

## **ACT I**

*Richmond, 1865. The U.S. Civil War.*

Mary Jane Bowser, a woman born into slavery to the wealthy Van Lew family in Richmond, is hanging laundry on the Van Lew plantation when she is approached by a woman named Lucinda, whom she has never met but who seems to know a lot about Mary Jane. Lucinda questions Mary Jane's close relationship with Elizabeth Van Lew, the daughter of the deceased family patriarch. Mary Jane defends Elizabeth, saying she took care of her after her mother died in childbirth. We learn that Mary Jane had been baptized and married in Richmond's church for white families, and that she was sent to the North for school to learn to read and write.

As Lucinda slips away, a man runs to Mary Jane begging for help to escape to the North. Elizabeth enters and berates him for implying that she is sympathetic to the Union. She also recognizes the man: she knows he is Travis Briggs, a Confederate Home Guard, who was trying to entrap Elizabeth and Mary Jane. Elizabeth's sister-in-law Callie arrives and vouches for Elizabeth's loyalty to the Confederacy. She, too, is suspicious of Elizabeth's Northern sympathies, but she is more concerned with protecting her family name.

When Travis and Callie depart, Elizabeth and Mary Jane drop the charade and focus on the task at hand: they have two Union soldiers hiding in the house, and they need Mary Jane's husband Wilson to help them escape to the North. Elizabeth then tells Mary Jane that their secret plan can finally be put into motion: Mary Jane will be loaned out to the Confederate White House. She will spy for the Union, sending intelligence from Jefferson Davis's study to the North through Elizabeth's spy ring.

At the seamstress shop, Mary Jane delivers a dress with Confederate secrets sewn into the hem. Travis approaches her, increasingly suspicious of her and Elizabeth; he nearly assaults her before he is interrupted by the Davises' butler, Henry, who is looking for Mary Jane to bring her back to the Davis house.

Wilson tells Elizabeth that, as he was delivering the message from the dress to the Union line, he learned that only one of the two Union soldiers made it back safely; the Confederate Home Guard must have captured one of the escaped Yankee prisoners. As Elizabeth worries about the captured soldier and about Callie and Travis's increasing suspicions, she asks Wilson to bury her journal: they cannot risk anyone finding the cipher to their messages to the Union.

Travis interrogates the captured Yankee but kills him when nothing is revealed. Lucinda mysteriously reappears, observing both the burying of the soldier and the burying of the journal. At the Davis house, Mary Jane has uncovered intelligence that needs to get to the North as quickly as possible: she does not have time to sew it into a dress to deliver later. She sets fire to the building as a distraction, encouraging Henry to run to the Van Lew house where Elizabeth can help him get to the North. As the fire grows, Mary Jane sees Lucinda consumed in the flames.

## **ACT II**

Mary Jane returns to the room where she started the fire, looking for signs of Lucinda: nobody else saw Lucinda in the fire. Back at the Van Lew house, Callie tries yet again to entrap Elizabeth. She pretends to be more concerned about her family's welfare in the war, asking Elizabeth to help them escape to the North. Elizabeth refuses to take the bait.

Elizabeth meets Mary Jane at the seamstress shop, thinking Mary Jane has found some new intelligence. Instead, Mary Jane asks about Lucinda. Insisting that no one was in the fire, Elizabeth reluctantly asks the troubled Mary Jane for more help: since Callie has been suspiciously watching her, Elizabeth needs Mary Jane to retrieve the buried journal. Mary Jane agrees, but then asks about her mother: what was her name? How old was she when she died?

When Elizabeth leaves, Mary Jane falls into a mysterious existence as spirits and ancestors dance around her. She sees Lucinda. Mary Jane asks her how old she was when she died, and Lucinda echoes Elizabeth's answer about Mary Jane's mother.

Travis finds Wilson digging up the buried journal and knocks him unconscious. When Mary Jane arrives, Travis confronts her about the secrets, stories, and cipher: he reads a story from Elizabeth's journal that departs from Mary Jane's knowledge of her mother's death in childbirth, instead saying that Mary Jane was two years old when the Van Lews took her mother to the auction block. As Travis moves to assault Mary Jane, Henry appears, and the men fight; Travis is killed.

Callie comes across Travis's body. She plans to turn Elizabeth in and destroy her family name. Elizabeth watches from a distance, a gun in hand, prepared to do the worst to protect herself and the spy ring. But as Callie realizes that destroying Elizabeth's reputation would include her and her children, she focuses on her own self-preservation: Callie buries Travis's body herself to keep the truth from being discovered.

Elizabeth tells Mary Jane what she saw Callie do. But Mary Jane is no longer concerned with the secrets of the war and the spy ring. She is concerned with the secrets Elizabeth has been keeping from her. As she confronts Elizabeth and learns the truth about what happened to her mother, Mary Jane decides to leave Richmond behind her and tell her story. The whole story.

*-Courtesy of Houston Grand Opera*