her to get the lye soap and rub it in the rag to make some suds, then to get another rag wet. Then Housemother with some clean dry rags soaked up the blood. She cleaned his back as best as she could with the soapy one. Housemother then wiped away the soap and more blood with the other rag.

"Flora Mae," Housemother directed, "get my biggest needle and the thread from the wagon so I can start sewing up James' back."

When she ran out of thread, she used horse hair from the horse's tail. She had a very hard time sewing because she couldn't stop the bleeding. She put about 100 stitches in his back in an hour. When she finished she knew it wasn't a very good job.

"He needed inside stitches in a cut like that but I didn't know how to make inside stitches," she explained. "I am sure he will die and all I can do is hope that I am wrong."

She looked up at Bubbles to tell him she didn't think James would make it. He was standing with his shotgun and looking at the dead white man as though he wanted to kill the corpse all over again for cutting James. After Housemother had done all she could, they laid James in the wagon on his

stomach, trying to make his bed as soft and comfortable as possible.

Bubbles rode on the tailgate so he could watch James. Housemother started driving again and Flora Mae took a shotgun up front with her. Bubbles reloaded his shotgun and kept it within reach. Housemother looked at Flora Mae and asked her if she could use a gun, and would she if necessary.

"I'll learn, and if I have to, I'll use it anytime, or on anybody who tries to hurt us or take what's ours," the young woman replied, and thinking of James, she gave Housemother a no nonsense look.

Housemother couldn't help but think out loud as once more their lonely wagon began moving down the long, seemingly endless road. "Wy, how different young folks is today, so determined and strong. When I was a young lady, I wouldn't ever use words like that." Then she turned around to Flora Mae and asked, "Did you see the way Bubbles and James was standin' up an' fightin' back the way a man should? It sure was a sight to see, honey!" She remembered what she had told Flora Mae about them being old and tired, and said, "Lawd, how wrong can a person be."

As they drove on down the road, they all looked back at the two men they had been forced to fight and kill. James was lying there in the wagon on the verge of death. The prevailing thought on each one's mind was that freedom was going to come at a tough price and they wondered whether they would

make it or not. On the other hand, there was no way to go but forward.

They traveled four days without further trouble, but now their food supply was very low. What little they did have was almost inedible. James' wound was beginning to smell ghastly, permeating everything in the wagon. They finally came upon a nice place to camp before night had fallen. Bubbles and Flora Mae were moving James out of the wagon while Housemother began setting up camp. There was a little stream by their site. Flora Mae and Housemother were doing what they could to clean up James. Bubbles was looking for some firewood and some kind of game to shoot. James' back had swollen badly and a few stitches had broken. There was blood and pus that was turning green. "The worst had happened; gangrene had set in."

As James was lying there on his stomach, he turned his face toward the side. Housemother was kneeling and said with tears in his eyes, "The pain is mo' than I can bear. I'm going to die, ain't I?" Housemother took his hand in hers, bit her bottom lip, and looked at him with tears rushing down her cheeks. Flora Mae, holding back her tears, continued to wash him. "Let's not talk about dying," she said as she put a clean shirt on him.

Bang! They heard a shotgun go off. They all looked in the direction of the shot, hoping that Bubbles wasn't in trouble. A few minutes later they heard a noise coming from

out of the woods. Flora Mae reached for her shotgun and held it in her arms. Out stepped Bubbles with a big jack-rabbit in one hand, an armful of wood, and a big smile on his face. They all breathed a sigh of relief. Bubbles asked James how he was doing and James weakly replied, "Okay, old-timer, okay."

Bubbles had built the fire; Housemother and Flora Mae were washing up so they cut up the rabbit and cook it before dark. Bubbles went off into the woods to relieve himself. He saw the women washing up near the stream. Flora Mae had her top and shoes off and her skirt pulled up. Her bloomers and shotgun were lying on the bark right next to her. Bubbles tried not to look, but Flora Mae's breasts were beautiful. She had washed her top part and was now washing between her legs and behind. When she brought the rag across her butt, Bubbles eyes got twice as big and he muttered, "Oh my God!" As she was putting her clothes on, Bubbles walked away mumbleing, "Oh Lawd, ifin' I still could get a hard on, I'd have to ask for some o' that pussy!" at lenght he said. "Oh, well," to himself and walked back into camp.

Housemother and Flora Mae returned to camp thinking that Bubbles had been there all the time. Housemother handed him the lye soap and told him to go clean up while she and Flora Mae fixed dinner. Bubbles started walking very fast down to the creek. Flora Mae, watching him move so fast, said to Housemother, "I ain't never seen Bubbles

move so fast jes' so he could wash!"

The food was ready, finally, and everybody was all set to eat. Bubbles took James a plate but he said he wasn't hungry. Bubbles asked, "Yo' sure?" with a puzzled look on his face.

With tears in his eyes, James moaned, "I'm sure, Bubbles."

Bubbles walked back over to Housemother and Flora Mae and said in a strange voice, "He don't want nothin' to eat. Jakes don't turn down no food. Why has he got them tears in his eyes?"

Housemother answered in a gentle way, "Jakes is jes' tired from the long trip, so jes' let him rest." She believed that James was dying, but said no more.

Flora Mae looked at Housemother very soberly. Bubbles said nothing. He wouldn't allow himself to think the worst.

They ate the rabbit, even though it was tough as hide, then bedded down for the night. James was sleeping soundly. Bubbles had first watch, then Flora Mae. Flora Mae was lying there looking up at the stars and thinking of what almost happened to her in the barn with the soldiers. She tried not to, but the face of the handsome black soldier kept coming in her mind when he had smiled at her as he had left the barn.

Housemother was lying there thinking about how glad she was that the pain in her stomach had slowed down. She thought

at last her body had begun to heal itself.

The throbbing in James' back wakened him, but he gritted his teeth and pretended to be asleep. He felt like screaming out loud, but was determined not to be any more trouble than he already had been.

Bubbles was gazing into the fire and thinking of how much he had done over the years and never got anything for himself. But those hard times were all over now because he was headed for freedom land.

A couple of hours passed and everybody was asleep, even Bubbles. He woke up in a start because while he had dozed off, the fire had gone out. This was bad. All of a sudden his keen ears heard something stepping on twigs. The noise was coming from the direction of James. Thanks to the light of the full moon, he could see it was some form of animal sniffing around James' back. Apparently the smell had drawn the beast into camp. Bubbles couldn't shoot for fear of hitting James, so he yelled while running towards the animal, swinging his shotgun. He hit the animal with a hard enough blow to knock it out; Bubbles then discovered that it was a wolf. By this time everyone was sitting up but James, too weak and sick to move.

Another wolf ran into camp and jumped on Bubbles' back in order to knock him down and get him by the throat. Bubbles fell, but with a speed no one knew he had, he rolled over and let loose with a shotgun blast that killed his

attacker. The wolf that Bubbles had hit in the head was only dazed and had gotten back on its feet. Flora Mae saw the animal but couldn't shoot because it was standing too near James. So Bubbles began prodding the wolf with his shotgun in order to maneuver it away from James to where he could shoot it. Two more of the hungry animals came out of the woods. They were creeping up on Bubbles while he was hassling with the other one. Flora Mae had a good shot at them; she jumped in front of Housemother and fired. It was the first time she had ever used the shotgun. She hit both the wolves. One of them ran off limping and tripping; the other fell dead. The blast from the gun kicked Flora Mae backwards into Housemother. They both fell into the bushes. Bubbles finally saw his animal turned around and shot it in the mouth. As all this happened, they could see that the eyes of the wolves still in the woods were beginning to fade away.

Housemother and Flora Mae got up and came from out of the bushes. Bubbles fell to the ground. He was very tired and out of breath. He had been tired before, but now he had a strange tightness in his chest that really pained him. He had never felt such pain as this. Flora Mae and Housemother, brushing their clothes, asked Bubbles if he was all right.

Bubbles, with the pain still in his chest answered that he was. Then said, "Let's get outa here! We musta stopped

in a wolves' den!" They loaded James and the rest of their gear and started traveling, hour after long hour until the almost noon day sun was beating down without mercy. Flies were buzzing around James' back and he was coughing weakly. Bubbles woke up from his seated position at the tailgate, asking, "What's the matter James? Wan' some water?" James made no reply. Bubbles told Housemother to hold up a minute. As the wagon rolled to a stop, Flora Mae woke up and asked sleepily, "What's wrong?"

Bubbles took a rag and was going to wipe the sweat from James' back. When he pulled up James' shirt he saw that his back was all green and full of pus. He said, "Good God almighty!" in a frightened voice. When Bubbles looked into the faces of Housemother and Flora Mae, they cast their eyes toward the ground. Bubbles then realized there was nothing more they could do. His eyes started to fill with tears. James whispered softly, "Bubbles, Bubbles."

Bubbles said, "I'm here, James."

"Help me sit up. I don' wan' to die laying down."

Bubbles said with uncontrollable tears rolling down his cheeks, "What makes yo' think yo' gonna die, James? An ol' goat like yo' don' die that easy."

James held onto Bubbles' arm tightly and said, "The pain is terrible. Feels like my back is going to bust wide open." James was sweating very hard; he looked Bubbles in the face and said, "I'm cold Bubbles, I'm cold." He made a moaning

bound and his head began to drop, then his eyes shut.

Bubbles began to scream and cry, "James, don' leave me! James, don' go! James! James!" Bubbles was rocking and crying with James in his arms. Housemother and Flora Mae watched in silence, tears streaming down their cheeks.

After a few minutes, Housemother said gently, "Bubbles, don' yo' think we should bury him now?"

Bubbles replied, "Yes, I guess we should." They laid the body back on the blanket, then pulled it to the edge of the tailgate. Then they lifted James' body to the ground. Housemother and Flora Mae washed James' face and combed his hair. As Bubbles dug the grave, tears ran down both cheeks. He was talking to himself, "If'n Flora Mae hadn't said nothin' about leavin' an' goin' to Atlanta, James would still be alive and workin' in the garden." They wrapped the body neatly in the blanket and carefully dropped it in the hole. Housemother said a few words over the body about a man giving his life for his friends, and they each took a few moments for private thoughts. Then they all threw the dirt back over the body and finished burying James.