

## NEW DAY DAWNING

By Joyce Hansen

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Sarah was careful of the thorns as she bent the stem of a deep red rose. She inhaled the flower's sweet perfume while watching several young men hurry through the gates and walk down the road. She knew that they were gone for good. Ever since the Yankee soldiers had come to the Thomas plantation in April to inform all of them that slavery and the war were over, people had been slowly leaving.

She picked another rose, turned around, and gazed toward the cotton fields, still dotted with the figures of men and women tending the growing plants that would be ready for picking by July. Sarah faced the road again and saw the young men disappear around a bend. In the past, the hounds would have chased them down, and Master George Thomas himself would have ridden, along with the patrollers, after them.

"Hey, girl, what're you looking after?"

Sarah jumped slightly. She hadn't heard Solomon approaching her. "Three more hands just left," she said.

"Yes. I know." A satisfied smile spread across his round face. "Ain't it wonderful? Them boys could just leave without a pass and see what's on the other side of this hill." His large eyes, as round as his face, fastened on her. "When are you leaving, Little Missy?"

"Don't call me that. I have a name." Sarah threw her head back and walked quickly toward the house.

Solomon followed her. "I'm just fooling with you, Sarah. Don't go getting mad."

Sarah passed the row of live oaks lining the walkway and glanced at Mistress Emmaline's bedroom window. Emmaline Thomas closed the curtain and moved away.

Solomon saw her, too. "Look at her watching her used-to-be property head down the road."

They walked toward the kitchen at the back of the house. "What're you going to do?" Solomon asked.

"Don't keep bothering me. I don't know."

Sarah and Solomon were both fourteen years old and had been born into slavery on the plantation. No one, not even Solomon, who was like her brother, seemed to understand how painful it was for Sarah to make a decision to leave the only life she'd known.

As she and Solomon entered the kitchen, the sweet smell of a pecan pie and Mariah's round scowling face greeted them. Mariah, the cook, was Solomon's mother and a mother to Sarah as well. Sarah's own mother had died giving birth to her.

"Where you been, Solomon? You might be free, boy, but you still have to work. Go on and fetch me some firewood." Her eyes fell on Sarah next. "You too, gal. No one's going to pay you to pick flowers."

"These are for Mistress."

Mariah sucked her teeth. "Mistress ain't studying you. Hardly talk to you or any of us since we been set free."

Davis, who had been the Thomases' most favored slave, sat at the table as he did every morning, eating a piece of corn bread and drinking a cup of tea before beginning his chores.

He smiled at Sarah. "Little Missy, how're you this morning?"

Only Davis could call her that, for it never seemed as if he were mocking her. He had named her Little Missy when the Thomases' daughter, Caroline, had died at the age of ten. Sarah was a year older than Caroline and had been her slave and playmate. After her daughter's death, the grieving Emmaline Thomas increasingly sought Sarah's company. And the young girl became her mistress's personal slave and companion.

Sarah slept in Caroline's bedroom instead of on a pallet on the floor at the foot of Emmaline Thomas's bed.

"Mariah, I'm going to take these flowers to Mistress."

"Is she sick or something? You better stay here and learn how to cook, so you can support yourself. Cooks always find work."

Sarah sighed. "But Mistress might be wanting me."

"She knows where to find you if she wants you."

Sarah's small, brown, oval face, as well formed and delicate as the roses she carried, hardened like a little rock. Ignoring Mariah, who continued to grumble, she entered the sitting room. She'd spent some of the happiest times of her life here, playing with Caroline on the window seat as the sun filtered through the lace curtains, or sitting on the sofa next to Mistress Emmaline, learning how to make lace.

She put the roses in Mistress's favorite china vase, arranging the flowers as Mistress had taught her to do, and made up her mind to go upstairs without waiting to be sent for.

Mariah's voice broke into her thoughts. "Sarah, come on in here and help me."

Sarah ignored her and walked up the stairs. Before she reached the landing, Emmaline Thomas called from her bedroom. "Sarah, you mind Mariah."

"But, Mistress, I have some beautiful roses for you. Make you feel better."

"Go on and help Mariah."

Sarah's eyes stung as if she'd been slapped. More hurt than angry, she ran back down the stairs and put the vase on the fireplace mantel. Mistress knew how much she hated working in the kitchen.

Without a word, Mariah handed her a large basket of peas. Sarah placed the basket on her lap and sat near the window looking out onto the yard and the fields beyond. She listened for every sound in the house, hoping that Mistress would call her—wishing that their life could be the way it had been in the past.

Davis stared at her sympathetically. "Missy, you have to decide what you're going to do with this freedom." His teeth were as white and perfect as his starched shirt.

"I guess I'm going to set here and shell peas till my fingers fall off."

"You go on, Little Missy." He laughed.

"If she knows what I know she better leave with me and Solomon," Mariah said.

Sarah opened one of the pods so hard the peas popped out and rolled on the floor. "Mistress say that people who leave their homes are starving on the roads."

Mariah put her hands on her hips and bent over Sarah. "Girl, you'll be a slave all of your life."

"I am not a slave. Didn't Master and Mistress say they'll pay us wages?"

Mariah rolled her eyes. "Fifty cents a week? Even someone as ignorant as me knows that that ain't no money to build a future with."

"Well, Master and Mistress say—"

Mariah interrupted her. "Stop all that Master and Mistress slavery-time talk."

Davis drained his cup and smiled handsomely at Mariah.

"So what should the child call her? Emmaline?"

"Call her Miz Thomas and him Mister Thomas."

"Well, it seems strange to say something different," Davis said. "We been calling them Master and Mistress for so long. Maybe it don't mean nothing—just a way of addressing them."

"Names do mean something," Mariah insisted. "And Master and Mistress mean slavery time."

Davis turned again to Sarah. "You didn't answer my question, Little Missy."

Sarah lowered her head over the peas as she tried fighting back panic and tears.

Mariah spoke to the top of Sarah's head.

“Sarah, I held you in my arms when you was a baby and your mother died. You are the same to me as Solomon, my own flesh. I held you in one arm and Solomon in the other. You won’t ever have a new life if you stay here and live like you did in slavery. Come with us.”

Sarah couldn’t tell her that she never felt like a slave, especially when Mistress was teaching her how to make lace and to quilt and was even beginning to teach her how to draw.

“Sarah, me and Solomon are leaving for Charleston. There’s a freedmen’s school there. They even have black teachers from the North. It’s wonderful to just think about! My son’s going to learn how to read and write and I can get work as a cook and make more than fifty cents a week. I’m going to get some land, too.” She plopped down in the chair as if the excitement of her plans had worn her out.

“I’m leaving too, Little Missy,” Davis said. “Going to Virginia to find my son and his mother. They lived on the Williams farm and was sold away five years ago.”

Sarah was so surprised that she found her voice. “You have a wife and child?”

She never realized that Davis had a life that went beyond serving George Thomas. He had been given as a wedding present to the Thomases when they’d married thirty years ago and Davis was ten years old. He had been a reliable and faithful slave—as polished and tasteful as the Thomases’ fine china and silverware. Davis, with his slight bows, knew how a table should be set, how a master should be dressed and a household should be run.

“It was a slave marriage,” he explained. “But I’m going to find them, and we’re going to have a real marriage by a priest.”

“How do you know where to look?” Sarah asked, forgetting her own problems for a moment.

“I have the name of the family they was sold to in Richmond. I’ll find them if I have to walk the whole state of Virginia.”

“You see,” Mariah said, and shook her finger in Sarah’s face. “Nobody is staying. It’s a new day dawning.”

“But Master and Mistress always treated me good.”

“They treated all of us good. They also treat their expensive furniture good. And treat their cows and horses good, too. Paid a lot of money for them, and for us, too. Would you abuse something you paid good money for?”

“We’re not property now,” Sarah said softly.

“That’s the point. Old George and Emmaline don’t own your hide no more. There’s no reason to take good care of you. You are on your own. You better learn how to take good care of yourself.”

“But Mistress said that the freed people are sleeping in the woods and eating wild berries, and starving to death.”

“She also said that Yankees had tails and horns.”

“But she’s going to pay us wages and she’s going to teach me how to paint.”

“Girl, you remember when Caroline took it into her head to teach you how to read and write?” Mariah’s face softened into a slight smile. “And then you decided to teach Solomon the two words you had learned, and Miz Thomas caught you? Gave you and Caroline a whipping and told her daughter it was against the law to teach a slave how to read and write. Do you remember that? Remember how you cried because you really wanted to learn?” She was silent for a moment. “If you stay here you’ll never learn nothing except how to remain a good slave.”

Before Sarah could answer, Solomon burst into the kitchen. “Hey, y’all, something’s happening. Them hands all left the fields and is walking up to the house.”

Davis stood up quickly, putting his arm around Solomon’s shoulders. “Come on, son, let’s look like you’re helping me with a chore, so’s we can find out why those hands are trooping off to the big house.”

“Sarah? Sarah!” Mistress called from the sitting room.

“Well, she finally got out of that bedroom,” Mariah mumbled, as she too headed for the yard to find out what was happening.

Sarah put the basket of peas on the table and rushed to the sitting room.

“Yes, Mistress?” Sarah said, and heard Mariah’s voice in her head warning against slavery-time talk. “You want to walk in the garden?”

“No, I’m tired.” The lines around her mouth were like two deep ditches.

Sarah pointed to the mantel. “I picked some roses for you.”

Mistress did not look. Closing her eyes as if she were in pain, she asked, “Are you abandoning me, too?”

“No, Mistress.”

Emmaline Thomas pushed a thin, gray strand of hair away from her forehead. “Sarah, don’t try to fool me. Everybody has changed. Even Davis. How could he think of leaving us? I’m not surprised about Mariah. She always did have a mind of her own.” Eyes still closed, she rocked back and forth slightly. “Why are they leaving, Sarah?”

“They’re the same. They just ... they just want to have a new life.”

Emmaline Thomas frowned as though Sarah had said something foolish.

“What new life? They’re leaving by ones and twos—a trickle, but one day, it’s going to be a flood and they’ll all be gone. But they’ll be back here in a month, begging me and Master to take them in.”

Nagged by the word *Master*, Sarah was silent.

“You know no other place but this one, Sarah. You’ll end up living in some cabin with cracks in the ceiling, so that stars are looking down on you at night. You’re not used to living like that.”

Emmaline Thomas opened her eyes, and Sarah was shocked to see tears brimming on her lashes and then trickling down her wan cheeks. “Sarah, don’t leave. Remember how you and Caroline used to play?”

The tears were painful for Sarah, bringing back a rush of memories of the days when Mistress and Caroline were her world. Tears welled up in her own eyes also.

George Thomas suddenly entered the room, his tall, bulky body dominating the space. “Emmaline!” he shouted excitedly. “The field hands are demanding that we put a school on the plantation, so their younguns can learn to read and write. If we don’t do it, they’ll leave us.”

The flood has begun, thought Sarah.

Emmaline sat up. “What did you tell them?”

“I told them yes. I need those hands to bring in the crop, Emmy; otherwise, we’ll lose everything. Oh, I’ll open up the school for them. I’ll even let that Freedmen’s Bureau send one of them black northern teachers.”

“Who’s going to put up the school?”

“I’ll supply the materials, and the hands will build it.”

This was the first time that Sarah had seen George Thomas smile in a long while. He clutched his wife by her sagging shoulders.

“Oh, Emmy, if the hands stay, we can bring that cotton crop in and we won’t lose everything. All they want is a school.” He threw his large head back with its great mane of white hair, and laughed. “Emmy, you come on back to life. The world isn’t dead yet.”

He loosened his grip on her shoulders, and she gave him a weak smile. “Well, I don’t suppose it’ll do any harm. Those young ones are not much use in the field yet anyway.”

Sarah didn’t hear the rest of their conversation, for without warning, like a gift from heaven, the answer came to her, and she knew what she was going to do.

Emmaline Thomas’s voice startled her out of her thoughts. “Come on, Sarah, let’s take a walk, so I can see my garden.”

As they strolled through the grounds bursting with roses and azaleas, Sarah asked, “If I stay here, am I free to go whenever I wish?”

“What kind of silly question is that? You belong here with us.”

Sarah said nothing then or to Mariah and the others that evening. She wanted to make her decision strong in her own mind so that no one could change it. She could hardly fall asleep as she made her plans and strengthened her resolve.



She was up by dawn. She dressed quietly and sat on the side of her bed, waiting to hear her former mistress stirring. Finally, when she heard her walk across the room, Sarah knocked on the door and entered. “Miz Thomas, I have to talk to you.”

Later, she ran down the stairs to tell the others the news. For a moment, though, when she saw Solomon, Davis, and Mariah sitting at the kitchen table, she felt as if her heart were splitting in two. “Morning, Little Missy,” Davis said.

Sarah poured herself a cup of tea and sat down with them. “I made my plans,” she said. “I told Miz Thomas that I would stay and work for her if I could go to the plantation school, too.”

She braced herself for Mariah’s eruption, but Mariah only asked quietly, “What did she say?”

“Said she didn’t know why I wanted to learn to read and write; said it wasn’t necessary for a colored girl to know such things. Said I already was a wonderful lady’s maid. I told her that I wanted to be a teacher someday in a freedmen’s school.

“And I told her I wouldn’t abandon her if I could go to the plantation school. Then she said I could go to the school if I had a mind to.”

Davis nodded his head. “You’re growing up, Sarah. No more Little Missy, now.”

“We can write each other,” Solomon said.

Sarah looked at Mariah hopefully. “Now you can stay here, and Solomon can go with me to the plantation school.”

But Mariah shook her round head. “Sarah, each of us takes freedom in his or her own way. I have to leave even if I only go around the bend to the Williams farm. If I stay here, I’ll never feel free.”

“That’s right, Mariah,” Davis agreed, tapping his forehead. “Freedom begins here, in our minds.”

Sarah embraced each one of them. “Long as I’m free to go whenever I want, I don’t mind staying a spell.”

They were silent for a moment, listening to the whack of axes hitting the tree trunks as the bright sun burned off the last traces of morning darkness.

“Those hands have already started building their school-house,” Davis remarked.

“There’s a new day dawning for all of us,” Sarah said, “former slaves and masters alike.”