

# Where Freedom Rings

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## Chapter One

The hot water covered Kelsa Colver's hands as she scrubbed the dried food from the plate in the sink. She rinsed off the plate and carefully placed it into the dish rack before she looked out the kitchen window at the two boys playing in the yard. The boys ran and laughed and wrestled with each other, lost in their youthful exuberance. Kelsa smiled at their playfulness. She admired them for finding such joy. She hoped her sons would hold onto that bliss for as long as they could, for she knew that their future would be filled with very few moments like this one.

Kelsa turned off the faucet and dried her calloused hands on a dishtowel. She slowly hung the towel on the ring at the bottom of the wooden towel rack. A faint breeze blew across her light-brown face as the late afternoon sun began to set. She knew that soon she would have to start making dinner for the Mallards and she wondered what the lady of the house would demand for their meal. The rich family had expensive tastes. They feasted on the best meats, the finest cheeses, and the priciest wines. The money they spent on food each month could feed dozens of ordinary people. The 130-acre Mallard plantation produced more corn and tobacco than any farm in the county, and Jackson Mallard, the patriarch, enjoyed the excesses of his wealth. He also relished in showing off his prosperity with lavish parties that bolstered his position in the community.

The Mallard fortune allowed the family to buy as many slaves as was needed in 1853 to work the plantation and keep the home pristine. Kelsa was a domestic servant. Her duties included cooking, cleaning, washing dirty clothes and any other task Virginia Mallard assigned to her. She was one of four such indoor laborers and she did her best to please Mrs. Mallard.

Kelsa had been around long enough to know what happens to a servant when their work is judged subpar. The punishment was always swift and merciless.

Kelsa opened the screen door and stepped out onto the back deck. The fleeting daylight signaled the end of the workday for those in the fields, and Kelsa looked forward to seeing her husband Wade and spending what little time they have with their sons Paul and Diamond. She knew that would have to wait, but the anticipation kept her spirits up. She crossed her arms over her chest as the boys raced toward her.

Paul was 12-years-old and he already had the thick, muscular arms and legs that he inherited from his father. He was taller than most boys his age, and his graceful movements defied his unusual size. His younger brother Diamond was physically opposite. The 8-year-old boy had slender legs, a frail upper body, and his soft skin was not as dark as Paul's. His saving grace was his superb speed and balance, traits that allowed him to escape from his big brother in times of need.

The older boy chased his prey as the youths recklessly circled their mother while she stood behind the oval table that was flanked by two smaller end tables. She warned them to slow down, but they ignored her. She tried to grab her younger son, but he slipped past her and looked over his shoulder with a grin. Diamond lost sight of where he was and he ran into one of the end tables, knocking it over. A glass vase on the table shattered as it smashed onto the ground.

The boys stopped dead in their tracks and stared at their mother. Her face became flushed. She quickly reached for a nearby broom as a brawny, white man approached them. "What the hell is going on here?" shouted Bo Torch. The plantation's overseer held a leather whip in his right hand and he tightened his grip on it as he halted in front of Paul. The boy kept

his head down as he trembled. “You know you’re not allowed near the house.” The man’s face reddened and a vein bulged in his forehead. He grabbed Paul and shook him. “Look at me when I’m talking to you boy,” he shouted. Paul looked up at him with tears on his cheeks. Kelsa swept up the mess and averted the man’s eyes.

The whip came down across the back of Paul’s legs with a sickening crack. Kelsa instinctively moved toward her son, but froze when Bo glared at her. The man whacked the child four more times as the boy cried out in pain. Then Bo snarled at Diamond without moving toward him. “You better be more careful if you don’t want the same.” Diamond bit his trembling bottom lip. Bo held his position for a few tense seconds before he turned and marched away from the house. He disappeared in the oncoming darkness before anyone else moved.

Paul ran over to his mother and wrapped his arms around her. She held him tightly as he sobbed. He told her over and over again that he was sorry. She gently rubbed his back and kissed his cheeks as she tried to calm him down. After he stopped breathing heavily, Kelsa carefully examined the back of his legs. Dark bruises had already formed. His broken skin shed blood that ran down to his feet. Kelsa guided him into the kitchen and tended to his wounds.

“It’s not fair, Mama,” said Paul, as he hugged her again. Diamond had followed them into the kitchen and he stood silently by the door. “Why do I always get in trouble? They never do anything to him.” He pointed accusingly at his brother. “He knocked over the table. I didn’t.”

His mother gave him a stern look. “Now Paul, you were both breaking the rules,” she said. Her expression softened. “You know you’re not supposed to play near the house. And you are the older brother. Part of your responsibility is watch out for Diamond.” Paul shook his head and sighed. Kelsa knew he wasn’t satisfied with her answer. She softly patted his behind. “Run

along now, you two. I'll bring some food over after I'm done here." Paul limped out the door without speaking to his brother.

However, Diamond remained where he was. Kelsa glared at him. "What do you think you're doing young man?" she asked. He didn't respond. He remained still with his gaze fixed on his mother's face. They stared at each other in silence. Kelsa extended her arms toward him. He ran to her and hugged her tightly. Kelsa pulled back and lifted his delicate chin with the edge of her fingers. "What do you want to tell me?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Mama," he said softly. He rubbed his right eye. "I didn't mean to get in trouble. We were just fooling around." Kelsa said she understood. Diamond paused and took a deep breath. "Mama, why don't they whip me?" he asked. He pressed his lips together and lowered his eyebrows as if he were trying to solve a puzzle.

Kelsa shook her head. "I don't know, baby," she replied. "Maybe it's because you're so young," she offered. She lightly took hold of his hands.

The child looked down at the floor. "No, that's not it. The other boys get whipped and some of them are younger than I am." He shrugged. "I don't want to get hit, but when I don't, the others make fun of me. They call me a princess and a pet." He took another long breath. "And Paul hates me." His body shook and his grasp on her hands intensified.

"No, baby," replied Kelsa. She slipped her hands out of his tight grip. "Your brother doesn't hate you. He hates the white folks who treat us this way." She kissed his forehead. "And that's not good either. We shouldn't hate anybody. God wants us to love everyone, no matter how hard it is or what they do to us." She looked intently into his eyes. "Do you understand what I mean?" He nodded obediently. She rubbed his right shoulder and the motion caused his shirt to

slide down, revealing the diamond-shaped birthmark at the base of his neck. She fixed his shirt and kissed him again as the swinging door on the other side of the room opened.

Virginia Mallard entered the room wearing her perpetual scowl. The middle-aged woman wore a flowing yellow dress that hung loosely over her thin body. She was taller than Kelsa and her erect posture and stiff gait emitted an air of arrogance. The woman stopped and crossed her arms over her chest. Kelsa quickly shooed her son out the back door. Virginia cleared her throat. “I’ve been told that there has been an accident on the back deck,” she declared. Before Kelsa could respond, the rich woman continued. “I don’t know how many times those scoundrels of yours have been warned. They just don’t seem to listen. Perhaps they should be kept on a leash.”

Kelsa clenched her fists but kept them out of view. “I’m sorry, Miss Virginia. I’ve spoken to the boys and they won’t do it again.” She relaxed her hands and swallowed a lump in her throat. “I cleaned up the mess. It’s as good as new out there now.” She stood perfectly still and watched the lady like a hunter eyeing some prey.

“Not quite good as new,” snarled Virginia as she marched past the servant and looked out the kitchen window. “That vase they broke was an antique worth over \$200.” Kelsa nodded in sympathy, even though she knew that it was a simple glass container that cost a fraction of that amount. “If it were up to me, you people wouldn’t be allowed to have children. They’re nothing but a nuisance.” She paused and glared at Kelsa. “But I guess they serve a purpose.”

“Yes, Miss Virginia, they do,” said Kelsa.

“It gives me great joy that you agree with me,” replied Virginia, with a clear dose of venom in her voice. She opened a cabinet drawer and removed a piece of paper. She handed the paper to Kelsa. “This is what you will be making for the dinner party tonight,” she said. Kelsa

took the paper and read over the list. She didn't know that the Mallards were having guests that night. She hid her disappointment at having to work late. "See to it that everything is ready by seven. There will be 10 guests. Since the other maids will be busy, I've taken the liberty of recruiting some help from the Wilkenses. They are sending a girl over." Kelsa nodded as she watched Virginia stiffly turn and depart the kitchen.

Kelsa removed pots and pans from the cabinets and placed them on the stove. Through the window, she saw the movement of a large man heading toward the house. She smiled and swiftly moved through the back exit. The air was cooler now and she shivered a bit as she ran toward her husband. Wade slowly lifted his arms and hugged her.

The man stood over 6 feet tall, with long, powerful arms, broad shoulders and thick legs. However, he moved like a man much older than his 35 years, and his motions were tentative and calculated. The years of hard labor had robbed his eyes of the spark they had when he was a child. Now they only flickered when he looked at his wife or his sons. Kelsa kissed his right cheek and stood back to look at him. It was then that she noticed the fresh slashes on his right arm. "What happened?" she asked softly.

Wade shrugged. "I was working on a neighbor's farm today," he said slowly. "The boss didn't like it when I asked for a sip of water." He grimaced for a moment, and then he forced a smile. "It's better now." They hugged again and Kelsa was careful not to touch the wound. "I am really hungry though," he said, as they pulled apart. "Can we eat soon?" he asked.

Kelsa shook her head. "I'm sorry, honey," she replied. "Miss Virginia just told me they are having a party tonight. I won't be back at our hut for a while." She patted his chest as he sighed. "I'll try to sneak off for a few minutes and I'll bring something for you and the boys."

“No, don’t do that,” said Wade. He slowly shook his head. “I don’t want you to risk getting into trouble. We can wait.” He leaned toward her and kissed her right cheek. They looked tenderly at each other for a moment before Wade turned and sluggishly walked toward their hut. Kelsa waited until she couldn’t see him anymore, then she dejectedly returned to the kitchen.

More than an hour passed before Kelsa saw an unfamiliar black woman enter the kitchen. The young woman had a razor-thin frame and a short crop of fuzzy hair on her head. She carried two metal pots in her hands and clumsily plopped them on the kitchen table. “Hiya there,” she said with a simple grin as she spotted Kelsa. “My name is Noreen. I’m here to help with the party.” She politely extended a hand to Kelsa, who wiped her own hand on her apron before clutching the stranger’s. “My, this surely is a nice kitchen,” said Noreen. “Much bigger than the one in my master’s house.”

“Yes, it’s very nice,” said Kelsa. “What do you have there?” she asked, pointing to the pots. She wiped her sweaty brow with her shirt sleeve. It was a warm night and the heat in the kitchen was intense. She had already drunk three full glasses of water, and she was ready for more. Her stomach grumbled but she ignored it, though it was difficult with all the food around her. She watched the woman lift the lid on the first pot.

“This here is steamed corn,” she said, tipping the top of the pot so Kelsa could see it. Then she picked up the lid on the second pot. “And here is some cooked broccoli.” She replaced the second lid. “What else are we serving?” she asked.

Kelsa pointed to the oven. “There’s a 20-pound turkey in the oven,” she replied. “I’ve already prepared the squash, the zucchini and the string beans. I could use some help peeling the potatoes.” She pointed to another pot on the counter near the stove. “They’re in there.”



Noreen talked at length about her home as the two women peeled the potatoes. “I told Mrs. Wilkensen that grass stains don’t come out and that the kids need to be more careful, but she didn’t want to hear that,” she prattled on. “No, no, her kids are perfect and we folks don’t know what we’re talking about.” She shook her head. “I can’t tell you how many pants those brats have ruined.”

Kelsa waved a hand at Noreen. “You need to be careful what you say,” she warned. “That kind of talk can get you into big trouble.”

Noreen quickly looked over her shoulder before facing Kelsa again. Then she shrugged. “I guess you’re right. Sometimes my mouth is faster than my brain. I’m sorry.” She took a quick breath and continued. “Anyway, that family goes through clothes like they’re growing on trees. With six kids and two nephews living there, you’d think they’d be more careful about that. I don’t know.” She shrugged again.

An awkward silence filled the room when the kitchen door swung open and Virginia rushed in with her cheeks flushed. She hurriedly waved a fan over her decorated face. “Is everything running smoothly in here?” she asked. “The guests will be here soon.” She didn’t wait for an answer as she opened the oven door and examined the cooking bird.

“Everything is fine, Miss Virginia,” replied Kelsa. She put the peeling knife down on the counter. “We’re just about ready to mash the potatoes, and then all that’s left is to carve the turkey.” She watched Virginia pour some of the hot water from the pan over the bird. “Will Mr. Mallard be doing the carving, Miss Virginia?”

The rich woman pushed the pan back into the oven and shut the door. “He always does,” she replied. “Are the cakes and breads done?” she asked. Kelsa said they were. “Good.” Then

Virginia addressed Noreen. "I don't know how things work in your fine home, but here we serve our guests quickly, neatly and quietly. Do you understand?" Noreen nodded in silence. "Good, then there shouldn't be any problems to report to Mr. Wilkensen." Noreen nodded again.

Virginia fanned herself more rapidly and swiftly left the kitchen.

Noreen whistled. "She sure is something else, isn't she?" she said, shaking her head. "That woman is headed for an early grave if she don't slow down." She finished the potato in her hand and grabbed another one. Kelsa started to warn her again, but she decided not to. Instead, she worked quietly and kept her eyes down. She flexed her sore hands for a moment before picking up the last potato in her pile. She expertly shed the brown skin and reached for one of the mashers. Noreen finished her last one and did the same.

After several minutes of intense mashing, Noreen stopped and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "It certainly is a hot night," she said. "Mind if I get a glass of water?" Kelsa pointed toward the old, chipped glasses that were kept for the servants. Noreen picked one up and poured herself a glass of water from a pitcher on the counter. She leaned against the counter and slowly drank. "Em, em, em," she started, tilting her head slightly to the right. "These people are something to see, aren't they?" she asked.

Kelsa shrugged. "What do you mean?" She was getting annoyed with how little help this person was. She wished her associate would do less talking and more mashing, but she realized that Noreen had no real incentive to work hard.

"Well, they've got all this money," continued Noreen. "A beautiful house, lots of land, and all the food they could ever want. But they never smile. Have you noticed that? These folks never smile. I don't get that." She finished the water and put the glass on the counter.

“Maybe they just don’t smile around us,” offered Kelsa. She nodded toward the bowl of potatoes near Noreen. The woman sighed and picked the masher back up. “Maybe they don’t want us to see how happy they really are.” Kelsa shrugged. “I don’t know. Perhaps they are just miserable. Though, Lord knows they shouldn’t be.” She put the dirty masher into the sink and then added milk and butter to her bowl. She picked up a mixing spoon and began stirring the ingredients together.

Noreen duplicated Kelsa’s actions. “That’s for sure,” agreed Noreen. “Imagine it. Having your own house, eating whatever you want, going wherever you feel like, and just doing what your heart desires. They got it all.” Her complexion suddenly lightened and her voice softened. “I’d be happy with all that, and I think we deserve to be happy. And I’m not the only one.” Kelsa shot her a confused look. Noreen continued. “Well, some of the folks at my place were talking about running off. You know, escaping.”

Kelsa immediately stopped working and glared at Noreen. “Don’t ever talk about that around here again,” she said in a low but forceful voice. She shook her head and went back to work. “That’s fools talk. I’ve heard it before and it never leads to anything good.” Kelsa took a deep breath and thought about the punishment they would get if anyone overheard them. If they were lucky, it would only be a few lashes with a whip.

Noreen turned away for a moment before looking back at Kelsa. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. But those folks just got me thinking. They said they heard of people who help folks like us get free. White families even. Not everyone thinks this life is fair.” She bit her bottom lip. “They got a plan to leave real soon. I wish I could go with them.” She blinked her wet eyes and tightened her grip on the mixing spoon.

Neither woman spoke again for a long time. They finished preparing the meal and Kelsa left the kitchen to tell Virginia that dinner was ready. A few of the guests had already arrived and Kelsa found them laughing in the large living room with Mr. and Mrs. Mallard. Kelsa whispered her message to Virginia. The rich woman responded with a slight nod. As Kelsa turned to head back to the kitchen, she caught Jackson Mallard's subtle glance at her. Keeping her eyes forward, she quietly slipped out of the room as one of the male guests made a rude remark about Kelsa's petite figure.

Eight couples were enjoying the Mallard's hospitality as Kelsa and Noreen silently served them. The men did most of the talking, while the elegantly-dressed women sat obediently beside their husbands. Only when the topics turned to domestic issues did the ladies chime in. The guests were courteous to Kelsa and Noreen, but none of them looked directly at the workers. Most of the conversations were mundane, but toward the end of the evening a discussion caught Kelsa's attention, though she did her best to hide it.

One of the visitors, Dale Larson, a fat, balding banker with yellow teeth, said that abolitionists should be jailed for their treasonous attempts to end the civilized practice of slavery. His comment brought snickers from a few of the guests. Kelsa noticed that Jackson tightened his grip on his fork, while Virginia nodded in agreement with the man. "We Southerners can't afford to lose our way of life to a bunch of rabble-rousers," said Dale.

"You mean we can't afford to lose all that free labor," replied Jackson. His statement brought immediate silence to the room. Jackson and Dale stared at each other like gunslingers outside of a saloon. Then Jackson relaxed a little. "I'm not disagreeing with you, Dale," he continued. "I'm just saying we should be honest with ourselves. I know my family has profited greatly at the expense of the Negroes and I'm not about to give that up."

The plump woman sitting next to Dale laughed. “Maybe we should ask one of your maids how they feel about that,” she said. The woman pointed to Kelsa. “Sweetie, tell us what you think of the abolitionist movement. Are you for it or against it?” She laughed again, with an agonizingly drunken squeal.

“Myrtle, stop speaking nonsense,” Dale said to his giddy wife. He wiped his flabby forehead with his shirt sleeve. “She doesn’t know what we’re talking about,” he added. Kelsa dropped her head and pushed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Dale then addressed his host. “Ok, Jackson, you’re right. It is in our best interests to keep things the way they are. I just wish those damn northerners would stop trying to force the issue.”

“Somehow, my friend,” said Jackson, “I don’t think they will. Better get used to it.” He finished the wine in his glass and glanced over at Noreen. The maid swiftly refilled his glass and moved back to her position against the near wall. Jackson gently scratched the lower part of his neck and Kelsa peered at the diamond-shaped birthmark on his skin. She quickly looked away when she saw that Virginia had caught her.

The guests followed up their royal meal with the desert cakes that Kelsa and Noreen served them. Kelsa couldn’t be sure, but she thought that one of the wives had flashed a sympathetic smile. The visitors then adjourned to the living room where the men indulged in brandy and cigars, while the women sipped hot tea. Kelsa and Noreen cleaned up the dining room and the kitchen before Noreen was taken back to her master’s home. Kelsa was glad to see the woman leave, but, much to her dismay, she found herself thinking about what Noreen had said about escaping. The idea had obviously come to her before, but she never quite took it seriously. However, she now found it weighing heavily on her mind.

After the guests left, Kelsa worked quickly to finish cleaning the kitchen. She forced herself to focus on the task at hand, but her mind kept going back to what Noreen had suggested. A life free of slavery. She wondered if it were possible. She thought about her family living in their own house. Wade would take care of the yard work while she kept the inside of the house clean. She imagined working in her own garden and the feel of the earth in her fingers as she planted her vegetables. She smiled as she envisioned her sons playing freely in the back yard with other kids. Kelsa gathered up her family's rations and quietly exited the Mallard home.

The short walk to her hut felt like a 20-mile hike as her tired feet burned under her wobbly legs. She entered the shack and placed the food on the only table they were allotted. The hut was smaller than the Mallard's bedroom and a torn curtain cut the tiny room in half. Two candles burned, providing the only light. Kelsa looked in on her sons and saw that they were sleeping on the old sacks that passed as their beds. She blew out the candles and huddled next to her snoring husband on their side of the curtain.

Kelsa leisurely rubbed Wade's back and his snoring ceased. He turned toward her and kissed her right cheek. Shafts of moonlight cut through the tattered walls of the hut. Kelsa's eyes adjusted to the darkness and she could see the slight smile on her husband's face. "I'm sorry I'm so late," she whispered. Wade said that he understood. "The food is on the table."

Wade slid the raw fingers of his right hand over his wife's left arm. "No, I'm too tired to eat now," he said. "Maybe in the morning. How was the party?" He gently rubbed her arm as his warm breath showered her neck. He shifted his legs until he was comfortable.

"Same as always," replied Kelsa, enjoying his soft touch. She paused for a moment before continuing. "They brought a girl over from another home to help out. A young one who

liked to talk a lot. She wasn't very helpful." She stopped again and debated bringing up the sensitive topic. Then she went on. "But she did tell me something interesting."

Wade kissed her again. "What was that?" he asked.

Kelsa took a deep breath. "She said that some of the folks at her master's home were talking about escaping." Kelsa looked at Wade's face and tried to gauge his reaction. Surprisingly, his expression didn't change. However, he did let go of her arm, dropping his hand onto his chest. Neither spoke for a tense moment.

Wade sat up with his hands in his lap. Kelsa sat up too. "Did anyone hear you talking about that?" he asked. Kelsa said no. "Good. Even talking about that can get you whipped, or worse. I've seen it happen." He scratched his right ear. "What did you tell her?" he asked.

"I told her never to speak of it again," replied Kelsa. Then she told him what Noreen had said about people helping escapees. "I know the dangers, but maybe we should try. If not for ourselves, for our boys. Did you see the bruises on Paul's legs that he got from Bo today?" Wade nodded. "That was just for knocking over a stupid old vase. That isn't right. This isn't the life I want for them."

"Some life is better than no life at all," said Wade. He lay back down. "Jackson Mallard is an evil man. If we get caught, he might kill us in front of the others to keep them from trying. It's too risky." Kelsa watched him close his eyes and cross his arms over his chest. Soon he was sleeping again. Kelsa rolled onto her side with her back to him. She knew it was dangerous, but she couldn't bear condemning her children to this kind of life. She had to do something.