

# WATERS PLANTATION



MYRA HARGRAVE MCILVAIN

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*Every writer needs a cheerleader.  
Stroud is mine.*

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# Chapter One

*August 1875*

*Washington County, Texas*

Albert Waters never admitted to anyone that he didn't sleep well on the night of a full moon. He figured with no woman to disturb, sleep would come in good time. Tonight, was different. He lay awake to listen, one last time, for the boy...he must stop thinking of Toby as a boy. He was a man—a Harvard man—at least he would be in a few weeks.

Those precious days had ended when Toby would ride home on weekends from school at Soule or Baylor—summer days of working in the fields and finishing up to plunge naked into the creek, or in winter when they warmed themselves next to the iron cook stove. Toby always rattled on about his school buddies or some wonder he'd just read and wasn't sure he believed.

The old clock had chimed four times when he heard the mare's hooves pounding down the road and around the big house to the corral gate. Surprised at Toby riding the animal so hard in the summer's intense heat, Al raised up on his elbow and pulled back the curtain to watch his son dismount. The moon painted a ghost-like sheen on the new barn and stables as Toby, almost as tall as the mare's head moved in and out of the shadows. He pulled the saddle from the animal, threw it against the fence. Instead of walking the mare to cool her down, he paced back and forth across the lot.

Al sat up, waiting to hear the bad news. Instead, he heard the squeak of the back screen and the click of his son's bedroom door. Something must have gone wrong at the class farewell party. The boy had been jumpy before he left. Took an extra-long time to iron his shirt and brushed his wiry curls more than usual. Al thought of teasing him about primping to go courting, but he remembered how he would have hated such an intrusion.

A familiar angst crept over him, and he leaned back onto the bed. The wild oats that people kept warning him to expect had not been sown, at least not enough to make him worry. Toby made him proud at every turn, but he always wondered if the truth were out, would his son feel the same about him?

Al kept shoving aside the image of the two o'clock train.

Unable to get back to sleep, he swung himself off the bed, went through a round of stretches the army surgeon told him he needed to do for the rest of his life to keep that left leg from drawing up like a piece of old leather. He wasn't sure it helped; the limp never got better, and the leg still looked as gnarly as an

oak branch. But just in case it did a little good, Al gritted his teeth through the painful exercises every morning.

Sweat ran down his torso as he lit the kerosene lamp next to his bed and carried it to the washstand beside the well on the back porch. He stripped off wet, limp drawers. The bucket of water he poured over his head felt like ice cascading down his naked body. He grabbed a towel and scrubbed himself warm and then padded barefoot back to the old wardrobe. After he pulled the crisply ironed shirt over his head, he balanced against the wardrobe to shove each foot into stiff trousers. His gaze fell on the old burlled walnut cradle that had been used by the Waters' sons for as far back as his grandfather. For three solid years, he had rocked that cradle with his toe every single night to lull Toby to sleep.

They had agreed that Toby would spend this last night with his school friends and breakfast would be Al's treat—eggs, beignets, and Creole coffee—the New Orleans specialty they usually prepared together. He had never learned to roll out dough to make the beignets as fluffy as Violet's. From the time he was big enough to sit on the kitchen counter and watch her nimble slave fingers massage the floured rolls, he imagined that someday he would be able to do it. Toby had caught on quickly, and even with hands larger than Al's, the boy showed unusual dexterity. "These are surgeon's hands," Toby always said when he kneaded bread dough, filleted a fish, or sewed a button on one of Al's shirts.

The warm kitchen caused the dough to rise faster than he expected. The grease had started heating when he heard Toby washing up on the back porch. "You're right on time," he shouted.

Early light framed the boy, almost as tall as the door. His stubborn curls lay wet against a lean face, tanned to the color of caramel.

Al glanced up from the frying beignets. "You hungry?"

"Not really." Toby reached for the pot, poured warm milk into a cup to cut the strength of the Creole coffee that he refused to drink straight the way Al loved it.

Al looked at the lowered head to see if it might be a hangover. The boy drank a little, never anything like he had done. He tossed a couple of hot beignets in powdered sugar before scooping them on a plate and raking in some eggs. "See if this wakes you up."

"I *said* I'm not hungry." Toby's eyes, reflected in the yellow lamplight, looked angrier than his words that were hardly more than a whisper.

Al pulled the pan of grease off the hob, shoved the skillet of eggs to the back of the stove, poured himself a cup of coffee, and slid onto the bench across from his son. "What's up, Toby?"

"Why do you call me that?" He hunched over his cup, both hands gripping it in a vise.

Al shook his head, a blank stare on his face. "What do you mean?"

"It's not my name. My name's Tobias. I don't remember you ever calling me by my name. Violet is the only one who ever called me Tobias."

Al felt the old fear rising in him, the dread he had lived with since the boy's birth. "You were so little. Tobias seemed like a big name for such a small

package.” Al spoke the truth.

“I’ve been bigger than you since I was twelve.”

Al shook his head, groped for an answer. He wrapped his fingers around his cup to dull the tremble.

“All right. I’ll ask straight out. Before I leave today, I want to know the truth. Was my mother your slave?”

Al thought the coffee was going to come back up. “God, no, Toby—Tobias. You know me.” The words hung in his craw, the implied innocence, the image of a man of principles.

“What I know for sure is you always preach...you always warn me about having strong seeds. How I’ve got to respect the ladies. What about you?” The cottonwoods filtered the new sun sending slits of light, shining threads of dancing dust particles on Tobias’ clenching jaw. “You never speak of my mother. Until the day she died, Miss Samantha never claimed me as her nephew. She didn’t even claim *you* as her husband. She stayed across the road in the big house and glared down at me from her bedroom window. I’ll say it plain. Am I a nigger like Jarrell Packerman said last night?”

Tobias shoved down a surge of guilt as he stared at his pop—a spiffy dresser who always wore ironed shirts and creases in his trousers even when he went to the fields—slumped now over his coffee like a man hit in the gut. He had obviously tried to make this last breakfast special, hadn’t even combed his curly brown hair, only rubbed it dry. He had always been awkward rolling out the beignets. This morning the splattered flour was mixed with sweat and turned into globs of paste streaking the front of his shirt.

Last night was supposed to be a farewell event for all the men in his class. He was the only one going so far away, and he planned to ask Patricia Sutlebury to write to him. If she agreed, he intended to kiss her. He had practiced asking if she’d wait for him to become a doctor, move off her family’s big plantation and live with him in Brenham. He was going to say he’d never be as rich as her father, but a doctor’s family would have respect from the townspeople.

The party had turned into a raunchy drinking match with some of the men talking wild. He finally maneuvered Patricia onto the porch overlooking the Sutlebury’s garden. The moon made her pale face and exposed shoulders look like porcelain, and her hair all curled and twisted with ribbons glistened like spun gold. He had reached for her hand when Jarrell Packerman swaggered out the door like a Banty rooster. “You think you ought to be out here? Courting Miss Patricia?”

“Jarrell, don’t talk so ugly. We’re saying goodbye. Toby’s going all the way to Boston.” Her voice sounded soft, almost mocking.

“You’re drunk. Go back inside, Jarrell.” Toby wanted to hit him in the mouth, knock that pasted-down yellow curl off his forehead, but that would ruin everything. He needed to be alone with Patricia, see if he had a chance to court the most beautiful girl in the woman’s college. Every man on campus stared at her and hoped she’d look his way.

Jarrell leaned on the porch railing, bent suggestively toward Toby. “It’s one

thing for your ol' man to get your kind into Baylor. It's another when you start courting one of our women. They may mix in New Orleans, but we don't mix here."

The words played a trick on Toby's mind, held him between surprise and insult. Before he could get his wits about him, Patricia's eyes squinted, she bent toward him like she was looking for worms in a pile of cow shit. She picked up the edges of her soft summer dress and shrugged her naked shoulders. "I'm not staying out here while you children fight." She turned, her eyes lowered away from him, making a show of stepping carefully in the dark.

Toby watched her go, wanted to cry out, beg her not to listen to that raving drunk. Instead, he walloped Jarrell so hard that his sorry ass landed beyond the porch railing in Mrs. Sutlebury's rose bushes. He didn't look back to see the damage. He held himself tight, sucked in his breath to keep stinging tears from spilling over. When he reached the stable, he saddled the mare and rode her hard until she was sweating and he was cooled off. Jarrell's words echoed—pulsing with the beat of his heart.

For as long as he could remember, he had wanted to ask about his mother. Did Al miss her? What was she like? Did he get his height from her? They always talked—about the crops, about tearing down the old slave quarters to build the new barn, and even what to stock in Al's stores in Brenham and Independence—but never about their strange life living in the little frame house across the road from Miss Samantha. He knew Jarrell had to be lying, trying to worm his way into Patricia's life. Besides, Al would never deceive him. He was the most upright man Toby had ever known. But, as he rode, knowing that Jarrell Packerman's words had destroyed his chance with the only girl he had ever loved, the moonlight flashing through the canopy of trees like flames licking an iron stove, fueled his anger. The questions burned into him like red-hot embers.

Toby stared at Al, slumped over his coffee like a whipped man. "I always figured you married Miss Samantha after my mother died in New Orleans. We moved here, and you brought Violet to care for us."

The breath had gone out of Al like a punch in the gut. *What made me think I could avoid exposing my real self? Avoid telling him about my stupid decisions—never getting over the love affair with Amelia, holding onto her memory like a sick calf. Then, being a spineless younger brother, promising Charles I'd take care of his damned plantation and his damnable wife.* He looked at Toby. "For several years I stayed drunk. I ran the stores in Brenham and Independence. I went to New Orleans to buy for the stores until the trips finally became reasons to drink."

"You don't drink now."

"You stopped me. When I bent over that crib, you took hold of my finger as tight as you're holding that coffee cup. You gazed at me with those honey-colored eyes with such a knowing look, as straight and intense as you're staring at me right now. I knew clear down in my boots that I had to be a new man. I was a father, and I was going to act like one."

"You never drank again?"

“Never. Right now, I’d give this twelve-hundred-acre farm for a drink. I’d drink until I didn’t have to face you.”

“Tell me about her. Was she a nigger?” He was startled at how easy he spit it out.

Al’s fist came down on the table, sloshing coffee from both cups. “Don’t say that word. It’s the worst thing people say about black skin.”

Toby spoke through clenched teeth, his face reddening. “Last night, they got sappy drunk, named all the high yellers on all the farms. Jarrell Packerman bellowed the loudest. Then, he laid it out pretty clear. Apparently, my status has always roused suspicion.”

Al sucked in his breath and stared at the grown man sitting across from him. *God, don’t let me lose him.* “Your mother, Rachel, was the very tall and beautiful daughter of a white Baptist preacher in New Orleans. One night as I staggered back to our townhouse in the Quarter, I passed her father’s church. She’d finished cleaning the place, getting it ready for the Sunday services. I often saw her cleaning her father’s house and the church. She scooped her arm under me and sort of carried me home. I think she planned to save my soul.” *I can’t tell the boy that I had spent the evening thinking of Amelia, longing for her, remembering how we walked along the same street, how we went back to the townhouse and made love for half the night.* “I got your mother pregnant that night.” He lifted his head. “And yes, I was already married to Samantha.”

“Why did the preacher’s daughter clean the church? At night?”

Al squeezed his fist between his knees and kept his gaze on his son trying to read the pained expression in his eyes. “She was one of her father’s slaves. She cleaned several places, and she always put the church last.”

“Slave? So, she *was* black?” He tried to keep the tremor out of his voice. Tried not to show the fury that felt like a volcano about to erupt.

“She had very light skin.”

“That’s what I am. I’m a nigger even if you’re too high and mighty to hear the word.”

“Tobias, you’re a decent, brilliant man.” Al reached for his hand. “I wanted to avoid this talk. I always hoped you’d settle for being my son and that would be enough.”

“Enough?” He brushed Al’s hand away. “Did she die when I was born? Or, is that another lie?” He kept his eyes from blinking; he wanted Al to feel chained against a wall of truth.

“Her father refused to look at her when he found out she was pregnant.”

“He shamed *her*?” Tobias felt his face on fire.

“You’ve seen enough around here. You know there’re plenty of light-skinned freedmen working on the old plantations.”

“You were the righteous planter who freed his wife’s slaves before the war.” Toby’s lip curled. “But you were no different—a planter who got a slave pregnant. Then you hid it.”



On the night Toby was conceived, Al went to Antoine's, asked for the same table where he and Amelia had sat in a corner away from the bar. He intended to eat the pressed duck like before, but he never got around to ordering. He dozed off, still clutching his empty bourbon glass. Antoine shook him awake and offered to call a carriage. Sober enough to be embarrassed, he insisted he could walk. With Antoine's arm lifting him from the chair, he straightened up, gritted his teeth and concentrated on walking toward the door and the January chill.

Rachel had always been friendly in a timid, childish sort of way, but that night she came out the gate as he stumbled along using the church fence for support. "Let me help you, Mister Albert." She tucked her arm through his

She smelled good, not like someone who scrubbed and cleaned all day. He felt flattered and amused that she'd been waiting for him. "You needn't try to sober me up. I'm a lost cause."

She didn't respond. Instead, she pulled him into the townhouse and up the stairs, all the time reaching for the buttons on his shirt and then helping him out of his trousers.

His hands running along her body as she undressed him brought an arousal he had ignored since Amelia sailed away. When she slipped out of her thin cotton dress and lay across him, the hunger took on an urgency.

"I see you walking so many nights. So lonely. I can make you happy."

Her flesh felt smooth and firm. "You're just what I need."

"I hate my father's house. I can keep yours really good." She kept moving against him until he wanted to explode.

"I think we can arrange that," he mumbled, knowing it was a lie, as he moved into her eager little body. That was when he realized she was innocent. Instead of pulling back, he let himself go.

He woke to the head-splitting screech of birds just outside the French doors, his mouth a cave of soured whiskey. When he opened his eyes, her smile tore a hole of guilt right through him.

"Good morning, Mister Albert. I'll cook you some good breakfast." She sat up. "Unless you want me to love you some more."

"I'm so sorry." He scrambled out of bed, pulled on his trousers, and fumbled to gather her clothes off the floor. "Let's get you dressed." He kept saying, "I was drunk. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you."

"Oh, no. I want to come here."

"But, I can't do that. I'm so sorry." He guided her to the door and kept trying not to look at her huge brown eyes searching his face, unable to understand. Finally, she nodded and skirted quickly up the drive, around the corner, and out of his sight.

He cleaned up, refused Violet's offer of breakfast, and walked directly to his bank. Jerome DeHart, fresh and handsome in his morning coat, bounded across the lobby to embrace him. "Are you well, my friend?"

The words stung because Al understood their meaning. “I am more alert than I’ve been in some time. I’ll be away for several months. I want your bank to handle my affairs, see that Violet gets what she needs to run the townhouse.”

“How long will you be gone?” Jerome took Al’s arm and led him away from the bustle of the lobby.

Al’s pride did not let him admit that he was running from an entanglement, but Jerome’s gentleman code of nods and shoulder squeezes served as message enough between the old friends.



“I got back home in time for planting and getting all the merchandise from New Orleans into both stores. Your mother came to the townhouse looking for me. She told Violet that she was expecting my baby.”

The boy’s eyes pooled, dark as midnight. “Did you go to her? Did you help her?”

Al looked away, focused on the sun glinting on the lamp to avoid looking into that piercing gaze. “I contacted Jerome DeHart. He bought her from her father and then completed her manumission papers. She moved into the townhouse. Violet’s husband had died, and she was glad to have the company.”

“So, I’m a quadroon?” His fingers stroked his cheek as if he could feel the pigmentation.

“No. You’re an octoroon. Your grandmother was also the daughter of a white slave-owner. That’s as far back as I know.”

“That’s how I’ve passed. I’m as white as you. And my hair isn’t nappy. It curls like yours.” Tobias stood, his long arms reaching for the coffee pot. He refilled his cup, the dark liquid sloshing onto the oilcloth table cover. Slumping back on the bench, he ignored the mess.

“You have a lot of white blood in your veins, Tobias.”

“Yep, sorry white slavers who used my women.”

“Your character has not been tainted. You’re a decent and brilliant man.” Al clenched his jaw, holding himself steady as a drunk trying to look sober.

“You’ve let me spend my life passing. I’m a black man, and I’ve been passing because I didn’t know any better.” *Don’t cry. Don’t let the bastard see you cry.*

“Your skin is white.” Al poured milk into his coffee. “Look how the coffee gets lighter each time I add more milk.” He emptied the pitcher into the cup. “Now, you can’t tell it was ever black.”

Tobias shook his head. “It still tastes like coffee.”

“It doesn’t look like coffee.” Al felt like a beggar, pleading for a handout.

Tobias shoved the cup aside. “How about explaining why we always lived in this little house across the road from Miss Samantha’s big house?”



When Violet's letter arrived near the end of October, the crooked half-drawn words spelled out Rachel's death and Tobias left an orphan. Al read it over and over trying to picture the child that was his, the child that never should have happened.

The night before he left for New Orleans, he went to Samantha's room and knocked on the door that she kept shut. Not that he ever wanted to sleep with her. From the beginning, it was a business marriage—he fulfilled his promise to his brother to run the plantation, and he agreed to her marriage proposal to keep the neighbors believing it was all very proper. His terms required that she let him free her slaves and hire them to work the land—one of the few things he'd done in his life that made him proud.

Samantha stood warming in front of the fireplace. When he told her that he intended to bring home his son, her face twisted with fury, her eyes cold as her marble body. "I looked the other way when Charles' slaves gave birth to white babies—Hébert, Anthony, and only God knows how many more. I will not look away when you openly shame me by bringing your child into this house."



"Your aunt Samantha knew I was bringing you here. When I arrived with you and Violet, this house was finished."

"You never intended to raise me, did you?" Toby's gut felt like it would cave in. "You never planned to move back to New Orleans and claim me, did you?"

"I thought I could keep the peace if you and your mother lived in the townhouse with Violet. She could raise you, and I would see you when I came to town."

"Then my mother died and ruined your plans?"

"It's true. I took the easy way. It's also true that everything changed when I looked at you." Al wanted to grab him, cradle him like he'd done so many times when he'd had a bad dream. But, this wasn't a bad dream, and Tobias clearly did not want his comfort.

"So, why did you name me Tobias if it's such a big name?"

"Violet said your mother wanted you to carry her father's name. He was Reverend Jonathan Tobias." Al tried to see inside the staring eyes. "Do you remember when you started studying Greek? You found out Tobias was the Greek version of the Hebrew biblical name for 'Goodness of God'?" *Please hear my love for you, boy.*

"I remember wondering why you never used it."

Al's mouth tasted like acid. He wanted to spit, to puke. "Lack of courage?"

Tobias grabbed his cup in both hands and gulped down the last of the coffee. He shuddered and slammed the cup down. "It's like this crappy Creole coffee. I never fit in your world. All this time you've been arranging my life so I can pass. I'm a black man as sure as any of the field hands the co-op hires to pick cotton." *And I've lost everything my white skin offered. Patricia Sulebury is gone forever.*

The big clock in the parlor chimed eight times. Tobias pushed back from the

table, started for the door. He clenched his teeth, torn between wanting to grind his pop into the earth and aching at the sight of him whipped like an old sweaty dog. “Hébert will be here with the wagon at half past eight.” He looked down at his pop’s head bowed over his cold cup. “Since Hébert is the same shade as me, and Mama Zoé is just a shade darker, I suppose they’re my relations.”

Al could not hold back the tears that burned his eyes. “They’ve never claimed it. Hébert was born on our family’s Louisiana plantation before your uncle Charles and Samantha moved here with their slaves. There are several families around here, including at the Packermans, who are light-skinned Negroes.”

Al wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand and looked at the kitchen—a mess like their life—splattered flour, cold beignets soaking up grease in the big black skillet, and hardened eggs stuck in the pan. He’d leave it for Mama Zoé who always came across the road from the big house to make sure they left the place clean. Al had started hiring her to look after Violet before she died and to help with the cooking and cleaning as much as Violet would allow. Until the day she passed, Violet demanded to be the one caring for him and for Tobias. “I raised you, and I’m raising Tobias,” she’d said. “I don’t aim to stop watching over you even if you did bring me to this God-awful place—cold as a dead body in winter. Cooks me in summer like a roasted hog.”

Thinking of her made fresh tears blind him as he dressed for the trip to Brenham. The occasion called for a suit and a big-brimmed hat even if they were taking the freight wagon. He had planned to make saying goodbye easier by staying busy—the way he’d handled all the brief farewells when Tobias went to Soule and then to Baylor. He’d managed those times by doing what he loved most—working on the inventory in both stores—planning what to order from New Orleans. Today, he would haul merchandise up to Independence and then drive back to the Brenham store for a few more days.

Tobias never showed much interest in being a merchant. Unlike Al, the boy had always been a serious student and preferred helping in the fields instead of working in the stores. But Al noticed that he had planned his wardrobe for Harvard as carefully as Al had done when he was a kid and went off to Georgetown Preparatory School in Maryland. When they made the inspection trip to Cambridge and Boston last summer, Tobias had laughed saying the Baylor students wore clothes as stylish as anyone in Harvard Yard. Al did not remind his son that most of his schoolmates’ clothing came from the Waters mercantile stores.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myra Hargrave McIlvain is a sixth generation Texan and a storyteller who began her career writing a family humor column while she raised her two children. After the nest emptied, her background in Texas history led to Austin where she wrote Texas historical markers that line the highways, designate historic homes, and chronicle the lives of cemetery residents.

McIlvain's love of a good story prompted her to write six nonfiction books about famous and infamous Texas sites and characters. Her most recent, *Texas Tales, Stories that Shaped a Landscape and a People*, is a collection of 113 of her favorite Texas history blog posts.

After several years offering Texas seminars, Myra and her husband began taking her classes on one-day historic trips that led to a worldwide tour business. When she retired, McIlvain lectured for the continuing education program at the University of Texas and other venues across the state. She published her first historical fiction in 2012 and is currently working on her fifth, *The Reluctant Bride*.

Whether she is telling stories in her books, her blogs, or her lectures, Myra McIlvain views history as the story of a people, and the people she knows best have made Texas home.