

THE TURN

a bond that shaped history

a novel by

DL Fowler

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*To forgotten people.
May their voices rise up and be heard.*

*Dream the dream that never ends
Of a place where known with unknown blends,
Pursue the path each tireless dreamer wends
Until the world, along that arc, tumultuously bends.*

Endless Dreams by DL Fowler 2018

CHAPTER ONE

Osawatomie, Kansas—August 1856

For most of William's twenty-odd years he had been like a plowshare. Nose buried in work, always doing Marse's bidding, never a shrug or word of complaint. If not working, keep out of sight, out of mind. Even in his brief time as a freedman, white folks' vision scarcely lighted on him, except to regard his usefulness, or with some purpose of malice or with irritation. It had never been so vital for him to remain inconsequential as it was in that moment.

Three hundred pro-slavery marauders—Border Ruffians—launched volleys of musket rounds into the woods where William crouched beside a fallen oak. He clutched a dead militiaman's musket, a ramrod jammed in its barrel. A stone's

throw away in the same thick woods, Captain John Brown's badly out-numbered militia returned the Ruffians' fire. The Ruffians had murdered one of Captain Brown's sons earlier that morning. They would not be content until the abolitionist stronghold of Osawatomie, Kansas, was reduced to embers—until the Captain's body swung from a tree and rigored there under the summer sun.

A whistling shrilled in William's ears, binding him to the refuge of the uprooted oak. His breath caught in his throat. Grapeshot rasped branches overhead. Ruffians charged the woods, howling like a wolf pack swarming helpless prey. Brown ordered his men to retreat north across the river, but desperation tore William in a different direction. Good sense said he would not get there in time to be of any use, but he cast the musket aside and raced toward town like a wind-swept prairie fire. The reek of spent saltpeter gripped his throat as he slashed through brush. Beads of sweat dripped from his coal-black forehead and stung his eyes. His clammy tow-linen shirt clung to his back.

William drew a deep breath, bent over, his palms pressed into his knees at the edge of town. He squinted, straining to focus. A cyclone of smoke rose from rubble, darkening the sky. Town folks scrambled to escape dozens of whooping horsemen. Cries for help were lost in the wrenching wails of Osawatomie crumbling into the throat of an inferno. William wiped his face with the hem of his shirt and patted the pocket of his pantaloons ... his certificate of freedom was still there—bought with the sweat of his older brother's brow.

Horses thundered past. A musket stock rammed William's shoulder, rattling his teeth, driving him to his knees. Pain ran up his neck, down his arm.

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A coarse hemp rope tumbled around William's neck. A boot pounded his back, vaulting him forward. A musket stock hammered him until he lay face down in the dirt. A heel pressed into the back of his neck. He could hardly breathe.

A voice rang out. "We ain't lynching this buck."

"Don't plan to. He'll draw a good price down river. Just don't want him running away."

Boots thudded to the ground. Calloused hands wrenched his arms. Manacles clanged around his wrists.

"Get up," one of the Ruffians growled.

The rope tightened around William's neck, tugging and scratching at his Adam's apple. He struggled to his feet. A meaty hand dug into William's pocket and discovered his certificate.

"Well, well. Lookie here."

"Whatcha got?"

"This one's got a certificate. Signed by some Kansas abolitionist judge."

"Won't hold water in Missouri."

The certificate floated to the ground. A boot stomped it, ground it into the dirt.

Resignation shrouded William's thoughts.

"Move it, boy," a Ruffian demanded.

By the time William was loaded into a covered wagon with captured abolitionists and other Negroes, he turned his mind to scheming a way of escape. He whispered, "Anybody seen Grace?"

"Women and children in the other wagon," one of the white prisoners whispered.

A Ruffian shouted, "Shut up."

William and the others held their tongues.

“Just once,” the guard bellowed, “I wish one of these abolitionists would sass me.”

“They’s as docile as them darkies they love so much,” the driver replied. “Say jump, they ask how high.”

“If it comes to war, all we’ll see of them—slave and slave lovers both—is their backsides as they run for cover.”

“No use getting worked up about no war what ain’t come yet. Gotta get these ones locked away in the county seat before that devil Brown and his vigilantes regroup. Marshal Wood says some New Orleans slave trader is due at the courthouse in a few days to buy some Negroes. Doesn’t want us to miss him.”

“At least we didn’t get stuck with that wench and her whiney young’un. It’s time Sam up there drew the short straw.”

William closed his eyes. He and Grace were headed to the same place.

* * *

William peeked out at dusk when the caravan looped into a defensive formation. Three wagons on a windswept prairie. No place to run. No place to hide. He and Grace and Maddie would be chased down like varmints scrambling for cover, hemmed in by a pack of ravenous coyotes.

Half a dozen armed Ruffians had already dismounted. One of them dragged Grace to the ground, still shackled and without the baby. Two white women climbed down behind her. The baby wailed inside the wagon. Grace reached for her daughter but was yanked back.

A Ruffian ordered the male prisoners down from the wagons. William and the others maneuvered to the back of the

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wagon, wrist and ankle chains rattling as they shuffled. Their feet thudded onto the ground. The Ruffians' leader barked, "Take off your boots."

William and Grace exchanged glimpses. He met the panic in her eyes with a flicker of hope.

Someone shoved William. "Start gathering wood for a fire. Then help make supper."

After the evening meal and cleanup, the prisoners loaded back into the wagons for the night. The Border Ruffians rolled out knapsacks and slept around a smoldering fire, taking turns standing guard in pairs. The caravan followed the same routine along two hundred dusty, jarring miles until they pulled into Columbia, Missouri—the Boone County seat. The prisoners unloaded at the courthouse and were transferred to the sheriff's custody.

The white prisoners landed in cells upstairs to await trial for offenses against Missouri's slave laws. In the basement, William and the other Negro men were cast into a packed cell, the air heavy with fetid odors. A few feet away, Grace screamed when her baby was stripped from her cradling arms. The child's shrieks stabbed at her heart. "NO! Maddie!" she yowled. Grace's despair echoed through the basement as little Maddie disappeared from sight. "Gone," Grace wailed. "My baby's gone. Please God, if you're gonna take my child away, strike me dead where I stand!"

Guards shoved the women into a windowless room at the end of the dank corridor. A heavy door slammed shut behind them. The clank of the bolt-lock battered Grace's ears.

William beat his head against the cell's iron bars.

An older prisoner pulled him back. "Won't do no good," the man whispered. "Might as well get used to the way things are."

“But the child needs her mother.” Tears streamed down William’s cheeks.

“White folk don’ see it dat way. Say our women and chillun don’ much mine bein’ separated. Say it ain’t no different den separatin’ a cow and her calf when the weanin’ time comes.”

William did not need to learn white people’s ways. His last mistress was a Mormon woman who taught her slaves everything they would need after paying for their freedom. Reading, elocution, posture, a Negro’s place in the world, all the ways of the civilized race.

* * *

Days later, William glimpsed Grace on the courthouse steps. Childless, she stood stripped to the waist, her head bowed, hands shackled in front of her. Bile wormed up into William’s throat as the auctioneer traced her firm, bronze breasts and touted her teen-aged beauty. The words “fancy girl” rolled off the man’s tongue, knifing William’s heart.

The gallery of bidders teemed with excitement as the auctioneer called for higher and higher offerings. At a price of \$1,600, frenzy gave way to hushed anticipation. “Sold,” declared the auctioneer, “to the fine gentleman from St. Louis.”

William reeled. His throat seized up. He had vowed to keep Grace and Maddie safe.

Half an hour later, a farmer from Western Missouri shelled out \$900 to claim William as human property.

William remained manacled—ankles and wrists—as the wagon rumbled toward his new master’s farm. Barefoot, he pulled his knees to his chest and kept his head down. An old Negro riding with him in the back of the wagon enjoyed

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complete freedom of movement. Slits in his boots allowed his bunioned feet to spread out. He crawled over to William and whispered, "It best to jest let life roll on. Dat what I figger affer all dese years wiff Marse. He ain't as bad as some."

"It's not me I'm worried about," William replied.

"Yous got nutin' else a worry 'bout. Everthin' else is outside yo control. Sooner you figger dat out, easier thins will be."

"You're wrong, old man."

"Name one thing else you gotta worry 'bout."

"You saw that quadroon girl this morning?"

"She none yo bidness anymore."

"She had a child when we got taken."

"Child none her concern no more. Yers, neither."

"I'll find them and free them, if it costs me my life."

"Look, boy. Lemme tell you how thin's is, what goin' happen. Her Marse take yo girl in his house. She serve him, satisfy him. She have chillun by him. When chilluns old 'nough, he work 'em in fields or in house. Maybe he sell 'em. When he marries, if he ain't already, his wife give him little white babies. Yo girl be dere mammy or he sells her to be mammy fer some udder house. Beliefs me. Been there. She forgets 'bout you, and best you do same wiff her."

"That may be good enough for you, but it's not for me."

"I tell you dis one time, boy. Whatever you lets eat you on the inside, don' let any white folk see on the outside."

The shackles binding William's ankles rattled when he turned away from the old Negro. As he looked inside himself, all he found was his uselessness. He had failed, utterly, to keep his sacred promise.