

DEFIANT ONES:

Phillis Wheatley

The American Revolution's Bravest
Women - Patriots, Prophets,
Poets & Spies

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER BLANTON





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Phillis Wheatley

By Heather Blanton

A Beautifully Flawed Productions Original

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My father once said to me, “Sometimes we do things because we don’t know we can’t.” That idea is beautifully reflected in the life of **Phillis Wheatley**. Brought to Boston on a slave ship at the age of seven, she was taken in by a Christian family who valued her humanity, educated her, and encouraged her gift for writing. She chose to listen to the voices that spoke of possibility rather than limitation. Goals rather than dead ends. This story is dedicated to the women who don’t know what they can’t do, and so they soar.

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28

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Chapter 1

Boston 1761

Susannah Wheatley sighed and fanned herself. The stifling July heat in the carriage threatened to make her lightheaded. “I hate the auction. It breaks my heart.” She stared out at the moldy brick and stone buildings along Boston’s waterfront. On the other side, ships and their sails swayed in the humid breeze.

“As it does mine.” Johnathan Wheatley, large, round, and lovable, reached across the aisle and tapped her knee. “But if we can’t stop the slave trade, we can at least give someone a warm, safe home.”

Susannah hugged herself and fought back a tide of emotions. They’d freed Lydia, a young slave girl, five years back, thinking it kind and magnanimous. One of only a thousand negroes in the city, she was unable to find work, fell into prostitution, and died eight weeks after her emancipation. Susannah would carry that guilt for the rest of her life.

“It is such a tangled, ungodly web,” she whispered more to herself than Johnathan.

“Indeed.”

The carriage bucked to a stop. He reached for her hand. “Shall we pray?” She closed her eyes and waited, their sweaty fingers entwined as he spoke. “Heavenly Father, all of your children are priceless and precious. Guide us to the one to whom we may be able to offer a better life, and share the love of Jesus with her. Amen.”

“Amen.” Susannah checked herself and tucked a loose auburn strand of hair back into her mob cap. “All right, I’m ready.” She always had to steel herself against the soullessness of the auction.

They climbed down, Johnathan assisting her, and trudged to the edge of the crowd. The auction had already begun. A strapping young black man, an iron collar around his neck, shackles on his feet, stood on the platform. His eyes were empty and hopeless, his shoulders bowed in defeat.

Men shouted and waved, voicing their offers. Susannah forced down a knot in her throat over the cruelty of it all. She couldn’t help but think somewhere, a mother might be wondering what had become of her son. She most likely would never know he stood on an auction block, chained like an animal, and sold with no more compassion than if he were a sack of grain.

“Sold!” the auctioneer bellowed. Chains clanking, the young man was led away out of sight, as two men moved through the crowd to claim their property. Susannah pressed her fingers to her nose in a vain attempt to stifle the odor of their sweaty, unwashed bodies. Slave traders. They would no doubt transfer the man south and sell him again.

The auctioneer cleared his throat. “Our next offering is...well, uh...”

Susannah gasped. A young black girl, thin as a beanpole, dressed in rags, her hair twisted into a knot-mess, stepped up on the platform. Her dark eyes went wide with fear as she scanned the unfriendly crowd.

“Dear God,” Johnathan whispered. “She’s but a child.”

“I reckon,” the auctioneer finally found his words, “she could be a good chambermaid. This little one is strong enough to empty pots—”

“Two pounds!” a man yelled.

Susannah clutched Johnathan’s sleeve. “She’s about the same age as Melody.” Their deceased daughter, seven years old, lost to scarlet fever only four months earlier. “Buy her.” A furious and admittedly irrational desire rose in Susannah to get this little girl off that platform. To save her. “Whatever the cost, buy her.”

Johnathan shot his hand into the air. “Ten pounds sterling.”

The crowd quieted. The auctioneer, a savvy businessman, scanned the crowd. He waited, but only a moment. Surely more profitable merchandise was ready to take the platform. Susannah held her breath and prayed.

“Sold!”

She hurried forward, pushing through the crowd, and bent over to match the little girl’s height. “My name is Susannah. Will you come with me? I promise, we’ll treat you very well. You’ll have plenty to eat, and a warm, safe bed.”

The darling thing didn’t react. Her gaunt face remained inscrutable, but her dark eyes narrowed with uncertainty. Susannah flinched. *I must sound like a babbling fool.* Most certainly, the child spoke no English.

Slowly, she offered her hand, palm up. “Will you come with me?”

On the carriage ride home, the little girl glanced all about, out the window, at the town, back to Susannah and Johnathan, over and over again. She was clearly a bright, curious child, but her stench was breathtaking, and signs of ringworm etched themselves on her cheeks and arms. Susannah couldn’t imagine the inhumane conditions the child had experienced aboard that horrid ship, yet there was so little fear in her eyes.

“I bet she’s smart as a whip.”

“Not exactly a housekeeper, my dear,” Johnathan said, turning to the window for a fresh breath of air.

“Wasn’t that the reason for today’s expedition?”

Susannah smiled at their predicament. “First, we bathe and feed her. Then we’ll worry about her position in the household.”

The pretty lady with rusty red hair smiled and gave Phillis kind looks as they rolled along in her carriage. Phillis had never seen one of these contraptions till the slave ship dropped anchor in London. There, everything and everyone had moved so fast that even the swiftest warriors in her village would have struggled to keep pace. She wondered where the people were all racing off to.

She had cried ceaselessly on the ships, but by the time she arrived in this place called Boston, she had no more tears. She had been ripped from her father’s arms when the slave traders attacked her village. Her mother had been dragged away to another ship, fighting and screaming, raging for her freedom, her village, her daughter. Phillis was sure she would hear those screams forever.

White men had kidnapped her, but the neighboring tribe of Fulani had helped them in the surprise attack. So, then, who should she hate? All of them? None of them?

She glanced at the white couple sitting with her. Perhaps she should have been afraid of them or even hated them, but she did not see in their eyes the fierce and greedy expressions of other slave buyers. She saw only pity and sorrow.

They spoke to each other and to her, and she couldn’t understand a word. She did, however, understand the tone. They wanted to calm her. Assure her.

“Mistress Sus-ann-ah,” the lady said, tapping her chest. “Susannah.” She pointed at the man, who smiled warmly. “John-a-than.”

He tapped his chest, as well. “Johnathan.”

He was a big man, fat as a lion that had just eaten a whole wildebeest. And his hair was white, but it moved on his head.

“Susannah,” the lady repeated, and waited, eyebrows raised.

Did she want Phillis to say it back? “Su-Susannah.” The word was strange and thick on her tongue, but Susannah clapped and beamed with joy.

“Johnathan, she said my name.” She turned back to Phillis. “Yes, Susannah! I am Susannah.”

The man smiled, but was busy studying a paper. “And what shall we call *her*?”

Susannah placed a finger on her lips and peered at *Phillis*. “Hmm.”

“What do you think of Phillis?”

She brightened. “Greek for foliage and greenery. Meaning, to flourish. To grow strong and healthy. Yes, I love it.”

He gestured with the paper. "The bill of sale says it was the name of her slave ship."

Her face fell. "A badge of shame or honor?" After a moment of thought, she raised her chin. "Yes. It will be a crown of courage and strength. Phillis."

Phillis understood none of this at the time. She did not know what lay ahead, and she was not at all convinced she would like the future here, but she did not think these two white people meant her harm.

At least, she believed such until she thought they tried to drown her.



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