

CONNIE BRISCOE

New York Times bestselling author of *Big Girls Don't Cry*



A Long Way From Home

"A wonderful celebration . . . a brilliant song of hope."
New York Times bestselling author E. Lynn Harris

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An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

10 East 53rd Street

New York, New York 10022-5299

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Cover design © 1999 by Honi Werner

Cover art painting © by Anna Belle Lee Washington/SuperStock

ISBN: 0-06-103021-X

www.avonbooks.com

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First Avon Books paperback printing: October 2000

First HarperCollins hardcover printing: August 1999

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Acknowledgments

I'm grateful to a number of people who helped me get this off the ground.

Tara Brazee, my researcher, often worked tirelessly and went beyond the call of duty. Her enthusiasm never wavered, even when it meant spending days in dusty old archives deciphering barely legible copies of handwriting that was sometimes more than a hundred and fifty years old.

Miles Reid spent a day showing me, my parents, and my grandmother around his hometown of West Point, Virginia. He pointed out sites and told us fascinating stories about my great-great-grandfather.

Clara Ellis Payne, a distant cousin who has done a lot of valuable research on the family, was generous enough to share some of it with me. Just sitting and talking to her gave me a better feel for our common ancestor, for whom Cousin Clara was named.

Some of the staff members at Montpelier, home of President James Madison, were especially helpful. Megan Haley, a research assistant, spent a day giving me and my parents a private tour of the mansion and grounds. She shared stories with us about the Madisons and some of their slaves. Jared Bryson, an archaeologist, spent an after-

noon helping me and my assistant search some of the files. He also gave us a memorable tour of the slave graveyard at Montpelier. And Scott Parker, archaeologist, showed me the archaeological work being done to learn more about the slaves and their habitat at Montpelier.

Mario de Valdes y Cocom, a historian who does work for PBS, took time out of his own very active schedule to help me dig up information.

Reggie Washington at the National Archives spent time explaining how to use the vast resources of the archives.

I have to thank my folks, Leroy and Alyce Briscoe, who were always willing to venture out with me on tours throughout Virginia. I discovered that my mother is a great note-taker. And thanks also to my Grandma Corine, who has such a wonderfully unbelievable memory at ninety years of age and so cheerfully shared it with me. I was truly blessed when it comes to family.

I'm grateful to my editor, Carolyn Marino. Her enthusiasm and belief in this novel were very encouraging. I'm also grateful to two women who have been with me since the beginning of my days as an author. I now think of them as members of my team: Victoria Sanders, my agent, and Wanda Newman, my sign-language interpreter.

And finally, thanks to the countless others who spent a moment or an hour sharing a memory, an anecdote, or a thought with me.

You all helped make this a much richer story.

PART I

1

Clara sat up on the edge of her pallet and rubbed her eyes with her fists. She could tell it was awfully late by the way the morning shadows fanned across the attic floor. Mama had been up long before the shadows, and by now she would be running around the mansion lighting fires, emptying chamber pots, and fetching fresh water from the well for Mass Jimmy and Miss Dolley and all the folks who always seemed to be visiting them. And if Mama knew her daughter's fanny was still lolling on a pallet way past day-clean, she would go into another one of her yelling fits. Clara just hated it when Mama got to fussing.

Still, it was awful hard to get moving. She had started having chores to do at dayclean when she turned ten almost a year ago, but she wasn't yet used to this getting up before the sun did. Sometimes she thought she'd never get used to it. She wiggled her bare toes and stretched her lips with a yawn until she thought her mouth would burst at the corners. She would just take a quick peek out the window before getting dressed, she thought. She stood and made her way across the plank floor, then pushed the shutters open and leaned out.

To the north, rows of pine trees lined a path leading to the small temple over the ice house. On the other end, a

deer browsed near a weeping willow, and a few sheep grazed nearby as Ralph, a boy about Clara's age, appeared from around the side of the mansion. He was leading one of the horses to the gate, probably for a guest who wanted to take an early morning ride on the grounds of the estate. Suddenly, the deer raised its head and leaped away.

Clara took a deep breath and filled her lungs with the scent of roses and jasmine drifting up from the gardens. She loved this spot at the very top of the mansion, for she could see clear across the lawn and over the treetops to the peaks of the Blue Ridge mountains. The plantation stretched out before her was small compared to the grand estates along the James River, but it was still considered by many to be the finest in the Piedmont area of Virginia. After all, this was Montpelier, the home of James Madison, former president of the United States, and his wife Dolley. And for the lucky few like the Madisons, it was a time of pillared mansions, velvet ball gowns, and gilded carriages, of Southern ladies entertaining in Persian-carpeted drawing rooms and gentlemen galloping freely across their vast estates.

But seeds of change were sprouting throughout the Virginia countryside, and Clara often overheard white grownups talking about the glories of the old days. Good land was harder to come by now, fields were overcultivated, and there were simply too many slaves. Whites bitterly recalled the days, only a few years earlier, when a slave preacher named Nat Turner held the citizens of Virginia in terror as he led a band of angry men through the countryside killing every white in sight. By the time they caught Nat Turner and hanged him that November of 1831, more than fifty whites lay dead. It was one of the bloodiest insurrections in American history, and it had happened right there on Virginia's soil.

Colored folks talked about that time, too, but usually with more awe than anger. For them, these had been long

days of retrenching freedoms, of women and men toiling from dayclean to daylean, and of dreams dying in the dark.

The horse neighed, and Clara snapped out of her reverie and looked down below. One of Miss Dolley's nieces walked down the gravel path in front of the mansion and mounted the horse as Ralph and now Ben and Abraham steadied the animal and handed the reins to her.

Clara closed the shutters, then ran back to her pallet and squeezed her feet into the hard leather and cardboard shoes lying on the floor. She looked down and tried hard to wiggle her toes. No such luck. They were her first pair of shoes, and Mama insisted she wear them, as all the other house slaves did. But the things were so dratted stiff, it felt like she was wearing rugs on her feet. How did Mama expect her to be able to run and skip and jump? Clara supposed she had the answer to that. If Mama had her way, her daughter's carefree days were over. Clara belonged in the big house now, Mama said, doing her chores. And for that, she had to look respectable; she had to wear shoes.

She sighed and pulled her dress over her head. She was extra gentle with the dress as she buttoned it at the collar. Mama had made it for her eleventh birthday, with new muslin fabric from Miss Dolley. Even though the special day was two months away, Mama let her wear it now, since most of her other dresses were getting too small. Mama said she was growing faster than a weed in a vegetable garden.

She smoothed the dress around her legs and looked down at the shoes once again. She wrinkled her caramel-colored nose with disgust, kicked the shoes off, and placed them side by side next to the pallet. There, she thought, stretching her toes on the plank floor. That felt more like it. Mama would get mad if she caught her walking around barefoot, so she would have to stay out of

Mama's sight. Probably a good idea, anyhow, since Mama was sure to make her do her chores if she caught her, and she had other fun things in mind.

Clara ran down the back stairs to the second floor of the mansion, then stopped and peeked around the corner. Even though she was supposed to use the back stairs all the way down, she was less likely to run into Mama if she used the main stairs. The problem was that the main stairs were all the way on the other side of the long hallway. But it was empty now, and if she was fast, she could probably make it across before anyone saw her.

She dashed down the hallway, skipped down the stairs two at a time, then jumped over the last three steps. Her feet hit the polished first-floor landing with a thud, and she promptly slipped and fell, landing hard on her butt.

"Drat!"

She struggled to her feet and rubbed her sore backside. That was when she noticed a strange lady standing just outside a parlor door, her eyes popped wide open as she stared. Clara froze.

"Goodness, child," the woman said, her cheeks flushed pink with agitation, "you nearly frightened me to death." She touched her silk fan to her heart as if to prove her point.

Clara licked her lips and backed away, planning to beat a hasty retreat. Too late, she realized, as Miss Dolley glided into the hallway from the other end. She wore one of her silk turbans piled high on her head, and her heels clicked with authority on the hardwood floor.

"There you are, Mrs. Campbell. I—" Miss Dolley stopped abruptly when she saw the expression on her guest's face and followed her gaze down the hall to Clara. The smile fell from her lips, and she turned back to her guest. "Is everything all right, dear?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Campbell exclaimed breathlessly. "I just need a minute to collect myself. Your girl nearly frightened

me to death with all that running and jumping about on the stairs. Stealthy little creatures, aren't they?"

"I suppose," Miss Dolley said. She walked slowly toward Clara. "It's nearly nine o'clock, Clara. Where should you be this morning?"

Clara gulped. Dusting, sweeping. Anywhere but here, she supposed. But it seemed Miss Dolley didn't know that. Clara lifted a finger gingerly and gestured toward the stairway. "Um. I was fixing to walk down to Aunt Winney's cabin, Missus, and help her mind the children."

"Well, hurry along then," Miss Dolley said, shooing her off with a wave of her hand. "But use the back stairs, and stop frightening my guests."

"Yes, ma'am," Clara said. She darted down the hallway, all the while looking back at Miss Dolley and her friend. Miss Dolley chuckled as she gently took Mrs. Campbell's arm and steered her back into the parlor.

"Forgive my ignorance, being from the North, Mrs. Madison, but you permit your house servants to go bare-foot here?"

"Only the children. With all the running about that they do, it's easier on the floors."

"I see. And at what age do they start to wear shoes?"

"At about ten. Clara is but eight or nine, I think."

"Ah. About the age when they stop being so cute . . ."

Clara paused at the top of the stairs. She wanted to remind Miss Dolley that she was about to turn eleven, but Mama said not to speak to white folks anymore unless they spoke to her first. Something about getting older and that was the way things were done. Clara didn't like the ways of these grownups all that much. But at least she had made it away from there without being sent to chore-land.

She rounded the corner and almost bumped into Aunt Nany coming up the stairs from the basement. Aunt Nany was carrying her shoes in her hands and tiptoeing. She dropped the shoes and let out a low shriek when she near-

ly collided with Clara, then caught herself and clamped one hand over her mouth. Aunt Nany had a musky smell about her, and it was all Clara could do to keep from wrinkling her nose and sniffing openly, but she didn't want to seem rude. Probably had something to do with that field hand from the Jones plantation that everyone said Aunt Nany was running off to meet most nights. Aunt Nany was Mama's younger sister, and Mama said she didn't approve one bit of all this rendezvousing with someone who worked the tobacco fields. Aunt Nany was probably sneaking back in now because she was as worried about running into Mama as she was Miss Dolley. Clara could understand that.

Clara reached down and grabbed the shoes. They were soft leather, and she loved touching the smooth surface. Aunt Nany was lucky enough to wear the same size as Miss Dolley, so she was one of only a few slaves who got to wear good shoes. Clara held them out, and Aunt Nany took them. Then Aunt Nany smiled and put her finger to her lips. "Shh," she whispered, then ran off. Clara watched as she disappeared down the hallway.

Clara descended the stairs, and the musky odor from Aunt Nany was replaced with one she knew well: freshly baked bread. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and peeked around the corner. As expected, Aunt Matilda, lord and mistress of the household kitchen, was sweeping in a corner of the big room. Iron pots steamed in the brick fireplace, which ran almost the length of one wall, and the scent of Aunt Matilda's beloved hot wheat bread filled the air.

Clara tried to slip through the doorway and over to the pots without being noticed. Aunt Matilda was hefty, with powerfully built hands and arms—probably gained from lifting all the heavy pots—and wouldn't waste a minute before using those hands on the buttocks of some child she thought had stepped out of place. But it was Aunt

Matilda's eyes that scared Clara the most—they could burn plumb through flesh. And it was no secret that Aunt Matilda didn't approve of Clara's ways. All of the children were scared of Aunt Matilda, but Clara thought she got the worst of it. She supposed it was because she was the only one around the big house to pick on. The babies were taken by their mamas down to Aunt Winney's before Clara even got up out of bed, and the older ones had their chores. Clara dreaded having to face this scythe-eyed woman alone at breakfast every morning before going out to play.

She decided to try to get just some buttered bread and eat it on her way down to the cabins. She turned to the long table in the middle of the room and scooped up a couple of pieces of bread that had already been sliced but noticed they hadn't been buttered. Drat! She had to have butter on her bread, and sugar, too, when she could get it.

She looked up, ready to put on her prettiest smile for Aunt Matilda. But her heart skipped a beat when she realized that the woman had been watching her all along. Drat again. That Aunt Matilda was awful sneaky. No, what was that word Mrs. Campbell just used? Stealthy, that was it. Clara lowered her gaze to the floor. "Um, you got any butter, Aunt Matilda?"

Aunt Matilda squinted. "You done washed your hands yet?"

Clara could feel those eyes piercing her body. She had plumb forgotten to wash anything. Mama always left some water in their tin washbasin for her, but the shoes had occupied all her thoughts this morning. Still, she wouldn't give this woman the satisfaction of knowing she was about to stick grubby hands into the food so Aunt Matilda could have something to scold her about. Clara looked straight at her. "Yes," she said, lifting her head high.

"Unh-hunh. You better not be lyin' to me," Aunt Matilda said, shaking a big brown finger in Clara's direc-

tion. She leaned her broom against the wall, then went to the end of the table and found the butter in the midst of all the bowls and kitchen utensils. Clara reached out just as Aunt Matilda did—the woman was so dratted stingy with the butter—but Aunt Matilda snatched it away.

“Here, hand me that bread.” Aunt Matilda stretched out her fingers, and Clara reluctantly handed the slices of bread over.

“And some sugar, too,” Clara said. She tried to sound like it was the most ordinary request in the world, but the frown on Aunt Matilda’s face told her it hadn’t worked. Aunt Matilda stopped buttering and stared.

“Please?”

“That sugar for Massa and Missus and their guests. You know better.”

Clara smiled meekly. “I suppose.”

“Humph,” Aunt Matilda said, shaking her head. “Lord knows where you get these high-falutin’ ideas from.”

Clara tightened her lips. “Please, Aunt Matilda? Just a little bit. They got so much, they won’t even miss it.”

“No, and don’t ask me no more. You lucky you got butter.”

Drat, Clara thought, sticking out her bottom lip. Seeing the pout on Clara’s face, the cook added a smidgen more butter. As if that made up for the sugar, Clara thought wryly. She sighed loudly and pointedly, but Aunt Matilda just ignored her. Clara realized it was hopeless, so she decided to try to get something for the others down at Walnut Grove. “Can I get some bread to carry down to the cabins?”

Aunt Matilda handed her the bread, then wiped her hands on her crisply starched apron. She pointed across the table to a basket covered with a towel. “I done already set some aside. But you sit and eat some of that hominy ’fore you go running off down to the grove.”

Clara shook her head. “I’m not all that hungry.” She

grabbed the basket and made a beeline for the door.

"Don't matter if you not hungry," Aunt Matilda called after her. "You need something in your stomach. Don't you have chores to do around here, anyhow?"

Clara walked faster.

"You hear me talking to you, child? Lord have mercy, I swear, these young'uns today . . ."

Clara reached the door and sprinted across the back lawn, not stopping until she reached the top of the hillside leading down to Walnut Grove. Then she took her piece of bread from the basket and munched happily as she walked down the steep slope. Aunt Matilda's bread was manna from heaven, but you had to go through hell to get it.

The cook faded from Clara's mind as she neared Aunt Winney's cabin and heard the laughter of children. Aunt Winney's cabin had one of the biggest yards in the grove and at this hour, with all the grownups in the fields, it was always filled with children romping in the grass and dirt. Aunts Matilda and Winney were half-sisters, but you never would have guessed it. Both were stocky and as brown as the trunks of the walnut trees that surrounded the cabins in the grove, but Aunt Winney was as cheerful and funny as Aunt Matilda was grim and ornery.

Clara made her way past a circle of barefooted boys shouting and shooting marbles made from rocks. Jim, a head taller than Clara, jumped up when he spotted her. "Mornin', Queen Clara," he said. He removed a plaited straw hat from his head and bowed deeply from the waist. Then he laughed and pointed at her, and the other boys joined in.

Clara didn't even look in their direction, just kept walking. "Reckon you don't want none of this sweet-smelling wheat bread I got, then," she said coolly.

Jim and a couple other boys broke away from the circle and followed Clara. Jim reached for the basket, but Clara

smacked his hand away. "Quit that. Aunt Winney gotta slice it first."

"Aw, give us just one of 'em 'fore you give it to A'nt Winney."

"No," Clara protested. "That ain't fair to the others."

"That ain't fair, that ain't fair," Jim said in a high tone of voice, mocking her. His big brown eyes danced with mischief.

She turned her nose up in a deliberately exaggerated manner and stepped around him. She entered the cabin while the boys huddled in the doorway.

"Lawdy," Aunt Winney said. "Lookee what the cat done finally dragged outta bed." She chuckled. She was sitting in a rocking chair with an infant in each arm. One was feeding and the other was crying but wouldn't take his bottle. Several toddlers slept in crude homemade cribs scattered throughout the cabin. Jim's younger sister Betty stood at a small table changing a diaper. She looked up at Clara and smiled. Betty and Jim had the same eyes—big, round, soulful.

Clara grinned sheepishly and placed the basket on Aunt Winney's pine kitchen table.

"Kin we git some of that there bread now?" Jim asked from the doorway.

"I's savin' it for y'all's dinner," Aunt Winney said. "You done already had yo' breakfast. Now git on away from that door." She shooed the boys away, and they groaned and ran back to their marbles.

Aunt Winney looked at Clara. "Help 'em finish eatin' their breakfast," she said, nodding toward four toddlers sitting at the table. "Then I'll comb that nappy head o' yourn soon as I git done here." She chuckled. "Lawdy, chile. Look like you got a beehive settin' up there on top yo' head."

Betty snickered as Clara sat down at the table. She picked up a drinking gourd and put it to the lips of a