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# Freedom in My Soul

a novel

Shauna Reilly

University Press of Colorado

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## Chapter One

Ever since I was a little girl, I knew I had freedom in my soul. Still, it took a long time before I could make a run for it. My family and I chose a muggy summer night in 1850 when our Chickasaw owners' personal concerns demanded their attention. By the light of a fading moon, we planned to start southward over Oklahoma Territory.

"If we survive that," I'd told the others, time after time, "we'll cross the hellfire and brimstone of Texas to reach free Mexican soil."

When the big evening arrived, my scheme started out as slick as I had devised it. We all kept calm through supper at the grub table, although that wasn't hard. Everyone was so exhausted from their days in the field that no one had much to say.

As we walked back to our cabin Mammy said, "Go on. I'll catch up with you. I'm going to check Mose and Amanda's cabin."

"Hurry, Mammy," said I, my stomach jumping into my throat. "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves this night of all nights."

Mammywhose given name was Chloecast me a scornful glance. "I want to leave that cabin as free of bugs as I found it."

Mammy had chased Mose and Amanda away by pointing out some crawlersthat she herself had smuggled inon the wall, then offering to cleanse the cabin of bugs. Just as they promised, Mose and Amanda had gone straight to their daughter's cabin after work, so there was no sign of them.

After Mammy squashed the few crawlers she could find, she called out for my pappy. His name was Isaiah, but most everybody called him Ike. I just called him Pappy.

Pappy had already turned part of the spring to run between our cabin and Mose's and Amanda's, and had the grass stripped down bare in that plot of groundto keep the fire we planned to set from jumping from our cabin to theirs.

"I'll just throw a few buckets of water on their walls," he told me. "I'd hate to set Moses and Amanda's place to burning."

"Go on, Pappy," I told him, "but don't be long."

When Mammy and Pappy came back, we all dressed in our traveling clothes and went to bed. Only Samboy and Pappy slept, because they were so tired from the fields. Mammy and I stayed on the alert, along with Dog.

"The quarters are settling down fast tonight," I whispered.

"Everybody's falling into their bunks, too tired to mind our doings," she agreed.

After an hour or so, I crept near our cabin's front door. "You sleep some," I told Mammy. "I want to watch the moon so I'll know when our running time comes."

Even though cloud cover blanketed the sky, I could see the moon's shine here and there. We'd agreed to stay in our cabin until the moon peaked. When it began to drop, we'd make our bid for freedom. That left me with several long hours to wait and worry.

Within minutes, I found my mind spinning back over the years leading up to this moment. My youngerand onlybrother had set off my recollecting earlier that evening. "Please, Mammy," he'd said, "don't let Samgirl cook on the runaway trail."

My brother hated my cooking because I believed garlic was the key to nearly

every dish, including some desserts. My love of garlic started during the 1830s back in northern Mississippi, where I grew up watching

Mammy split those fat bulbs with her hammerlike thumbs. She'd just grab those cloves and bust them open, and the smell would wash over me like a scent straight from heaven.

"My mammy is the best cook around," I'd brag to anyone who would listen. By the light of a pine-knot torch, she roasted ears of corn in the ashes of the fire, then scraped off the kernels and fried them. She boiled all kinds of greens that she collected from the woods and mixed them with deer or wild turkey meat, or sometimes with fish from the creek or turtle from the swamp. On Sundays, she made grits with pounded hickory nuts in it.

"I don't care about learning the fine points of cooking," I often told Mammy. "I'm more worried about freedom." To myself I vowed one day I would get me some.

I believed I could free myself because I had certain abilities. I've always been clever and I was well educated. My brother sometimes taunted me, "That's a mistake our Chickasaw Indian owners made, educating you right along with their own offspring."

The main trouble with getting freedom was my blackness. Even as a girl, I was very black; you might say ebony black. If I had been light, maybe quadroon color, and talked as good as I talked, freedom might have been easier to come by. Maybe I could have grabbed my chance and sashayed down the streets of town along with other free blacks, most of whom were light-skinned. But for me, freedom could only come the hard way; my blackness marked me much like Abel marked Cain.

Still, even though I was black as black could be, I was beautiful black. My skin shone like it had been oiled. My hair stood out like a fierce bush around my head and my eyes glittered like quartz. My cheekbones were high and my lips like petunia petals, just waiting to be kissed.

My brother, who was named Sam just like me Samuel and Samanthawould split his trousers laughing if he ever heard me describe myself. He'd surely say, "Our Chickasaw 'family' gave you too many fancy ideas, Samgirl."

Of course, the Chickasaw took white folks' ways, including Christianity, right into their hearts long before I came on the scene. Still, I admit they passed a few ideas on to me.



Despite all their fine ways, the Chickasaw sure lacked imagination in the name department. To distinguish me from my brother, they called me Samgirl and him Samboy. I once asked Mammy, "Why not just give us two different names at the start of life instead of making it so confusing down the line?"

"I didn't have any say in the naming of my own children," Mammy replied.

Although the Chickasaw treated their slaves like people, they sure wanted to be there first in the matter of naming slave babies. Now that I think of it, our Chickasaw owners weren't too good at Indian names either. The pa went by John Stands-in-Timber and the ma by Nellie Mad-Doe. The children were a passel of apostles: Paul, Simon, Peter, with an Esther and a Rebecca thrown in. No wonder they ran out when it came to naming my brother and me.

Samboy could be right. Maybe I did get some unnatural notions from old John and Nellie. I had it easy growing up that is, as easy as growing up in slave quarters gets. I ran barefoot and buck-naked with John and Nellie's youngest for a summer or two, then Mammy made me a tow smock. I was still barefoot, and naked as a bluejay under the smock.

Sometimes I waved a straw fan over old John and Nellie's guests, or fetched water for them or a snack to eat. Mostly I was free to climb trees, play marbles with pebbles, and torture the old rag doll Mammy had made for me. That doll had charcoal eyes and red thread worked in for the mouth, and was my only real toy.

Next thing I knew I was eight years old and going to school every morning regular with old John and Nellie's brood. That was when one of the little apostle fellas, Paul, said to me, "I own you. Ma and Pa gave you to me for my eleventh birthday because I'm the oldest and have to learn how to manage slaves. I especially asked for you."

That boy was only three years older than I was, but already his evil side showed. He was a sneak, less than a credit to the man who sired him and the mother who bore him. I worried about the change in my ownership, but was too innocent to know what it really meant. It took me years to find out how much suffering Paul's owning me could cause.

It started to come to me when I myself turned eleven. I had a yellow mutt who had taken a shine to me and followed me around the quarters.



I fed him scraps of food when I could and he slipped away to peruse the big house's garbage when I couldn't. I could count his ribs through his spiky yellow fur. He always appeared lopsided to me because he had lost most of one ear in a fight he probably didn't win.

I loved that dog with a fierce passion. "I want to call him Samdog in honor of me and Samboy," I told Mammy.

But she said, "That'll only muddle everything more. Think of somethin' else." My family also seemed to lack imagination for naming, because we finally ended up calling him just plain Dog.

Paul, who always seemed to be hanging around me, hated Dog. Paul disliked anyone or anything that got between me and him when he wanted to use his rights to me. Just about twilight on my eleventh birthday, Paul dawdled his way down to the quarters and gave me a lace handkerchiefa bit frayed around the edges, but lace nonetheless. He also glided me behind a thick oak tree and ran his hand up my shiny black leg farther than I thought he should.

"My mammy and pappy will be looking for me, Paul," said I as I slipped out of his grasp. I headed for our cabin, but Paul snatched my arm and held fast.

"Too bad for them," he snapped. "You're mine and I can take you where I want." Paul planted his feet in the loamy dirt and fixed his eyes on mine.

I wiggled my arm, trying to get loose. He held on tight, set on getting his own way. "But it's my birthday," said I, with a twisted logic I hoped would fluster him.

Paul blasted right back, "And I brought you a birthday present, so you owe me something in return." He grabbed the front of my dress and tried to pinch where a breast should be. Because I was only eleven he came away empty-handed.

That was where Dog came on the scene. I squealed and Dog, ever my protector, bared his teeth and had the temerity to growl at Paul. Like the original apostles, Paul smote his enemy smack between the eyes. Instead of having the good sense to retreat, Dog actually had the gall to snap at Paul.

I seized Dog by his good ear and ran for the cabin, hauling him behind me. My departure sure frustrated Paul, in both the breast-pinching and dog-smoting arenas.



"Come on, Dog," I urged as I dragged him into our cabin. "Get in and stay in, if you know what's good for you."

Being that our cabin didn't have a door, and Dog was male and therefore lacking sense about fighting and enemies and such, he snuck out sometime during the night. Although I could hardly credit it, Paul must have waited outside for me or Dog to appear. The next morning I heard Dog whimpering on the bare boards we grandly called a porch.

Dog sat crying, held in place by a rope tied around a huge rock, his good ear completely gone. Dried blood caked over the side of his head like dark mud. A few trickles of fresh, red blood made tiny streams through the dried black blood. I was down on the boards in a flash, with Dog's butchered head in my lap and the acrid smell of blood going up my nose.

I buried my head in Dog's bloody fur and let hate for Paul rise up the back of my throat until it almost choked me. I must have groaned something fierce because Mammy and Pappy ran onto the porch and dragged me and Dog, a tragic spectacle to be sure, inside the cabin.

"Get that creature inside," Pappy bellowed, "where your mammy can care for it."

The upshot was that Dog lived, thanks to my mammy's doctoring. Dog never went near Paul again, and I tried to keep my distance, too. At the time, I kept my silence about these happenings, but I tucked them away in a back corner of my mind. Many nights I hugged Dog to me, even when he was smelly and dirty from running through the swamp all day. I cried myself to sleep, some tears for Dog's ear and some for me as being owned by Paul.

Despite this and other troubling events, it took me another two years to figure out what Paul's owning me was leading to. "What does that Paul want with me?" I would ask Mammy.

She would shake her head and once let a small tear dribble out of the corner of her eye. "You'll know soon enough, Samgirl."

It hit me hard when I was thirteen and Paul started to lie in wait for me, behind the oak tree, along the road to the big house, or wherever

his warped imagination landed his sassy ass.

I managed to dodge Paul. I was always busy, going here and there and keeping lots of folks around. That is, until one Tuesday morning. I remember because Mammy was up in the big house starching and ironing with her work partner, Becky. They'd drag the irons off the stove, land them with a thump on Master's Sunday shirt or Mistress's petticoat, and slam them back on the stove. Then they'd grab other fresh, hot irons and make the clean-clothes smell go right into the air again. Around and around they'd go, dragging irons from stove to shirt and back again. No wonder folks called them sad irons. They sure made Mammy and Becky sad every Tuesday morning.

Anyway, I was in our cabin putting some beans and fatback and a bunch of garlic to soak when Mister Paul that's what he made me call him poked his head in the open door and announced, "We're going for a walk in the woods."

I glanced around for help, but Pappy and Samboy had gone to the fields at dawn. Dog cowered under the table. I should have known I wasn't safe anywhere, even in my own cabin. I snatched the first feeble excuse that came into my head. "I have work to do, *Mister Paul*," said I, but he grabbed my hand and dragged me off.

"I own you," he told me, in a sharp tone that lit a flame of fear in my chest and reminded me of the occasion on which Dog had lost his second ear. "If I say we're going for a walk, then you walk. Understand me?"

I couldn't help thinking how little Paul resembled his daddy. Old John was scrawny and dark-skinned and kind. His bright, piercing brown eyes almost always had a sparkle to them and his black hair hung in his eyes like a little boy's hair. Even though Paul was scrawny too, his muddy brown eyessort of the color of animal dung gleamed with hate most of the time. He spoke in a tight, sharp voice and kept his hair slicked back from his forehead so that his pointed features stood out on his red-brown face.

I couldn't picture old John commanding or abusing any of his slaves, but Paul fancied himself a modern Chickasaw. In my opinion, Paul spent too much time running around with the white boys in the neighborhood. They gave him downright un-Indian ideas about slaves.

To make matters worse, old John let Paul do whatever he wanted, seeing as how Paul was the eldest son and the favorite and all. I thought old John put too much store by Paul's being the oldest. "Maybe it's some Chickasaw way we know nothing about," I told Mammy. "Or maybe old John learned it from the white planters in Mississippi."

That morning Paul asked me, "You're thirteen now, aren't you?"

"Yes," I answered with a chill dancing up and down my backbone about what was coming next.

"Then you should become a woman," Paul continued.

"You're going to do this for me?" I sassed right back.

Paul blinked and glanced sideways at me. "Yes, I am. Today, up in the woods."

"I kind of figured it," said I, my chin sticking out and my shoulders high. My breakfast oatmeal stood high in my stomach and threatened to come roiling out.

"Good, then it's settled," Paul muttered and kept on striding, me stumbling along behind.

I wasn't a stupid girl. My mammy had talked to me about making babies two or three years ago. Besides, we lived in a tiny one-room cabin that wasn't much. The roof was shake and the walls plank with a mud mixture shoved in between the cracks. Other than that we had a fireplace with a stick-and-mud chimney, some wooden stools and a table, and homemade beds nailed to the wall, with rope springs and corn-husk mattresses. "I was right there," I liked to brag to Samboy, "to see you born, coming out all red and squeezed between Mammy's legs."

There was plenty of other plain evidence of where babies come from. I saw pigs do it and later have piglets, and cows do it and later have calves, and so on. I knew Becky and her man, Eurias, did something real regular because at one time they had fourteen children, though only eight were alive now.

Of course, I lacked particulars. Even though I could hear Mammy and Pappy moving around and moaning sometimes at night when they thought I was asleep, I didn't know exactly what they did. A couple of times I even hung my

head down from my bunk I had the top one because Samboy worried about falling out but I couldn't see anything. There was no window in that cabin to let in the moonlight.

I did better with young Tatea handsome, strutting buckwho fooled around with every slave gal he could get near.

"Let's follow Tate behind the barn tonight," Samboy suggested one moonlit harvest night.

"All right. I'll go along," I said, not wanting to look a coward. When me and Samboy snuck up on young Tate, we saw him heaving and panting over some gal he had pinned to the ground.

So, that Tuesday morning I pretty much knew what I had in store for me. I was happy I'd escaped it as long as I had. I'd never forgiven Paul for what he had done to Dog, but, at the same time, I knew I had no one to protect me. Old John and Nellie had given me to Paul. As Paul often reminded me, I belonged to him. Besides, old John seldom, if ever, curbed Paul.

Paul didn't make it any easier on me, or on himself either.

"Follow me," he ordered.

He pulled back his bony shoulders and marched into the woods like he was Satan leading the way straight to Hell. When I hung back, trying to scrape the nettles off the hem of my dress, he caught my hand and yanked me on toward a huge old weeping willow tree.

"We're there now," he said.

Paul parted the willow boughs like a curtain and dragged me through. "You been here before?" I asked.

"What do you think?" he said as he pointed to a small cache near the willow's trunk.

I spotted a blanket or two, a pillow, a comb and mirror, and what looked like a sack of clean underwear. "You mean you've been here with another gal?" I asked, my eyes round and unbelieving.

"No, I've got better places to take girls of my own kind. I fixed this especially for you and me."

"I appreciate your trouble," I began, "but I don't think I'm ready for"

Paul's lean hand shot straight out, grabbed the neckline of my dress, and tore a strip out of it right down the front. I clutched the piece in place and headed for

the hanging willow boughs. "This ain't a good day for me," said I.

This time Paul caught me by the back of my dress, causing the damaged front to give way and the whole thing to depart from my body.

So there I stood naked, except for a pair of drawers made from the same material they used to make cotton-picking sacks. Paul also ripped off the drawers, pulling with his talon-like fingers from the waist down.

He stood in front of me like a prizefighter and began undoing his belt. "So you think this is a bad day, huh?" he asked.

I folded my broad hands across the few strands of pubic hair I had managed to grow and nodded. "It's a real bad day."

Paul's hand blasted out again, this time aimed at my face. I felt the sting of his blow even before I knew his fist had connected with my jaw. Paul's jab caused me to bite my tongue. I spit blood on the ground near his feet, but, thank goodness, no teeth with it.

"It's going to be a worse day if you don't stop your whining and resisting," Paul hissed. "Remember, I own you and I"

"can do anything you want with me," I finished for him.

Wham, his hand jinged out again and left me with a bloody nose. I couldn't see why he would want to mess with a girl with blood oozing from various parts of her face, but I figured he didn't plan on doing much more with my face anyway.

I was right; Paul got right down to business. He spread a blanket and pointed to it and said "Lay," so I laid. When he got the rest of his clothes off, he plopped down beside me. He fooled a minute with my breasts, which had grown near to nothing since the last time he tried when I was eleven. He gave that up and stuck his fingers up me instead.

"Quit wiggling and turning," he said.

Then he rolled over on top melike me and Samboy saw young Tate do that nightand rooted around awhile, just like I'd seen male hogs do. Next thing I knew, it was over. Now I bled from three places.

Paul rolled off me and rested on his back for a second or two. Then he leapt up and started to get dressed. "Clean yourself up and get home," he ordered me. "From now on, when I say 'meet me at the willow,' you hightail it up here and take your clothes off and get down on that blanket."

I felt sassy because I had lived through the ugly ordeal and because Paul

seemed considerably spent. I sat upright and stared at Paul mean and hard. "Oh, yeah?" said I. "I've got work to do. How'll you explain to your ma when my kitchen work isn't done?"