

1828

The letters of a person, especially of one whose business has been chiefly transacted by letters, form the only full and genuine journal of his life.

—Thomas Jefferson to Robert Walsh, Monticello

Sons of a revolution fight for liberty. They give blood, flesh, limbs, their very lives. But daughters . . . we sacrifice our eternal souls. This I'm sure of, as I stand in the quiet emptiness of my father's private chambers.

I'm here now because my father is dead and buried.

And I'm left to make sense of it all.

My gaze drifts from the alcove bed where Papa drew his last breaths to his private cabinet beyond to the adjustable mahogany drawing desk he brought from Paris so many years before. Light filters down on me from the skylight built into the soaring ceiling and plays off the mirrors to make me feel as an actor upon a stage, playing a secret role.

Even knowing that he'll never return, I hesitate to settle into the red leather swivel armchair upon which my father struggled to write his letters, fewer and fewer every year. His hands, his eyesight, and endurance all failed him in the end. But never his intellect; *that* he had to the last.

From between the pages of a leather-bound book on his revolving book stand, I find a sketch. A drawing of an obelisk monument and tombstone to be inscribed with what he wished to be remembered for—and not a word more.

Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of American Independence
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom
and Father of the University of Virginia

I brush my fingertips over the sketch and imagine the coarse granite that will bear these words and stand eternal guardian over Papa's final resting place. Alas, memories are made of more than inscriptions in stone. They're made, too, of the words we leave behind. And my father left so many!

Most of his meticulously ordered, copied, and cataloged letters are stored in wooden cabinets here in his chambers. It will take time to go through them all, but time is all I have now. So I start with the earliest letters, warmed to hold the fading pages in my hands, overcome with pride at seeing his confident script soaring so eloquently across the yellowed paper.

A glass-paned door opens behind me from the direction of the greenhouse where my father's mockingbirds sing, and I swivel in the chair, startled to come face-to-face with my father's lover. Sally Hemings doesn't knock, nor does she apologize for the intrusion. She strides into the space as if she belongs here. And she does. For as much as my father cherished the seclusion of this sanctum sanctorum, almost until his last breath, this was her domain.

But now Thomas Jefferson is gone, and Sally and I have come, at last, to the final reckoning between us. We stand, two aging matriarchs amidst his books, scientific instruments, and a black marbled obelisk clock—the one over his bed that counted down

the minutes of his glorious life and now counts down the moments until we will follow him.

Sally, who bears a tawny resemblance to my lovely, petite mother, wears a crisp white apron over the gown she sewed from colorful calico. And she surveys the space much as I did moments ago. Silently, I rise to my feet, towering over her in my dark and somber gown with hair that has gone from red to reddish brown—the image of my father.

In the reflection of the gilt mirror, we are matched reflections of the ghosts in this room. But it's my father's presence that we both feel now. I suppose some might say she was his beautiful mulatto slave wife and I the plain white wife of his parlor. We both birthed children for him: hers of his bed and his body; mine as a daughter of his bloodline, for his legacy.

He loved us both.

But only his love for me can be remembered.

Standing self-possessed as an ancient priestess, holding a bundle of relics collected from her life with my father, Sally informs me, "I'm taking these." A jeweled shoe buckle Papa wore as the American minister in France. An inkwell that serves, perhaps, as a remembrance of the immortal words he wrote. An old discarded pair of spectacles. Holding them tight, she doesn't say why she wants them. Perhaps it's because it was through those spectacles that he looked at the world and saw her.

I see her, too.

With black glossy hair shot through with only a little gray, the long length pulled back in a chignon at her neck, Sally possesses a beauty that hasn't faded. Is it sadness I

see in her expression for the loss of a great man who left us both alone and in ruin? Or is it defiant triumph?

I cannot know, so my gaze drops to the bundle in her hands and I nod. She's entitled to the spectacles. She's entitled to more than he gave her—more than *I* can give her.

She nods, too, the culmination of a lifetime of conversation between us—sometimes spoken aloud, sometimes in passing glances and measured silences. But now we have nothing left to say. Sally looks one last time at the alcove and my eyes follow the direction of hers, taking note of how his bed sits between his private dressing room and his study—caught between his private and public life, just as he was.

Just as Sally and I have been.

Finally, she shakes her head, as if pulling herself from a memory, and steps toward me. With quick, deft fingers, she unlaces the ribbon at her hip where the key to this room has dangled for nearly forty years. She surrenders it to me, just as he surrendered to me the fate of everything and everyone that once belonged to him.

Our hands meet in the exchange of the key—her bronzed fingers against my pale, freckled ones, and it feels like a circle closing. We've made this whole journey together, from the time we were innocent children on my father's mountain when this grand house was a mere shadow of itself. I meet her eyes wondering if she knows the sin I'm about to commit and if she would give her blessing, or if she dreads it like I do. But Sally's eyes are like hardened amber in which secrets are preserved but trapped beyond reach.

She doesn't grant permission, nor does she ask it anymore.

She merely walks away.

And I let her go, because she's a part of the story that must remain untold.

I'm then alone again in the silence of this sacred place where my father's belongings remain exactly as he left them, as if awaiting his return. The solitude is both suffocating in its finality and protection, like a cloak that shelters me against a storm, that protects my very nation.

Returning to his desk, I take my seat once more. And I set my mind to the task I and I alone must do.

For, my father was the author of our Independence. His pen unleashed one revolution after another by declaring *that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*

Deceptively simple words—the greatest words he ever wrote.

Perhaps the greatest words anyone has *ever* written.

Words that inspired men to pledge their lives and fortune to the cause, that inspired women to make countless sacrifices, and inspired nations to embark upon an experiment of freedom. My father's words gave voice to a movement. His voice was the voice of a nation. A voice that changed the world.

Who am I to censor that voice?

I am a daughter who must see to it that he is remembered exactly the way he wanted to be. I recall the instructions he'd written for his tombstone: *and not a word more.*

Which is why I light the wick of a candle in one of the holders ingeniously, and somewhat dangerously, fastened to the arms of my father's chair. And with shaking hands, I hold one of his sacred letters above the flame. In so doing, I feel the heat, as if a prelude to hell's fires awaiting me.

But I have defied God before.

My heart is already heavy with sins and secrets and betrayals. I'm stained with the guilt of slavery. I have counted as a necessary sacrifice the blood of patriots. I have denied the truth written upon my own skin in the black and blue ink of bruises. I have vouched for the character of men without honor. I have stayed silent to avoid speaking the truth. What is one more silence when it preserves all we have sacrificed for?

That will be my legacy.

The service I render my country.

For I'm not only my father's daughter, but also a daughter of the nation he founded. And protecting both is what I've always done.