

## HEART AND SOUL

THE STORY OF AMERICA AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

WORDS AND PAINTINGS BY
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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

It's ironic. History was not at all my favorite subject in school, and yet as a full-time artist and author, for almost a decade I've found myself primarily writing about and illustrating historical subjects. I've loved painting subjects like slavery, the Underground Railroad, and the civil rights movement, but never had I pieced them together in a single volume. The idea of doing this was exciting because it gave me an opportunity to delve deeper into the story of America, learn its history from the ground up, and see it through the eyes of the people who lived it. As I read, wrote, sketched, and painted during the creation of *Heart and Soul*, the American story came alive to me.

Painting historical American subjects pushes me to learn more about who I am, where I come from, and the role my ancestors played in helping form our country. Before working on *Heart and Soul*, I had known that African Americans had a deep connection to America, but it wasn't until I became engrossed in my research that I could fully appreciate how. I learned that whether willingly or unwillingly, African Americans and Europeans forged a new country together. And their interdependent relationship is what would sustain the new country and allow it to thrive. Although our beginnings were not free of blemish, the work of navigating through the marvelous words of the Declaration of Independence and the contradictory inhumane and discriminatory practices of the new country would help define the nation's character over the span of hundreds of years. It is a story of the country's continuing challenges of coming-of-age.

I knew I could not convey the whole story in a hundred pages, so I felt the most natural and concise way to tell the tale would be through the recollections of a narrator whose family history was very closely tied to the American story. I first thought of my own family and began interviewing some of the eldest members who had lived through key moments in our history. I heard stories about the last slaves in my family and my great-great-grandmother who was a member of the Seminole Nation. I learned of those in my family who had come from the Deep South and made the trip northward to escape Jim Crow or find work in northern cities during and after the great wars. I found worn photos of great-aunts and great-uncles who proudly posed for the camera as they stood in front of a cornfield or in their military uniforms. I listened to aunts and uncles describe what it was like during a college sit-in or when they heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak in their hometown. Through the memories of my elders, the American story unfolded right before my eyes. I wanted to share these stories in the way that I heard and saw them, through the words and family photos of an elder African American, a grandmother-like figure who would allow me to focus on major historical milestones that affected both her family and the rest of the country. So when the narrator describes her family's journey from Virginia to Chicago and their celebration when they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, we understand the importance of this moment as a personal achievement for her family, but at the same time we also learn about the Great Migration and how it literally changed the face of America.

Heart and Soul is not only the story of my family, but an intimate introduction to American history that I hope will remind readers of our extraordinary story and inspire them to learn more about America as I have done—by exploring their unique family stories and their connection to the American story.