

F R E E D O M

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CATHERINE JOHNSON

FREEDOM

 SCHOLASTIC

CHAPTER

1

JAMAICA, 1783 BARRATT HALL ESTATE

I swept the paths in the flower garden as if I was the devil cutting down every sinner in hell. But I kept my face cool as an evening breeze. No one would see my anger if I could help it. I screwed up my eyes to stop them prickling. I didn't want anyone to notice how hard I was trying not to think of Mamma and my

baby sister Martha. Would they be on the wagon by now? I'd seen it arrive nearly an hour ago. Mamma had hugged me tight before I left for work, told me to be strong. I didn't want to let her go. I hugged Martha too but she was grizzling like she knew something was up and there was nothing in the world I could do for her.

I would probably never see them again.

Even so, I kept my eyes down, my anger bottled up. I didn't want Missis Palmer, the housekeeper, telling me my business, or worse one of the Barratts. Either the young master or the old mistress who liked to sit on the veranda with her parrot, Mr Bird, her hand resting on her long hardwood stick. Although the young master was callous, sharp-tongued and nasty, it was his mother, the old mistress who was worse. I gripped the broom tighter. On my right hand there were only four fingers. And while the old mistress hadn't chopped it off herself, she had stood by while Mr Bird took his great black beak, sharp as a machete, and pecked it clean off.

Last night the rain had come down heavy as

stones, now the hibiscus blooms carpeted the path in every shade of blue and purple, and my job was to sweep up every single one. The roses seemed to have enjoyed the drink and just opened up, white and pink; so much colour. I knew I should have felt joyful at the work of God's hand, but I did not.

Oh, I knew that working in the gardens was a nice, nice job. I knew I was lucky I didn't have to break my back in the fields with Mamma, cutting the sugar cane with baby Martha strapped to her back. So even though I wanted to walk through all the flower beds, stamping on everything, killing it all, I kept sweeping.

Old Thomas, the gardener, with his bent back and barely a hair on his head, called out to me. I looked up and he waved me over. I threw down the broom. He was taking a cutting from a lantana tree, holding the branch so tenderly it might have been a baby.

"This is the one, see, Nat? Cut the stem here where it fork." Old Thomas kissed his teeth. "Are you watching, Nathaniel? How you expect to learn?"

"Excuse me, sir," I said.

Thomas grinned, showing two teeth, one top, one bottom. He shook his head. "You think I don't know

what you're thinking? Throwing a good broom like that when it don't do you no wrong!" He took a knife from his pocket with his free hand and cut the branch just so, like it was butter.

"You wan' end up like me?" He looked down at his right foot. Cut in two but healed up into half a foot long before I was born. Smooth brown skin patterned with darker scars. No toes.

"If the young massa or the overseer catch you before you find Maroon Town and freedom, then this what happen," he said. "You have a good job, decent job, 'member that. No whip on your young back if you careful."

"I know that, Mr Thomas, but—"

"No buts. You go wrong, you run away, they take off half your foot so you no run no more. You no listen to Massa, they whip you 'til the skin fall off your back. Maybe take off your ear, slit your nose so." He pointed his knife at me and I stepped back.

"Sorry, Mr Thomas."

"Don't be sorry. Listen. Learn. Your mother told me keep my eye fix 'pon you and so I do. You no worry about her or the pickney no more. You hear?

Them sold an' that the end of it." He tipped the straw hat back on his head and itched at his scalp. He looked serious. "An' you an' I know she probably better off far from here."

I didn't say anything. My eyes stung. I must have had some dust or something in the corner because I had to rub them with the back of my sleeve. I sniffed too. But I knew he was right. Since the old mistress had brought in a new overseer things had got worse for all of us. Earlier, when the wagon arrived, I heard the crying as folk said goodbye. I knew Mamma and my little sister would be gone before the sun rose any higher. Gone to work in a parish far from here on the south of the island.

Old Thomas shook his head. He snipped off an armful of yellow flowers from the lantana tree and piled them in my arms.

"Tek these to Missis Palmer. Go on with you, up to the house. Go the long way and you jus' might see the wagon pass at the long bend."

"Thank you, Mr Thomas!" I said, even though I had already started running.

But I was too late. The big six-wheeled cart carrying

Mamma, Martha and the others who'd been sold, was rolling down the palm-lined drive. It was almost at the gate. I dropped the flowers without thinking and waved and waved with both hands.

"Mamma!" I called out loud, and I swear I saw her head turn.

It came like a bolt of lightning. The blow across the back of my head sent me reeling. In an instant I was face down on the ground with a mouthful of dirt and a pain so hot and hard across the back of my scalp I thought my head had split right open.

"Pick those up. Horrid boy!"

It was the old mistress. She stood above me, a slight woman with a core of iron. She wore a dark cotton dress down to the ground and Mr Bird sat on her shoulder, a tiny chain around one scaly clawed foot. It regarded me with its yellow eye and opened its beak up wide and laughed its horrible laugh.

"Horrid boy! Horrid boy!" it screeched.

The mistress had dealt me a blow with her stick. Thomas had told me about the tree it was cut from. How they used to hang slaves in its branches before

it fell down in a storm. How the gardener before him had cut a stick for the old master. And how that stick had done a deal of harm for a long time. To man and boy, woman and girl.

The old mistress swished away, with Mr Bird stretching its wings out.

“Horrible boy,” she said. “Waving your arms about like that.”

“Idiot,” Mr Bird said, and laughed some more. “God’s bones and blood!”

My head felt like it was singing with pain. I got up without making a sound, even though I wanted to yell with the hurt of it. I stopped myself putting my hand up to the back of my head where I could feel the skin broken and something wet, blood maybe, trickling down the back of my neck.

I began picking up the flowers. I took my time, watching as the old mistress entered the big house and disappeared. I would not give her the pleasure of knowing how much she had hurt me. What did Mamma say? *Walk tall, they cannot hurt us. They have hurt us so hard and for so long. What more can one blow do?*

When I'd gathered them all up I walked towards the house, heading to the small kitchen door. From the open windows above I heard shouting. And not just shouting, neither. The young master was fairly raging at his mother. I wondered for a short moment why she did not use her stick on him.

"You had no right to decide which slaves we sell or which we keep!" the young master yelled. Then the sound of breaking glass. "I am in charge here, Mother. Not you!" Another crash. China smashing this time. Perhaps a vase? A chamber pot?

Missis Palmer the housekeeper saw me and snapped at me to come in. Her face was a mess of scowling. That woman could cut her eyes at you so sharp you could fall down dead. I thought to get away quick before she hit me too.

Just then there was another crash from upstairs. Missis Palmer clapped her hands and despatched Bets and Mary Two to clean up.

Bets shook her head. "I'm not going 'til that noise stop, not for nobody."

Missis Palmer spoke low, her voice dangerous.

“You better do as you’re told, Betsy Barratt, or I’ll see you’re on the next wagon out of here to Mount Vernon along with the others!”

Betsy picked up the dustpan and left.

All I could think was Mount Vernon. That was where Mamma and Martha were going.

“Have you no brains, Nathaniel? Are your wits shotten? I don’t want those here!” Missis Palmer bought her hand down so hard on the tabletop that the flowers jumped. The pain in my head throbbed harder.

“And stop your bleeding all over my kitchen floor. It only clean two minutes!”