

Advance Praise for *Jude and Diana*

How do we honour the lives of two enslaved women who were murdered in Nova Scotia? Sharon Robart-Johnson does that through her deft recreation of the lives of Jude and Diana, who endured cruelty and brutalization at the hands of their white enslavers. The author excavates the story, and through fiction, brings it into the light of day. Jude and Diana speak once more. And what a story they tell!

By speaking the names of Jude and Diana, and putting flesh on the bones of their story, Robart-Johnson provides what was denied them at the hands of the magistrates of Yarmouth County—justice.

The author does not shy away from recounting the violence of brutalization whites wrought on the bodies and soul of Black people. But through her achingly beautiful writing, she restores Black humanity and hope.

Let your heart be moved by the sorrow and pain that is continuously braided through the story. Weep for the lost lives of these two women. And be outraged. Let your anger move you to commit to creating a world of justice and beauty.

The story of Jude and Diana has finally come to light and we thank Sharon Robart-Johnson for being the torchbearer.

— Afua Cooper, author of *Black Matters*
and *The Hanging of Angelique*

Meticulously researched and unflinching in detail, Jude and Diana puts flesh and bones on the plight of enslaved Black people in Nova Scotia, who are too often reduced to a sterile footnote in the polite version of Canadian history. In its explorations of Black dignity, deferred justice, and the responsibility of “good” white bystanders, this historical novel is deeply relevant for our present time.

— Chad Lucas, journalist and author of *Thanks A Lot, Universe*

Sharon Robart-Johnson imagines Jude and Diana out of the depths of the colonizer’s archives. Let us seek them, celebrate them, and with Robart-Johnson, listen for the lessons they might have for us today.

— Lynn Jones, creator of the Lynn Jones African-Canadian and Diaspora Heritage Collection in the Saint Mary’s University Archives

This is a story of Jude whose strong will and unyielding spirit resisted the cruel bonds of slavery in Nova Scotia where she hoped to find freedom and, instead, found her place in history.

— Rosemarie Nerville, author of *Swamp Robin*

*Jude
and
Diana*

SHARON ROBERT-JOHNSON



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*This story is dedicated to Jude and Diana, strong young women
whose lives were taken from them far too soon.*

RIP Jude and Diana.

*I wish to express deep appreciation to my friend,
Rosemarie Nerville, whose encouragement and suggestions
helped bring Jude's story to life and to light.*

PROLOGUE

Slaves is nobodys. We can't have this; we can't have that. Us slaves, we had dreams jus' like anybody did. That's all we had was our dreams. I always dreamed that maybe one day I would meet me a nice man who was pretty to look at and who didn't care no never mind that my face and body was marked by the whip. I got me plenty of marks that the Missus or one of her boys put there. But I can still be loved. A pretty face don't mean nothin'. Yes, I is stubborn, but some men, they like that. They want them a strong woman who can work 'longside them in the fields, and cuttin' wood, and givin' them healthy babes. I can do that.

I dreamed of havin' me tons of babes. Well, not tons, but six. When I was a child, I always said I wanted six babes. Maybe if we hadn't moved to Yarmouth, me and my friend, Jack, we might'a got together. He was a fine-lookin' boy. I bet he grew up to be a fine-lookin' man. Me and him, we would'a made us some pretty babes, and then I could'a had me them six babes. But it ain't gonna happen now. Master Wood sold him before he sold me. I used to see him sometimes before we moved, but I haven't seen him since we left Shelburne. He could be dead, for all I know. I hope not 'cause he was always good to me and we had us some good times together when we was with Master Wood. I wonder where he be now. I guess I'll never know. No sense in me thinkin' 'bout havin' babes with Jack; I ain't gonna have no babes with no man.

Me and Diana, we can't go nowheres to meet us some fine-lookin' fellas. We can't go nowheres to meet the ugly ones.

PART I

Jude's Story

EXCERPT

CHAPTER I

The Major and the Missus, they think I is stupid 'cause I don't talk much. When I do talk to them, all I say is "yes, Suh," or "no, Missus," and I keep my head down. But I listened to them talk and I learned to talk almos' like them. Sometimes I talk like them, and sometimes I mix my words up and talk like me and them together. But that's okay 'cause it makes no never mind how I talk.

Diana, she learned too, but most times we don't talk to each other with the good words 'cause if they hear us, they jus' might sell us, and we'd be separated. Again. They almos' caught us one time, but me and Diana, we jus' stared at the Major and went 'bout talkin' our old words. We had to be careful after that time. Mamma always said, if you let them know you can read or write or talk like them, they could sell you for more money. I didn't want to be a slave for nobody, but I didn't want to be sold all the time either. So, when I was old 'nough and could talk almos' like them, I kep' my mouth shut. And if they did talk to me, I knew how to talk to fool them. They think they is better than everybody, but they is high-and-mighty white trash. That is what they is.

Now, I is dyin'. How many times did my sister, Diana, tell me this day would come? I knew this day was gonna come sometime, but bein' the stubborn cuss that I is, I wasn't gonna listen to nobody. I worry 'bout what's gonna happen to my sister after I is gone, but Diana, she'll be all right by herself; she's a strong woman. She learned how to fight when she didn't before. So, I have to believe she'll be all right.

After I was back with my mamma and papa, Mamma said to me, "Jude, you gotta stop" 'cause I was always fightin' and gettin' myself in trouble. It wasn't Mamma's fault. She tried to talk to me all the time, and one time she put her hand on my back end for it. I was rubbin' it for a whole day. She said better her hand on my back end than Master's whip. I guess she was right, but it made no difference to me. She didn't put her hand on my back end too much, but sometimes I needed it, I tell you. I gave Mamma and Papa nothin' but trouble back then, and now I still get myself in trouble. She said when I came out her belly, I came to the world screamin' at the top of my lungs and my fists was punchin' in the air. I didn't really believe her, but she said they was. Well, Mamma, she never lied to us, so that must be how I came out.

I hate leavin' Diana, but when I is dead, I will finally be free. When I is gone, there will be no more pain and no more hunger.

A piece of fish, a small tater, and a cup of coffee, that was all the Missus gave us. After Mamma and Papa was gone, when me and Diana was hungry, I stole whatever I could to fill our bellies. And we was hungry most all the time. Diana was always 'fraid to take it, but I made her. She always told me I was gonna die one of them times when I stole food, and she always tried to stop me when I made up my mind to raid the pantry. Every time I stole, I knew it could be my las' time. She told me that. She did. But I wouldn't listen to her. Sometimes, I wish I did; maybe I wouldn't be layin' on the floor bleedin' all over. I is glad Mamma and Papa ain't here to see me now. Mamma would'a been sad, and she would'a been whupped too 'cause she would'a went after the boys for doin' this to me.

I remember Mamma sayin' to me, "Jude, why is you so pig-headed?" I would grin and run and hide so I wouldn't get her hand on my back end again. Diana was always the good baby. I call her a baby even though she be older than me by two years. But I be bigger.

I is layin' on the floor bleedin' to death and I is bein' silly.

I is shaped like my papa, and Diana, she is shaped liked Mamma, 'cept she don't have a big, soft belly like Mamma did. Mamma said I was silly sometimes, but she said she liked it when I was 'cause it made her laugh. We didn't have a lot to laugh 'bout. We was born slaves, and we will die slaves. Mamma and Papa, they is already gone. It's jus' me and Diana left, and soon it will only be Diana. I love my sister so much. She was always there to tend to my cuts when I got whapped. It didn't matter what I did. If the masters thought I did somethin' wrong, they took the switch to me. Sometimes, I never done nothin'. But the Missus, she would make up somethin' so I would get punished. The Major, he never questioned his wife. What she said had to be so.

Here I is, layin' on the floor I have to scrub every day, near the hearth I have to clean every day. I is cut in my head and my neck, and I is bleedin' a whole lot, but the Major and Missus, they don't care. They'll jus' leave me here 'til I is dead. If I could go back to before I was sold to Master Abel, maybe Master Harold wouldn't sold me if Mamma had begged him not to, and maybe I wouldn't be dyin' on the Major's floor.

I is gonna have me another scar on my leg from them embers that is jumpin' out the hearth. I guess it don't matter how many scars I have; soon I is gonna be dead anyway. They don't burn so much, not as the cut on my neck does.

I don't know how to say it, but I know I must be goin' to sleep sometimes 'cause I don't hear nobody come in. But they must'a 'cause somebody put more wood in the fire. Them flames sure is shootin' high. Boy, look at them sparks. Ow, there's another scar.