

The Vance Legacy

(Excerpt)

Lillian and Bell sat on the steps outside the kitchen house as they often did in the evening. The house was quiet and most everyone else was already asleep. Lillian looked forward to the peaceful evenings that she and Bell and sometimes Nan would spend at the back of the kitchen house.

The evening was cool and the two women sipped warm milk as they talked. "Guess God done finally answered your prayers, ah?" Bell asked.

"Yeah," Lillian answered half-heartedly. "At least he's home."

"Sho is. Guess you done already met that woman he done brought back with him? Massa James says theys planning a wedding. That tells you something, don't it?"

"You don't know what you're talking about old woman," Lillian said.

"What I know is that you had ten years to rid that white man from your heart but you still dreamin' bout something that ain't gone ever be."

"Bell, you don't understand."

"I don't, huh? Why you think he done brought that woman back with him?" Bell didn't wait for Lillian to answer. "I'll tell you why. Cause he ain't no boy no more girl. He ain't bout to make the same mistakes he made when he was a boy."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talkin bout. I'm saying that he don't want no more trouble. He needs that white woman sos folks tongues won't start to wag all over again. He's a grown man now Lil. He can't afford to be so foolish."

"Even if that's so, it don't really make no difference."

Bell chuckled deep in her throat, a sound that said she really didn't find anything funny. "You really think that white man loves you, don't you?" Bell mocked.

"Why is that so hard to believe Bell?"

Bell laughed again. "I can hardly believe you is so stupid. He ain't got to love you girl, he owns you."

Lillian sprang to her feet to go into the house but Bell stopped her with a firm hand on her arm. She gently guided Lillian back down onto the step. "I'm gonna tell you something that I promised I would never speak of to any living soul." She took a sip of her milk and cleared her throat. "More than thirty some years ago I had this same talk with your Mama."

"You're lying Bell."

"Think so, huh? I told your Mama the same things when Big Bill came a buzzin round the slave quarters like a bee buzzin' round nectar. He was a young man then. He had broad shoulders and them green eyes that seemed to look right through to your soul. Your Ma and me was just kids then but it didn't make him no never mind. All that man saw was a pretty little black gal that belonged to him. He was Massa and he could do whatever he fancied, and he fancied your Mama. He took her one day, kickin' and screamin' about a month after he brought her here. Took her up to the big house and kept her there for a while.

"After a time Mamie got to thinking that she was better than the rest of us. She started prancing around with her nose stuck up in the air. Every now and again he'd bring some little trinket or a new dress and it all made Mamie just full of herself. She start to thinking that she'd won the old man's heart. She even thought she was better than his own wife cause, after all she was the one keeping him satisfied. Just like you, Mamie thought he loved her. His wife didn't like Mamie so she had to move from the house into one of the shacks. It didn't matter to Mamie though. She thought he loved her so much that he was gonna give her freedom papers. Huh!" Bell chuckled again. "Big Bill ain't never set nobody free. Mamie wasn't no more than a slave to him and as

soon as he tired of her, he sent her right back to them tobacco fields.”

“You’re making this up as you go along,” Lillian accused. “I know that you’re lying because my mother hated Big Bill.”

“Sure, by the time you came along she did hate him.”

“Then why did she send me to him when I was just a girl?”

“Lillian, it ain’t like she had a choice in the matter, but she knew about his lust. Mamie knew better than anybody that if you pleased him, it would keep you away from those tobacco fields at least until he tired of you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why would I lie?”

“I don’t know.” Lillian was thoughtful for a moment. “Do you think that Big Bill was my father?”

“No! Truth be told, he passed your Ma around so much there ain’t no telling who your daddy is. Your Ma always thought your daddy was old Walker from the Cambridge plantation. If you didn’t know better you’d think Walker was a white man himself.”

Both women were silent for a few minutes. “I’m telling you these things for your own good, Lillian. You right about one thing. Your Ma hated Big Bill but when she was a girl she thought all that attention was love. Took some time but she learned that a white man’s lust ain’t got nothing to do with love. It’ll do you good to learn that yourself.”