

THE PLANTATION

CHAPTER ONE

Mary Bottoms, heir to her father's fortune made in New York real estate and construction, would never do without the finer things in life. She hated the cold of New York, opting to move south to New Orleans, a booming southern town. Being a young, hard-driven woman with good business sense, she decided to move to Louisiana, buy a plantation, and start a new life. What she never considered were the responsibilities of being a slave owner. These people, kidnapped from Africa and sold into slavery, worked the cotton fields around New Orleans. They were housed in squalid quarters away from the main house and not well-fed. They survived on their love for each other, their worth measured by the work they could accomplish.

Mary left New York by train and two weeks later she was in an opulent hotel in New Orleans. She contacted a real estate agent to arrange a showing of a working plantation in the morning. Tonight, she hired a carriage and enjoyed the nightlife of New Orleans. She loved the music, food, and excitement of the gambling establishment she visited. Mary enjoyed the evening and met Franklin, a wealthy business owner, with whom she would spend her future. He was smitten with Mary and accepted her invitation to accompany her on her property search. As his family had plantations in the area, and he owned the cotton brokerage houses in town, his input would be invaluable.

The next day Franklin picked up Mary in his buggy. He was familiar with the plantation she was going to see, and after a lengthy drive they arrived at their destination. The long winding laneway was lined by large southern oaks, their branches full of Spanish moss. Mary fell in love with the charm these trees brought to the plantation.

Mary also realized she was beginning to fall in love with Franklin, who felt the same way. In time, their love would blossom propelling them into an unexpected union. Mary surveyed the scenery and was sure she was going to buy the property. However, the result of this decision might make her wish she had never left New York.

CHAPTER TWO

Franklin and Mary entered the plantation house, which exuded Southern charm. The rooms were furnished with period pieces, which had been shipped from abroad, and cabinets built by the best craftsman in New Orleans. Slaves worked in the home, attending to the owners' needs. The house staff were selected from slaves who demonstrated devotion to their owners, acceptance of their situation, a neat appearance and unwavering obedience. Working in the house provided them with a better life, including improved quarters, healthier food, and an escape from the unbearable heat of the fields.

After a tour of the inside, Mary and Franklin retreated outside to inspect the grounds. Beautiful flowers and trees graced the property, meticulously cared for by the gardeners. They toured the fields, watching the slaves harvesting the cotton, which would be sent to Franklin's brokerage houses and then on to the mills. An inspection of the Negroes dwellings found a collection of wooden shacks in disrepair. The state of these homes indicated the current owners did not take

proper care of their property. There were numerous owners who gave their slaves little, rarely providing needed medical care or life's necessities. If they died, the slaves were buried in the nearby cemetery. The owners hired handlers to oversee the laborers in the fields, who were often treated with cruelty and received harsh punishment if they did not follow orders.

Mary thought this property would be a sound investment and, with Franklin's encouragement, she planned to contact an attorney to begin the purchase process when she returned to town. The pair headed back to the city, visiting Franklin's horse ranch outside of New Orleans on the way. Franklin was wealthy, having capitalized on his family's ties to the area. He started his own brokerage house, proved himself to be a successful business owner and soon became the dominate cotton broker in New Orleans. He had been married, but three months after the wedding his wife had died in a carriage accident.

Arriving at Franklin's house, lunch was prepared for the couple. Franklin wanted to show Mary his property, asking if she would like to view it from horseback. Mary was obliged, and they headed to the corral, picked two horses, and were on their way. After a two-hour ride, they were back at the stables. Franklin returned Mary to her hotel saying he would see her tomorrow, giving her a small kiss on the forehead before leaving. Mary felt lucky to have met Franklin, but she knew little about him. For now, the only thing that mattered was the strong attraction she felt toward him.

CHAPTER THREE

The next day Franklin called for Mary, telling her they would be taking a ride on one of the paddle-wheeled steamships docked in town. These boats offered all-day outings on the Mississippi River, with food and gambling being the main attractions. Mary had never been on one of these boats and was looking forward to the experience. After a short ride they reached the waterfront, tethered their carriage, and joined the crowd that had gathered to board. A short blast from the horn on the boat indicated boarding would begin shortly. Franklin had reserved a stateroom, where they deposited their belongings and then made their way to the deck to watch the boat leave.

With a blast from the whistle, huge columns of black smoke rose from the smokestacks as the ship pulled away from the dock and headed into the river, maneuvering around the boats waiting for dock space. New Orleans was a busy trade port, with goods arriving from cities upriver, as well as overseas.

Franklin and Mary headed to the restaurant, where platters of delicious, southern-style fare were offered. After dining, they walked together, along the outside deck enjoying the sunshine and scenery. Mary was surprised at the amount of activity on the water. Boats of every shape and size passed by, with people waving to one another.

Inside the ship a live band began playing; Franklin took Mary's hand and led her to the dancefloor. They spent the next half-hour dancing and getting to know each other. Afterwards they entered the casino, trying their luck at the roulette wheel and baccarat tables. Mary watched

as Franklin played his favorite poker game, seven-card stud. In what seemed like no time, it was announced that the boat would soon be returning to port.

The couple decided to return to their stateroom to wait for the boat to dock. There was a flurry of activity onboard as the people prepared to return to New Orleans. In the stateroom the couple discussed the meeting with the plantation owners and their lawyers about the sale of the plantation, which was scheduled for tomorrow. Within a brief time, they were back in port collecting their buggy, and heading to Franklin's place to spend the rest of the day.

Mary had loved the boat, as much as she loved spending time with Franklin. She was surprised when he informed her his mother was coming for a visit this afternoon. They went to the stables, where Mary watched him care for the horses, while they waited for his mother. Upon her arrival, they went indoors for tea. Mary found Franklin's mother to be outgoing and charming, and a friendship was born.

Franklin soon took Mary back to her hotel, telling her he would see her tomorrow. She retired to her room where she spent the evening reading and thinking of Franklin. This was Mary's first meaningful relationship with a man, and she hoped she could manage it responsibly.

CHAPTER FOUR

The morning found Mary at the lawyer's office; Franklin, the plantation owners, and their lawyer were also present. They reviewed the plantation's financial statements for the last five years and discussed the transfer of ownership of the slaves. Mary, having her father's business acumen, had her lawyer offer a cash deal twenty per cent lower than market value. With little thought, the owners accepted the offer knowing another opportunity might be a long time coming. Tomorrow they would meet at the Bank of New Orleans to complete the transaction.

Franklin offered Mary the use of his guest cottage until she took possession of her new property. She happily accepted and the couple returned to the hotel to pick up her belongings. That afternoon Mary found herself in Franklin's guest house, with her own servant to take care of her needs. Mary was pleasantly surprised with the young Black girl who was well-spoken and polite. Franklin had to go to his office to deal with things his managers could not oversee. He had a few contracts to negotiate, needed to sign documents, and see if any emergencies had arisen.

At dinner that evening, Mary told Franklin she was fond of her attendant and was instantly chastised for her feelings. He informed Mary the number one rule of being a slave owner was not to befriend the slaves, as trusting them could lead them to take advantage of you. Mary was disappointed to hear this, but understood what Franklin was telling her.

The following morning the papers for the plantation purchase were signed and a bank draft was issued to the previous owners. Mary was now the proud owner of the cotton plantation. All the furnishings had been included in the sale, as the owners were moving to California. Mary was to take possession of the property in a week. The news of the sale created anxiety among the slaves who feared the changes a new owner inevitably makes. Sometimes this transition causes a peak in slaves running away as they fear the worse.

Mary spent the next week with Franklin, helping around the ranch, riding horses, and enjoying the nightlife in New Orleans most evenings. They had fallen in love, and Mary wondered if it were going to lead to marriage, as she knew Franklin could help, and protect, her as she began her new venture.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mary's move to the plantation was unsettling for the slaves; knowing little about their new owner created panic among them. The night before Mary moved into the plantation house a slave ran away. The earlier owners informed Mary of the situation. They told her the handlers were searching for him, but if the bloodhounds were not successful, she should consider placing a bounty on his head. This turmoil was not what Mary was expecting. Instead of the smooth transition Mary hoped for, she was thrust into something more sinister, human slavery.

Following Franklin's advice, they met with the slaves in the morning. Mary introduced herself and Franklin and assured those gathered no radical changes were planned. Against Franklin's wishes, she ordered a feast prepared for the slaves as a gesture of good will. She then toured their decrepit homes and ordered building materials for repairs, hoping to bring a bit of happiness into their community. Franklin hated what he was seeing but said nothing, he would wait until he had control over the plantation, at which time he would put a stop to this nonsense of being kind to the slaves.

A week later, over dinner at one of New Orleans' finest restaurants, Franklin proposed, and Mary accepted. They agreed to become equal partners in the plantation, with Franklin reimbursing Mary for half the cost of the property. He would sell his ranch and keep his horses at the plantation, where a new barn would be built to accommodate them. Since this was his second marriage, and Mary had no family nearby, they decided a small wedding at the plantation would be appropriate. Their wedding day soon arrived, with a small gathering of twenty people seeing the ceremony and celebrating the marriage with a bountiful dinner.

Franklin completed his transaction regarding the plantation, which gave Mary a sense of relief knowing she had someone with experience helping run the business. Franklin had realized his own dream, owning a plantation and the slaves that came with it. In truth, Franklin was a devious and cruel man, something he hid well from Mary. He planned to cheat her by lowballing the amount of cotton harvested, pocketing the ill-gotten gains for himself.

Franklin treated Mary well at first, but over the following weeks she noticed a change in his behaviour. He became controlling, angered easily, and was disrespectful when he addressed her. Mary was concerned, as she had heard that some men transform after marriage, becoming abusive and domineering. She feared things could get physical in time. Mary's dream was turning into her nightmare, one she had no idea how to escape.

CHAPTER SIX

Mary felt she was losing control of her say in the plantation, as Franklin was no longer asking her opinion, making all decisions on his own. He gave her no information about the finances and tried to keep her away from the slaves. She had befriended them, which Franklin viewed as a

threat to his control. Rumours circulated about Franklin's cruelty, dishing out undeserved punishments for perceived infractions, using the tip of his whip on slaves who he felt were not working hard enough.

Mary's most trusted servant pulled her aside and told her that Franklin had been raping the female slaves, including one as young as thirteen. He had told the slaves if his wife found out, he would start hanging them until the person who let out his secret stepped forward and took the blame. Mary was appalled that this was happening without her knowledge. She did not know what to do. If she confronted Franklin, he would deny it, accusing her of believing the slaves over him. He was already calling her "slave lover" for the empathy she showed towards them, which he hated. There was no authority to report this to, as the abuse of a slave was not a crime.

Mary's love for Franklin had been replaced by hatred. She now realized how evil he was, and how easily he had manipulated her. Getting involved with this man had been a huge mistake. She feared for her own life, knowing dropping her would solve all his problems. She had to be smart and continue living with this man, pretending to not know the truth, while she sought a solution to the problem.

Fate was already catching up to Franklin. The male slaves, their lives becoming unbearable under Franklin's tyranny, and having admiration for Mary, decided to take matters into their own hands. They formed a plan which would result in the sacrifice of two lives in exchange for improving the lives of the other slaves. Franklin's brutality had to stop, even if it meant his death.

The plan was to grab Franklin and hang him from the same tree he was continually threatening to use to punish them. Franklin was a scrawny man who would not put up much of a fight. After they hung him, they would run, using two of Franklin's horses. They hoped to not get caught but knew if captured they would be killed for their crime. This plan would have to be conducted soon for fear that it might be exposed. Change was coming to Mary's life, a change she deserved but was not expecting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The rope in the tree swayed in the wind, ready for its newest victim. Franklin left the house at his usual time to complete a slave count, making sure no one had run during the night. Two men were ready, waiting in ambush, nervous as they thought about the task ahead of them. Franklin, whip in hand, was angry. One of the slaves had been less than cooperative yesterday, and he was about to teach him a lesson. He had waited to mete out the punishment this morning, planning to whip him and send him out to the fields. Franklin took pleasure in knowing sweat in the slave's open wounds would intensify the pain he felt.

As Franklin neared the slaves' quarters the two men jumped him, threw a burlap sack over his head, and wrestled him to the ground. Franklin never saw them coming. He struggled but the men being larger and stronger made his efforts futile. As soon as the men tied Franklin's hands behind his back, he knew what was coming. He pleaded for his life, offering them whatever they wanted to let him go. The slaves knew better than to listen to his lies, removed the burlap sack

and gagged him. They drug him to the tree, a look of terror on his face. Franklin was about to pay dearly for the crimes he had committed against these defenseless people. They slid the noose over his head and soon it was over. Franklin was dead, hanging at the end of the rope.

The slaves congregated around the tree, as word spread that someone had been hung. They expected to see one of their own, never their master swinging in the wind. A gasp of horror went through the crowd, as they now wondered what the punishment would be. The men that ambushed Franklin had quietly left the scene, retrieved two horses, and were now on their way to New Orleans. They would ditch the horses as they got closer to town, and mingle with the people, allowing them time to make their next move. New Orleans had freed slaves, but they had to carry papers, which these men did not have.

Franklin was found hanging by the field supervisors when they arrived for work. He was cut down and authorities were called. Mary was shocked when she learned of Franklin's death, but thought his murder was justified. Two days later the escaped slaves had not been found. The horses were recovered and returned. A fugitive hunt was ongoing, as white people sought revenge for Franklin's death. If captured, the slaves would be hung in the town square, to the delight of cheering spectators.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Franklin had not been well-liked nor trusted by his family or the business community. His days of dishonesty were over, and many in the community felt he got what he deserved. His brokerage firm was left to Mary, a change he had made to his will to gain Mary's trust before they married. However, he had no intention of leaving his assets to her. The sale of this business was immediate, as Mary had no interest in running it herself.

Mary, enriched by this sale, gave up the cotton business and freed her slaves. The ones that chose to stay were treated well. Years passed and eventually the freed slaves moved on, finding their own way in life. Mary, unable to sell the plantation abandoned it, and moved to New York with her long-term servant, as the rumours of civil war gripped the country.

The two slaves that had hung Franklin had been taken in by freed slaves who hid them. With Mary's financial help they were able to make it to Kentucky, where with the help of the underground railroad they made it to Canada.

Months after Mary's arrival in New York civil war broke out. The war over slavery was brutal, killing hundreds of thousands of Americans on both sides, with the North being the eventual victor and slaves being emancipated. When the North captured New Orleans, soldiers ransacked and burned Mary's plantation, cementing an end to her misguided venture.

Mary died at the age of ninety. She left her property and money to her caretaker, who had come from New Orleans with her. The end of slavery started a new chapter in the nation's history. Black people had gained their freedom, but were still discriminated against and treated poorly, which continues to be a problem today.

