

# Part One

1846

*T*rudell, a slave girl born to the Winslow rice plantation on one of the Georgia Sea Islands, lives with Pearl, a slave there for fifty years. They live in a hut beside the river in order to be close to the grasses and other plants Pearl needs to make baskets and medicines for the plantation.

*As there is no mistress on the Winslow plantation, it is left to the slaves to have their own ceremonies at the slave quarters. Pearl believes in spirits that exist to offer warnings of good or bad things to come. Her favourite spirit lives in the river and she calls him 'the river man'.*

*Pearl goes to the slave quarters and to the big house but Trudell is confined to the hut and the*

*Devil Child*

*forest around it because Pearl is afraid that the child will be taken away from her if their living arrangement should be discovered. The situation does not sit well with Trudell.*

*Trudell's biggest worry and fear is for her own mammy who was sold to another plantation four years earlier.*

*On October 13, 1846, the biggest storm seen in the Sea Islands for twenty two years wreaks havoc on the plantation and goes on to damage the port city of Savannah on the mainland. It brings with it changes to Trudell's life.*

## CHAPTER 1

At dawn, a fisherman found a body where it floated just under the surface of the river near the levee that divided the two rice plantations on the island. That was the first thing to happen on a day, which according to Pearl when she heard about the drowning, was destined to be filled with signs of trouble brewing.

Pearl was a great believer in signs. The old woman was adamant when she said that the stronger the signs given, the worse the trouble was going to be when it arrived. Trudell did not hold with such superstitious nonsense.

“You’s e has come from somewheres far,” the girl said. “Peoples here ain’t thinkin that.”

Pearl snorted in disdain.

“How many peoples you’s e know?” Pearl asked.

Trudell felt hot with anger. She determined not to answer the question but her mouth released the words anyway.

“You’s know how many ‘cause you’s keep me away from them,” she accused.

“How old are you’s, missy?” Pearl taunted.

“Twelve,” Trudell replied in as haughty a fashion as she could manage.

“You’s can’t have a whole lot of ‘sperience with signs or nothin, I’s ‘spose?”

“Don’t need ‘sperience to know what’s right and what’s not,” the girl muttered.

Pearl just laughed. Trudell left the hut and went out into the yard where the chickens ran toward her. The old woman followed her outside. The next thing out of Pearl’s mouth was enough to upset the girl even further.

“I’s got to go,” Pearl said. “This here ole plantation ain’t got no mistress to look after the praise services for them poor slaves so I’s got to take care of things.”

Trudell made a face behind Pearl’s back.

“Why’d you’s call those peoples ‘poor slaves’ when you’s one of them and I’s is too?” she asked.

“We’s different,” the woman told her. “You’s was born here. You’s bin on this

## Chapter 1

here Georgia Sea Island all you'se days. You'se don't bin no place else. I'se bin here so long, I'se don't remember no more place neither."

"But, Mammy Pearl, why ...?"

"Got no time for silly talk, girl," Pearl chastised.

"It's not fair," Trudell pressed. "I'se wants to go with you'se."

Pearl shook herself, stood tall, and appeared even more intimidating than usual.

"Got no time for foolishness, neither," the old woman said as she stalked off toward the trail that led to the slave quarters.

"My mammy took me with her," Trudell called out to the old woman's retreating back, "when we was livin in the slave quarters and she was workin in the rice fields."

"You'se mammy's not here now, is she?" floated back to Trudell on the silent air.

There was nothing that the girl could say to that. Feeling frustrated, she kicked at a chicken that clucked at her feet in sympathy.

The yard stretched wide in front of the wooden hut with its shady veranda before

narrowing at each end into a track barely wide enough for a wagon as it snaked along the river. Trudell watched Pearl disappear down the path to the slave quarters knowing the old woman would be gone for hours.

A long time later, the girl muttered to herself about the unfairness of her life as she drew a picture of a small song bird in the hard packed dirt of the yard with a sharp stick. The pursuit gave her none of her usual pleasure and she soon scratched the image out again.

She grew more restless with every passing moment. She resented being alone at the hut by the river while Pearl was away enjoying herself with the other people in the slave quarters.

“They’s is singin down there and they’s is dancin,” she said out loud.

The rooster cocked his head as he stared in fascination at Trudell.

“It’s true. If’n you’s e got no idea what goes on in them slave quarters, I’s e do!”

The ache in her belly brought the thought about the food she was never going to eat.

## Chapter 1

Her voice rose to a howl and the rooster made a mad dash to collect his hens and herd them to safety.

“They’s eatin special food they’s done for the gatherin,” the girl shouted after him.

She began to make small forays along the river path in the direction of the slave quarters in an attempt to gain enough confidence to follow Pearl to the praise meeting.

“Whats she gonna do if I’s go there?” Trudell asked herself over and over.

Time and time again, the answer was ‘nothing’ and yet, the thought of what the old woman might do made her return to the hut not daring to go more than a short distance down the trail.

“It’s not fair,” she complained to herself. “I’s should see peoples, not just Pearl and peoples who come to the hut.”

The situation was maddening. At first she had liked to be the only one to bask in Pearl’s affection; to have her undivided attention, to help with the baskets she made for the plantation, but after four years, the satisfaction was becoming thin.

As time toiled on in slow anguish, Trudell began to feel unwell.

“It’s this heat,” she thought as she headed into the shade of the oaks once more.

She made up her mind to talk to Pearl the moment she got back. The time had come for things to change. She’d make the old woman realize she was no longer a child and should not be treated like one.

From the distance, a loud wail pierced the girl’s thoughts. It managed to cut through the bravado she had wrapped around herself the way the burning sun dissipated the mist over the river. She scampered back to the hut to wait. Her breath caught as she watched Pearl approach.

“What’s the trouble, Mammy Pearl?” she called out.

The girl remembered the last time she had seen Pearl look as angry as she did now. That time, Trudell had stood at the edge of the yard for a long time as she looked up the river path in the direction of the big house.

With a guilty feeling, that made her squirm, she realized it was just the way she had looked

## Chapter 1

down the path to the slave quarters this morning; with an ache in her heart for the people she imagined she was missing, for the life that went on down there without her. She hadn't heard Pearl approach that other day until the old woman had spoken to her.

"What you'se doin there?" Pearl had asked.

Trudell had skittered away from her like a startled critter.

"I'se ain't doin nothin," she'd said.

Pearl had folded her arms in front of her and glared down at the girl who'd struggled to find a reason that might sound believable.

"I'se waitin for my mammy to come get me," she had said.

It was a lie and the old woman knew it. She had looked hard and cold, just like she looked now as she came down the path from the slave quarters.

"You'se mammy ain't comin," she had told Trudell. "She's bin sold somewheres and ain't comin back today or any other day. Soon as you'se stop dreamin and look at what's real, better off you'se goin to be."

Trudell remembered that she had cried then for a long time. Until today, she had never looked down the path again, for her mammy or any other person.

She stared hard at Pearl as she came closer. Her heart felt heavy as she wondered what the old woman had to say to her this time that had made her look that way again. Her body reacted to the fear she felt. Her arms crossed over in front of her chest and as her hands tightened on her arms, she felt her fingernails dig into her skin.

“What’s the trouble, Mammy Pearl?” she asked again.

She recognized fear and sadness in the way the old woman held her body; they were evident in her clenched fists, in her set face and in the way her shoulders drooped.

“A fisherman found a girl floatin in the river up at the levee,” the old woman announced as she came into the yard with long, fluid strides that spoke of her considerable height.

The chickens ignored the protests of the rooster and ran in front of each other as they tried to keep up with her.

## Chapter 1

It was long before noon but the river already seethed under the hot hand of the oppressive air. The girl plucked at her smock where it clung to her in wet blotches.

“Who was it?” she whispered as she thought about the few people she had met since she’d come to live at the hut.

Pearl stopped and two of the chickens bumped into her legs, fell over and righted once again, gave an indignant shake to their feathers, fluttered away with a squawk and began to cluck and scratch in the dirt with their sharp claws. The old woman lifted her apron with both hands and dabbed at her eyes before she let it fall again.

“At first, they don’t know who that girl is. Both plantations count peoples to see whose missin a slave afore they found her name,” she told Trudell.

“Was she from Winslow’s?”

Pearl shook her head.

“It was a girl from the McLean plantation.”

“Why don’t they know right off who she was?”

“She’d just come here.”

Pearl’s face was pinched and more wrinkled than the young girl had ever seen it before. Her eyes were wet and red like they’d been rubbed. She seemed to avoid meeting the girl’s worried look. Trudell was frightened by Pearl’s expression and she blurted out the question that burned in her mind.

“Was it my mammy?”

Pearl looked at her then. Her expression had changed to one of astonishment.

“Silly talk,” she said. “You’s mammy’s bin sold somewheres for four years.”

“But she said she’d come for me and you’s looks like you’s knowd that slave ...” the girl offered.

“I’s bin tellin you’s that you’s mammy’s never comin back.”

Trudell wilted under Pearl’s glare.

“I’s knows that,” she said.

She looked down at her bare toes where they wiggled in the dust.

“I’s never saw the drowned girl,” Pearl said in a voice so low the girl looked up at her and strained to hear, “but know her sure

enough; the fear in her heart, the longin for home, the hurt she's seen, 'cause I'se bin like that girl."

"But you'se didn't drowned you'se self," Trudell protested. The old woman's eyes looked fierce.

"Maybe, she didn't do that," she snorted. "Maybe, she was runnin away and forgot this is an island. Maybe, she just fell in and couldn't get out."

Pearl stopped talking and took in great gulps of air as if it wouldn't take much to drown her either. Panic rose in the young girl's throat and she felt the stretch of her widened eyes. Tears streamed down the old woman's cheeks as she pushed the air from in front of her with both arms, like a swimmer who floundered.

"I'se seen too many death, too many pain," she said as she made her way past the girl and went into the hut.

Trudell thought she would not be welcome if she followed the woman inside so she plunked herself down in the meager shade provided by the side wall of the hut.

She knew very well that the drowned girl couldn't have been her mammy but the idea that it might have been stuck in her head.

"Part of me's eight years old," she mourned, "I'se a chile still waitin for my mammy to get me."

Trudell shifted her position. She felt annoyed with herself, irritated that she had whispered those words out loud. They had sounded foolish even to her.

"That's why she says I'se talkin 'silly talk'.

She dug her fingers into the dirt, brought some of it up in her cupped hands and threw it toward the river. The exercise gave her no pleasure.

"I'se twelve now," she told herself. "Pearl said so and if'n I'se don't know that's true, I'se believe it 'cause I'se believe Pearl."

Another thing she regretted was saying out loud that she was still waiting for her mammy to come back. She understood very well that once people went away, they didn't ever come back.

"Sides, it's not true," her mind raged. "I'se want to stay with Pearl."

## Chapter 1

For the next hour, she worried about what had happened to her mammy after she had left the Winslow plantation. It was the not knowing that the girl had trouble with. She also wondered about the way Pearl had reacted to the young woman's drowning but she soon had something else to think about.

"I'se hurtin," she acknowledged to herself.

Even as she crossed her arms over her stomach, she realized she'd had aches on and off all morning. She moved her position again and felt something sticky between her legs. She poked the place with her fingers and encountered wetness. When she brought her fingers up to where she could see them, they were bright red. She knew at once that it was blood.

"Mammy Pearl, Mammy Pearl," she yelled as she got up, clattered across the porch, and ran into the hut.

Pearl was punching dough, something that always calmed her down and gave her great satisfaction. The old woman stopped what she was doing when she saw Trudell's frightened face.

“What is it, girl, what’s wrong?” she shouted as she wiped her hands on her apron.

The girl held up her fingers.

“Blood’s comin out of me! Is I’se dyin, Mammy Pearl?” she cried.

As far as she was concerned, blood always came with death, like the chickens in the yard that ran around headless with blood spurting out of their necks before they fell down dead.

“And my belly’s hurtin,” she added.

The girl found it hard to believe that Pearl just smiled at her predicament as she put the dough by the fire to rise. The old woman gave her a rag to put between her legs and cut up some onions to boil for a hot poultice she could hold against her stomach.

“You’se growin up, that’s all tis.”

“I’se ain’t dyin?” she persisted.

“Stop that silly talk, girl,” Pearl said.

As if the day wasn’t catastrophic enough, a wind soon began to buffet the hut. Trudell could hear it roar as it gathered itself together, raced toward them and slammed into the structure time and time again. She put both hands over her ears.

## *Chapter 1*

“This here hut is stronger than it looks,” the old woman assured her.

The rain came with the wind. Not the soft drops that the girl liked to catch in her mouth but vicious volleys that tried to pierce the roof and turned the yard to mud.

To add to the hullabaloo, the river slapped against the outside wall of the hut. Water began to run in across the floor.

“It’s the river man gettin all riled up,” Pearl pointed out. Climb onto the bed, Trudell, we’d better get our feet up.”

The girl could feel the old woman’s body shaking as they sat on the narrow bed built along the wall and sought comfort in each other’s arms.

“I’se shoulda knowd there’d be a storm,” the woman told her. “There was quiet, heavy air and it was hard to breathe.”

“And the birds stopped makin noises,” Trudell added.

The assault lasted all day and kept them both confined to the hut. When the din died down at last, Pearl opened the door to assess the damage the storm had left behind.

“Lord, almighty, that storm’s the worse I’ve seen in more than twenty years,” she reckoned. “I’ve ain’t seen nothin like that 1824 wind storm until I’ve seen this today.”

The girl could see for herself what had happened. The yard the old woman swept every day with an old corn broom was filled with debris and bits of wood.

“A big mess,” Pearl muttered as she thought about the work it entailed.

The rooster strutted around on a survey of his own while the hens stood near their shed and watched. Trudell closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“It smells nice out here,” she said. “It’s not hot and heavy no more, like it wanted you’s to lie down and stay still.”

“The wind’s taken it away,” Pearl said.

“And the rain washed the leaves,” The girl’s voice conveyed her delight as her eyes opened to a splash of vivid colour. “Did you’s see them bright colours afore?”

Pearl patted Trudell’s curly head.

“And look at the oaks,” the child went on as she pointed in the direction of the track

*Chapter 1*

that led to the big house, “there’s branches lyin on the ground.”

“The moss got sopping wet. It got too heavy for the tree,” the woman told her.

“And the river splashed over and it’s sulkin in pools on the trail.”

Pearl chuckled at the description.

“I’se thanks the Lord every day that you’se come to this place,” Pearl told Trudell as she squeezed the child at her side. “You’se let this here ole woman see with new eyes.”

The child tugged on Pearl’s skirt till the old woman looked at her.

“Then I’se not a worry to you’se like you’se allus sayin I’se is?”

Pearl smiled.

“You’se a blessin, sure enough,” she acknowledged, “even if’n you’se is a run-away slave and that’s the part that worries me ‘cause I’se have to hide you’se all the time.”

“But that’s not right,” Trudell said in the angry voice she always used when the subject was mentioned, “I’se didn’t run away, my mammy left me behind.”

“There ain’t no right or wrong ‘bout it,” Pearl told her. “That’s the way it is, chile. You’s a slave, just like me, and if’n a slave girl don’t turn up where she’s ‘sposed to, they say she’s run away and start lookin for her.”

As the girl grumbled about how wrong it all was, the old woman turned in the doorway and wagged a finger under her nose.

“Now don’t look like that, Trudell,” she said. “How many times you’s got to be told you’s got to face what’s real? The world you’s live in is nothin like what’s in them pictures you’s draw.”

The girl’s expression clouded up. She stood as tall as she could and shrugged a truculent shoulder.

“You’s talkin ‘bout the town I’s drew in the yard with a stick one day while you’s was away,” she accused. “I’s thought you’s would like it but you’s made me sweep it away.”

“I’s liked it,” the woman nodded her head. “I’s just ain’t seen nothin like it afore. I don’t want you’s gettin notions in you’s head that ain’t real, that’s all.”

## Chapter 1

Trudell knew Pearl spoke the truth but somehow she was also aware that she had an innate knowledge of the buildings, lanes and towns that she could create on a piece of paper or a section of flat ground. She could not explain, even to herself, how such a thing could be.

“It’s real to me,” she pouted.

Pearl held the child close to her. Her voice softened.

“I’se never seen a chile afore who can see the things you’se do but you’se belong to this here world at Winslow plantation. If’n massa Winslow finds out I’se got you’se here, he’s gonna want you’se back, for sure.”

Pearl pushed Trudell back into the hut and shut the door. The two of them sat down again; the old woman in the rickety rocking chair that somebody had thrown out of the big house and Trudell on the stool beside the open fireplace that someone had built from river stones. It covered half the wall with its array of metal hooks, cooking plates and shelves.

“I’se sorry to be a trouble to you’se, Mammy Pearl,” the girl persisted. The words

were laced with sarcasm and held some of the anger she had felt earlier. She glanced sideways to gauge the old woman's reaction.

"Silly talk," Pearl said and proceeded to ignore the girl.

Trudell picked up the bag of boiled onions that she had set aside when she went to the door and held it against her aching stomach.

"I'se shoulda knowd we was fixin to have a storm," the old woman said again. "There was signs and for the river to come over its banks, that ole river man must've got mighty upset 'bout somethin."

She muttered under her breath as she referred to the spirit she believed lived in the river behind the hut. The girl pushed back the quick thought that the river man might somehow have sensed her distress when she'd discovered she had started to bleed. It was an errant thought as she didn't even believe that the river man existed.

"You'se allus talkin 'bout the river man but I'se ain't seen him," Trudell rolled her eyes in frustration.

You'se don't need to see him," the old

## Chapter 1

woman chastised, “You’s got to notice when he want to tell you’s somethin.”

“What would the river man be upset for?” the girl asked.

Trudell surmised that if anybody knew the answer to that question, it would be Pearl. She was like one of those newspapers they had in Savannah only they had words that were all written down and the woman just remembered words in her head.

“Could be ‘cause they’s almost finished buildin that Fort Pulaski over to Cockspur Island,” the old woman said. “It’s a disgrace, chile, what folks’ve done there.”

Pearl got up to pour them both some tea. Once she sat down again, she added to what she had told the child already.

“They’s carted bricks from Savannah. They’s bin stirrin up the river with their ole steamboat so it ain’t no wonder the river man is beside hissself.”

“How’d you’s know so much, Mammy Pearl?”

“That’s what massa Winslow asked me,” Pearl laughed. “I’s told him somethin that

he didn't know and didn't find out till he went to Savannah. He come back and asked me that question."

"What did you'se tell him?"

"I'se told him I'se listen. That's all, chile, I'se listen."

"Did he believe you'se?"

Pearl laughed again.

"He thinks I'se got some kind of magic. I'se not gonna worry if'n he thinks that 'cause it keeps him away."

The old woman frowned as an old memory came into her mind.

"Massa Winslow lost his mama when he was a small boy, just like you did, only his mammy died," Pearl explained. "I'se bin here a long time, chile, so I'se knowd what happened."

Pearl stopped talking but Trudell had become curious.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Massa Winslow's pappy was a kind man," the old woman began. "It's 'cause of him I'se got to live in this hut away from the slave quarters. He liked the baskets I'se

## Chapter 1

made for the plantation and he wants me to be happy.”

“Why weren’t you happy?” Trudell asked.

Pearl only smiled and went on with her story.

“Massa Winslow shoulda let me care for the boy but he left the island and got hisself married to a woman. He brings her back and she ruins his life and his boy’s life too.”

“What she do?” the girl asked as she sat up straight, her two eyebrows lifted like question marks above her wide open eyes.

“That woman was mean. When the chile cried for his mammy, she locked him in a closet.”

Pearl rocked slowly back and forth as she remembered. Trudell held her breath as the woman sipped at her tea. She could hardly comprehend such horror.

“I’se told that woman that she could bray the devil in but she’d never bray him out and that’s what she did to the poor boy. There was nobody to stop her.”

“Why didn’t his pappy stop her?” the girl cried out unable to stay quiet a moment longer.

“His pappy didn’t want to lose his woman. Then young Ezra Winslow got sent away to school and when he come back, he was grown,” Pearl shrugged.

“What happened then?” Trudell’s voice came in a whisper.

“He hit the woman and she left,” the old woman remembered. “She didn’t come back.”

“What happened to his pappy?” the child breathed.

“He went off with the woman and he didn’t come back neither,” Pearl shrugged again.

Trudell thought about the boy who had grown up without love and turned into the man who owned the rice plantation.

“I’se would have loved him,” she decided as she burned with kinship for the poor motherless boy. “Someone shoulda loved him, he had no mammy.”

“Promise me you’se won’t go near that big house, chile,” Pearl’s voice rose as she reached over and grasped Trudell’s arm, “I’se don’t want massa Winslow to know about you’se.”

## Chapter 1

Trudell nodded her head and smiled. Her eyelids drooped with drowsiness induced by the bag of boiled onions that warmed her stomach and eased her pains.

“Right now, I’s don’t want to go no other place but here,” she said as she surveyed the entire hut from where she sat beside the open fire. One wall was piled up to the rafters with the baskets Pearl made for the plantation. There was little room left for the bed built of boards that straddled the opposite wall, the small table, the rocker where Pearl sat and the stool she sat on herself.

“This hut by the river is the best place in the world to be,” the girl decided.

“You’s got to learn to listen,” Pearl said. “It’s important. When I’s go to a praise meetin in the slave quarters or I’s go to the big house for somethin, I’s listen to what folks say. There’s no other way to learn.”

The fact that the old woman went to places without her was a bone of contention to Trudell and she turned petulant again.

“I’s don’t like when youse go to places without me,” she said in a disgruntled tone.

“How can I’se listen if’n you’se don’t take me with you?”

The woman raised her voice again.

“Don’t complain,” she said. “If’n some peoples knowd you’se here, they will come and take you’se. You’se wants that, girl?”

The child shook her head. The old woman’s voice took on a more sympathetic tone.

“You’se got to listen, not just to peoples who want to tell you’se somethin but to the rocks and the trees and the river.”

The girl found it hard to believe that those objects had the power to give signs to people about minor and major happenings. At the risk of making Pearl angry, she decided to be honest with her.

“Why should I’se listen to the river man?” she asked the woman. “When I’se don’t believe in him.”

“If’n’ you’se don’t listen to him,” Pearl said, “you’se might be ‘sprised when he picks up this hut and tosses it in the river.”

“Oh, Mammy Pearl,” Trudell’s voice rose in alarm, “I’se don’t believe the river man could do that.”

*Chapter 1*

“Girl, I’s seen the river man so angry he put that whole island, where they’s done built Fort Pulaski, under water. There was a wooden fort there afore and he washed it out to sea.”

Pearl paused to consider her words and then she smiled.

“This time they used bricks. Maybe, that’s what made the river man mad.”

“Did the river man give you’s a sign the night I’s come to you’s?” the girl’s voice trembled.

“Don’t look back, Trudell,” Pearl scolded with a shake of her head.

Despite the admonition, the girl could not stop her memory of the night she had been left behind.