

# QUEEN OF THE UNION

JR ZINK

# CHAPTER 1

Central Kentucky 1846

“Excuse me, Master Johnson, have you seen my mammy?” The twelve-year-old boy stood in the library doorway tentatively. “Today is Tuesday. I have Master Aaron’s clothes for her to wash.”

The middle-aged man, dressed in dark pants, shirt, and waistcoat, looked up from his papers. “Come in, John.”

“Yes, sir.” John approached the desk, holding a basket of clothes.

“Put that down. Close the door and take a seat.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy moved slowly to the wooden chair that faced the desk and sat on the edge of the seat. He gripped the front of the chair between his legs and looked at the floor.

“She’s gone,” said William Johnson.

“Where’d she go?” asked John without looking up.

“She’s not coming back. Mrs. Johnson sold your mammy to a plantation in Mississippi. We needed the money, so she had to go down river.”

“Who’s going to do the laundry then and look after Mrs. Johnson?”

“Your sister Martha will move into the big house and take on her duties,” said William.

“Why Mammy and not one of the field hands?”

“I’m sorry, John. It wasn’t my decision. Mrs. Johnson and your mammy didn’t get along, so this is best for peace in the house.”

“She didn’t say goodbye.”

Distressed, William rubbed his fingertips against his forehead. “She wanted to, but there wasn’t time when they came for her. It will be all right. Your sister and your brother are still here for you.”

“Are you going to sell any more of us if you need more money?” asked John.

“You’re a good boy and a hard worker.”

“What if Master Aaron decides we don’t get along anymore? What if you don’t need me while he’s away at school in Cincinnati?”

“I won’t let her sell you, John.”

“What about Martha and Harry? Are they going to be sold?”

“Don’t you worry yourself. We need you all to keep Given House running smoothly. We’d be lost without all your help. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

William looked at the boy, started to speak, then made a choking sound as he took a long breath. “That’s all. Get on with your chores now.”

“Yes, sir.” He picked up the laundry basket and started for the door.

“John.”

John stopped and turned to William. “Yes, sir?”

“She loved you. She’ll be fine, and you’ll be fine. You’re strong.” William nodded his head.

John blinked away tears. “Yes, sir.”

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Lydia Johnson sat under the covers, propped up with pillows in the large bed. Her twelve-year-old son lay on top of the bedclothes on his back next to her. She stroked his hair gently.

“You are growing up to be so handsome. Those Yankee boys at school won’t hold a candle to you. You come from a great family, one touched by the grace of God. Your great-granddaddy was one of the great men who settled Mississippi. He built one of the largest plantations from nothing, with over one hundred slaves working it, raising the finest cotton in America. When he died, your granddaddy took over the plantation. He’s the one who bought this land and built this house as a place for us to spend the summers. I came here as a young girl and was one of the most sought-after belles of Kentucky. All the handsome men wanted to dance with me at our parties.”

“That’s where you and father met, right?” said Aaron, enjoying hearing the story of his parents’ young love again.

“Yes. Your father did business with your grandad, and he came to one of our parties during a visit to Given House.”

“Why did you marry father instead of one of the Southern gentlemen?” asked Aaron.

“Your father was handsome and very savvy in business. He worked for the insurance company in Cincinnati. Granddaddy thought it would be an advantageous match to bring his business into the family.”

“So that’s when you moved from Mississippi to Kentucky?” said Aaron.

“Yes. Granddaddy gave us Given House as a wedding present. Granddaddy gave Uncle Lyle the other half of his land here in Kentucky. That’s when Uncle Lyle built his house down the road. Your daddy kept his house in Cincinnati, so he had a place to stay when he was there on business.”

“Mother? What’s going to happen to Given House when you...” Aaron fell silent

“When I’m gone?” She touched his cheek.

“Yes.”

“All of my property will become your father’s and one day yours. Your father will own Given House. He and Uncle Lyle will share ownership of the slaves.”

“It makes me sad to think about you dying,” said Aaron.

“Me too, my darling. I wanted to see you rise to be master of your own estate. Be in charge of running a farm and a house and marry a beautiful belle. You’re already a wonderful horseman. One day you’ll host sporting events and hunting weekends. It breaks my heart knowing I won’t see you become a man.” She caressed his arm.

“John’s mammy won’t get to see him become a man either.”

“Dear, darkies don’t get attached to their families as we do. She’s probably already over leaving her children. She’ll forget them in no time. They’re not like us.”

“But John is very sad about losing his mammy,” said Aaron.

“Well, he’ll soon forget too. Why are you worried about him? He’s your valet and nothing more.”

“Today, when we were playing, he was different. He didn’t talk much.”

“Well, he’s not like you. Darkies’ brains aren’t as developed, and they don’t have the capacity for feelings or thinking as we do. You can tell that by looking at them.”

“John was pretty quick to learn during our lessons,” said Aaron.

“He was probably just mimicking you. Your father insisted he be schooled for a few years so you’d have someone to study with. He was a fine playmate for you as a boy, but you need to put him in his place now that you’re becoming a man. His education is over. You’re off to college. He’ll never be more than a houseboy. You see the difference, don’t you?”

“Yes, but he’s feeling sad.”

“Never let your emotions interfere with your actions as master over your slaves. It’s undignified. Besides, some of them can be sly and try to take advantage of a soft heart. You’re too strong a man for that.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have confidence in yourself, Aaron. You have a strong bloodline. There’s a pecking order in life, with families like ours at the top. You must lead; that’s your destiny. Others of lesser lineage will naturally take places in society below you. You’ll meet them at school and in your commerce dealings. There’s you, there’s men from less prominent families that aren’t equipped to lead, there’s immigrants, and there’s darkies. It’s the ladder of society. That makes perfect sense, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now give me a kiss, and go enjoy your ride.”

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After the Johnson family had all retired, John, his sister Martha, and Miss Clara, the head house servant, sat in their room in the basement of the big house. As domestic servants, they lived in the basement room instead of the cabin, so they would be nearby to assist the family. The room contained two beds, a wooden chair, a chest of drawers, and a chamber pot. Miss Clara pulled the chair close to where John and Martha sat on the bed.

“Why, Miss Clara? Why did Mrs. Johnson sell our mammy down the river?” asked John. “She’s the devil herself. What did Mama do to deserve that?”

“Hush, child,” said Miss Clara. “Someone hear you talking bad about the Missus, and you’ll be right behind her. You don’t want to go down river. Working those cotton plantations is a hard life, and the drivers beat you if you don’t work hard enough.”

Martha started crying. “Mammy. Oh, they’re going to beat Mammy.”

“She’ll be all right, now. Come here,” said Miss Clara, extending her arms. Martha went to her and sobbed into Miss Clara’s embrace. She rocked with the girl in her arms. “Shh. Shh. We’re going to be all right, the three of us. Look at you now, moving up to work in the big house.”

“I don’t want to work for that witch. She sold Mammy,” said Martha.

“What I say to your brother?” said Miss Clara. “You can’t be talking those sort of words about the Missus. You can think ‘em, but you don’t say ‘em. You keep those words to yourself.”

“I don’t want to work in the house and live with these white people. I want to go back to the cabin,” said Martha.

“You don’t have a choice. You got to do what the Master and Missus say. And they say your job now is to look after Mrs. Johnson.”

“I don’t know how to look after the Missus.”

“I’ll show you what to do. You’re a smart girl. None of this work is so hard that any of us couldn’t do it. Hardest part is learning to use a stitch, but I’ll show you.”

“Miss Clara, where do you think Mammy is now?” asked John. “Master Johnson said she’s in Mississippi. Why did they send her so far away?”

Miss Clara said, “Mrs. Johnson didn’t want your mammy ‘round cause she didn’t want her tempting Master Johnson no more. She likely gone to her daddy’s plantation in Mississippi.”

“What do you mean tempting Master Johnson?” asked John.

“Master Johnson had a liking for your mammy. I think that’s why he sold Ray, her husband. Every now and then over the years, Master Johnson spent time alone with your mammy. After Mrs. Johnson came down with the fever, he started back up with your mammy, and Mrs. Johnson found out about it. I heard her screaming at him, and Master Johnson promised to stop seeing your mammy. He said he was sorry, and he sounded like he meant it. The Missus told him to get rid of her. He tried to talk her out of it, but she ordered him like she was the master, not him.”

“If Mr. Johnson liked Mammy, why’d he agree to it?” said John.

“Mmm-mmm. Boy, here’s how it works. If a white man has a white woman, she is the queen. His Black woman is someone he can be with and may even love, but white people don’t like

Blacks and whites to mix in that way. If white men do it, they got to be sneaky about it. The white queen don't want nobody knowing her man with a Black woman. Besides, Mrs. Johnson's family own us. When she married William, he became the master, but Mrs. Johnson runs this house. You see it. She's in charge until she dies."

"When the fever takes Mrs. Johnson, could they sell us all?" asked John.

"Then I don't know what happens. We all either go to Master Johnson or her brother, Master Lyle. Nobody told me what's gonna happen. We have to wait and see," said Miss Clara.

"No, they can't sell any more of us. All I got left is my brother and my sister," said John.

Martha started shaking her head and crying again.

"John, you settle yourself. You don't know what's going to happen. Don't you be getting your sissy all upset over something you don't know."

"I won't let it happen," said John.

"You can't stop that from happening any more than you can stop the wind from blowing."

"Mr. Johnson likes me," said John. "I'll talk to him. I'll promise him that we'll work harder. He has to keep us together."

Martha hung her arms tightly around her brother's neck. "My mammy, Mammy," she cried. "John, don't let them take anyone else away."

"I won't, Martha. You, Harry, and me will stay together. And I'm going to find Mammy. Somehow, someday, I'm going to find her and bring her back to us."

"Really?" said Martha.

"If it's the last thing I do. I promise," said John.

Miss Clara shook her head. "Foolishness. She's gone. You both need to get all your crying out tonight. Tomorrow morning, we got work to do. Martha, you wake up and put a smile on your face, and you do what you're told. Mrs. Johnson don't have many days left on this earth, and you make them the best you



can. That's your best chance of staying in the big house where the living is easier."

"She's right, Martha," said John.

"All right. I'll do it."

"We'll get you a bath with hot water," said Miss Clara. "We can't have you waiting on Mrs. Johnson dirty like a field worker. I'll fix one of the dresses to fit you, and we'll find you some shoes. House servants wear shoes. One more thing. Watch out for Master Johnson. You be nice to him, but not too nice. If you let him have his way with you, you might end up down the river just like your mammy."

"How I know he having his way?" asked Martha.

"Don't let him touch you, and don't be alone with him."

"What I do if he does?"

"You holler loud as you can for somebody. Now, time to sleep. The sun will be up early tomorrow. Martha, you sleep in that bed with John." Miss Clara blew out the lamp.

"I'll find her, Martha. I promise. I'll find her, and we'll all be together again. I will," whispered John.

John and Martha clung to each other in the dark.