

## Chapter 8 - Trudell Begins Her New Life

In all her life, Trudell had never known that such a wonderful place, as the big house at the McLean plantation, existed. The ceilings were high and the long, wide hallway ran from the front of the house all the way to the back letting errant breezes cool the house.

The rooms were filled with light and air and the doorways were hung with curtains; thick with swags and tasseled. The girl longed to reach out and stroke the rich fabric but feared she would cause offence if she did so.

"I expect a lot from the people who live in my house," Miss Emily told her. "Do you think you will be able to do well here?"

Trudell kept her eyes focussed on the polished floorboards at her feet. The pleasant scent of orange blossom filled her nostrils. She thought it might come from one of the shrubs that nearly reached the ceiling in one corner of the room.

"Yes, Miss Emily," she said.

"First of all, it is important that you look into the eyes of the person with whom you are speaking."

Trudell was a quick learner. She put her shoulders back and looked straight at the older woman.

"Yes, Miss Emily."

The owner of the plantation smiled. She tugged on a velvet rope beside her chair.

"This is what we are going to do," she said. "Samuels will be here in a moment to introduce you to the others in the house. He will assign you some work that you are to carry out until next week when I will see you again."

When Samuels entered the room, the girl recognized him as the elderly black man she had seen on the morning she had brought the baby to the plantation. He stood just inside the doorway while Miss Emily introduced her to him.

"This is Trudell and I want you to take her in hand, Samuels. She will need a uniform, a place to sleep, a job of work and some idea of how the household runs."

"How do, Missy," Samuels said.

"He extended his hand and when she offered hers in return, he shook it.

"Everything will feel a little odd at first," Miss Emily said, "but before long you'll be used to the way things are."

By the next week, she felt like a different young woman. She stood straight, her hands splayed out on the sides of her uniform. She did not hesitate to meet the eyes of her employer. She could tell by the lilt of her own voice that the pleasure she felt in her new position found expression as she gave her report.

"I don't know how to thank you, Miss Emily," she began.

The woman waved her hand the way mammy Pearl had often done to dismiss the girl's words. Miss Emily had noticed with pleasure that she had picked up the use of 'I' and 'you' in the short time she had been there and she commented on that before going on to other things.

"You look very nice in your uniform, Trudell," she added.

The girl smiled and stroked the fabric of her skirt. It felt as soft and shiny as it looked.

"I've had a good report about you from Samuels," Miss Emily went on. "Tell me what you have to say about the experience."

A kaleidoscope of images filled the girl's head and she didn't know where to begin.

"I've got a nice soft bed and my own room," she said.

It was the first time in her life she'd had a bed never mind a room. For as long as she could remember, except for when she'd been hurt, she had slept on the floor on a blanket. She bit her lip as she felt a small pinch in her chest and put her hands on her heart as a longing for Pearl washed over her for a moment but then she smiled again.

"I've met Clara."

She had never had a friend before and she liked the close camaraderie that had developed between her and the other housemaid.

"And there's Mrs. Samuels who helps me."

The cook reminded her of Pearl. She had the same tart way about her, the same kind spirit.

Her employer clapped her hands as she listened to Trudell's excited account.

"But what do you think about the work you've been assigned?" Miss Emily asked.

"It ain't work, Miss Emily. It's pure joy. And I got to know where that there smell of orange blossom comes from."

Miss Emily laughed.

"I polished floors all week," she felt proud to relate, "and orange blossom was an ingredient in the wax I used."

"It is called scent," the woman instructed. "Smell is something that feels bad in your nose."

Trudell grinned. She repeated the word and all of a sudden she felt inadequate and looked down at the carpet.

"There's a lot for me to learn in a place like this," she said.

"Yes, there is," Miss Emily agreed.

"I don't want you to think that I don't like the smell," she added.

Miss Emily laughed again and put one hand to her side as if she had an ache there.

"So, tell me," Miss Emily urged, "what was the best part of the week?"

"It was whenever I saw the girl chile."

Trudell felt certain that for her the best part of the hour, the day or the week had been to catch a glimpse of the child who had been born in Pearl's hut.

"I watched the nursemaid and Clara run through the halls to catch the chile when she tottered away from them in her bare feet," the girl remembered.

She had looked on as they tried to stop the little girl when she climbed into the potted plants and threw dirt onto the floor. She had seen them tote her away to her own part of the house. The child had gurgled and laughed and cried and screamed throughout the week.

"The very best part of all was when the little girl used me as a defence against the rest of them," she told Miss Emily. "She hid behind me and clutched my skirt in both tiny little fists."

The fact that the child would trust her to that extent pleased her beyond measure.

"What a little devil you are!" Clara scolded as she tore the child away.

"Don't you call her that," Trudell chastised.

The little girl had smiled at Trudell in such an angelic way it had made Clara laugh.

"And you're a deceiver as well," the nursemaid added.

The child looked back at Trudell over the nursemaid's shoulder until they were out of sight.

"Her name is Grace," Miss Emily said. "I called her that because when I found her outside my door, it was such a lovely, unexpected gift. I had wanted a child for such a long time and I had given up. That day, I thought that God had sent her to me."

The girl frowned. She had half a mind to tell the woman that God had nothing to do with it because she had decided that all by herself.

"Miss Emily ..." she began.

Miss Emily raised her hand to stop Trudell and nodded as though she understood what the girl had been about to say.

"I believe that God knew I wanted a child and he knew that the baby wanted a mother so he used you to make sure we met each other. Does that make sense to you?"

Explained like that, it made perfect sense and the girl could only agree.

"Yes, Miss Emily."

"That very afternoon," the woman went on, "I had told Samuels that by the grace of God, we had survived the storm. A few hours later, I was able to tell him that by the grace of God, I had a child. It seemed her name had to be Grace after that."

Miss Emily's words made the girl think of how Mammy Pearl and her man had survived on the slave ship. They could have been thrown into the sea like the others but they had been spared. According to Miss Emily, that would have been by the grace of God.

"I like the name," she decided.

"Would you like to learn how to be my daughter's personal maid?"

Trudell couldn't speak. It seemed as if all of her words had fled from her mind and all she could do was nod her head.

"It will mean that you will have to learn many things. It will take a lot of time and effort on your part. Are you sure you want to take this on?"

She nodded again.

"There is one thing for you to think about, though."

Miss Emily no longer smiled. Her eyes were clear and cold. They looked directly into Trudell's and the young woman felt choked as a lump formed in her throat and tears built up behind her eyelids.

"Pearl wants you to stay away from the Winslow plantation," Miss Emily explained. "That was part of our bargain with Ezra Winslow and if you don't want to abide by that rule, then you will not be allowed to look after Grace."

The same words she had said to Pearl the week before raced round her mind and came out of her mouth.

"But I'll never see Mammy Pearl again."

Miss Emily waited until she had herself under control again.

"Pearl says she will come here to see you. She wants you to wait for that and not to be impatient. Can you do that?"

The thought of the little girl called Grace made up her mind.

"I want to but I don't understand why Mammy Pearl has gone and done that."

"One day you will," Miss Emily promised.

One afternoon, a short time later, Trudell was summoned into the drawing room where a young man with big, codfish eyes waited with Miss Emily. He looked just as surprised to see her as she was to see him.

"But, Miss Emily, this is a black woman!" he said as he got to his feet.

"Yes, Trudell is black," Miss Emily concurred.

"You can't expect ...." the flustered young man stumbled over his words. "I can't teach a black woman .... I won't."

Miss Emily rose to her feet and pulled the velvet rope.

"Then you will not teach my child, either," she said. "Good day, Sir,"