

The door opened, and an elderly woman stepped out. Her back was bent. Her dark skin was wrinkled. Her hair was white. But her deep brown eyes were sharp.

“Yes?” she said.

“Good morning, ma’am. My name is George Watson,” the man said. “Are you Alma Henry?”

The woman blinked. “I am. How may I help you?”

“Actually, I’m hoping we can help each other.” He held up a yellowed newspaper. “Did you put an ad in *The Freeman*? One looking for your long-lost daughter, Alice Henry?”

Alma stared at the paper, then at him. “I did.”

George let out a long breath. “Alice Henry was my mother.”

Alma braced herself against the door. “Oh. Oh, my. After all these years. Please, come inside.”

They sat at Alma’s kitchen table and looked at one another in wonder. Then Alma touched his cheek and smiled. “You have her eyes.”

George smiled back. “And she had your smile.”

Alma’s eyes widened. “Had?”

He put the newspaper on the table and covered her hands with his. “I’m afraid your daughter died many years ago, Mrs. Henry.”

“I see.”

Alma bowed her head. After a moment, she shook herself and smiled sadly. “Now, George. You are my grandson. So, you must call me Granny.”

He laughed. “She told me you’d say that, if I ever met you.”

Alma leaned forward. “What else did she tell you?”

“A lot.” He pulled out a small booklet with a worn leather cover. “And she wrote a lot down, too.”

“My Alice could read and write?”

He nodded and tried to give her the book. She pushed it away gently.

“She could read and write. I can’t.” She tilted her head back. “Read to me, George.”

And George did.

My name is Alice Henry Watson. I was born in Virginia sometime in 1833. My parents, Alma and Joseph Henry, were slaves. So, I was a slave, too.

My father worked in the tobacco fields. My mother cleaned and cooked for the people who owned us. My first memories are of tobacco smoke and corn bread and my mother singing.

George paused. Alma was humming. “My mother sang that song to me,” he said.

“Mine did, too,” she replied. “Please, continue.”

I started helping my mother when I was 6. We worked side by side for two years. Then one day, a man named Clay came into the kitchen. He ordered me to follow him. I didn’t want to. But I had no choice.

Alma grew still. “That was the last time I saw Alice.”

“She told me,” George said softly. “And she said there wasn’t anything you could have done to stop it from happening.”

Clay took me from the only place I’d ever known to Richmond. The noise, the smells and the crowds of the city terrified me. And it got worse. Clay brought me to a slave market. I stood in a pen with other frightened girls and women. Then I stood alone on an auction block. A man called Barton poked me, looked at my teeth, then bought me. I was loaded onto a ship and shut belowdecks with other slave girls and women.

No one told us where we were going. No one told us what would happen when we got there. They just left us in the hot, humid darkness.

I was frightened and hungry and thirsty when we set sail. But the ship rolled and pitched so violently, anything I ate or drank came back up again. Others were sick, too. As the days passed, our cries for help turned to moans, then to silence.

When the ship finally landed in New Orleans, I was almost too weak to stand. Barton took me to another pen, where he made me wash and grease my skin so I’d appear healthy. Then he shoved me into the back of a wagon between bales of tobacco. They smelled of my father. It made me weep for him and my mother.

We traveled over rutted roads for hours. At dusk, mosquitoes swarmed me. Their bites left itchy bumps. It was dark when Barton left me outside a shack. A woman in a dirty apron led me inside and gave me water. Her hands felt like leather. Her face shone with sweat. Her breath smelled like onion. I didn’t care. She held me while I cried.

Her name was Missy. She told me I was in Georgia, slave to a cotton plantation owner. She taught me how to pick cotton. How to keep my head down when the overseer was nearby. How to keep going, day after day, month after month, year after year.

I met John Watson when I was 17. He was strong and smart. He knew how to read and write. I asked him to teach me.

And I will teach our son, George, when he is old enough. Because I believe slavery will end one day, and when it does, the written word will unite us.

When that day comes, I will give him this book so that he knows where he came from. So that he knows the names of the people I love.

Alma listened quietly, then turned to George. “How did she die?”

He closed the book. “She got sick. She died in her sleep in December 1862, just weeks before President Lincoln set all slaves free.”

“And your father?”

“He joined the army soon after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. He died fighting. I wanted to fight, too. But I was only 11. So, I stayed behind with Missy.”

“If you had fought,” Alma said, “you might have died, too. I never would have known what happened to my Alice.”

George touched *The Freeman* newspaper. “If you hadn’t run this ad, I never would have found you.” He smiled. “So, Alice was right.”

“Yes. The written word united us, and others, too.” Alma picked up the book and pressed it to her heart. “And it brought Alice back to me.”

About the author:

Stephanie True Peters is a freelance children’s book writer with a diverse portfolio of published titles featuring princesses and swamp monsters, inspirational men and heroic dogs, sports of all sorts, and Greek mythology. She began her career at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers in 1989 and struck out on her own seven years later. Her books have been on the New York Times bestseller list and received glowing reviews from Kirkus and Publishers Weekly, among other trade publications. An avid reader, workout enthusiast, animal lover, and a firm believer that our words and actions matter, Stephanie lives in Mansfield, Massachusetts, with her husband Dan, an aging cat, and two rabbits. You can reach her at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/stephanie-true-peters-81291a14/>.

About the artist:

Joe Stewart is originally from Bronx, NY, and relocated to Atlanta, GA after graduating from Clark Atlanta University. He holds a BA in Fashion Design and MA in African American Studies. His passion for art led him to become a published tattoo artist. Stewart utilizes his artistic skills as a Visual Arts educator for Atlanta public schools. His current art series, Cultural Currency, is a multimedia project which focuses on prominent civil rights leaders, freedom fighters, and abolitionists. Each figure is featured on a fictional currency and includes important imagery connected to each figure’s personal story.

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