

A NOVEL

JUNIE



ERIN
CROSBY ECKSTINE

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Erin Crosby Eckstine



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Acknowledgments

About the Author

*To my grandmother,
who told me this story and made me believe I could tell it, too.*

Part One

Summer 1860

*Hope smiled when your nativity was cast,
Children of Summer!*

—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Chapter One

Junie wakes up in the red mud, listening to the water that slithers between the rocks in the creek. The faint first light of sunrise slips through the gray moss tangled between black oak branches. The sunshine's needle points warm her bare legs as mud cools her from below. The earth's smell is enchanting after the rain, sharp, metallic, and sickening if you inhale too long, like copper pots on a humid day. The mud takes what should be hard and makes it soft, what should be finished and makes it raw.

The distant crack of the foreman's whip tells her she's not supposed to be here.

She can't get to her feet fast enough. Instinct makes her rub the wrinkles out of her moth-eaten nightdress, but in doing so, she coats it in caked red mud until she is crimson streaked like Granddaddy's pants after he slaughters a pig.

The whip cracks again. There is no time to fix it.

August's humidity swarms her like yellow jackets. She runs, trying to ignore the pounding in her head and the stinging in her bare feet, from stepping on cracked twigs and pointed rocks. The woods are thinning out now; she can see the field and the sun through a gap in the trees. She holds her hands up, measuring the sun's distance from the field line. It sits on the horizon like a freshly cracked yolk, and on days as hot as this one, the McQueens won't wake for breakfast until the sun's at least a half-hand above the horizon.

She has to make it to breakfast. She can't be late for breakfast. She promised Bess she'd help with the laundry, and knowing Bess, she's been out since before day.

It's another mistake, another lapse, another failure.

Junie starts running again.

Bellereine Plantation, owned by the McQueen family, is stripped bare to make room for cotton fields, but the woods that frame the edges stay thick up to the banks of the Alabama River. She's memorized these woods as well as anyone can memorize something alive enough to change, where the best blackberry bushes grow for Auntie Marilla's cobbler, the squeal the squirrels make when the hawk starts circling, the creeks that sprawl like veins from the river, which hide the best skipping stones. Bellereine is the only home she's known in her sixteen years. Sometimes, when she's running, she imagines that the branches and roots bend, allowing her to slip through, like they know her, too.

The whip cracks again, this time too close to be the foreman.

Someone else is in the woods.

It's still too far to the cabin for Junie to make a run for it. She can't stay on the ground; she has to get out of sight.

She searches for a branch low enough to catch and hauls herself up onto the nearest oak tree, wincing as the bark cuts into her clammy palms. She climbs past layers of Spanish moss until the spiderwebs of dried plants hide her from the rusty forest floor, then leans her weight onto the trunk and covers her mouth with her blood-speckled palm.

She's done some foolish things in her life but falling asleep out here has got to be one of the worst.

The whipping is punctuated by the crack of horseshoes on dried sticks. Bellereine is miles away from a town or neighbor, and anybody coming through the county would take the main road. Even the patrollers, a bunch of white men with nothing better to do than chase Negroes, don't come through here. With the river so close, they assume any runaways will drown before they get far enough. Who is down there? She shouldn't look, but her nerves won't settle until she does. She pinches apart the moss and squints to peek.

It's her granddaddy, steering Mr. McQueen's polished wood carriage through the muddy pig path. The horses' legs are covered in red mud, and

the carriage's lower half is filthy. Granddaddy would never take the carriage through here, especially after a storm. Why is he here?

A metal cane bangs inside the carriage. Granddaddy jerks to a stop below Junie's tree as the door slams open. McQueen tumbles out like a bale of hay. On the ground, he holds his knees and vomits.

"Shit, my shoes," rasps Mr. McQueen through the heaving. The smell of sick and corn liquor rises in the humidity. "Tom, where in the hell are we?"

"Outside the main house, sir. Tree's blocking the road a half mile back; must've come down in a storm," Granddaddy says. McQueen retches again. He is drunk, as he always is.

Mr. McQueen owns Bellereine, but he might as well be a guest for all they see of him. He claims he occasionally comes home to settle accounts and mind the crops, but everyone at the house knows it's only to remind the mistress that he's the one in charge. The rest of the time, he sniffs out stiff drinks, dogfights, and any other vice not found in Lowndes County. For most of this summer, all Junie's seen of him has been his piles of sweaty French clothes that make the yard reek of liquor, tobacco, and vomit. The master isn't around enough to cause her any real trouble, but keeping Granddaddy away is enough to make her resent him to hell.

Junie knits her eyebrows, confused. Her days blend together in infinite cleaning and serving, but yesterday was her day off, meaning today is Monday. Why is the master here early?

Suddenly, she sees a pop of yellow and her breath stops cold.

Her sleeping head wrap is hanging from a branch above McQueen's head. Even a white man as oblivious as the master would know a scarf like that belongs to a Negro. Of course, she'd fallen asleep here the one time the road was blocked. Of course, she'd lose her scarf on the one branch next to the master. Luck isn't ever on Junie's side.

That's not what everybody else thinks. Muh, her grandmother, says bad luck has nothing to do with it, that Junie is *carefree*. *Why you always got to be so carefree? Be careful, like your sister.* Junie wants to tell her that she's wrong, that being carefree is a good thing, that the word she means to say is *careless, thoughtless, or foolish*. She swallows the lump in her throat.

“You got anything to clean this up, Tommy?” McQueen asks, hunched over.

The carriage slumps to one side as Granddaddy climbs down. He holds his back with one hand while pulling clean boots from underneath his seat. As he hands them to Mr. McQueen, his eyes catch what the master’s eyes haven’t. Even from high above, Junie sees him shaking his head.

He shoves the scarf into his pocket.

Junie knows what he’s thinking. He’s thinking about what a fool his granddaughter is. He is thinking about whether she’s home, safe in bed, or left for dead somewhere in these trees.

“Let’s get on, Tommy,” McQueen says. “Best we be back and cleaned up before Mrs. McQueen wakes. You know how she hates a mess.”

The horses trot onward, bumping the carriage toward the stables. She wants to call down to her granddaddy, tell him that she’s sorry, that she’s all right, that she’ll never do this again.

But even if she could, she’d be lying.

Precious minutes slip away. Finally, Junie climbs down and hurries to the cabin, which sits where the quarters meet the woods. She nudges the cabin door open to find Muh stretched out on her hay-filled pallet, snoring loud enough to vibrate the pine plank walls. Junie’s shoulders relax a little; a scolding from Muh is the last thing she needs. She starts tidying the disheveled quilt pile she abandoned a few hours ago. It’s been a nightly routine, her tossing and turning until she falls into the clutches of one of her nightmares. When the terror finally lets her go, she wanders out of the cabin and beyond plantation grounds to her spot next to Old Mother, the ancient tree near the riverbank.

Junie slinks to pull her maid’s uniform off its hook and creeps back outside.

The sun has risen over the field. By her calculations, it is still early enough to avoid most punishment, aside from scoldings from Granddaddy and Bess. Junie cuts through the footpath toward the main house until the bright morning light makes her head sting. Her eyes fall on the tall blades of grass, each crowned with a dewdrop. The crickets chirp over the breeze that

brushes through the field. Each breath tastes of green and sweet dew. Junie gazes over Bellereine, turning away from the big house until her view is the field, the sky, and the rising sun.

North toward Huntsville, she has heard, there are hills and mountains, but in Lowndes County, the earth is flat all around. Sunlight brims the horizon like fresh butter on warm grits. She likes it this way, with more sky to take in. Tension fades in her muscles; a faint smile stretches across her lips. She fumbles in her apron pocket for her notebook, made from a few paper scraps sewn with twine. The words, both her own and her favorite poets', are too precious to leave anywhere for someone to find. She thumbs to the first page and reads under her breath.

*Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened*

The lines are from "Tintern Abbey," her favorite poem. She has it memorized, but keeping it in her pocket makes her feel like the limitlessness of the poet's world is within reach.

Is this the sublime she feels now?

Before Minnie died, Junie used to gaze over the land first thing in the morning, or watch the lightning bugs at night and feel a shock in her belly, as though if she could only breathe in a little farther, or open her mouth a little wider, she might inhale the whole world and hold it inside herself. Maybe that is why she ventures to places she isn't meant to go. To chase after the ember that promises a forest fire.

The clock ticks inside her chest. She slips her notebook away and stares across the land.

Her sister used to walk to the house every morning with purpose. When Minnie would see Junie, lost in the sky or mud, she would stomp back, pinch her arm, and drag her to the house, repeating the same phrase:

Only a real fool could see beauty in a place like this.

A sharp pinch stings Junie's arm. A horsefly crawls on her elbow, leaving behind a swelling, red bump. She slaps it away and keeps walking.