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## Chapter 1

# *Given to God*

1779

*P*reaching from high in his pulpit to the white people seated in the main sanctuary, Pastor Mason lifted his voice so that it carried to the Negroes seated high in the gallery of the Scottish Presbyterian Church on Cedar Street, reaching to Hannah Williams as well. So much so, that tears rolled down her cheeks, dropped to her hands, and trickled onto her faded homespun dress, making dark splotches. Hannah's hand gripped the hand of her seven-year-old Katy, sitting beside her.

Slave traders stalked New York City daily, seeking slaveholders whose earnings had dwindled under the British military government in the Colony. Massa Bruce had been seen by a Negro servant from a prominent household pocketing money from Newton Woolridge,

the slave trader within whose eyes burned the very fires of hell. Rumor said it was for an adult woman, and all the Negroes—sitting tall and still in the gallery despite the shivering cold—knew that most likely it was Hannah who was going to be sold. Whatever it was, they knew it was a herald of disaster.

When church ended, the white worshipers pulled their heavy coats and shawls around themselves and left, leaving the Negroes to linger freely in the gallery of the small, white-frame structure.

“Don’t you worry, Hannah. We hopin’ it ain’t how it ’pears to be,” said one man, holding his hat in his hand.

“We don’t know what’s gonna happen, Hannah, but we all gonna be prayin’ fer ya,” said an older man, as others nodded.

“Don’t make no sense!” interrupted a flat-faced woman wearing a green dress. “Worrying ’bout whether you gonna get sold to a flesh merchant. Lord, it ain’t right!” They all agreed, shaking their heads, “Ain’t no right in it!”

At home that evening in their icy garret above Robert Bruce’s dry goods store, Hannah, with Katy on her knees beside her, prayed a desperate prayer. “Lord, please don’ let Massa tear me and my baby apart! Who gonna love her like I do? How her daddy gonna find her if she ain’t wit’ me? If I get sold and my baby get lef’ behind, I wants to leave her in Yo’ hands. She Yours, Lord, just like she mine. I’m givin’ her to You.”

She said to Katy in a husky voice, “Either way, if Massa Bruce sell me or if he don’t, you in God’s hands now. Wetchee and Sim will help you.” Hannah cried,

pulling her daughter to her bosom.

“Don’ cry, Momma,” Katy consoled.

Hannah got up and stuffed rags around the dormer window to help ward off the cold, then huddled beside her daughter on the straw-filled ticking that served as their bed. For the little one, a warming glow of colors surrounded her mother, a glow that leaped and danced and chased off the drab brown dullness of slavery. She saw her mother’s love as a cozy flame and felt it whenever she was near. Sometimes she closed her eyes, allowing the glow to surround them both. Downstairs, the Bruces and their three children lay on quilts around the wood-burning stove in their store, to draw warmth from the last glowing embers.

Frost coated the windows next morning when Hannah arose. Dressing quickly, she descended to the kitchen to stoke the hearth. After serving warm porridge to the Bruces, she returned to the attic room to get her child, so they could eat what remained. Later, she stood at the kitchen sink washing dishes, while Katy played with spoons at the table nearby.

“Hannah!” called Massa from the outer room. At the sound of his voice, Katy jumped down from the chair and ran to her mother. Something in the way he called her mother’s name frightened her, and she grabbed Hannah tightly around the waist while burying her head in her mother’s skirts.

“No!” she screamed, holding fast to her mother. Tears welled up in their eyes.

“It’s all right, baby,” she said to Katy, tugging her thick braids. “We don’ know.”

“Hannah!” called Massa Bruce, raising his voice to its full force.

“Yes, Massa?” answered Hannah, wiping her hands on her white apron.

“No, Momma, no!” cried Katy.

In a moment, Massa Bruce’s lean, gaunt frame filled the doorway. His lips lined up under a well-shaped nose, dark eyes, and a bushy, furrowed brow. His angry stare pierced Hannah’s heart.

“Now!” he demanded, moving toward them as though to forcibly peel Katy’s arms from around her mother’s waist. Hannah pushed Katy behind her.

“Yes, Massa.”

“Go up to Pearl Street,” he ordered. “Search through the rubble from the fire and see what you can find. Bring back anything of value.”

Several nights earlier, a fire beginning on the west side at Whitehall Slip had cut a fiery path up north along Broad Street to Broadway, reaching all the way to the college grounds. Five hundred buildings in all, almost a third of the city, lay in charred ruins, leaving distraught residents and business owners to search among the rubble for anything they could find.

Even as Mr. Bruce dispatched Hannah, he knew that Woolridge’s agents lurked there waiting to seize her and drag her to the slave market for auction. But that was more palatable to him than having them take her from his shop. He never wanted a slave anyway but bought one because the missus wanted help with Ann Amelia. He went along with Missus because he knew she needed help and because he owed Dr. Marion money. The doctor

needed money to leave the Colonies fast, so he had bought her.

Mr. Bruce stepped aside to let his slave pass, then blocked the doorway. Katy screamed hysterically, punched the master's thigh with her tiny fists, and ran upstairs to the attic room. From there she watched anxiously through the window, weeping and twisting her shirt. A pall hung like a dark cloud over the normally busy street. Gone were the sparrows that skittered among the leafless branches. Gone were the people; no one walked up or down the street. Not a single cart squeaked by. The last thing Katy saw through the barren trees was the red bandanna tied around her mother's head. When it disappeared, she clutched her rag doll, went to her bed, and tightly curled up there.

Out in the streets, beleaguered New Yorkers without means to flee the British-occupied city suffered through the virtual standstill of trade and services. The recent fire added to their burden as they searched throughout the once-thriving city for fuel and food.

Two days had passed and Katy still lay in the same position on her bed. Mr. Bruce called Pastor Mason from the Scottish Presbyterian Church on Cedar Street to come pray for Katy's health. The clergyman agreed and soon after was following Mr. Bruce up the narrow stairway to the garret. Pastor Mason pulled up a homemade stool and squatted on it—his knees almost touching his chin.

"I oft have prayed for such in Scotland," he mused quietly before bowing his head in a long, silent prayer for Katy. When several minutes had passed, the girl

stirred and the reverend stood, bumping his head on the slanted ceiling.

Pastor Mason had seen this child and her mother sitting among the Negroes in his church, listening attentively to his sermons. He had marked them as a pair who loved the Lord. Now the mother was gone. These colonists with their slave system were sometimes more than he could bear. Like the cotters in Scotland's Highlands, he felt they had a right to be free. Soon Katy opened her eyes.

"Pastor Mason!" she cried weakly and raised herself up on her elbows.

"Let's go, Pastor!" inserted Mr. Bruce, clasping the pastor's arm and ushering him to the stairway. "I really appreciate your coming. I'll tell the neighbor's help to come look in on her now." They left, and Katy soon heard Miss Wetchee's quick, sure footsteps, followed by the daintier, more highly arched footsteps of Miss Sim, climbing the stairs to the garret. Sim held a wet cloth in her hand for Katy's forehead. An apple and a small paring knife bulged in the pocket of Wetchee's red-checkered apron. Wetchee, a pure African, had been captured as a young girl. The only thing she ever liked about New York was the apples, and she stole one whenever she could.

"Dey stole me, so I reckon I can steal a' apple o' two," she always said.

Sim knelt down, lifted Katy's head in her fair hand, and wiped Katy's face. Wetchee knelt beside them, retrieving the knife from her apron pocket and scaling small bits of apple, which she put to Katy's lips. When

Katy sucked a little then took the apple in her hand, Wetchee breathed easily. Sim hummed softly as she stroked Katy's arm. A little cry broke from the girl's throat, followed by deep sobbing. "She all right now," nodded the women to each other. Sim embraced Katy as the child wept, and Wetchee, remembering her own two children who had been taken from her almost at birth, sighed.