

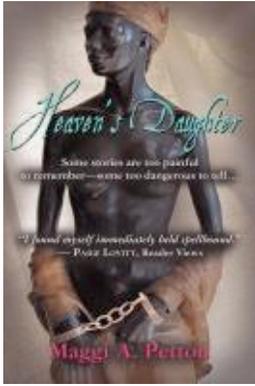
Heaven's Daughter

Some stories are too painful
to remember—some too dangerous to tell...

"I found myself immediately held spellbound."

— PAIGE LOVITT, Reader Views

Maggi A. Petton



An unlikely trio unites during the Civil War. Noni, ripped from Africa, lives an unimaginable life of slavery in the American South. When her daughter, Efurū, is threatened, they run away, meeting Abby, a kidnapped white girl. Efurū and Abby become fast friends. They grow, struggling with family, prejudice and dysfunction, as their relationship changes through tragedy, betrayal and love. Heaven's Daughter invites us to examine how we work to deceive ourselves...and the consequences.

Heaven's Daughter

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Second Edition

PART ONE

Home

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

Maya Angelou

Chapter One

Efuru

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The eleven year-old pushed herself up slowly, never taking her eyes from her mother's face, bracing herself for what she would see when she turned—bloodhounds, white men with rifles, ropes and whips. Her throat clamped shut. Her breathing

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

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

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

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

“C’mon over. We ain’t gonna hurt you,” Efuru said.

The frightened girl took a few halting steps toward them.

“No,” Noni said. “No.”

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

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

“She’s white,” Noni said, as if that were the end of the matter.

“She’s just a girl like me,” Efuru said. She reached down and lifted the girl’s hand into her own. “She’s just a lost girl,” Efuru said so softly that only the girl could hear her. “Ain’t you?”

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

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

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

Efurú reached into the sack on the ground and pulled out some jerky and a piece of bread. "Come on and sit." She reached again for the girl's hand and pulled her down next to the fire. "You look hungry."

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

"I'm Efurú, and this here is—"

"Stop!" Noni practically shouted. "Don't be tellin' dat girl our names. You don't know she ain't gonna find her way and tell folks 'bout us. You wan' get caught?"

Efurú looked from her mother back to the girl. "What's your name?"

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

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

Noni looked from Efurú to the stranger. Her eyes narrowed. "I don't like it. Tomorrow she gotta go. We can't be draggin' no white girl along to--" she stopped. Efurú knew what she was thinking. The former slaves helping them on their journey would not take kindly to them travelling with a white girl.

"Just tonight, Mama." Already Efurú was determined that this girl would be with them as long as she needed to be.

Chapter Two

Noni

“Grandmother! Grandmother! Where are you?” Noni called. “Why can’t I find you?”

Noni ran through the jungle. The lion was gaining on her. She could almost feel the hot breath against her back. Faster and faster she ran. “Grandmother!” she cried. “Help me!”

She turned and saw the lion just as it leaped into the air to pounce on her, but when the paws hit her chest she flew backward and landed in her grandmother’s arms. Bisa ordered the lion away. He turned obediently and walked back into the jungle.

Bisa lifted Noni as if she were a child again. Then, like magic, they ascended high above the jungle, flying, floating toward home. Somehow Noni could see everything from the safety of her grandmother’s arms. One moment she gazed into her grandmother’s face, the next she saw a pond below them that she knew was close to their village. Gazelles and giraffe, water buffalo and wart hogs all congregated at the watering hole. The landscape was lush, the animals familiar. Marabou stork and tawny eagles perched on and around the lake.

Bisa floated them down toward the water, circling around and around above the reflecting pool until Noni felt healed from the trauma with the lion. Noni saw their reflections in the water. Her grandmother’s arms were wrapped firmly around her. The bright colors of their clothes were almost blinding against the backdrop of white clouds.

When they reached the far side of the pond Bisa landed gently on the shore. Noni turned, throwing her arms around her beloved grandmother. Bisa took Noni’s face in her hands. Though she did not speak, Noni heard her as though she did. I am with you, Noni.

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Then Bisa smiled and motioned for Noni to look again at her reflection in the water. Noni bent, but when she looked into the still surface of the water, she saw the white girl's face on her own black body.

When Noni woke, Efuru and the white girl were wrapped in each others' arms. She understood the dream and what it meant. Whatever it was that had happened to the girl didn't matter. She was a girl who, for whatever reason, found herself alone in the woods without her family.

Noni gently woke them.

"Hab a little somethin' to eat," she said and handed them each a piece of bread. "Den we best get movin'."

Efuru looked at her mother with worry.

"No need to be lookin' at me like dat. De girl can stay if she want to."

Efuru threw her arms around her mother's neck. "I love you, Mama."

"C'mere, child," Noni said to the white girl.

The child got up and went to where Noni sat on a log. Noni opened up a tin of medicine, scooped some out onto her finger and dabbed it onto the girl's bloody knees.

"You gotta name, child?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," she answered. "It's Abby."

"Abby." Noni looked at her. "Look like you can stay wid us if'n you want to."

Abby smiled. She looked over at Efuru whose face exploded into a huge grin.

"Abby," Efuru finally said, then repeated the name softly, like a prayer, "Abby." Then she nodded as if the name itself gave sense and meaning to her life.

Noni curled her finger and beckoned Efuru over for an application of medicine. Without a thought, the child dropped

the shift off her shoulders, held it at her waist, and exposed her brands and stripes for treatment.

Abby's gasp startled them. They both turned to look at her. She had clamped her hands over her mouth. Her eyes held an expression of horror and confusion.

Noni and Efuru were surprised by the girl's reaction. After all, they were used to such sights. Almost every person they knew was striped and branded. It was their way of life.

An awkward silence ensued, broken, at last, by Abby.

"What happened to you?" Tracks lined Abby's dirty cheeks as tears dripped down her face.

It was Noni who answered. "You never seen a slave who been whipped or branded?"

"I," she started, "I never met a slave before."

Noni and Efuru looked at each other, their understanding slow to come. "How?" Noni asked. "How you live down here and don't know no slaves?"

"I don't live anywhere near here. I don't even know where here is."

Noni sighed. "We best start movin'. Let me put some medicine on you, Efuru." She gently dabbed medicine onto her daughter's infected brand. "Looks like we got plenty to learn 'bout each other," she said as she dropped the ointment into her sack. "Come on, girls." She smiled and shook her head as she began walking. "Miss Abby, look like you better tell us yer story."

Chapter Three

Abigail

Abby wasn't at all certain where or how to begin her story; in fact, remembering was difficult. In the many weeks she'd been gone from home, she'd closed herself off to thinking about her life prior to the events that led to her being alone in the woods so far from home.

"I ... I ..." Her face scrunched in confusion as she struggled to reach the story buried within her.

She stopped walking. It was as if the effort to recall what happened prevented her walking and thinking at the same time. Her insides began to churn and her breaths came in short bursts. She reached up and grabbed a handful of her hair.

Efuru and Noni stopped and looked back at her. Abby felt foolish and was about to say so when Efuru walked back to her and took her hand. The effect was instantaneous. Abby felt herself begin to calm. Her breath slowed again. Grateful for the touch, she smiled at Efuru and started walking again.

"How old are you?" Efuru asked.

"Ten," she said, then added, "Wait, I was going to be eleven just before ..." She forced herself to keep walking, as the memory of what happened sifted through to her consciousness.

Efuru squeezed her hand. "We're the same age!" she said. "I knew it. I'm eleven, too!" Efuru beamed at Abby and the grin was infectious. Abby found herself grinning back. Her breath returned to her. For the first time in many weeks, she felt something other than fear and sadness.

"Of course," Efuru continued, "I think I'm going to be twelve pretty soon. Ain't that right, Mama?"

"I 'spect so," Noni said. "Seem like we be comin' up to dat time."

"Where you from?" Efuru asked Abby.

“Pennsylvania.”

“Is that far?”

Abby nodded. “Seems like we were walking forever. I’m pretty sure we walked through several states.” She paused and tried to think about what states they’d passed through.

“Who you mean by ‘we’?” Noni asked.

“Nate,” Abby said. She looked up and saw the worry in Noni’s eyes. “Nate.” Abby closed her eyes, took a big breath, and said, “He had a knife, and he took me. He took me from my home and made me go with him in the woods.”

Noni had been walking in front of the girls, but she stopped and waited for them to catch up to her. She took Abby’s other hand, and they walked quietly for a bit.

“He was a Rebel soldier. My pa and I saw him in the woods by our house just a day or two before he came back to take me.”

“When dat happen, Miss Abby? Kin you ‘member?” asked Noni.

Abby’s brow knit together as she tried to remember how much time had passed since her kidnapping.

“Just a few days before my birthday, I think. So it must have been early July, but I don’t know exactly when. I know the fighting started at Gettysburg. My pa wouldn’t let me climb trees in the woods anymore once the Rebels came through.”

Efuru asked. “What happened after the man, Nate, took you?”

“We were just runnin’ and hidin’ ever since.”

“Where he takin’ you?” Noni asked. “He say?”

“All he kept sayin’ was he needed me to help him get home. He was afraid they’d catch him for runnin’ away from the war. So he wanted it to look like we were a father and daughter just passing through.”

“Where was you headed?” Noni asked.

heaven's daughter

“He wouldn’t tell me. I think he was afraid that if I knew where we were going I’d tell someone later, and they’d come find him.”

Noni stopped walking. She pulled Abby to a halt. “Abby,” she said and looked into the girl’s eyes with great concern, “he hurt you?”

Maybe it was Noni’s look or her tone in the way she asked the question; maybe it was just feeling safe for the first time since she’d been away from home, but Abby realized that Nate never laid a hand on her except when he first took her from her home. She shook her head and swallowed the lump that suddenly formed in her throat.

“Das good, den. Das good,” Noni said.

“How you git away from that Nate feller?” Efuru wanted to know.

Abby thought back on the events of the past few days. Unexpected feelings flowed through her. She didn’t really understand how she could feel so badly about running away from Nate, but she did. She intended to tell Efuru and Noni about how she escaped, but instead she found herself thinking about the last night she and Nate spent together.

Just before they entered the Uwharrie forest, Abby and Nate sneaked into a barn, stole some eggs and Nate grabbed a chicken. He quickly twisted its neck, breaking it, and shoved it into his bag.

As evening fell, he said, “This here’s a good spot.” He looked around for rocks to ring a small fire. Abby found small pieces of dried wood to burn. “Pluck off them feathers, and we’ll have a chicken feast tonight,” he said and handed the bird to Abby. While she plucked, he whittled a stick to a sharp point. When the bird was clean, he sliced it down the middle, gutted it and pushed the pointed stick through the bird. As soon as it was dark enough that the smoke would not be seen, he started a fire

and placed the stick on two forked branches, one on either side of the fire. He turned the bird every now and again.

In spite of herself, Abby found her stomach growling and mouth watering by the time the chicken was cooked. Her anticipation of the food seemed to give her some energy.

“How much longer?” she asked.

“Ten, maybe fifteen minutes or so, I ‘spect.”

“No. I mean how much longer until I can go home?”

He smiled at her. “Oh.” He reached out to turn the chicken again, then scratched his bearded face. “Well, we’re almost through North Carolina. So we still got to get through the south one. After that,” he paused, “shouldn’t be too long before we get to where we need to be.” He stared at the fire. “Maybe another week if we can keep up our speed and don’t run into any trouble.” Then he added, “You know I can’t tell you where we’re goin’. Can’t take no more chances.”

Abby knew she slowed him down, but more than once she knew she had saved him by pretending she was his daughter; like the time they had fallen asleep just inside the woods on the edge of a farmer’s tobacco field. They were awakened by the farmer and his dog. The farmer had a shotgun aimed at Nate. Abby was sleeping beneath a blanket.

“You a deserter?” the farmer asked.

“No sir.” Nate sat up. “Me an’ my little girl just headin’ to some relatives.”

The farmer eyed him suspiciously. Nate still kept Abby tied to him by a length of rope, but she was hidden beneath the blanket. He pulled it down from over her head, making sure to keep the rope covered.

The farmer’s face softened, and he lowered his shotgun. “All right, then. These parts get a fair amount of deserters. I turn ‘em all over to the authorities if I catch ‘em.” He invited them home for a meal, but Nate declined, giving the excuse that they’d gotten a little lost and needed to get on their way.

heaven's daughter

As the chicken roasted on the spit, Abby eyed the meat hungrily. Their rations the past few weeks were meager and mostly Abby found them inedible. When the chicken was cooked, they ate every morsel of it. It didn't matter that it was a laying hen, probably wouldn't even have mattered if it was a rooster, they enjoyed that chicken as if it were the best, most expensive meal in the world and fell into a satisfied sleep.

"Wake up, girl!" Nate whispered frantically.

Abby's eyes flew open. She heard the baying of hounds and saw the fear on Nate's face.

"I got to see where they are and how many. I can't get caught." His face was filled with anxiety. "Not now. Not now we're so close." He was untying her. "Gotta trust you. No choice."

Abby looked at the end of the frayed rope as it fell from her wrists. She looked at him questioningly.

"Stay hid," he ordered. "I'll be back soon. I gotta see who's out there--how many and where they are. Don't try to go anywhere, hear?"

Abby nodded. Nate headed in the direction of the barking dogs and disappeared. No sooner had he slipped through the trees than Abby was on her feet, running as fast as she could through the forest.

It wasn't long before she heard him calling her. "Abby! Abby! Where are you?"

As soon as she heard Nate's voice, heard him running in her direction, she stopped and looked desperately around her. Trees. Nothing but trees everywhere.

Not too far from her was a huge boulder, nearly as tall as she was. It sat close to a tree with good foliage. She didn't stop to think about anything. In a sprint, she flew to the rock, climbed to the top of it and jumped up to grab the lowest branch of the tree. In seconds she was halfway up, completely concealed by

the leaves and lower branches. Nate appeared a few moments later.

He was out of breath and stopped to try to catch it. "Abby," he called quietly once he regained his ability to speak. "Please," he begged. "Please, no." Nate was near the boulder, almost directly under her. She opened her mouth wide to help silence her breath.

Nate fell to his knees and buried his head in his hands. He wept openly, sobbing until he had no tears left to cry. Abby watched from her hiding place, never making a sound. Eventually Nate stood, and she watched as he made his way back to the place from where he had just come.

She almost called out to him, almost dropped down out of the tree to run after him. She felt so badly about making him cry. Almost.

Abby did not share her feelings of remorse about Nate with Noni and Efuru, only the facts of her escape. Nevertheless, she could not shake the image of his sagging shoulders as he gave up looking for her and walked away. She would never forget the sound of his cry nor watching the tear-stained boulder slowly dry after he was gone.

"But that was two days ago," Efuru said. "You been lost in the woods for two days?"

"First night was hard," Abby said, "but I managed to climb into a tree and sleep a little. I thought I'd be out of the forest the next day. Nate and I were only in this forest for about half of a day."

"Bet you was scared," Efuru said.

Abby nodded. "I just kept telling myself I was on my way home."

"I'm going home," she whispered to herself. Then a little louder, to bolster her confidence, "I'm going home."

heaven's daughter

The colors in the wood began to deepen as the sun set on her first evening alone. Clouds hovering overhead transformed from white to gold, then pink to orange. As the sky purpled and the moisture in the air began to cool, she shivered and wondered how she would get through the night. Darkness pulled itself into the forest like a monster's shadow. Nighttime sounds screamed in Abby's ears, turning her this way and that until she thought she would go mad.

Her panic increased as the comforting light of day receded. Her vision blurred with tears she couldn't keep from filling her eyes.

The floor, she finally thought in a single, sharp moment of clarity. The forest floor is not safe. So she stopped and looked up and around her before the last slivers of light disappeared altogether. She found what she was looking for and climbed the only tree with branches low enough for her to manage. Once she was off the ground, her heart slowed, the tears subsided, and she made her way up to where two thick branches sprouted off the main trunk. Settling against the trunk, she managed to wedge herself within the arms in such a way that if she fell asleep, she would not tumble out of the tree.

Her night was restless, filled with tears and prayers. She shivered. Her stomach growled with hunger. Nate had the sack with the food and supplies. Doubts about her decision plagued her throughout the night. Perhaps she should have stayed with Nate. At least she would not be alone in the woods, hungry and scared. All these thoughts swirled through her mind as she begged for morning to come. Finally, she closed her ears to the sounds of the nocturnal creatures and willed herself to sleep. In the hours before dawn, she fell into a fitful slumber.

Cradled in the arms of the great old oak, Abby did not wake until the sunlight fell through the dancing leaves and touched her face. Though somewhat refreshed, she was ravenous. Looking around, she spotted a squirrel munching contentedly on

maggi a petton

an acorn in a neighboring tree and realized she was surrounded by the fruit of the oak. She scrambled carefully out onto one of the branches and managed to collect a handful of acorns. Tossing them onto the ground, she climbed down the tree, placed the nuts on a rock, and smashed them open with another rock. The meat was bitter but satisfied her hunger.

Abby stood and looked into the sky. Remembering how the shadows fell the night before, she calculated a northerly direction and started walking. By late afternoon, she was distressed to still be in the woods. She did not want to spend another night alone in the forest; hungry, frightened and cold.

“Please, God, help me get out of here,” she prayed. She knelt at the side of a small creek and cupped her hands to drink. She didn’t know if following the creek would get her to civilization sooner but decided that it had to be flowing south. Nate followed any source of water in the direction of flow, so it only made sense that if she did the opposite, she’d likely be moving closer to home.

Aside from acorns and water, Abby found little to eat her second day alone in the dense forest. As evening neared, she started to panic again. She was dirty. Her hair was greasy. Bugs feasted on her, and she was covered in bites. The acorns unsettled her stomach, and she vomited until she was empty. When she was done retching, she stood on shaky legs and knew that she had to keep moving away from the smell of her sickness.

Evening was closing in on her. She’d been so certain she would be out of the forest by the end of the day. She and Nate had been in this forest for less than a day when she had escaped, but she had no way of knowing that they had entered the Uwharrie forest from the east. If she continued north, it would take her days to reach the end of the dense trees.

I just need to get out of these trees, she thought to herself, then I can find a town or people to help me get home.

heaven's daughter

Once again night plunged her into a sea of darkness. She struggled for breath as shadowy fingers wrapped around her chest, making it difficult to breathe. Trees, last night her refuge, transformed into monsters and lowered menacing branches to scratch at her face. She bolted from their vicious claws, sobbing as she ran, while thorns of bushes grabbed at her clothing and pulled at her like hungry wolves. Her only thought was to get out of the woods. That thought drove her wildly, groping in the dark. When her foot caught on a tree root and sent her flying to the ground, she lay trying to catch her breath, and wept onto the pine needles until she was spent. Finally, she got up. Her arms and legs were covered in blood and dirt. Her face was stained with tears and dirt, but she felt calmer.

I'll just keep walking, she thought. And, like a mantra, she moved one foot and then the other. She ignored the pain in her body and the fear in her soul.

“I stopped when I saw a tiny light,” Abby said. “As I came closer to it I heard someone singing.”

Efuru beamed. “My mama?”

Abby smiled and nodded. “I was still scared. I couldn't understand the words.” Abby paused, remembering the sound of Noni's voice in the dark. “But the song was so sweet....” She looked up at Noni. “And I saw how you were holding Efuru, and I thought you must be good, and--”

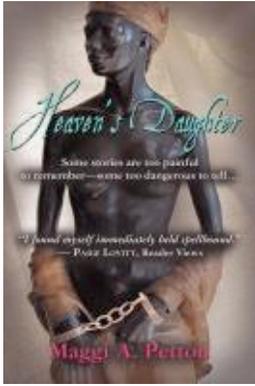
“And that's when Noni saw you, and you came into our camp.” Efuru finished the story.

Abby nodded, looking at Noni again, and said, “Thank you for not sending me away.”

“Child,” Noni said. “You 'n me, we got a whole lot in common.”

“My mama was kidnapped, too. Huh, Mama?”

“Mmmmm.” Noni nodded.



An unlikely trio unites during the Civil War. Noni, ripped from Africa, lives an unimaginable life of slavery in the American South. When her daughter, Efuru, is threatened, they run away, meeting Abby, a kidnapped white girl. Efuru and Abby become fast friends. They grow, struggling with family, prejudice and dysfunction, as their relationship changes through tragedy, betrayal and love. Heaven's Daughter invites us to examine how we work to deceive ourselves...and the consequences.

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