

Praise for *Libertie*:

‘In this singular novel, Kaitlyn Greenidge confronts the anonymising forces of history with her formidable gifts. *Libertie* is a glorious, piercing song for the ages – fierce, brilliant and utterly free’ Brandon Taylor, author of *Real Life*

‘I want to say that Kaitlyn Greenidge’s *Libertie* is a glorious diasporic literary song, but the novel is so much more than that. A book so deeply invested in the politics and place of silence is one of the most melodious books I’ve read in decades. The ambition in *Libertie* is only exceeded by Greenidge’s skill. This is it’ Kiese Laymon, author of *Heavy*

‘This is a historical novel, a magical novel, a familial novel, a Bildungsroman – a work that defies simple categorisation. The complexities herein signify an important writer throwing all her talents and brilliance on the page, offering us more than we deserve. Reading *Libertie* can feel like reading Toni Morrison. Such a comparison, however, is a disservice to Kaitlyn Greenidge, who is an original light, a writer to emulate, a master of the craft, and a mind we’re fortunate to have living among us’ Gabriel Bump, author of *Everywhere You Don’t Belong*

‘*Libertie* is a Bildungsroman for America in the twenty-first century, providing us with a spiritual education we sorely need. What is care and what is poison? Where does life end? Where does liberty begin? By creating *Libertie* – a nineteenth-century “black gal”, a modern existential heroine – Greenidge has resurrected more than an ancestor – she has revived the anger and the love, the grief and the pride, and, above all, the fierce need for freedom that still drive our nation today’ C. Morgan Babst, author of *The Floating World*

‘Wielding both her knowledge of our history and her incredible sense of story, Kaitlyn Greenidge further establishes herself as one of the sharpest minds working today. *Libertie* is a novel of epic power and endless grace’ Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, author of *Friday Black*

‘From the first page, Greenidge catapults us into a masterfully crafted story in which the possibilities, limitations and shifting contours of freedom for Black people take centre stage ... She conjures a fiercely gorgeous, complex portrait of life for Black women during the Reconstruction era. It is a story that’s at once politically weighted and intimately resonant ... Greenidge perfectly weds the precision of historical details and context with fantastical elements of myth and magic to illuminate the enduring questions: What does freedom mean for Black girls and women? What does it look, smell, feel, sound and taste like? *Libertie* is a beautifully written meditation on Black liberation and imagination. It is exquisite historical fiction that lovingly reminds us to reassess our own present-day commitments to fighting for, and practising, freedom’ *Ms.*

‘Few novels have as strong a sense of place as this fascinating blend of magical realism and African American historical fiction ... Greenidge succeeds beautifully at presenting the complexities of an intense mother–daughter bond ... Greenidge creates a richly layered tapestry of Black communal life, notably Black female life, and the inevitable contradictions and compromises of “freedom”’ *Booklist*, starred review

‘Greenidge (*We Love You, Charlie Freeman*) delivers another genius work of radical historical fiction ... This pièce de résistance is so immaculately orchestrated that each character, each setting and each sentence sings’ *Publishers Weekly*, starred and boxed review

LIBERTIE



a novel by

KAITLYN GREENIDGE



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I saw my mother raise a man from the dead. “It still didn’t help him much, my love,” she told me. But I saw her do it all the same. That’s how I knew she was magic.

The time I saw Mama raise a man from the dead, it was close to dusk. Mama and her nurse, Lenore, were in her office—Mama with her little greasy glasses on the tip of her nose, balancing the books, and Lenore banking the fire. That was the rule in Mama’s office—the fire was kept burning from dawn till after dinner, and we never let it go out completely. Even on the hottest days, when my linen collar stuck to the back of my neck and the belly of Lenore’s apron was stained with sweat, a mess of logs and twigs was lit up down there, waiting.

When the dead man came, it was spring. I was playing on the stoop. I’d broken a stick off the mulberry bush, so young it had resisted the pull of my fist. I’d had to work for it. Once I’d wrenched it off, I stripped the bark and rubbed the wet wood underneath on the flagstone, pressing the green into rock.

I heard a rumbling come close and looked up, and I could see, down

the road, a mule plodding slow and steady with a covered wagon, a ribbon of dust trailing behind it.

In those days, the road to our house was narrow and only just cut through the brush. Our house was set back—Grandfather, my mother’s father, had made his money raising pigs and kept the house and pens away from everyone else to protect his neighbors, and his reputation, from the undermining smell of swine. No one respects a man, no matter how rich and distinguished-looking, who stinks of pig scat. The house was set up on a rise, so we could always see who was coming. Usually, it was Mama’s patients, walking or limping or running to her office. Wagons were rare.

When it first turned onto our road, the cart was moving slowly. But once it passed the bowed-over walnut tree, the woman at the seat snapped her whip, and the mule began to move a little faster, until it was upon us.

“Where’s your mother?”

I opened my mouth, but before I could call for her, my mother rushed to the door, Lenore behind her.

“Quick,” was all Mama said, and the woman came down off the seat. A boy, about twelve or thirteen, followed. They were both dressed in mourning clothes. The woman’s skirt was full. Embroidered on the bodice of her dress were a dozen black lilies, done in cord. The boy’s mourning suit was dusty but perfectly fit to his form. At his neck was a velvet bow tie, come undone on the journey. The woman carried an enormous beaded handbag—it, too, was dusty but looked rich. It was covered in a thousand little eyes of jet that winked at me in the last bit of sun.

“Go, Lenore,” my mother said, and Lenore and the woman and the boy all went to the back of the wagon, the boy hopping up in the bed and pushing something that lay there, Lenore and the woman standing,

arms ready to catch it. Finally, after much scraping, a coffin heaved out of the wagon bed. It was crudely made, a white, bright wood, heavy enough that Lenore and the woman stumbled as they carried it. When the coffin passed me, I could smell the sawdust still on it.

My mother stepped down off the stoop then, and the four of them lifted it up and managed it into the office. As soon as they got it inside, they set it on the ground and pushed it home. I could hear the rough pine shuffling across the floor.

“You’re early.” Mama struggled with the box.

“Don’t start with me, Cathy,” the woman said, and Lenore looked up, and so did I. No one, except Grandfather before he died, dared call Mama “Cathy.” To everyone except for me, she was always “Doctor.” But Mama did not bristle and did not correct, as she would have with anyone else.

“Word was you’d be here at midnight.”

“We couldn’t leave,” the woman said. “He wasn’t ready.”

The woman knelt down in her dusty skirts and drew a long, skinny claw hammer from the handbag. She turned it on its head and began to pull at the nails on the coffin’s face. She grunted. “Here, Lucien.” She signaled to the boy. “Put some grease into it.” He fell down beside her, took the hammer from her hands, and began to pull at the nails she’d left behind.

Mama watched, eagerly. We all did. I crossed the room to stand beside her, slipped my hand into hers.

Mama started at my touch. “If you’d only come later.”

The woman’s head jerked up, her expression sharp, and then she looked at my hand in Mama’s, and her frown softened.

“I know we’ve done it differently. This time we really tried,” she said. “Besides, my Lucien sees all this and more. If you do this work, Cathy, your children will know sooner or later.”

Mama did not take advice from anyone, certainly not advice on me, but she said nothing at this softest of rebukes, only watched the woman and her son.

The boy, Lucien, pulled hard, and when the final nail was out, he and Lenore pulled at the splintering plank until it gave a terrible yawn. And then I saw:

a man curled in on himself like a dried mulberry leaf,
his skin gray, his eyes open and staring,
his pants damp. He smelled sharp,
like the spirits Lenore used to cut Mama's medicines.

The woman gasped and reached for the boy and held him close. Lenore gasped, too. Mama let go of my hand and knelt down at the side of the coffin. She held her ear over the man's open mouth, and her eyes went blank, that look she always got when she left this world and entered the one of her mind.

She stood up suddenly. "The arnica, please," she said to Lenore, who hurried to the shelf over Mama's worktable.

Lenore held the big glass jar close to her chest, then set it down beside the coffin. Without looking at her, never taking her eyes off the dead man, Mama held out her right hand.

"Thirty grains," she said. "Exactly. Don't skimp me, girl."

Lenore counted them out.

One . . . two . . . three . . .

I watched the yellow pellets move from the jar to Mama's open palm. Mama wet the fingers of her free hand with her spit, the better to gain purchase, and then pinched each grain, one by one, from her right palm and fed them into the dead man's mouth.

fifteen sixteen seventeen

"He wasn't like that when we put him in, Cathy," the woman said.

Lucien turned his face into her side, and I felt a flash of pride, that a boy bigger than me couldn't watch what I could.

twenty-one twenty-two twenty-three

Thirty seeds passed between his lips.

The last five left them yellow.

Mama stood up. The man lay still in his coffin. Mama put her hands on her hips, frowned. Then she knelt down suddenly and whacked his back. The man sputtered and coughed and made the lowest moaning sound. His eyes blinked, and he rolled them up to look at all of us, from his resting place.

"There," Mama said.

The woman sighed. "Cathy, I don't know what we would have done—"

"Well, we don't have to wonder." Mama wiped her hands on her skirt. The man in the coffin was still groaning.

"He was so eager to keep going," the woman said. "He and his sister came to us three days ago. He said he should leave before his sister. That he was strong enough to make it first. But when he saw how he had to come, he got scared. He was shaking something fierce."

"I told him, 'Me and Manman took a girl not but ten years old this way, and she was brave and didn't cry the whole time,'" Lucien said. He was much recovered now and had stepped away from his mother's side. "I said, 'Be brave, Mr. Ben.'"

"Last night, he disappeared," the woman said. "That's why we left at the wrong time. He went missing and almost killed us all. He was down in Market Square, begging for whiskey to help him through. I said, 'You fool,' but he was already drunk by the time he got back. Pierre told me to wait till he sobered up, but if we'd done that, he would have kept yelling, drawing even more attention to us. It took Pierre and

Lucien both to get him in the box, and the whole time he was hollering that we were trying to kill him. He kept saying ‘Damn, nigger, what’d I ever do to you?’”

Mama started to laugh but caught herself. Instead, she said, “How did you get him to be quiet?”

“I soaked that rag in some laudanum and stuffed it in his mouth, and then he fell right still. When we nailed the top on, I swear he was still breathing.”

Mama shook her head. “You always overdo it, Elizabeth,” she said, and then we all heard a great whoosh as Mr. Ben sat up in his coffin and began to cry.

“That black bitch right there promised to get me out. They all said she can get you out. No one ever said it was like this. In a goddamn coffin.” Mr. Ben was upright, and I could see him clearly. The color came back to him—his skin was a dark brown. I liked his face. It was soft and, I thought, handsome, made more so by his cheeks and chin. They rounded in to the pout of a spoiled and much-loved baby. I could not tell how old he was—his skin was smooth, but his hair, what was left of it, was turning gray and clipped close to his skull. He wore a graying shirt and britches and no hat. His hands were enormous and calloused. He was crying, loud, racking sobs that I did not think a grown person could make. He made no move to leave his coffin, and my mother and the woman made no move to comfort him.

The woman said, “Behave yourself, Mr. Ben.”

Mama pursed her lips. “Is this his final destination?”

“We take his sister to Manhattan next month.”

“Then perhaps Mr. Ben can wait for her there. Mr. Ben,” Mama said, “you will have to stay the night here, but I trust we can count on you to be quiet?”

Mr. Ben did not look at her; instead, he gazed up at the ceiling. “As long as I don’t ever have to sleep in any coffin.”

Mama laughed. “Only the good Lord can promise that.”

MAMA HAD LENORE set up a bed for Mr. Ben by the fire, and she and the woman—Madame Elizabeth, she’d said to call her—took Mr. Ben by both elbows and helped him stand for the first time in twelve hours and walk around the room before settling down.

Mr. Ben went easily enough to sleep, and Mama and Madame Elizabeth fell to talking.

I was too cowed to say anything to our visitors. With the other people who came to see Mama at the house—her patients, and the runners from the pharmacy closer to town, and all the women in the committees and societies and church groups Mama headed—I had been trained to make polite conversation and ask, “How do you do?” But Madame Elizabeth was different. She spoke to Mama as if we had not all just seen her raise a man from the dead. As if Mama was the same as she.

“Cathy,” she said when Mama stood over Lenore as she made up Mr. Ben’s cot, “you work this poor woman to death.”

As they talked, I did not dare to interrupt them. I did not want to be sent away to bed. Mama brewed strong sassafras tea for both of them—they had seemed to agree, without ever speaking it aloud, that they would both stay up the night to make sure Mr. Ben made it. I sat very still and close to Mama, and the only way I was sure she had not forgotten me was when, after she finished her mug, she silently handed it to me, because she knew that I believed that the sweetest drink in the world came from the dregs of a cup she had drunk from.

From their talking, I learned that Madame Elizabeth was a childhood friend of Mama's. She had a husband, whom she called Monsieur Pierre. "A Haitian Negro, so you know he's unruly," Madame Elizabeth said, and Mama laughed.

"Oh hush," she said.

He and Madame Elizabeth owned a storefront down in Philadelphia—Madame Elizabeth ran a dressmaker's shop on one side of the house, and Monsieur Pierre ran an undertaker's on the other.

"You are doing well?" Mama asked, and Madame Elizabeth stood up, stamping her feet so her skirt hung down straight.

"Well? Well? Look at this dress, Madame Doctor." She turned. It was, indeed, a very fine dress. The lilies embroidered on the bodice stretched tendrils down to the skirt—a queer embellishment on a mourning dress that she had clearly worn over many travels.

"You play too much," Mama said. "A dress like that draws attention, and that's the last thing any of us need."

"We're doing the Lord's work in a cruel world, but that doesn't mean we can't do it with style," Madame Elizabeth said.

Mama looked at the fire. "If we are found out because you insist on introducing yourself with an ostrich feather, I don't know that I, or the Lord, can forgive you."

"Well, ostrich feathers are *déclassé*." Madame Elizabeth took the hem of her dress in her hand and artfully shook it. "Pierre always hated them, and lo and behold, the ladies say they're no longer in fashion. So nothing to worry about on that account."

They fell into a practiced quarrel, one that must have been older than me, centered on Mama's bad dress sense. Mama did not care for beauty; this was true. Like all the women in our town, she dressed for work—in heavy dark-colored gowns that could bear the mark of other people's sweat and tears and spit and vomit, and never show the stain.

But where others took care to tie a scarf at an angle or thread sweetgrass through a shirt cuff, Mama did not care. She was not scraggly. She was always neat, and on Sundays she allowed for the vanity of a hat with a big sweeping brim, which was decorated with the same set of silk flowers she'd won in a church raffle before I was born. But when one of the ladies' groups she belonged to would occasionally fall into giddy talk about the newest bolt of fabric or a new way of tying a head scarf, she would always quickly steer the conversation back to what was at hand. She would have been mortified to know it, but I had heard some of the women point to those same silk flowers on her hat that had not changed position for many seasons and call them "more reliable than springtime."

Madame Elizabeth teased Mama about the cramped practicalities of their youth until finally she turned to me, the first she had acknowledged me since she came in.

"Do you think she was always this way?" She glanced sideways at my mother.

"You turn my own daughter against me?" Mama said, but she was laughing, really laughing, in a way I had not heard before.

"When we were girls at the Colored School"—Madame Elizabeth leaned in, her voice low, as if I was as old as she and Mama—"I used to be so terrible at arithmetic. But not her. She was the best at it. Oh, so quick! You'd think the devil was giving her notes."

"Elizabeth!"

"But he wasn't of course. She was just so smart, your mother. Smarter than the devil, but good. But not all the way good. Can I tell you? Can I tell you a secret, my dear?"

"Don't listen to her." Mama went to cover my ears, but Madame Elizabeth drew me to her and held me close to her lap, and mock whispered, loud enough for Mama to hear: "Do you know what your clever

mama would do? She'd ask me to dye her ribbons purple for her. Yes, even your good and smart mama wanted a bit of purple ribbon. And me, being her bestest friend, being her kind Elizabeth, mashed up all the blackberries I could find and dyed those ribbons the prettiest purple anyone in Kings County had ever seen."

"And extorted me and forced me to agree to do your arithmetic for you in exchange," Mama said.

"But can you blame me?" Madame Elizabeth's breath was so soft on my ear I shivered. "Your mama has always been the brightest."

Madame Elizabeth stroked the plaits in my hair and ran her fingers over my brow. "Lord," she said, "your girl may be dark, Cathy, but isn't she pretty?"

"Libertie is beautiful," Mama said, gazing happily at me, and I flushed warm, because Mama did not often comment on anyone's appearance, unless it was to note that their skin had gone jaundiced or developed a rash.

"It's a shame she got her father's color," Madame Elizabeth said absently, and Mama stopped smiling.

"It's a blessing," she said, very distinctly, and Madame Elizabeth's hand paused.

"You aren't scared?" she said. She was stroking my face again. I did not want her to stop, but I could see from Mama's face that she wished that she would. "This work grows more dangerous, you know. You are all right. You're bright enough they hassle you less, maybe. But she's too dark."

Mama stood up abruptly. "It's less dangerous work if your help-meets come to you at midnight, as promised, not dusk," she said. She bent over Mr. Ben's cot.

Madame Elizabeth let go of my face.

"I told you why we missed our time."