

BLACKBOARD BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Beverly
Jenkins

Indigo

"Beverly Jenkins has reached
Romance Superstardom!"

—The Detroit Free Press

Indigo
by
Beverly Jenkins

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The art of creative writing is in and of itself a solitary endeavor, but you can't be successful without guidance and input. It's a bit like trying to build a house with a single brick.

So, thanks to the following individuals for their support.

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It is to be regretted that effectual efforts were not made at an early date to furnish a history of the services of men (and women) of color.

—William Butler Yeats, 1838

Prologue

September 7, 1831

Dearest Katherine,

I hope my letter finds you well. I am aware it has been over a year since my last correspondence, but circumstances have prevented me from writing before now. Dearest sister, all my life you have cautioned me against making rash decisions. Had I taken your wise counsel to heart maybe I would not be paying so dearly for that flaw now, but the die is cast. For the love of a woman named Frances Greaton, I have forsaken all I am and given my freedom over to her master. I am a slave now, Katherine. My worth is no longer measured by how well I can steer a ship or the languages I've mastered, or the lands I own, but rather by my strength, my weight, and the health of my teeth. According to Master Greaton I am very valuable—much like a prized steer.

To her credit, Frances was furious upon learning what I'd done and refused to speak to me for days. But Katherine, to be near her I would carry water in hell. This is a hard life, especially for those in the fields. Master Greaton has for the present put me to work in his clerk's office where I help with ledgers and accounts. I realize now, after much raging from Frances, that I could have arranged to be with her in a less dramatic fashion, but at the time the captain of my ship refused to delay leaving port until a more rational solution could be found. So I chose love over freedom—possibly the last free choice I will ever make in this life.

Frances will give birth to our first child around the New Year. Master Greaton has agreed to keep our family together in exchange for my lifelong servitude, but Frances doubts the pledge will be honored by his heir should Master Greaton pass on, especially if the child is male. So, she and I have made a pact to somehow send our child north to you. No child should be made to suffer the repercussions of my decision. Slavery is truly an abomination against God. It is against the law to post this letter to you and I am risking much by doing so, but I cannot let you think I have died at sea.

Pray for me.

*Your loving brother,
David Wyatt*

December 12, 1833

My dearest Katherine,

My worst fears have come true. Old Master Greateon was killed in a carriage accident and, as Frances predicted, Greateon the Younger has not honored his father's pledge. My Frances has been sold Deep South. The anguish and rage I feel over our forced parting pales in the face of the horror of watching the child of our love sold also. Her name is Hester. Greateon's ledgers say she has been sold to the Sea Islands of the Carolinas to a man named Weston. Find her, Katherine. Move heaven and earth, but find her. If you must, offer the owner everything I possess in both land and monies to secure her freedom. Alas, it is too late for me. I have contracted a wasting disease that will not let me see the New Year. My Frances is gone from me forever and I grieve for her every day. However, I will go to my grave less haunted if I know Hester is safe in your loving care. To help you in identifying Hester, Frances severed the tip of the little finger of her left hand the day she was born in anticipation of this tragedy. Both Hester and Frances cried for days after the severing, but the cut healed clean. I hereby relinquish all my accumulated Michigan properties, possessions, and monies to you in Hester's name. Goodbye, dear sister. My love for you will live on in my sweet daughter.

*Your brother,
David Wyatt*

Chapter 1

Whittaker, Michigan
October 1858

Three loud thumps echoed through the floor beneath Hester's feet—a signal that her guests had finally arrived. She quickly moved aside the rocker, positioned as always in front of the big bay window, then the heavy rug underneath which hid the trapdoor. The visitors were late by more than two hours and she wholeheartedly hoped the delay resulted from the fiercely raging storm outside and not some unforeseen trouble.

Mr. Wood, an old Quaker friend of her late Aunt Katherine's, appeared first on the steps leading up out of the tunnel that ran beneath the house. He acknowledged Hester with a terse nod and handed her a drenched and shivering tarp-wrapped child of no more than five years. Hester carried the boy to the fire and set him down as close as safety would allow, then quickly returned to offer assistance to the others in Mr. Wood's party.

In all, he'd transported six on this trip: one man, and a couple with their three children.

The small family had fared well considering the dangers of the journey. Hester knew from her own experience what they must have experienced escaping north. Along with having to place their lives in the hands of strangers, even such dedicated conductors as Mr. Wood, fleeing slavery—and the only life they ever knew—had probably been a very difficult decision to make. However, they'd ridden the "train" together, and unlike some of the other guests who'd passed through Hester's station on the Underground Railroad, this family had arrived north intact.

The sixth visitor had not fared as well, Mr. Wood explained as he and Hester hurriedly made their way down the length of the lamp-lit earthen tunnel. "I wanted to take him on down to Harsen's Island, but he's hurt pretty bad."

The tunnel emptied out onto the banks of the Huron River, and outside the wind and rain swirled ferociously. Hester, fighting the force of the storm, pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. She had to squint against the

deluge in order to help Mr. Wood undo the false bottom of the wagon. The man inside lay motionless. To Hester's surprise, he was dressed and rouged as a woman. The injuries had drained the color from his mulatto-gold complexion, but the angry red swelling and dark bruises associated with a severe beating stood out brilliant against the pallor of his skin. With the rain pouring over his face, he looked like a corpse.

"There's a price on his head!" Mr. Wood shouted to be heard in the storm. "You sure you want to do this?"

"I don't care," Hester screamed back. "Bring him in."

Between them, Hester and Mr. Wood managed to drag the unconscious man back through the tunnel and into the room built behind the wall of the house's underground cellar and finally settle him atop a cot.

"Who is he?" Hester asked softly. Kneeling beside the unconscious man, she listened to his shallow breathing while she hastily shrugged out of the wet shawl. One side of his face had borne the brunt of the beating. The eye was swollen shut, the skin around it had turned a vivid violet and black.

"The Black Daniel."

With a shocked expression, Hester turned his way. "Are you certain?"

Mr. Wood nodded a grim confirmation. "It'll be very dangerous hiding him, Hester."

She agreed. His exploits were legendary; slave catchers had been hunting the elusive Black Daniel for years for leading slaves north. His condition left her few options, however. He didn't look up to going on to the next station, a thirty-mile trip, especially not in the bottom of a storm-jostled wagon. He'd have to stay.

Hester gently opened his heavy woolen coat. Her stomach lurched at the deep red stain saturating the right side of the old dress he wore. "Are you going on tonight?" she asked Mr. Wood.

"Not with this storm," he responded while she ran her hands lightly over Daniel's upper torso and shoulder blades in search of less visible injuries. A soft touch over the surface of his ribs made him moan and his battered face twisted with pain.

"I believe he has some broken ribs," Hester said, looking up into Mr. Wood's concerned blue eyes. "He needs more help than I can give. If you're not going on, I need you to fetch Bea Meldrum and bring her here."

Bea lived about a half mile up the road and did most of the doctoring for

their community, and right now Hester prayed she was home. "Help me get him out of this coat, then go get Bea."

At fifty-six years old, Mr. Wood was still a formidable-sized man, but the strain of raising the Black Daniel so Hester could slip the coat off showed plainly in the old man's face. The Black Daniel was big. He towered over Mr. Wood's six feet by more than a few inches. He also looked to outweigh him by a good fifty pounds. Mr. Wood described it as trying to raise a mountain.

When she freed him of the coat, Hester tried not to dwell upon the blood staining the sheet where the Black Daniel had lain, and silently signaled Mr. Wood to ease him back down to the cot.

Hester placed a hand on his damp forehead; fever had set in. He was beginning to shiver and shake. Because he'd been concealed in the false bottom of the wagon, his clothing, except for the blood staining it, felt relatively dry, so Hester left the dress, and the trousers he wore beneath, on him for now. After she and Mr. Wood removed the Black Daniel's boots, another maneuver which seemed to cause him much pain, she drew three large quilts from the old chest in the corner of the room and covered him gently.

Mr. Wood left to fetch Bea, and Hester went back up to the house to check on her other guests. The children were sleeping soundly in one of the bedrooms on the second floor of the big old house. Their parents were seated and talking quietly in front of the fire in the dining room. At her entrance, both looked up with tired smiles. After assuring Hester they'd had enough to eat, she directed them to the room they would have for their time here. In another few days, after they'd regained their strength and adequate clothing had been acquired for them and their children, they would decide whether to go on into Canada or try to carve out a new life somewhere else.

There was still a bit of hot water left in the kettle from the tea Hester had made earlier in the evening so she poured what was left into a small basin. Then she refilled the kettle and put it to boil just in case Bea needed the hot water. After covering the basin with a clean towel, she went in search of some clean rags that could be used for bandages. Ready, she extinguished the lights in the front rooms and went back to the man in the cellar.

Hester placed a hand on the Black Daniel's forehead – and felt fever-driven heat scorch her skin. In the short time she'd been away, he'd grown hot as a flatiron. Dampening one of the rags in the warm water, she gently began

to clean up the cuts and abrasions on his swollen face. She hoped she wasn't causing him any pain, but there was no other way to tend the superficial wounds.

Mr. Wood returned with Bea a short time later. Hester considered Bea one of the oldest and wisest people around and was glad she had arrived to help with this situation. Bea declared that the wound in his side had come from a knife. She treated the ugly gash and stitched it closed, along with the wicked slashes across the backs of his hands. Three ribs were indeed broken and she bandaged him gingerly, though tightly, to give them support.

Bea also discovered why the removal of his boots had seemed to cause such pain; the left ankle was injured and very badly swollen. She wrapped it to keep it still.

When she was finished, Bea looked up and pronounced, "He'll live, although it's apparent someone wanted it otherwise." She gathered up her supplies and slowly got to her feet, saying with mock severity, "Lord, I hate getting old."

Bea had celebrated her sixty-seventh birthday last August First. She was a valuable member of the community, and Hester knew that when she inevitably passed on, there would be a hole left in everyone's hearts.

Bea shrugged back into the old olive-colored slicker she'd discarded earlier and said, "You know, Hester, beneath all that bruising is probably a very good-looking man."

Hester could see nothing of the man's true features beneath the injuries. "Why do you say that?"

With all seriousness, Bea replied, "Because the Good Lord would not put a mule's face on a man as finely made as that."

Hester, accustomed to Bea's frankness, simply shook her head and chuckled. The old woman could always be counted upon to bring a smile. Hester looked down upon the sleeping man. Earlier, Bea had cut away the old dress he'd been wearing to facilitate her work. He lay now on the cot, chest bare but for the white bandages encircling his ribs. Hester had seen a man's bare chest only two or three times in her adult life, but even she knew Bea spoke truth; he was indeed handsomely made. The chest appeared sculpted, the arms and shoulders powerful.

Bea's voice broke her reverie when she asked, "Hester, who is he?"

Hester looked quickly to Mr. Wood, who gave an almost imperceptible