

EMANCIPATION

Elizabeth Keckley's Remarkable Journey from Slavery
to the Lincoln White House—and Beyond

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Synopsis

ACT I

Elizabeth Keckley is writing a narrative of her slave life and remarkable journey to Washington, where she became Mary Lincoln's seamstress and closest confidante. Elizabeth asks her friend Frederick Douglass for advice; he recommends her to James Redpath, a prominent abolitionist editor. Elizabeth's visit with Douglass is disrupted by George Kirkland, who tormented (and repeatedly raped) Elizabeth in her youth.

Redpath interviews Elizabeth about the painful details of her slave life before she purchased her freedom, and her intimate relationship with the First Lady; he agrees to publish her memoir. Kirkland later lies in wait for Elizabeth; their confrontation is interrupted by her close friend Amelia Lancaster, a former slave.

ACT II

Elizabeth and Redpath prepare Elizabeth's book for publication. She belatedly discovers that Redpath has betrayed her by including Mrs. Lincoln's private letters in the narrative. As a result, the former First Lady abruptly ends her intense, decade-long friendship with Elizabeth.

Facing public ridicule and shame, Elizabeth vigorously defends herself. Kirkland threatens her during a public gathering and is shot dead by Amelia. Elizabeth's book and life story are soon forgotten, but are resurrected years later—shortly before her death—when Elizabeth's goddaughter discovers her memoir.

Actors

The play involves 20 characters. They can be played by eight actors: five women (three black, two white); three men (one black, two white). Two scenes suggest small crowds; it may be possible to employ audience participation. (During the lyceum scene, an audience member may ask an "unrehearsed" question.)

Actor 1: Elizabeth Keckley, Older Elizabeth

Actor 2: Young Alberta Lancaster, Young Elizabeth, Young Slave

Actor 3: Frederick Douglass, George Hobbs, Lyceum Questioner

Actor 4: George Kirkland, William Bingham

Actor 5: James Redpath

Actor 6: Master's Wife, Anne Garland, Mary Lincoln, Lyceum Questioner, Nurse

Actor 7: Amelia Lancaster

Actor 8: Middle-Aged Elizabeth, Lyceum Questioner, Older Alberta Lancaster

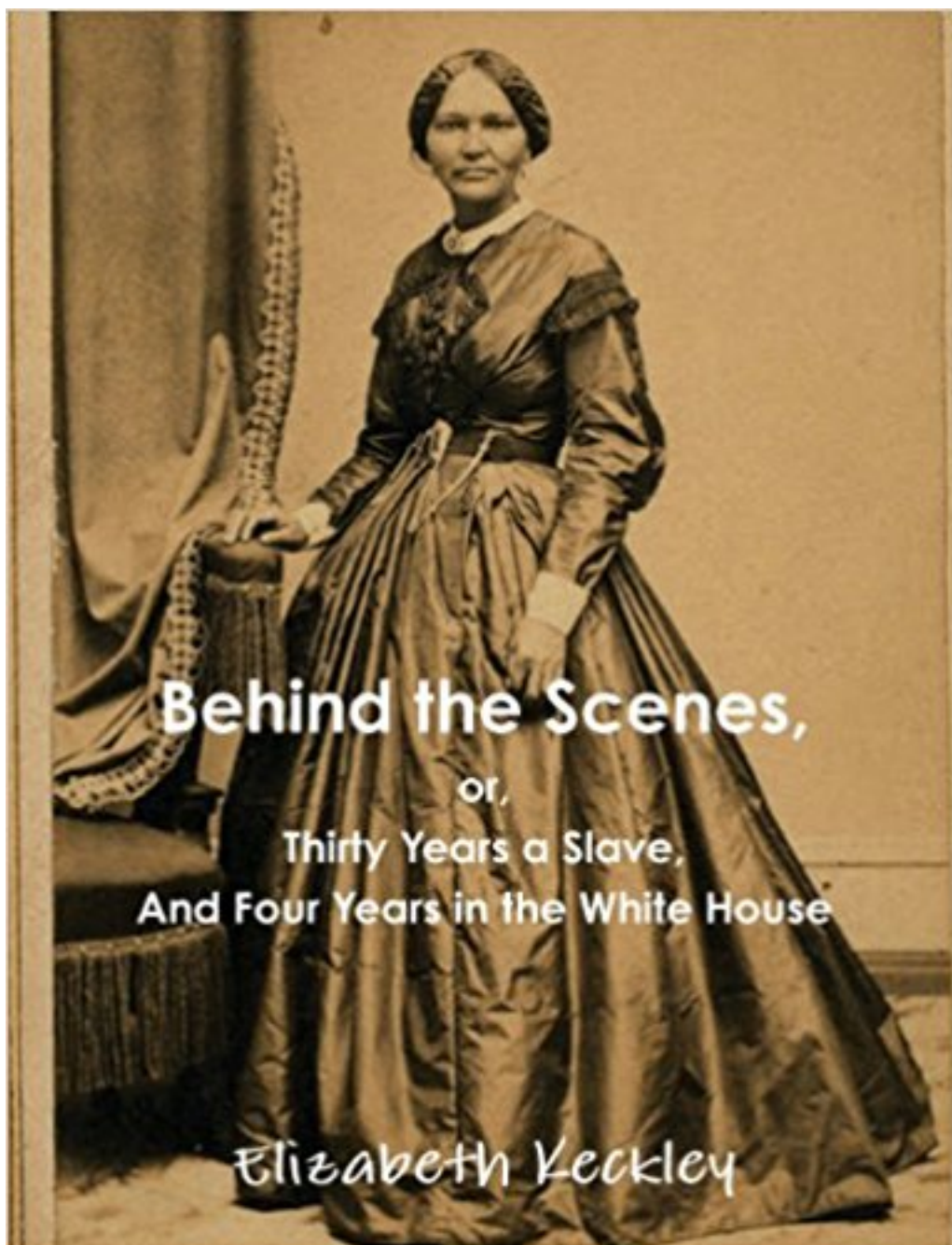
Characters

(In Order of Appearance)

Elizabeth Keckley:	Former slave, now free, 50
Young Alberta Lancaster:	Elizabeth's goddaughter, in her early teens
Frederick Douglass:	Former slave, abolitionist, 50s
George Kirkland:	Elizabeth's tormentor, late 50s
James Redpath:	Journalist and editor, mid 30s
George Hobbs:	Elizabeth's slave father, 50s
Young Elizabeth:	Elizabeth, in her teens
Master's Wife:	Married to Elizabeth's first master, 30s
William Bingham:	Village schoolmaster, 30s
Anne Garland:	Married to Elizabeth's third master, 40s
Mary Lincoln:	Abraham Lincoln's wife, 47
Middle-Aged Elizabeth:	Elizabeth, 47
Amelia Lancaster:	Elizabeth's companion and protector, early 50s
Young Slave:	Woman in silhouette, in her teens
Lyceum Questioners:	White woman, 40s Black man, 50s Black woman, 40s
Older Elizabeth:	Elizabeth, 89
Nurse:	Elizabeth's nurse, 40s
Older Alberta Lancaster:	Elizabeth's goddaughter, 50s

Staging

While an upper/lower staging is presented in the script, it can be adjusted to fit the requirements and capabilities of individual theaters.



ACT I—Scene 1

(New York City, summer 1867. A small, sparsely furnished apartment. ELIZABETH KECKLEY stands before a mannequin, putting the final touches on a dress she's making. She steps back, assesses her work, then finishes up. ELIZABETH then moves to a simple desk, sits, and begins writing.)

(After a moment, YOUNG ALBERTA LANCASTER enters stage right, a bundle of youthful energy. She slows from a run to a fast walk, playing with a hoop that she rolls across the floor.)

ELIZABETH

(Looking up from her writing) Slow down, child.

YOUNG ALBERTA

(Still moving quickly about the apartment, rolling the hoop) Then I can't play the game.

ELIZABETH

Not in the house. You know the rules. We'll go outside in a minute.

(YOUNG ALBERTA continues her fast walk around the apartment, keeping the hoop upright as ELIZABETH continues writing.)

YOUNG ALBERTA

I'll be careful.

(YOUNG ALBERTA loses control of the hoop and accidentally knocks over a table; a pile of books falls to the floor.)

I'm sorry, Aunt Lizzie.

ELIZABETH

Careful? (Beat) Well, if that's the worst thing that happens today, I've not much to worry about. Now pick everything up, Alberta. I'm not your slave.

(YOUNG ALBERTA puts the table and books back in place. As ELIZABETH returns to writing, YOUNG ALBERTA walks over, stopping next to her.)

YOUNG ALBERTA

(Softly) You were one once.

ELIZABETH

What?

YOUNG ALBERTA

A slave.

ELIZABETH

Who told you that?

YOUNG ALBERTA

Mama.

ELIZABETH

Well, Mama was right. A long time ago. It's not something you should think or worry about.
(Beat) I've put some milk and cookies out. Maybe eating will slow you down a bit.

(YOUNG ALBERTA grabs a cookie and takes a sip of milk before returning to ELIZABETH.)

YOUNG ALBERTA

What was it like?

ELIZABETH

Child, first your legs move a mile a minute. Now it's your lips.

YOUNG ALBERTA

But there's no slavery now.

ELIZABETH

Who told you *that*?

YOUNG ALBERTA

No one, exactly. Just something I learned in school. When they talk about Mr. Lincoln.

ELIZABETH

Don't believe everything you hear. Slavery is more than what the law says it is.

(Beat. YOUNG ALBERTA continues munching on the cookie.)

YOUNG ALBERTA

Mama says you knew him.

ELIZABETH

(Hesitating, impatient) I did, as well as his wife and children. It was the privilege of my life.
Now please, Alberta. I've got work to do.

YOUNG ALBERTA

(Interrupting) What was he like?

ELIZABETH

(Putting down her pen) Well, it doesn't look like I'm going to get much done today. (Beat) He was the finest man I ever knew.

YOUNG ALBERTA

The finest white man?

ELIZABETH

The finest man, other than Mr. Douglass. (Gently). Now you should be playing with that hoop—*outside*—and not thinking about me, or Mr. Lincoln, or slavery.

YOUNG ALBERTA

But I want to know what happened. To you. To Mama. I hear her talkin' to Daddy about life before the war. She's upset. Mostly angry. But no one ever talks to *me*.

ELIZABETH

There'll be a time and a place, when you're a little older. It just won't come when you're a child, leaving cookie crumbs around my apartment and knockin' over the furniture. (Beat) *Now let's go.*

(ELIZABETH stands up as YOUNG ALBERTA gathers up her hoop.)

YOUNG ALBERTA

Will you tell me one story? (Pleading) Just *one*.

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) *One*. On our way to the park. We have only a couple of hours of daylight.

(As YOUNG ALBERTA rushes off with her hoop, ELIZABETH calls after her.)

I'll be right there.

(ELIZABETH returns to her desk, gathers up her papers, and places them carefully in a drawer. She then walks quickly after YOUNG ALBERTA.)

(Lights out.)

ACT I—Scene 2

(Several days later. A racially mixed crowd is applauding enthusiastically inside a Manhattan meetinghouse. FREDERICK DOUGLASS, formally dressed despite the stifling heat, is facing his listeners from behind a lectern, about to conclude his speech. He's physically imposing, solidly built, standing straight and tall—a commanding presence. His animated, strikingly handsome face is defined by dark, piercing eyes, a full beard, and thick, slightly graying hair that rises prominently around his head. As the audience waits for DOUGLASS to resume his remarks, he takes a theatrical pause to sip from a glass of water. He then begins speaking in a deep, rich, confident baritone.)

DOUGLASS

“What shall we do with the Negro?” I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are worm eaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! I am not for tying or fastening them on the tree in any way, except by nature's plan, and if they will not stay there, let them fall. And if the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. What I asked for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice.

(There is loud applause and clapping from the audience. As DOUGLASS acknowledges their adulation, the din lightens, then fades as the crowd files out of the hall, with a few stopping to shake the great orator's hand.)

(All exit except ELIZABETH, seated in the front row, who stands after all have left. Like DOUGLASS, she has a dignified bearing. Her strong, determined face is unlined, her gaze penetrating yet welcoming. Her hair, pulled back, is flecked with gray, matching the color of her simple but elegant dress, which she finished making just days before.)

ELIZABETH

That was beautiful, Mr. Douglass.

DOUGLASS

Thank you, Elizabeth. And thank you for coming. It's been too long.

ELIZABETH

Far too long.

DOUGLASS

But I must say you look well. New York has done wonders for you after the rigors of Washington...though I can't imagine you miss the city, especially since the president's murder.

ELIZABETH

I miss the people, not the place. The president...the First Lady...their sons.

DOUGLASS

And your work for Mrs. Lincoln?

ELIZABETH

At times, although there's plenty for me to do here.

DOUGLASS

I always marveled at the result—as did everyone in Washington.

ELIZABETH

I merely sewed Mrs. Lincoln's dresses, Mr. Douglass. I wasn't, like you, a forceful presence, changing the world.

DOUGLASS

Well, you certainly *changed* Mrs. Lincoln and, I suspect, the president and their family. You made many contributions, even if they occurred away from the public's prying eyes.

ELIZABETH

(Smiling) I don't think my needle and thread compare to your oratory—and they certainly didn't contribute to the hopeful faces we saw here today.

DOUGLASS

Well, maybe people keep listening because there's still so much work to be done. (Beat) Now enough of this serious talk; often a speech stays with me long after the applause has faded. Please come sit. I've been on my feet all day and could use a rest.

(DOUGLASS grabs a cane, walks a few paces, then sits, motioning for ELIZABETH to join him.)

ELIZABETH

I looked for Mrs. Douglass but didn't see her.

DOUGLASS

Anna is back in Rochester. She would have liked to see you.

ELIZABETH

And the children?

DOUGLASS

All are well. But I can't think of my sons without thinking of yours—how they survived the war and your boy was lost. I would have liked to see him here today.

ELIZABETH

(Smiling) I'm sure he *heard* you, Mr. Douglass. Your voice is powerful enough to reach the heavens. I can sense his presence.

DOUGLASS

(Clasping both of ELIZABETH's hands in his) Well, it's good to have *yours*. And to know you're flourishing in this city so soon after the war.

ELIZABETH

I've been fortunate.

DOUGLASS

Fortunate doesn't explain the beauty of the dresses you made for Mrs. Lincoln. You're an artist, Elizabeth. You made her look like a queen.

ELIZABETH

It's what she wanted.

DOUGLASS

It's what she *needed*...along with your friendship.

ELIZABETH

Now confined to occasional letters.

DOUGLASS

You no longer sew for her?

ELIZABETH

She has no funds and is virtually alone.

DOUGLASS

Loneliness and poverty—unattended—kill the mind and soul. I feel sorry for her.

ELIZABETH

She wouldn't want your pity.

DOUGLASS

What would she want, then?

ELIZABETH

Understanding. Respect. Not to be seen as shrill and unbalanced.

DOUGLASS

But she *has* an uneven disposition.

ELIZABETH

She *has* a temperament that can shatter like glass. But that can be said of many of us. Her critics are unforgiving.

DOUGLASS

Is that why you want to write your book, Elizabeth? The one you wrote me about? To better explain Mrs. Lincoln to the world?

ELIZABETH

I want to explain *all* that I experienced...from slavery to my years with the First Lady. I see your work...your books...as an inspiration. I'd like your advice—as a friend of many years who knows how to tell a life story.

DOUGLASS

It's a subtle business. Failure is more common than success.

ELIZABETH

But you've put pen to paper, told a courageous story, and are famous now...a hero to many.

DOUGLASS

(Chuckling) And a villain to an equal number. I'm an outspoken Negro—and that comes with a cost. The hand many shook so eagerly tonight was broken years ago by a mob and has still not healed. I doubt you'll pay that price, but you might pay another, especially as a colored woman whom many would want to remain *silent*.

ELIZABETH

(Softly) I want my voice to be heard.

DOUGLASS

Words are weapons, Elizabeth, and yours could be very powerful. But you should prepare yourself. While I'm famous in some quarters, I'm infamous in others.

ELIZABETH

I have a thick skin, Mr. Douglass. I don't know if my story will interest others. What I *know* is I can't tell it alone. I need someone to help shape the narrative.

DOUGLASS

I'll make an introduction, then—to James Redpath. He's a writer and editor of great reputation—and a powerful abolitionist voice. He's published my work, and that of many others.

ELIZABETH

But I'm unknown to him.

DOUGLASS

Your *story* is more important than your *acquaintance*. Mr. Redpath is intrigued by slave narratives, having published hundreds before the war. If Southerners had known his true intent when he was among them—to shame and humiliate slaveholders—they would have hanged him from the nearest tree. He'll also warm to your association with the Lincolns, since he knew the president. And I suspect he's aware of your work for the First Lady.

ELIZABETH

The book will include recollections of both.

DOUGLASS

(Smiling) Then that should be icing on the cake. (Grabbing his cane, standing, and preparing to leave, he looks thoughtfully at ELIZABETH) Why is this book so important to you?

ELIZABETH

I no longer wish to remain anonymous. My mother and father died in obscurity. My son died on a battlefield. I want the world to know *they* existed...that *I* exist...how *I* lived and what *I* learned. Is that too much to ask?

DOUGLASS

Not if you write from the heart. That's what Sojourner and Harriet did. And I suspect Mr. Redpath will feel the same. (Beat) Most important, he's *not* in the anonymous business.

ELIZABETH

How should I prepare?

DOUGLASS

Follow my introduction with a letter of your own, explaining your purpose. Also read his book on John Brown, which will reveal his style and approach.

ELIZABETH

I'm deeply appreciative.

DOUGLASS

It's my pleasure, Elizabeth, especially if your story helps end the oppression that still haunts us.

(A rock crashes through a window, sending shattered glass everywhere.)

(Urgently) Get down.

(DOUGLASS pulls ELIZABETH to the floor.)

(Whispering) Don't say a word.

MALE VOICE [KIRKLAND]

(Offstage, yelling, with a heavy Irish accent) You in there, Douglass?

DOUGLASS

(To ELIZABETH, softly) Stay here.

(DOUGLASS springs to his feet, bolts the front door to the hall, then rushes back to ELIZABETH's side.)

(Shouting) What do you want?

MALE VOICE [KIRKLAND]

(Offstage) Why, we want *you*, Mr. Douglass. You can either come out now, or we'll come in...where you'll get the rougher of it.

DOUGLASS

What's your purpose?

MALE VOICE [KIRKLAND]

(Offstage) To have a friendly chat about why you niggers are taking our jobs...why so many of our friends, fresh off the boat, had to fight and die in your fuckin' war. (Beat) You've got ten seconds.

ELIZABETH

(Whispering) What should we do?

(DOUGLASS, hunched over, half crawling across the floor, motions for ELIZABETH to follow. He pulls aside a rug in front of the lectern.)

DOUGLASS

I'll be right out.

MALE VOICE [KIRKLAND]

(Offstage, loudly) Nine...eight...seven...

(DOUGLASS opens a trap door.)

...Six...five...four...

(First ELIZABETH, then DOUGLASS, begins descending hidden stairs.)

Three...two...one...

(There's a loud banging on the front door as ELIZABETH and DOUGLASS continue descending. As the noise intensifies and the door splinters, DOUGLASS pulls the rug back over the trap door and shuts it. The instant he does, a shotgun blast shatters the front door and GEORGE KIRKLAND bursts into the hall.)

KIRKLAND

(Barking orders as the sound of footsteps grows louder) Check out back. Check upstairs. Check *everywhere*. (Beat) You in here, Douglass? (Louder) You in here? Come out in the open where I can see you. Come out so we can have our little chat.

(KIRKLAND raises his shotgun and fires a second blast. Lights out.)

(Upper stage illuminated. ELIZABETH and DOUGLASS emerge outside the

meetinghouse. Both are shaken but calm.)

DOUGLASS

It's best we split up. They're looking for me, not you.

ELIZABETH

I think we should stay together.

DOUGLASS

(Emphatic) *No*. I've done this many times. Get home as fast as you can, but don't run or rush. Just blend in. I'm leaving for Rochester tonight, and will be out of danger.

ELIZABETH

I'll write to you.

DOUGLASS

And I to you. Now get home safely...and don't be frightened.

ELIZABETH

I'm not frightened, Mr. Douglass. I'm *angry*.

DOUGLASS

(Looking back toward ELIZABETH as they exit in opposite directions) And remember...
(Urgently) *get* to Redpath.

(Lights out.)

ACT I—Scene 3

(Late summer. JAMES REDPATH sits behind a desk, smoking a pipe, writing with intense concentration in his small but comfortable book-lined Victorian office. Heavy curtains are drawn aside, allowing a soft, gray late-morning light to filter into the room. Flickering flames from a wood-burning fireplace also illuminate the office. The quiet is broken by a knock at the door.)

JAMES

(Brightly, with a Scottish accent) Coming...

(JAMES practically springs from his chair, briskly crossing the room with a few short, choppy steps. He's a man of medium height and weight who moves with bristling energy. His red hair is closely cropped; mutton-chop whiskers and a full mustache frame a handsome, almost boyish, face.)

(Enthusiastically, opening door) Welcome, Mrs. Keckley. Welcome. Thank you so much for coming.

ELIZABETH

(Pleasant but dignified) It's my pleasure, Mr. Redpath.

(ELIZABETH steps into the office and JAMES helps her off with her coat and bonnet, which he hangs on a stand by the door.)

JAMES

Would you like some tea? There's a slight nip in the air and I have a kettle on.

ELIZABETH

Thank you, yes.

(JAMES pours two cups of tea as ELIZABETH glances around the office, admiring the various books. She's carrying a small satchel, which she places on a nearby table.)

I see you admire Dickens.

JAMES

There's no better writer of the English language. Or one who tells the story of the poor and oppressed so passionately.

ELIZABETH

(Reflecting a moment before pointing to the Dickens volumes that line the bookshelf) Do you have a favorite, Mr. Redpath?

JAMES

I take something from each. *Great Expectations*: "Heavens knows we need never be ashamed of

our tears.” *A Tale of Two Cities*: “There is prodigious strength in sorrow and despair.” And so we’re not overwhelmed with negative thoughts today, Mrs. Keckley, *Nicholas Nickleby*: “Happiness is a gift and the trick is not to expect it, but to delight in it when it comes.” And I’m certainly delighted that you’ve come here today—especially given all you’ve been through.

ELIZABETH

Mr. Douglass told you.

JAMES

Briefly...in his letter. His main focus was on you and your book. He’s not one to dwell on himself or misfortune. The important thing is that neither of you was harmed.

ELIZABETH

He knew exactly what to do.

JAMES

Because he’s been assaulted his entire life. But I consider you both fortunate. The hatred that sparked the draft riots—when so many Negroes were murdered—still lingers. New York remains a dangerous place.

ELIZABETH

Despite Emancipation.

JAMES

Because of Emancipation. Poor whites are fearful and jealous of Negroes. Many would like your race back in chains, shipped to Africa—or worse. Luckily men like Mr. Douglass have strong voices and passionate followers.

ELIZABETH

Your pen’s also helped.

JAMES

You and Mr. Douglass have done far more, Mrs. Keckley. I merely wrote on the subject...and certainly never felt the lash.

ELIZABETH

But you made others *aware* that such weapons, and worse, were being used against our race. You shouldn’t minimize your contribution, Mr. Redpath. Your book of slave interviews is very powerful.

JAMES

But their impact—and our goal of *equality*—is far from certain. (Beat) But for now, I’m willing to be an optimist.

ELIZABETH

Why’s that?

JAMES

Have you heard of Robert Freeman, Mrs. Keckley?

ELIZABETH

I'm sorry, I haven't.

JAMES

Last fall, he was the first Negro to graduate from Harvard Dental School. That was unthinkable before the war, as was colored men being granted the right to vote. But we *must* keep pressing. Keep getting the word out. *That*, Mrs. Keckley, is why I wanted to meet with you today. While I've talked with hundreds of slaves, I've yet to meet one who began life in chains, bought her freedom, and served a First Lady.

ELIZABETH

You believe the story has appeal?

JAMES

To be sure, I must hear the *details*. I'm intrigued by what little I know. More than intrigued, actually. But I need to understand the depth of your narrative and, *most important*, how you intend to *tell* it. Readers must feel compelled to turn the page. (Enthusiastically) You must capture their imagination.

ELIZABETH

Like you did with John Brown?

JAMES

(Enthusiastically) Precisely! People wanted to know *every* detail of his radical life. He was willing to kill and die for his beliefs. I applaud that, Mrs. Keckley. And he remained defiant even as he stood on the gallows with a rope cinched tightly around his neck.

ELIZABETH

You should know, then, that I would never kill to be free. I hated slavery. And I despised the white men who treated me like an animal. But I have kind, truehearted friends in the South and would not wound them by sweeping condemnation. (Beat) They were less responsible for the curse under which I was born than the men who framed our Constitution.

JAMES

(Dismissive) You're too kind, Mrs. Keckley. Even those who treated their slaves with some measure of kindness knew that others were being whipped, raped, and murdered...that families were separated and destroyed. In my view, there are *no* innocents—and little room for forgiveness.

ELIZABETH

I was treated with kindness by some, cruelty by others. Those are the facts of my life.

JAMES

I would view such sentiments cautiously, Mrs. Keckley. *Very* cautiously.

ELIZABETH

I know love when I feel it, just as I know hatred. I'm a product of *both*.

JAMES

Emancipation wasn't achieved through love...or forgiveness...or kindness. Many had to suffer and die. There was no other way. (Beat) But let's not start on a quarrelsome note. I would like to begin, instead, by asking you some questions—and for you to answer them as honestly as possible. Feel free to sit or stand...move around if you'd like. The point is for you to feel comfortable. (Looking directly at ELIZABETH) Are you comfortable, Mrs. Keckley?

ELIZABETH

(Confidently) I am. But first, if I may...

(Elizabeth goes to the window, pulls back the drapes, and looks out.)

JAMES

Is there a problem?

ELIZABETH

For several weeks...and on my way here...I've felt a presence I can't explain.

JAMES

Since the episode with Mr. Douglass?

ELIZABETH

From around that time. It's probably nothing but nerves.

JAMES

Keep a watchful eye, Mrs. Keckley. And let me know if you find yourself in distress.

ELIZABETH

(Turning her gaze from the window to JAMES) Of course.

JAMES

(Sitting at his writing desk, pen in hand) Let's start with your parents...

ELIZABETH

I don't know much of my father; he disappeared when I was a child. He kept in touch through letters.

JAMES

What were the circumstances?

ELIZABETH

He was sold to a man in the West. He was with us one moment and gone the next. It happened in a matter of hours.

JAMES

(Indignant) John Brown would have told your father to put a bullet through your master's brain rather than suffer such abuse.

ELIZABETH

(Anguished) Killing was the last thing on our minds. But the memory of our family being ripped apart never fades. Our prayers. Our tears. His final kiss.

JAMES

(Adamant) Then violence was *all* the more justified.

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) With my *slave* father killing my *real* father?

JAMES

I didn't realize...

ELIZABETH

Late in her life, my mother told me what I'd long suspected, as my skin was lighter than my mother's...and far lighter than the man I *thought* was my father.

JAMES

Do you know what happened to him?

ELIZABETH

Not the details. But every letter he sent contained a message for me...

(Center stage darkens. Center aisle. A spotlight illuminates GEORGE HOBBS, Elizabeth's slave father. He's a tall man, though significantly worn and stooped by age. His clothing is torn and ragged, hanging loosely from his slight, emaciated frame. HOBBS has a scraggly beard, deep lines on his thoughtful face, and a smattering of teeth visible through a thin, humble smile. As in his daughter, one senses in him a deep dignity and quiet pride.)

HOBBS

(Tenderly) Dear Wife: I am a living in a town called Shelbyville and I have wrote a greate many letters since Ive beene here. My dear wife...I hope when you get this letter that you be Inncougege to write me a letter. I am well satisfied at my living at this place. I am a making money for my own benifit and I hope that its to yours also. If I live to see Nexct year I shall heve my own time from master by giving him 100 and twenty Dollars a year and I thinke I shall be doing good bisness at that and heve something more thean all that. I hope with gods helpe that I may be abble to rejoys with you on the earth and In heaven...I am detemnid to nuver stope

praying, not in this earth and I hope to praise god In glory there weel meet to part no more forever. So my dear wife I hope to meet you In Paradise to prase god forever. I want Elizabeth to be a good girl and not to thinke that because I am bound so fare that gods not able to open the way.

(Spotlight down. Lights up center stage.)

ELIZABETH

(Reflectively) The final letter came from Tennessee—almost thirty years ago. We heard nothing more.

JAMES

So your father remains a mystery?

ELIZABETH

More like a ghost—someone I can sense but never touch.

JAMES

(Beat. Writing furiously) Tell me of your mother.

ELIZABETH

She was kind and humble; never had a day's rest. My master's wife *always* treated her harshly. She said my father wasn't the only slave sold from his family and she should find another man. To her, it was as simple as replacing an old piece of furniture.

JAMES

She *must* have known what happened between her husband and your mother.

ELIZABETH

I suspect she kept it a painful secret—understood by all, but revealed to no one.

JAMES

Was it your mother who taught you to read and write? To express yourself as you do to me?

ELIZABETH

It happened in bits and pieces. A word here. A phrase there. Soon paragraphs, then chapters—mostly from our Bible. My mother had memorized much of it. As she spoke, I read. She knew if I didn't read and write, and speak with conviction, I would remain a slave forever.

JAMES

She was right, of course.

ELIZABETH

In this...and many other things.

JAMES

What became of her?

ELIZABETH

She died in Vicksburg after the war. I never visited her grave because it was deserted and the markings obscured. But memory preserves a sunny picture of her, and I don't allow an abandoned graveyard to destroy its beauty.

JAMES

What else do you recall?

ELIZABETH

I was raised in a small cabin before being transferred to my master's house. I thought I would be safe there because I looked after his children. But that wasn't always the case.

(Center stage darkens. Upper stage illuminated. YOUNG ELIZABETH is rocking a cradle—tentatively at first, then with greater enthusiasm as she warms to the task. Suddenly, she pushes too hard, and the infant tumbles to the floor. Panicking, YOUNG ELIZABETH seizes a fire shovel and frantically tries to scoop the crying baby back into the cradle. This only makes matters worse as the infant, wailing now, is unintentionally pushed and prodded by YOUNG ELIZABETH, who has grown hysterical. The MASTER'S WIFE rushes in, screaming for YOUNG ELIZABETH to stop. YOUNG ELIZABETH, frozen with fear, drops the shovel. The MASTER'S WIFE scoops up her crying infant with one arm while grabbing YOUNG ELIZABETH with the other. In one violent motion, she spins YOUNG ELIZABETH around and throws her from the room. As she does, she hollers...)

MASTER'S WIFE

Whip her. (Beat) Whip her good.

(The MASTER'S WIFE takes a moment to calm her daughter. Then, as she slowly crosses the stage, comforting her now silent baby, we hear YOUNG ELIZABETH being whipped, with each lashing followed by her anguished cries. The MASTER'S WIFE, oblivious to the screams, exits. Lights down.)

(Lights up center stage.)

JAMES

Were the beatings frequent?

ELIZABETH

I learned to be careful, Mr. Redpath. And not make the same mistake twice.

JAMES

(Beat. Writing furiously) What are your other early memories?

ELIZABETH

When I was fourteen, I was sent to my master's son—a Presbyterian minister. His salary was small and he was burdened by a helpless wife, who came from nothing and thought I looked down on her.

JAMES

Did you?

ELIZABETH

I showed her little deference, if that's what you mean. But it wasn't her background that offended; it was her cruelty.

JAMES

Go on...

ELIZABETH

There were endless punishments.

JAMES

She likely felt threatened and jealous, knowing her husband's father was *your* father.

ELIZABETH

But it doesn't explain the beatings, especially from those who pledged allegiance to Christ and praised the word of God. Yet they could claim—with some innocence—that they weren't responsible for the harm that came to me.

JAMES

Because?

ELIZABETH

Others did their bidding...Mr. Bingham, the village schoolmaster and a member of my master's church, was the worst offender. (Beat) One evening, I was watching a baby I had just put to bed, when he appeared.

(Center stage darkens. Upper stage illuminated. WILLIAM BINGHAM and YOUNG ELIZABETH face each other. YOUNG ELIZABETH looks fearful and uncertain. BINGHAM is tall and well built, burly, with a stern expression. He's wearing a light overcoat, which he removes as he speaks, pulling a short, frayed rope from one of its large pockets.)

BINGHAM

(Firmly) Take down your dress.

YOUNG ELIZABETH

(Alarmed) I won't.

BINGHAM

(Insisting) It's not for you to question. *Take it down.*

(YOUNG ELIZABETH stares at BINGHAM defiantly, then turns to leave. As she does, BINGHAM moves quickly toward her, grabbing her by the arm and spinning YOUNG ELIZABETH around. She deflects the first blows from his rope with upraised arms, then fights BINGHAM with all her strength. But he soon overpowers her, tearing her dress, binding her hands, and beating her about her naked and bleeding back and shoulders. Despite the intense pain, she remains silent throughout the attack, too proud to scream. After delivering multiple blows, BINGHAM ends the assault and steps away from YOUNG ELIZABETH, breathing hard. Still standing, but bent over in pain, she slowly straightens, glaring at BINGHAM with a look of cold fury and defiance. BINGHAM steps cautiously forward, draws a knife from his pocket, and cuts YOUNG ELIZABETH's hands free. YOUNG ELIZABETH pulls her dress back over her shoulders, holding the torn garment in place with a bruised and bleeding arm. Still glaring at BINGHAM, saying nothing, she turns and begins walking with slow, halting steps. Her pace quickens as she exits. BINGHAM, after putting on his coat, follows. Lights down.)

(Lights up center stage.)

JAMES

What happened next?

ELIZABETH

I rushed to my master and his wife.

JAMES

(Stunned) You thought they would assist you?

ELIZABETH

I needed to know *why* I'd been flogged.

JAMES

They don't seem the type who would care.

ELIZABETH

But *I needed to know*. (Beat) Yet my voice caused only annoyance. The reverend struck me and I fell to the floor. I then returned to my room, dressed my wounds, and tried to sleep.

JAMES

Animals...

ELIZABETH

Yet I would have forgiven everything for one kind word.

JAMES

(Incredulous) After what they did to you?

ELIZABETH

I was young, Mr. Redpath, and didn't know my own mind. That would change. But, at the time, seeking approval from whites had become second nature. It was *beaten* into me.

JAMES

Such accommodation only guarantees more violence, which I assume was the case.

ELIZABETH

The following week Mr. Bingham returned, prepared with a new rope and cowhide. I told him I was ready to *die* if he flogged me. Though he beat me again, I resisted. (Beat) Soon after, the abuse stopped.

JAMES

Because you refused to relent?

ELIZABETH

Because the only alternative was to *kill* me, and even my master didn't want that.

JAMES

(Holding up his hand) A moment please, Mrs. Keckley...

(JAMES picks up a broom near the fireplace.)

I need to get a sense of the blows.

(JAMES brings the broom down on the back of a chair, with moderate intensity.)

Were you struck with such force?

ELIZABETH

Harder.

(JAMES strikes the chair again, with greater intensity.)

Harder still.

(JAMES strikes the chair a final time, with full energy, breaking the broom in two.)

You've found the proper effort, Mr. Redpath.

(JAMES, disgusted, tosses the broom aside.)

JAMES

I'm sorry, Mrs. Keckley. I hope I didn't alarm you.

ELIZABETH

I'm only alarmed that you destroyed a *perfectly good broom*.

JAMES

(Rising from his desk, speaking delicately) I've talked with many slaves who suffered the same abuse. But for some, it was even worse. I'm thinking specifically of what happened to your mother. This is a delicate question and I apologize, in advance, if I offend. But were the beatings the worst that happened to you?

ELIZABETH

(Beat) My mother's fate was also mine. While she gave birth to a daughter, I gave birth to a son. His father was a drunk who came after me—*whenever he wished*—with my master's blessing.

(Upper stage. Silhouette of YOUNG ELIZABETH seated, behind a screen. No sound. KIRKLAND approaches and she rises to meet him with clenched fists, pounding on his chest as he grabs her. He throws her down, then stands over her and begins unbuttoning his shirt. Silhouettes go dark.)

JAMES

(Thoughtfully) And your son's name?

ELIZABETH

George Kirkland.

JAMES

And the name of your tormentor?

ELIZABETH

The same.

JAMES

So you named your son...

ELIZABETH

(Interrupting) The man was his father...and he *insisted*.

JAMES

What did George know?

ELIZABETH

The truth. But it no longer matters, Mr. Redpath. When war came, he enlisted in the army as "white," which he could do since his skin color was much fairer than mine. George was killed in his first battle, just weeks after Bull Run. He was twenty-one years old.

JAMES

(Delicately) Mothers of black soldiers weren't compensated when their sons died in battle. But that wasn't the case for white soldiers. Because George was thought to be white, and was named Kirkland, did you claim and receive death benefits?

ELIZABETH

Eight dollars a month. Later raised to twelve.

JAMES

Did you also claim to be married to Mr. Kirkland? Otherwise the funds wouldn't have been available.

ELIZABETH

I did, which was false. I added that I later married Mr. Keckley, a black man, which was true. But I have no qualms about the deception. The rebel bullets that killed George did not differentiate by skin color when they found their mark. He died a *Union* soldier.

JAMES

What became of Mr. Kirkland?

ELIZABETH

He left one day and never returned. I assume he died—and went straight to hell.

JAMES

(Writing at a fast pace to complete his thoughts, then looking up at ELIZABETH) So you're now a young woman with a son. How did you cope?

ELIZABETH

I was transferred again, this time to my master's daughter in St. Louis. She and her husband put me to work as a seamstress—a skill I learned from my mother. The best ladies in St. Louis were my patrons, and my earnings fed the family for years. It was there I married Mr. Keckley.

JAMES

A happy occasion?

ELIZABETH

(Resigned) For a short time. But I soon learned my husband was a slave rather than the free man he represented himself to be. He then became a source of trouble—more a burden than a helpmate—and I was *not* willing to share his degradation. (Beat) Mr. Keckley is now sleeping in his grave, where I've buried all unpleasant memories of him.

JAMES

I'm sorry...

ELIZABETH

Don't be, Mr. Redpath. I had something more important to accomplish than persist in a failed marriage. I set my goal—my aim in life—to buy my freedom, as well as my son's.

JAMES

Why then?

ELIZABETH

(Adamant) Because George was older and I didn't want him to live life as a slave. I determined that no man should own us. George came into the world through no will of mine; white blood, as well as African, flowed in his veins. One current represented freedom, the other generations of despair. By the laws of God and nature, as interpreted by man, one-half of my boy *was* free—and that birthright *removed the curse* from the African half.

JAMES

A laudable view, but it doesn't buy freedom.

ELIZABETH

I offered my master \$1,200 to set my son and me free.

JAMES

(Incredulous) Why didn't you just flee? You could have crossed the Mississippi any time and headed north.

ELIZABETH

But *I* was a slave of a white man—and would *only* be free by such means as the law allowed.

JAMES

But you had to *ask* permission and *beg* for money.

ELIZABETH

I begged for *nothing*. (Unyielding) You *must* understand this, Mr. Redpath. The decision to purchase my freedom—*not* flee—was *mine*. I accepted it as the right thing to do then, as I do now. I *respect* the law. As for the rest of my story, I can either stop now or continue. With all due respect, I'm not seeking your approval. I'm looking for my story to be told.

JAMES

(Backing down slightly) Then I'll continue to listen.

ELIZABETH

(Purposefully) I worked to purchase my freedom, but the family claimed so much of my earnings that it was not possible, even after many years.

JAMES

Then how'd you raise the money?

ELIZABETH

One of my patrons heard of my situation and funds were eventually received from her friends and mine. (Exultant) Then I was *free*, Mr. Redpath. Free by the *laws* of man and the smile of God.

JAMES

Who signed the papers?

ELIZABETH

My master's daughter. I always keep the certificate with me.

JAMES

Not because you have to.

ELIZABETH

(Softly) As a reminder...it's the most valuable thing I own.

(Center stage darkens. Left aisle. Spotlight on ANNE GARLAND, Elizabeth's former mistress—a wealthy middle-aged woman.)

ANNE GARLAND

Know all men that I, Anne P. Garland, of the County and City of St. Louis, State of Missouri, in consideration of the sum of \$1,200, to me paid this day in cash, hereby emancipate my Negro woman Lizzie, and her son George; the said Lizzie is known in St. Louis as the wife of James, who is called James Keckley; is of light complexion, about 37 years of age, by trade a dressmaker, and called by those who know her Garland's Lizzie. The said boy, George, is the only child of Lizzie, is about 16 years of age, and is almost white, and called by those who know him Garland's George. Witness my hand and seal, this 13th day of November, 1855.

(Spotlight down. Lights up center stage.)

JAMES

I say good riddance to her.

ELIZABETH

You don't understand. I visited her family in Virginia after the war. It was an affectionate reunion, which I know you'll find difficult, if not impossible, to believe. But two of her daughters died in my arms. I loved them as I loved my son.

(JAMES attempts to speak, but ELIZABETH raises her hand and cuts him off.)

Please, Mr. Redpath. When I would mention the family and express interest in their welfare, my Northern friends would roll their eyes and ask how I could have kind thoughts for those who inflicted such pain. But the family—mostly the women—were kind to me and I could not repay such kindness with rebuke.

JAMES

Old memories can conceal the truth.

ELIZABETH

But mine are clear. To deny the past is to surrender the greatest part of my life—early impressions, friends, the graves of my father, mother, and son. These people are associated with everything that memory holds dear and I regard some—*both colored and white*—with great affection.

JAMES

Did you ever express even *one* unkind word to Mrs. Garland?

ELIZABETH

I told her I regretted not having a proper education—and she acknowledged the omission. Yet overall, there was goodness in her heart.

JAMES

(Dismissive) I think she used you for her own ends; she wanted a slave and that's what she got. Your opinion is far too generous.

ELIZABETH

Mr. Redpath, I don't think you're listening to what I have to say. And if you're not listening, I have no purpose here.

(ELIZABETH gets up to leave.)

JAMES

(As she reaches the door) I won't deny you your past—at least how *you* see it. (Beat) Please, Mrs. Keckley. I want to know the rest of your story.

(ELIZABETH reflects a moment, then turns toward JAMES.)

ELIZABETH

You'll listen?

JAMES

I will. But you must also allow me to express myself. I've devoted a lifetime to your cause.

ELIZABETH

You can speak as you wish. But you must *hear* me.

JAMES

Understood.

(JAMES motions for ELIZABETH to sit back down. Beat.)

JAMES

So you're free now after almost forty years. Is that when you headed north?

ELIZABETH

I traveled to the capital looking for patrons, and was recommended to Mrs. Jefferson Davis just before the war.

JAMES

This represents either a strange fate or an amazing coincidence—working for the First Lady of the Confederacy before joining the First Lady of the Union.

ELIZABETH

I can't be certain which, but believe it was God's will.

JAMES

You couldn't have worked long for her.

ELIZABETH

A few months. Secessionist pressures were building and war seemed certain. Mrs. Davis was warmly attached to Washington and disliked the idea of ending old friendships and heading south. But she had no choice.

JAMES

Did she ever discuss your future?

ELIZABETH

She asked if I would go with her to Virginia, and said she would take care of me. She stressed that when war broke out, Negroes would suffer in the North because people would blame us for the conflict.

JAMES

You rejected her offer, of course.

ELIZABETH

I was unsure, at first, as her reasoning seemed sound.

JAMES

What? (Clearly irritated) That your race would be treated badly in the North. But you had been a *slave* in the South.

ELIZABETH

I've experienced mistreatment *everywhere*, Mr. Redpath. I might have been beaten and abused in the South, but I've been humiliated in the North. And the sting of ridicule is often as sharp as the lash. (Beat) When my conversation with Mrs. Davis ended, I promised to consider the matter—that was all.

JAMES

(Raising his hand) Stop. Please...

(JAMES reaches for a decanter of whiskey on his desk and pours himself a drink.)

Go on...

ELIZABETH

But I ultimately declined the offer.

JAMES

(Relieved) Thank God!

(JAMES quickly downs the drink and pours himself another.)

ELIZABETH

I knew the North was strong and Mr. Lincoln re-elected. I cast my lot with a president who denounced slavery.

JAMES

That, Mrs. Keckley, was the right choice. (Downing the second drink) I assume you never saw the Davises again after they left Washington?

ELIZABETH

I had one final encounter, though not in person.

JAMES

I don't understand.

ELIZABETH

I was in Chicago after the war, visiting a charity for families whose sons died in battle. The main building contained a wax figure of Mr. Davis the moment he was captured. He was wearing a shawl I'd made for his wife.

JAMES

There were many caricatures of Davis disguising himself as a woman.

ELIZABETH

I've heard the rumors, but don't believe them. He was a proud man.

JAMES

Did you hear a second one? That his slave and valet placed the shawl on Davis to protect him from the cold.

ELIZABETH

That's something a slave would do.

JAMES

He should have slit his throat. (Slightly embarrassed. Beat) I'm sorry. I'm *listening*.

(JAMES, working off his frustration, begins slowly pacing the room.)

We have time for one more story. Tell me how you met Mrs. Lincoln.

ELIZABETH

The introduction came through a patron. The First Lady had spilled coffee on the dress she intended to wear at the inaugural. She needed a new one and, fortunately, knew my name as I'd worked for some of her lady friends in St. Louis.

JAMES

You weren't deterred by rumors that Mrs. Lincoln was difficult and unstable.

ELIZABETH

I was applying for a *job*, Mr. Redpath...*not* sainthood. I dearly wanted the position.

JAMES

When did you actually meet?

ELIZABETH

I was invited to the White House just before the inaugural. While waiting for the First Lady I was surrounded by three other dressmakers—all white women—and thought I had no chance for success. I was the last one summoned.

JAMES

What else do you recall?

ELIZABETH

I was timid and nervous, but relaxed when Mrs. Lincoln greeted me warmly. She asked whom I had worked for and I mentioned Mrs. Davis. This seemed to impress her. She then asked about my prices, saying she couldn't be extravagant since she and the president were from the West, and therefore poor.

JAMES

(Lightly) Which must have struck you as humorous since you were standing in the White House when Mrs. Lincoln made the remarks.

ELIZABETH

I saw the humor in it, though Mrs. Lincoln didn't. After agreeing to terms, I measured the First Lady, took the dress, and was working on it when I learned the reception had been delayed. A few days later, I returned to the White House.

(Center stage darkens. Upper stage illuminated. MARY LINCOLN is moments away from attending a presidential reception. She is, however, only partially dressed, and in a

panic as she stares into a full-length mirror. She's complaining loudly to herself that the hour is late and she has nothing to wear. MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH enters.)

MARY LINCOLN

(Angrily) You're late.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

(Stunned) There must be some mistake.

MARY LINCOLN

(Firmly) I don't make mistakes, Mrs. Keckley. You're clearly not a woman of your word.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

(Stunned) But I thought I was on time. I'm sure of it.

MARY LINCOLN

I don't accept excuses either. From *anyone*.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

(Apologetically) I apologize then...and can have you ready in a few minutes.

MARY LINCOLN

(Petulant) There's no time. Mr. Lincoln can go to the reception without me.

(MARY LINCOLN starts to leave the room in a huff.)

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

I can make you look like a *queen*.

(MARY LINCOLN stops abruptly. After receiving a stiff nod from MARY LINCOLN, MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH quickly arranges MARY LINCOLN's hair and helps her dress. It's clear from MARY LINCOLN's expression that she's pleased.)

MARY LINCOLN

(Stiffly, but softening) Are you available tomorrow?

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

I'm available as needed, Mrs. Lincoln.

MARY LINCOLN

Just be sure you're on time.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

Of course.

MARY LINCOLN

(Beat. Then curtly, but with a degree of warmth)... Thank you.

(Lights down. Center stage illuminated.)

JAMES

Were you put off by her anger?

ELIZABETH

After she settled down, I was surprised by her composure—which always gives way to grace.

JAMES

(Upbeat) On that note, Mrs. Keckley, we'll leave things for today.

(JAMES rises from his desk and moves toward ELIZABETH.)

(Enthusiastic) Yours is a wonderful story and I'll help you tell it—if you allow me.

ELIZABETH

(Surprised) And you commit to this without hearing my *full* story.

JAMES

I've heard enough, Mrs. Keckley. The years you spent with the Lincolns only add spice to the drama. (With relish) The public will *love* your narrative because it tells a *great* story.

ELIZABETH

(Softly) I make no claims to greatness.

JAMES

(Excited) I believe we have excellent prospects for a top seller and that you'll make *a lot* of money. (Beat) So this is how I'd like to proceed, with your permission, of course. I'll gather my notes and put together an outline for publishers to review. I also want to see everything you've written so far.

ELIZABETH

(Obliging) Of course. (Then firmly) But I must insist on one thing, Mr. Redpath—that the story be told in *my* words.

JAMES

It will be, I assure you. While I'll edit the text and help shape the narrative, it will be *your* story. (With emphasis) If there's one thing I've learned, Mrs. Keckley, it's that *authenticity* sells books. You should also get used to *telling* your story, just as you've told it to me. I've created a lyceum for writers who speak to audiences in New England and beyond. That's where the *real* money is made.

ELIZABETH

When do you want me to return?

JAMES

Take your narrative to the time of Mr. Lincoln's assassination. We'll pick it up there. I would stay with you now, but must organize my lecture business. We have a young journalist and writer whom I'm promoting—Samuel Clemens, who you might know as Mark Twain—and I need to be with him. He earns thousands of dollars a tour.

ELIZABETH

I've never done much public speaking.

JAMES

You'll do fine, I assure you. But let me suggest this. Do you have a friend you can rehearse with? Someone you can tell your story to, just as you've told it to me. Obviously, a person you trust.

ELIZABETH

I do. Amelia Lancaster. I'm her daughter's godmother. We've known each other for years.

JAMES

Then have her listen to your story. She can ask as many questions as she'd like, just as an audience would. It will be good practice for public speaking and help you remember events that you might have forgotten.

ELIZABETH

It can be easily arranged.

JAMES

Excellent, Mrs. Keckley. Excellent.

(JAMES clasps both of ELIZABETH's hands, then reaches for her coat.)

And one final matter. Earlier you referred to correspondence that you possess. Which in particular?

ELIZABETH

The letter from my father. Some from my master's children. And many affectionate exchanges with Mrs. Lincoln.

JAMES

I'd like to see the Lincoln correspondence. That will help me better understand the First Lady's state of mind and your relationship. That's a key part of your story.

ELIZABETH

I've brought a sampling. I can leave some with you today and send the rest. I only ask that they remain private and be returned to me.

JAMES

Of course.

(ELIZABETH reaches into her satchel and hands JAMES a small batch of bound letters. JAMES then helps ELIZABETH on with her coat. As she prepares to leave, ELIZABETH notices a photograph of an older woman with her children hanging on a wall by the door.)

ELIZABETH

Your wife and children?

JAMES

Her name is Mary. We've been married a decade. The children...Caroline and Dudley...are from her previous marriage.

ELIZABETH

You're lucky to have them all alive and well.

JAMES

The photograph is most literally a reminder since I'm a slave to my work, travel frequently, and don't see them often.

ELIZABETH

You should take the time...and not be a slave to *anything*. As I discovered, a family can be lost in an instant.

JAMES

Maybe after the book is finished. There's much work to be done.

ELIZABETH

I look forward to our collaboration...and one day meeting your family.

JAMES

Until next time, Mrs. Keckley.

ELIZABETH

(Pensive) Until next time, Mr. Redpath.

(ELIZABETH departs. JAMES walks slowly to his desk, opening the package of letters. He sits, puts his feet up on the desk, and begins reading, absorbed in thought. Lights out.)

ACT I—Scene 4

(ELIZABETH'S apartment later that evening. She enters a darkened room, strikes a match, and lights a kerosene lamp. As she does, we hear a heavily Irish-accented voice from across the room.)

KIRKLAND

(Menacing) Good evening, Mrs. Keckley...

(ELIZABETH spins toward KIRKLAND, seated across the room, and gasps.)

...although I always thought of you as Mrs. Kirkland.

(ELIZABETH is stunned into silence.)

Speechless? (Beat) Cat caught your tongue?

ELIZABETH

I thought you were dead.

KIRKLAND

Very much alive...though doctors say me liver could be in better shape.

ELIZABETH

How'd you get in?

KIRKLAND

You should lock your windows, Elizabeth. You never know who's wanderin' about.

ELIZABETH

I want you to *get out*.

KIRKLAND

So hasty. It's been a few years. I think we could use some catchin' up time.

(KIRKLAND stands, pulls a flask from his pocket, and takes a swig. He then moves toward ELIZABETH.)

How's our boy doin'? I admit to not being the most attentive father, but I sometimes wonder about the lad.

(ELIZABETH grabs a knife from the kitchen table.)

ELIZABETH

You take another step and I swear...

KIRKLAND

(Mocking) Swear what, Elizabeth? You're not the killing type—and I *know* the type.

ELIZABETH

Times have changed...

KIRKLAND

Not *that* much. You might be free, but the world still won't sanction the killing of a white man by a nigger; especially by a woman. So I suggest you just calm down.

(Gripping the knife tightly, ELIZABETH circles away from KIRKLAND.)

ELIZABETH

How'd you find me?

KIRKLAND

Me and me mates staked out Mr. Douglass the other night and I could hardly believe my eyes when you walked by. You weren't hard to find.

ELIZABETH

A bunch of thugs.

KIRKLAND

Careful, Elizabeth. You're talkin' about me chums. That Douglass is one slippery nigger. I still can't figure out how he got out. But I didn't see you either. So perhaps you hold the answer?

(ELIZABETH remains silent.)

Well, it really doesn't matter; we'll catch up with him some day. He's not exactly keepin' a low profile. And then neither are you, having made all those fancy dresses for Mrs. Lincoln.

(ELIZABETH is momentarily caught off guard.)

I asked around. You're fuckin' famous.

ELIZABETH

I want you to *get out*.

KIRKLAND

Easier said than done. New York's me home. Served with the rebs early in the war, then deserted and joined me mick friends for the draft riots after Gettysburg. There wasn't much to do afterwards, except bury a lot of dead niggers. After that, I stuck around. (Beat) I've no plans to leave.

ELIZABETH

George is a grown man now and will be back any minute. He served in the Union army and

knows how to handle himself.

KIRKLAND

Never been licked by a nigger and I don't mean to start now. (Beat) You were never a good liar, Elizabeth. I don't know where the hell Georgie is, but I'm bettin' he's *not* 'round the corner. So why don't you put the knife down, and we'll have us a little chat.

(KIRKLAND takes a few more steps toward ELIZABETH.)

...Or perhaps something friendlier.

ELIZABETH

You take another step...

(KIRKLAND hesitates; takes another swig.)

KIRKLAND

Maybe you'll warm up a bit by talkin' about that fancy group of yours. The one that helps darkies settle in the North. (With mock respect) The *Freedman's Association*. Isn't that what you called it?

ELIZABETH

We need protection from scum like you.

KIRKLAND

Wrong, Elizabeth. You need us to teach you all a lesson...

(KIRKLAND moves quickly and bats the knife away. ELIZABETH lunges for the blade, but KIRKLAND moves the instant she does and wraps her in his arms.)

That's more like it.

(ELIZABETH struggles, but KIRKLAND holds fast.)

Just like old times. You remember, don't you, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

(Beat) Yes.

(ELIZABETH bites KIRKLAND hard on the shoulder. He howls in pain.)

KIRKLAND

(Angry) Why, you little bitch.

ELIZABETH

(Yelling) Get OUT!

KIRKLAND

Not 'til I get what I came for.

(As KIRKLAND moves closer to continue the assault, there's a loud knock on the door.)

AMELIA

(Offstage, alarmed) Elizabeth, you in there? You all right?

ELIZABETH

(Tentative) I'm fine, Amelia.

AMELIA

(Offstage) Then what's all the screamin' about?

ELIZABETH

I'll be right there.

KIRKLAND

(In a low, menacing voice) You're one lucky nigger. But rest assured, I'll be back.

ELIZABETH

Coming.

(ELIZABETH keeps a wary eye on KIRKLAND as he backs away and climbs out the open window. After briefly calming herself, ELIZABETH opens the door. AMELIA LANCASTER bursts into the room, brandishing an iron frying pan. She's a large, middle-aged black woman, with fire in her eyes.)

AMELIA

(Scanning the room) What the hell's going on?

ELIZABETH

(Beat) I've told you about George's father.

AMELIA

The one who died before the war.

ELIZABETH

He's *not* dead.

AMELIA

(Urgently) How'd he find you?

ELIZABETH

It was his gang that harassed Mr. Douglass the other night. He saw me.

AMELIA

(Glancing at the open window) He came through there?

(ELIZABETH nods.)

I'll nail the damn thing shut tomorrow. Meanwhile, you're stayin' with me.

ELIZABETH

I'm through running, Amelia. I'll file a police report. They likely know who he is and where to find him. Probably Five Points.

AMELIA

His arrest is as likely as Christ showing up here with the twelve disciples.

ELIZABETH

I'll spend the night with you and return in the morning. We have to talk about my book. We have to get it *done*.

(As ELIZABETH gathers up a few belongings, AMELIA crosses the room and slams the window shut.)

AMELIA

The son of a bitch returns, I'll put a bullet in him.

(ELIZABETH and AMELIA exit, with AMELIA banging the door shut behind her. Lights out.)

ACT I—Scene 5

(The next day. ELIZABETH's apartment. AMELIA, hammer in hand, is nailing the window shut.)

ELIZABETH

It turns out the police know who he is.

AMELIA

Knowin' don't mean nothin'. They need to throw the bastard in jail.

(AMELIA bangs the hammer down on the last nail.)

ELIZABETH

They said they'd look into it.

AMELIA

Don't hold your breath... 'cause I ain't holdin' mine. (Beat) You ready?

ELIZABETH

Just ask me questions; anything that comes to mind about the Lincolns. We'll close with the president's assassination.

AMELIA

I brought a little insurance...

(AMELIA draws a revolver from a pocket in her dress and places it on a table.)

...and let's change places. I want to keep an eye on the window.

ELIZABETH

You think that's going a bit far?

AMELIA

I don't think it's going far enough.

(AMELIA and ELIZABETH switch positions around the table.)

ELIZABETH

(Beat) Well, let's begin.

AMELIA

If there's one thing the world can't stop talking about, it's Mrs. Lincoln's spending.

(Lights down center stage. Lights slowly up stage right. MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH is standing behind MARY LINCOLN, fitting her for a new dress.)

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

You like the color?

MARY LINCOLN

I *adore* the color. What do you think will go best with it?

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

Pearls—with a string of white roses around your head and down the back. Mr. Lincoln will think you're the prettiest lady in the room.

MARY LINCOLN

Mr. Lincoln *always* thinks that.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

I can see it in his eyes when he follows you around.

MARY LINCOLN

(Beat) We have few secrets, Elizabeth. (Emotions starting to build) You know how expensive this fabric is...the drapes...the furniture. Well, they're more than I can afford. And far more than Congress has allowed me to spend.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

(Consoling) I'm sure they'll make up the difference.

MARY LINCOLN

A twenty-seven thousand dollar difference! The president's salary is twenty-five a *year*. If he discovers the expenses—and we both know how he hates duplicity—I fear the outcome.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

Maybe you can break it to him gently?

(MARY LINCOLN spins around to face MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH.)

MARY LINCOLN

(Fiercely, looking directly at MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH) Mr. Lincoln must *never* know. The world must *never* know. I would be torn apart by the public and it would cost the president the election and, likely, our marriage. This is *our* secret, Elizabeth. *Yours* and *mine*. It stays in *this* room.

(MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH is momentarily stunned into silence after MARY LINCOLN's sudden outburst.)

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

(Gingerly) But Mr. Lincoln also understands the power of truth—that you weren't given sufficient funds for the task. He's a forgiving person.

MARY LINCOLN

(Snapping) I think *I'm* the best judge of that. I've known the man for twenty years. I know his humor...his sorrow...*and* his rage. (Beat. Abruptly) Let's end the fitting. I'm not feeling well.

(MARY LINCOLN walks to her bed and lies down. MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH pours water from a pitcher into a basin and dips a cloth in the water; then, sitting beside her, she presses it gently against MARY LINCOLN's forehead.)

(Lights down stage right. Lights up center stage.)

AMELIA

Did Mr. Lincoln ever find out?

ELIZABETH

There were many complaints of the First Lady's spending. But the specifics, I believe, eluded him.

AMELIA

Do you think he loved her?

ELIZABETH

The president was far too honest to marry a woman he didn't love. When he saw faults in his wife, he excused them as he would the acts of an impulsive child. Mrs. Lincoln was never more pleased than when the president called her his child-wife.

AMELIA

(Disapproving) If my husband called me that, I'd smack him over the head.

ELIZABETH

(Good-naturedly) Then it's a good thing you were never Mrs. President.

AMELIA

(Firmly) Well, in my household, I'm the next best thing. *Everyone* does *exactly* what they're told, including dear Alberta. And now free of the South, I take orders from *no one*.

ELIZABETH

(Smiling) Except me, of course.

AMELIA

An unfortunate exception. (Beat) As for Mr. Lincoln, I always thought he was a public man in a lonely marriage. I don't know why, but he seemed so solitary...so lost in thought...even sad.

ELIZABETH

He was *all* those things. But he saw humor in life and would tell stories that made everyone laugh—including himself. Yet Mrs. Lincoln wasn't easy on the president. She thought he should spend less time with the war and more with her and their children. She was also jealous and

insecure. But I always remember the inscription on her wedding band: “A.L. to Mary Todd. Eternal Love.” That tells you something.

AMELIA

(Skeptically) It certainly *does*—that Mr. Lincoln was a smart man who knew how to please a temperamental wife. As for the eternity part, I hope the president doesn’t wait for Mrs. Lincoln to pass through the pearly gates if he’s found love in heaven. But whatever happens, I’m sure he’ll hear her *coming*.

ELIZABETH

I hope they’re reunited, Amelia, and find peace that was not always possible in this world. They could be with their son again.

AMELIA

(Beat. Sadly) When Willie died, the nation mourned.

ELIZABETH

The Lincolns were holding a reception in the White House when he fell ill. I could hear the Marine band from the sickroom.

(Center stage darkens. Lights slowly up stage left as music filters into the room. Willie is lying in bed asleep, covered by a sheet, MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH by his side. MARY LINCOLN enters, looking concerned.)

MARY LINCOLN

(Worried) How is he?

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

Feverish. Breathing hard. But he’s quiet now.

MARY LINCOLN

Let me stay with him awhile...you need to rest.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

I’m fine, Mrs. Lincoln. Really.

MARY LINCOLN

Please. I need the time.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

I’ll return in a few minutes.

(MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH begins to exit, stopping when MARY LINCOLN calls after her.)

MARY LINCOLN

I want to thank you for everything you've done for Willie. Also for Tad, the president, and me. You've supported us with your heart and soul—especially when we've been sick and distressed, which is much of the time. We couldn't have survived without you. I want you to know that.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

It's been a privilege, Mrs. Lincoln.

(MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH takes a few more steps, then turns back to MARY LINCOLN.)

You look beautiful in that dress.

(MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH exits as MARY LINCOLN turns her attention back toward her seriously ill son. Lights down.)

(Lights up center stage.)

AMELIA

What happened next?

ELIZABETH

The night passed, morning came, and Willie started to fail. He lingered a few days, then died. I assisted in washing and dressing the body, and prepared it for viewing.

AMELIA

Where was Mrs. Lincoln?

ELIZABETH

She withdrew from the world. She didn't attend Willie's funeral and never again entered the Guest Room, where he died, or the Green Room, where he was embalmed. There was something supernatural in her dread.

AMELIA

She saw no one?

ELIZABETH

Me. The president and her sons. She distrusted everyone else.

AMELIA

Do you ever wonder why she put such faith in a colored woman?

ELIZABETH

I listened...I sympathized.

AMELIA

And hid the truth.

ELIZABETH

What truth?

AMELIA

Your doubts. Your true beliefs about Mrs. Lincoln. (Beat) We were trained to serve white folks, Elizabeth. But we also learned to conceal ourselves from them. If they knew the depth of our feeling—ranging from hatred to despair—they would never let us into their confidence...or their homes.

ELIZABETH

It's not that simple.

AMELIA

It is to me. You used Mrs. Lincoln for your own ends—to gain renown as the best seamstress in Washington, working for the most powerful family. And she used you to make a plain woman look beautiful, and soothe her tortured soul. I see *nothing* wrong with that. It's just a truth to be acknowledged.

ELIZABETH

It was the best way to improve my circumstance, just as you needed to improve yours.

AMELIA

But I could never hide my anger. When you knock on a white woman's door, you're shown right in. If I knock on the same door—*black as spades*—I'm greeted with a look of fear, and either turned away or shown 'round the back. But I think you're angry, Elizabeth—in your own way.

ELIZABETH

What I write about Mrs. Lincoln is what I saw and felt. It's the truth as I know it.

AMELIA

And that truth isn't always flattering and includes a desire to raise your profile and capitalize on *who you are and where you came from*...which isn't nearly as pretty as the dresses you make. Again, I *don't* condemn that. God knows we've been through enough, and I think the world could use a huge dose of truth telling. Personally, I'd like nothing more than for most whites to burn in hell. That's not a noble sentiment and I don't pretend otherwise. You shouldn't pretend either.

ELIZABETH

I'm not pretending.

AMELIA

But when you talk of Mrs. Lincoln, I hear stories she won't want told. Of her spending. Of Willie's death. Private matters.

ELIZABETH

She hid nothing from me.

AMELIA

Which doesn't mean she wants it exposed to the world. *That's* your anger. Your need to be recognized. (Beat) She told you her woes and bared her soul because it made her feel good. You were polite and did exactly what she wanted, which served your purpose. My guess is that Mrs. Lincoln never truly knew what you'd been through, and didn't really care. She only saw a fair-skinned colored woman do her bidding, providing love and devotion that she couldn't get from others—including her own husband.

ELIZABETH

That's how you see it?

AMELIA

Yes, Elizabeth, it is.

ELIZABETH

I'm angry over a dead mother, father, and son; over the beatings and the taunts. But I'm not angry all the time and not at all whites. Why can't you say the same?

(AMELIA falls uncharacteristically silent.)

AMELIA

I've never told you this before. I was too ashamed. But since you're telling your story, I'll tell you *mine*—but for *you* only. And *only* today.

(AMELIA moves to the stove and picks up a piece of firewood.)

One night my master's son came for me, arriving with a purpose I was not willing to accommodate. When his intentions became clear, I took a piece of wood—just like this one—and beat the living hell out of him.

(AMELIA slams the wood down on the table.)

His blood drenched us both before he stumbled home. (Beat) The next day he branded me (raising the sleeve of her dress to reveal an ugly, welt-raising scar on her arm), then cut me here (pointing to both breasts) and here (pointing to her groin). It's why I only bore one child.

ELIZABETH

(Softly) Amelia...

AMELIA

Ten years ago, a slave girl—Celia, I always remember her name—was convicted for the same assault: using a piece of wood to bash in a white man's skull. Because he died, she was hanged. So, in some ways, I consider myself lucky.

ELIZABETH

(Pause) Maybe we should take a break.

AMELIA

(Adamant) There'll be *no* breaks, Elizabeth. The world will *not* hear my story, because that's *my* choice. But it will damn well hear yours, because it's *your* choice—and I will do *everything* in my power to make it happen...so let's proceed.

ELIZABETH

Are you sure?

AMELIA

As sure as the scars that are carved into me.

ELIZABETH

Okay, then...

AMELIA

I will, however, require some fortification.

(AMELIA reaches into a pocket of her dress and withdraws a small flask.)

(Looking at ELIZABETH) I'd offer, but I know the answer.

(AMELIA takes a swig, calming herself for a moment.)

Now where were we?

(There's a soft knock of the door.)

You expecting anyone?

ELIZABETH

No... (Loudly) Come in.

(YOUNG ALBERTA enters, carrying a small bag over her shoulder. She gives AMELIA and ELIZABETH each a hug.)

AMELIA

What are you doing here, child? I thought you were in school.

YOUNG ALBERTA

I was. But this nice man came to see me and asked to take me here. My teacher said that was fine.

AMELIA

(Suspicious) What nice man?

YOUNG ALBERTA

I never met him before. But he bought me candy and asked a lot of questions. He seemed to know Aunt Lizzie very well. Then he gave me something to give to you. He said it was a present.

ELIZABETH

Did he give his name?

YOUNG ALBERTA

He said it was George. He left me a couple of blocks from here and just walked away.

ELIZABETH

(Alarmed) Oh my God.

(YOUNG ALBERTA hands the package to ELIZABETH.)

AMELIA

Wait outside, Alberta. We'll be with you in a minute.

(YOUNG ALBERTA exits as ELIZABETH slowly opens the package and pulls out a note. She reads it, then sits in stunned silence.)

What's it say?

ELIZABETH

(Reading) "To nigger woman, Betsey Kickley"; he didn't even spell my name right. "Whore to Frederick Douglass. Both worth more dead than alive."

AMELIA

That's it. You've moving in with me.

ELIZABETH

Let's not overreact.

(AMELIA begins gathering up ELIZABETH's belongings.)

AMELIA

I may be many things, Elizabeth, but I'm not *stupid*. And I'm *not* taking any chances. You're coming with me.

ELIZABETH

Not now.

AMELIA

Yes. NOW!

(AMELIA picks up ELIZABETH's writing materials, then ushers ELIZABETH from the room, slamming the door shut behind her.)

(Screaming) Bastards.

(Lights down.)

ACT II—Scene 1

(JAMES's office, a week later. JAMES is seated behind his desk. ELIZABETH is standing and pacing the room.)

JAMES

Are you ready?

ELIZABETH

I am.

JAMES

I can ask the police or some of my abolitionist friends to look after you.

ELIZABETH

That won't be necessary. It's been over a week and nothing's happened. Plus, I can hardly get Amelia to leave my side; she's ready to take on an army.

JAMES

Okay, then. Let's start with the president's assassination.

ELIZABETH

I saw Mrs. Lincoln the day the president was murdered. She was attending the theater that night but I didn't assist her. About eleven o'clock, I was awakened with news that Mr. Lincoln had been shot, but not mortally wounded. I then dressed quickly and went out into the night.

JAMES

To the White House?

ELIZABETH

It was surrounded by soldiers and no one was allowed to pass. A guard said Mr. Lincoln hadn't been brought home, so I wandered the streets for hours.

JAMES

When did you learn the president had died?

ELIZABETH

In the morning. Flags flew at half-mast and were draped in black.

JAMES

When did you hear from the First Lady?

ELIZABETH

A carriage arrived around noon and drove me to the White House.

(Lights down center stage. Lights up stage right. MARY LINCOLN is reclining in bed in

a semi-darkened room, moaning and tossing about. MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH approaches her, covering MARY LINCOLN with a blanket.)

MARY LINCOLN

(Opening her eyes. Weakly) Where have you been, Elizabeth? I sent messengers all night.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

None found me. (Beat) Please rest, Mrs. Lincoln. You must conserve your strength.

MARY LINCOLN

Where's Tad?

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

He and Robert will be here shortly.

MARY LINCOLN

I need you to stay, Elizabeth. Here. In the White House.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

(Comforting) I'm not going anywhere.

MARY LINCOLN

They've brought the president home, but I can't see him. I can *never* see him. And Tad must stay away. The violence of his father's death will tear him apart.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

I'll be sure he keeps his distance. (Placing a cold compress on MARY LINCOLN's forehead) Where's Mr. Lincoln?

MARY LINCOLN

In the Guest Room.

MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH

May I go to him? If only for a moment...to see that everything's in order.

MARY LINCOLN

(Nodding) You're the only one I trust—not the jackals that surround him. (Beat) He would like a last visit from you.

(MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH squeezes MARY LINCOLN's hand, then stands and walks slowly to left center stage, which is illuminated. Right center stage darkens. The body of Abraham Lincoln lies in state. MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH approaches slowly. Once at the deceased president's side, she lifts the white cloth covering his face and stares at it for several anxious moments. MIDDLE-AGED ELIZABETH then places the veil back over the president's face, kneels, and bows her head in prayer.)

(Lights down, then up slowly center stage.)

JAMES

That must have been a moment of unbearable sadness.

ELIZABETH

Despite the violence of his death, there was something beautiful in the president's expression. I saw his sweetness, his intelligence and gentle nature. I gazed at his face a long time. (Beat) When I returned to Mrs. Lincoln she was shrieking and in convulsions. Tad's sorrow was as great as his mother's, but her outbursts awed him into silence.

JAMES

When did Mrs. Lincoln leave the White House?

ELIZABETH

Several weeks later. She took only a few items—including a nightstand the president loved—and gave away everything else; all the articles passed through my hands.

JAMES

What were you given?

ELIZABETH

Mrs. Lincoln's cloak, stained with the president's blood...the bonnet she wore the night her husband was killed...Mr. Lincoln's comb and brush, which I frequently used to stroke his hair. Frederick Douglass, I'm pleased to say, received the president's walking stick.

JAMES

Do you recall the day Mrs. Lincoln left the mansion?

ELIZABETH

It was so unlike the one when the president's body was taken from the hall. Then thousands gathered in silence as the hearse drove away. Now his wife was leaving and no one said good-bye. She passed down the stairway, entered her carriage, and never looked back. She was completely alone.

JAMES

How long did you stay with her?

ELIZABETH

A few months in Chicago...then I returned to Washington. Mrs. Lincoln later wrote that she was short of funds, had sold her home, and returned to boarding. To generate funds, she intended to sell her dresses—many sewn by me.

JAMES

What were the arrangements?

ELIZABETH

We met in New York, where a broker recommended she write letters to prominent politicians, noting her financial distress. He said party leaders would make heavy advances to Mrs. Lincoln rather than have embarrassing letters published that revealed her poverty.

JAMES

How much did she ask?

ELIZABETH

Sixteen thousand dollars. I stood by Mrs. Lincoln's side as she wrote the letters, as I didn't want her words to sound desperate or threatening.

JAMES

It's hard to disguise extortion.

ELIZABETH

No advances were made. She then became desperate and gave the broker permission to place her wardrobe on exhibition and publish her letters in the *World*. The reaction was scathing.

(Center stage darkens. Upper stage illuminated. MARY LINCOLN is sitting at a writing desk, alone in a barren apartment.)

MARY LINCOLN (V/O)

My Dear Lizzie...Robert came up last evening like a maniac, and almost threatening his life, looking like death, because the letters of the *World* were published. I could not refrain from weeping when I saw him so miserable...I pray for death this morning.

(MARY LINCOLN stands and looks into a mirror, examining herself.)

My Dear Lizzie...You would not recognize me now. The glass shows me a pale, wretched, haggard face, and my dresses are like bags on me. The politicians, knowing they have deprived me of my just rights, would prefer to see me starve, rather than dispose of my things.

(MARY LINCOLN's gaze turns from the mirror to a small pile of newspapers that are stacked on the corner of her desk; she picks one up.)

My Dear Lizzie...The Republican papers are tearing me to shreds. A piece in the morning *Tribune*, signed "B," pretending to be a lady, says there is no doubt Mrs. L. *is* deranged, has been for years past, and will end her life in a lunatic asylum.

(MARY LINCOLN puts down the newspaper, sits again at her desk, and resumes writing.)

Dear Lizzie...I am positively suffering for a decent dress. Do send my black merino to me very soon. (Beat) I leave this place early in the spring; had you better not go with me and share my fortunes, for a year or more? (Emphatically) *Write*.

(Upper stage darkens. Lights up center stage.)

ELIZABETH

Although I wrote to Mrs. Lincoln, I didn't travel with her. I also wrote to the *Evening News* and other newspapers in her defense. But mine was a lone voice.

JAMES

No one else defended her?

ELIZABETH

Negroes felt a strong sympathy and Frederick Douglass agreed, after some initial reluctance, to lecture on her behalf.

(Main stage darkens. Upper stage illuminated. DOUGLASS is sitting at his writing desk, alone in his Rochester home.)

DOUGLASS (V/O)

My Dear Mrs. Keckley...If lecturing *is* to be done, it should be on a grand scale. The best speakers in the country should be secured. You should not place me at the head nor at the foot of the list, but sandwich me in between, for thus out of the way, it would not give *color* to the idea...

(DOUGLASS stands near his desk, picks up a set of hand weights, and begins lifting them at a slow, deliberate pace.)

My Dear Mrs. Keckley...The obligation resting on the nation is great and increasing, but especially does it become colored men to recognize that obligation. It was the hand of Abraham Lincoln that broke the fetters of our enslaved people, and let them out of the house of bondage.

(DOUGLASS puts the weights down, returning to his desk to write.)

My Dear Mrs. Keckley...Mr. Lincoln did everything for the black man, but he did it not for the black man's sake, but for the nation's sake. But for being president, Mr. Lincoln would have been alive, and Mrs. Lincoln would have been a wife, and not a widow. Do all you can, dear Mrs. Keckley—nobody can do more than you in removing the mountains of prejudice towards that good lady...

(Upper stage darkens. Lights up center stage.)

ELIZABETH

I wrote to Mrs. Lincoln, proposing to mobilize her colored friends, but she declined the offer. When I showed her response to Mr. Douglass, the project was abandoned.

JAMES

What a pity. It was a good plan.

ELIZABETH

Unfortunately, Mrs. Lincoln didn't always act in her best interests. She also couldn't pay me. (Beat) But, eventually, I settled all her accounts.

JAMES

Were you bitter from the experience?

ELIZABETH

No one should shed any tears for me. I've led a good life. While my experience in New York ends the book, and was a constant source of trouble, I have few regrets.

JAMES

(With finality) *That*, Mrs. Keckley, is a most eloquent...and hopeful...conclusion to your story.

ELIZABETH

Thank you, Mr. Redpath. I think we're *finally* done.

(JAMES rises from his desk and with obvious excitement begins circling the room.)

JAMES

(Enthusiastically) So here's how I'd like to proceed. I have your notes and draft narrative, as well as my own detailed accounting. I'll edit everything and put it in a manuscript. Then I suggest we get together and move to publication. (Beat) I'm *very* excited about the prospects for your book.

ELIZABETH

If it sheds light on the abuses facing colored people and helps restore Mrs. Lincoln's reputation, I'll be most gratified.

JAMES

It will accomplish that and more, Madame Elizabeth. Excuse me, may I call you that?

ELIZABETH

It's the same name the president used...and, yes, you may.

JAMES

I suggest we meet in a couple of weeks to review the draft.

ELIZABETH

That sounds like a reasonable plan.

(JAMES opens the door for ELIZABETH, who's preparing to leave. KIRKLAND is standing in the doorway, obstructing her path.)

KIRKLAND

(Deeply sarcastic) What a cozy gathering.

(JAMES and ELIZABETH step back inside the room; KIRKLAND takes several strides forward.)

JAMES

Who the hell are you?

KIRKLAND

Shut up, you Scottish pimp.

ELIZABETH

He's the man I told you about—the one who went after Mr. Douglass, then came to my room.

KIRKLAND

Oh come on, Elizabeth, you can do better than that. (To JAMES) Mrs. Keckley once claimed me as her husband, at least as far as Union bureaucrats were concerned.

JAMES

You're a filthy rapist.

KIRKLAND

I've been called worse. But I never stooped so low as to call niggers me friends and fight for their fuckin' cause. You're the same as Douglass, only a white scum journalist to boot.

(JAMES reaches for the fire poker.)

Oh, I wouldn't do that, Mr. Redpath. (Pulling back his jacket to reveal a revolver tucked into his belt) Now if you'd be good enough (KIRKLAND motions for JAMES to hand him the poker.)

JAMES

You're fucking Irish trash.

(JAMES reluctantly hands the poker to KIRKLAND, who immediately takes it and strikes JAMES, knocking him to the floor.)

KIRKLAND

Now, Elizabeth. I didn't come here to talk. You were mine once and you're still mine. The war has changed nothin'.

ELIZABETH

It's changed *everything*.

KIRKLAND

Maybe for niggers and abolitionists... (Beat) ...but not me, especially when there's money to be had. You're a fuckin' star, and that's worth a buck or two, especially if you and your friends want to keep breathin'.

ELIZABETH

You can go to hell.

KIRKLAND

Before you decide anything, be aware that me men are following you and everyone you know. It's amazing the accidents that happen in this city, especially when cops look the other way. Take Jimmy here, he could fall down a flight of stairs, bust his head, crack his ribs...

(KIRKLAND kicks JAMES viciously in the side)

...and no one would be the wiser. And women can mysteriously disappear...like your friend Mrs. Lancaster... (Beat) ...or her daughter.

ELIZABETH

You wouldn't dare.

(KIRKLAND reaches into his jacket and pulls out YOUNG ALBERTA's bag.)

KIRKLAND

One of me men was in their room this morning when they stepped out. I'm sure you recognize this...

(ELIZABETH grabs the bag from KIRKLAND, clutching it to her breast.)

We know where she lives...where you live...where Jimmy here lives. We know just about everything. So next time we meet, I suggest you be more accommodatin'.

ELIZABETH

If you harm a hair on her head...

KIRKLAND

Nothin' worse than an empty threat, Elizabeth. And I know what you're up to. Jimmy boy here's as famous as you...loves telling tall tales full of hate for men like me. Well, as far as I'm concerned (turning to JAMES) you can take your goddamn stories and shove 'em up your arse.

(JAMES lunges for the poker. KIRKLAND steps aside, then brings it down hard on JAMES's outstretched left hand.)

Word on the street is you're collaboratin'. It wasn't too hard to figure given Jimmy's talent for sleaze and (looking at ELIZABETH) your talent for... (Smiling. Sarcastic) ...well, for many things, Elizabeth. Regardless, I hope it puts money in your pockets, because it'll find its way to mine. (Turning back to JAMES) But if me name appears anywhere, you're a dead man. You hear me?

(JAMES stares hard at KIRKLAND, but remains silent.)

Hell, it's gotten so fuckin' quiet 'round here. And I can't stand quiet.

(KIRKLAND drops the poker on the floor.)

You both think about what I said. (Beat) And I'll see you 'round.

(KIRKLAND exits. ELIZABETH picks up the poker and throws it hard against the door. She then falls to her knees next to JAMES. Lights down.)

ACT II—Scene 2

(Several weeks later. An apartment in New York.)

AMELIA

When is Mr. Redpath coming?

ELIZABETH

He should be here any minute.

AMELIA

You gave him directions.

ELIZABETH

He knows we've moved and will make sure he's not followed.

(A knock on the door. ELIZABETH answers it. JAMES enters, walking with a slight limp and a bandage on his left hand.)

JAMES

Madame Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

I know you've heard of my friend, Amelia.

JAMES

My pleasure, Mrs. Lancaster.

AMELIA

Mine as well.

ELIZABETH

How are you faring?

JAMES

Better than expected. It was more of a glancing blow and the ribs are improving. Thank God I don't write with my left hand.

ELIZABETH

That's welcome news. (Beat) Now I know you've brought some items for me to review. Do you mind if Mrs. Lancaster remains?

AMELIA

(To JAMES and ELIZABETH) I'm sorry, Elizabeth, but I must be going. (To JAMES) I look forward to hearing Elizabeth's reaction. There's a lot at stake.

JAMES

Indeed.

AMELIA

Good day, Mr. Redpath.

(AMELIA exits. JAMES hands ELIZABETH the proofs of her book.)

JAMES

(Excited) We can commence publication as early as next week.

(ELIZABETH begins leafing through the pages.)

ELIZABETH

The chronology is as we discussed, and the story seems to be what I told you. I will, of course, need to take a closer look. Can you leave this with me?

JAMES

Of course.

(ELIZABETH keeps thumbing through the pages, then comes to an abrupt halt.)

ELIZABETH

(Surprised) What's this?

JAMES

What?

ELIZABETH

Mrs. Lincoln's letters...in the back.

JAMES

The publisher and I both agree the book is *much stronger* with them included.

ELIZABETH

But I told you they were to be kept private. I don't want anything published that will embarrass Mrs. Lincoln.

JAMES

I understand, but this will do no such thing. You yourself said her secrets were mostly known, and to reveal them would do no harm.

ELIZABETH

But these are *her* words. *Her* private letters. They were written in *confidence*.

JAMES

You must take my word on this. It will be a *better* book, and sell *many more* copies, with the letters *included*.

ELIZABETH

The world won't see it that way. And certainly Mrs. Lincoln won't.

JAMES

But they provide a window into her soul. This is literary *gold*.

ELIZABETH

(Adamant) I want them taken out. It will end my friendship with Mrs. Lincoln and I hate to think how others will react.

JAMES

(Firmly) You said you wanted *honesty*. And that is *exactly* what you have. This will be well received, even by Mrs. Lincoln, I believe, because it represents the *truth*.

ELIZABETH

(Angry) Which should be written in *my* words.

JAMES

We *must* stress the close connection between you and the First Lady. There are those who will downplay the relationship—say you made it up. The letters will prove otherwise. This point is *essential*.

ELIZABETH

So is my relationship with the Lincolns.

JAMES

Well, I'm sorry, but we really have no choice. The type is set and would be expensive to change. I don't believe either of us has the funds to do so.

ELIZABETH

(Exploding) I will go to the publisher and *demand* their withdrawal...no matter the *cost*.

JAMES

Then I assure you the book won't be published, because the letters are *the hook*. *No one else* has them.

ELIZABETH

It will be a disaster.

JAMES

That's not how I see it.

ELIZABETH

Had you ever been a slave—actually *lived* in our skin and not merely *written* about it—you would know better. Colored men and women are allowed *no* mistakes. And *no* second chances.

JAMES

But we're in this *together*. As your reputation is tied to Mrs. Lincoln's, mine is to yours. If you want people to know you...to *believe* your story...you *must* agree to this.

ELIZABETH

(With disdain) For the purpose of selling a few more books?

JAMES

For the purpose of telling a *remarkable* story—which is what you've *always* wanted.

ELIZABETH

What I've wanted is respect.

JAMES

Which history will provide—because you're on the right side of it.

ELIZABETH

Not in the eyes of many whites.

JAMES

But surely the ones who'll buy your book. The ones who *matter*.

ELIZABETH

Everyone matters.

JAMES

But your reputation is also tied to your success—and that means, like it or not, *selling books* and *turning a profit*.

ELIZABETH

(Coldly) My reputation can't be bought. (Long beat. Then firmly) There can be no further betrayals.

(ELIZABETH grabs JAMES's coat and hands it to him.)

I only agree to this because you've left me no choice. And we'll *both* suffer the consequences.

JAMES

It's a decision you won't regret...and history will long remember.

(JAMES takes his coat and starts to leave.)

Good day, Madame Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) Mrs. Keckley.

(JAMES exits; ELIZABETH's anger and defiance turn to weary resignation as she sinks into a chair. AMELIA enters a moment later.)

AMELIA

I was downstairs and saw Mr. Redpath leave. He appeared rushed and didn't smile when he passed.

ELIZABETH

He's publishing Mrs. Lincoln's letters. In the book.

AMELIA

I can stop him.

(AMELIA, who had begun taking off her coat, puts it on again.)

ELIZABETH

Let it be, Amelia.

AMELIA

To hell with him. The man needs another good thrashin'.

(As AMELIA moves toward the door, ELIZABETH grabs her by the arm.)

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) *No*...we need to think this through.

AMELIA

I've done all the thinking I need to.

ELIZABETH

Mr. Redpath will do as he pleases. But we still have choices. (Beat) I'll try to head off the storm by writing to Mrs. Lincoln. I won't apologize for the book, but I will—profusely—for the letters.

AMELIA

But there's more than Mrs. Lincoln to worry about.

ELIZABETH

But her opinion matters *most*—and will shape others. We'll worry about the rest of the world later.

AMELIA

(Imploring) We need to do something *now*.

ELIZABETH

We *need* to be patient. Mr. Redpath won't take kindly to threats, and certainly not another beating. Right now all he sees are dollar signs.

AMELIA

Then what's the plan?

ELIZABETH

Stand with me... (Beat) ...*Fight* with me.

AMELIA

That I can do.

ELIZABETH

(With conviction) Our time will come, Amelia. I just don't know when.

(ELIZABETH sits at her desk to write. Lights out.)

ACT II—Scene 3

(A few weeks later. ELIZABETH is waiting anxiously, alone. AMELIA enters with several newspapers tucked under her arm.)

ELIZABETH

I'm ready.

AMELIA

You might want to brace yourself.

ELIZABETH

Please. Let's proceed.

(AMELIA sits across from ELIZABETH; each takes a deep breath.)

AMELIA

(Reading) *The New York Citizen*: "Has the American public no word of protest against the assumption that its literary taste is so low grade as to tolerate the back-stairs gossip of Negro servant girls...?"

(Upper stage. Silhouette of YOUNG SLAVE, with her dress stripped to her waist, receiving a *single*, hard lash.)

ELIZABETH

I know where this is going. What's next?

AMELIA

(Reading) *The National Intelligencer*: "Where will it end? What family that has a servant may not, in fact, have its peace and happiness destroyed by such treacherous creatures as the Keckley woman?"

(Upper stage. Silhouette of YOUNG SLAVE receiving a *second* hard lash.)

ELIZABETH

Let's try another.

AMELIA

The Springfield Daily Republican... (Reading) "One would suppose the public had been treated to Mrs. Lincoln and her affairs *ad nauseam*...but the scandal is always a marketable commodity, and this book contains plenty of it.... The line must be drawn somewhere, and we protest that it had better be traced before all the servant girls are educated up to the point of writing up the private history of the families in which they may be engaged...."

(Upper stage. Silhouette of YOUNG SLAVE receiving a *third* hard lash.)

ELIZABETH

(Interrupting) That's enough. What's the final one?

AMELIA

The *New York Times*.

ELIZABETH

I read it this morning. But go ahead.

AMELIA

(Reading) "We cannot but look upon many of the disclosures made in this volume as gross violations of confidence.... Mrs. Keckley really knew very little about life in the White House, and she ekes out her scant stock of story and anecdote with extracts from newspapers, moral reflections and other expedients of like character. The public will be disappointed when they read her book, which is full of half-truths and lies." (Beat) I'm *so* sorry.

(Upper stage. Silhouette of YOUNG SLAVE receiving a *final* hard lash; stage darkens.)

ELIZABETH

(Beat. Determined) I've prepared a letter to the *Times*. I want you to deliver it. I'm going to see Redpath.

AMELIA

I'll go with you.

ELIZABETH

(Emphatically) No. I have to fight this battle alone.

(AMELIA reaches into her pocket and offers ELIZABETH her revolver. ELIZABETH refuses the offer.)

You know that's not the answer.

AMELIA

The hell I do.

ELIZABETH

My best—and only—weapons are my words, Amelia. They might have failed me in print, but I don't intend for them to do so in person. Just take this to the *Times*.

(ELIZABETH hands a folded note to AMELIA before exiting. As she does, AMELIA opens her letter and reads aloud.)

AMELIA

"Was it because my skin is dark and that I was once a slave that I am being denounced? As I was born to servitude, it was no fault of mine that I was a slave; and, as I honestly purchased my

freedom, may I not be permitted to express, now and then, an opinion of becoming a free woman?" (Halting, looking up from her reading) Beautiful....

(Lights out.)

(Upper stage. Lights up. MARY LINCOLN is sitting at a desk; a copy of Elizabeth's autobiography, lying atop wrapping paper, is within reach. Several newspapers are strewn around the desk. MARY LINCOLN has just finished a letter. After signing her name with an angry flourish, she stands and begins slowly pacing the room.)

MARY LINCOLN (V/O)

Mrs. Elizabeth Keckley: I have always thought that betrayal was the highest form of treachery—and the publication of your book surely proves this. You are a self-appointed, heinous chronicler who disparages the reputation of someone who was once your friend. I have read your explanation, which I believe is a poor attempt to justify your perfidy. It is reassuring to know that the newspapers verify this assessment and portray your actions for what they are—the desperate attempt of a woman to betray friendship for profit. This will be my final letter to you, Mrs. Keckley, and I will refuse to read or respond to any that are sent in return. For Robert, Tad, and me, you cease to exist.

(MARY LINCOLN returns to her desk and sits down. She thinks for a moment, folds the letter, then slowly tears it up, throwing the scraps of paper into a wicker basket. She gathers up the newspapers, crumples them together, and throws them away as well. Finally, MARY LINCOLN discards Elizabeth's book.)

MARY LINCOLN

(Shouting) Tad.

TAD

(Offstage) Yes, Mother.

MARY LINCOLN

I have some trash for you to throw out.

TAD

(Offstage) Now, Mother?

MARY LINCOLN

Yes, *now*. And Tad.... *Burn* it.

(Lights out.)

ACT II—Scene 4

(An hour later. JAMES's office. ELIZABETH enters without knocking.)

JAMES

(Defensive) Good day, Mrs. Keckley.

ELIZABETH

(Slamming the newspapers on his desk. Indignant) I suppose you've seen these.

JAMES

(Calmly) I have.

ELIZABETH

And...

JAMES

I know you're upset. But it doesn't mean your book is a failure. These are the opinions of a few reviewers. They don't represent the public.

ELIZABETH

Scathing reviews do not translate into sales, Mr. Redpath. I might not know your business, but I know that. And they destroy reputations.

JAMES

Such reviews also generate controversy...and that can sell just as well.

ELIZABETH

And who suffers as a result?

JAMES

You must keep this in perspective.

ELIZABETH

Perspective? What if Mr. Kirkland brings a lynch mob to my door? Such things happen in New York, as we both know. Or what if he waits around a corner and shoots me dead? White men don't get convicted for killing colored women—especially those accused of slandering a heroic president and First Lady.

JAMES

I understand your fears. But this is likely the first—and last—wave of dissent.

ELIZABETH

I don't believe that. I *only* believe you'd do anything to sell a few more books.

JAMES

My goal was for yours to be a top seller; it's something we *both* wanted.

ELIZABETH

Not for the price that's being paid. Selling a million books wouldn't justify *that*.

JAMES

I've devoted a lifetime to your cause. I've no desire for it to be destroyed.

ELIZABETH

Yet you cast it away in an instant.

JAMES

I wanted the *book* to succeed. I wanted *you* to succeed. Yes, I published the letters because I thought they would enhance the book's appeal. But I have *no* interest in its being a failure. (Beat) Neither of us is an innocent, Mrs. Keckley. You were warned from the beginning there could be risks.

ELIZABETH

Not of this magnitude.

JAMES

You're in the dressmaking business. I'm in the publishing business. We both know the rules of commerce and want to turn a profit. You should have no illusions.

ELIZABETH

My only illusion was in your good faith. It's cost me my reputation. And people will use it as another excuse to hate the Negro.

JAMES

(Beat) I believe your account, over time, will bring honor to you and to everyone of color. Maybe not now. Maybe not tomorrow. But soon. Yet none of this will happen if we remain silent. We *must* get before the public. If we are quiet—especially now—it will guarantee failure.

ELIZABETH

(Coldly) It's already assured.

JAMES

(Pleading) I *beg* you to listen to me. I can set up lectures in New York and Boston—as I've done for many others.

ELIZABETH

(With bitter sarcasm) What, another money-making scheme?

JAMES

A chance to *defend* yourself. I can't predict reviews. No one can. But I know the audience that shows up for book tours. They aren't like political meetings, which can become a blood sport.

ELIZABETH

It sound more like a circus. With me playing the dancing bear. Better yet—the dancing *black* bear.

JAMES

I guarantee that won't happen.

ELIZABETH

Guarantees don't mean much when they're coupled with deceit. And I can't help but notice that our celebrated partnership—of which you spoke so glowingly—isn't mentioned *anywhere*. Yet all the world seems to know the despised Mrs. Keckley.

JAMES

(Pressing) We can make this *work*. I assure you. A tour will give you a chance to speak directly to an audience. I promise to be by your side.

ELIZABETH

(Sharply) I'd keep a safe distance.

JAMES

If you're challenged you can *fight* back. It's what you've been doing your *entire* life.

ELIZABETH

Before the world cast its judgment.

JAMES

The jury is still out, Mrs. Keckley. Only *you* can influence the outcome.

ELIZABETH

(Long beat) First you pressured me into publishing Mrs. Lincoln's letters...now this.

JAMES

(Reassuring) We can make it work.

ELIZABETH

Then let's be clear. I'm not doing it for you. Or the book. But for those I've loved—who now risk being forgotten.

JAMES

You speak for them and you'll bring them back to *life*.

ELIZABETH

(Bitterly) Or die trying.

JAMES

(Awkward pause) I'll set something up for next week. We should strike while the iron's hot.

ELIZABETH

If turnout is low and interest faint or hostile, I'll cease future engagements. I'll not be embarrassed or humiliated.

JAMES

I recommend you return home, prepare some notes, and try to ignore the tempest.

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) I want Mrs. Lincoln's letters returned to me. Although she has stopped answering my correspondence, hers remains a treasure.

JAMES

They'll be returned.

ELIZABETH

(Gathering up her belongings and preparing to leave) I'll credit you with one thing. You said people would rally around Mrs. Lincoln, and they surely have—even as a pitiful victim. As for me, I'll write no further on this subject, or anything else. It's over.

JAMES

That would be a serious loss; you still have much to give.

ELIZABETH

The truth is...I have nothing more to say.

JAMES

(Plaintively) What will you do then?

ELIZABETH

Fade away. (Beat) Disappear. It's the safest thing for me, as I can never regain what was lost.

JAMES

You should know I never meant to harm you or your race...and I say that from my heart.

ELIZABETH

And that's the shame of it...and I say that from my *soul*.

(ELIZABETH exits. Lights down.)

ACT II—Scene 5

(Hours later. An apartment in New York. ELIZABETH and AMELIA are in conversation.)

AMELIA

And that's all he said? That he "never meant to harm you?"

ELIZABETH

Or our race.

AMELIA

Well, he's a sorry excuse for a man. The *only* thing I agree with is that you don't sit back and take it—that you fight.

ELIZABETH

So I should do this?

AMELIA

It's the right thing. We both know it. (Beat) But you need your rest. I'm going to meet Alberta and will be back in an hour.

(AMELIA gathers up her things and exits, dimming the lights as she leaves.
ELIZABETH lies back on the couch and closes her eyes. Lights down.)

(Lights up. Upper stage. MARY LINCOLN is standing before a mirror, holding a dress in front of her. ELIZABETH enters.)

ELIZABETH

It's the dress I made for the inaugural.

(MARY LINCOLN, startled, steps back from the mirror, dropping the dress to the floor.)

The one you loved.

MARY LINCOLN

Don't talk to me about love. (Beat) Don't talk to me about *anything*.

ELIZABETH

I wrote that I was sorry.

MARY LINCOLN

Which doesn't mean a hell of a lot when I'm embarrassed before the world. (With barely suppressed rage) *You had no right*.

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) It was the truth.

MARY LINCOLN

Between us! Beyond us, there is no truth. Only scorn and hatred.

ELIZABETH

It's directed at *me*.

MARY LINCOLN

Not the ridicule. Not the pity. Not the disgust. That's reserved for the *lunatic* Mrs. Lincoln. And you brought it all back—those loud, jealous, snickering voices.

ELIZABETH

That wasn't my intent.

MARY LINCOLN

I couldn't care less about your intent. (Beat) You never really fooled me, Elizabeth. You were there. You pretended to care. But you were just like the rest of them—looking out for yourself.

ELIZABETH

I protected you. I admired your husband. And I loved your children.

MARY LINCOLN

You protected *yourself*. You took advantage.

ELIZABETH

If I didn't look out for myself, I would've been dead long ago. But I made those dresses because I wanted you to look beautiful.

MARY LINCOLN

Then take a closer look. (Turning to face ELIZABETH directly) What do you see now? A worn dress that hangs off an old woman. Everything fine you've made has been forgotten. And what's ugly has been revived. Books aren't memories, Elizabeth. They don't, like dresses, turn to dust.

ELIZABETH

Give it to me. I'll mend it.

MARY LINCOLN

You can't mend what's beyond repair. (She takes the dress off the floor and holds it over a candle.)

ELIZABETH

(Screaming) *No...*

(ELIZABETH rushes forward as the dress bursts into flames. She tries to snuff out the fire that engulfs the garment. In the ensuing struggle over the burning dress, both ELIZABETH and MARY LINCOLN fall to their knees, facing each other. The dress, smoldering, lies between them.)

(Heartfelt) I'm sorry.

MARY LINCOLN

(Beat. Exhausted) It was the most beautiful dress you ever made.

(Light down upper stage. Lights up lower stage.)

(ELIZABETH is asleep on the couch. AMELIA enters, followed by YOUNG ALBERTA, rolling her hoop. YOUNG ALBERTA rushes to ELIZABETH's side.)

YOUNG ALBERTA

(To ELIZABETH) You sleeping, Aunt Lizzie?

ELIZABETH

(Waking up) Only for a moment, child.

(ELIZABETH sits up.)

YOUNG ALBERTA

Look, Mama bought me a new hoop.

ELIZABETH

Then we must put it to good use.

(ELIZABETH takes the hoop from YOUNG ALBERTA and rolls it across the floor until it disappears offstage. YOUNG ALBERTA chases after it. ELIZABETH looks at AMELIA.)

It's time to fight.

(Lights down.)

ACT II—Scene 6

(A small meetinghouse; attendance is light. ELIZABETH is standing behind a lectern, reading from her book. JAMES stands off to the side, serving as master of ceremonies. AMELIA and YOUNG ALBERTA sit in the audience.)

ELIZABETH

(Reading the last lines of her book) The labor of a lifetime has brought me nothing in a pecuniary way. If poverty did not weigh me down as it does, I would not now be toiling by day with my needle, and writing by night. (Beat) In memory I have travelled through the shadows and the sunshine of the past... Though poor in worldly goods, I am rich in friendships, and friends are a recompense for all the woes of the darkest pages of life. For sweet friendship's sake, I can bear more burdens than I have borne.

(A smattering of applause.)

JAMES

Mrs. Keckley will now take questions.

WHITE WOMAN

Madame, I find yours to be a very interesting account—it took a lot of courage to write your book.

ELIZABETH

Thank you.

WHITE WOMAN

But I was surprised that it included private letters from Mrs. Lincoln. I can't imagine she approved of their publication.

ELIZABETH

(Glancing at JAMES) You've touched on a sensitive subject. I was not in favor of their inclusion, but it was done and there's nothing I can do about it now.

WHITE WOMAN

How could you *not know* about letters published in *your* own book? Such a claim is beyond belief.

ELIZABETH

It's true, nonetheless.

WHITE WOMAN

Well, Mrs. Lincoln must be furious.

ELIZABETH

I'll concede as much.

JAMES

Next question, please...

BLACK MAN

We share the same race, but I don't believe you should have revealed Mrs. Lincoln's private life. It certainly must be embarrassing to her to have this all dragged before the public.

ELIZABETH

I revealed little that the world doesn't already know.

BLACK MAN

Much was new to *me*. I don't mean criticism of the First Lady; that was common throughout the war. But you revealed the details of her debts and the fact that she kept this secret from her husband.

ELIZABETH

(Emphatic) But don't you sympathize with her? Understand how she got into such a mess? This is a woman who sought favor in a city that mostly despised her...who lost a husband and son. This would be a shattering experience for anyone. Don't you see that?

WHITE WOMAN

What I see is a colored woman, with inside knowledge, trying to make a dollar. Do you really think Mr. Lincoln would have wanted his private life revealed to the world?

JAMES

Next...

ELIZABETH

(Interrupting) No, Mr. Redpath, I'll take this. (Pause) There is *no one* I hold in higher regard than Mr. Lincoln. He was, and remains, a hero to me. He wouldn't object to my telling stories that revealed his humanity and good humor—even his melancholy. He wasn't afraid of others knowing who he was. He was *only* afraid of failure and the destruction of the Union.

JAMES

Next question.

BLACK WOMAN

You were beaten as a slave and clearly abused. Yet you have good feelings, even love, for some who enslaved you. How is that possible?

ELIZABETH

Many were white women who grew up on plantations and didn't know any better. They were a product of their time and circumstance. If we don't recognize the good qualities in people, we will live forever in the past; we will *die* there, filled with hatred. I don't wish to live such a life.

BLACK WOMAN

Do you think only white people should change?

ELIZABETH

The obligation falls to us all. I wouldn't kill to be free, but that doesn't mean I lacked the sentiment. When I was beaten, with blood gushing from my body, I was capable of anything. But I knew if I hated whites as much as some hated me, I would be destroyed. I was *not* going to let that happen. Survival—and *freedom*—are the best revenge.

WHITE WOMAN

(Interrupting) You're being naïve. The war's been over just three years. Your race emancipated for only five. These are troubled times. You should have kept quiet.

ELIZABETH

(To WHITE WOMAN. Challenging) Let me ask you this. If a white woman had told such stories, would she be vilified? Would she be called every vile name, including the equivalent of "nigger"? I think not. I'm not sure the world can yet accept a colored woman who seeks to be heard—who *speaks her mind*. I'm not sure it ever will. I find that both sad and tragic.

AMELIA

(Bolting from her seat) Those who attack you—and the woman you are—can't face the truth. It's just another way for white folks to beat up on the colored. (Slowly scanning the room) Your book should be required reading for *everyone*—black, white or *pink*.

ELIZABETH

(Sweetly) Thank you, Amelia. But please.... (ELIZABETH motions for AMELIA to sit).

BLACK WOMAN

Would you still write the book, knowing everything you know now?

ELIZABETH

No one—*black or white*—should fail to act because they're afraid. That, in my mind, is a sin. If I leave a single message for all of you tonight—both those who agree with me and those who don't—it's to fight for what is right and damn the consequences. Live a life of courage and respect your fellow man. Then let God be the judge. For *his* is the only view that matters.

JAMES

Final question...

BLACK MAN

Do *you* think you betrayed Mrs. Lincoln?

ELIZABETH

(Long beat) In some ways, yes. I knew she would oppose some of what I wrote, but proceeded. I thought, mistakenly, I could put a human face to her struggles. I also wanted recognition and a place, however small, in history. I didn't want to die in poverty. And I didn't want to die without

leaving a legacy for my family. Life is full of compromises and publishing the book was mine. But let's not forget—*all of us*—a price was paid...and damage done.

KIRKLAND

(Offstage. Aggressively) But not nearly enough, Elizabeth. For Mrs. Lincoln isn't the only one you fuckin' betrayed.

(KIRKLAND steps from the shadows at the rear of the hall.)

JAMES

The program is over, sir.

KIRKLAND

It's not over 'til I say it's over.

JAMES

(With disdain) It's over *now*.

ELIZABETH

(Interrupting) Good night, everyone.

(KIRKLAND draws a revolver and fires into the air.)

KIRKLAND

I suggest you all just sit down.

(The members of the crowd, some of whom have stood to leave, promptly obey.)

(To ELIZABETH) Plus, you left somethin' out...somethin' important...which your audience should hear...(scornfully)...now that it's in print.

(KIRKLAND tosses the book to ELIZABETH.)

I've marked the page. (Then coldly. Loudly) *Read it.*

(ELIZABETH slowly opens the book, then hesitates.)

There are five bullets left, Elizabeth, and you don't want any of them to leave the chamber.

ELIZABETH

(Reluctantly beginning to read. Softly) "I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man (looking directly at KIRKLAND)—I spare the world his name—had base designs upon me. Suffice it to say that he persecuted me and I became a mother. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of his birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life..."

KIRKLAND

(Cocking his revolver) *Finish it.*

ELIZABETH

“He must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my position.”

KIRKLAND

What I did wasn’t a crime. It was (hollering) my *right*.

ELIZABETH

(Angry) You had *no* right.

KIRKLAND

(Yelling) I had *every* right...*then* and *now*...especially with a nigger whore.

(AMELIA flies out of her chair. She has an umbrella in her hand and is about to strike KIRKLAND when JAMES moves forward, catching her upraised arm.)

AMELIA

(Screaming) You white bastard.

(AMELIA tries to force her way past JAMES, but he wraps his arms around her.)

ELIZABETH

(Breaking the silence. Gently) Amelia.

(AMELIA turns toward ELIZABETH.)

Please.

(AMELIA slowly lowers the umbrella.)

KIRKLAND

(Sarcastic) You act so high and mighty. Like you’re better than the rest of us. Well, let me tell you—you’re not. I had my way with you and thought you half enjoyed it; maybe more than half. You tried lockin’ me out of your room years ago, but I held the key. *And I still hold it.*

(AMELIA again lunges at KIRKLAND, but JAMES continues to hold her back; ELIZABETH remains calm.)

(To JAMES) Keep that crazy bitch away from me.

JAMES

The police are outside.

KIRKLAND

So are me men. I guarantee no one's makin' a fuckin' move 'til I say so.

(ELIZABETH steps from the podium and begins walking slowly toward KIRKLAND.)

ELIZABETH

Put the gun away.

(ELIZABETH continues toward KIRKLAND, who points his revolver at her.)

KIRKLAND

(Threatening) You want the next bullet?

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) I said put it away.

(AMELIA breaks free from JAMES and draws a pistol from her purse.)

AMELIA

You heard Mrs. Keckley.

KIRKLAND

You just won't keep your fuckin' mouth shut, will ya?

AMELIA

Put it down, or I'll blow *your fucking* head off.

YOUNG ALBERTA

(Bolting from her seat, screaming) Mama.

(As YOUNG ALBERTA rushes toward AMELIA, KIRKLAND intercepts her and pulls her close.)

KIRKLAND

And what do you say to this? Want me to blow her brains out, too?

(YOUNG ALBERTA slams her foot down on KIRKLAND's. He hollers in pain as he tosses her aside. KIRKLAND then pivots toward AMELIA and both she and KIRKLAND fire simultaneously. KIRKLAND drops to the floor, wounded. His gun falls next to him and JAMES kicks it aside. AMELIA, also wounded but still standing, shuffles over to him and points her gun close to his head.)

ELIZABETH

(Screaming) NO!

(AMELIA cocks the pistol and hovers over KIRKLAND.)

STOP, Amelia. STOP!

AMELIA

(In a barely controlled rage) Apologize to Mrs. Keckley. Then to my daughter.

KIRKLAND

You're fuckin' jokin'.

AMELIA

(Screaming at the top of her lungs) APOLOGIZE!

(AMELIA lifts her gun slightly and fires; the round passes just above KIRKLAND's head.)

ELIZABETH

(Pulling AMELIA's arm down by her side. Then urgently) Put the gun away.

AMELIA

Not 'til he...

ELIZABETH

(Firmly) It's *over*, Amelia.

(ELIZABETH grabs a reluctant AMELIA, who, in turn, grabs YOUNG ALBERTA by the arm. ELIZABETH then drags them both through a side door. The moment they disappear, KIRKLAND, though bleeding from his wound, gets to his feet, pushes JAMES aside, and retrieves his gun. He half stumbles to the side door, raises his pistol, and fires several rounds into the night. A split second after he empties the chamber and lowers his arm slightly, a single shot is heard from outside the hall. KIRKLAND drops to the ground, dead.)

JAMES

(Loudly) Everybody out.

(Members of the audience, stunned by the shooting, move slowly toward the exits.)

(Louder) NOW!

(The audience's pace quickens as everyone clears the hall.)

Not you (pointing to BLACK MAN). Come with me.

(JAMES motions for BLACK MAN to follow him to KIRKLAND'S body. He reaches under KIRKLAND's arms and pulls him up.)

(To BLACK MAN) Grab his feet.

(Together JAMES and BLACK MAN drag KIRKLAND's body away from the door, dropping it near the podium. JAMES then picks up KIRKLAND's gun and places it in the dead man's hand.)

(To BLACK MAN) I want this absolutely clear. We're going to have a lot of cops and this man's friends rushing in here. And we're going to tell them *the same story*. That Mrs. Keckley was in the middle of her lecture, when this man pulled out a gun. He threatened her; she ran out. We got in an argument. I took out my gun and we both fired. (Beat) It was *my* bullet that killed him. Self-defense. Got it?

BLACK MAN

Got it.

JAMES

And I've got fifty bucks to prove it.

(BLACK MAN nods in agreement as JAMES reaches into his pocket and hands him the cash.)

You can go now.

(BLACK MAN exits. JAMES sits in a chair next to KIRKLAND's body. As the sound of voices grows louder on the outside of the hall, JAMES draws a pistol from his pocket and places it on a nearby table. He then turns his fist into an imaginary gun and points it toward KIRKLAND. After a beat, he lowers the hammer on an imaginary trigger, as his arm jerks backward from an imaginary recoil.)

(Lights out.)

ACT II—Scene 7

(Washington, DC, spring 1907. OLDER ELIZABETH is lying on a couch, covered by a blanket, at the Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children. Her basement room contains a few simple furnishings and photos on the wall. OLDER ELIZABETH is in the final weeks of her life. She dozes, a book open by her side. The NURSE enters.)

NURSE

Your goddaughter's here.

OLDER ELIZABETH

(Weak, but excited) Wonderful! Show her in....

(Before the NURSE grants permission, OLDER ALBERTA LANCASTER walks briskly into the room, wraps her arms around OLDER ELIZABETH, and gives her a long embrace.)

OLDER ALBERTA

My dear Elizabeth...

OLDER ELIZABETH

(With great warmth and affection) My dear Alberta.

OLDER ALBERTA

So *incredibly* good to see you.

OLDER ELIZABETH

It's not always easy to find joy in this place, but you've certainly brought it with you.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Glancing at the book by OLDER ELIZABETH's side) And I see you're still inspired by Mr. Douglass.

OLDER ELIZABETH

(Putting her hands on the book) "No man can be truly free whose liberty is dependent upon the thought, feeling and action of others..." As true today as then. (Beat) But let's get down to business. How's your mother?

OLDER ALBERTA

Feisty as ever. I still keep a careful watch.

OLDER ELIZABETH

As God watches over us all.

OLDER ALBERTA

He's certainly watching over me.

OLDER ELIZABETH

You've come upon some good fortune.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Excited, reaching into her satchel) I've brought something. Something *really* special. Something I thought I'd never find...but have been searching for my entire life.

OLDER ELIZABETH

A pot of gold?

OLDER ALBERTA

Oh, much better than that.

OLDER ELIZABETH

And worth more, I hope.

OLDER ALBERTA

More to me.

(OLDER ALBERTA hands OLDER ELIZABETH a package, tied in string. OLDER ELIZABETH unwraps it, revealing a worn, tattered book; it's a copy of her autobiography, published four decades earlier.)

OLDER ELIZABETH

(Stunned) Oh, my goodness.

OLDER ALBERTA

I found it in a secondhand bookstore. Tucked *way* in the back, covered with dust. For years, I've always inquired when I bought a book, but no one ever had a copy...until yesterday.

OLDER ELIZABETH

That's because Robert Lincoln forced the publisher to stop printing it, and told booksellers to toss out the rest.

OLDER ALBERTA

Then it's a miracle. I might have the only copy left in Washington.

OLDER ELIZABETH

...or the country. (With mixed emotions) This is very kind of you.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Beat) Are you okay, Elizabeth?

OLDER ELIZABETH

It's complicated. This (touching the book) brings back a flood of memories—some pleasant, some not.

OLDER ALBERTA

I thought it was *remarkable*. I read it last night and this morning before coming here. Mother told me some of the stories over the years. And I remember the one you told me as a child. It's the best book I've *ever* read.

OLDER ELIZABETH

You're sweet. But too young to remember that it didn't sell. It turned into a humiliation. (Beat) I sometimes wonder if I should have written it at all.

OLDER ALBERTA

(With emphasis) Then we wouldn't be holding it in *our* hands... (Leaning forward and grasping both of OLDER ELIZABETH's hands, which are still wrapped around her book)...and it would have never touched *my* life.

OLDER ELIZABETH

But you must understand the *full* story, not all of which is contained in these pages. It angered virtually all whites...as well as some colored, who thought they wouldn't be hired by those who feared betrayal by a book or essay written in spite. But none of this makes a difference, Alberta, because the book is long forgotten. And Mrs. Lincoln, the president, and their children, save Robert, are long gone. It simply doesn't matter any more. *I* don't matter any more—except, thank God, to you.

OLDER ALBERTA

You're wrong, Elizabeth. Even I didn't realize how much you've been through—all the pain and suffering.

OLDER ELIZABETH

Don't be afraid of pain, Alberta. It's part of life. A big part, for many of us. Which makes joy, when it comes, all the sweeter.

OLDER ALBERTA

But I don't accept the thought that you don't matter...or that the book was a failure...or that the world doesn't care about what you wrote and how you lived.

OLDER ELIZABETH

It *doesn't*. I'm not sad or bitter about it. It's just the truth.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Tenderly touching the book) The *truth* is it's a powerful book that will change people's lives.

OLDER ELIZABETH

If they care so much, how come they're still lynching Negroes in the North *and* South—by the hundreds? And our race lives in poverty and faces prejudice in every part of the land.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Pressing) But there's the legacy of your friend Frederick Douglass, and so many others. Sojourner Truth. Harriet Tubman. Booker T. Washington. *They* inspire me. *You* inspire me. *Your book* inspires me.

OLDER ELIZABETH

(Smiling) Youth sparks unbridled optimism, doesn't it?

OLDER ALBERTA

I see it in my *past*. (Squeezing OLDER ELIZABETH's hand) And in my *future*. (Beat) I'm just sad you never wrote another word or received proper recognition.

OLDER ELIZABETH

One book, my dear, was quite enough. And now that you've presented me with a gift, I have one for you. (Pointing) It's at the foot of the bed. Inside the locker. On top.

(OLDER ALBERTA reaches inside and pulls out a quilt.)

I made it for Mrs. Lincoln...from scraps of her old dresses...but never had a chance to deliver it.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Holding up the quilt) It's so *beautiful*.

OLDER ELIZABETH

It's *yours* now.

OLDER ALBERTA

(She hugs OLDER ELIZABETH, then pulls a blanket over her to keep her warm.) I'm curious about what happened to everything you were given after the president's death. His brush and comb. The clothes worn by Mrs. Lincoln.

OLDER ELIZABETH

All sold to a gentleman in Chicago years ago. I held on to them for more than thirty years, then could no longer afford to. But with age, objects once so dear become less important. It's the memories I treasure.

(The NURSE tucks her head inside the doorway.)

NURSE

Mrs. Keckley, just a few more minutes. You need to rest.

OLDER ALBERTA

(To OLDER ELIZABETH) Don't despair, Elizabeth. Your book will live on. I'll see to it. And this quilt will always have a special place in my home.

OLDER ELIZABETH

Oh, I'm not despairing, Alberta. Like everyone else, I have my moments of reflection. Some are painful and others fill me with joy. *You* fill me with joy. *Your family* fills me with joy. That's the great advantage of old age—regrets fade away and the pain of life subsides.

(OLDER ELIZABETH and OLDER ALBERTA reflect a moment.)

Now would you be a darling and help me to bed?

(With some difficulty—slowly and with great care and deliberation—OLDER ALBERTA helps OLDER ELIZABETH to her bed and tucks her in.)

OLDER ALBERTA

I'll come see you next week. And I want you to take care of yourself between now and then.

OLDER ELIZABETH

Well, I'm certainly not going anywhere—and they take good care of me here.

(OLDER ALBERTA reaches down, kisses OLDER ELIZABETH on the forehead, then stands, ready to leave.)

OLDER ALBERTA

Whatever happened to Mr. Redpath?

OLDER ELIZABETH

He died years ago. I read about it in the newspapers. I also read that he assisted Jefferson Davis in writing a history of the Confederacy. A great irony, wouldn't you say?

OLDER ALBERTA

Did he ever return Mrs. Lincoln's letters?

OLDER ELIZABETH

I never received them. Lost to history, I suppose.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Glancing at a photo of Mary Lincoln on the wall, flanked by two others) That's her, isn't it?

OLDER ELIZABETH

Taken years ago...next to George and my mother.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Cautiously) Do you regret your lost friendship?

OLDER ELIZABETH

Frederick Douglass once told me there's no progress without struggle. While I regret what happened, I *don't* regret the past. I did what I thought was right. Not everything went according to plan, but most things in life don't. So I accept my fate, and all that goes with it.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Softly) And Mrs. Lincoln's claims of betrayal?

OLDER ELIZABETH

It's not a simple matter, Alberta. In some ways, we betrayed *each other*. Then Mr. Redpath betrayed us both. The intent was not always malicious, but reputations were destroyed—or nearly so. Certainly Mrs. Lincoln and I never fully recovered. Only Mr. Redpath—who used us both for his own ends—was untarnished.

OLDER ALBERTA

Which seems unfair.

OLDER ELIZABETH

It's neither fair nor unfair; history will render judgments on us all. Whether harsh or lenient, I'll not venture a guess. All I know is what flows from the heart, where all is forgiven. While Mr. Redpath is a distant memory, Mrs. Lincoln remains a strong and abiding presence, residing in a place of honor (looking up at the three photos on the wall), next to those I hold dearest. While your mother and Mr. Douglass are not among the trinity, I hold them close as well.

(She hands OLDER ALBERTA the autobiography.)

OLDER ALBERTA

No. I couldn't...

OLDER ELIZABETH

It's *yours*, Alberta. I have no use for it. I know every word it contains. Since you believe it's such a treasure, I want you to pass it on—to your children and to their children. If it has meaning for them, I'll die a happy woman.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Smiling) There will be no dying around here...at least for some time. (Kissing OLDER ELIZABETH, then moving toward the door, carrying the quilt and holding the book up before tucking it under her arm) Thank you for this. It's my greatest gift.

OLDER ELIZABETH

It's all that's left—and given with pleasure.

(OLDER ALBERTA reaches the door, then turns back to OLDER ELIZABETH.)

OLDER ALBERTA

(Before exiting) It's amazing that you're still here, while so many are gone.

OLDER ELIZABETH

I'm not much for giving up, Alberta.

OLDER ALBERTA

(Pausing slightly) To the future then...with you beside me.

OLDER ELIZABETH

(Softly) With luck...and God's blessing.

(OLDER ALBERTA exits. Lights dim until a spotlight shines only on OLDER ELIZABETH and the photographs of her mother, her son, and Mary Lincoln. Then the spotlight on each is extinguished, one after the other—first George, then Agnes Hobbs, then Mary Lincoln—until it remains only on OLDER ELIZABETH. After a reflective moment, she turns on her side, closes her eyes, and begins to sleep. Lights out.)

FIN

PROGRAM NOTE

Elizabeth Keckley died in her sleep in 1907 at the age of 89, outliving Mary Lincoln by a quarter of a century and James Redpath by more than a decade. Her pastor, the Reverend Francis Grimke, eulogized Elizabeth with these words: “She was a commanding figure, a splendid presence... She was a woman of remarkable energy... She was a woman who thoroughly *respected herself*.”

While Mary Lincoln lies buried in a vault in Springfield, Illinois, next to her husband and sons, Elizabeth’s remains have disappeared. In the 1960s, a developer paved over the National Harmony Memorial Park Cemetery in Landover, Maryland, where she was buried. When her remains were moved to a new cemetery, they were placed in an unmarked grave—the same fate suffered by her mother and son.

Elizabeth’s book survives, as do some of the dresses she made for Mary Lincoln, which are on display at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. What also survives is the quilt she made from scraps of Mary Lincoln’s old dresses. It can be viewed today at the Kent State University Museum in Kent, Ohio.

Elizabeth Keckley’s quilt



Dress made by Elizabeth Keckley and worn by Mary Lincoln during the first inaugural ball in 1861.

