



The
Other
Side
of
Free

K R I S T A R U S S E L L

The Other Side of Free

KRISTA RUSSELL


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Summary: In 1739, having escaped from slavery under the British, thirteen-year-old Jem finds himself in the custody of sharp-tongued Phaedra at Fort Mose in Spanish Florida, but his efforts to break free of Phaedra's will have surprising results.

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*This book is dedicated to
the people who built Fort Mose,
those who fought for her,
and those who've made sure her story is told.*
—K.R.





CHARLES TOWN FEBRUARY 16, 1739

Rise up!" Aunt Winnie's whisper was low and insistent. Jem tried to cover his head with the worn rice sacks he used as blankets. The night was shivery and the root cellar smelled of damp. Bright lamplight shone in his eyes.

"Boy looks sickly," a woman said. "You sure he ain't got the fever?"

Jem came awake at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. He was dimly aware that it must be very late, for the stone Aunt Winnie had warmed for his bed was cold against his feet.

"Needs some fresh air and greens is all," Aunt Winnie said. The lantern clanked as she set it on a barrel.

"You told me he was thirteen! Don't look half that."

"You backing out?"

"Too late for that. But I should've looked at the boy before I bargained with you, old woman. This runt ain't good for nothing. Can't even get himself up."

The pallet was yanked out from under Jem and he landed hard on the dirt floor.

"Quick now." Aunt Winnie pulled him to his feet.

He squinted at the dark-skinned woman standing next to her. With a long neck sticking out of her cloak and a black wrap

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around her head, the woman reminded him of a buzzard. Her bony claws clutched at his pallet.

"This here's Phaedra," Aunt Winnie said to Jem. "You're going with her."

"Going where?" His voice was a squeak. What was she talking about? Jem shook his head, but couldn't clear the confusion. "Are you coming?" he asked. Jem didn't like the look of the stranger. He wouldn't go anywhere with her unless Aunt Winnie came, too.

Aunt Winnie spit into the darkness. "Never mind where. I'll be along later." She grasped his chin. Her fingers were warm and smelled of sassafras and pokeberry, sharp but also soothing, like Aunt Winnie herself. Even in the shadowy light, he could make out the dark red stain around her nails. "Promise me you'll do as she says."

Jem glanced back at the younger woman. Something glinted like cold steel in the opening of her cloak—a small silver medalion.

"You must give me your vow." Aunt Winnie raised his chin so she was looking deep into his eyes.

He stared back at her, his resolve evaporating like morning mist over the Cooper River. It was impossible to deny Aunt Winnie. Though not his blood, she was the closest thing to family he'd ever known.

She was also Charles Town's most powerful conjure woman. And Jem knew better than to resist the forces of conjuration.

"I promise," he whispered.

Chapter One

Spanish Florida
October 13, 1739

The fort was eerily quiet. Shadows hung like phantoms in the dark reaches of the yard. Most of the militia had gone to the Castillo de San Marco, the large fortress in St. Augustine. A small group sat around the fire. Big Sunday, who'd been one of the first to escape to Florida, had taken his usual place at the center of the gathering. His half-Indian son, Domingo, had come from his village toting a string of fish he'd speared in the harbor.

"Tell a tale about Brother Rabbit and Brother Fox," Jem said, thinking of the story Aunt Winnie had told him the night he left Charles Town. He'd puzzled over its meaning all the long months he'd been in Spanish Florida.

"Which one?" Big Sunday asked. He stoked the fire with a long stick, releasing a swirl of fiery embers into the moonlit sky.

"The tale where he tricks Fox into leading him out of the Great Dismal." Jem shivered at the images the swamp's name

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conjured: water the color of tobacco spit, tree cover so thick it blocked all daylight, and winding trails that led nowhere. No telling what manner of wild beast lurked within.

Phaedra snorted. "We'd be better off if we'd gone to the Dismal instead of coming here."

Evenings at Fort Mose hadn't been the same since Phaedra started sitting up late with the others. She'd broken the magic of the circle, ruined the spell of the stories. There were almost a hundred people living at the fort, and dozens used to come to listen to Big Sunday's stories. Now most retired early, and those who stayed were quiet, wary of Phaedra's sharp tongue.

"I'd rather face the English across a battlefield than live like an animal in the swamp," Big Sunday said.

Phaedra grunted. "You think we're any different from those critters in your stories? No sir, the Spanish got us stuck out here like rabbits in a trap."

Jem touched the blue Africa beads Aunt Winnie had sewn onto his shirt. He was glad he had them to protect him. "Brother Rabbit wouldn't let himself get caught," he said, hoping Big Sunday would tell the tale.

"Nobody asked you. Make yourself useful and fetch my shawl from our *chosa*." Phaedra kept her eyes on the sweet-grass basket she was working on. Her fingers snatched at the fronds again and again, until each strip was bent and shaped to her will.

Jem left the fire and made his way across the yard toward the thatched hut where they slept. But when he entered the dark *chosa*, he stubbed his toe on a bedpost. Hopping on



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his other foot, Jem fought the urge to cry out. Phaedra was always going on about how clumsy he was. Finally, the pain became a dull throb. He dropped to his knees and drew a circle in the dirt. Through the middle, he marked an X. He spit onto the center and walked slowly around the circle. Satisfied he'd countered the bad luck, Jem smoothed the dirt and crept carefully around the gloomy hut until he found Phaedra's shawl.

"Took you long enough," she said when he returned to the fire. "You get lost?"

Someone laughed. Jem scanned the faces, but couldn't tell who. He decided to ignore Phaedra's remark. Keeping his eyes on the ground, he went back to his whittling. But it was as though the whistle were made of straw. His knife sliced too deeply into the stick, breaking it in half. He threw the remnants into the fire and watched them catch and burn.

A twig snapped outside the circle and Shadrack stepped into the light. "Something out there," he announced.

Shadrack was the oldest of the escaped slaves who'd made their way south to freedom. Maroons, the Spanish called them. The old man slept in the woods beside the kiln where he burned the wood to make the charcoal needed to forge weapons for the militia. But he came to Fort Mose for meals. He wore brown trousers and a tunic turned gray from soot. His watery eyes seemed unnaturally wide, likely because his lashes and brows had been singed off so many times they'd given up growing back.

"What'd you see?" Big Sunday barked, the rich cadence of his storytelling voice gone like smoke.



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"Not see." Shadrack tapped a finger to the side of his grizzled head. "Hear."

"Only thing you ever hear is the dinner bell," Thomas the blacksmith said.

"Then tell us what you heard," Big Sunday ordered.

"Nothing."

Phaedra snickered.

Shadrack turned to her, his voice dropping to a whisper. "When *obia* come, the critters go still."

The flesh on Jem's arm prickled. He traced a finger along the hem of his shirt where Aunt Winnie had sewn the line of blue beads to ward off the evil eye. He listened for the familiar sounds of the night from outside the fort's earthen walls, but heard only the crackle of the fire.

A log fell, sending sparks flying.

Jem started and then stole a glance to the side, hoping Domingo hadn't seen him flinch. Big Sunday's son made him uneasy. More than once he'd snuck up on Jem in the forest, or appeared suddenly beside him as he gathered grass in the marsh. Domingo had an air of watchful stealth that reminded Jem of the sly trickster, Brother Fox.

"Leave off with your stories," Phaedra said. "I've had my fill. If it's not you bending our ears with your African mumbo jumbo, it's that priest going on about Daniel and the lion and such. Truth telling's what we need here in purgatory, not tall tales!"

Shadrack shook his head. "I feel sorry for all you this-country-born folk. You'll change your mind when *obia* come for you." He glanced at Jem. "Or mayhap he come for your little brother."



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Jem jumped to his feet. "I'm not her brother!" He glared at the faces around the circle. They didn't understand. Most of them had kin. He had no one. Not since Aunt Winnie had traded him off like a sack of rice.

Phaedra ignored him. "Don't waste your pity on me, old man," she told Shadrack. "I was born kicking. Anything comes for me, I'll be ready."

"So will I!" Jem said, jumping up and overturning the basket Phaedra had been working on.

Phaedra snatched up the basket and glared at him. "What you gonna do?" she scoffed. Whistle at them?"

"I can take care of myself."

"You can't take care of nothing," she said. "Almost killed the whole flock of chickens when you let the water run out."

"I didn't!" he cried. He was sure he'd filled that water bowl. "You probably kicked it over yourself!"

"Hush now, boy," Big Sunday said. "Show some respect."

The wind changed, and a fetid smell filled the clearing.

Big Sunday grimaced. "What in creation?" he asked, turning toward Shadrack.

The old man held out a leather pouch on a hide string tied around his neck. "Conjure bag. Just got it. Keep obia away."

Phaedra fanned the air in front of her nose. "Obia's not all it'll keep away."

"Don't mind her," he told Shadrack. "She don't know about the powers of conjuration." He turned toward the fire, away from the smell. Of this he was certain: there were mighty forces at work in the world. Unseen, yet irresistible. A trick, a charm, or a curse, and life could change in a hair's



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breadth. Conjure was a way to right wrongs, a way to even the scales.

"Shut your mouth and fetch more firewood," Phaedra said.

Jem ground his toes into the packed dirt, then rose to obey. He'd had his fill of doing Phaedra's bidding. If only Aunt Winnie hadn't made him promise to obey. Her betrayal stuck in the back of his throat, like a swallow of rancid stew that refused to stay down. He collected more logs from the woodpile and placed them carefully on the fire.

He'd kept his word, hadn't he? He'd followed Phaedra into the night and away from Master's house, followed her past the taverns on the waterfront to the docks, and followed her right into the hold of the leaky ship that carried them to freedom in Florida. Except being here didn't feel like freedom.

He was almost fourteen now. Old enough to be his own master. Old enough to join the militia. Yet Phaedra still treated him like a child, incapable of performing the simplest chore without mishap. Breaking free of her wouldn't be easy. It would take all his wits and maybe a strong dose of conjure. But he was ready.

Big Sunday peered out at the walls of the fort as though he might see right through them into the forest. "Could be English spies out there. Or scouts. Just thirty-five miles between us and their troops."

"Let obia take them all." Phaedra picked out a line of her weaving with her horn nail, a spoon with the bowl removed and the end sharpened to a point. Jem ran his hands over



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his forearms, conscious of the times he'd felt the jab of that horn nail when he didn't move as quickly as she liked.

Big Sunday turned back to the fire. "We swore an oath to fight the English."

Phaedra's laugh was harsh. "We vowed to stand betwixt two bands of white men intent on killing each other. I say we step out of the way and let them commence."

"And if the English win, you're content to be a slave again?" Big Sunday asked her.

Phaedra frowned. "How many years were you in St. Augustine before the Spanish remembered their promise of freedom? Ten? Eleven? The Spanish don't take pains to remember their oaths. You don't need to remind me about mine."

Jem glanced over at Domingo. Had he taken the oath? Jem couldn't picture it. Domingo had a crafty smugness about him that made it seem unlikely he'd make many promises, let alone keep them. Why did he live at the Indian village instead of here with his pa? With his ma gone, what reason could there be, other than that he was afraid of the English?

Well, Jem wasn't afraid. In the months he'd been at the fort, he'd learned his way around every pine barren, palmetto scrub, and oak grove outside its walls. "I'll go," he said. In the silence that followed, the rashness of his words came down on him like a cane whip. What if there really was a fearsome obia out there?

"Go where?" Big Sunday asked.

Brandishing his whittling knife, Jem pointed toward the forest. The solid weight of the handle reassured him. "See what's out there."



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"You'll do no such thing." Phaedra shook her head. "Only a fool would go out into the night because of what another fool didn't hear in the woods."

"She's right," Big Sunday said.

With both of them against him, no good would come of arguing.

A lone star blazed a trail across the dark sky. Jem recognized it at once. It was just the sign he needed. He might be small, but he was clever. And he knew to take care in the forest.

"Then I'm going to bed," he said. As he turned to leave, his eyes met Domingo's. An odd expression crossed the older boy's face, disappearing in a trice.

He knows something, Jem decided as the fire's comforting glow faded behind him. *Does he suspect what I'm planning to do?*

Then another thought struck him hard.

Maybe he knows what's out there.