heaven's daughter

a novel

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PART ONE

Home

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but, if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

Maya Angelou

Chapter One

Efuru

Night noises of the forest filtered through the trees, falling like invisible leaves to snap and pop in the small fire Noni had built. The sounds still unnerved Efuru, though less than they did a few short nights ago.

Noni leaned against a boulder, Efuru's fevered head and upper body in her lap. Efuru snuggled against her mother's body as comfortably as she could, which wasn't easy. Her back was tender, still raw from her first whipping. Her shoulders raged, nearly steaming, from the brands forced upon her just a couple of days before.

"Sing me a song, mama," Efuru whimpered. "Sing me a song of Africa."

Noni began humming. "Mmmm, hmm, hmmm." The words soon followed. "Hah, hahye, hahye. Aye, hahe. Om maam na pum imjya, kothbiro, kothbiro. Hah, hahye, hahye…" Sweet notes of the lullaby Noni's grandmother used to sing to her.

Efuru drifted in and out of sleep, floating on her mother's voice as the melody connected her to a world she had never known.

Noni's long, slender fingers stroked her daughter's arm, careful to avoid the angry wounds. The song stopped abruptly. Noni stiffened. The woods went silent. Efuru woke with a start, alert to the sudden danger. She looked up into her mother's face and saw the very look she hoped not to see.

Oh, God. Efuru's fear leaped from her chest to her mind. *We have been found.*

The eleven-year old pushed herself up slowly, never taking her eyes from her mother's face, bracing herself for what she would see when she turned…bloodhounds, white men with rifles,

ropes and whips. Her throat clamped shut, her breathing stopped, her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She turned slowly, wondering when they would grab her to take her back to the plantation. Her body tensed, prepared to flee, or fight.

In the dim light of the tiny fire, clinging to a tree, was a girl: a white girl. At least Efuru thought she was white. The child was so dirty it was difficult to tell. She could feel her mother's fear, the tension in her body, but her own fear drifted away on wispy tendrils of smoke, as she felt only relief.

The white girl did not move, nor did she speak. As she looked into the filthy face, Efuru saw all of her own emotions staring back at her. Efuru smiled. "Hello." The white girl's eyes moistened and flakes of firelight sparkled in them. If Efuru could have labeled what she felt at that moment, she might have said she was seeing herself reflected in a mirror, a mirror completing a picture of her own soul in a way that felt like she had found home.

But Efuru couldn't describe the depth of her experience any more than she could have recited Shakespeare. All she knew was that she needed the girl looking at her as much as that girl needed her.

"C'mon over. We ain't gonna hurt you," Efuru said.

The frightened girl took a few halting steps toward them.

"No," Noni said. "No."

The child stopped, but her eyes never left Efuru's. Efuru's gaze stayed with the girl. Ignoring her mother, she held out her hand. "It's okay." She stood and walked the few steps to where the lost child waited.

"Mama, she's scared," Efuru said, still looking into the depth of what she could now see were blue eyes.

"She's white," Noni said, as if that were the end of the matter.

"She's just a girl, like me," Efuru said, as she reached down and lifted the girl's hand into her own. "She's just a lost girl," Efuru said so softly that only the girl could hear her. "Aren't you?"

The stranger allowed Efuru to draw her closer to the fire.

"She can't stay." Noni was on her feet. "S'all we need is to have us a white girl in tow. Dey hang us fer sure."

"Mama, we can't send her back into the forest alone," Efuru said as she finally looked at Noni. "She needs us."

Efuru reached into the sack on the ground and pulled out some jerky and a piece of bread. "Come on and sit." She reached again, pulling the girl down next to the fire. "You look hungry."

Silently, the girl followed Efuru's direction, took the bread and devoured it, then started chewing on the jerky.

"I'm Efuru and this here is…"

“Stop!” Noni practically shouted, “don’t be tellin’ dat girl our names. You don’t know she ain’t gonna find her way and tell folks ‘bout us. You wan’ get caught?”

Efuru looked from her mother back to the girl. “What’s your name?”

The girl didn’t answer, just hung her head as if she didn’t have enough strength to hold it up.

“’S’ okay,” Efuru said, “we can talk tomorrow. You look real tired.” Efuru turned to her mother and said, “Mama, let the girl sleep with us, please. She ain’t gonna go tell anyone about anything tonight. Look at her.”

Noni looked from Efuru to the stranger. Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t like it. Tomorrow she gotta go. We can’t be draggin’ no white girl along to…” she stopped. Efuru knew what she was thinking, that the former slaves helping them on their journey would not take kindly to them travelling with a white girl.

“Just tonight, then, mama.” But already Efuru was determined that this girl would be with them as long as she needed to be.