

A half-dozen years before Abe Lincoln's election, comes another collision between European immigrants and African abductees that does not end well. "De troubles Posey sees" in Two Rivers reminds one of Southern Gothic storytelling.

Two Rivers: De Trouble I Be See

By Bob Rogers

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The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a rural landscape. A river flows through the center, with a dirt path crossing it. In the foreground, several people are working in a field, some with large haystacks. The sky is blue with some clouds and birds flying. The overall scene is peaceful and depicts a typical antebellum rural setting.

AN AMERICAN ANTEBELLUM NOVEL

Two Rivers

De Trouble I Be See

Bob Rogers

Acclaim

"Rogers...tells the story [in *Two Rivers*] with the restraint of a gifted writer. Very highly recommended."—**Jamie Michele for Readers' Favorite**

"*Two Rivers*...creates an opportunity for [us] to better understand the lives of Americans—black and white—living day-to-day in 1854-1855. ...the novel [is] based on actual events and the deeds of real people during the decade leading up to the American Civil War."—**Jeyran Main for Review Tales Magazine**

"[*Two Rivers* is] a fast-paced tale of enslaved people in a land on the brink of war...a novel about the iniquities of slavery in pre-Civil War South Carolina."—**Kirkus Reviews**

"Bob Rogers packs so much into this fascinating...novel that it's hard to know where to start. For me, the standout feature of the work is its ensemble cast and the passion and emotional intelligence that Rogers displays in crafting so many different, realistic, and fully fleshed-out viewpoints...*Two Rivers* is intricately penned with much to experience, be intrigued by, and learn from."—**K.C. Finn for Readers' Favorite**

"...interpersonal conflicts unfold against the broader backdrop of growing forces that will eventually culminate in the Civil War, as predicted by U.S. Sen. John C. Calhoun (one of the novel's several real-life characters) and anticipated by [the character] Posey..."—**Kirkus Reviews**

"Rogers very skillfully works these and other historical elements, including the South Carolina hurricane of 1854, into the interlocked, dramatic subplots of his narrative, which proceeds at a brisk pace throughout."—**Kirkus Reviews**

"Rogers is an excellent storyteller, and his words feel authentic. ...[we hear] what Posey and all the other slaves are saying as they would have said it."—**Asher Syed for Readers' Favorite**

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This book is a work of fiction based on actual events and the deeds of real people during the decade leading up to the American Civil War. The point of view characters and supporting cast who engage in dialog herein, as well as the *Tiffany and Horseshoe Bend Plantations*, are my inventions. The historic men and women referenced along with organizations, places, events, geography, and weapons, are all real.

First Edition

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Also by Bob Rogers

Hitting Life's Curveballs

Lieutenant Flipper's Trial—The Play

The Laced Chameleon

Sacrifice at Shiloh Church

First Dark

My Blue Yonder

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List of non-fiction characters and people mentioned in *Two Rivers*

- William S. Aiken, Jr.—Congressman, D-SC, former governor of SC, owner of Jehossee Plantation
- Harriet Aiken – wife of William
- Henrietta Aiken—daughter of William and Harriet
- Andrew Burnet Rhett, Sr.—husband of Henrietta
- Daniel Alexander Payne—an American bishop, educator, college administrator and author
- Toussaint Louverture – architect of successful Haitian Revolution
- Jean-Jacques Dessalines—protegee of Toussaint Louverture and first black ruler of Haiti
- Denmark Vesey—convicted and executed for planning a major slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina
- Gabriel Prosser—convicted and executed for planning a large slave rebellion in Richmond, Virginia
- James Gadsden—United States Ambassador to Mexico (Gadsden Purchase)
- John Schnierle—Mayor of Charleston
- T. Leger Hutchinson—Mayor of Charleston
- Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr.—Publisher of the *Charleston Mercury* newspaper
- Robert Smalls—an American politician, publisher, businessman, and maritime pilot
- Nat Turner—an American preacher who led a rebellion of enslaved and free black people in Southampton County, Virginia

- Franklin Pierce—President of the United States
- John C. Calhoun—Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of War, Senator, Congressman
- James Monroe—Governor of Virginia
- John Lyde Wilson – Governor of South Carolina
- Thomas Affleck—published popular account-books; example: The Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book
- Eliza Seymour Lee—Charleston restaurateur and caterer

Chapter 1:

The Burying Ground

At 9:31 pm, Posey's arrow pierced the grave-robber's heart. Not far away, a great horned owl sounded, "hoo-h'HOO-hoo-hoo."

With his mouth agape from pain and surprise, the grave-robber looked down at the shaft of the hickory arrow in the middle of his chest. His black bowler hat fell into the partially opened grave. The man's grip tightened on his wooden-handled iron meat hook. He staggered backward, then forward, and fell face first into the grave.

Though down and dying, the robber's fist still held the meat hook used to insert under the corpse's collar bone and extract it from the box in which was buried. Posey spat in disgust at the thought of his sister's body being hoisted from her grave with a meat hook designed to hang the carcass of a hog or cow for butchering. He fought to keep his loathing from interfering with his self-appointed mission of ending, at least for a time, body snatching from this burying ground.

The resurrectionist's white shirt had made him an easy target in the waxing first quarter moonlight that warm Sunday evening, July thirtieth, in 1854.

Perched on a limb of an ancient live oak draped with Spanish moss, Posey readied another arrow from his crocus quiver. Chuck-will's-widows' calls abounded from near and far as they feasted on mosquitoes that they caught in mid-air. Though the small brown birds made Posey's favorite night music, he did not hear the birds now as he concentrated on finding his nocking point and aiming a second shot.

A digger shoveling at the foot of the grave screamed when his boss tumbled and landed at his feet. Dropping his shovel, he dug his fingers into the damp ground at the edge of the grave and hoisted himself up and out. The former digger ran behind another member of the gang of robbers, who were already scurrying toward their wagon and waiting team of horses.

Though the robbers came from Charleston, the burying ground where they labored was in Colleton District on the north edge of the vast Tiffany rice farm. Tiffany Plantation, as the owner called it, was on the west bank of the wide Pon Pon River that separated Colleton from Charleston District.

Posey's next arrow stopped the lead runner as it landed less than a foot in front of him. The former digger collided with the back of his halted, trembling comrade.

A deep voice from the tree line at the edge of the burying ground said, "Halt! Don't move!"

Without moving their feet, both men looked in the direction whence the voice came. One of them flatulated. A nearer great horned owl answered the first, "hoo-h' HOO-hoo-hoo." The voice from the tree line spoke again. "Return. Gather your comrade. Sell his carcass in place of the body you came for. Of course, you get a better price for a fresh white body." The voice sounded again with an insidious, blood-curdling laugh.

The stupefied robbers shivered, though the night was warm. The twosome remained frozen in their tracks.

Posey glanced westward at the moon, appearing to rest atop the hundred-foot-tall bald cypress trees of Snuggedy Swamp. The first quarter moon was providing only about thirty percent of its maximum luminosity. It would soon set, about an hour before midnight, leaving only starlight. Posey spoke again in his disguised voice, "Move your asses. You don't have all night."

The robbers clutched each other's shirtsleeve, holding fast to the only support available. Still, they did not move.

Posey said, "Dammit! Move now! Or one of you will get my next arrow."

In a shaky voice, the white robber said to his black comrade, "W-w-we'd better d-do as he says. I don't wanna die."

"Me, needa!"

Turning toward the open grave, the white robber said, "Let's git de boss and git de hell outta heah."

The black enslaved man said, “Time atter time, I done tol’ oona [you] white folks dat de call o’ de hootie owl means deaf! But no-o-o...”

“Oh, hesh up wid de ‘I told you so’ and let’s git movin’. Quick!”

Watching the tree-line but seeing only trees, both men took two cautious steps toward the open grave, then ran the remaining distance. Leaping into the grave, they grabbed their leader by his legs and armpits and unceremoniously heaved his body up onto the ground beside the grave. When they climbed out, Posey said, “Now, put the dirt back like you found it.”

The robbers shoveled at a frantic pace, causing their wooden shovels to collide occasionally. The dull thuds echoed against the woods.

When they patted the last dirt atop the grave into a rectangle, the white robber wiped his brow on his sleeve and asked the tree-line, “Is this alright?”

Posey responded in his disguised voice. “Go. Spread the word that arrows and bullets will greet all who bother graves in any burying ground in this part of the country. Any means all graves—Indian, black, or white. Clear?”

In unison, the robbers said, “Yessuh!” They loaded their boss aboard their wagon and forced their horses into a gallop.



Posey retrieved his second arrow, the one that stopped the thieves from running. Minutes later, he stood beside the restored grave of his sister. Clara was the last of his siblings. At eighty-eight, she was four years older than Posey. With his head bowed, his tears fell on soil turned on Friday to open a grave for Clara and turned again twice on Sunday.

“Sis, already, I miss oona wisdom and jokes. I pray that now oona can rest in peace wid Ma Ndidi. Y’all wuz lak two peas in a pod—so much alike.” Through his tears, Posey smiled as he pictured his mother and sister laughing together in his mind’s eye.

He made a deep sigh. At that moment, he heard again the night sounds that had surrounded him all the while. The voice of a nearby great horned owl startled him. Then came the call of a chuck-will’s-widow followed by a cacophony made

by creatures from crickets, cicadas, and frogs to the distant bellow of an alligator in the swamp and the faint barking of hounds back at the overseer's kennel. A mosquito sang by his ear. Swiping at the insect and missing caused pieces of the drying gray mud he had smeared on his hands and wrists to fall away.

Involuntarily turning his head to the direction of the mosquito's sound, the whitewashed wooden picket fence across the road caught Posey's eye. His gaze was steady for a few seconds on the graves and headstones in the fenced, manicured cemetery of the Tiffany family dead. Posey was standing in a neglected burying ground where the number of graves of deceased enslaved people far outnumbered those of the Tiffany cemetery. As his ire rose, he spat.

Next, Posey turned to the filled but sunken grave that had been Roxie's resting place for two days until her body and the body of her infant were stolen. His mind slid back to the three-week-old memory of trying, with Clara, to comfort Jacob, his best friend Roxie's grandfather.



On the second Monday night of July, sixty-two-year-old midwife Ella was confronted with a difficult delivery. Ella, midwife emeritus Clara, and doula Peninnah, had tried with mounting desperation to turn Roxie's breeched baby and staunch her heavy loss of blood. As she weakened, Roxie's pants and moans faded. The minutes passed as they watched the now quiet seventeen-year-old Roxie slip away with Penny holding her hand. Twenty-six-year-old Penny was apprenticed to Ella.

Ella and her friend Clara pushed aside the hanging quilt that covered the only doorway of the cabin. While allowing some air flow, the quilt blocked the view of the men waiting outside that hot night. From the moment they stepped out of the cabin where Roxie had lived with her husband of less than a year, Posey knew from his sister's countenance that they had bad news.

While Ella comforted Roxie's distraught husband, Clara and Posey held Jacob in a loose embrace without speaking. While he continued shaking his head, Jacob's silent tears flowed in a torrent. Posey admired his friend's strength facing the loss of his favorite grandchild, having raised her as a single parent. In his empathy, Posey thought of his bond with his granddaughter, Eve, whom he

raised as a single parent from age three after the death of her father, Posey's son, Malachi. Days after Malachi died, Eve's pregnant mother, Mecca, was sold away.

Besides her midwifery duties, the petite Ella was also the undertaker. She enlisted help from her younger brother, George, and Clara to carry Roxie's body to her place of work—the infirmary. There, Ella dismissed George and set about preparing Roxie's body on her cooling board for burial. Ella said, "Clara, you and Penny fetch me a pail o' hot water while I work here."

When Clara and Penny returned with a wooden hoop pail of hot water, it was after midnight. Clara gestured with a sweep of her hand toward her chest and said, "Ella, when I die, I don't wanna be buried in dese ol' ugly work clothes—not a single stitch of'em. I want for oona to wrap me in som' o' dat nice clean muslin you got laid by over there for Roxie."

Ella paused, washing Roxie's body and looked at her older friend. In a soft voice that betrayed her tiredness, Ella said, "My dear bosom buddy, of course I will."

Late Tuesday morning, Posey and George arrived at Ella's infirmary with the box for Roxie's body. Posey said, "Ella, oona brotherbody, sho' is something. Jes' lookit this fine box he done built overnight!"

As Posey and George lowered Roxie's muslin wrapped body into the box made from boards meant for a flatboat George was building, Ella beamed. "My brother ain't known throughout this country as a master carpenter, jes' for talk. That's why dem rich white folks in Charleston allus bidding for to hire'im."

Taking his leave, the modest George said, "Y'all hesh up all dat gushin'."

Roxie's Wednesday night funeral followed a delay of a day demanded by Franklin Foster, the head overseer. Foster ordered the hands to finish the last hoeing of the rice fields before Jacob and his crew began the final flooding of the fields for the growing season. Torch bearers and pall bearers led the way from the settlements of cabins where more than three-hundred enslaved people lived on the Tiffany rice labor camp. Roxie's parents, Jacob, who was arm-in-arm with Roxie's husband, and black clad Margaret Tinsley Tiffany, the only white person attending, followed them. The silent and solemn marchers were at

the head of a long line of mourners. Eight-year-old Caleb played softly on his harmonica.

In place of lay-preacher Jacob, Ella recited, “The Lawd is my Shepherd... shadow o’ death... house o’ the Lawd, forever.” In the middle of Ella’s prayer that followed, Posey’s eyes were open. He thought it strange that during a sad occasion, he would see Ella’s countenance take on a glow that came not from the pine torches posted beside her. Posey blinked and felt a surge of warmth in his chest for Ella. As Ella raised a song, he mumbled to himself, “Stop your foolishness up heah, ol’ man!” He thought, *she’s jes another woman. Close your eyes and stay true to the memory of your beloved Kat!*

In the second bar, Caleb and his harmonica joined Ella’s song. The harp was a treasured gift from Margaret Tinsley Tiffany. Ella had ended her short eulogy of Roxie, saying, “... Beautiful young Roxie is now done wid de trouble of dis world.” Then, Ella sang:

“I know moonlight, I know starlight; I lay dis body down.

I walk in de moonlight; I walk in de starlight; I lay dis body down.

I know de graveyard, I know de graveyard, when I lay dis body down.”

This was Ella’s first time leading a funeral service. Lay-preacher Jacob usually led funerals for the enslaved. Posey assured himself that Ella’s excellent performance was the reason he had surprised himself by the new attention he was paying to her.

On the walk back to the settlements, Caleb played several upbeat jigs. Clara nudged her brother with her elbow. “Uh-huh! I saw you looking at Ella like you ain’t knowed her all her life. You ol’ coot!” She rolled her eyes and gave him a prideful smile. “That’s okay, lil’ brother. She’s been widowed for over two years.”

Posey had found his brogans to be very interesting in the dim light. Despite trying to suppress it with all his might, a trace of what he condemned as a teenage grin emerged. To himself, he said, *got to watch out for dese smart-lip womens! Besides, the last thing I need now is a wife... for these mean-ass white people to*

kill like they kilt you, Kat. No. I'm fine all by myself! Right, Kat? Huh? Yes, I'm fine.



The morning calm Posey had enjoyed the following rainy Saturday was broken by Jacob's voice. Jacob's volume increased as he approached Posey's door. "Double damn the black-hearted sonsabitches!"

Posey met Jacob at his door. Jacob kicked a small rock into the distance. Posey said, "Jake, stop cuttin' the fool out there and come in heah outta dis rain 'fore you cotch you deaf!"

Inside, Jacob said, "Is Gawd asleep?"

"Huh? Jake, boy, what's ailin' you? How cum you talking outta your head?"

Jacob did not stop moving once inside. He walked in a rapidly agitated circle around Posey's only table.

Posey sat. "Dammit, Jake, set yo' ass down and tell me what's going on in yo' head."

Jacob stopped on the opposite side of the table from Posey. He snatched his straw-hat off, slammed it onto the floor, and stomped it several times—hard.

Posey stood and, with hands outstretched and said, "Jake, what the fuck?"

Jacob threw himself onto Posey's other chair and buried his face on his arms resting on the table. Jacob sobbed and his shoulders shook for several minutes.

Without a word, Posey walked over and put a hand on his friend's back. He hummed, "Nobody knows de trouble I be see."

Jacob began banging both fists on the table and repeating several times, "Double damn the black-hearted sonsabitches!"

After a deep sigh, Jacob sat up straight. "Posey, dey back. Dey done stole my Roxie and her baby!" His tears flowed again.

Posey felt nauseous and dropped onto his chair. "Damn Franklin Foster's soul! He said he'd put an end to body snatching."

Jacob said, “Yeah, well maybe his ass is in wid dem grave-robbers. As head overseer, he knows and keeps track of every birth and death. So, he could tip off...”

With his eyes unfocused, Posey Interrupted. “Maybe. Maybe not. Could be, he tried and dis is bigger’n him.” He slouched further in his chair. “Money...” Posey paused. A minute later, he continued, “You know, I remember George telling me last month ‘bout something he read in the *Charleston Mercury*. Them Medical Society peoples are up to something.” Posey drummed his fingers on the table. “Seems they been talking ‘bout teaching white doctors in that new Roper Hospital using actual bodies. Okay. Okay. I know. So, Roper’s already four-years-old. At my age, it’s still new.”

Jacob ignored Posey’s joke. “You don’t mean to say dey using dead people, do you?”

Posey blinked and looked at Jacob. “Yes, they means dead people. I paid little attention at the time. But if they’re paying bounties... money... Hmmm. Maybe they’re the ones hiring these bloody thieves.”

On that thought, they lapsed into silence. Both men stared at nothing and cupped their chins in a hand. After several minutes, in an abrupt motion, Posey sat up straight. *What did Pa say his pa told him about invaders? How they stopped them, except they failed that last time... Yes!*

Posey stood and paced. *We can’t depend on that damn Franklin Foster or the Tiffanys. It’s nothing to them to hear tell another black body done gone missing. No one’s stealing their dead. They jes shake their heads and say how sorry they be. “Sho’ is awful. No, so sorry, but there’s nothing we can do...” So, maybe Big Grandpa Onitsha can live again and help me put an end to this shit... I think... Yes! I’ve got it, Big Grandpa!*

He stopped pacing and concentrated for a long moment on his epiphany. “Jake...”

“Huh?”

Posey stared out the open door.

“What Pose?”

Posey waved his hand as if at an insect. “Oh, nothing. It was nothing.”

Thanks, Big Grandpa, I hear you. This thing is best kept between you and me.

Now, Posey could not wait for Jacob to leave. Stroking his stubble, he nodded. *I need time to study and make a plan.* In rapid, animated motion, he retrieved Jacob's flattened straw-hat and reshaped the crown on his fist. "Here, Jake." Posey shrugged and handed the hat to Jacob. "That's the best I can do for your hat." He grinned. "You done damn nigh kilt it!" He pointed to the opened doorway. "Hey, lookit. The rain has stopped."

Jacob stood and donned his hat. "Thanks, Pose. Thank you for letting me cuss up in your house. Folks might take a dim view o' dey preacher a cussin' and a carryin' on lak I done. So, I thank you very much, my cussin' friend."

Grinning, Posey said, "Any time! Come on back and cuss up all you want with me. Any time a'tall."



Posey was deep in thought and missed his mid-day meal. Well into the night, he continued thinking of alternative ways to thwart the grave-robbers. Because Posey could not read or write, he repeated aloud several times an outline for his plan—thereby memorizing it.

In the darkness of his cabin, he said aloud, "Damn these thieving white bastards! They understand force. What will get their attention better than death?" Confident he knew the answer, Posey nodded. "Please forgive me, Lawd. But it looks like you done left this thing up to me. I promise to do what the dead can't do. I will defend them!" He shook a finger at the emptiness about him and said, "B'fore day clean this Sunday, yessuh, I will be about this work."

After tossing and turning most of the night, Posey breakfasted early Sunday on slices of fatback fried to a crisp and eggs with corn pone cooked in the grease produced by the fatback. At first light, he left his cabin in the Bridgetown settlement for the forest at the north edge of the plantation, where it joined the Charleston-Savannah roadway.

Making his way into the woods in dim light that cloudy morning, Posey said aloud, "Big Grandpa Onitsha and Grandpa Ekwem, Pa told me what y'all did.

This morning, I need you to guide me like I'm a young know-nothing apprentice—which I am. Please sirs, teach me how to make the weapons I need.”

From the crocus bag he carried over his shoulder, Posey withdrew a hatchet. He stood before a mockernut hickory sapling. Grasping the young tree with one hand, Posey imagined the diameter to be great enough to be the source for two bows. With his hatchet, he made quick work of downing the small tree and removing a section long enough to make his bows. *Thanks, Big Grandpa, for showing me the bow inside this trunk!*

Posey's harvest from the forest included a chunk of bark from a loblolly pine oozing rosin, a rolled section of smooth bark from a beech sapling, and eight straight sections of hickory with diameters about the same as his little finger. Returning to his cabin with his bounty concealed in his crocus sack, Posey avoided his neighbors and especially children.

On a Sunday morning, some would go to worship services with their children in tow. Others would have children helping them maintain their vegetable plots. They would herd smaller children off, as was done on work days, to the yard of old Aunt Zarah's cabin for the day. Posey stored his harvest in his loft, out of the sight of visitors and the inquisitive eyes of children—especially his great-grandson, Isaac.

At the big house's chicken yard, Posey said, “G'moanin', Liza. How are you this fine moanin'?”

“Why, I'se jes fine Uncle Posey. Hi you?”

“Oh, I'm tolerable. You know, your son is quite the music fellow. He did very well playing for Ella at the funeral.”

Liza was the head cook in the kitchen house for the Tiffany family. In a quick expert motion, Liza wrung the neck of the chicken she held. “Why, thank you, Uncle Posey. Me 'n' Al are very proud ol' Caleb.”

“That's mighty fine, Liza, y'all should be.

“Say, did y'all cook a turkey recently? I sho' 'nough love me some smoked turkey necks.”

Liza laughed. “You jes hold on Uncle Posey. We cooked a turkey yisdiddy. I'll bring you the neck after supper.”

Walking away, Posey tipped his battered old sweat stained felt hat. “Why, bress you, Liza. I’m truly much obliged.”

With the information he got from Liza, Posey made his way to the back of the kitchen house, searched the yard, and found the items to make his arrows—wing feathers of a turkey. *Dese will fly again!*

By late morning, Posey had collected all the materials he needed. He had borrowed the necessary tools—a wood chisel from George and a hand sickle from Gus in the smithy. He spent his Sunday remembering stories from his father and grandfather about how his great-grandfather Onitsha and the village men had made bows and arrows for hunting and to defend their village against raids by other tribes. Posey shook his head. *At least, they remained free until Big Grandpa died in battle and his men lost the final scrimmage... Speaking of free, I wonder, yet again, jes exactly how it would feel to be free. Is it too late for thoughts of escape? Dammit, Posey! Don’t you remember? Sho’ as shit is too late, you ol’ coot! You ain’t no spring rooster no mo’! Well, staying and raising a family here hemmed in by these swamps and rivers wasn’t such a terrible choice—what slave has good choices?*

After curfew, Posey split and carved two bows out of the trunk of the older sapling. Then he carefully cut the feathers in half length-wise and trimmed them. He ruined the first two arrows by heating them until the bullet ends had turned ashy. Posey cursed. *Bloody hell, Pose. Can’t you follow directions?* The second night, he plaided strips of beech bark and made the bowstring. He used pine rosin and small strings to attach the halved turkey feathers as fletching to the shafts. This time, with patience, he successfully heated the sharpened bullet ends of the arrows in the flames until they hardened a bit at a time without burning the wood.

At daybreak on Tuesday, Posey returned to the forest with his bow and arrows hidden inside two crocus sacks. He practiced until his accuracy was consistent. Then he marked the nock point on the bowstring by tying a piece of white thread on the string.

Posey smiled.



Chapter 2:

Ella's Secrets

Shaking her head, Ella said, “Claire, I’ve seen too many girls die like Roxie. Makes me so sad. What in the world can we do to save our womenfolk?”

“El, honey, I jes don’t know. Way back when you were still a field hand, I asked Doc Pritchard the same question. He said he didn’t know what they could do to turn a baby, so its head pointed down. He said there was no way to know which way the head pointed ‘fore labor started. Then, of course, it’s too late.”

“Wait. Claire, are you telling me that with birthin’ we ain’t no mo’ worse off than white women?”

Clara made a deep sigh. “I fear that’s the awful truth.”

“Lawd, have mercy upon top po’ womankind!”

Clara shook her head. “Of course, if Posey overheard us, he would say, ‘Some white women have the added burden of stupidity—thinking their babies are better than ours or Indian babies.’ Oh well, that’s a different problem.”

“Sounds jes like’im. He would probably also say, ‘Then, the parents set in making their young’uns stupid just like they are.’ Lawd, have mercy.”

“While we are thinking what Posey would say, have you heard him say how he thinks white folks differ actually from other peoples?”

“Yes. Guns and money; or, did he say it’s money and guns?”

“Uh-huh.”

Silence ensued.

Ella and Clara sat facing each other on stools under an ancient live oak. Their stools were vertical sections of a cypress log. Above them, the noon sky was cloudless that Sunday. They were sharing a wide cutting board that rested between them on their knees—the handiwork of George.

On the ground beside them were sweet grass baskets of okra, onions, scallions, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and spinach. Each chef used a short paring

knife, made in the smithy, to dice into small medallions the “ladies fingers” they had gathered from the okra patch a half hour before. Every so often, both women wiped the sides of their knives against the lip of a wooden vegetable bowl to break the cling of the okra’s mucilage.

“El, why are you shaking your head?”

“I jes can’t keep my mind off it. I say again, Lawd, have mercy upon top po’ womankind!”

At that moment, Penny returned with a greasy basket—the one she always used for meat—held against her hip. With a bright smile, she said, “Hey, Aunties. What now? Did we women do something else to need more mercy from the Lawd?”

Ella paused her cutting and looked up at Penny. “Naw, child. What we talkin’ ‘bout ain’t something else—and it sho’ ain’t new. Womenfolk, rich and po’, been dying birthin’ babies for ages.”

Without missing a cut, Clara said in a mournful tone, “Few men understand de trouble we see.”

Penny’s countenance dropped. She mumbled, “Yessum.” She looked about to see if there was a man within earshot. Seeing none, Penny continued, but in a hushed voice. “The mating bizness is a mighty pleasurable thing. For true, I love it. But at times, I can’t enjoy it much, ‘cause I can’t push away my fear of winding up in a family way yet again.”

Ella was cutting again. She laughed. “Amen to that! I sho’ was one happy gal when the curse left me. I’d rather hot flashes any day! At least, I had a few years o’ bliss left ‘fore my sweet Simon passed.”

Clara stomped her foot and rocked the cutting board. “Yes! Spoken like a true widow—jes’ like my own heart! Even at eighty-eight on some lonely nights, loving memories come to me of the embrace of my long-dead husband.”

Beaming and with her eyes wide, Ella said, “You, too? My, oh my, how I miss those nights. How cum we never mention this widow talk before?”

No one spoke. Each woman was lost in the recall of some long-ago event. Above them, a gentle breeze periodically stirred the small leaves of the live oak and caused its limbs and Spanish moss to sway ever so slightly.

In the silence, Penny busied herself hanging a large cast-iron pot by its handle on an “S” hook. Several chains holding “S” pot hooks hung from a small hickory log over a crescent-shaped brick fire-pit. Instead of being fixed in place, they stacked the bricks with space between each to allow ventilation for the fire. The pit was a few paces beyond the outer edge of their live oak’s canopy. Two tripods of hickory poles stood like sentries on both sides of the pit, about two feet from the walls. The poles were lashed together near the top by ropes made from plaided twine. The “hanging log” rested in one of the two “V’s” formed near the top of each tripod.

“Uh-oh, Aunt Clara. Aunt Ella done gone somewheres. She’s smiling and staring at nothing.”

Though Penny called the older nurses and midwives “auntie,” the three women were not family.

Clara laughed. “Yeah, child. I see that. Could it be the po’ thing has some man on her mind?”

Piece by piece, Penny added assorted meats to the pot. “Yessum. I surely hope so.” One by one, she held up and examined four ham hocks, then dropped them into the pot.

Grinning, Penny said, “By the way, lemme tell you this funny thing before I forget. When I passed Uncle Posey’s cabin a bit ago, I saw a very unusual thing. He had blocked his doorway with a hanging quilt. Though I couldn’t see him, I said, ‘good morning, Uncle Posey.’ You’ll never guess what happened next.” Adding water to her pot, Penny laughed.

Ella said, “Knowing that rascal, anything might happen. I have no idea. Claire, he’s your little brother. What do you think happened?”

Smiling, Clara shrugged. “I dunno. What, Penny?”

Still laughing, Penny struggled and said, “Uncle Posey yelled, ‘Posey ain’t heah. He’s gone fishing in his boat’.”

The trio laughed together. Clara said, “Sho’ sounds like my brother! Everybody knows he ain’t got no boat.”

Soon, Penny’s pot reached a slow boil. She stirred the ham hocks, chicken wings, chicken feet, turkey wings, and an ox tail with a long wooden paddle.

Gentle bubbles appeared in the broth. While Ella and Clara sliced and chopped the remaining vegetables, Penny put the sweet potatoes in the ashes at the edge of the fire and raked coals over them.

Clara said, “Peninnah, dear, git a piece o’ fatback and heat up my pot settin’ yonder on the pit. Heat it enough to make me some grease. I think it’s time to get the okra ready.”

“Yessum. Directly.”

Ella leaned their cutting board against her stool. She said, “Sorry, but I’m getting awful forgetful lately. Tell me again, Claire. What did you say your ma called this soup we’re making?”

“Ask as many times as you like. You know, I’m Igbo. My ma, Ndidi, says our people call okra soup, ‘ofe okwuru’. Ma say her ma show her how to make it.”

Using a long wooden spoon, Clara stirred the okra medallions as they made a “sh-i-i-i” sound in the fatback grease. Clara said, “Okay, Peninnah, add the ground crayfish, pepper, and onions to your pot and stir. When it’s well mixed, cover it for a few minutes. Then, I’m coming with the okra.”

“Yessum.”

Ella was peeling and dicing the last of the tomatoes in a wooden bowl. Grinning, she said, “Too bad we ain’t got none o’ Posey’s fish for the pot.”

Laughing, Clara said, “I see you remembered this is the time we would add the fish if we had any. Welcome to the Igbo people, my sister.”

Penny chimed in saying, “Then, we add the scallions, tomatoes, and spinach.”

“I see you and Ella know really well how to make ofe okwuru.” Clara turned her attention to the arrival of Isaac, her seven-year-old great-grandnephew. “Boy, you just in time.”

“Whoa!” The running Isaac came to a stop as he pulled back on the string tied to his imaginary horse. Isaac’s horse was a crooked stick he dragged between his legs.

Clara said, “Turn your dusty ol’ hoss around and go tell your ma and pa to come to dinner. Tell Mister Sam and Miss Hannah. Oh, and find your Big-grandpa Posey. Tell him to come, too.”

Turning his horse, Isaac’s eyes brightened. “Yessum! Right away, Big-Auntie! Com’on. Git up dere!”



When Isaac was out of earshot, Ella shook her head and said, “Poor Jacob.” She sniffed. “First, he lost his beloved Roxie. Now, her body and baby are stolen.”

A tear rolled down Ella’s right cheek.

Clara walked over and put a hand on Ella’s shoulder. “El, dear, I know you feel a closeness with Jake in his double loss.”

Penny patted Ella’s other shoulder. “Aunt Ella, you did your very best to save Roxie and her baby.”

Ella cried more tears as she rocked back and forth on her seat. “I-i-it’s not that...” Her voice trailed off.

Clara said in a soft voice, “Peninnah, there’s more to Ella’s story and midwifery that you will learn over time.”

Ella hugged herself. “C-C-Clarie is right. I-I-I...” She blew her nose into a rag from her apron pocket. “Claire, I think Penny is mature enough to know today...” Ella stopped speaking. She thought, *Jake came as close as anyone to knowing the hurt I felt from the double loss of my little Joey.*

Clara said, “On second thought, I agree. Penny can know now. Perhaps the sorrows we have witnessed could help her know what may come to pass again.”

Slack jawed, Penny stood before her older friends with her eyes darting from the face of one to the other, searching for meaning.

With a deep sigh, Clara began. “You see, Peninnah, before you were born and before my dear friend, El, became my apprentice, she was a field hand and had several miscarriages before she gave birth to a son. Her miscarriages made her son, Joey, even more special.”

Rocking again on her seat, Ella said, “Yes.”

Clara waited. When she realized Ella would say no more, Clara continued. “Little Joey came down with a fever and passed soon after his first birthday. Then his body was stolen.”

Holding the sides of her face, Penny said, “Oh my God! I did not know. I’m so sorry.”

“So El has deep understanding of what Jake and Roxie’s husband are going through. Their grief has the awful pain of salt added to their wounded hearts—an anger that makes your head feel as if it will burst. These are words El used to describe how she felt when she lost Joey—twice.”

Penny repeated, with a hand over her mouth, “I did not know. I’m so sorry.”

Ella sniffed and wiped her tears.

No one spoke. In the distance, they heard birds, children playing, and the crackle of their cook fire.

The sound of the burning wood took Ella back to the January delivery of a baby girl at the nearby Horseshoe Bend Plantation by candle and the light of a roaring fireplace. That was nineteen years ago. Ella thought *Laurie’s sister could be next. She already told me their family don’t need another mulatto like Laurie. Lawd have mercy.*

Ella spoke over the new rasp in her voice, “Penny, I fear you will live to see some of the sorrow me and Claire done seen. Now, picture the grief and guilt of a mother who smothers her baby girl because she thinks that the child’s color will be too much like that of her white father.”

Penny gasped and covered her mouth.

Ella continued. “The mother has planned and does this deed in the presence of her midwife.”

Penny mumbled. “My head is spinning. I must sit down.” She dropped onto a stool and held her chin cupped in her hands with her elbows on her thighs. “Please, just give me a minute.”

While Penny collected herself, Clara chopped green scallion tops. Ella closed her eyes and memories flooded back.

The crackle of wood burning in the fireplace had been the only sounds Ella heard that January night in the cabin's single room. As was customary, they had summoned her days before from Tiffany to Horseshoe Bend, downriver a ways, to deliver another baby. Just as they had planned, upon extraction, Ella had placed the baby girl on the mother's abdomen. Maude, the mother, was perspiring profusely. Maude lay upon a straw-tick placed atop a bunk attached to the wall and supported by two posts from the floor. Involuntarily, Ella glanced toward the closed door of the earth-floored cabin as she handed a cloth to Maude. The hand-off was deft. Ella cut the umbilical cord. Maude covered the baby's nose and mouth before the child drew a breath.

Soft sobs came from Maude as she held the cloth fast across the child's face. Holding Maude's shoulder, Ella stood in a position to block any view of Maude and the baby in the unlikely chance that someone would open the cabin's only door. Maude's tears flowed over her ears and onto her cotton-stuffed pillow.

Minutes later, Ella reached for the infant, but Maude refused to let go of her deceased baby. Ella shrugged and continued her work, removing the placenta and washing Maude. Then, in a soft voice with her hands extended, Ella had said, "Maude, it's time to let your folks know it was a stillbirth."

With tears still flowing, Maude had nodded and let Ella take the baby. Finally, Maude said, "The bloody sonsabitches won't sell this one away from me or make her into a breeding 'ho."

Penny poked the fire under their soup pot, causing the fire to crackle rapidly, sending sparks aloft. The sound startled Ella and brought her back from her memory.

Ella said to Penny, "Do you think dem 'taters are 'bout done?"



Early the next Sunday morning, Ella made breakfast in Clara's fireplace. Laughing and talking, the two old friends sat at Clara's slab table fanning away flies and munching on eggs, bacon, and corn pone covered with a dab of molasses.

Abruptly, Ella's tone changed. "Claire, I've been meaning to ask you for some time. Is it true that Laurie is Franklin Foster's daughter?"

Clara swallowed and sighed. "That's more likely to be true than not."

"I knew you would know."

"Yes. It was my sad reply 'to give in' when her po' mama came to me, barely able to walk after a third beating. Why was she beaten? Because widower Foster got his way and forced her away from her husband."

Ella thought, *here we go again*. She said, "You know, Massa John III has taken to visiting Laurie in the night."

"Humph. It will never end. Get ready for mo' mulatto and even whiter babies."

"Yeah. Laurie's older sister already told me she don't need no mo' relatives who look like Laurie."

"For your sake and the sake of any babies, I hope she don't mean what I think she means."

"Trust me. She means it." Ella stood and picked up her vegetable basket.

Still seated, Clara said, "What will you do if what you're thinking comes to pass?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll call you out of retirement."

Clara picked up her basket. "Fat chance I'll help birth another baby. I'm done."

They walked in silence to the vegetable patch behind Clara's plank-floored cabin.

"Claire, I haven't seen Posey around much in the past week or so. What's he up to these days?" Waiting for an answer, Ella turned and looked at Clara.

"El, I don't know. I've missed him, too. He usually yells at me every morning since Massa John III retired him last year. But not this week gone."

"How old is Posey, anyway?"

“Wait. Let me think. Well, I’ll be... Jes as sho’ as this is late July, he’ll turn eighty-four b’fore the month is over.”

Ella’s eyebrows rose. “Hmm. He’s mighty spry and busy to be that old. There ain’t another man on this place who’s worked ‘til he was eighty-three.”

As they approached Posey and Clara’s vegetable patch, a lone green heron rose from between the rows with an earthworm in its beak and flew toward Snuggedy Swamp. Each woman had a sweet grass basket swinging from one arm to carry the vegetables they would harvest. Clara picked long green pole beans from the vines supported by a series of trellises Posey had constructed along the rows. Each comprised two bamboo tripods and an overhead horizontal pole supporting several vertical climbing poles. Braided twine rope held the trellises together.

Clara stopped picking and frowned. “You know, I never gave that a thought. I guess there was no need. All his life, he’s been the strong backbone of our family.”

“Speaking of family, how cum Posey had only one child?”

Clara held a fistful of beans against her hip. “Posey and Kat had three sons.”

“Oh, I didn’t know Posey until you and Doc Pritchard rescued me from dem rice fields back in ‘35. I saw him here ‘n’ there, but didn’t know him. Of course, I done heard plenty of talk about his son, Malachi.” Ella paused, shaking her head. “We lose so many babies. Is that what happened to his other two sons?”

Clara stopped gathering beans and took a deep breath. “No.” After a pause and a sigh, she continued. “All of his sons were grown men before Malachi was kilt. Mr. Foster and the Tiffany family panicked when they heard the rumor about what all Malachi may have been up to. That led to my nephew’s death. Then, on suspicion, they sold Malachi’s brothers, Louis and Joseph. The next thing to know is Kat died soon after she lost her sons—within days of each other. Nobody asked me, but I think the po’ thing died of a broken heart. Posey thinks so, too.”

Ella put a hand on Clara’s arm. “Oh, I’m so sorry. My questions are bringing back such painful memories.”

Clara sighed. “Aw, girl. That ain’t no problem. No harm done.” She smiled. “Why anyway, you’s practically family.”

Relieved that Clara smiled and with an impish grin, Ella said, “Even though my folks came from Angola?”

Clara laughed. “Even so!”

Ella retrieved her hoe from its place, leaning against the garden’s slab fence. The fence protected the garden vegetables from rabbits, deer, chickens, and free-range farm animals. She set her basket on the ground and began digging turnips. Each deft chop with the hoe that Ella made into the soft gray soil yielded an undamaged purple and white turnip with beautiful green leafy tops intact.

Arms folded, Clara stood and watched Ella dig. “El, I see your years of field expertise with a hoe are still with you.”

“Yeah, some old habits are worth having.”

Grinning, Clara said, “Say, El, I don’t recollect you asking so many questions before about Posey. How cum now?”

Ella stopped digging and raised her body to an erect posture. She leaned on her hoe thinking; *I feel like a foolish teenage girl*. Ella cleared her throat and said, “Well, do you remember our widowhood talk last Sunday?”

Clara half smiled and smirked. “Yes. So?”

“While I made my rounds from patient to patient this week gone, I couldn’t keep my mind from straying to the possibility of this old woman finding a good man.”

“Ella, you ain’t old.”

“Well, you know, just a manner of speaking.”

With a knowing smile blossoming over her face, Clara said, “So, between Tiffany and the Hoss Shoe Bend place, did you spy one that meets your fancy?”

“Clarie, you wise ol’ fox! You knew from my first question that I got my eyes set on your baby brother.”

Clara laughed. “True. I knew.”

“Yeah, and further mo’, I know I can trust you not to tell my secret to a soul—especially, Posey.”

“My lips are sealed. But only on one condition.”

Ella’s countenance fell from a grin to a creased forehead. “Okay. What?”

“The condition is that you never mention the lil’ secret I’m about to tell you.” Clara paused for effect.

Ella stamped her foot. “Well, Clarie?”

Smiling, Clara folded her arms.

Exasperated, Ella dropped her hoe and her hands flew akimbo. “Com’n, Clarie! Out with it!”

“Okay. Okay. A lil’ more’n a week ago, Posey was still saying he don’t need another wife to get kilt like white folks kilt Kat. He admitted he has thought about you.”

Ella’s jaw dropped.

Clara’s face turned serious. “Just in case I’m not here to see how y’all do, know that Posey ain’t convinced yet if he should or wants to marry anybody. So, it’ll be up to you make’im yours.”



Five days later, while walking with Ella, Posey called out to Clara, but she did not answer. He would remember this fateful moment, Thursday morning, July twenty-seventh. He would remember this fateful moment, he entered Clara’s cabin.

With tears on his face, Posey spoke, but not to Ella. “Lawd, what is this here agin this moanin’? You done took away my beloved Sis.” He paused and removed his hat. “Thank you, Lawd, for bressin’ me with her presence and wisdom all this long time.”

Clara had died in her sleep Wednesday night and was buried Friday night, lovingly wrapped by her dear friend, Ella, in white muslin.



“Posey, thank you for cooking the fish. I thought you would just bring it straight from the river.” Ella set out two tin plates adorned with identically arranged portions of catfish, cabbage, and corn pone.

“Aw, ‘twas nothing to go on ahead and cook the rascal.”

“Well, I sho’ thank you. That was mighty nice of you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Smiling, Ella set a third plate on the table, its contents covered by a wooden bowl.

Posey pointed to the third plate. “Say, are you expecting company?”

With a big grin, Ella said, “No. Let’s give thanks and eat while our food is hot.”

Minutes later, all was quiet except for munching sounds. In the center of Ella’s rough-hewed table was a pint-sized blue glass jar, chipped at the lip from years of use. The jar held a bunch of wild flowers that hung over the rim. Ella felt wilted, like her flowers in the stifling heat and humidity of the third Sunday afternoon in August. With a bandanna, she patted the sweat on her forehead. Her white hair was plaited in two braids on each side and wrapped around her head in opposite directions like a crown. She wore her ankle-length Sunday go-to-meeting dress. An apron covered her front, from her collar to her knees. From outside her open door and window came the sounds of children laughing and playing hide-and-seek.

In Ella’s case of nerves, she kept her eyes fixed on her food. With a glance, she noticed Posey staring at her. She dropped the fork-load of cabbage that was on its way to her mouth onto her lap. “Now, see what you’ve done!”

“Huh? What? Me?”

“Didn’t your ma tell you not to stare at people’s food? See, it’s true. You made it fall.”

“Well, I never...”

With an impish grin, Ella waved a backhand at Posey. With the other, she retrieved the cabbage. “Oh, never mind.”

Laughing, Posey held his plate up. “I’ll eat it. Since, as you say, I made it fall.”

She blinked and sat up straighter. “You want to eat this cabbage from my apron and fingers?”

Nodding, he said, “Uh-huh.”

Dropping the cabbage on Posey’s plate, Ella turned and uncovered the third plate. “Here. Eat this with your cabbage.”

Posey’s mouth dropped open at the sight of his favorite food—a smoked turkey neck. “How did... what made you... I mean, you knew I love smoked turkey necks? How?”

Beaming and supremely content, Ella folded her arms. “Never you mind about how I know. Enjoy!”

He laughed. “This is a great surprise! Thank you, Ella. Eat from your fingers? Woman, you’ve done a number here today! I’ll eat from the palm o’ your hand.”

Ella felt herself blush and gave thanks that her dark complexion did not let it show. She thought, *okay, lil’ teen girl. Control yourself! Act grown up!*



Chapter 3:

South Carolina Railroad Company

“Geoff, on our way to McCrady’s last evening, the boss told me he wants a report comparing the cost of hired hands against the cost of nigger workers.” James Boshier took a pull on his Partagás cigar and held it aloft by its ivory holder as he exhaled, adding more blue smoke in the room.

Across the table, forty-three-year-old Geoffrey McGrath sat up straight and dropped his pencil on his ledger of earnings and expenditures. He gave James, nine-years his junior, an exasperated look. “Huh?”

With a sigh, James stood, raked his fingers through his dark-brown hair, and walked to a tall window. “Yes, you heard right. More details for us to find and calculate—or manufacture.”

James loosened his collar. There was no breeze from the open window to relieve his discomfort. Thursday morning, the third of August 1854, was hot and muggy under an overcast sky. James and Geoffrey shared a sturdy oak work table in the second-floor satellite offices of the South Carolina Railroad Company. The growing SCRC had rented additional office space in the Southwestern Railroad Bank’s building on Broad Street, one block west of East Bay Street in downtown Charleston.

A grinning Geoffrey said, “Manufacture? Great idea! Do you have a thought as to why he wants yet more numbers?”

“Actually, you need’n worry. He directed me to do these numbers since I am the one ‘advocating buying more nigger hands instead of hiring white wage earners’—or even renting niggers.”

Throwing up both hands, Geoffrey said, “And your gut tells you what?”

“Without putting any numbers on paper, there is no question that buying is the obvious better solution.”

“Does the boss agree?”

James resumed his seat. “Yeah. Sort of. I think he wants the numbers to convince himself and so he can go armed when he presents my proposal at the next board meeting.”

Geoffrey nodded. “Uh-huh. Makes sense.” He laughed. “So, I’m off the hook for manufacturing more numbers?”

“Yeah. For...”

“Excuse me, gentlemen. Good morning.” A clerk interrupted and stood in their doorway. He pointed toward the stairs. “Mr. McGrath, Deputy Walcott is here with that nigger, Heracles, you sent for.”

Geoffrey said, “Tell Walcott to bring’im on up.”

“Geoff, why did you tell’em to bring a nigger in here?”

“Because I want you to look this running nigger over and tell me if you think he is worth continuing the company’s investment in him. He’s run away twice. I heard you when you told me we ought to keep him on your track maintenance crew. You seldom actually see the niggers I buy.”

“True. They are just numbers and names in my ledgers and the rental contracts we have.”

“Where do you send them?”

“Most go to gangs working along our new lines to Camden and Augusta. I’ve never spoken to any of them. Anyway, how much did this Heracles cost?”

“We paid \$1,000 for Heracles...”

They were interrupted again. This time by Deputy Walcott’s voice behind chain-bound Heracles, whose chains scraped along the wooden floor.

“Mr. McGrath, here’s yo’ big-ass nigger.” Walcott shoved Heracles into the room with the butt of his shotgun. “He’s a bigg’un, but he ain’t so tough to handle wid dem hand and ankle irons he’s awearin’!” Walcott let out a loud laugh.

Heracles’ stumbled forward, stopped, and stood erect. Taking in the sight, James rose from his chair. From his five-foot four-inch frame, James looked up at a very large black man more than a foot taller and twice as wide at the shoulders as he. Mouth agape, he stared in silence.

Damn.

Walcott said, “Well, me and the sheriff done delivered lak you asked. We flopped’im good with ‘bout thirty licks. We used a mighty wide strop. Jes lak you ordered. We didn’t leave a mark on’im. So, now if’n it’s all the same to you, Mr. McGrath, you can go on ahead and pay me and I’ll take my leave.”

Geoffrey paid Walcott. James was happy to see the last of Deputy Walcott.

Geoffrey said, “James, why are you staring? Say something.”

Without turning his gaze, James said, “Okay. Heracles, look at me.”

Heracles’s eyes remain fixed on the floor. He moved not a muscle.

“Heracles, I said, look at me.”

The giant raised his chin. Instead of turning toward James, Heracles looked out the window.

“Will you stop running off?” James paused. After a sigh, he continued. “Do you wish to be whipped again?”

Heracles did not respond.

“Do you want to force us to sell you?”

Heracles looked down at a pale James and may not have noticed James’ shudder as they locked eyes. Nor did Heracles know James had stifled an urge to pee. James felt Heracles’ scorching dark brown eyes. He had heard that the enslaved feared looking a white man in the eye. Astonished, James felt misinformed.

Oh, shit.

After a long minute of silent staring at each other, James spoke to Geoffrey while maintaining eye-contact with Heracles. “Sell him. Forthwith. Today.”



By three o’clock, Geoffrey had sold Heracles and signed over the title to the new owner—the Horseshoe Bend Plantation of Colleton County. James watched as Geoffrey negotiated a price that made a \$200 profit for the SCRC.

“So, what are you going to do about a replacement for Heracles? Without a replacement, we delay new revenue on the Augusta line.”

“Didn’t you tell me we finished the new construction already?”

“Yeah, but there’s a fair amount of ‘deferred’ maintenance to be done. You know, stuff you won’t see in the newspapers.”

Geoffrey raised an eyebrow and gave a knowing laugh. “So, completed with loose ends yet to be dealt with. I see. Don’t fret. I’ve got you covered. Watch this.”

Geoffrey walked James over to a white man standing with a black family of four at the edge of the crowd of auction onlookers. Geoffrey had watched and knew the white man had been unsuccessful in attempts to sell the family as a unit.

“I say, my good man, would you entertain an offer for this fine specimen of a hand and his family?”

James could see the white man’s countenance rise as a smile spread across his face and the faces of the enslaved couple.

“Sir, I’m Franklin Foster, head overseer at the Tiffany Plantation of Colleton District. Yes. Indeed, I am ready to hear your offer. You see, the owner’s wife at Tiffany gave me unusual instructions to keep this family together. That’s why we’ve been here all day waiting for someone like you to come along.”

Within the hour, Geoffrey and the older man, Franklin, had agreed on a price of \$2,250 for the family and a down-payment of \$1,200 from SCRC. Geoffrey invited Franklin to meet him at the one-year-old Farmers & Exchange Bank on Friday afternoon to complete the papers for the mortgage and insurance.



“Geoff, what did you just do? How do your transactions benefit the SCRC?”

A light mist was falling as they began their two-block trek back to their office from the site of the auction. In 1854, they held auctions in Charleston of the enslaved outdoors in an open lot on the north side of the Old Exchange Building on East Bay Street.

“What you just saw me do was extract a one-year loan of \$1,050 from the Tiffany Plantation. That loan will pay the cost of maintaining that family of niggers I just bought. You will take the new nigger hand on your ledgers and keep your maintenance teams up to strength. I do not know where you will employ the woman. I am sure you will figure that out.”

James shook his head. “You know, I never thought about how you bought or sold hands. I was happy enough that you just got it done.”

“Say, instead of going to the office, let’s head up to McCrady’s and get out of this mist before we’re soaked. I have another mortgage idea that might interest you. Pun intended. I’d rather not be overheard at the office on this one. It ain’t baked yet.”



Walking north on East Bay to McCrady’s Tavern, they passed the Farmer’s & Exchange Bank. James touched Geoffrey’s sleeve and gestured in a sweeping motion toward the bank building’s facade. “I have long admired architecture from southern Spain. This is one of the most elegant examples I have seen in my limited travels.”

“Well, I have almost no knowledge of architecture, but I know what I like. I especially admire the arches over the entrance and the second-story windows. When were you in Spain?”

James held up both hands. “Oh, no! Let me not mislead you. I was born in Richmond. Pennsylvania defines the boundaries of my very limited travels in the north and South Carolina in the south.”

“Humph. Still, your travels are more extensive than mine.

“James, changing the subject, perhaps it’s an interesting coincidence that you called attention to F&E’s building. That bank is central to the mortgage matter we will discuss in a few minutes.”

James laughed. “Well, my obvious clairvoyance is all the more reason you and the boss should take my proposals without question upon first hearing!”

The two shared a hearty laugh.

At McCrady's, they took an isolated table opposite the one displaying a sign that read, "President Washington dined here in 1791." With the overcast and drizzle, an early darkness fell on the city. At five o'clock, the dining room was lit by oil lamps. Candles adorned each table. Sipping their second bourbons, James and Geoffrey ordered a supper of surf and turf.

Geoffrey tilted his chair backward. "Say, James. I remember you as a young shave-tail lawyer coming to work at SCRC up there at the depot office on Hudson Street. How long have you been with the company?"

"Funny you should bring that up. October will mark my tenth year. From the start, you have been my mentor. So, thanks again for helping me get started. How long were you here before I arrived?"

"Three years, I think. More than long enough."

James took a pull on his bourbon. "Huh?"

Geoffrey's eyes narrowed as he gazed into James' quizzical expression. "I'm taking you into my confidence and sharing a matter that only my wife knows about."

James blinked and nodded. "I appreciate your trust."

Geoffrey took a deep breath. "I'm leaving the SCRC next month."

James set his glass down with a crash. He sputtered, "W-w-what? Why?"

"You heard me. I'm out. Why? I want to make some real money for my growing family. Before you ask how, I'll tell you. It's all about mortgages on niggers. I'm telling you these things so you won't have to wait as long as I've waited to make some important investments."

James let out a sigh. "To tell the truth, finding an alternative to jobbing has been on my mind."

"That figures. I guessed as much because I know you're smart."

Geoffrey pointed at James with his fork. "Remember, keep this completely under your hat." He paused and forked a shrimp into his mouth.

James held up his right hand as would a witness in court. "My lips are sealed."

Geoffrey nodded. “Now, here’s the little I know. You just saw me do a kind of nigger mortgage. The more important matter is what banks can do with many mortgages. There, I see some risk but great potential reward. Keep in mind, during the panics of the thirties, mortgage holders suffered catastrophic losses. Businesses and banks closed when the price of cotton went off a cliff and mortgagees couldn’t pay.”

“Yes. I was just a lad at the time. I remember the hard times. What did the falling price of cotton have to do with mortgages?”

“Everything. The price of niggers, no matter if they worked cotton, sugar, or rice, was tied to speculation in king cotton.”

“Oh. So, the two fell together.”

“Correct. However, I believe there’s another wave of opportunity coming soon. I don’t mean to miss it.”

James put his fork down and made a pyramid with his hands. With his eyes blinking rapidly, he said, “I don’t mean to pry. But are you buying a plantation?”

Geoffrey coughed and laughed. “Oh, no! I don’t have that kind of money! With what I can spare, I will invest in mortgage-backed securities. To safeguard my investments, as best I can, I will go to work on the ‘inside.’ I’m accepting a position at the F&E Bank.”

James’ jaw dropped. “What!” Then he said, “Do you mean to tell me that common workers like us can make money off niggers without having to own them?”

“Sh-h-h! Keep your voice down. The answer is yes. I’m guessing you want to know how the whole thing works.”

“Why, yes. Of course.”

Smiling, Geoffrey held up a hand. “I don’t want to tell you more than I know. I don’t yet know all I feel I need to know about how mortgage-backed securities work. So, soon I will introduce you to an expert. He was a Philadelphia banker who recently moved to Charleston to join F&E as a vice-president. His name is Merle Goddard.”



In his flat on Friday and Saturday evenings, 4 and 5 August, James recounted several times his confidential conversation with Geoffrey. *There has got to be a better way forward than just taking a different job—even in a bank.*

Late Saturday morning, James breakfasted at a small eatery in the Charleston Market, three blocks below his house on Anson Street. Again and again, he thought, *there has to be a better way.* Deep in thought, when his breakfast was finished, he made three steps toward the exit. Then he heard the proprietor's voice.

“Oh, Mr. Boshier. Are you forgetting something?”

Startled and jolted back into reality, James flushed and said, “A thousand pardons, Sam.” Digging into his purse, he said, “Here's your money and a little extra for my absentmindedness.”

“No harm done, Mr. Boshier. Thank you. See you again soon.”

Absorbed in thought again, James ambled past St. Philips Church headed south along Church Street—in the opposite direction from his flat. After two blocks in the heat, he crossed to the west side of the street and entered the bar of the Planter's Hotel for a lemonade.

Seated by an open window, chin propped by both hands with his elbows on his table, James felt pensive. *It's time for resolution. The years flew by while I focused on making money for the railroad—someone else's damned enterprise.* He gave his head a violent shake as if to clear it of the thought. *That was then; this is now! What to do? Surely, becoming a dirt farmer will not make me into a planter anytime soon. That will take far too long. Dammit. Okay, James, don't start in kicking yourself again.* He struck the table with his fist, causing condiments to rattle and patrons to pause their conversations and look at him. He failed to see their stares. James briefly gritted his teeth. *Before this day is done, by God, I will find a course to follow that will make me a planter while still in my thirties—by any means necessary.*

Saving my rent money by moving into an employer furnished flat is not the answer. Rent money is—not real money. Get money from where? He rubbed his chin. From where? Where? Given what I saw while at the railroad company,

bank terms on struggling newbies that's never even set foot on a farm will be onerous. Where else is there money to be had other than from planters themselves? Wait! Hold on. Their relatives? By Jove, that's it! Now that I think about it, that's how some young sonsabitches have gotten their asses into planter families. Though he was unaware of it, James' face displayed the envy and contempt he felt as his upper lip rose at a corner in a snarl. *Hmmm. I wonder how many came from other planter families. Money marrying money? Dammit. Foiled again. Whoa. Wait a minute. Hold it. Maybe not.* A sinister grin blossomed across James' face. *Somewhere, there must be owners who have daughters needing husbands. He smiled and nodded. Anybody know an industrious eligible bachelor lawyer with wit, charm, and good looks?* His grin creased his face.

James left Planter's and strolled a few steps north before turning east on Queen Street. Two blocks farther at East Bay Street, Queen became Vendue Range. Here, he stopped to concentrate on a new thought. *Planter is too general. Forget cotton and tobacco. This is not Richmond. In Charleston, Colleton, Georgetown, and Savannah, the local and state rule-makers own rice plantations.* He grinned. *Aha! So, the lucky damsel's father grows rice.*

Turning south on East Bay Street, he slowed his pace as he was momentarily distracted by a two-story wooden building that had suffered roof damage during a cyclone. His attention shifted to take in the view beyond the building. There stood the tall masts of ships tied up at the wharves in front of him. *Some year soon, my rice will load here, bound for Europe. Say, this must be where my old college chum's dad sells his rice... Action!*

Immediately, James turned north and hurried home to dash off a letter to John Bartholomew Tiffany III, heir-apparent of the huge Tiffany Plantation in Colleton District. On his way to work at SCRC on Monday morning, James posted his letter.

John's response arrived the following Monday. It read in part, *"Delighted to hear from you, old pal. By this letter, I invite you to meet me at a private gala to be held at my family's townhouse on the northwest corner of South Street at Hanover Street, at nine in the evening, Saturday, August nineteen, instant. It will be great to reunite with you over refreshments while being distracted by marvelously clad female flesh! See you there. John III."*



The mid-summer sun was beaming yellow-orange as it neared the western horizon beyond Charleston's Ashley River. Elliot Holloway stopped his two-door taxi coach beside a weather-beaten buckboard in the intersection of Meeting and Calhoun Streets. The top of the buckboard's right rear wheel leaned onto the slatted body while the bottom had come to a stop at a precarious angle, pointing away from the vehicle.

A white-haired black woman was waving from the edge of the cobblestones. With her other hand, she clutched at her headscarf against the strong wind of Saturday, August 19. Her companion, another white-haired black woman, pushed with no effect against the wheel.

On the passenger seat of the taxi, James laid his pocket-size journal aside. Perplexed, James asked, "Elliot, why are we stopped?"

Setting his rig's brake and climbing down from his high box seat, Elliot replied, "Mister Boshier, I'll see if I can help these ladies get their buckboard rolling."

The waving woman limped into the street to meet Elliot. Steps before she reached Elliot, she extended her hand. "Bless you, young man. Thank you so much for stopping. As you see, we're about to lose a wheel."

James called from the taxi's window, "Elliot, return immediately to your seat and drive me to my destination."

"Yes, Ma'am. You're welcome." Elliot glanced over his shoulder at James. "Mister Boshier, this will take only a few minutes."

Before James could respond, Elliot was removing crates from the buckboard. James spoke to Elliot's back. "Get back here—now!"

To the women, Elliot said, "This is not serious. You've lost a cotter pin. I'll fetch one from my toolbox."

As the sun set, Elliot returned to his rig. James hissed, "While in my hire, you will not make further stops without my permission."

Ignoring James, Elliot selected a spare cotter pin and headed back to finish the repair.

Upon realizing that Elliot had not returned to drive, James bellowed, “Get back here now or you’re fired!”

Over his shoulder to James, Elliot said, “Okay, sir. I’m fired.”

Seething and sliding further back into his seat, James did not leave the taxi.

The older of the two women was alarmed. “Son, I’m so sorry we’ve caused you trouble. You best go on back to your master.”

“He ain’t my master, and that’s my taxi.”

“Oh, my. That’s a fine coach. It makes me so joyful when I learn of another African owned business.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’m trying my best.”

After a pause, he said, “Okay. When I lift the axle, both of you push the wheel further on.”

After the lifting and pushing was done, the panting older woman said, “Hallelujah! We did it!”

As first dark approached, Elliot inserted the cotter pin and spread the ends. With the cotter pin securing the wheel and the crates reloaded, the older woman extended her hand again. “I’m very sorry to detain you all this time. I forgot my manners. Sorry. I’m Eliza Seymour Lee and this is my colleague, Charlotte.”



From the taxi window, James admired the three-story Tiffany urban mansion’s red brick edifice. *Even in gaslight, this is a magnificent house.* At half-past eight, Elliot held the passenger door of his taxi open for James to alight at the mansion’s front walk on Hanover Street. *Old Tiffany and his money must be the reason that city street lamp is positioned just so to show off his house in the best light. He is an example to follow. Someday soon, I will...*

Elliot interrupted James’ ‘daydream’. “So, Mister Boshier, am I still fired?”

On the walk, James turned to face Elliot. He thought *I should fire him. Firing him wouldn’t teach him his place. He is one obstinate and maddening black*

sonavabitch. Firing his ass would only deprive me of a dependable driver. Damn his time.

“Well, sir, am...”

“No! Dammit! Like I said, bring me that note at half past ten.”

“Yes, sir. See you at half past ten.”



The Tiffany family’s butler invited James to follow him. “Yessuh, the young Master John, is expecting you. Says he’ll meet you in the library.”

Passing through the large parlor, James admired a large sofa upholstered in a luxurious purple velvet. Ivory lion paw feet supported the six short mahogany legs at its ends and center. In particular, the recessed buttons covered with the same fabric drew him. The elegant buttons anchored squares of the plush contours of the sofa. It flanked the large sofa by two matching smaller sofas facing each other. Two mahogany straight-back chairs with seat cushions of the same purple fabric faced the sofa from across a large marble-topped coffee table. Light from two twelve-lamp chandeliers hanging from the fifteen-foot-high ceiling accented the evenly spaced folds in the sofa’s extraordinary design. Nodding, James thought, *my day is coming*.

In the dining room, enslaved servants dressed in matching black and white costumes maneuvered gracefully about with trays offering hors d’oeuvres and before dinner beverages to the gathering guests. The sounds of soft music, light chatter, and the clinking of glasses in salute and cups colliding with saucers filled the room. Guests spilled into the parlor upon hearing the first notes from Margaret’s playing of Robert Schumann’s Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, with the recent addition of a Scherzo as a second movement. There were delighted oohs and ahs from guests about Margaret mastering the latest musical piece.



James leapt to his feet as John strode briskly into the library. They met in the center of the room. James thought John’s handshake was firmer than he

remembered. John's warm greeting was even more gratifying. "JP, welcome to our home. By God, it's great to lay eyes on you again."

"John, thank you for your kind invitation. Likewise, I am happy to reconnect with you. I see, some things never change. You are still the only person who calls me 'JP'."

Laughing, they settled into chairs, careful not to spill their glasses of bourbon. After swapping stories from college days and recounting James' years at SCRC, John said with a twinkle in his eye, "Of course, without asking, you're forgiven for not letting me know you've lived in Charleston all this time."

James flushed. He took a deep breath. "Well, to tell the whole truth, I was embarrassed to only find a job somewhere, anywhere. That's what I get for graduating last in my class. So, I've just concentrated on getting my feet under me."

John waved a hand. "Aw, hogwash. Don't let such small matters get in your way."

Looking deep into John's eyes, James decided to confide in him. "John, I think it's time to follow a friend of mine who just left SCRC."

John listened without questions as James laid out his need for a new career. He stood and put a hand on James' shoulder. "JP, I have an idea. If you're ready to dust the cobwebs off your lawyering skills and take on some management responsibilities, perhaps I can introduce you to a man looking for same."

James stood with his mouth agape. He stammered, "I-I-I didn't expect..."

John waved him quiet. "Timing is everything. Besides, you may not be interested in interviewing with my father for the dual positions he is creating. My old man wants to bring on a man to apply the latest scientific management methods to the production of rice.

"Let me be clear. This is not about growing rice plants. My father is interested in getting more production from his investment in niggers."

Still, James did not realize his mouth was agape.

John continued, "I told my father that it would be difficult to find what he wants in one man. So, as I predicted months ago, he has not found such a person.

“You’re a lawyer with some management experience at SCRC. Are you interested?”



The last of the invited couples arrived while James was closeted in the library with John. Opening the library door, John said, “Com’on JP, just as we did at Dickinson College, let’s get out there and inspect some female flesh!”

“Don’t let me step on your heels!”

Under the dining room chandeliers, tables arranged in a single line and covered with fine linen from London accommodated the party of twenty-two for dinner.

Minutes later, John tapped his glass with a spoon and introduced James.

His sister, Josephina, presented as her special guest, Jacqueline, daughter of the president of a new Charleston bank, and late of New Orleans.



After dancing with Josephina, Jacqueline, Henrietta, and Frances, James wanted more time to chat with these daughters of plantation owners, a bank president, and a former president of the SCRC. He wished he had not asked Elliot to bring the fake note and extract him from what he expected would be a boring social affair.

Because of the late hour, Elliot’s knock at the door caused a minor momentary interruption. Elliot delivered James’ fake message at precisely half past ten.

Minutes later, a second interruption occurred when Margaret rose to address the gathering. “Ladies, several of you asked me, a foreigner among you, how did I arrange preparation of such thoroughly Charleston cuisine for tonight—and, especially, the exquisite pastries.” She laughed. “The answer is, I did not. So, I’ll share my secret. Feel free to use my secret. Come on out, Eliza.”

Eliza emerged from the large butler’s pantry, where food arrived from the kitchen house to be arranged on plates for delivery to guests by servants.

There was a buzz in the room.

“Here she is, Eliza Seymour Lee, caterer and owner of the Lee House Restaurant downtown on Tradd Street.”

The buzz grew louder amid scattered applause.

Jolted from staring across the room at Henrietta Aiken, James snapped his head toward Margaret and Eliza. His quick frown contorted his face. *What!? That's that nigger woman from the street!* He covered his open mouth with his hand... *She actually owns a business? Like Elliot... How cum I didn't know this about niggers? How cum I've heard all my life how shiftless and lazy these people are... Never mind, I'll think about this later.*

Beaming, Eliza curtsied and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Tiffany. I may not have arrived here at all had it not been for the kindness of Mr. James Bosher, who stopped and lent his driver to fix my wagon.”

With all eyes on him, James flushed, forced a weak smile, and waved to acknowledge the applause. *Dammit! I never expected kindness from a nigger—especially when I withheld kindness. Who does that? What kind of people are they? Wait. Are they even people?*

Saying good night took a quarter of an hour. At the door, John said, “My father wants to interview you here over dinner at three o'clock next Saturday.”



After breakfast on Sunday morning, James took a long walk along East Bay Street and reviewed revelations from the Tiffany gala. He stopped short at Unity Alley. *My head is reeling. Too many thoughts may be lost. I need to put options down on paper and make a plan. Yes, and map a specific way forward. Then go big—go whale hunting. What? No, who is the biggest fish in this pond? First things first.*

Slowly, James realized he felt warm. Then he noticed he was not walking, but standing in direct sunlight. Moving again, he turned into the alley and made for McCrady's Restaurant. *Okay. First, list the fathers and then look for eligible daughters!*

With his pocket journal open on his favorite table at McCrady's and an Emerson and Son of Walden, Massachusetts pencil in hand, James began an alphabetical list from memory. He smiled as he began. *A is for Aiken, said the teacher. Shit. I could stop here. I don't know of a bigger fish than Aiken!* An hour later, his list was short. James decided, distasteful or not, he needed female help to expand his list. In the meantime, his excitement grew at the thought that he could enter the Aiken family.

Oblivious to his surroundings, while James labored, a brief afternoon thunderstorm raged. Throughout, he remained unaware of the rain. When he sat up and sighed, James' plan did not occupy a full journal page. He read and reread his words through his afternoon dinner, making serious edits here and there. Pleased at last with his work, he smiled. James turned the leaf and began work on the first action listed in his plan. After many starts and erasures, his letter to Henrietta Aiken was ready to be transcribed at home in the evening with his best ink and on his finest stationery. It read:

*Sunday, the twentieth day of August in the year of our Lord,
one thousand-eight-hundred-fifty-four.*

Dear Henrietta,

Please accept my very humble and tardy congratulations. If the "Mercury" and the "Courier" are to be believed, your presentation a few months ago set a new top bar for Charleston debutantes for ages to come. Your entry at the ball to the music of Robert Schumann was novel—music almost as beautiful as you. I apologize for being away from the state and unable to attend in person and pour out yet more accolades that you so richly deserve.

I beg your forgiveness and invite you to please join me at Mc Crady's for an early dinner and a matinée performance at the Charleston New Theatre on Meeting Street.

No hurry. But please choose a performance date from the published schedule and let me know your preference.

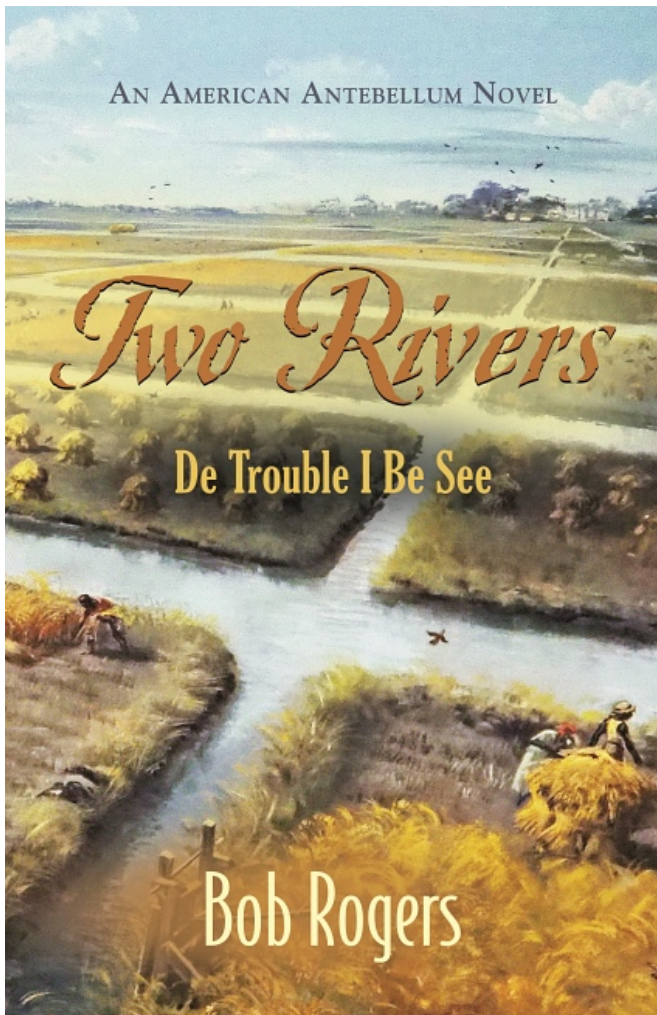
It will be my great pleasure to fetch you at your Elizabeth Street home at an hour appointed by you.

Until then, I remain your humble and devoted servant.

James Philip Boshier,

Esquire of the South Carolina Railroad Company





A half-dozen years before Abe Lincoln's election, comes another collision between European immigrants and African abductees that does not end well. "De troubles Posey sees" in Two Rivers reminds one of Southern Gothic storytelling.

Two Rivers: De Trouble I Be See

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