

Jubal

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Gary Penley



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to
George Michael
in loving memory

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De olden people was mighty careful of de words dey let slip dey lips.

—Lizzie Davis, a former slave

Prologue



The house was ablaze by the time the truck arrived. The porch hadn't totally caught fire when the men rushed the door, but the flames spread across the front as they ran. The chief stopped at the bottom step, covered his face with a gloved arm, shook his head, and motioned them back.

I would hear the story dozens of times over the years. People ran from everywhere, stopping in the dark street to watch the sweating firemen sweep their tiny streams of water across the tall flames. Sheriff Turnbull ran into the yard and halted abruptly. "Who's in the house?" he hollered.

"Jessica, Lucas, Sarah—I think they're all in there, Sheriff," the chief said. "We tried to get to the door but the heat was like a blast furnace; we couldn't do it."

Suddenly the sheriff yelled, "No! No!"

A large figure loomed out of the darkness and charged across the yard. Heedless of the sheriff's words, the searing heat, or the roaring orange flames, the man leaped onto the porch, turned his shoulder, and drove his body through the blazing front door.

The porch roof was burning now, flames licking their way down the tall posts supporting it. Spectators held their breath and watched the doorway—a dark hole in a wall of flame that engulfed the front of the house.

Time stopped. Even the fire seemed to stand still as they waited. Then someone hollered, "There he is!"

His massive outline filled the flaming doorway.

"He's got something in his arms!" a man shouted.

"My God," the sheriff muttered. "He's on fire."

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