

Chapter 1

Lucy pushes herself up from their bed an hour earlier than usual, quiet and purposeful. Off to start the cooking fire, Israel thinks, fully awake now, but he says nothing. The sleeping room of the small cabin borders on pitch-dark, with only a hint of the moon's light coming from a single small window. He intended to be first up this morning, and gone before the inevitable rehash of last night's quarrel and resulting standoff, but that's no longer an option. The Bottom is calm the way only early morning brings, before the rooster's crow, and Israel's mind races, thinking about going into town, into Colfax. Yesterday he heard from a neighbor sharecropping the next plot that the last steamship from New Orleans had come and gone, with no Federal troops on board. The new officeholders arriving today would need local protection from the colored men of Colfax.

Lucy pauses to smooth the quilt over their boys, still asleep on their shared moss-filled mattress, and then slowly pads her way toward the front of the cabin. Her step is heavy with

the additional weight of the new baby she carries inside her, a soft, rhythmic waddle as her wide feet slide across the planked floor, oddly reassuring. Israel assumes she knows he is awake. Lucy always recognizes his moods and his habits, and he follows her unspoken signal and gets up too, drawing his cotton shirt and pants on over his sleeping union suit, and gathers up his worn leather boots from the corner. He stops at another bed in the room to shake two of the boys awake. He lets the younger children sleep.

‘David, Noby, get on up, you covering my chores today,’ Israel whispers.

Since he has missed his early getaway, he heads out to the shed in the darkness to relieve the cow of her morning’s milk. By the time he enters the cooking room of the cabin with a half-filled pail, the fire is lit and starting to blaze up in the fireplace, and Lucy has already pulled on her faded house-dress and wrapped her hair in a tight kerchief. She is packing up cold foods for him to carry away in a bucket, an acknowledgment that she has lost the argument. Deep circles under her eyes give away her exhaustion.

‘Pone, tack, and taters,’ she says. ‘Three days’ worth.’

‘More than enough,’ Israel replies. ‘Might be home tonight.’ He pulls the straight-back chair to the old traveling trunk that serves as their eating table and begins to eat the biscuit and fried chicken’s egg Lucy lays out for him. ‘Soon’s the Federals come, I hightail it back, least in time to preach Sunday’s sermon. You’ll see.’

‘Can’t nothing but grief come from you showing yourself like this.’

‘We been over this, Lucy. I’m going.’ Absently, with his thumb, Israel rubs the length of an old scar like a question mark split deep along his cheek and down to his jaw, lighter in color and raised like a welt.

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‘We free and movin’ up, Israel, and you throwing away our work of the last seven years.’ She whispers, but her tone is urgent. ‘We come from nothing, less than nothing, and now we owns our own wagon, and the cow. We got the Reconstruction, and laws be on our side. Colored politicians sitting side by side with white down in New Orleans, and our colored men up here vote different-thinking men in to Colfax, fair and square too. We might could own this land one day if we keeps low, but not if you go down to the courthouse and rub the white man’s nose into the politics. Stay home. This not like you.’

Israel doesn’t look forward to confrontation, either at the courthouse or in his own home. Against his better judgment, he steps into the carryover of last night’s row.

‘Why the colored man risk everything to vote if the Republicans we vote in just be turned back when the time come to take office? That’s all we trying to do. Get the old guard in Colfax to stand down long enough for the new appointees to catch hold.’

‘This not like you,’ Lucy says again. ‘Mixing in white man’s business. We done fine by keeping out the gaze of white. Let the new sheriff handle it.’

‘We got a sheriff coming in today, elected, but they got a sheriff too, don’t want to give up his place. Colored men meeting at the courthouse ’cause we got a job to do till the Federals come. White business and colored business not so separate no more.’

David and Noby shuffle barefoot into the cooking room, still sleepy-eyed, dressed in the shabby mismatch of their everyday homespun shirt and trousers. David is two years older and over a head taller than his younger brother, rail-thin legs too long for an eleven-year-old boy. His skin is pale and heavily freckled, and the light sandy hair falling into his

face without curl or nap makes it seem he has been accidentally left with the wrong brown-hued family. His fierce gray eyes, so light as to be mistaken sometimes for blue or green, scrutinize and judge everything around him, and never seem to leave Israel's face, as if searching for clues. Noby, at nine, is somewhere between the caramel color of his mother and the walnut tinge of Israel, and although it is difficult to know when the growth spurts will start and stop, he seems to be a little replica of his father, brooding brown eyes, high forehead, nappy-headed, sturdy of body.

The boys approach cautiously, waiting in the morning chill to see which way the household wind is blowing. Not once last night or this morning have they heard their parents' voices rise above a regular speaking tone, but there is a tautness in the air of unresolved difference. Their mother almost never answers back against the wishes of their father, and they have seldom heard so many words at once from their father unless it is Sunday and he is delivering a sermon. Despite the tension, David separates himself from Noby and steps forward.

'Papa, if you go to town, can I come too?' he asks.

Finished, Israel pushes his tin plate aside and jams his hat on his head. 'Noby might's well come with me,' he says.

'Why take the boys?' Lucy asks.

'This a man's job, a *citizen's* job,' Israel pronounces carefully. 'Noby need to understand.'

'Then take David.' Lucy moves quickly toward the two boys and throws her fleshy arm around David's shoulder. 'David the oldest.'

'David need to stay and cover the chores,' says Israel. He motions to Noby, and when the smaller boy comes to stand near his side, Israel touches him lightly at the neck to shepherd him outside. David's pale face flushes deep red, and he

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flinches as if struck, but Israel is already on the move away from the table.

‘That’s settled,’ Israel says, satisfied. ‘We be gone, then.’

Lucy keeps her arm around David, but he shakes her off and trails behind Israel and Noby for a few steps as they move toward the front door of the cabin.

‘All right,’ Lucy says. ‘We watch over things here till you home again.’ Suddenly, she seeks out the straight-back chair at the table and sits down hard, as if her wind has given out.

‘You see us soon,’ Israel says. He lifts both his and Noby’s jacket from the wall hook, and the two of them head off down the twisting, mud-crusted road on foot.

David shadows his father and his brother as far as the edge of the yard in front of the cabin, near the vegetable patch, staring at their backs until they are obscured from view by the thicket of pine trees to the north. Neither father nor son looks back.

The steely sky with its dark-tinged clouds feels heavy, and for Israel it is almost as if he carries an extra burden, like a woman balancing a heavy wash basket on her head as she walks. The sun struggles to punch through, and intermittently succeeds, but Israel and Noby get caught in several brief showers, only enough wetness to damp down the dust and muddy the cow and horse trails. In long-leaf Pine Hills country, they pass a small cluster of naked cypress trees, the spindly, brittle branches seemingly dead, used up, bare and sheathed in gray, with a few curled brown leaves that still refuse to drop. Spanish moss hangs from the gray trees like rotting flesh from a skeleton, ghostlike.

‘Spring coming,’ Israel tells Noby. ‘Them Resurrection trees gonna get green again soon.’

* * *

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They walk in silence, and when they come to Red River, Israel and Noby follow the bank, paralleling the course of the water through the bottomlands on their way to Colfax. A large brown heron begins flight at the river's edge, outstretched wings so heavy they bat the water several times before the bird gains the air, creating brief ripples before settling. Noby runs to the bank, picks up a rock, and skips it along the river's surface.

Some of the good cropland they pass remains fallow, not planted out since the last flood, but of the land in cultivation, most is in cotton and corn, the rest in sugarcane. It is unusual to head into the village for a purpose other than to bring back supplies from the general store. Colfax isn't such a far distance from The Bottom, but Israel makes the journey to town only two or maybe three times a year, a few more if you count the visiting trips to nearby Smithfield Quarter.

'How long to Easter, Papa?' asks Noby.

'Go look at that pecan tree, tell me what you see.'

Noby races to a twenty-foot tree in the direction of the river, studies it, and runs back to where Israel waits. 'The tree got buds, and little leaves starting.'

'How big the leaves?'

'Size of my thumbnail.'

'Spring don't come to Louisiana till the pecan trees leaf out, leaves at least big as that quarter dollar we got buried in the backyard,' replies Israel. 'Easter come about the same time. We got almost three weeks till it safe to plant new in the garden, otherwise late frost likely come and steal up all our labor.'

They make good time, less than ninety minutes through the woods on the walk from The Bottom, past Calhoun's Sugarhouse and into Colfax's center. They hurry to the hub of the small town, the courthouse, a dusty-red wood and brick

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structure that squats on its designated patch of land, blocking the view of the Red River.

Israel and Noby arrive unobserved and slip to the rear of a clutch of two dozen or so colored men standing around in front of the courthouse doors. Noby doesn't recognize many of the men, particularly the handful of whites at the front doing most of the talking, but Isaac McCullen is well known around Colfax, and stands toe-to-toe with one of the white men.

The large colored man takes off his trademark slouch hat, a weather-beaten wreck of a fedora that at one time must have been sleek and velvety brown but now is faded blotchy and dull. A small but showy blue-gray heron feather is tucked securely into the wide band above the brim, and the man waves the hat in an arc above the ground with a flourish. 'My name be Isaac McCullen, but just call me McCully,' he says to the sheriff. 'Only problem we got is getting in, but someone small slip right through that side window.'

McCully turns to the waiting men, scrutinizing them like a bloodhound on the scent. Noby Smith freezes in the over-size man's critical gaze. His hand-me-down shirt, torn through at the elbows and threadbare after so many seasons of use, barely keeps out the early-spring dampness. There is only one other boy among the townspeople gathered, smaller and shorter than Noby.

'Sheriff Nash carry the key, but that don't mean we stuck outside,' McCully says.

'Ex-sheriff Nash,' says the white man. 'I'm sheriff of Colfax now.'

Most of the men nod in agreement, but some shake their heads, resisting the notion of breaking any parts of the law even if the new replacement sheriff, white and seemingly in

charge, stands in front of them encouraging them to do just that.

Noby takes notice of everything around him, as his father has taught him to do when navigating the woods. He observes the beginnings of the white sheriff's impatience, the crowd's shifting mood, Mr McCullen's confidence, his father's scowl, the nervousness of the new men in town declaring themselves friends of Colfax coloreds, the long white-pine crates of guns that the strangers brought with them into the parish on the steamboat this morning, stacked like coffins in front of the locked double doors of the Colfax courthouse.

Noby swallows hard and steps away from his father. 'I can do it, Mr McCullen, sir,' he says. Noby is uncertain whether to try to look smaller than his nine years, so they will believe he can fit through the half-open courthouse window; or bigger, so they think he is up to the task.

'Go on, then, boy,' says the sheriff. 'Sooner we get inside, sooner we establish Republican rule and stand up for our rights.' He has a tarnished silver star on the lapel of his jacket and a small pistol firmly seated in a worn leather holster at his hip, sheriff for only a few hours. He waves a folded piece of paper he says is from the governor of Louisiana.

Noby stands still, looks back to his father and Mr McCullen. Israel doesn't make eye contact, with Noby or anyone else, staring down at the ground as if there is a secret hidden in the dirt at his feet. Israel Smith is not a man to act in haste, especially with whites around. Several long moments pass.

'A good choice,' McCully says into the awkward silence. Out of respect, he waits for Israel to give a sign. The two colored men stand with Noby between them.

Outside of the protection of his own home, Israel Smith has an odd, almost hypnotic way of pausing before he speaks,

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signaling his desire to make a pronouncement, as if asking permission. He loosens and tightens the muscles around his lips, building up the required momentum for the thought to be delivered, giving the impression that the journey from thought to speech is dangerous, weighed down by the boundless possibilities of ominous and unforeseen penalties. But Israel doesn't speak. He only catches Noby's eye, briefly, and then nods, a slight tilt of the head. The crowd waits to see if there is more.

Israel lets his gaze fall downward, and Noby knows his father has resigned himself to the outcome. Noby has given him no option, no real decision to make. Israel Smith would have to go against the wishes of a white man to speak his true mind. His father, like a possum. Laying low in public, going limp in the face of danger.

Noby sprints toward the window, and McCully follows behind to the side of the courthouse at a measured pace. Effortlessly, the thickset man lifts the boy up on his shoulders until Noby's chin is even with the middle of the tiny window. Noby snugs the callused soles of his bare feet on Mr McCullen's shoulders and finds his center of balance. He feels for the reassuring stiffness of the hidden reading primer tucked securely in his waistband before reaching out to establish a toehold on the high windowsill above.

Noby's palm rests on McCully's coarse hair, just the briefest moment of contact. The big man's fiercely tight hair twists are slightly damp from scalp sweat, giving off the flat scent of yesterday's farm chores and dotted with as much gray as black. Not like Israel's hair, nappy but inky black all the way through, with a softness that yields easily under Noby's fingers.

The men watch the surety of Noby's movements, all eyes on him. Adrenaline pushes Noby forward, but another, more

cautious part of him registers the colored men he doesn't know, has never seen. Not to mention the handful of too cordial, unfamiliar white men, as suspect as old, gamy pork.

Noby anchors his bare foot on the ledge, wiggles it through the opening, and contorts his body to follow. He drops down inside the courthouse, out of his father's sight. Later, for his refusal to seek permission first, will come the strap or extra chores, maybe both, Noby's refusal to cry, his mother sneaking him a biscuit or a cold bit of ham if there is any left.

Noby makes his way to a room dominated by a high pinewood counter, with oversize bound books squeezed so tightly along the walls they look like cut logs stacked on end. He is tempted to linger in a place that holds so many books, as if being in such close proximity will help him understand the wonder of the words they contain. One day, he tells himself, he will be able to read these books. Already he can write the year, tracing it in the dirt with a stick, following the swirls and shapes of each of the four parts to form 1-8-7-3, 1873. Already he can write his own name, first and last, Noby Smith. Hansom Brisco, his godfather and owner of the land his father sharecrops, is teaching him how to read and write in the woods, wrapping his big, blistered farmer's hands around Noby's small, eager ones, first guiding the stick and then expecting him to repeat the motion on his own, smiling at the boy's keenness to learn, calling him a natural. Already Noby has mastered some of the sentences in the primer tucked into his waistband. *This is a fat cat on a mat.*

Noby follows the darkened hall past several rooms, some with long pine or oak tables and rows of mismatched chairs, stacked and pushed to the side. The air inside the courthouse smells musty with what Noby assumes is the potent combination of paper and power. He continues around toward the front of the building, where the double doors stand locked,

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but when he tries to turn one of the knobs from the inside, the door won't open.

'Twist the bolt, boy,' a voice calls from outside.

Noby twists and turns metal in random order until the doorknob spins, and then he opens the double doors to both the men and the stacked gun crates outside.

They are in.

The building seems bigger inside than it looked from outside. Israel enters the wide double doors along with the others, unsure what they will do next. He makes sure Noby is safe, watching from the corner of his eye as his son settles himself in a corner. Noby sits small, curling himself into invisibility while the men debate what to do now that they have possession of the courthouse. Though Israel can see Lucy in the boy, her quietness, her reserve, her competence even under crisis, he sees himself in larger measure, not only physically but in the occasional mirrored image of his own moodiness staring back at him, and the impending menace of the red rages. Noby is so obviously from his seed, and David is so obviously not. Noby, his stolen child. Stolen from slavery. Stolen from death. The first of his seed to live with him in freedom.

The sublime blessing of freedom is exacting its price, is demanding his participation here today, and he wants his son to see his bravery. Lucy and Israel came together from Alabama into Louisiana during the War Between the States, during an era when bravery wasn't much of an option. They didn't start out as a couple but came together at the same time, brought in by the same master. Lucy was newly pregnant with David then, but she didn't tell anyone until much later. Israel and Lucy's pairing made sense. Her man was left behind, as were Israel's woman and the children they had

together who hadn't already been sold away. The plantation where they lived and worked was put up for sale along with everyone on it, and the slaves went out in all directions, to other parts of Alabama, to North Carolina, to Louisiana, and down deep into Mississippi.

No explanation was given for why they didn't sell Lucy and her man as a pair, but Israel knew he was younger by quite a few years. Maybe the new master thought there was more work left in Israel. Lucy and Israel traveled into central Louisiana by wagon with their new master, a hard, stingy man. By the time they had made the trip and settled into their new surroundings, Lucy and Israel considered themselves together, a pair, making do the best they knew how. They were like-minded enough to be all right with each other.

David was born while most of the white men were away fighting for the Confederacy. Israel thought he was fully prepared to embrace Lucy's child as his own when David came, even though he was the issue of Lucy's other man. But Israel was sickened when he saw the boy-child for the first time; he had felt his insides become a hard knot of disgust and rage. The boy Lucy named David was pale as dried hay, with deep-set eyes an unnatural, grayish color, and wisps of straight, light brown hair on his head. He even smelled different. In between the normal baby smells of milk and spit-up and night soil, Israel thought he sniffed out a thin, sharp odor of ruin, a sullied stink. For Lucy's sake, Israel tried to interest himself in little David, to hold him close, but all he could think about was which white man on the old place had forced himself on Lucy and planted this child. Lucy never apologized or made excuses, and Israel never asked who or what or when. He tried hard to swallow back the revulsion he felt for the boy who grew up to call him Papa, who stared at him with those strange, begging eyes.

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Noby was born two years later, after the domination of the North ushered in the miracle of freedom in Louisiana and swept along with it the promise of a new kind of life. Israel was relieved to see his nappy-headed brown son, although the baby was puny and sickly from the start. Lucy did what she could for Noby, but the boy seemed always to be crying or choking or both. There was no medicine, only what an old black nurse-woman on the place could do with herbs while Lucy and Israel worked the field. More important, there wasn't enough food. Sickly babies didn't have much chance to survive, and Lucy was already heavy with another. The war was all but over, and the land in disarray. White men came back from the front, some in anger, most in defeat, and colored men were on the move too. With the children in tow, Lucy and Israel set out from the hill country down toward Alexandria and got work on one of the Calhoun plantations.

Israel remembers the Sunday in the middle of that sweltering summer when they gave up hope for little Noby, the baby listless for several days already, barely responding. Together, Israel and Lucy laid the child out in the back of a wagon, knowing he wouldn't live another week, maybe not another day.

Israel sat vigil alone with Noby, checking to see if he still drew air, trying to get him to drink a drop or two of water, wiping him down. It was the least he could do for the boy, the first son he and Lucy had made together. Noby was lethargic, his breathing dangerously thin, and Israel rigged a shade blanket over his head to mute the sun. Wrapped in his own waiting and grief, Israel was startled when a colored man on a sorrel bay mare passed.

'What you got in the wagon?' the man asked. He was a working farmer with calm brown eyes, fit and well fed, dressed in dirty overalls and a rough homespun shirt, a little younger than Israel.

‘This my son, taking his last breaths,’ Israel said. His tongue worked against him around strangers, and he had to push at the words to make them come out. ‘We laying him out for the Lord.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ the man asked. He spoke almost like a white man.

Again, Israel tried to judge the man who talked to him from a high perch on his horse, to assess if he posed any danger. ‘Don’t know what he got. He weak-like from the day he born.’

The man dismounted and came closer to the wagon. He lifted the thin burial cloth tucked around the lower part of Noby’s body. ‘Skin and bones,’ he observed.

‘Don’t none of us have too much to eat,’ said Israel. ‘I done lost every son of my flesh before they was ten, from either them or me being sold, and now we got freedom, my boy getting ready to be snatched away before he turn two.’

The man reached out to feel the baby’s forehead, then took one of Noby’s small hands into his own.

Weakly, the tiny baby curled his small fist around the stranger’s finger. The man looked surprised. ‘Can’t eat, you say?’

‘We got lots of mouths to feed. Noby get his share, but there’s not much.’

‘He got any catching disease?’

‘No, sir. None of the rest of the children got this.’

‘You work here on the Calhoun place?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘My name is Hansom Brisco. You let him, this baby gonna die right here. Why not give him a chance? My wife will look after him.’

Israel didn’t understand. ‘Pardon me, Mr Brisco?’

‘Let me take the boy and see if we can help him.’

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‘The Lord ready to take this boy for His own, sir. What you be wanting with him?’

‘Might be nothing wrong but not enough to eat.’ Brisco sounded angry. ‘There’s enough senseless death to last a lifetime around here.’

‘Why my boy?’

‘Why not?’ The anger drained out of Brisco’s voice and was replaced by a bargaining tone. Brisco ran his thick and callused hand, the one Noby didn’t have hold of, slowly across the smooth cheek of his sunbaked face, buying time. ‘Look, there’s nothing to lose. If the boy dies, I bring him back and you bury him, like you planned. If he lives, in a few days or weeks or months, I return him to you healthy. I’m less than half hour’s ride from here.’

‘Don’t seem natural, taking a dying boy from his mama and daddy.’

‘What they call you?’

‘Israel. Israel Smith.’

‘All right, Israel, who take care of the boy tomorrow while you in the field if he don’t oblige and die today? You let me try to save this boy’s life, I’ll pack up food for you and your family, whether he makes it or not, and deliver it to you here tomorrow.’

Israel felt cornered. Hansom Brisco seemed well intentioned, and the rest of the family could use the extra food. They were all hungry. Maybe the man really could save Noby. Israel wanted to believe things like this could happen. ‘You bring back his body?’ he asked.

‘Yes. But I hope to bring back a boy made well.’

They wrapped Noby tighter in the blanket and transferred him from the back of the wagon to a spot Hansom Brisco made in front of him on his horse.

Israel watched the small trail of dust that swirled behind them as Hansom Brisco rode off with his son.

True to his word, Hansom Brisco brought food for the family and came to visit with periodic reports of Noby's good progress. Two months later, he delivered to Israel and Lucy a vigorous baby boy, strong of lungs, with flesh filled out around his ribs.

'He's your son, always be yours, but they belong to all of us,' said Hansom Brisco. 'We can't spare a single one. I be watching this boy, not only for health but for what use he put it to.'

'You give me back my son. I can't never pay you back enough,' Israel said. 'But anything in my power I can ever do for you, just ask and it be done. Anything.'

'Then let's start now,' said Hansom. 'I'd like to be god-father to this child, see him to manhood.'

Israel, grateful for this unexpected smile of fortune, was thankful to comply. Noby Smith had been stolen for the first time from death.

The courthouse smells stale and damp but protects them from the nipping cold of the wind. The men set about the business of organizing themselves, and the newcomers bark out orders to the colored volunteers, breaking them into groups. There are three white officeholders—the wiry sheriff, with deep lines grooved in his forehead from too much time in the sun; a pasty-faced judge with a thin nose and wide belly; and a small, runtish tax collector. The sheriff takes the lead, and the tax collector sets off down a hallway looking for an office, while the judge keeps taking off his black hat and running his hand over his thinning hair before replacing the hat on his head. The three colored men with the newcomers aren't officeholders and have lived in Colfax two or three years, ex-soldiers in the United States Army in the War Between the States.

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Israel is assigned with two others to pry open the wooden crates outside so rifles can be distributed, then joins the rest of the men digging a long trench for a barricade about forty feet in front of the courthouse. Within two hours, the sweat-sheened men have a good start in hollowing out the reddish soil in sections around the courthouse, digging up slimy mud to form a series of trenches that look like a series of narrow, shallow graves. Noby makes himself useful by running water to the men outside and carrying off displaced dirt and mud.

In the early afternoon, they halt to eat, and Israel shares the contents of his dinner bucket with Noby.

‘Time for you to go on home now, son,’ Israel says. He mentions nothing about Noby’s part in the morning break-in. ‘You able to find the way. Follow Red River and then Bayou Darrow.’

‘Can’t I stay with you?’ Noby asks.

‘Too many guns here. This not a place for a boy after all. Tell your mama I might be staying longer than I thought.’

A good number of the men have finished eating and are already back to work, stabbing at the hard ground with pickaxes and shovels. With all the movement, the square has the feel of a disrupted anthill. Noby says goodbye to his father and sets off, alone this time. Retracing the same path in reverse of the morning, Noby pictures his mother in their small cabin, what she is likely to be doing right now. Lucy is always in motion, scrubbing, cooking, cleaning, or sewing. Tending and mending, his father says, and there is fondness to it.

Last Easter, his mother made a new collar for his father’s Sunday shirt and passed the old frayed collar down to David. There are too many sons and daughters in their family for his mother to manage new clothes for everyone, or more than

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a mending and pressing of her own Sunday dress, but she sees to it that each one sports something white.

Lucy Smith is soft-spoken, yielding, always in some stage of creating babies. Unlike this morning, she usually defers, with a calm acceptance demonstrating her unshakeable belief in the inevitability of life. She delivers the most baffling answers to questions that explode in Noby's head all day long. She doesn't shush him or shoo him away, but her answers seldom fit the questions he asks. The serenity of her voice soothes him nonetheless.

'Mind your father,' she says after Noby asks if he can go off to school in Montgomery when he gets older. 'God is great,' she says when asked why possum tastes different than chicken. 'The husband shall rule over the wife' is her response when Noby asks if she tires of wearing the same faded dress four seasons in a row.

Lucy Smith and the other women in *The Bottom* will make sure there is plenty of food Easter Sunday. Noby assumes Mr McCullen and his father and the rest of the colored men of Colfax at the courthouse will be finished standing up for their rights by then.

It is only the third week of March.