



LOIS LEVEEN

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A Novel

THE SECRETS OF
Mary Bowser

P.S.
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INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

Prologue

*M*ama was always so busy. Busy tending to Old Master Van Lew and Mistress Van Lew, Young Master John, Miss Bet. But she was never too busy to riddle me. She said it was the first kind of learning she could give me, and the most important, too. Be alert, Mama meant. See the world around you. Find what you seek, because it's already there.

"I spy with my little eye, where the bird goes when he doesn't fly," Mama said one mid-day, her words floating on the Richmond heat as we carried empty cookpots through the yard to the kitchen.

I sing-songed the riddle to myself, eyes half closed against the bright Virginia sun. What could she mean, with no birds in sight? Then I spotted it, set in the crook of the big dogwood.

"Oh, Mama, a bird's nest!"

But Mama frowned. "I made a rhyme to riddle you, Mary El. You're old enough to rhyme me back your answer."

Whenever Mama said *you're old enough*, it meant something new was coming. Something hard I had to do, no matter what—cleaning all those fireplaces, polishing the silver, helping her serve and clear the Van Lews' meals. Old enough was never good news yet. And now old enough was ruining our favorite game.

I pouted for a bit, until Mama said, "No new riddle, until you answer that one proper."

I wanted the next riddle so bad, the words burst out of me. “Up in the tree, that little nest, is where birdie goes when he wants a rest.”

Mama smiled her biggest smile. “A child of five, rhyming so well.” She set her armload of iron pots down, scooped me up, and looked to the sky. “Jesus, I know my child ain’t meant for slavery. She should be doing Your work, not Marse V’s or Mistress V’s.”

She kissed me, set me back on the ground, and picked up the cookpots again. “But meanwhile, I got to do their work for sure.”

Mama’s gone now. Though she worked as a slave all her life, she saw me free. She even put me onto the train to Philadelphia so I could go to school.

But a decade up North taught me about being bound in a different way than all my years in slavery ever did. Living free confounded me more than any of Mama’s riddles, until I puzzled out the fact that I could never truly savor my liberty unless I turned it into something more than just my own.

Once I realized that, I knew I had to come back to Virginia. Knew I was ready to take up the mantle of bondage I was supposed to have left behind. Except instead of some slave-owning master or mistress, it’s Mr. Lincoln I’m working for now.

Mama, your little girl is all grown up, and still playing our best game. I am a spy.

One

*M*ama and I woke early, put on our Sunday dresses, and stole down all three sets of stairs from the garret to the cellar, slipping out the servants' entrance before the Van Lews were even out of bed. We walked west down Grace Street, turning south past the tobacco factories to head toward Shockoe Bottom. The Bottom was nothing like Church Hill, where the Van Lew mansion sat above the city. Buildings in the Bottom were small and weather-worn, the lots crowded with all manner of manufactories and businesses. I held tight to Mama's hand as we ducked into a narrow passageway between two storefronts along Main Street.

Papa stood tall on the other side of the passage, same as every Sunday, waiting for us in his scraggly patch of yard. As soon as he caught sight of me and Mama, a smile broke across his face like sunshine streaming through the clouds. He hugged and kissed us and then hugged us some more, looking me over like I'd changed so much since the week before that he feared he might not recognize me.

I may have changed, but he never did. My papa was so lean and strong, his muscles showed even through his Sunday shirt. His rich skin shone with the color and sheen of the South American coffee beans that made Richmond importers wealthy. Large brown eyes dominated his narrow face, the same eyes I found staring back

at me whenever I passed the looking glass in Mistress Van Lew's dressing room. What a strange and wonderful thing, to see a bit of Papa in my own reflection. All the more delightful when I pestered Mama with some peevish five-year-old's demand and she chided, "Don't look at me with your papa's eyes." Mama's complaint told me that I was his child as much as hers, even during the six days a week we spent apart from him.

Standing beside Papa, Mama seemed small in a way she never did when she bustled about the Van Lew mansion. Although she was not a heavy woman, she was fleshy in a way Papa was not. Her skin was even darker than his, so deep and rich and matte that whenever I saw flour, I wondered that it could be so light in color yet as sheenless as Mama's skin. Her brow and eyes curved down at the outside edges, making her seem determined and deliberate, whether her mouth was set straight across, lifted in one of her warm smiles, or, as was often the case, open in speech.

But for once, Papa was talking before Mama. "About time you ladies arrived. We got plenty to get done this fine morning." Papa spoke with the soft cadence of a Tidewater negro, though he hadn't seen the plantation where he was born since he was just a boy, when his first owner apprenticed him to Master Mahon, a Richmond blacksmith.

Mama's voice sounded different from Papa's, as sharp as though she and Old Master Van Lew had come from New York only the day before. "What can we have to do at this hour on a Sunday?"

"High time we return all that hospitality we been enjoying at the Bankses. I stopped over there on my way home last evening, invited them to come back here with us after prayer meeting."

"That whole brood, over here?" Mama eyed Papa's cabin. The four-room building had two entrances, Papa's on the left, and the one for Mr. and Mrs. Wallace, the elderly free couple who were his landlords, on the right. Even put together, Papa's two rooms were smaller than the attic quarters where Mama and I slept in the Van

Lew mansion or the summer kitchen where the cook prepared the Van Lews' meals. One room had but a fireplace, Papa's meager supply of foodstuffs, and a small wooden table with three unmatched chairs. The other room held his sleeping pallet, a wash-basin set on an old crate, and a row of nails where he hung his clothes. The walls were unpainted, outside and in, the rough plank floors bare even in winter. The only adornments were the bright tattersall pattern of the osnaburg curtains Mama had sewn for the window and the metal cross Papa had crafted at Mahon's smithy.

The way Mama frowned, I could tell what she was thinking. Broad and tall, Henry Banks was a large presence all by himself, a free colored man who risked enslavement to minister to the slaves and free negroes who gathered each week in the cellar of his house. A two-story house big enough to accommodate him, his wife, and their six children. On those Sundays when Mama, Papa, and I were invited to stay after prayer meeting for dinner with their family, I savored the chance to amuse myself among all those children. So though Mama frowned at Papa, I was delighted to hear that the whole pack of youngsters was coming over today.

Besides, Papa was already soothing Mama. "It's warm enough to do our entertaining outside. All we got to do is borrow some chairs and plates and whatnot from the neighborhood, so it'll all be ready when we get back here." He smiled. "Honestly, folks'd think you married a fool, the way you carry on, Minerva."

To everyone else in Richmond, colored or white, Mama was Aunt Minnie. But Papa always called her Minerva. Whenever he said the name, she made a grand show of rolling her eyes or clucking her tongue. So I figured Mama wasn't nearly so put-upon as she pretended to be, planting her hands on her hips and shaking her head. "Don't you start with me at this hour, Lewis, don't you even start."

Papa winked at me. "Don't you dare stop, she means. And I ain't one to disobey her." With that he hustled me and Mama

about, gathering up what we needed to serve our guests before he hurried us off to prayer meeting.

All through the morning's preaching and praising, my head buzzed in anticipation of hosting company. Each week, when Mama, Papa, and I walked back from meeting, I took care to lag a few paces behind, then come barreling up between them, my arms flailing in the air. Mama and Papa would each grab one of my hands and swing me forward, calling out, "Caught." Once caught, I walked the rest of the way between them, my hands in theirs, my face beaming. But this Sunday I was so excited to be with the other children I forgot all about getting caught until Papa turned around, his big eyes searching for me. I wrinkled my nose at him and went back to chattering with Elly, the oldest and prettiest of the Banks girls. When I looked ahead again, Papa was no longer watching me.

Once we reached the cabin, Papa hauled a bucket of water from the well, and Mama called me from my playmates to help serve our guests. When I carried the first pair of filled cups to where Reverend and Mrs. Banks sat with Papa, I marked how Mrs. Banks was shifting in the straightbacked chair, trying to catch a hint of shade from the lone box elder tree in the tiny yard.

"I'm sorry there's no ice for your drinks," I said as I served. "Papa don't have an ice room, but if you come visit my house, we can give you lots of ice and cushions for your chairs, too."

In a flash, Papa yanked me to him. He turned me over his knee and swatted me hard.

"That big house ain't yours, Mary El, it's the Van Lews'. And you don't mean no more to them than the cushions or the chairs or any other thing they got for their comfort. Understand?"

He kept his tight hold on me until I murmured, "Yes, Papa." As soon as he let go, I ran into the cabin. My Sunday joy curdled to shame at being treated so in front of Elly and the other children, and I sobbed myself to sleep on Papa's cornhusk pallet.

I woke hours later, to the sound of low, angry voices in the next room.

“The child need to know her place is with me, with us, and not with them Van Lews,” Papa said.

“Well, you’re not gonna teach her that with a spank,” Mama replied. “Slaveholders can’t get enough of beating on negroes, you need to do it, too? To our own child?”

“What should I done? Smile and pat her on the head? Mary El can’t be acting like she better than other folks just cause a rich family own her. This is our home, whether them Van Lews let you here one day a week or one day a year.”

“Lewis, you think I like it any better than you? Wake to them, work for them, doze off at night to them, every moment aching for you. But what are we supposed to do?”

“For one, you can stop carrying on about *we in the house* this and *we in the house* that. You in the house like them pretty horses in the barn. There to do the Van Lews’ work till you no use to them anymore, and then—”

Mama caught sight of me, and sucking her teeth hard to cut him off, she nodded toward where I stood in the doorway.

“What’s the matter, Papa?” I asked. “What’d Mama and me do wrong?”

He rose and walked toward me. I shrank back, afraid he might hit me again. My terror drew a look of bitter contrition I’d never seen before across Papa’s face. He knelt and reached out both hands, palms up to me.

“Mary El, you more precious to me than a ice room or fancy cushions or anything in that big house. Am I more precious to you than them things?”

I wanted to please Papa, to set everything right between him and me and Mama. Slipping my small hands into his large, strong ones, I nodded, my own shame at being spanked fading next to all the fear and humiliation in Papa’s question.



Old Master Van Lew was always a shadowy figure in my childhood, already suffering from the breathing troubles that everyone whispered would kill him. In the fall of '44, not long after we'd exchanged the canvas floor coverings for wool carpets and taken the mosquito netting off the beds and paintings, he finally passed.

As Mama and I dressed the drawing room in black crepe, preparing for mourners who would call from as far away as Pennsylvania and New York, all she said was, "We in the house have plenty to do, good days or bad, happy times or sad."

We in the house meant the seven Van Lew slaves. Me and Mama. The butler, Old Sam, who toiled beside us in the mansion and slept across from us in its garret. Zinnie, the cook, and the coachman Josiah and their daughters, Lilly and Daisy, who were quartered together above the summer kitchen at the side of the lot. We knew things people outside the Van Lew family couldn't have guessed, things the Van Lews themselves wouldn't care to admit. We listened close when Young Master John stumbled in after an evening at Hobzinger's saloon, reeking of whiskey and raving about being made to stay in Richmond to tend the family business, when at the same age his sister, Miss Bet, was fanfared off to a fancy school in Philadelphia. We discovered the embroidered pink bonnet that the widowed brother of Mrs. Catlin, a neighbor woman, sent spinsterish Miss Bet, cut to pieces and stashed inside her chamber pot. Mama taught me how we were to mark such things and, with a few spare words or a gesture, share them among ourselves whenever the Van Lews' backs were turned.

We in the house were always decently dressed, while some Richmond slaves didn't even have shoes to wear on the city's unpaved streets. Though Old Master Van Lew's family held slaves, including Mama and Old Sam, when he lived in New York, neither Old Master Van Lew nor his Philadelphia-born bride could quite

abide the way human chattel were treated in Virginia. We were Van Lew property. To Old Master and Mistress Van Lew, keeping us suitably clothed and fed was a measure of both their financial and their moral accomplishments.

The Van Lews were Northerners enough that when their housekeeper set her eyes on a handsome young blacksmith twenty-five years earlier, they understood she meant to be a proper wife to him. Though they made it clear they would neither sell her nor purchase him, they consented to the match. But no law tied my mama to my papa, or either parent to me.

Much as we slaves studied the Van Lews, still we didn't know whether they had more capital or creditors. Which meant we didn't know what might happen to us when the time came for the settling of Old Master Van Lew's estate. The morning that George Griswold, the Van Lews' family attorney, called on our widowed mistress, we lurked outside the drawing room, knowing we had as much interest in the terms of the will as the Van Lews themselves.

We heard how the mansion and all its contents—that meant Mama and me and our fellow slaves, along with the inanimate possessions—were held with a handsome annual income for Mistress Van Lew, until her death or remarriage, at which point they would pass to Young Master John. He was sole heir to his father's businesses, hardware stores in Richmond and Petersburg, which Griswold reported had substantial assets and little debt. Miss Bet would receive a ten-thousand-dollar inheritance, a share of the annual yield from a small market farm the family kept southeast of Richmond, and residence in the mansion until her death or marriage.

That last stipulation had Zinnie snorting to Mama, "Guess we'll be waiting on Miss Bet till the Good Lord take her home."