

SUZANNE FELDMAN

SISTERS

of the

GREAT WAR

A Novel



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Praise for the novels of Suzanne Feldman

“*Sisters of the Great War* offers a meticulously researched portrait of the first World War, while providing marvelous insight to the lives of female nurses and ambulance drivers who served at the front. You’ll root for Ruth’s dream of becoming a doctor, Elise’s right to be herself, and for both sisters to find love! Perfect for fans of *Lilac Girls*, *The Alice Network*, and *Girls on the Line*.”

—Suzanne Rindell, author of *The Two Mrs. Carlyles*

“*Sisters of the Great War* is a war novel like no other. As with Feldman’s previous novel, *Absalom’s Daughters*, a harrowing time in history is perfectly rendered and fearlessly explored through the lives of two sisters, in this case the horrors and challenges of the Great War. Ruth volunteers as a nurse, Elise as an ambulance driver. Their lives are utterly transformed in a riveting narrative that redefines who the true heroes of war are. *Sisters of the Great War* is an experience I shall never forget.”

—Dennis Danvers, author of *The Perfect Stranger*

“More than a century since the guns of the Western Front went silent, World War I continues to horrify and illuminate. *Sisters of the Great War* shows us why, through the rich, gripping stories of heroes and siblings Ruth and Elise Duncan. Humanity as a whole may’ve reached its nadir during these dark years of industrial slaughter. But brave, committed people still found purpose and resolve amidst all that ruin. What a striking novel about war, love and hope.”

—Matt Gallagher, author of *Youngblood* and *Empire City*

“*Sisters of the Great War* is a deeply life-affirming book, the kind that will sustain you through the darkest of times. This novel is grounded in history yet boldly contemporary in its depiction of the two female protagonists. It shines the spotlight on women in active roles at the front as a nurse who is also doctor-in-training, and an ambulance driver. These women are real and

vulnerable, yet they never lose sight of their priorities and of the people they love. I couldn't help falling in love with them, both for their vulnerabilities and their strengths. This book is immersive, profoundly affecting, and transformative in appreciating and understanding women of the past.”

—Olga Zilberbourg, author of *Like Water and Other Stories*

Sisters of the Great War

Suzanne Feldman



For Vicki, Forever and Always.

Suzanne Feldman, a recipient of the Missouri Review Jeffrey E. Smith Editors' Prize and a finalist for the Bakeless Prize in fiction, holds an MA in fiction from Johns Hopkins University and a BFA in art from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her short fiction has appeared in Narrative, the Missouri Review, Gargoyle and other literary journals. She lives in Frederick, Maryland.

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AUGUST, 1914

God said, "Men have forgotten Me:
The souls that sleep shall wake again,
And blinded eyes must learn to see."

So since redemption comes through pain
He smote the earth with chastening rod,
And brought destruction's lurid reign;

But where His desolation trod
The people in their agony
Despairing cried, "There is no God."

VERA MARY BRITAIN

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

JOHN McCRAE

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Baltimore, Maryland
August 1914

Ruth Duncan fanned herself with the newspaper in the summer heat as Grandpa Gerald put up a British flag outside the house. If he'd had a uniform—of any kind—he would have worn it. People on the sidewalk paused and pointed, but Grandpa, still a proper English gent even after almost twenty years in the US, smoothed his white beard and straightened his waistcoat, ignoring the onlookers.

“That’s done,” he said.

Ruth’s own interest in the war was limited to what she read in the paper from across the dining table. Grandpa would snap the paper open before he ate breakfast. She could see the headlines and the back side of the last page, but not much more. Grandpa would grunt his appreciation of whatever was inside, snort at what displeased him, and sometimes laugh. On August 12, the headline in the *Baltimore Sun* read, France And Great Britain Declare War On Austria-Hungary, and Grandpa wasn’t laughing.

Cook brought in the morning mail and put it on the table next to Grandpa. She was a round, gray-haired woman who left a puff of flour behind her wherever she went.

“Letter from England, sir,” Cook said, leaving the envelope and a dusting of flour on the dark mahogany. She smiled at Ruth and left for the kitchen.

Grandpa tore open the letter.

Ruth waited while he read. It was from Richard and Diane Doweling, his friends in London who still wrote to him after all these years. They’d sent their son, John, to Harvard in Massachusetts for his medical degree. Ruth had never met John Doweling, but she was jealous of him, his opportunities, his apparent successes. The Dowelings sent letters whenever John won some award or other. No doubt this was more of the same. Ruth drummed her fingers on the table and eyed the dining room clock. In ten minutes, she would need to catch the trolley that would take her up to the Loyola College of Nursing, where she would be taught more of the things she had already

learned from her father. The nuns at Loyola were dedicated nurses, and they knew what they were doing. Some were outstanding teachers, but others were simply mired in the medicine of the last century. Ruth was frustrated and bored, but Father paid her tuition, and what Father wanted, Father got.

Ruth tugged at her school uniform—a white apron over a long white dress, which would never see a spot of blood. “What do they say, Grandpa?”

He was frowning. “John is enlisting. They’ve rushed his graduation at Harvard so he can go home and join the Royal Army Medical Corps.”

“How can they rush graduation?” Ruth asked. “That seems silly. What if he misses a class in, say, diseases of the liver?”

Grandpa folded the letter and looked up. “I don’t think he’ll be treating diseases of the liver on the battlefield. Anyway, he’s coming to Baltimore before he ships out.”

“Here?” said Ruth in surprise. “But why?”

“For one thing,” said Grandpa, “I haven’t seen him since he was three years old. For another, you two have a common interest.”

“You mean medicine?” Ruth asked. “Oh, Grandpa. What could I possibly talk about with him? I’m not even a nurse yet, and he’s—he’s a doctor.” She spread her hands. “Should we discuss how to wrap a bandage?”

“As long as you discuss something.” He pushed the letter across the table to her and got up. “You’ll be showing him around town.”

“Me?” said Ruth. “Why me?”

“Because your sister—” Grandpa nodded at Elise, just clumping down the stairs in her nightgown and bathrobe “—has dirty fingernails.” He started up the stairs. “Good morning, my dear,” he said. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Uh-huh,” Elise mumbled as she slumped into her seat at the table.

As Grandpa continued up the stairs, Ruth called after him. “But when is he coming?”

“His train arrives Saturday at noon,” Grandpa shouted back. “Find something nice to wear. You too, Elise.”

Elise rubbed her eyes. “What’s going on?”

Ruth pushed the letter at her and got up to go. “Read it,” she said. “You’ll see.”

* * *

Ruth made her way down Thirty-Third Street with her heavy book bag slung

over one shoulder, heading for the trolley stop, four blocks away, on Charles. Summer classes were almost over, and as usual, the August air in Baltimore was impenetrably hot and almost unbreathable. It irritated Ruth to think that she would arrive at Loyola sweaty under her arms, her hair frizzed around her nurse's cap from the humidity. The nuns liked neatness, modest decorum. Not perspiring young women who wished they were somewhere else.

Elise, Ruth thought, as she waited for a break in the noisy traffic on Charles Street, could've driven her in the motorcar, but no, she'd slept late. Her younger sister could do pretty much anything, it seemed, except behave like a girl. Elise, who had been able to take apart Grandpa's pocket watch and put it back together when she was six years old, was a useful mystery to both Father and Grandpa. She could fix the car—cheaper than the expensive mechanics. For some reason, Elise wasn't obliged to submit to the same expectations as Ruth—she could keep her nails short and dirty. Ruth wondered, as she had since she was a girl, if it was her younger sister's looks. She was a mirror image of their mother, who had died in childbirth with Elise. Did that make her special in Father's eyes?

An iceman drove a sweating horse past her. The horse raised its tail, grunted and dropped a pile of manure, rank in the heat, right in front of her, as though to augur the rest of her day. The iceman twisted in the cart to tip his hat. "Sorry, Sister!"

Ruth let her breath out through her teeth. Maybe the truth of the matter was that she was the "sorry sister." It was at this exact corner that her dreams of becoming a doctor, to follow in her father's footsteps, had been shot down. When she was ten, and the governess said she'd done well on her writing and math, she was allowed to start going along on Father's house calls and help in his office downstairs. Father had let her do simple things at first—mix plaster while he positioned a broken ankle, give medicine to children with the grippe—but she watched everything he did and listened carefully. By the time she was twelve, she could give him a diagnosis, and she remembered her first one vividly, identifying a man's abdominal pain as appendicitis.

"You did a good job," Father had said to her, as he'd reined old Bess around this very corner. "You'll make an excellent nurse one day."

Ruth remembered laughing because she'd thought he was joking. Her father's praise was like gold. "A nurse?" she'd said. "One day I'll be a doctor, just like you!"

"Yes, a nurse," he'd said firmly, without a hint of a smile. It was the tone

he used for patients who wouldn't take their medicine.

"But I want to be a doctor."

"I'm sorry," he said. He hadn't sounded sorry at all. "Girls don't become doctors. They become nurses and wives. Tomorrow, if there's time, we'll visit a nursing college. When you're eighteen, that's where you'll go."

"But—"

He'd shaken his head sharply, cutting her off. "It isn't done, and I don't want to hear another word about it."

A decade later, Ruth could still feel the shock in her heart. It had never occurred to her that she couldn't be a doctor because she was a girl. And now, John Doweling was coming to town to cement her future as a doctor's wife. That was what everyone had in mind. She knew it. Maybe John didn't know yet, but he was the only one.

Ruth frowned and lifted her skirts with one hand, balancing the book bag with the other, and stepped around the manure as the trolley came clanging up Charles.

CHAPTER TWO

That evening, Elise was hunched over the motorcar on Charles Street where the engine had conked out. Father had come home irritated and sent her out after supper to fix it, or retrieve it, or *something*. Just have it ready for calls the next day.

With her stained blue mechanic's apron covering her long dress, Elise peered around, expecting the stares of passersby—a *woman* working on a *car*? She was used to the scorn. Once, while she was driving, someone's snotty brat had thrown a rock at her, missing her, but leaving a little dent in the shining black body of the car. Here, so close to the university, the least she expected was mocking comments from passing fraternity boys. That'd happened more than once. In her experience, though, the women were the worst, with their silent, judgmental eyes. Elise could almost read their thoughts—almost. When they stared at her, she felt accused of something—taking a man's job? She wasn't sure. The women put their noses in the air and hustled their children along, as though just the sight of her working on a car would somehow scar them for life.

At this point, it was so late, hardly anyone was on the street. There were no hecklers, so she focused on the engine again. Smelling of gasoline, black with oil, it was barely visible in this dark space between streetlamps.

She found the fuel line by touch—where the problems with the motorcar usually began—and was just detaching it, when a shadow fell over the already shadowy engine. She looked up and found herself staring into the amused eyes of a man in a pin-striped suit.

“Do you need help, miss?”

This happened all the time, too. Men who knew nothing about engines were always ready to dive right in, assuming she was a damsel in distress.

“No, thanks,” said Elise briskly. “I know what's wrong with it.”

“It was an empty offer, actually,” said the man. “I don't know a thing about motors.” He smiled at her. His lips were full and his face round. He had beautiful eyelashes. “You must be quite an expert,” he said.

Elise made herself look away, back at the grimy innards, the invisible fuel line. “I've been working on this one ever since my father bought it.”

“Your father’s a mechanic?”

“He’s a doctor,” said Elise.

“A doctor? Then who taught you what to do?”

Elise spared him a glance. Was he flirting with her? *That* would be a first. “I just watched what the mechanics did.” Should she tell him the details? The men laughing as she unscrewed the spark plugs when she was ten, and the subsequent streaks of grease on her sundress? The way Father had sold off old Bess and the buggy to the milkman as soon as he was convinced his daughter could fix the car? How the small stable behind the house smelled of gasoline now instead of hay and leather?

“Really,” she said down into the engine, “I just like to fix things.” She wished he would go away.

“How extraordinary,” said the man in an entirely different tone—sweeter, higher, utterly fetching. “Maybe you could come and fix my motorcar sometime.”

Elise looked up. At first she wasn’t sure. Then her mouth opened as she saw through the *him*, into the *her*.

His—her—smile widened, and the man—the *woman* dressed in a pin-striped suit—grinned. “The thing breaks down all the time. Maybe,” she said, “it just needs a loving touch.”

Elise straightened, wrench in her hand. The back of her neck prickled. The prickle shivered down her spine, lower and lower, until it ended up all funny and tingly. Elise could feel herself blushing deeply in the dark.

“Do your friends fix cars, too?” the woman asked.

“I don’t...have many friends,” Elise replied.

“And the ones you do have, don’t understand you,” the woman said. She raised an unmistakably suggestive eyebrow. “They think you’re peculiar. What about your family?”

“My—my father sent me out to fix—you know.” She gestured at the car, its open hood. “This.”

“So he at least understands.”

“Understands?” Elise asked.

“You don’t have to hide it from him.”

“Hide?” Elise repeated. “Hide what?”

The woman let out an easy laugh. “Come with me,” she said. “I’ll show you.” She turned and started walking away.

“Hey!” Elise shouted. “Wait! I can’t just leave the car.”

The woman beckoned, her smile wide and languid, as though every question could be answered just by following.

Elise, speechless, looked at the car, and then at the pinstripes disappearing into the night. With the wrench still in her hand, she followed.

* * *

Elise trailed the woman at a distance, across Charles Street, through Wyman Park, and down Howard Street, through thin crowds into a sketchier neighborhood, where she had driven but never walked. Houses around her became storefronts, then drinking establishments. Elise wanted to pause and get her bearings, but couldn't lose sight of the pin-striped suit. Streetlamps cast hard shadows, and she hurried through them, bumping into people—women in low-cut blouses who might have been prostitutes and men who might have been their customers. Ahead of her was the woman dressed as a man, making her way down the street, strutting as though she owned it.

Elise followed until the woman stopped in front of a bar marked with a single purple musical note painted on the door. She waited until Elise was close enough to see her open the door and go in.

Elise stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, aware, finally, of her racing heart, the wrench in her hand, and her surroundings. Between her and the door were four or five couples, women in nice dresses, men in smart suits all out of place in this run-down part of the city. It took her a moment to ask herself the blindingly obvious question, and in that moment, their eyes turned to examine her. Heat rushed into her face. What did they see? An eighteen-year-old girl dressed in a mechanic's filthy apron, her long brown hair tied back. And what did she see? For the first time in her life, Elise saw through their disguises. These people could be anywhere. Walking down the street. Driving in cars. Shopping at the market. She realized she was holding her breath—perhaps everyone was—and then one of the “men” bent to kiss one of the women on her full, painted lips. Elise let her breath out in a gasp. The woman giggled. The two of them separated long enough to stare at Elise.

“Girl,” said the one dressed as a man, in a low but distinctly female voice. “You simply *must* make up your mind.”

Elise stifled the blurt of words brimming in her mouth, turned and ran. She ran, not knowing if she would have spoken or screamed. *Make up my mind about what?* She bolted up the length of Howard Street until, panting, she had

to stop and walk. She walked in the dark until she found her father's car and hunched over the engine, breathing in its fumes.

In her heart, she knew the answer to the question, and had known for quite some time.

CHAPTER THREE

September 1914

Dr. John Doweling, Ruth noted, was tall, sandy-haired, with large, practical hands and a shy smile. She, Elise, Father and Grandpa met him as he got off the train. John hadn't eaten since breakfast, so they took him out for a late lunch at Sunny's, a not-too-fancy restaurant within walking distance of Penn Station.

Over sandwiches, they quizzed him about the war.

"Will they send you directly to the front?" Grandpa asked. "Or will there be some training first?"

"I suppose they'll have to teach me how to march," John said, over coffee. Ruth had expected him to order tea, but he'd been in the States for years now, and said he'd developed a taste for it. He took a sip. "I'll miss coffee when I get back home, but it's not a proper meal without a cup of tea."

"It's hard to get a good cup of tea in America," said Grandpa. "No one knows how to make it. Too strong, too weak, the water's the wrong temperature. You'll appreciate it when you get back to London."

"I imagine I will," said John. "And I imagine it'll be near impossible to get a cup of coffee at the front. It'll be tea and Bovril."

"What's that?" Elise asked around her sandwich.

"It's a sort of instant broth," said John. "Easy to send in packages. I hear it's a staple for the soldiers."

Ruth hadn't spoken yet. She was evaluating him. So far, John seemed nice, not stuck-up or snooty. In fact, if anything, he seemed quietly worried. "What else do you hear?" she asked.

"Well," said John, "I hear that the war is a glorious endeavor. Everyone in my parents' neighborhood is signing up to go. But I also hear the Germans have machine guns that can cut down a hundred men in minutes."

"*Machine* guns?" said Grandpa. "That sounds dreadfully unsporting."

"I'm not sure this is a sporting war." John put his sandwich down. "Some say the casualties will rival those of your Civil War."

Father looked up in surprise. "But that was tens of thousands of men."

“A machine gun is a bad bit of business, Dr. Duncan,” said John. “And if you believe what you hear, entire villages of civilians have been shot by the Germans simply because one person is suspected of spying.”

“I’ve heard that,” said Grandpa. He seemed to have finished eating even though half a sandwich still lay on his plate. “People are fleeing their homes. I’ve seen the photos in the newspaper.”

Ruth had, too, across the dining room table. Awful pictures of refugees—orphans with bundles, entire families with their belongings loaded into a donkey cart, people on foot who’d escaped with nothing but their lives, all searching for safety between the German advance and the barrier of the English Channel. All they’d found was a little town called Ypres, in Belgium, where the British and French had dug in to hold off the Bosch.

Ruth cleared her throat. “I’d like to talk to you about medical school.”

John seemed to brighten, and he looked straight at her for the first time. “Yes, of course,” he said. “You’re the nurse, is that right?”

“For now,” Ruth started, “but I really want to be a—”

“That’s enough,” said Father sharply. “I’m sure Dr. Doweling is quite tired from his journey.” He got to his feet. “It’s time to go.”

* * *

The next day, Sunday, Father told Ruth to show John the sights, but because Father took the motorcar—and Elise, in case it broke down—they could only walk. Grandpa was assigned as chaperone.

John and Ruth were free to amble along the leafy streets while Grandpa strolled behind, well out of earshot, as though they were courting.

Maybe they were, Ruth thought. John was handsome enough, but she wanted to talk about medicine, not romance.

“What would you say if I told you I wanted to be a doctor?” she asked as they were walking down the tree-lined boulevard that was Thirty-Third Street.

Traffic was light. A few drivers were out in their cars, but mostly it was carriages pulled by horses, and a few other people out on foot. It wasn’t noisy, but still, John said, “What?”

Ruth repeated herself, making it sound like a joke this time. She was afraid he would laugh at her.

“I would say you’d better start soon,” he answered seriously. “It takes

years to earn a medical degree.”

She was taken aback. “But there aren’t any medical schools for women.”

“There are,” he said. “In London there’s a women’s medical college, and I know they train women as doctors in France. There are some here in the States, too.”

Ruth stopped in her tracks. “Father told me there were none.”

John stopped, too. “That just isn’t true.” He waited for Grandpa to catch up and said, “Do you know that your granddaughter wants to be a doctor?”

“She’s been through this with her father,” said Grandpa. “Why do you ask?”

“Why didn’t you tell her about the schools here in the States?” asked John. “And what about the one in London? Why’ve you let her spend all this time becoming a nurse instead of what she really wants to be?”

“What school in London?” Grandpa said blankly. He listened as John told him. “Well, I had no idea about anything like that,” said Grandpa, somewhat in a huff. “But I suppose these are different times.”

John turned back to Ruth. “With your training, the women’s college would certainly consider you. You could come to London and stay with my family. What would your father say to that?”

Ruth swallowed hard and told him the truth. “He would say *no*.”

* * *

That evening, Ruth sat with John and her father in the parlor. It was just the three of them, but Father was talking as though she wasn’t even in the room.

“This is all very well and good,” he said, when John told him about the medical colleges for women, “but what will she do for a husband? She’s not likely to meet a man in a school for women, is she?”

“Father,” Ruth started, but he motioned at her to be quiet.

“And even if she was accepted,” said Father, “I’ve heard about those places. Their focus is on female patients. She wouldn’t even learn how to treat men. That’s not real medicine. Besides, nursing school is expensive enough.”

“There are always scholarships,” John persisted. “My family couldn’t afford Harvard without them.”

“You were a gifted student,” said Father. “Ruth is good at the basics—it’s all she needs. She makes good grades and she does well, but darling,” he

said, finally, to Ruth, “I don’t know if you would stand out in a crowd.”

“But,” said Ruth, “I’m at the top of my class!”

“You’re in a small school,” said Father. “And though I’ll admit you have some talent, we’ve talked about this before. You are a nurse, and a nurse you shall be. You might as well get used to that idea, because I will not be sending you to England to fulfill some girlish fantasy.”

Ruth sat up very straight in her plush Victorian chair, trying to keep the tears out of her eyes.

* * *

The rest of the week passed slowly. Ruth showed John monuments, museums and churches. Grandpa was always there to take them out to lunch. Ruth pretended to enjoy herself, but inside she wanted to go to her room and curl up under the covers until John was gone. He had held something out to her, all in innocence. She found herself sitting in silence at lunch while John and Grandpa talked. John had worked with an X-ray machine, been trained in new surgical techniques, saved limbs, hands, even eyes. She had no doubt he would be a good doctor on the battlefield, though he seemed sad when he talked about it. *There will be so many*, he said. *It’ll be like the medicine of the Napoleonic Wars where you would just cut off the wounded limb. Everything I’ve learned will be for nothing.* Those words went to her soul, and she stared at her uneaten sandwich. His training, like hers, might turn out to be useless.

The next Saturday, they were waving their goodbyes from the dock as his ship sailed out of the harbor. No one seemed happy, even though people threw confetti and streamers from the ship to the crowd gathered below. The departure was muted and sad, and when the ship was out of sight, the crowd dispersed into an early autumn rain. Elise drove them home in silence.

Ruth stared out the car window feeling like something had been pulled from her, like a feather plucked out of a wing. She had found, as John’s boat sailed away, that she was more than sorry to see him go. He had shaken Grandpa’s hand, then Father’s, then Elise’s, smiling and saying his thank-you’s, his goodbyes. Ruth had reached out, expecting his firm, friendly grip. Instead he held her hand for a long moment, his gray eyes meeting hers. With his other hand, he had smoothed a lock of loose hair behind her ear. The touch was like a bolt of lightning. She couldn’t say anything. She could hardly take a breath.

She would write to him, she decided. She would see if he wrote back, and if this incomplete feeling was mutual.

* * *

Ruth spent a week composing her first letter. It was harder than she'd thought, skirting the issue of feelings in favor of friendly information. In the midst of her indecision and different versions of the same *how are you*, a letter arrived from John.

Dear Ruth,

I have enlisted as an officer and been sent to camp to train. I hope never to have to shoot this gun they have saddled me with. Your grandfather was right—I did miss good old English tea and particularly teatime, which we have daily no matter what drills we are performing. We march, we crawl through mud, and though I have an orderly who washes my clothes, I must admit I never feel fully clean. I imagine this is only a taste of what awaits me at the front in Ypres in Belgium where I am to be stationed. I pretend that I will be able to maintain sterile conditions there, but I don't have much hope. My orderly has been to the front and returned with a wound in his leg that makes it impossible for him to do much but totter about. He doesn't speak of the war very often, but when he does, he makes it sound most awful. I don't know if he is trying to frighten me with his expertise, or just with honesty.

On the home front, my parents are well, but sad to see me leave. I know they will write to me, but I hope you will, too. I would be very glad to hear from you. Tell me about your studies. Tell me about your plans to become a doctor, for I have confidence in you, and would like to know more.

*Yours most sincerely,
John*

At supper that evening, there was nothing but talk of the war until Grandpa pointed to Ruth and said, "You could go over. You could serve in the hospitals. Represent the family."

"Good heavens," said Father, his fork halfway to his mouth. "Don't put

crazy ideas in her head! She hasn't even finished nursing school."

"She's studied with you since she was a child," said Grandpa. "How much more ready can she be?"

"Absolutely not," said Father, looking right at Ruth. "Absolutely *not*," he said again as she began to think about what Grandpa was suggesting.

* * *

Ruth and Elise sat together in the parlor that night. Father had gone to his study. Grandpa was in the kitchen, having another piece of Cook's irresistible peach pie, Ruth suspected. She was leafing through her anatomy book. Elise had her bare feet up on the sofa, which Father hated, and was flipping through a magazine. It was after dark and the gas lamps were lit, giving the room, lined with bookshelves, a warm glow.

Ruth closed the anatomy book, marking her place with her thumb. "What would you say if I told you I was going to volunteer for the war?"

Elise turned the page. "I'd say, why would you volunteer for anything after all the money Father's spent on your school?"

"I think I want to go to Belgium," said Ruth, and hearing the words come out of her mouth made her heart flutter. "I want to help the wounded, with John."

"I'll tell you what I think," said Elise, and she turned another page. "You're sweet on him. I saw how he looked at you when he left. But have you really thought about it? I doubt it would be anything like nursing school—do you even study bullet wounds or sword wounds, or what're those things called? Bayonets?"

"That's for the doctors," said Ruth. "All I know how to do is stand by and hand them instruments. How am I going to learn to do anything more except by getting my hands dirty? I could get medical experience in Belgium I wouldn't get anywhere else."

"Why would they let you do anything over there?" Elise asked. She cocked her head. "Let's say I went, too. What would I do except watch some man work on an engine while I handed him tools? It wouldn't take long before he decided he could pick his own tools out and I'd be peeling potatoes and doing his wash."

The parlor door opened and Grandpa came in, wiping his whiskers with a napkin.

Elise swung her feet onto the floor and sat up straight. He settled next to her and eyed Ruth. “What did John have to say?”

“He says they’re teaching him how to shoot a rifle and crawl in the mud,” said Ruth. She looked down at the anatomy book again. “He asked me to tell him my plans.”

“Plans?” said Grandpa. “What kind of plans does he think you have?”

“I think I want to represent the family,” said Ruth. “In the war. Like John.” She took a breath. “I’ll graduate in the spring. I’m old enough to make decisions about my own life.”

“You heard Father,” said Elise. “He’ll never let you go.”

Grandpa leaned forward on the sofa, elbows on his knees. For a while, he didn’t say anything. Then he looked up at the two of them. “Sometimes it’s better not to listen to your father.”

Ruth’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“You must be patient with him,” said Grandpa, “because he lost his wife. My Marie.”

Ruth and Elise glanced at each other in amazement. *Marie*. Even eighteen years after her death, Father refused to speak her name, and because of that, no one else dared. The only trace of her was an old photo on Father’s nightstand. When they were little, and Father was away on house calls, the governess would sometimes tiptoe Ruth and Elise into his room to see the picture of the soft-eyed young woman with long, trailing hair.

There’s your mother, she would say in a whisper, watching you from heaven.

Grandpa clasped his hands together. “I won’t undermine him. He is your father. However, sometimes you must have the courage to question him. Because he does make mistakes.”

“What kind of mistakes?” Ruth asked, hardly believing her ears.

Grandpa looked over at Elise, on the sofa beside him. “Your mother asked for a midwife when she was in labor with you. Your father refused to call one.” He turned to Ruth. “Even though she nearly died when you were born.”

No one had ever told her *that*. Ruth eyed her sister. She knew Elise felt guilty about their mother’s death, as though she, in taking her first breath, had been responsible. Father had never reassured Elise that this was not true. Now Ruth didn’t know what to think.

“Marie wrote me a letter after you were born, Ruth,” said Grandpa. “She told me she was afraid to have another child, but that your father wanted a

son. And she would try.”

“I killed her,” said Elise miserably. “And I’m not even a boy.”

“You did no such thing.” Grandpa put his arm around Elise’s shoulders. “She asked for help. If he had listened to her, you might still have a mother, and I might still have my only child.”

“But how do you know this?” said Ruth. “She couldn’t tell you... Did *Father* say something?”

“He wrote to me just after her funeral, telling me what had happened,” said Grandpa in a soft voice. “Of course I was shocked. He was a doctor, after all. But then I thought, *now he’s a widower, like me*. Your grandmother died of consumption, and no doctor could cure her. Perhaps having a midwife wouldn’t have made any difference. Maybe no one could have saved her.” He shook his head slowly. “Your father begged me to come from London and help him. *Live with us*, he said. *Leave your sorrow behind. Watch your granddaughters grow.*” Grandpa let go of Elise and balled his hands in his lap. “He met me at the dock. I’ll never forget his face. He was weeping like a child, and I forgave him.” He took a deep breath and looked up at Ruth. “I’m telling you this because I know your father loves you. Marie’s death nearly destroyed him. If you pursue medicine, I believe he’s afraid the same thing could happen to you.” He leaned forward on the sofa and said, more urgently, “What if you were to become a doctor, Ruth? What would you do if someone you loved died? Because of something you did—or didn’t do?”

Ruth hesitated. The nuns at Loyola often talked about death, but in hushed tones. Not in terms of the body—more the transformation of the soul. The truth was, Ruth had never seen anyone die. Father kept her away from his terminal cases, and at school—well, the doctors oversaw the transformation of souls. Not student nurses.

“What do you think it’ll be like in a hospital full of wounded and dying men, Ruth?” said Grandpa. “Think about that long and hard before you make a decision.”

CHAPTER FOUR

November 1914

After that conversation with Grandpa, Ruth couldn't concentrate at school. Her normal focus blurred. Her grades plummeted, and the nuns eyed her with either concern or pity. Ruth felt herself moving mechanically through her classes, day by day, asking herself the same question. *What if someone you loved died under your care?*

Advanced nursing students like her were allowed to assist the college's surgeons, but all she did was hand instruments to men in white masks. The surgeons didn't look at her twice, and weren't interested in teaching. Certainly, their thoughts about life and death were hidden from her. Ruth watched as they cut into living flesh, and asked herself if she had the courage to do the same.

The most the surgeons let the nurses do was stitch up incisions, as though sewing was beneath the men. Ruth, grounded in girlhood embroidery lessons, learned from the nuns to put a needle through skin, to make her knots tight and neat. The sisters would nod at her delicacy and skill, but if they knew more about repairing the rest of the human body, they weren't saying.

Ruth did her best to get her hands on the worst cases with Father's patients, but when they needed surgery, he would send them to another doctor at the hospital. One night, after she thought everyone had gone to bed, she noticed that the lights were still on in the office downstairs. When she went down to turn them off, she found her father in the examination room, sitting in the white wooden chair with a roll of gauze bandage in his lap.

"Ruth," he said as she stood, surprised, in the doorway. "Come in here and help me."

"What's the matter, Father?" she said when she saw his bloody wrist. It was the right wrist, and he was pressing the gauze against a wound. "What happened?"

"The MacQuistons' dog," he said. "It took me by surprise."

Ed and Marjory MacQuiston had twin girls, barely three years old and sickly. The dog, small, high-strung and protective, lunged at anyone who

came to the house. Father went there often, sometimes twice a week, and always complained about the dog.

“It wasn’t locked up?” said Ruth, bending to examine his wrist.

“Obviously not,” said Father. “I’ll need stitches.”

For a small dog, it had left a ragged tear almost four inches long, lengthwise up his arm.

“It missed the artery,” said Ruth, gently probing.

“I *know*,” said Father, and he pulled away. “That’s why I waited so long to do anything about it. Now get the suture kit. You’ll be sewing me up.”

Ruth blinked, but kept her eyes on the bloodied gauze. Father had never asked her to do anything like this. Despite her schooling, he was still only letting her mix plaster and give spoonfuls of medicine. He hadn’t asked her for a diagnosis in years, though she would silently offer them. In his mind, she knew she was supposed to calm the children, the parents. The dog.

“Yes, Father,” she said, and went to get the kit, the alcohol and cotton.

She wanted him to sit on the padded exam table so she could have the chair and a better angle, but he showed no sign of moving, so she knelt on the floor at his feet, and gently dabbed at his wound with alcohol-soaked cotton.

“I know it burns,” she said as he winced.

“Never mind that,” he said through clenched teeth.

Up close and clean, the cut didn’t seem bad. Not only had the dog missed the artery, but its teeth had just scraped the tendons. There had been a certain amount of bleeding, but most of that had stopped.

“You may not need stitches,” said Ruth. “A pressure dressing would be fine.”

“Are you giving me a diagnosis?” said Father.

Ruth flushed and looked up. “No, Father, I’m just trying to save you some pain.”

“Stitches,” he said. “Unless you don’t think you can do them.”

Maybe he felt stupid for not seeing the dog coming. Or maybe he was angry at the MacQuistons. Whoever. Whatever. Now he was angry at her.

“I would do it myself,” said Father, “but I would prefer not to sew with my left hand.”

She realized then, with absolute clarity, that he had no faith in her at all.

But she would do this. Because he had finally asked her to do something. Still on the floor, she took the curved needle out of the leather suture kit, wiped it down with alcohol and threaded it with catgut. His gaze was on her

like a weight. Ruth took his hand, braced it against his knee, and pressed the point of the needle into his skin. A drop of blood sprang out. She heard him take a breath, and it occurred to her that he had never been hurt like this before—had never had stitches, or had a bone set—that his most serious and lingering injury had been her mother’s death.

Just as quickly, she pierced the other side of the wound, and tied the ends of the catgut neatly, precisely, as the nuns had taught her.

They had praised her. He said, “This is not *embroidery*.”

Somehow, by doing this the right way, she was making him angrier. Ruth positioned the needle for the next stitch.

“Too far from the first,” he said. “Make it closer, or I’ll have a scar.”

He was going to have a scar no matter what. The thin skin of the wrist was prone to it. Ruth moved the needle. Her palms were sweating. “Yes, Father.”

“Get on with it!”

She slid the needle in and out. She tied the stitch, but now her fingers were clumsy and the knot was off.

His irritation was a heat. “Haven’t you learned *anything* in that school?”

She couldn’t think of an answer. It was as if she’d forgotten everything. She angled the needle, touching skin for the next stitch, but she hesitated. Too close? Too far? And then he moved his hand.

The needle drove into the vein of his wrist. Blood dripped out, and he yanked away from her with a yelp, dragging the needle and catgut out of her fingers.

“Good God!” he shouted at her, on his feet now, blood running down his arm. “How many hundreds have I spent on you! And this is the best you can do?”

Ruth scrambled up from the floor, her shoes catching in the hem of her long skirt, which made her feel clumsier and even more incompetent. “I’m so sorry—”

“Sorry is not *enough*.” He pointed at the door, the stairs. “Get out. Get out!”

Terrified of what he might say next, Ruth fled.

* * *

Father saw Ruth’s grades at the end of the fall semester and refused even to look at her. The cut on his wrist had become a messy scar, which he showed

her on the evening he deigned to notice her again.

“Your grades are abysmal,” he said, as they sat alone by the fire in the overheated parlor. “I’ve paid your tuition through next semester, and you may finish school, but I’ll tell you now, your future is clearly not in medicine.” He leaned back in his chair, staring into the flames. “I wanted a good, decent life for you, Ruth. I’ve tried to keep you from being unrealistic, but you’ve wasted my money and your own time.”

Ruth, on the sofa with her elbows on her knees, looked down at the floor. There were so many things in her mind that she didn’t have the courage to say—*I never wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to follow in your footsteps, to be a doctor.*

She squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to let herself cry. In the heat of the room, she understood that whether she became a doctor or a nurse, or someone’s wife, he would never have a word of praise for her. Grandpa had forgiven him for the unforgivable, widower to widower, but instead of love or compassion, Ruth could see the anger and guilt her mother’s death had left in her father. Anger at his wife for having the nerve to die. Guilt for his own responsibility in her death.

CHAPTER FIVE

January 1915

It took Elise a long time to find the door with the purple music note again.

For weeks that winter, she drove slowly down Howard Street whenever she had a chance, but nothing looked familiar except the prostitutes huddled in their tight dresses and fake furs. She was afraid to ask them anything. Elise began to wonder if she had imagined the door, somehow, and the woman dressed as a man—or had been so lost in this bad part of the city that she would never find either of them.

She discovered that she didn't especially want to find the woman dressed as a man. She seemed too bold, too knowledgeable. She had already worked her way into Elise's dreams. The long eyelashes held her like a net. And the lips. There was always a kiss, which left Elise wide-awake and sweating every time. She had to throw off her covers and fling her limbs out like a starfish to let the heat rise from her body, gulping back the words, *Make up my mind...?*

One cold afternoon in January, after she'd dropped Father off at the hospital to check on a patient with some awful disease, Elise made her way up Howard Street, thinking that daylight and a different angle might make the door easier to see.

She cruised past hole-in-the-wall churches and bars, past a music hall she couldn't remember ever seeing before, and finally turned to bump over the trolley tracks into an alley. The alley was strewn with trash and broken liquor bottles, and she was afraid for the tires. She drove carefully, slowly, certain this was *not* the right place, because she didn't remember such a lot of broken glass. But sure enough, at the end of the alley was the door, fastened to a nondescript building, with the purple note, faded in the daylight.

Elise came to a dead stop at the end of the alley by the door, trying to get her bearings. Then the door opened. Her heart gave an enormous *thud*. Instead of the woman dressed as a man, she saw two police officers.

"Lock it up," said one. He was holding a padlock. If he'd looked over his shoulder, he would've seen Elise, staring in shock and surprise.

“But what about the fags?” said the other.

“They’re gone. Flew the coop.”

“We could wait for them inside, tonight.”

“Not worth it,” said the first one. “They’ve seen us. They’ve gone somewhere else.” He handed the padlock to the other officer, who slammed the door.

“Gone where?” said the man, ratcheting the lock into place.

“The usual spots,” said the first one. “You know. Don’t worry, we’ll track ’em down.”

“Goddamn fags,” said the other, and they both turned down the street, walking away from the alley, swinging their billy clubs.

Elise, frozen in her seat, didn’t make a move, or a sound, until they were well out of sight. Then she let her breath out between her teeth, put the car in gear, and drove, trembling, in the other direction.

* * *

Half an hour later, Elise found Ruth standing alone in the blowing cold at the intersection of North Charles and Coldspring Avenue. Her heavy coat flapped around her as she waited for a trolley home from class. Elise pulled up to the curb.

“Get in!” she shouted over the noise of the engine. “How long’ve you been standing there?”

“Twenty minutes.” Ruth shoved her book bag in the back and practically fell into the passenger seat. “The trolley’s always late.” She blew on her hands and rubbed them together. She eyed Elise. “What’s the matter with you?”

“What?” said Elise. “Nothing.”

“You’re pale,” said Ruth. Her breath came out as steam. “It’s freezing and you’re sweating. Are you sick?”

Elise shook her head, not trusting her voice. *Goddamn fags.*

“Well, you *look* sick,” said Ruth, and she took an envelope out of her pocket. “Here. See if this’ll snap you out of it.”

“What’s this?”

“A letter from John,” said Ruth. “It’s not long. I don’t think he ever has time to write anything long. Read it. It’s interesting.”

Elise frowned. Ruth was trying to tell her something, but she was so

distracted. Elise fumbled the letter open and skimmed two short paragraphs.

“Ambulance drivers...are women?” she said in amazement. “All the men are fighting, so the women are driving?”

Ruth raised an eyebrow. “Maybe you wouldn’t have to peel potatoes and do laundry. Maybe you could fix ambulances. Who knows? Maybe there’re dozens of girls like you over there.”

“What do you mean by that?” Elise said nervously.

Ruth frowned at her. “Mechanics, Elise. What did you think I meant?”

Elise put the letter down. “You’re seriously thinking about going?”

Ruth let her breath out in the cold air and nodded, as if reassuring herself. “I’ll graduate in June, and then...well, then I’ll just *go*.”

Elise blinked at the letter. “What if the war’s over by June?”

“They thought it’d be over by Christmas,” said Ruth. “Christmas has come and gone.”

“Father would never allow it. He’d—” Elise heard how her own words sounded and stopped.

Ruth was wiping one eye with the heel of her hand. “I didn’t tell you this.” She put both hands over her face. “He said medicine wasn’t in my future.”

“When was this? Why on earth would he say such a thing?”

“He got bitten by the MacQuistons’ dog.” Ruth dropped her hands into her lap. “He wanted me to stitch him up. I did a terrible job. He wouldn’t even let me finish. Then he saw my grades. He thinks he’s wasted his money on nursing school.” She took a shaky breath. “He’s so angry. I just don’t think I can stay.”

Elise looked down at John’s letter. It was like a beckoning finger. “You don’t have to go to *war*,” said Elise. “We could get a place together.” She touched her sister’s shoulder lightly, knowing that more would make Ruth break down. “We’ll move out. I can find us an apartment.”

“Neither of us have jobs,” said Ruth. “How would we pay for that?”

“I’ll be a—a nanny,” said Elise. “You’ll be a nurse. We can do it.”

Ruth let out a breathless laugh. “A *nanny*?”

“A teacher?” said Elise. “A chauffeur?”

“Oh, Elise,” said Ruth. She sniffed hard. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. “You’re not that kind of a girl—and you don’t need a job. You’re going to be the one who stays with Father through sickness and health until the day he dies. You’ll get the house. You’ll get the car. You’ll have an inheritance to get you through your old age. You’re special to him...and

I'm...not."

CHAPTER SIX

Someone had lied about Porterville. Beanie Simms or Ovid Beale, and for the life of her, Cassie couldn't understand why. She felt a strange twinge when she thought about herself as a white girl instead of a black one, like she wouldn't know who she was anymore. Using some kind of magic was different from using the albino boy to create a light-skinned baby. Surely turning white wasn't something that could happen overnight. It must be something that took time and some study. Judith wouldn't want to wait around. She would go on to Virginia and leave Cassie behind.

With only four weeks to get to Virginia, it seemed sensible to get off the secondary roads and try the more direct highways. An east-west line on the map was marked HIGHWAY 80; they ran into Highway 80 later that afternoon. There was a man parked at the intersection in his pickup truck selling from a crate of apples and a stack of cheeses. The apples were mealy, what you'd expect this time of year, but the cheese was good. In another few miles, just past Compton's Bluff, they found a gas station.

Cassie sat in the driver's seat needing to pee, but the bathroom was for WHITES ONLY. She didn't want to go around back behind the bushes. There were houses nearby, and besides, there was this pimply white boy. He was wearing a white gas station uniform. His job was to pump gas and wash all the car windows. He sopped the side mirrors and the headlights, which didn't even work. Why was he being so thorough with the windows when the rest of the car was such a mess? He looked at her through the windows as he

washed, which made her uncomfortable. For the most part, though, he stood by the side of the car and rattled the gas pump until the sounds of flowing sputtered to a stop and the tank was full.

Judith had gone inside craving Red Hots. Cassie had given her a nickel, saying, “You sure you ain’t pregnant?” Judith had laughed.

Farther down the road, Judith showed Cassie what you could get for a nickel—Red Hots *and* about fifty jellybeans in *all* different colors, even the licorice ones which Cassie hated. Judith reached into the bottom of the bag. “I got this for you.”

It was a postcard of a town square with a statue in the shape of a woman holding a vase over her head. Water sprayed out of the vase and cascaded down. People in their Sunday best stood around, admiring her.

“You like that?” said Judith. “The man behind the counter give it to me for free.”

Cassie slowed and took the postcard.

“Keep your eyes on the road now.”

“Where’s this?”

“That in Enterprise, Al’bama, straight ahead, ’bout eighty, hunnert miles. We goin’ right through.”

“They have a statue?”

“It’s a *monument*.”

“To what?”

“He din’t say.” Judith took the postcard, squinting at the printing on the back. “Hail, I cain’t read this. Here, les switch, an’ you kin read it to me.”

“My turn to drive.”

“Well.” Judith dug in the bag again and took out a freshly sharpened, bright yellow pencil. “I got this for you too.”

“What for?”

“Well,” said Judith. “I thought you might want to send a postcard to your mama.” She pulled out an identical second postcard from the bag. “An’ while you’re at it, mebbe you kin help me write to my momma too.”

In the evening, well behind a billboard for KELLOGG’S CORN SOYA TWIN

TREATS, they built a fire, ate the rest of the jellybeans, and Cassie wrote out postcards as Judith scratched another day off the calendar.

“What you want to say?” she said to Judith.

Judith put the calendar down. “Dear Mama an’ Henry,”

Cassie had already written that part. Her letters looked blocky, unpracticed. Not like the flowing script in blue ink from the newspapered-over walls back home. *My dearest sister; I am sorry to tell you that our father is dead.*

“I am almos’ in Al’bama.”

Cassie wrote it down. In spite of the candy taste in her mouth, the sense of accomplishment in driving so far, and her own denial, she felt homesick.

“It is cold,” said Judith, and Cassie wrote that down too, but Judith made her erase it. “Then she’ll try’n’ send me new socks or somethin’. Here, write this. ‘I am on my way to New York City to be-come a singin’ star.’” She watched Cassie print the words. “Now write, ‘You keep list’nin’ to the reddio, and you’ll be hearin’ from me.’”

Cassie wasn’t sure how to spell *radio*, so she wrote it the way Judith always said it. *Reddio*. “You want to mention your daddy?”

“It’d make her spittin’ mad if she knew I was gonna see him. Now lemme sign it.”

Cassie gave Judith the pencil. Judith took the card and made smeary black marks in the remaining space at the bottom that spelled *Judith Forrest*, as though her mother might be confused about which Judith had sent her a postcard.

Later, when Judith was asleep, Cassie wrote her own postcard.

Dear Lil Ma.

I am doing good. We have a car and people help us when it don’t run.

Grandmother would see it too, maybe first. The postman might just hand it to her. She erased everything and started again, with proper grammar this time.

Dear Lil Ma and Grandmother,

I am doing well. We have a car and people help us when it doesn't run.

Wind blew under the KELLOGGS billboard, making the fire thin. A wall of thorny bushes separated the billboard from the road, and birds chirped sleepily from inside. She wondered what to write next. *I miss you.* Even though it was true, that would make Lil Ma cry. Cassie couldn't bear to have Lil Ma's crying in her mind.

I have met a mule that once was a man.

They would think she'd taken up drinking.

Soon we will be in Enterprise in Alabama ...

That seemed good. She wrote it down.

where there is a monument to ...

She turned the postcard so she could see the caption on the back. In the firelight, at first she thought she'd read it wrong. She read it again. She turned the card over and finished her sentence.

... where there is a monument to the Boll Weevil. I will write more soon.

Love, Cassie

She addressed it to Lil Ma at:

The Laundry on Negro Street,

Heron-Neck, Mississippi

Cassie put the card on the dashboard and lay down on the seat. She was tired, but the last two days had been so full of strange things. She found herself thinking about the two elderly women up on Hilltop who had spoken to her in such hard tones—as stern as Grandmother—but then another woman had given her the basket full of ham sandwiches, which she'd probably been

taking to the funeral. Which made her think about Judith's fears about the man the ham might've once been, which made her laugh. Judith sat up suddenly in the back and sucked in a quick breath through her teeth, like she'd scared herself out of a dream.

"You 'wake?" Judith said.

"Yes."

"You hear that?"

Cassie listened but could only hear the low sound of the wind coming around the billboard. "Hear what?"

"Voices."

"You dreamin', Judith. You was sound asleep, and I bin 'wake this whole time."

"I wasn't asleep." Cassie could hear her unwrapping the pistol.

Cassie sat up. "*Please* don't go out there an' start shootin'."

"I'll shoot enny damn thing that needs to be shot." Judith climbed out of the car.

Cassie scrambled after her. "There ain't nothin' out there."

"*Shush!*"

The pistol was immense, even in the dark. It was as long as Judith's lanky forearms and heavy enough that she had to hold it with both hands. It was so big, it made her look too small to do anything with it.

Cassie followed her around the front of the car to where they had a clear view of the road. The area directly underneath the billboard was filled with thorn bushes and briars grown so thick and high that they presented the illusion that there was nothing behind the sign but briar patch, but there was actually a hedge of barbs and thistles. Judith and Cassie hunkered down on their heels, close enough to the thorns for their sleeves to catch.

"I heerd somethin'," said Judith. "It weren't no dream. Look."

Across the road, two figures—as flat as a cardboard in the dark—were walking toward the billboard.

One of them said distinctly, "Dave said he saw 'em pull in back year."

"He sure it's them?"

“He said it was a junky ol’ Model A with a coupla nigger gals drivin’ it.”

“Thought one was white.”

“One was ’tendin’ she was white. The other one too dark to fool ennyone.”

Was one of them the pimply faced boy from the gas station? It didn’t really matter who they were. The boys sauntered closer to the sign coming around the opposite side where Cassie and Judith were. Cassie pushed Judith forward, keeping the island of thorns between them and the boys.

Judith let herself be pushed, but not far. She craned her neck to see. Cassie could tell by the crunch of brush that the boys were coming around to a point where they couldn’t help but see the car. She gave Judith a shove, but Judith didn’t budge.

“They gonna de-stroy the car,” Judith hissed. “They ain’t no different than them damn Justice boys. They prob’ly brought a canna gasoline.” She took a step toward the car. Cassie grabbed Judith’s arm to hold her back and pulled. She pulled with such force that Judith lost her grip on the heavy gun. It fell out of her hand and into the mass of briars.

“Jesus *Christ!*” Judith plunged her hands in to find it.

“Hey,” said the voice of the pimply faced boy, which Cassie could now hear clearly. “Hey, here’s that piece o’ crap now.”

She could just see the tops of their heads and heard them kicking the cast-iron skillet around and slamming the car doors.

“Where you reckon they went?”

“They heard us comin’, idjit. I tol’ you to shut yer mouth. They miles away by now.”

Judith pulled herself loose from the bushes, wiping blood from where the thorns had raked her arms. She didn’t have the gun. “God dammit,” she panted. “Come on!” She lunged forward, but Cassie grabbed her again.

“It don’t *matter* what they do to the car! What you think they gonna do to *us?*”

“Well, if I had my damn *gun*, they wouldn’t do *nuthin’.*” Judith yanked away and ran before Cassie could get another hand on her.

“Hey!” Judith shouted. “Hey, you git the hail away from mah car!”

Cassie hunched in the shadows, wondering what the *hail* she should do now. There was only one thing. She snaked her hands into the briars.

“Well, now,” said one of the boys. “Looky year. Where’s yer friend?”

“She saw how ugly you was, and she run off,” said Judith. “You git the hail outta here. You got no bizness botherin’ folk in the middle of the goddam night.”

“My, my,” said the other boy, “we din’t realize this was yer personal billboard. An’ look how nice you got it set up. Where you sleep? Inna backseat?”

“I said git out,” said Judith, and Cassie heard the iron skillet ring as she picked it up off the ground. “An’ I mean, *git out*.”

“Lil lady, you needn’t get all excited.”

Cassie’s fingers touched cold metal. She got a two-fingered grip on the barrel of the gun. Thorns stuck into the backs of her hands.

“I’m gonna crack your haid wide open!” yelled Judith, and a second later, Cassie heard one of the car windows smash. Male voices laughed. Cassie got a better grip on the gun, her hands scored. She wrenched it out, and the skin of her wrists tore like the cuffs on an old shirt. The gun glinted in the dull night. It weighed more than she’d thought, as heavy and graceful as two bricks. She almost dropped it again. She stuck the pistol straight in front of her, bolted around the billboard, and burst out in front of the car, where Judith was swinging the frying pan with furious desperation. The boys were close enough to grab it.

“You stop right there!” shrieked Cassie, and both the boys stopped. She’d never shot a gun in her life. She pointed the heavy thing at the pimply faced boy’s heart. Judith looked scared. Cassie could see that and the scratches and blood trickling down her own arms all at the same time.

“Whoa, now,” said the pimply faced boy. “There ain’t no need fer violence.”

“You get out right now! Or I’ll blow your head off!”

“Looky year,” said the other boy.

“*Get out!*” Cassie screamed. Her arms were giving way under the weight of the gun. “*Get out!*” She’d never heard herself scream before.

The pimply faced boy took a nervous step away from Judith. Judith raised the skillet without hesitation and swung it into his elbow. The bang and howl made Cassie think that the gun, inspired by the situation, had shot of its own accord, but the sound was the impact of the cast iron on bone. The pimply faced boy howled again. The other boy grabbed the back of his friend’s jacket and practically carried him past Cassie. She swung around to follow them with the barrel of the gun and this time remembered to put her finger on the trigger. She wanted to kill them. It had something to do with the driving and the wind and being away from home. She wanted to kill them, and then Judith was behind her, pulling the gun out of her hands. Cassie dropped into the dirt on her knees. Judith fell down beside her. Out by the road, the boys were still running, into the trees on the other side.

“We have to go,” said Cassie.

“We goin’ right now.” Judith picked herself up and helped Cassie to her feet. She held the gun against her chest like a pet cat, and when they got to the car, she only let go of Cassie long enough to pick up the skillet and toss it in the backseat.

“I thought you was gone to hit him in the head with that thing,” said Cassie.

“I wanted to. But I din’t wanna kill ’im. You want to drive?”

Cassie shook her head and got in the passenger side. Judith slid in, shut the door, and started the engine.

“I wanted to kill ’em,” said Cassie. “I cain’t believe how much I wanted to.”

“You was truly terrifiyin’,” said Judith. “They saw you standin’ there, a lil nigger gal with a big ol’ gun, pointed right at ’em. I bet that keeps ’em up at night fer a while.”

She pulled onto the road and sped up. They watched the trees and the shadows. After a mile or two, the trees opened up into newly plowed fields. Cassie watched the road behind them until she was sure they weren’t being

followed.

“They’s something you should know ’bout that gun,” said Judith.

“Don’t it shoot?”

“It shoot,” said Judith, “except there ain’t no bullets in it. They right here in my pocket.” Judith produced three bullets, huge even in the dark, each the size of a man’s thumb.

“Why ain’t they in the *gun*?”

“These here is the very last three bullets that goes with this gun, and I cain’t see wastin’ ’em on no trashy white boys.”

“What do you mean ‘the last three bullets’?”

“Miss Cassie, as you well know, Big Red is right at one hunnert years old, and so far as I know, they ain’t makin’ bullets for it no more.”

“What if they don’t work?”

“All a bullet’s gotta do is fly out the gun and stick itself into something. Ain’t no one gonna bother us with a bullet stickin’ in ’im.”

“Have you *ever* shot that gun?”

“Lotsa times,” said Judith.

It felt pointless to ask any more questions. Cassie looked out her side of the car, at nothing in particular, not even the dark.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After the episode with the pimply faced boy and his friend, both Judith and Cassie stayed in the car when they went to gas stations, and both watched suspiciously as the service man pumped gas and sopped the windshield with soap. The broken window from when Judith had smashed it with the frying pan was in the back, and they found a piece of cardboard big enough to fill the hole and sturdy enough not to be blown away as they drove.

Judith still wanted candy and jerky, but instead of getting these at gas stations, they agreed that a stop at a five-and-dime in some tiny town wouldn't put much of a dent in their schedule. Judith would use the WHITES ONLY bathrooms to keep herself cleaned up. Cassie would find an isolated patch of trees to relieve herself and various cold creeks to wash in.

February was almost over, March was fast approaching, and Virginia was a long way off. Cassie worried, but with the calendar in hand, Judith seemed confident that they would get there with all the time in the world to spare. In the meantime, the car ran, if not smoothly, then at least steadily. At night they camped behind billboards for KENT CIGARETTES, FUNK'S BUTTER, and OLDSMOBILE. Usually there was enough brush to keep the car hidden from anyone driving by. If there was enough moonlight, Cassie would study the maps before she went to sleep. Judith would puzzle out city names, and they would follow the courses of rivers and railroads with their fingers.

By the end of their first week, they'd reached the Alabama border. There was no golden gate or candy-striped guardhouse. There was only a sign:

WELCOME TO ALABAMA
THE HEART OF DIXIE

“Dammit,” said Judith.

Cassie was driving.

“God dammit.”

Cassie looked over to see a bloody stain spreading on Judith’s skirt.

“Ain’t we got a god-damn rag somewhere in this heap?”

Cassie pulled off by the first creek in Alabama. The car bumped off the road and into the grass. Judith kicked her door open and ran down a narrow pebbly beach and into the water, up to her knees. There were houses nearby, so instead of taking the dress off to wash it, Judith twisted around in it so that it was on backward, dark buttons running up her chest instead of her back. She squatted in the water, took off her drawers, and scrubbed them.

Cassie waded out into the cold creek and stood next to her. Judith was crying. Her tears dripped off her chin and into the chill water. “I can get the blood out for you,” said Cassie.

Judith stood up, soaked. The stains on her dress were on the back and the front. It wouldn’t matter which way she put it on. She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands.

“Why’re you cryin’?” said Cassie.

“It ain’t my time of the month,” said Judith. “It was a baby. I was gonna have a baby.”

Cassie built a fire on the riverbank and hung the dress on a stick to dry. It was still stained. Only vinegar and salt, or bleach would truly clean it.

Judith sat among the pebbles in her undershirt and discolored drawers. “I wonder if it woulda looked like him. All pale like he was.”

Cassie pushed twigs into the fire. “Din’t you think he was good-lookin’?”

“I guess. Those pink eyes bothered me. Did you think he was? You know. Handsome?”

“I kinda thought so. He wasn’t too nice to you, though. Good lookin’ don’t mean nothin’ if he ain’t good to you.”

Judith hugged herself. Her skin showed gooseflesh. Cassie got her patchy red coat from out of the car and draped it around Judith's shoulders.

"That what your mama said?" said Judith

"My mama never talked 'bout no men."

"Your grandma?"

"What your mama tell you 'bout men?" Cassie stirred the fire.

"'Fore daddy left, she'd say, 'Find yo'sef a man just like yo' daddy.' She used to make me an' Henry get down on our knees an' pray with her every night 'fore bed and thank God for our lil fam'ly. We did that until the day Daddy run off, an' after he left, she'd say, 'Don't never marry no man like that! He gonna bamboozle you, an' no one gonna forgive you for bein' so stupid! Not even God.'" Judith studied her own bare feet. "You know how in fairy stories the pretty girl gits rescued by a knight on a white horse? She'd tell Henry stories like that when he was sick. She loved them stories more'n she loved the ones in the Bible." Judith looked up at Cassie. "But unless you a beautiful princess locked in a tower or in some magical sleep, ain't no man ever gonna come rescue you. They ain't interested in your misery." She hunched over her belly.

The fire smoked and gave off no heat to speak of. Cassie tried to think of something to say to make Judith feel better. "Beanie Simms used to tell me stories, but they never made no sense. They was animals instead of people. Like this monkey who found gold in the river behind his house. So he gets his friends—the elephant and the lion—to help him dam the river and dig up the gold. He says he gone share it. When they're done, he breaks the dam and they all drown, and he keeps the gold."

Judith pushed her arms into her coat and gave that some thought. "How you drown a elephant?"

Cassie poked the fire. "Guess it was a big river."

"Din't that monkey's friends know he never gonna share nothin' with 'em? What kinda story's that—one monkey gits rich, but ever'body else dies in the end?"

"It's just a story," said Cassie. "What kinda lady stays locked up in a

tower till the right man come along?”

Judith put her head in her hands. She looked weary, like an old woman.
“I’m gonna go lay down.”

“You feelin’ all right?”

“Just tarred.”

“Well. G’night then.”

“G’night.”

Later the moon rose over the bare trees, so full it woke Cassie out of her sleep. She knew it was the moon, not a noise, and she sat up in the front seat, not afraid but alert.

She got out of the car as quietly as she could. Judith was curled up in the back, sleeping too deeply even to snore. Between the river and the car, Judith’s dress hung drying on its rack of sticks. The dress was a light color, possibly white at one time, or maybe a pale pink. In the moonlight, the stains spread down like maps of unknown places. Maybe they could pick up some bleach, or vinegar and salt at a store, soon, depending on which was cheaper.

Cassie went back to the car and took Lil Ma’s shoes out from under the passenger seat and went barefoot to the creek to count the money they had left. One dollar bill, four quarters, and some change, which added up to another forty-six cents. She put all of it back into one shoe, put both shoes on, and stood.

It was a warm night. Satiny moonlight reflected from the surface of the creek, shimmering on tree trunks on the opposite bank. Spring peepers chirped in the shadows. The intruding moon made her restless. She walked along the river until it reached the road. The bridge there was concrete with 1947 molded into it at the near end. There was no trace of traffic. Cassie looked across the bridge and thought she saw lights on in a house, but it was the moon shining through the trees. The trees stood in a perfectly straight line, thick-trunked but branchless. Were they telephone poles? She squinted against the moon. They weren’t trees or telephone poles, but columns that had at one time held up some part of a mansion. The other trees around them were saplings growing inside where the veranda had been. In the dark from

where she was standing on the bridge, the shape of the vanished house was surprisingly distinct.

Cassie crossed the bridge and stood at the edge of the road, where short-stemmed brush had broken through the remains of a flagstone terrace. Some of the flagstones had fallen away, leaving open holes, which were filled with water, maybe from when the creek ran high. A pool glittered in the moonlight in an opening behind the columns where the front hall or the foyer might have been. The moon shone on the water through the five remaining pillars. Water lapped against what was left of the house.

Someone was kneeling in the ruins of the house. The lapping was the slap of wet fabric on stone.

A short woman, a colored woman, was scrubbing clothes in the flood of the house's foundation. Two wicker laundry baskets flanked her. Cassie heard herself make a surprised sound, and the woman stopped her washing.

"Who's that?"

Cassie said her name and stepped down into the ruin, where the woman could see her from the opposite side of the pool.

"Come on over heah," said the woman. "Stan' wheah I kin see ya."

Cassie came around the edge of the pool, carefully across cracked flagstone. "We just passin' through. Sleepin' in a car by the crick."

"We?"

"Me an' 'nother girl."

"Where you from?"

Cassie told her.

The woman looked her over. "Ain't you et properly?"

"We et what we brung."

"You friend thin like you?"

"No thinner'n she ever was."

The woman wrung out the shirt she was washing and put it in one of the wicker baskets. "You hep me tote this'er laundry, an' I'll fix you up some ets." She put one of the baskets on her head and pointed to the other. "Follow me."

Cassie picked up the basket and set it on her hip. It was heavy with wet wash. Down the road was an old house set back about ten feet from where cars went by during the day. There was a light on in the front room downstairs, and when the woman with the laundry basket opened the door, another woman, very elderly, looked up from a rocking chair.

“Now who’s this?” she said.

“This a vagrant chile who sleepin’ by the river.”

The house reminded Cassie of her home on Negro Street. Stairs went up along one wall of the house. Upstairs there would be two underheated rooms. Were there bits of newspaper covering the walls? She felt terribly homesick.

The younger woman took the baskets into the kitchen. Cassie heard an outside door open and knew the younger woman was on her way to hang the laundry on lines out back.

“Why you a vagrant?” said the old woman.

“I’m no vagrant. I left home is all.”

The back door slammed again, and the younger woman, the daughter probably, came back into the front room. A puff of cooking smells followed her from the kitchen.

“You done let the stew burn,” said the daughter.

“Ain’t burnt,” said her mother.

The daughter turned to Cassie. “You like rabbit stew?”

“Yessum.”

“Your friend like rabbit stew?”

“I think so.”

“You know how to make corn bread?” the daughter said and eyed her mother. “This old woman was s’posed t’ make some, but she so damn old she plumb fergot.”

“Lawd,” said her mother. “I plumb fergot. I was bein’ so keerful ’bout the damn rabbit stew.”

The daughter turned back to her. “It a wonder you still alive. One o’ these days you gone plumb fergit to take yo’ nex’ breath.”

“I kin make the bread,” said Cassie.

“I ain’t so old you got to bring vagrant gals inna middle of the night to make the corn bread,” said the mother.

“Oh you *ain’t*, is you?” said the daughter. “Then how come we *ain’t* got no supper?” She caught Cassie by her wrist and pulled her into the kitchen.

“You yeast your bread?” said Cassie, as the daughter dragged her under the drape separating the kitchen from the front room. The daughter looked back like Cassie was crazy.

“We ain’t got time to let it rise, gal. I got to git up in two hours and clean the damn houses.”

The kitchen was wide and warm and brightly lit, and the rabbit stew simmered on a white enamel gas stove. Cornmeal, baking powder, salt, a big bowl, three brown eggs, and a pitcher of milk sat on the kitchen table along with a metal baking dish. The daughter handed Cassie a wooden spoon.

“Mix it up,” she said, “an’ git it inna oven. I got to finish hangin’ these damn clothes.” She went out the kitchen door into the dark. Her mother came in under the drape, limped over to the table, and sat in one of two rough wooden chairs.

Cassie poured cornmeal in the large bowl, guessed at the amount of baking powder, broke in the eggs, and poured the milk. She stirred until the old woman said, “You fergot the salt.”

Cassie added the salt, mixed, and was about to pour it into the pan when the old woman said, “Butter it!”

Cassie got butter from the refrigerator—not an icebox like the one at home but an actual electric refrigerator—found butter and greased the pan. She poured the batter and faced the stove. She’d never used a gas stove before.

“Here, now,” said the old woman, “see them knobs?” She told Cassie how to turn them for the right temperature, which struck Cassie as being something like tuning the radio in the car. She put the cornbread in and brushed off her hands.

“You think you done?” said the old woman. “Grab out them collards from the sink.” She took a long paring knife out of the folds of her skirt and handed it to Cassie. Cassie trimmed the collards and cut them into neat strips,

stems in a pile for the garden, like Grandmother had taught her. “Ma’am,” Cassie said. “If you don’t mind my askin’. Do you gen’rally do cookin’ and cleanin’ in the middle of the night?”

The old woman let out a snort. “We do what we got to do when we got to do it.” She pointed to a door by the refrigerator. “Look in the pantry and slice off a little of the ham hangin’ there.”

Cassie took the knife and opened the door. The pantry was tiny, no bigger than a small closet. It was dark inside and almost as cold as stepping outside on a winter day. Cassie’s breath let out as steam.

“Ham’s in the back,” said the old woman. “Over them baskets of dried apples.”

A dozen little jars of clear water sat in a row just inside the door. Cassie stepped over them and ducked under braided hanks of onions hanging from low unpainted beams. Baskets full of potatoes, turnips, and roots she didn’t recognize were stacked close together on the cold stone floor and gave the air a brittle fragrance. The pantry was so dark, she could barely see the smoked ham. She took a step, stumbled on a potato basket, and flung out a hand for the back wall, but there was no back wall. Her hand touched a surface like a stair instead, filthy with age and icy to the touch. And there was something else, densely cold, almost solid. Whatever it was, when her hand brushed through the icy space, something sighed a melancholy sigh. Cassie stiffened, the smooth wooden handle of the knife in her hand.

“What you doin’ in there, gal? Don’t be steppin’ in my baskets!”

The ham swung in an unfelt breeze. Cassie stepped back, eyes locked on the invisible thing in the dark.

“What you doin’ in there, gal?” demanded the old woman. “Ain’t you see that ham? Git me two good slices an’ come on out!”

Cassie jammed the knife into the ham and hacked off two pieces. The presence on the stairs moaned as if it had known the hog personally. Cassie reeled backward between baskets, spun around, ducked the onions, and with two thick strips of ham in her fist, jumped the line of glass jars. She emerged into the kitchen to see the old woman rocked back in the kitchen chair.

“You look chilled, gal.”

“Cold in there,” whispered Cassie.

“Sure as hell,” said the old woman. “Bit crowded, too. Now get that ham in the pan.”

Cassie dropped the ham into the skillet and stood half-frozen while the meat sizzled. She remembered to put the collards in, but her feet itched with the desire to run right out the door. Grandmother had always sneered at people who told stories about ghosts. She dared to look over her shoulder at the kitchen door and the front door beyond. The old woman had blocked any clear escape. Cassie turned to the collards.

“Gal, you like yams?”

Cassie wished the younger woman would get back from hanging the laundry. “Yessum.”

“You knows where yams comes from?”

Cassie concentrated on the collards, stirring them as they wilted down. “From the garden?”

“Yam come from Africa, gal. Some people call it *sweet potato*, and sometime I expect the yam think of himself as a sweet potato, but the sweet potato and the yam two different things confused for each other.” She scowled at Cassie. “You knows where you come from, gal?”

“Mississippi, ma’am.”

“Right there, you like the yam. You think of yo’self as one thing, but then there’s another thing. You don’ know it. Nobody round you know it, but there ain’t no way you cain’t be it. No more’n a yam kin be a sweet potato.”

“Is it like the mule, ma’am?” said Cassie.

“What you know ’bout mules, gal?”

“They the mos’ nigger of all critters.”

The old woman leaned forward in the chair so that it gave a deep, aching creak, and gave her the same disbelieving look as the man who’d been sitting in the mule wagon back by Ellie’s store.

The kitchen door opened, and the younger woman came in. She sniffed at the smells coming from the stove, eyed the ham frying in the pan, half-hidden

by the limp darkening collards, and gave her mother a look, as if she knew exactly what Cassie had felt in the pantry.

“Dammit,” she said to her mother. “I kin see the gooseflesh on her where you gone and scairt her witless.” She pushed in front of Cassie and took over the stove and everything on it. “Gal,” she said, “this ol’ woman send you into the pantry?”

Cassie nodded wordlessly.

“We got some cold spots in this house.” She gave the collards a good hard stir. “Some people likes to think of them as spooks. This the overseer’s house back in slavery time.”

The old woman leaned back in her chair. “Cold norm’ly drift down, but not in this house, cause this house ain’t normal.”

“There ain’t no damn spooks,” said the daughter. “An’ even if there was, I ain’t lettin’ ’em have the run of this place. This place belongs to me, an’ I got things to do.”

The younger woman scooped half the collards into a big, chipped bowl. She took the hot corn bread out of the oven, sliced up two big hunks, and put them in the bowl with a generous scoop of the rabbit stew. She put in two big spoons and covered it all with aluminum foil.

“This vagrant gal stayin’ with us for supper,” said her mother.

“No, she ain’t,” said the daughter. “I ain’t gonna let you play with her jus’ cause you got nuthin’ better to do.” She opened the pantry door without hesitation and took out an empty basket. A cold draft curled through the kitchen, but there was no moaning or sighing. The cold smelled of old wooden beams and onions.

She packed the food into the basket and handed it to Cassie. “Share that with your friend out there by the crick. Careful you don’t spill. You need help findin’ your way?”

“Nome.” Cassie held the heavy, fragrant basket in both hands. She wanted to bolt out the door, but there was one more thing she needed. “I was wonderin’, though, if I could bother you for some vinegar and salt.”

“Someone bleedin’ on they clothes?” demanded the older woman.

“Yessum.” Even though it was a harmless lie, the words sounded suspicious and hung in the room like the cold air from the pantry. “The blood done set,” she added, because at least that was true.

The younger woman reached into a cabinet and took down a bottle of vinegar and a box of salt. She poured out about a quarter cup of salt into an empty jam jar and screwed the lid on tight. She put it and the vinegar in the basket with the food. “You leave this and the basket by that pond inside the mansion.” She led Cassie to the door. “Where’re you goin’?”

“Virginia,” said Cassie.

“Long way,” said the older woman.

“You an’ your friend be careful,” said the younger woman.

The old woman got up from her chair and grabbed Cassie’s arm. “Take yo’ friend’s bloody draws to the pool. Not that li’l crick—the *pool*. Scrub it with that salt and vin’gar an’ save the squeezin’ water off it in that jam jar.” She angled her head at the pantry door and the row of glass jars, unseen behind it. “Blood and salt water. That’s how we keep evil things away.” The old woman sat down in the straight-backed wooden chair again; righteous.

The daughter led Cassie to the front door and opened it to the night.

Cassie crossed the bridge and followed the creek back to the car. Judith was huddled in the front seat, shivering in her coat.

“Where the hail have you bin? Mah Gawd! I thought you run off.”

Cassie got into the junk car and handed Judith the basket. “Folks gave me supper. And stuff to wash out your dress.”

“You knockin’ on doors and doin’ laundry inna middle of the night?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” Cassie pulled the foil away to show Judith the food. She took one spoon and gave Judith the other, and they ate every bit of the rabbit stew and corn bread and collards. Cassie let Judith eat all the ham.

* * *

In the morning Cassie washed the dress in the pool where the old mansion had been. Judith sat cross-legged in her draws and undershirt. The basket,

empty except for the bowl and two spoons, sat in the shade by one of the disintegrating columns.

“I’ll wash it,” Judith said for the second time. “It’s my dress.”

“That’s all right.”

“Don’t scrub so hard.”

The dress was old and thin, but a stain was a stain. “Don’t worry about the dress,” said Cassie.

“I’ll worry if I want to,” said Judith. She waved away gnats.

The salt roughed itself into the damp fabric, gritty, then slippery as it dissolved. Vinegar added something to the mix that made the stains slide out and vanish in the rinse. In the cool light of sunrise, the dress was dark with water but clean. Cassie squeezed the dress where the stains had been and let the water trickle into the empty jam jar. The water had a brackish look to it, an unpowerful look.

Judith propped herself up. “What in the world are you doin’?”

“What’s it look like I’m doin’?”

“It *look* like you saving the damn bloody washin’ water.”

“I guess I am.” How could she say what the water in the jar was really supposed to do?

Judith picked up the jar and threw it into the pool. She took up the dress and wrung it until it was as dry as it would get without being hung. She put it on. “It’ll dry when we get drivin’,” she said.

“You’ll catch cold,” said Cassie.

Judith straightened her damp dress. “Cain’t you tell it gonna be a hot day?”

Cassie drove, east through Alabama. The land looked a little different. The pines taller and thicker in the woods and a smoky quality to the air, especially higher up in the hills. Overall, though, the flatland was still flat, and where the land was farmed, there was always a man and a mule. Two times there was a man and a tractor. Always, there was a tumble of shacks, and in the distance, a big house on a hill, falling to pieces under huge old trees.

Cassie thought about the jar and the water, mixing with all the other

washing water in that pool. She thought about what Lil Ma might be doing, which was easy. She was doing the wash while Grandmother kept an eye on her, and from beyond the grave, the mothers of grandmothers and grandmothers before them kept an eye on her. Clear back to slavery mothers. Maybe beyond. Was the ghost in the pantry kin to the older woman and her daughter?

“You b’lieve in ghosts?” Cassie said.

Judith had been frowning at the road, not really seeing it.

Any other time this would have been enough to launch Judith into some convoluted story she’d made up on the spot; this day Judith just hunched into her shoulders. “Don’t you?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

For the three days it took to get to Enterprise, Judith didn't say much. The junk car pattered along the two-lane highway. People in other cars yelled at them to *git outta the way*. Even other junkers passed them.

Cassie turned on the radio and found a station with a man playing a melancholy guitar and singing cowboy songs. Judith didn't sing along. She cried at night. Cassie tried to say things she hoped were comforting, but when nothing seemed to help, she said, "Is you sick? Mebbe you need a doctor to look at you." Back in Heron-Neck, Mrs. Duckett had known about every female trouble. She knew who was confined to bed rest, who'd miscarried, who'd had twins (each by a different daddy). She knew who was trying hard to get with-child and who didn't need "enny more chillun ennyhow." Mrs. Duckett talked about male troubles too, but those were discussed mostly with raised eyebrows and hand gestures, and only when Grandmother wasn't around. Cassie felt far less informed about male problems.

At the end of the third day, the land turned hilly, and the car, unaccustomed to climbing, began to overheat. Even though it was early in March, the day had been hot. Cassie had stopped often to make sure there was water in the radiator. Judith slept in the backseat, oblivious.

In the late afternoon while Cassie was peering into the heat and darkness of the radiator, Judith woke up. "Where are we?"

"Alabammy hill country." Cassie shut the car hood and picked up a galvanized bucket she'd found on the side of the road. The bucket had been

shot at, but the holes were only in the upper half, so the bottom still held water. She'd been keeping it in the foot well of the passenger seat. There seemed to be a creek in every little valley.

"I mean where on the map?"

"I guess about a day away from Enterprise."

Judith sat up in the backseat. She looked better, not so bloodless. "Where we gonna stop?"

"I ain't seen a safe place. I seen a lot of lil shacks with white folks an' big dogs. None o' the coloreds been wavin' back."

"Ever'body think you stole this car, an' now you drivin' round showin' it off." She got out of the backseat and made her way gingerly to the front. She sat down with her feet on either side of the bucket without acting like she'd even seen it. "You lucky you ain't been shot at."

"Nobody wants this car but us. You want somethin' to eat?"

Judith leaned her head back on the ragged upholstery. "I'd like a steak 'n' taters, please. An' a ice-cold Coca-Cola to wash it all down." Cassie laughed, and Judith smiled a pale smile. "Let's find us a big ol' billboard for the night."

A billboard for TIDE detergent was at the top of the hill and had been for such a long time that the bright orange-and-yellow bull's-eye box had faded to gray. Cassie and Judith hid the car in thorny weeds and ate stale corn bread, all they had left. Judith marked off the past three days on the calendar and turned the page uneasily to March. Two weeks left and still in Alabama.

"We gonna hafta drive day and night," said Judith.

"We don't have the money for gas to drive day and night."

"Well now," said Judith, sounding a little desperate. "We cain't git stuck out here after comin' all this way."

"We'll find a way," said Cassie, "isn't that what you said?"

"I know it's what I said."

"We got to eat," said Cassie. "We'll think better with something in our stomachs."

They picked dandelion greens and tried boiling them the way they thought

they remembered their grandmothers had, but the greens were bitter and tough. Not far behind the billboard, Cassie found a stand of mulberry trees with enough fruit for the two of them to feel less like they were starving. In the long grass under twisted trees they found a rotting arrangement of crates, which had once been set up as a table and chairs. Judith pushed a crate over with her foot, and that was when they found the bottles of moonshine whiskey. One was corked, nearly full, and only dirty on one side, where it'd been lying in the leaves for who knew how long. Judith scuffed around it until all the spiders ran off, and took it back with them to the car.

It had been a clear hot afternoon, and the evening was no different. From the top of the hill, their view of the sky was uninterrupted. Stars came out. Crickets, frogs, and night birds sang all around them. There wasn't so much as a porch light showing in the valley. Had they fallen between the crisscross of roads and landed somewhere on the old map they'd started with—on which the markings had worn away?

Judith uncorked the bottle, took a deep whiff, and handed it over to Cassie. It smelled like paint thinner.

"I hope you don't think I'm gonna drink this," said Cassie.

"Din't nobody in your fam'ly drink?" said Judith. "Not even when your granny wasn't lookin'?"

"You know my momma din't."

"She shoulda." Judith reached for the bottle. Cassie handed it back and watched Judith put the mouth of the bottle between her lips and lean back so the whiskey just rolled in. Judith swallowed twice, silently, with a terrible expression on her face, leaned forward, and coughed like she was drowning. Cassie tried to pound her on the back, but Judith held her off.

"At's how it s'posed to be." Judith gasped and pushed the bottle at her and made encouraging motions with both hands.

"I felt so sorry for your ma," Judith said. "She din't wanna sleep with my daddy. She coulda done better by you. I'd see people lookin' at your mama, jus' *lookin'* at her. I felt so sorry for her," she said again. "Din't you?"

Cassie looked out at the dark and the moon, aware of a pain in the middle

of her chest.

“You wanna go home,” said Judith.

“I don’t.”

“You do,” said Judith, “but you cain’t.” She giggled, got up, and stumbled to the car. The radio came on. Static hissed. A white man’s voice read an agricultural report. The idea that white people were right here, talking about how the corn crop was coming along, not just among themselves around a kitchen table, but on the radio where everyone could hear, made Cassie’s chest hurt more. Judith had left the bottle on the ground, and Cassie picked it up. It was about half gone. *Cain’t. Ain’t.* She shut her eyes and tears came out. She took a gulp, fast, so as to bypass her tongue; it was like a mouthful of gasoline. The fumes came up behind her eyes and made them water. She choked for breath.

“Don’t you be drinkin’ the whole bottle!” Judith said.

The stuff ran down into Cassie’s stomach and lay there. Her mouth and throat felt like she’d swallowed lit matches. There was nothing to do but drink again. She did and had to lie down on her back in the grass. She blinked at the moon. Her chest seemed not to hurt as much.

Judith was fiddling with the radio.

“We out in the middle of nowhere,” Cassie kind of sang. “What you gone get ’sides hillbilly music?”

“You lissen an’ see.” Voices flickered through static, faint, then stronger, sharp-edged, distant accents from a different world.

I’m young, I’m loose, I’m full of juice.

Drums and horns and a man’s voice spilled out of the radio. Judith pranced back through the darkness and stood over Cassie. She pattered her hands across her hips, shook her hands around, and rolled her eyes. From Cassie’s ground-view, Judith looked like a boneless waggle of limbs, which was funny. Judith reached down and pulled Cassie to her feet. “Come on an’ I’ll show you how to dance. Do what I do.” Judith threw her hands over her

head and wiggled all over. Cassie tried it, and the silliness of it made her burst out in a laugh. Judith swung her arms and kicked her feet and sang along with her chin jutting out until static overwhelmed the song. She whirled over to the car to find another station. Cassie rubbed at where the pain had been in her chest. The ache was gone, and she felt fine now. Even the worry about getting to Virginia on time was fading. Where was the bottle? In Judith's hand.

“They only play this kinda music at night?” Cassie said.

“Ain't legal durin' daylight hours. Jack tol' me.”

Judith squinched up her face in the moonlight, listening for something in particular amid the shreds of music and yelps of voices. There was a *Woohoooo! Woooohoo!* Not a human sound. Barely an instrument. Judith bounced out of the car, kicked off her shoes, and stood tiptoe in the long grass. “I wanna show you how Jack showed me to dance,” she said. She took a long suck on the bottle, steadied herself against the car, and wiped sweat off her forehead.

It was the moon, Cassie thought, the moon was making everything so hot. The liquor, which had numbed her stomach and her chest, seemed cooler in the bottle than the night air, so it only made sense to take another drink, and even though it still felt like fire, her throat was seared now, so it didn't really matter what went in there. She was surprised to see how the moon shone through the dirty glass of the bottle, and how the light from the moon looked on her own skin, like a wash of thin white paint, which made her think of Grandmother, and how she must look at the world—coated in shades of white. How complicated all Grandmother's plans seemed, when just standing under the light of a nearly full moon with Judith and her reddio music and a bottle produced the same results. As long as it was night, she was white. Cassie laughed until she thought she might vomit.

Judith laughed too. She snatched the bottle back. “Was you watchin'? Didja see?” She rocked her shoulders one way and rolled her hips in the other direction. “This how Jack taught me to dance.” She grabbed Cassie's hand. “You be me,” she said. “I'll be him. Here now, spin round!”

Judith spun her. The moon circled around unexpectedly, and the ground felt wobbly. Cassie caught Judith's other hand, the bottle still in it. Together they gripped it, Judith swayed, singing along, to the sounds coming out of the radio. Even though she didn't know the song, Cassie felt like she did, and the words just came out of her mouth, words about love and regret and leaving and return. Judith took another gulp from the bottle, and Cassie did too. The song changed to something slow. The grass was flattened where the two of them were dancing. The moon shone straight down on everything.

"Now," said Judith, "you be him, and I'll be me."

Cassie felt Judith become heavier, and the heaviness pulled Judith into a long, woozy spin. Cassie reached out to keep her from falling down in the flat white grass and saw her own arm, white, white, white.

The albino's whiteness. It had descended on her. The music was slow and sad. Their sweaty hands touched. Judith looked up with weepy eyes. She clutched Cassie's hands and said, "Want to see how Jack showed me how to dance? This 'ere, this's how we did it," and she collapsed against Cassie's chest, buried her wet face into Cassie's neck. The two of them held each other, sweating whiskey through their clothes, whiskey tears soaking into each other's hair, in the middle of the night, at the top of the hill in the trampled grass, where only deer and foxes had been before.

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning, they got up later than usual. By Cassie's judgment the height of the sun made it almost noon. The weather was cool, which was good, but a light morning mist had settled into their clothes, chilling them both. Their mouths were dry and their heads hurt. The noise from the old junk car made their heads hurt worse. Judith said "Time's a-wastin'," and they got started driving. The highway opened up in front of them. Soon they saw a sign that read ENTERPRISE 10 MILES.

Judith, who was driving, said to Cassie, "What you got left in your shoe?"

Cassie took off her shoe and counted the change. "Ninety-six cents."

"We ain't gonna get to Virginia on ninety-six cents."

"We can get work in Enterprise."

"No one gonna hire us for nuthin'," Judith said. "We jus' vagrants far as ennyone concerned. Besides, earnin' money gonna take too long. I got an idea."

Cassie put her shoe back on. "What's your idea?"

"I ain't telling you," said Judith. "'Cause I ain't sure it gonna work, an' I don't want you thinkin' I'm'n idjit."

"I'll tell you right now if it's a stupid idea, and then you don't have to worry 'bout me thinking you'n idjit."

"You don't have to do nuthin'. An' if it don't work, then I guess we'll clean ourselves up an' find a place needs help with the laundry."

Up ahead signs announced ENTERPRISE'S RARITAN and LIONS CLUBS and a

host of others, including the FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE.

“You ain’t gonna try to do hoorin’, are you?” Cassie said.

“Even *I* ain’t idjit enough for that.”

By the time they got to Enterprise, the cool March morning had turned into a warmer March afternoon. Highway 80 led directly to the center of town, which was where the statue in the picture postcard was. Cars and pickup trucks were parked at an angle along both sides of the street in front of a hardware store, a grocery, and a diner. The monument to the boll weevil rose from a concrete island in the middle of the street. A gleaming white woman stood on a pedestal, dressed in something flimsy that was decorated with gleaming golden curlicues. She looked like she had fallen from the sky, from somewhere completely different than the dusty ordinariness of downtown Enterprise, Alabama. She towered over everything. Her bare arms were raised over her head, hands joined as though in a victorious gesture. In the postcard picture, water had come rushing out of a vase. Now the fountain was dry, and the top was blocked by something dark and oddly shaped.

Judith parked the car by the fountain. “What she holdin’ up there?” said Judith.

Cassie squinted into the brightness of the day. What object was that woman holding over her head in both hands, like a trophy?

“Damned if that ain’t some kinda insect,” said Judith. “Is it a tick?”

“It’s a weevil,” said Cassie. “See its legs stickin’ out on the side?”

Judith stepped into the street and walked over to the edge of the fountain’s dry pool. Cassie waited for a pickup truck to chug by, then followed Judith. She could feel people staring at them from the windows of the diner. Cassie shaded her eyes to get a look at the top of the statue. Judith squinted in the sun.

“This ain’t how it looked in the picture,” said Judith. “It looked better without the bug.”

“Maybe no one could tell what it was a monument for.”

“Why’d you make a monument to a pest?” said Judith. “It ain’t like it died inna war.”

They studied it for a while longer. Cassie said, "People looking at us."

"I know." Judith put her hands on her hips. "We got a hat?"

"I don't think so."

"We got somethin' like a hat?"

"Nothin' even like a hat," said Cassie.

Judith eyed the car. "Bring me that ol' skillet."

"Why you want the skillet?"

"We ain't got no hat for folks to toss pennies into."

Cassie looked up at the weevil. "What you plannin' on?"

"I aim to start my fame and fortune right here and now," said Judith. "This the biggest town we come to. Time to stop wishin' an' start doin'. Will you bring me that skillet?"

Cassie went and got the skillet out of the trunk. At the foot of the monument, standing in its afternoon shadow, facing the half-seen people behind dusty windows, Judith cleared her throat and did some humming to warm up her voice. Cassie put the skillet on the ground to Judith's left. Sparse traffic veered around them and the monument. Cassie didn't know where Judith thought her admirers were going to stand and listen. She could have told Judith that she had a better chance at pennies if she stood on the sidewalk in front of the diner, but Judith had a vision in her mind, and there would be no changing it.

"What you gone start with?" said Cassie.

"'Amazin' Grace,'" said Judith. She cleared her throat and began to sing to the afternoon street.

Cassie sat on the edge of the dry fountain and kept her eye on the diner. On the other side of the plate-glass window, paunchy white men in overalls drank coffee and cut into slices of pie. *What was that girl doin' out there, singin' in the afternoon sun?*

Judith was building steam. Her outsized grown-up voice lent itself to gospel, and she let the sound of it ring off the dusty fronts of the brick buildings. She sounded good today. Cassie smiled at her to let her know she thought so. Judith raised her eyes to the afternoon sky and sang her song as

though it was a prayer to God Almighty for success to hit her like a lightning bolt.

She got all the way through “Amazing Grace.” People were looking at them from inside shops on both sides of the street. No one came out except for a couple who got in their car and drove off.

“Maybe these ain’t religious folks,” said Judith, dabbing sweat from her chin. “Maybe I should sing somethin’ more country.”

“Country don’t sound good without accomp’niment,” said Cassie, though the truth was, she was starting to get nervous about the lack of interest here in Enterprise. It felt like hostility was coming together behind those shop windows. Gospel might protect them from the worst things. “It’s getting late. Mebbe we should get goin’.”

Judith started into “Surely God Is Able.” More folks got in their cars and drove off. The ones that drove past the monument glared disapprovingly until a woman shouted, “*Git outta here, you raggedy tramps!*” and someone else in a truck yelled, “*Nigger beggars!*”

“I think it is time for us to go,” said Cassie.

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere until I finish.” Judith raised her voice for anyone listening. “*The Lawd don’t like bein’ innerupted!*”

“You better hurry up.”

Another car pulled out, two-toned brown and white, like a fancy shoe. It came slowly down the street and stopped in front of the fountain. The windows were open. A pudgy white woman in a hat too nice for a diner sat on the passenger side. A man in a black suit was driving. Judith, still singing, didn’t miss a beat. Cassie held her breath, half expecting a shotgun barrel to poke out, but the woman waited for Judith to finish, tugging on a pair of white gloves, adjusting her hat, and examining Cassie all the while.

Judith spread her arms wide for her finale. She ran out of air, clasped her hands, and smiled at the woman in the car.

“Where y’all from?” said the woman.

“Heron-Neck, Mississippi, ma’am,” said Judith.

“What y’all doin’ here?”

“Singin’ to get a little money, ma’am. I’s on my way to New York City to make mah fortune.”

“Singin’?” said the woman.

“Singin’,” said Judith.

The woman reached behind her seat and opened the back door. “Now come on an’ git in,” she said. “We real impressed with you singin’, and we gone to introduce you to the members of our church.”

Cassie jumped up from the edge of the fountain. “Miz Judith! Miz Judith! Cain’t you follow long in yo own car? You know I cain’t drive, and you cain’t leave me heah by mahsef!” She rolled her eyes at the impending evening and the marble monument and the boll weevil topping it all.

“I cain’t leave her here, ma’am,” said Judith. “This gal already half died from fright a dozen times. She ain’t got too many frights left in her.”

The woman examined their car. “We’ll go slow. It’s just a mile or two.”

Cassie slid into the passenger seat, and Judith got behind the wheel. The car wheezed to life.

“What you think?” said Judith breathlessly.

“Mebbe they witches.”

Judith giggled. “They ain’t *witches*. You think they got enny connections, you know, with the singin’ bizniss?”

“I think they gone to make you sing for they prayer meetin’ and send you off with a big basket of fried chicken.”

“And mebbe some tater salad?”

Cassie poked her. “Be sure you tell ’em you need money for gas. You kin tell ’em ennything you want about New York City, but *please* don’t say anythin’ ’bout our daddy.”

They followed the car into one of the nicest neighborhoods either of them had ever seen. The houses weren’t big houses like the ones up the hill in Heron-Neck, but all were white with fresh paint, neat front lawns, and flowers. The lady’s car pulled into the crowded parking lot of a dainty church. Lights inside the church shone through stained glass windows.

“You think they Baptists?” said Judith.

“Don’t even ask,” said Cassie. “Just do what they want you to do an’ come back out.”

“Ain’t you comin’ in?”

“What-all would I do? They’ll make me sit in the back and give me dirty looks. I ain’t going in there.”

“What if somethin’ crazy happen?” said Judith.

“Like what, a man turning into a mule? These normal folk.”

“What if I need you? You gots to come in.” Judith lowered her voice. “You my *sister*.”

The woman and the man were getting out of their car. The man, Cassie saw at last, was a minister in a minister’s black suit. The woman was pudgy, dressed in blue. “All right,” Cassie said. “They gone to make me sit on the hardest chair in the room.”

Judith bounced out of the car. “Y’all got the prettiest church I ever seen!”

“Thank you,” said the minister. He introduced himself as Father Ash and the woman as his wife, Beatrice. “Won’t you come in?” he said, just to Judith. “You’ll want to see the windows before you meet our members.”

“An’ mah gal here?” said Judith.

Beatrice pointed Cassie to the rear of the church and led her around the back, while Father Ash took Judith up the front steps to see the stained-glass glory inside.

“We don’t usually have a lot of singin’ on a Wednesday night,” said Beatrice. “It’s our prayer meetin’. But that gal got quite the singin’ voice.”

“Oh, yessum. Miz Judith got the callin’, an’ I guess th’ callin’ took us here.” Cassie smiled with all her teeth. “We prayed on it together that someone who know good singin’ would hear her.”

At the back of the church, stairs led down to a basement door. Beatrice waddled down and rattled the knob. “Anna May? Anna May! Open this door!”

Anna May was just as round as Beatrice and wore her blondish hair in a varnished swirl at the top of her head. When she saw Cassie, she frowned, but Beatrice made impatient gestures with her hands, and Anna May stepped

aside.

The basement was brightly lit. Two dozen white ladies sat around long tables in fancy prayer-meeting hats. They turned as one when Cassie came in, and Cassie wished she'd insisted on waiting in the car. It wasn't like Judith would crumple from stage fright if she was here by herself. Judith could sing hymns for a pack of wild dogs. Beatrice sat Cassie in a folding chair by the back door, right up against the cinderblock wall. All the while, not one of the prayer-meeting ladies took their eyes off her. Then Father Ash escorted Judith down the stairs on the other side of the room and heads turned like a flock of geese.

Father Ash introduced Judith and helped her up onto the kind of low stage the churches back in Heron-Neck used for Christmas plays. Judith smoothed her cleaned-up dress, shuffled her worn-out shoes, and cleared her throat. Beatrice sat at an old upright piano looking self-important.

Father Ash nodded at Judith. "What'll you start with, Miss Forrest?"

"Precious Lord," said Judith, with terrible gravity, "Take My Hand."

Beatrice played the opening chords. The basement was like a shoebox, and the piano was out of tune. The smells of rosewater and hand lotion thickened the air, but none of that could stop Judith. She opened her mouth and the song spilled out.

It crammed itself against the walls and low ceiling. It practically drowned out the piano. Judith clenched her fists and squeezed shut her eyes. She crouched over the lyrics and sweated real sweat across her upper lip. Her drama carried across the long tables, revealing a girl who believed and who had been saved by every word that came out of her mouth. On the low rise of that church stage, Judith threw off her drunken nights with the Justice boys and her days of hauling laundry for nickels. The Judith Forrest who lied like she knew everything but wasn't experienced enough to recognize a tube of used lipstick had disappeared; this Judith Forrest was a decent young gal of little means, traveling 'cross the southland to bring the message of Christ Our Lord to everybody, high and low, and so on and so on. Cassie leaned against the cool cinderblock and watched Judith work the room. The church ladies

fanned themselves and clapped politely at first, fanned themselves a bit harder as Judith picked more energetic songs. They wiped their eyes over time-worn favorites and rose up and sang in their lily-white church lady voices when Judith called everyone to their feet.

When she was done and had patted her brow, and the ladies had finished their applause, Father Ash stepped forward to pass the collection basket. Cassie watched from the back of the room as the dollar bills and silver dropped into the basket. Just about everyone put in something. Cassie counted twenty-four prayer-meeting hats. If each one put in only a quarter, it would be enough to buy gas for a couple of weeks. The basket made its way to the front of the room again, and Father Ash and Beatrice presented it to Judith with huge smiles and invited her to dinner. Cassie watched Judith nod graciously and walk away, up the stairs, and into the church proper, without a backward glance.

* * *

Judith came back to the car hours later. The church bell had chimed nine o'clock. Cassie was lying on the grass. The night was warm and clear, and the stars were thick as bees.

Judith plopped down cross-legged beside Cassie on the grass. She had a worn fake-leather purse over one arm and a little basket covered with a picnic napkin over the other. "You hungry? I got fried chicken, mashed taters, an' chock'lit cake."

Cassie found a drumstick and bit in. Barely warm, and the crunch had gone out of it. "They give you that purse?"

"Yep." Judith dangled it. "Prob'ly sumpin' they woulda thowed out, but I don't care. They put the money in it. And I think the gun'll fit in there too."

"How much money?"

"Thirty-one dollars and seventy-two cent."

Cassie blinked in amazement. Why even stop in Virginia when they could make more money than Bill Forrest would ever inherit? But this wasn't the

time to bring that up. Cassie finished the drumstick, found a fork in the basket, and started on the cake. “This good cake.”

“Ain’t it? Kinda wisht we coulda started with it. The taters got too much water in ’em, and the chicken’s just all right.”

“You din’t say that to ’em?”

“Hail no. I knows how to be a guest.” She wrapped her arms around her knees. “How’d it sound to you?”

“What? The singin’? It sounded good.”

“Good like real good? Or good like real, real, *real* good.”

“Now I ain’t gone say nothing to swell your head.”

Judith picked a piece of grass and rolled it between her fingers. “It was good?”

“Pretty good.”

Judith got up and twirled around. “I kin do ennythin’!” She skipped in a circle around the car. “Ennythin’! Ennythin’!”

CHAPTER TEN

After that, the trip seemed to get easier at the same time it got harder. They tried driving all day and all night, but the car overheated, and they had to stop to let it rest. Judith sang for folks in a big Baptist church in the middle of a town called Sunderland. The Sunderland people gifted her with seventeen dollars and a basket of fried chicken. The following Wednesday she performed for the Ladies Auxiliary of the Halsey Church of the Nazarene. They gave her three dollars in dimes, two dresses, and a pair of shoes. In Elliston she got ten dollars and pork ribs. In Daysville she got a basket of apples, a loaf of bread, and a chunk of farmer's cheese. Cassie and Judith kept their calendar up-to-date by looking at the local newspapers in the towns they passed through. They saw headlines in the papers about Elvis Presley and President Eisenhower, but all they really needed were the dates, not the news.

Before long, it was March tenth, and they were barely through Georgia. Cassie sent Judith in for more maps at a gas station and saw how far away Virginia really was.

"We ain't never gonna git there at this rate," said Judith. Cassie could tell how worried Judith was by how quiet she was as they drove.

Cassie put in her left shoe the money Judith earned, and in her right, the money remaining from what Lil Ma had given her. At night when she took off her shoes, she took the right one off first, so as to think about her mother, and then the left, so as to think about what might be ahead the next day. In

the morning, she put the shoes on in the opposite order with the same thoughts for each shoe, so she was prepared for the day but with a thought for Lil Ma foremost in her mind.

At the South Carolina border, which they crossed on Tuesday, March fifteenth, Cassie asked Judith what was the point in going to Virginia. With less than a week until Eula Bonhomme-Forrest's March twenty-first deadline, they weren't going to make it on time. Cassie was carrying close to fifty dollars, not counting the change, which was so uncomfortable to walk on that she hid it in the trunk.

"We could just pass through Virginia," she said as they drove along on a county highway. Every day the weather was warmer, and it felt like spring. "You can sing and earn money and go on through without no trouble. We can get you some nice new clothes for New York City."

"Well now, you're right," said Judith, "an' I bin thinkin' 'long the same lines for a while, but you know what I come up with each time I considers it?"

"What?"

"I knows I'll spend the rest of my life wishin' I'd stopped in Virginia. I want him to see what he lef' behind. I don' care if he got enny money. I don't care if he drunk as a skunk and hoorin' around town."

"Yes, you do."

"All right, I do. But I want him to know he cain't jus' run off an' never see his fam'ly again, like we was somethin' that never mattered."

"You gone follow him like a curse."

Judith looked out the window at the flowering trees and then back at the road. "What you gonna do in New York City when we gits there?"

"Ain't I staying with you?"

"I 'magine you could do mos' ennything you wanted. It's s'posed to be different for colored folks up there. Ennyway, half the singin' money's yours."

"Now what'm I gone do in New York City if I ain't helpin' you get to be a reddio star?"

“Mebbe start a laundry bizniss? Mebbe git your momma outta Mississippi?”

These ideas had been at the edge of Cassie’s mind. Hearing them come out of Judith’s mouth made her stomach flutter the way it did when the car went down a steep hill. She opened her mouth to say *I’ll think about that*, when the car, which had been running just fine for weeks, belched blue smoke from under the hood. The greasy innards gave a clattering convulsion that shook the hood wide-open. The engine gasped, shuddered, and quit.

Judith guided the car off the road into a damp patch of weeds and poison ivy. They got out and looked at the smoking engine without touching it. The last town was an hour behind them. It was late in the afternoon. It looked like it was going to rain.

Judith took a sniff of the smoke and coughed. “Smells like a *daid* thing.”

They sat back from the road eating the last of the apples. Judith drank a warm bottle of Coke from the trunk. Coke made Judith jumpy, and Cassie considered the stuff a waste of money, but hot or cold, Judith swigged it down with gusto.

Before long they heard a car coming down the road. Judith stood up from behind the tall grass and thorny shrubs and shaded her eyes.

“That a new car,” she reported. “Two-tone paint. Red an’ white.”

“It’ll be a car fulla drunk white boys.”

“They stoppin’. I kin hear their reddio playin’.” She took a quick little breath as though the best thing in the world had just happened. “Oh, Cassie, they *colored*. They colored men in suits!”

She jumped out on the road shouting, “Hey y’all! Hey! Y’all know ennythin’ ’bout fixin’ cars?”

Cassie followed, hoping they wouldn’t be scared off by the crazy white girl leaping out of the roadside weeds.

Two cinnamon-colored men in dark suits—church or funeral suits, Cassie thought—were just getting out of their car, so new, the sidewalls of the tires were still sparkling white. They were about the same height and age, and when they looked up, Cassie thought they were at least brothers if not twins.

She saw their eyes flicker between herself and Judith and watched their faces fill with the usual questions. One took off his hat and made a wide, gallant motion. “Ladies? Do y’all need some assistance?”

“We shorely do,” said Judith. “Is you gentlemen know anythin’ ’bout cars?”

“We’re mechanics,” said the second man. “We got a garage over in Porterville.”

“Porterville?” said Cassie in amazement. Judith had already bounced off to ogle their car and its radio. “We been looking for Porterville,” she said. “You know a man by the name of Mistah Johnson Mallard?”

One of the brothers was wearing a red kerchief in his breast pocket. “He’s our daddy. How you heard about him?”

“Someone in a place called Hilltop told us to ask for him. We thought he was talking ’bout a town in Mississippi. We thought we missed it.”

Judith skipped over, full of sugary energy. “Kin you git it to start? Ev’ry time I tries to start it, I wonder if it’s gonna turn over.”

The brother with the red kerchief got into the car and tried the ignition. The engine clicked lifelessly. “Alternator?” he said.

“Alternator,” said the other.

“We’ll give you a tow into Porterville,” the first one told Cassie. “We’ll have you fixed up before suppertime.”

“We kin pay,” said Cassie, “but how much you think it’ll be?”

“Rebuilt model?” said the one with the red kerchief.

“Rebuilt model,” agreed his brother.

“New one costs twenty dollars,” said the one. “We can get you going for ten.”

“Good as new?” said Cassie.

“Good as new,” replied the other.

* * *

Charlie Mallard was the one with the red handkerchief. Junior was his twin.

Their garage was in Porterville Township and took up the front yard of their family's house. The house was set well back from the road behind newly leafed locust trees and looked the same as the dozens they'd passed—rough boards with a tin roof and a sagging front porch. The garage was a different story. It was new, painted white, built of cinderblock, with a big glass window that looked in on a neat little office. MALLARD BROTHERS AUTO REPAIR was painted over the double garage doors in professional-looking script. The two dozen cars in the gravel lot beside it were parked in rows, washed and waxed. Even in the overcast afternoon, the cars gleamed like they were new.

Charlie got out to open the garage door. Junior smiled at them in the rearview mirror. "Have a bite to eat at the house while you're waiting. Dad'll take care of you."

He led them past the garage, where Charlie had already shouldered into his stained blue mechanic's coverall and was untying their car from its tow rope.

Up close, the house wasn't as raggedy as Cassie had first thought. The boards needed paint, but they'd been scraped recently. One side of the porch did sag, but the other was covered with pine boards so new, they smelled of the sawmill. Junior opened the front door into a parlor crowded with furniture, an upright piano, and bric-a-brac. It took a minute for Cassie to see Mister Mallard the elder sitting in an armchair by the room's only window. He looked up from reading a newspaper, and Judith nearly stepped on Cassie's heels as Cassie stopped short.

His skin stretched tight over his wide cheekbones and the deep sockets of his eyes. He was so thin in the face, it made Cassie wonder if he could even stand, but it wasn't just his starved appearance that stopped Cassie in her tracks. It was his eyes, which were pink, and his skin, which was the color of chalk.

"You're like Jack!" Judith blurted.

Cassie caught Judith's shoulder to keep her from saying any more. "It's just—we know someone else who's—the same."

"'Nother albino," said Mister Mallard, in a tone too flat to tell if he was

offended. "A true albino?"

"Yessuh," said Judith, ignoring Cassie's grip. "He was as true an al-biner as I ever did see. Till now, course."

"He a Negro albino?" said Mister Mallard.

"No, suh," said Judith. "He just a white white boy."

"We rare," said Mister Mallard. "Negro albinos real, real rare. Prob'ly more albino white folks than you think. Hard to tell with some of 'em. Now, I knew two colored albino boys when I was comin' up; they both got lynched for 'tendin' to be white men. Wasn't neither one of 'em more'n sixteen years old."

Junior cleared his throat. "These girls waitin' for us to fix their car. I said you'd give them somethin' to eat."

"Sho, sho, I ain't inhospitable." Mister Mallard folded his paper and laid it by the chair, revealing the rest of his body, which was just as thin and bony as his face. He lifted himself onto his feet and beckoned them into the kitchen but stopped Judith at the door. "You a white gal, ain't you?"

"Yessuh. I shore am."

"Why you travelin' with this colored gal, here?"

"We sisters," said Judith before Cassie could say anything. "We got the same daddy."

Mister Mallard fixed his pink eyes on Cassie. "That true?"

"Yessuh," Cassie said reluctantly and waited for Judith to bring up their being progeny and so on, but to Cassie's surprise, Judith showed more sense.

"Seen that," said Mister Mallard, like this was just what he'd expected her to say. "All that mixin'. I seen plenty of that."

He poured coffee for them from a battered metal pot, scrambled them some eggs, fried a ham slice, and put a big biscuit on each of their already loaded plates. Cassie thought his arms would snap, but he ignored her when she offered to help.

"Hope you ain't mind eatin' breakfast so late in the day," he said when they were settled at the kitchen table. "That's all I cook since my wife done passed. If not for my boys, I'd be eatin' ham'n' eggs three times a day. Taste

all right?”

The two of them nodded, mouths full.

“That’s good.” Mister Mallard set his frame down at the third chair at the table and pulled the kitchen curtain aside. “You gals see the back of that garage?”

“Yessuh,” said Cassie, around her biscuit.

“What you see in the back of that garage?”

“They got themselves a window lookin’ out the back,” said Judith. It was so big and clean, Cassie could see the road on the other side.

“Window lookin’ out the front make perfect sense. You got to see who pullin’ into your lot. Who pays good money for a window in the back, where all you kin see is you own house? I’ll tell you who—a man who’s too sure that there’s gone be money comin’ in tomorrow, the next day, the next month. That’s two men too sure that the white folks gone to keep bringin’ in they cars to a coupla colored mechanics.”

“They only do work for white folks?” said Cassie.

Mister Mallard made a dismissive motion. “Sho, they got colored folks comin’ in, but half them cain’t pay and half they cars ain’t fixable.”

“But if the colored folks cain’t pay and they cars ain’t fixable, who else they gonna get for work ’sides white folks?” said Judith. “Less’n you got some other kind of folk round here.”

Mister Mallard scowled. “We got other kinda folk round here. They start out humble, that’s for sho. They family’s been here since slavery times. Then they pick theyselves up and get a little money, and then they gone. Once they gone, they ain’t never come back, not them, not they chillun, not they chillun’s chillun.”

“You mean colored folks?” said Judith. “They make some money and move someplace better? There ain’t nothin’ wrong with that.” She nudged Cassie. “That what we’re doin’.”

“Oh,” said Mister Mallard, sitting up in his chair, “there ain’t nothin’ wrong with that, if *that* was what we talkin’ ’bout, but *that* ain’t what we talking ’bout.” He leaned over the table with fierce urgency. “We talkin’

'bout the future of colored folks. And 'scuse me, lil white miss, if I starts talkin' in a way you don't understand." He turned to Cassie. "Now your white daddy ain't somethin' you planned on, but now you got to be thinkin', *If I so light now, if I git me a light-skinned man, maybe my chillun be light 'nuff to pass for white.* You ever think 'bout that, girl?"

"My grandmother thought 'bout it," said Cassie. "That all she ever thought 'bout."

"Well now, here the part she ain't thought 'bout," said Mister Mallard. "She ain't thought 'bout things like knowin' the difference tween a damn yam an' a damn sweet potato. Like standin' up in church shakin' yo hands up to the sky. She ain't thinkin' 'bout things colored folks do that white folks don't cuz we coloreds and we come from some place there ain't no whitefolks." He pointed toward the garage. "Them boys jus' come back from a funeral. They tell you that?"

"No, suh," said Cassie.

Mister Mallard leaned over his elbows on the table, his frightening emaciation filling the space. "This mornin' they buried a man a hunnert and twenty-five years old. He born into slavery by a woman straight from Africa. He growed up in slavery but kep' his Africa in him. Not just cuz he black as tar—he was frightful black—but cuz he 'membered what his mama taught him 'bout Africa." He gave Cassie a hard look. "Your mama teach you ennythin' 'bout Africa?"

"No, suh."

"You think she know ennythin' 'bout Africa?" Cassie shook her head, and he said, "How 'bout her mama? Her mama 'fore that?" Mister Mallard eyed Judith. "You know where your folks come from, lil white gal?"

"Mississippi, suh."

"I mean 'fore that."

"Been there as long as I know, suh."

"You there 'fore the injuns?"

"Far as I know, suh," said Judith, and Mister Mallard made a *phfft* through his teeth.

“See now?” he said to Cassie. “Ain’t no white folk in Mississippi ’fore the injuns, but white folks done put that fact outta they minds. It don’t fit in with how they see theyselves. Colored folks doin’ the same thin’ now. They gits whiter, and they fergits everthin’ ’bout they past. One day they ain’t gone to be no past, jus’ folks behavin’ like today the only day that ever was.”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing,” said Cassie.

“Girl,” said Mister Mallard, “you shut your mouth.” He reached for her plate. “You done?” She wasn’t, but he took it anyway and then snatched Judith’s. “Now set yourself down in t’other room whilst I wash up.”

“You mighta insulted him,” Judith said in a whisper as they stood in the parlor.

“I was sayin’ what I thought. He was sayin’ what he thought.”

“Ol’ folks ain’t innerested in what you have to say. Like your granny. You ever have enny real kinda conversation with her?”

Back in the kitchen, Mister Mallard banged pots and ran water and didn’t seem like he was going to come out. Judith glanced around the jammed little parlor and squeezed between a pair of ladderback chairs to look at the framed black-and-white photos lined up on top of the upright piano. “Here them two boys when they was little.”

Cassie made her way over to see. One photo was of Junior and Charlie with Mister and Mrs. Mallard when the boys were three or four. Mister Mallard was younger looking but as thin as ever. The black and white of the photo picked up the highlights of his face and deepened the shadows until he looked positively skull-like. Mrs. Mallard was a dark, pretty woman with high, round cheeks and fetching eyes. The boys looked just like her—*thankfully*, Cassie thought. The other photos were from baseball teams Junior and Charlie had played on.

“Lookit how cute.” Judith pointed to a row of serious-looking little colored boys in striped shirts and pants. “I cain’t see which ones is them in this’n. But see here in this high school picture?” Junior and Charlie were off to the left, distinctly identical and noticeably lighter than any of the other young men. “How kin they be dark as the dickens when they was little and

turn out so light in high school?” Judith raised an eyebrow at Cassie. “I never noticed y’all get lighter.”

“It’s just a bad picture,” said Cassie, but there was really no arguing it. The most recent photo showed Junior and Charlie grinning in front of the gleaming white garage, arms over each other’s shoulders, lighter-skinned than they were in any of the other photos. A banner stretched over the office door behind them which read, GRAND OPENING!!

“When you think that was took?” Judith said and answered her own question. “Not too long ago. See? The trees’re all leafed out like summer.”

The brightness of the white paint should have made their darkness even darker, but it didn’t. It obviously didn’t.

“It’s just a bad picture,” said Cassie again. “It’s jus’ how they look in front of that white garage.”

The front door opened, and Charlie came in. “Turns out you threw a rod,” he said. “Means we got to order some parts, an’ that means we ain’t gone be able to fix it till tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” said Judith. “We got to be in Virginia in less than a week!”

“Don’t see how you’d get there even if that trap runnin’ smooth,” said Charlie. Judith started to object, but Charlie said, “You need somewhere to spend the night, and it ain’t proper for y’all in a house fulla men. We gone take you to the minister, the Reverend Glade. His wife’ll fix you up.” Charlie sniffed the air, which was still heavy with the smells of their late, short breakfast. “Daddy feed you?”

“Yessuh,” said Cassie.

“He let you finish eatin’?” Cassie looked down at the plain brown carpet, and Judith twisted her fingers together. “I ’pologize,” Charlie said. “Daddy got some real set ideas. You think you havin’ a discussion. He think you dead wrong. I cain’t tell you how many dinner plates I had yanked out from under my nose. Mama wouldn’t put up with it.” He opened the door. “Come on. We’ll drive y’all down to the church.”

The church was at the other end of town, which, in Heron-Neck, would have put it on the wrong side of the tracks. But the railroad didn’t seem to

pass through Porterville or anywhere near it, even though Ovid Beale had shown them the speck of the town in relation to the tracks. Cassie tried to shake Ovid Beale and his wrongheaded directions out of her thoughts and study the town passing by. The houses were modest, well-kept, and most had a car in the driveway. Back home on Negro Street, Lil Ma would point out the places where people paid rent to landlords and how those places were always more run-down than the places people owned for themselves. In Porterville, Cassie saw no renters. She also saw no white people.

“At the church,” said Junior, who was driving, “there’s a wake goin’ on for Mister Legabee. That’s the fella we done buried this mornin’.”

“The man who’s a hunnert and twenny-five years old?” said Judith. “The fella borned into slave-ry?”

“That’s right,” said Charlie.

“If you don’ mind, I’ll stay here in this nice ol’ car.” Judith ran her hands over the smooth leather upholstery. “I ain’t impolite enough to make a big disruption.”

“You’ll be welcome,” said Junior. “Both of you’ll be welcome. There’ll be plenty white folks.”

“Mister Legabee was a respected man. His family been here a long time,” said Charlie.

“He gave advice,” said Junior.

“Good advice,” said Charlie. “He’d help you find the right direction for your life.”

“Like a preacher?” said Cassie. “Or minister?”

“Like an elder,” said Junior.

It would have been hard for Mister Legabee to be anything but an elder at a hundred and twenty-five, Cassie thought.

Junior had to park way down the street because the dirt lot behind the church was full. They ended up walking half a mile only to be the last of the latecomers.

Junior pulled the basement door of the church open for them. Inside, the room was filled with mourners and with the aromas of home cooking. People

sat in groups in folding chairs. Others chatted at tables piled with casseroles and hot dishes. Among all shades of darker folk, the crowd was salted with white faces.

“Let me introduce you to the Reverend Glade,” Junior said. “Then you can help yourselves.”

The Reverend Glade was a light-skinned colored man in the middle of the crowd, shaking hands heartily with a well-dressed white man. He shook Junior’s and Charlie’s hands too.

“Your father didn’t come,” said Reverend Glade.

“I hope you weren’t expecting him,” said Charlie.

“I’m glad to see him once in a month of Sundays.” The Reverend Glade smiled at Cassie and Judith.

Charlie introduced them to the Reverend Glade and told him they’d been directed to Porterville by a man in Hilltop.

“Back in Mississippi?” said Reverend Glade. “Did you meet Mister Beale?”

“Mister Ovid Beale told us you were just down the road,” said Cassie. “But we didn’t find you until South Carolina.”

“Maybe you were using an old map.” The Reverend Glade clasped his hands in front of him. “Where’re y’all headed?”

Judith took a breath to answer, but Cassie laid a hand on her arm. “Judith’s on her way to becomin’ a big singin’ star in New York City, but our car broke down.”

“We fixin’ it,” said Junior, adding that Judith and Cassie needed a place to stay for the night.

“Let me find my wife and tell her.” The Reverend Glade clapped Junior on the shoulder. “You young ladies help yourselves to the food. The Mallard boys can introduce you to the widow Legabee so you can pay your respects.” This last the Reverend Glade directed to Cassie, excluding Judith, but Judith didn’t seem to notice, or if she did, she didn’t care. Judith lost no time finding a plate and filling it with fried chicken, potato salad, collards with bacon, and a delicious-looking piece of apple pie. Cassie tried to take less than Judith but

found herself just as hungry after their interrupted breakfast. She and Judith sat together at the end of one long table and dug in, starting with the pie.

“We ain’t never gonna get to Virginia,” Judith said. “They’re gonna fix that ol’ trap, an’ it’s gonna break down again, just outside Remington.”

Cassie thought Judith was probably right but kept forking in the collard greens with bacon. “Maybe they’ll sell us a car that’s more reliable.”

Judith took another bite of the pie. “You think they got somethin’ faster?”

“Anything would be faster.”

“You think they got somethin’ that’ll get us to Virginia in less’n six days?”

“All we can do is ask.”

Judith straightened up to look for Charlie. A colored woman came around, offering squares of corn bread on a platter. Judith declined the offer, and the colored woman moved on. “I’m so sick of corn bread,” said Judith. “When I’m famous I ain’t never eatin’ corn bread agin’. I be drinkin’ champagne and eatin’ ka-vee-yar.”

An elderly colored lady scooping black-eyed peas from a floral bowl moved closer to them. “Honey, you know what caviar is?”

Judith wiped her mouth. “Somethin’ famous folks eat, so I hear, ma’am.”

“It’s fish eggs,” said the woman. “They scrape ’em out of a kind of carp.”

“I might’ve got the name wrong,” said Judith.

“Tiny little black eggs,” said the woman. “Like pinheads, floatin’ round in salty oil.”

“You had ’em before?” said Judith.

“Oh yes,” said the woman, “and champagne too.” She took a neat square of corn bread from the next platter and put it beside the peas on her plate. “Caviar is an acquired taste, honey, let me tell you.” She disappeared into the crowd.

“You think she famous somewhere?” Judith said.

“I think she playin’ with you.”

Just as they were thinking about a second helping of everything, Charlie Mallard came over. “Come on, now,” he said before Judith could start asking

him about a new car. “Let me introduce you to the widow Legabee.”

He led them to the far end of the crowded basement hall, where there was a stage with a red velvet curtain. People of all shades and ages stood on one side of the stage, chatting in low tones, dressed in solemn black, waiting to go behind it. The women wore fantastic hats. The men wore shoes so shiny they reflected the red drape of the curtain.

“That where the widow is?” said Judith to Charlie, and he nodded. “Why she back there?”

“Just the way her family does things. Her daughter’s there too, and her grandson.”

“This like Miz Tabitha’s estate sale back in Heron-Neck,” said Judith. “When she passed, the whole county showed up. She a white woman. But she run a store and she sell to ever’body, so all kinds of folks came down. Course,” she added, “they didn’t mingle so.”

The Reverend Glade waved at them from the other side of the stage and came over with a trim, light-skinned colored woman in a demure black dress. “Here they are,” he said. He took Judith by the elbow. “This is my wife, Mrs. Glade, our choir director. She’s very interested in your singing career.”

Judith, happy to go into detail, allowed herself to be guided away by Mrs. Glade. Charlie caught Cassie’s shoulder.

“You should meet the widow,” he said.

A mass of people were waiting in line to speak to the widow. “Ain’t all these people first?”

“You’re a visitor,” said Charlie. “She’ll see you ahead of them.”

“I never even met her husband,” said Cassie.

“Still,” said Charlie. “You should pay your respects.”

Cassie didn’t understand this. She hadn’t paid her respects to Tabitha Bromley, and she’d seen Miz Tabitha once a week for her entire life. She followed Charlie around to the side of the stage and behind the red curtain. A heavysset colored man sat in a folding chair, straight-backed, like a soldier. He wore a patterned brown-and-white cape and a hat made of the same fabric. It wasn’t a normal hat—it had no brim and came up straight from the sides of

his head, like something military, except for the colors. He nodded to Charlie and gestured to the darker, back part of the stage.

Cassie had expected the stage to be crowded behind the curtain, but she and Charlie were the only ones. A table was covered with candles and plates of food, as though people had left their dinners as offerings, but neither the widow nor her family were eating. They were sitting together on a big armchair. The two women were black as black could be—frightful black, Mister Mallard would have said—and so squeezed together that the younger woman was practically sitting on her mother’s lap, and the baby, a boy, black as coal, sat on top of the two of them. If not for the arms on the chair, they might’ve fallen off onto the floor.

Charlie stopped in front of the strange arrangement of women and baby boy. He ducked his head. “My sincere condolences, Missus Legabee.”

“Your daddy come?” said the widow.

“No, ma’am.”

“He still havin’ his problems?”

“Yessum,” said Charlie. “Still havin’ his problems.”

“He like the talkin’ skull,” said the daughter. “Lots to say, but nothin’ helpful comin’ outta his mouth.”

“You’ll be buryin’ him next,” said the widow, which struck Cassie as truly improper, but Charlie just opened a hand toward Cassie.

“Here the young lady the Reverend Glade told you ’bout.”

The two women eyed Cassie like predatory birds, their eyes black as ink, and the baby’s somehow even blacker.

“You a pretty girl,” said the widow. “You light-skinned too, like Ovid Beale said.”

“Mister Beale told you ’bout me?” said Cassie. “Is he here?”

“He ain’t here, but we talked to him,” said the daughter.

The man who was a mule—or whatever they’d seen weeks ago in Mississippi—came back to Cassie as a bad feeling. “How—how can you talk to him?”

“Girl, ain’t you heard of a telephone?” said the daughter. “He my daddy’s

nephew. Course we talk. He told us you was headed to Virginia with a crazy white girl claimin' to be your half sister. That true?"

Cassie nodded. The bad feeling might have been just too much pie in her stomach.

"Half sister," said the widow. "You daddy a white man?"

"Yessum."

"You almost light enough to pass," said the widow. "Tell me that ain't somethin' you long for."

"I ain't wishin' for something that ain't gone to happen."

"You a liar," said the widow.

"You meet Charlie Mallard's daddy?" asked the daughter. "You see how white that black man is? And you see how black he is underneath that pale skin? He a cursed man, 'cause if his skull woulda look different, he coulda walked on outta the South that he was born into, free as a bird. Coulda gone to some white man's school in the North, coulda got some good-payin' white man's job, but 'cause of the way he look underneath his skin, all he ever gone to be is a pink-eyed, white-lookin' Negro. You hear me?"

"Yessum," said Cassie.

"An' don't think he ain't bitter 'bout it," said the oil-black widow. "Don't think he ain't come to us asking for somethin' to change his state of affairs."

"An' don't think we ain't tried," said her daughter. "An' don't think we don't know what he likely told you 'bout us."

"He didn't say anything."

"You a liar," said the widow again. "But it don't matter, because even if we cain't do for him, I knows we kin do for you. We gone to gift you, little cinnamon-color gal. We gone to give you a gift like you ain't never got before, and we givin' it to you 'cause Ovid Beale sent you this way and 'cause Mister Charlie done brought you to us."

"You don't have to give me anything," said Cassie.

"But we do," said the daughter, "an' you gone to take it. But first you gone to make a solemn pledge." She held up her right hand, and Cassie did too. "I pledge never to forgit the past," said the daughter. "I pledge to recollect my

roots, no matter what my state of affairs.”

Cassie repeated the words and was about to put her hand down, but the widow shook her head sharply, so she kept her hand up.

“And you further pledge never to say a word ’bout what you gone to find out in a minute.”

“I pledge it,” said Cassie.

“That’s good,” said the widow. “Now touch the baby. Go on,” she said impatiently as Cassie hesitated. “Touch his head. Touch his hands.”

Cassie put her fingers to the baby’s warm forehead. His jet eyes seemed to soften, and he smiled at her. He stuck out his baby hands, and she put her fingers into his palms. His palms were the same black color as the rest of him, not pale, like every other colored person she’d known. He gurgled and squeezed her fingers with his damp baby hands. When he released her and she turned her hands over, there was some kind of sticky substance left behind.

Charlie, who’d been standing back this whole time, stepped forward. “Rub your hands together,” he said in a soft and urgent tone.

Cassie did. The sticky stuff came off in a tarry black wad. Charlie took it from her fingers and turned her right hand so the knuckles were up. He rubbed the stuff across them.

“Look,” he said.

Her skin was lighter where he’d rubbed, like he’d taken an eraser and wiped away a layer of her.

“God,” she said.

He put the stuff into her palm and closed her fingers around it.

“Now git,” said the daughter, “and ’member.” She shook her coal-black finger in Cassie’s face. “You don’t show nobody, or that black gonna come right back.”

Charlie pulled Cassie away, and the next thing she was aware of was trembling beside a punch bowl on one of the buffet tables, gripping the wad in her right hand. Charlie was next to her with a paper cup and a ladle. Cassie heard herself ask where the bathroom was, and he pointed to the left. She

wobbled off until she found the door marked WOMEN.

She locked that door behind her and stared at herself in the mirror. She looked at the black wad of stuff in her hand. What was it exactly? It looked like tar, exactly like tar, and when she sniffed it, it had a faint tarry smell. She looked into the mirror again and touched the tar to her cheek. She took away the tar. The spot it had touched was ever so slightly lighter. She had the impression that if she started to scrub at herself, within an hour she would be as white as Judith, as white as some of the people out there at the wake, waiting to get behind the curtain, to leave their food at the candle-covered altar. Waiting to leave Porterville and their past behind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cassie lay awake that night with Judith beside her, snoring peacefully, while the lump of tar, or whatever it was, stayed hot inside Cassie's fist. *You don't tell nobody, or that black gonna come right back.* At home, she would have shown it to Lil Ma, shown her what it could do. And then what would have happened? Because she had told, would Lil Ma's black come right back? Or only her own? Was this piece of tar for her and her alone? If she found some roundabout way to tell Lil Ma that Beanie Simms was right and there was no need to have a light-skinned child now, how could she help Lil Ma find this place, which seemed to be one place on the map and somewhere else in reality? Cassie sat up in the bed. Judith sighed in her sleep. Cassie put on one of the bathrobes Mrs. Glade had left at the foot of the bed. She put it on over the nightshirt she couldn't remember ever seeing before, over the smell of scented soap from a bath she didn't recall taking. Cassie went out of the bedroom, closed the door softly, and sat in the dark hallway at the top of the stairs. A clock somewhere on the first floor chimed two. She squeezed the tar in her hand until it oozed between her fingers, black in the blackness, just texture and warmth. Was it changing her now? Was it turning the back of her hand the same pale shade as the palm?

She needed light.

She went downstairs in the dark. On the first floor was a powder room with a toilet and a mirror over the sink. Cassie turned the electric light on with the switch. There was a rose in a little vase on one side of sink and a bar

of scented soap on the other. Cassie recognized the way the soap smelled. She squinted in the light and checked her hands. The tar held the impression of the inside of her fist. The skin on the back of her hand still showed the light mark where Charlie had demonstrated what this gift could do. She peered at her face and found the pale streak she'd made herself. How hard would she have to scrub, how long would it take, to change herself completely? And what about her skull? Like Mister Mallard, would her bones give her away? She examined her features: her mother's eyes, Judith's mouth, and an unremarkable nose that looked nothing in particular like one race or another. She touched her hair with the hand not holding the tar. It was dry, flat, and neglected. It needed to be healed with oils and experienced hands. What would happen to her hair?

Someone turned on a light in the hallway, and a female voice said, "Cassie?"

It was the minister's wife, Mrs. Glade. It would be impolite to not answer. Cassie cracked the powder room door. Mrs. Glade came into view and smiled. Cassie pushed the hand with the tar into the pocket of the bathrobe.

"Can't you sleep?"

"None."

"Come on. I'll make you some warm milk."

In the kitchen, Cassie sat at the small table by the window. Mrs. Glade poured milk from a glass bottle into a pan on the stove and lit the gas burner. She adjusted the gas and came and sat down across from Cassie. "Reverend Glade and I were talking about you girls after you went to bed." Mrs. Glade was a chatty woman, Cassie now recalled. She didn't look a bit sleepy, and Cassie wondered if she'd been to bed at all. "Your friend—well, your sister—seems to have things all planned out for herself, but she didn't really have anything to say about your future. Have you thought about your future?"

"I want to get to New York with Judith."

"And do what when you get there?"

It was hard to think. Hadn't she and Judith discussed this? "If Judith can't get famous, I can find laundry work."

“It takes years and years to get famous,” Mrs. Glade said, in a tone reserved for children—sleepy, uninformed children. “What’re you going to do for years and years?”

“We’ve always been together one way or the other,” said Cassie.

“Just because things have been one way for a long time, doesn’t mean they have to stay that one way,” said Mrs. Glade.

This conversation, Cassie finally realized, was about sending Judith off on her own to become a reddie star and never seeing her again. Because telling anyone about the tar—and maybe especially telling Judith—would make all that black come right back.

“For example,” Mrs. Glade said, “have you thought about learning a trade besides the laundry? Or starting a business of your own? Or going to school?”

It was the middle of the night. What kind of questions were these to get asked in the middle of the night?

“Reverend Glade and I have friends in Boston we’d like you to meet. They grew up here, but they’ve moved on. We could send you up on the train. You’d be welcome at their house and in their community.”

“You’d send me to Boston?”

“We’d be glad to pay for your ticket.” Mrs. Glade got up and went over to the stove. The milk was steaming. She took a spoon from a drawer and lifted the skin that had formed. She lifted it like it was a thin wet napkin and shook it off into the trash.

“What about Judith?”

“What about Judith?”

“Well. She’s my sister.”

“Your half sister, isn’t that right?” Mrs. Glade poured the milk into a pink coffee cup and brought it to the table. “No matter how you’re related to her, she’s really not your kin. Kin doesn’t ask kin to be their servant while they seek fame and fortune.”

“She never asked me to do that.”

“Of course not,” said Mrs. Glade. “But when she’s auditioning, what’ll

you be doing? Waiting in the wings with her hat and coat? When she has a performance, where will you be? Cleaning her apartment?” Mrs. Glade pushed the pink coffee cup of steaming milk at Cassie. “Would you do anything for her because she’s your sister? Or is it that you haven’t given any thought to what you could be doing instead?”

“You make her sound like a bad person.”

“There’s nothing bad about knowing what you want out of life,” said Mrs. Glade. “It’s the waste of an opportunity that’s bad.”

Mrs. Glade was a light-skinned woman. Her hair was straight and fine. She was lighter than what Cassie’s grandmother referred to as *redbone*, lighter even than what she’d heard white folks refer to as *high yellow*. If Mrs. Glade herself had her own piece of tar, why wasn’t she a white woman yet? Why was she still here? Why wasn’t she in Boston with her friends and their *community*? What *opportunity* was she waiting for? Or was she like Beanie Simms—only the messenger?

Cassie gripped the sticky wad in her pocket. “You mean the—the tar.”

“The what?”

“The tar. From the baby. That’s what you mean about Boston and—community and opportunity.”

Mrs. Glade smiled faintly. “You must’ve had a dream. I didn’t realize I was upsetting you with all this talk. Drink your milk now and go back to bed. You’ve had a long day.”

* * *

In the morning, the Reverend Glade let in Junior Mallard in his mechanic’s coverall. Junior was explaining that the old junk car the girls had driven across three and a half states was no longer fixable. It was dead, deceased.

Judith had come downstairs in her nightgown and terry robe just before Junior knocked, and was standing in the kitchen doorway with a cup of tea when Junior broke the news. Cassie was at the top of the stairs, where she could see but not easily be seen.

“How kin it be daid?” said Judith from the kitchen door. “It bin sittin’ inna woods for years. Some ign’rint redneck boys’t cain’t even read done made it run, an’ you cain’t—.” She stopped herself. In the uncomfortable silence, the smell of pancakes, syrup, and bacon drifted up the stairs.

“Miss, you been runnin’ it without a lick of oil,” said Junior. “The engine got so hot it melted.”

“Mistah Beale’s nephew made it run. All he hadda do was put gas innit.”

“Sorry, miss,” said Junior. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“Hail,” said Judith. Then, with a glance at the Reverend Glade: “Scuse me.” She looked up the stairs to see Cassie. Cassie watched the Reverend Glade put a comforting arm around Judith’s shoulders and walk her back into the kitchen. He would be talking about putting her on the train to Virginia or New York, whichever she preferred. *But I ain’t got that kinda money*, Judith would say. *Don’t you worry about that*, the Reverend would say to her, and Cassie could almost hear him. *We’d be glad to pay for your ticket. You can leave today if you’d like.*

After breakfast Cassie and Judith sat together in their bedroom upstairs. Mrs. Glade had left a basket of clean, neatly folded clothes for them, all from church donations.

“For the needy,” said Judith. “I ain’t feelin’ so needy no more, though. One day soon I might buy me a new dress.” She held a light-blue frock up to her chest. “You like that?”

“It’s okay.”

“S’matter with you? These folks gonna pay t’put us onna train to New York or Virginia or ennywhere else we want to go. We kin git to Virginia with time to spare. These right Christian folks for sure—an’ I never said that ’bout ennyone else, not even all them white church ladies with their tater salads and fried chickens—so why you so sad-lookin’?”

“I’m not sad.”

Judith shook out a pink dress with dainty rosettes at the cuffs of the sleeves. “Now you know that’d look so pretty on you. Pink’s your color.”

Because it gave her cinnamon skin a rosy cast. Lil Ma had always said so.

“Ain’t there somethin plain in there?” said Cassie.

“How ’bout this ugly ol’ apron dress? No, that’s for some woman with big boozums. Why you want somethin plain? Oh well, here’s a white dress with no ruffles or nuthin’.”

It was a chalk-colored dress, short-sleeved, and would fall just below her knees. It would be a marker for her change. A yardstick to measure her difference by. Cassie held it against her chest and felt a surge of hatred for it. It was a particular and familiar hate she’d last felt at Tabitha Bromley’s estate sale, when a worthless old white woman on a sagging old porch called Lil Ma a nigger because of a wringer. Cassie’s grandmother had overseen the humiliation, to make sure it happened, because there would be no new wringer without it. Nothing so simple as paying. She’d hated Grandmother for knowing that so well. It was that exact hate she felt for this dress and for the people in this house. She understood why it was important to erase everything dark, but it had never been so clear to her as now. It had never been so apparently possible. She hated that too.

Judith paused her pawing through the basket of donated clothes. She was nearly to the bottom, where panties and brassieres were hidden underneath everything else. Judith looked at them doubtfully. “I kin see wearin’ some other gal’s dress, but I ain’t sure ’bout their knickers.”

“You gonna need a bra in New York City. And clean knickers.”

“I s’pose.” She picked out a bra with cups like soup bowls.

Cassie fished out a pair of pink panties. “These’ll fit you.” She tossed them into Judith’s lap.

Judith squealed and pitched them back. “I ain’t wearin somebody else’s panties!”

“You’d wear ’em if they was mine.”

“No, I wouldn’t neither!”

“Yes, you would, I mean washed and all.” She shook the panties for emphasis. “These is washed. They even smell good.”

“I don’t care.” Judith threw herself back on the bed, rumpling the covers and scattering pillows. She covered her face with both hands. “I don’t care. I

ain't wearin' 'em!"

"Why?" said Cassie. "Because they come off some colored girl?"

Judith lay still with her hands over her eyes, breathing hard.

"Oh, that's just stupid," said Cassie. "That's stupid, and I don't even believe it."

Judith let her hands fall away from her face. "I said a bad thing this morning."

"Judith, a day don't pass when you don't swear. I know you cain't help yourself, not even in a minister's house."

"I don't mean the swearin'. I mean I said something rude to Mister Junior when he came in to say the car ain't never gonna run again. I said even redneck white boys could fix that car, and I was ready to say some more. An ever'body got real quiet. An then Reveren' Glade started talkin' to me 'bout leavin' on the nex' train."

"I heard you."

Judith blinked away tears. "I cain't stay 'cause I insulted them."

"You want to stay?"

"Ain't you stayin'?"

"Why you say that?"

"I kin see you like it here. They nice people. They like you."

Cassie put the panties down on the bed. The wad of tar was like a hot coal in the pocket of her bathrobe. "You goin' to New York City, Judith. You cain't stop now."

"I cain't see myself goin' without you."

"You got a callin', Judith. All I got is laundry. What'm I gonna do in New York sides be your maid?"

Judith pushed herself upright on the bed, flushed and serious. "You ain't never gonna be my maid. You my sister."

"I ain't really. If I was your white sister, it'd be different. Maybe we'd sing together."

"But you cain't sing. I mean you kin carry a tune and all." Judith picked at the clothes in the basket. "Is that what you want to do?"

“I ain’t no singer.”

Judith’s face started to crumple. She moved closer on the bed. “What you want to do, Cassie?”

“I don’t know.”

Judith threw her arms around Cassie’s neck, and Cassie felt hot tears on Judith’s cheek. “You got to come as far’s Virginia. Kin you come that far? Come back here after, but we got to do that together.”

Cassie put her arms around Judith’s shoulders. Judith started to sob.

“If I was your colored sister,” Judith wept, “would you come to New York with me?”

“What you gonna do,” said Cassie, “cover yourself with shoe-black and pass for a gospel singer?”

“You think that’d work?”

“No.”

Judith sniffled and tried to laugh. “Will you come to Virginia?”

Cassie nodded. “I’ll come to Virginia.”

“And then we’ll see?”

“And then we’ll see.”

Judith went to wash her face and Cassie went to wash hers, and when Cassie came back, Judith had fallen asleep curled up on the blue dress, which would have to be ironed now.

Cassie sat next to Judith. Judith didn’t budge. “Judith?”

Judith sighed in her sleep. Her skin was so fair and fragile-looking after being washed, she looked almost bruised. Cassie wasn’t sure she’d ever seen Judith this clean. Her hair was fluffy and made little curls around her ears. Even her ears were pinker, like someone had made her scrub them, front and back. Cassie imagined Judith covered with shoe-black. Seeing her that way wasn’t very hard.

Cassie looked at her own lightened knuckles and at Judith’s chapped red hands. She waited a long minute and took the tar out of her pocket. She held it so it was hidden in her fist. Was just taking it out with someone else in the room a form of “telling”? Judith was asleep. Cassie watched her knuckle, but

the light streak didn't waver. She opened her fist to expose the tar to daylight. The light streak stayed. The tar was black with an oily sheen, but when she rubbed it with her fingers, it felt almost powdery. She picked it up with her thumb and forefinger.

“Judith?” she said.

Judith's eyes flickered under thin lids.

Cassie touched Judith's left hand with the tar, drawing it across the knuckles. There was no change. She did it again. Judith smiled in her sleep, which made her look like she was ten years old. Cassie wiped the tar across Judith pale skin a third time. No change at all. She put the tar in her pocket and got off the bed. She went out of the bedroom and downstairs to tell Mrs. Glade and the Reverend that they had both found dresses that they liked and that she would be leaving with Judith for Virginia on the next train.

When they asked if she would go on to Boston when she was finished with her business in Virginia, Cassie said yes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Reverend and Mrs. Glade dropped them off in front of the train station in the town of Parmetter, about twenty miles east of Porterville. It took two hours to drive there on unpaved roads, and Mrs. Glade kept making Cassie repeat their phone number so she could call if she had any problems on the way to Boston because there was no way to memorize the route back to Porterville and no one in Parmetter would know the way.

They reached the train station late in the afternoon. Reverend Glade gave Cassie the money for the train tickets. There was enough for her to buy a one-way ticket to Boston and about two-thirds as much for Judith, to get to Virginia, where Bill Forrest was, and then be on her way to New York. The station in New York where Judith would get off was called Grand Central, and it sounded so very grand to Cassie that it was hard to not want to go. How bad could it be, really, to be a maid in a place with a Grand Central Station? Would Boston have anything like that? None of the newspapers or magazine pages lining the walls at home in Heron-Neck had mentioned anything about Boston. She only knew that Mrs. Glade had told her that it was cold there in the winter and she would have to dress warm.

The Glades drove away, and Judith and Cassie stood on the wooden platform and waved. Each of them wore a secondhand dress and shoes with white ankle socks. Each had a purse and a small suitcase of secondhand clothes, including brassieres and underwear. Judith kept sticking her thumbs underneath the band of her brassiere through the bodice of her dress.

“This is the most uncomfortable thing I ever put on.”

“The price o’ fame,” said Cassie.

“I’m hungry,” Judith said. Mrs. Glade had given each of them a paper bag with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper, apples, and brownies for dessert. “Let’s eat.”

“It’s only five in the afternoon,” Cassie said.

“I’m gonna git me a Coke from that drugstore crost the street. You want one?”

“You know I don’t like Coke.”

“Then you git the train tickets.”

“You the one gonna buy ’em.”

“Why you think the Reverend Glade done give you the money? He think I’m liable to run right off with it.” She pointed at the ticket booth, directly under the clock. “Jus’ go on over there and tell ’im where we goin’.”

It would have been so much easier for Judith to saunter up to the white man in the ticket booth. This was the real reason that Reverend Glade had given Cassie the money. It had nothing to do with trust. It had to do with the tar. She could almost taste the humiliation of being a colored girl asking for two train tickets.

Farther down the platform a group of colored women in church hats chatted with animated gestures around a heap of luggage. “You ain’t gonna be the first colored t’buy a ticket today. You sure you don’t want somethin’ from the sodee fountain?”

“I’m sure.”

Judith went across the street and disappeared into the drugstore.

Cassie wandered over to the ticket booth and examined the schedule pinned into its frame. The columns of numbers and places made no sense to her. She went to the ticket window and said, “Hello, suh.” The stationmaster, reading the newspaper, ignored her from inside his little cage. There was no one else by the ticket window, and the platform was empty except for herself and the colored ladies down a ways. The stationmaster scowled at her from under bushy white eyebrows.

“You gettin’ on a train?”

“Suh,” she said, “you got a train goes to Grand Central Station in New York City?”

“Shore we do. Cost you fifty-three dollars.”

“How long it take to git there?”

“Three days and two over-night, but see here,” he said. “If you ain’t takin’ no train, you wastin’ my time askin’ ’bout it.”

“No, suh,” said Cassie. “I ain’t mean to waste nobody’s time. You mind if I ask you ’bout ’nother train?”

“Where to? The North Pole?”

“Oh no, suh, that be way too cold. But my daddy’s in Virginia. You got a train goes to Virginia?”

“We got trains go all over Virginia. Different places got different fares. Where’s your daddy?”

“Remington, Virginia, suh.”

He consulted the papers on his desk. “That’s thirteen dollars and fifty cents.”

“What time it leave, suh?”

“That train come in one-half hour from now.”

“When it git to Remington, suh?”

“Nine oh five tomorrow mornin’.”

She took the money out of her secondhand purse and laid the bills on the counter. “Kin you give me two tickets to Remington, suh?”

He eyed her, her money. He looked like he wanted to know where she’d gotten so much. “Two tickets for the colored seats.”

She had anticipated this but not in a way that kept her from saying so quickly, “Suh, the girl I’s trav’lin’ with is white.”

“Two tickets then,” he said and held them until she slid the cash under the bars in his window. He slid the tickets out but didn’t let go as she put her fingers on them.

He said, “Where’d you get all that money, gal?”

She didn’t take her eyes off the tickets. “Suh, ain’t you heard of Miz

Judith Forrest?”

“Cain’t say I have.”

“She a singin’ star from Mississippi to South Carolina. She travel from church to church spreadin’ the gospel word. I’s surprised you ain’t heard of her yet, but you will once she git on the reddie. Her voice so beautiful, it lift your soul right up.”

“So what’re you doing with her money?”

Cassie raised her eyes just a little, just enough to see the bottom of his white beard. “I’s her maid, suh.”

She felt him let the tickets go, and she scooped them up before he could change his mind, behind those white eyebrows and beard. “Thank you, suh,” she said. “You lissen to the reddie, now. Miz Judith Forrest.”

Judith came across the street with a bottle of Coke and a big paper cup of cold water. “They wanted t’charge me a penny for the cup. I had to tell ’em the cup ain’t worth even half a penny.” She sat on the edge of the platform and offered Cassie the water.

“You git the tickets?”

Cassie showed her.

“These to Remington.”

“You kin git that New York ticket yourself.”

“There enough money left?”

Cassie gave her the fare for the New York trip and took a long cold drink from the paper cup.

Judith opened the Coke and took a swig. She took the apple out of the dinner pail and took a bite out of it. She chewed while Cassie thought about introducing herself as *Miz Judith Forrest’s maid* forever.

The train announced itself with a profound rumble that Cassie felt inside her chest before she saw it. She felt in her pocket for the tar. It would work, as long as she was willing to abandon everything. The train appeared from around a bend, enormous and black. Steam rushed out from under it in hot clouds. It rolled past them, heat billowing from its metal skin, wheels, and pistons, hotter than any part of the day. Passenger cars rattled past, each

window a snapshot of the people inside.

Judith shouted over the noise, “We cain’t sit together?”

“I don’t imagine so.”

“How’m I gonna know when to git off?”

“Nobody gonna let you ride for free. Someone’ll tell you.”

“You shore?”

“I’m sure.”

Judith flung her arms around Cassie’s neck and hung on like she was scared for the first time in her life. The train slowed and stopped, and Judith let go. She grabbed her suitcase and her dinner and ran to where a white conductor was helping white people down off the train. Judith pushed past them and clambered on. She turned once at the top of the stairs to wave and vanished inside. Cassie walked down the length of the train, looking for her through the windows but not seeing her. Toward the end of the train, she found a colored man in overalls tapping the wheels with a hammer.

“Excuse me,” she said, “where’s the colored car?”

“Down there. Number fourteen.” He pointed to where the women in Sunday hats were getting on the very last car before the caboose. “You got a ticket, gal?”

She showed him, and he stuck his hammer in the loop of his overall and walked with her down to number fourteen. He helped her up on the wobbly wooden step and into the train car with a rough, strong hand. She found a seat by a window, back from where the Sunday hat ladies had grouped themselves, and watched the man in the coveralls as the train pulled away. He stood on the platform, hands on his hips as though the whole enterprise belonged to him.

Cassie put her palm against the glass and turned to watch him and Parmetter and everything south of it roll away, faster and faster still.

* * *

In the evening, the ladies took out a basket of fried chicken and biscuits and a

carefully packed pitcher of iced tea. They didn't act like they'd noticed Cassie until she started eating her peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and then a lady in a white satin hat said to her, "Come over here and have some decent food."

They made room for her on the edge of one of the seats. These particular seats were arranged to face each other, as though the passengers were in a very small parlor. The ladies' knees practically touched each other, and the widest ladies squeezed the thinnest between them. They asked where she was going and where she was coming from and where her people were. She told them most of the truth and felt bad for not being entirely honest with them, as they were very generous with their food and their cold tea. She asked if any of them had ever been to Remington, and none of them had. They were all getting off in Maddox, South Carolina, for a wedding, and wasn't it ridiculous that this late train was the only one that stopped there and folks had to be bothered to pick them up at the station at ten in the evening. Cassie asked if any of them had ever been to Boston, and they laughed as though it was the funniest thing they'd heard all day.

"You got people in Boston?" said a lady in a blue hat, and Cassie said, "No, ma'am." And the lady said, "What're you gonna do in a place where you don't know nobody? Who gonna give you work?" and the other hat ladies *umm-hmmed* in agreement. "At least in the South ever'body related to ever'body else," she said. "People may not like it, but they cain't deny it. Up North, people from all over, don't know their own kin, wouldn't know a cousin or an uncle if they fell over 'em. You say your daddy in Remington?" Cassie nodded, and the lady in the white satin hat patted her hand. "Git him to show you round. You say you do laundry? Well ever'body got to git they draws washed, so you shouldn't have enny trouble findin' work."

One of the ladies, a thin one, said that even folks in Boston had to git they draws washed, but no one was listening to her, and the talk turned to the wedding and the cake and how the bride was too fat to ever look good in her mama's dress an' white sure wasn't the right color on her *ennyway*. Cassie sat with them until the train pulled into the Maddox station, well after ten.

They wished her good luck and got off the train under yellow street lamps. Nice cars awaited them and drove them away into the darkness.

The lights stayed on in the train car all night but were only bright enough to show you the way to the toilet. Once the ladies left for the wedding, there were only two other people, a man and a woman at opposite ends of the car, both sleeping. Cassie was tired enough to sleep, but there was too much going on in her head.

Boston. Judith. New York. The tar. Boston. Judith. New York. The tar.

The rhythm of the train on the rails started to sound like the words in Cassie's mind. To make the beat stop, she opened the bulky purse the Glades had given her and tried to organize the few items in it. There was a compact with pinkish powder in the puff but no mirror. She found a tube of used lipstick, which made her think of Judith and the albino boy, and Judith bleeding through her dress, standing in that creek in Alabama, wringing out her dress and trying not to cry. There was a postcard in the bottom of the purse. It was the one she'd written to Lil Ma before they'd reached Enterprise but forgotten to send.

Dear Lil Ma and Grandmother,

I am doing well. We have a car and people help us when it doesn't run. Soon we will be in Enterprise in Alabama where there is a monument to the Boll Weevil. I will write more soon.

Love, Cassie

She felt as though she'd written it years ago. What would she say now?

Dear Lil Ma and Grandmother,

I have the thing that will make me white.

Love, Cassie

The tar in her pocket watched her thoughts. Writing a letter might be all right, but mailing it would make the letter a lie.

Outside, South or North Carolina rushed by in the dark. Cassie repeated the Glades' phone number under her breath. She counted the money they had

put into her secondhand purse, and came up with fifty dollars. Cassie put everything back into the purse and snapped it shut. She looked out the window and noted with surprise that the trees were covered with blossoms, so thick and white they shone in the dark, lit by the passing train. To regular travelers this might not be remarkable, but only yesterday afternoon, in Porterville, the flowers had been frail and rotten, falling to the ground. Fresh white blossoms rushed past the train window, a second chance at the change of the season. Cassie leaned her cheek against the glass.

Boston. Judith. New York. The tar. Boston. Judith.

What would Judith do if Cassie abandoned her in Remington? Judith didn't need help finding Bill Forrest. She didn't need Cassie to become a big singin' star.

Boston. Judith. New York. The tar. Boston. Judith.

Judith would be all right without Cassie. Not happy. Furious when she had time to think about it. But unstoppable.

The sun was coming up, turning the blossoms, the sky, and the drab interior of the train different shades of pink. The iced tea changed from a pressure to a need. Cassie picked up her suitcase and her purse and went into the colored ladies' toilet, a seat with a hole and tracks rushing underneath it. There was a mirror but no washbasin. The mirror was opposite a shaded window. Faint daylight rippled through the shade as Cassie looked at her reflection. Mrs. Glade had brushed her dry hair out, oiled it, and braided it up behind her ears. It was soft and thick and looked better than it had since she'd left home. The tar in her dress pocket was a hot wad against her thigh. She took it out and touched her hair with it, lightly. She expected it to stick, a sticky joke on sticky hair, but where the tar touched, the texture changed. Kink became smooth. Black became brown. A strange feeling gripped her in the chest, like joy, or the kind of strangle she felt before breaking into sobs. She pulled out the pins and bands. She pulled her hair out of its careful braid. She wiped the tar all through until her hair became a white girl's hair. Not like Judith's, which was lank. The glossy kind, the kind white girls flipped over their shoulders and tied up in sprightly ponytails. It fell around her

shoulders, loose and full. The tracks rattled past below the hole of the toilet. The hair lay around her cinnamon-colored face like a wig.

She tore the tar in half and scrubbed both sides of her face with it. Her hands shook as the cinnamon came off. She wound the tar into each ear, behind her ears, over the back of her neck. In the mirror, the hair framed her white face, her lean nose, her lips so similar to Judith's. The last thing that might speak for her, her skull, the shape of her bones, the skull underneath this skin, was mute.

Remington! Remington, Virginia!

She was sweating, and there were tears coming out of her eyes, which she was afraid would wash off the white and leave streaks showing the color still inside. She couldn't look at herself. She scrubbed her hands with the tar instead, back and front, and her arms up to her shoulders. The train slowed. She struggled out of the secondhand shoes and socks and wiped away color from her toes up to her underpants. She straightened up to see little tear-trails on her face. These she dabbed away with great care. Underneath, she was still white.

The train stopped. Outside the toilet door, people were getting off, thumping luggage. She pushed the window shade aside a finger's width to see the platform. She should get off. Her ticket was only good for this stop. She would have to get off without Judith seeing her, or all the black would come right back. She searched the platform frantically through the sliver of window. Where was Judith? Cassie saw only colored faces. Remington was the city rising beyond the platform—a traffic light, a brick bank, a wooden warehouse. New-looking cars waited at the traffic light. White people in the cars. Colored people crossing the street on foot.

Richmond! Richmond Special!

Richmond? How far was Richmond? Was Judith still on the train? What if she'd fallen asleep? Cassie turned from the window and saw herself in the

mirror again, a panicked white girl. A white girl in the colored toilet. She made her face close, the way she made it close when white people looked at her. The expression looked different, but there wasn't time to figure out why.

Cassie put on her socks and shoes. She opened the toilet door an inch. The man and the woman who'd stayed in the car after the women had gotten off at Maddox were still in their seats. The man was sleeping. The woman was looking out the window. Cassie opened the door wider. No one stirred. She put her foot and one shoulder through the opening in the door. No one noticed. Her armpits were slick. She gripped the handle of her suitcase hard enough to feel her own short nails dig in her palm. She stepped out with her back to the woman looking out the window and the sleeping man. She made her legs move, her white legs, through the door, into the first of the cars for white passengers.

White people were getting on at the other end of the car, bustling around with children and luggage, hats, and lunch buckets. Colored porters helped them with their bags. Cassie sat in the first seat she came to, the seat against the back wall of the car. She slid over to the window farthest from the train platform. She would go to Richmond, wherever that was. She looked across the car at the crowded platform. Was Judith there? Cassie huddled down, with her suitcase and purse. There was room for three in her row, and she dreaded someone sitting next to her, but the front of the car filled up and everyone seemed to settle in, leaving the back half of the car mostly empty. The porters left. The conductor cried, "*All aboard!*" The train lurched forward. Cassie looked over at the platform once more and this time saw Judith standing with her purse clutched to her chest, watching blankly as the train pulled away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cassie had never been around white people for such a long time without having to do something for them.

The women's toilet for the car was at the end of her unoccupied row. She could hear everything anyone said if they were standing there. It was strange to listen with no pressure to answer any demands. She looked the other way, out the window. The meadows, fields, and forests of Virginia sped past.

Mama! Look what I found!

Oh, where'd you pick up that nasty trash?

I found it on the railroad tracks. Look, it's a medal! I'm a soldier!

Get that filthy thing off that nice white shirt. It's just a dirty bit of tin. Here, give it to me. Give it to me 'fore I tan your hide! Now git in there and pull down your pants.

For a while no one came to use the toilet. Apart from the rhythmic chug of the train, Cassie heard disconnected threads from the conversations around her. Outside, a river ran invitingly, shaded by willows, maples, oaks. There were ducks on the water and neat little houses with colored folk on the porches and chickens pecking in the yards. The trees thickened, obscuring the river and any houses along its banks. Two women, older women, came to the toilet door.

I would never, ever say this to her face, but I have to wonder if all her health problems aren't God's way of sayin', You lived a wicked life, woman, and here's your reward. I mean, I would never say that, but I think you know what I mean.

That time she had with Thomas.

While she was married to Richard!

But Richard was cheatin' on her.

I'm sorry, but revenge-cheatin', or whatever you want to call it, ain't in the Bible, an' if it ain't in the Bible, God's got every right to give you bleedin' troubles in your womb and pains in your titties. Ain't it seem righteous to you?

Cassie tried to imagine Mister Mallard, the albino man in Porterville, talking like this and couldn't. His bitterness was different. And the widow behind the curtain at the church in Porterville, her daughter in her lap, and the sticky black baby balanced on top of both of them? Would any of them say a thing like "God's got every right to give you bleedin' troubles in your womb and pains in your titties"? It was easy to imagine Mrs. Duckett, in the laundry, having a conversation with Lil Ma about God's revenge and "bleedin' troubles." Still, there was something in the way these voices spoke that made them different, as though they had a handle on something in particular that made their opinions, no matter how mean-spirited or common, more correct than if the same words came out of the mouth of a colored person.

The door at the far end of the car opened. The conductor came through saying, "Tickets, tickets, please." Cassie had seen him before, when he punched her ticket on the way out of Parmetter. He was an older white man with a short bristled beard and white hair under his conductor's cap. He arrived at her row.

"Ticket, miss."

Her old ticket was in her purse. The ticket didn't say COLORED on it. It didn't have to. She was afraid even to touch it, though, afraid whatever residue it carried would make him recognize her. She gripped her purse. Her fingers wanted to open the window next to her and leap free of the train, roll down the grassy embankment, and run away under the peach blossoms.

"Ain't you gotta ticket, miss?"

She shook her head.

"Where you gettin off, Richmond?"

She nodded at the purse in her hands.

“Four dollars and fifty cents,” said the conductor. “You got that much in your purse?”

She looked hard at her fingers to see if there was any color left on them, but the tar had taken everything. Her hands were pale and lined with pale blue veins, which were so fascinating she just wanted to stare at them. She made herself open the purse and gather five bills in a sweaty crumple.

The conductor took the money and gave her change. He punched her new ticket. He went on through the door to the colored car. That was all.

Cassie shivered in her own chill. She repeated the Glades’s phone number in her head. She understood now why they would have sent her to Boston. For the *Community*. For the *Opportunity*. The *Community* would never have let her travel alone like this, and the *Opportunity*, she was sure, would have shown her exactly how to smile at the conductor and hand over her money, cool as a cucumber, lily-white.

* * *

Even the little towns around Richmond seemed bigger than Remington. They were so crowded together, she couldn’t tell where the city itself began. There were traffic lights and junk yards and a big road with four lanes paralleling the tracks. The train rattled across switches and crossings. Cars drove as fast as or faster than the train; sometimes it looked like the car was still, and the trees behind it were moving. On one side of the tracks the houses were painted white, with flower gardens. On the other side were the Negro streets. Shoeshines, fruit stands, a laundry. A mule hitched to a cart. Children, barefoot in the dust, waving at the train. The train rumbled by in the midmorning, casting a shadow over all of them.

Last stop, last stop Richmond! Last stop, Richmond Special!

The train slowed to a crawl, and the passengers got up to collect their things. The train stopped. Some passengers hustled right off. Others, with

children mostly, took longer. Cassie shuffled out behind the first group. At the door, a colored porter steadied a wooden stair while a second colored porter helped people off the train.

Cassie stepped forward, and the second porter caught her elbow to help her down. She gave him a nervous smile. He gave her the smile he saved for white folks.

“Help you with your bag, miss?”

“No, thank you,” she said and knew immediately that *no thank you* meant something else coming out of this mouth; a curse, concealed in politeness. The wooden stair wobbled under her. The porter’s hand on her arm was all that kept her from tumbling onto the brick platform.

“Steady there, miss,” he said.

She didn’t say anything at all, and that felt terrible too.

* * *

The beautiful shop windows of Richmond—jewelry and furniture, bakeries and dresses—were framed by blossoming trees and telephone poles complete with wires. It was lunchtime, and men either rushed past Cassie with a briefcase in one hand or sat, eating and drinking in restaurants. No one looked at her for more than a moment, which would have made her think that the tar had actually erased her if she hadn’t seen her own white face in every display window she passed.

Her feet hurt in the secondhand shoes, and her mind was numb. What should she do now? In Remington, Judith was probably looking for work and a room. Perhaps, in Remington, Judith had found her father, confronted him with her state of progeny, and grabbed whatever money he still had right out of his pockets. Maybe she was already on her way to New York, leaving her past behind as well.

There were a few signs for jobs posted in the shop windows. SALES LADY WANTED. COUNTER HELP NEEDED. Nothing about laundry. Laundry jobs would be on the other side of the tracks, or in the backs of the stores, and for colored

women. Cassie tried to imagine Judith, brash as usual, walking into a ladies' fine dress shop and offering her services as counter help. The ladies in the shop would laugh at her and yell at her to leave, because there was nothing more lowly than Judith, except for a colored girl. Even with white skin, Cassie understood that she had risen only a notch, and a shallow notch at that.

She repeated the Glades's phone number to herself. There were three choices. Go back to Porterville—if she could still find it. Go back to Remington and tell Judith about the tar. Or go on to Boston, where she knew no one and would be depending entirely on strangers. If she went back to Remington, she might not have to say a word. The minute Judith laid eyes on her, the tar's effects would evaporate. Cassie would be the same as she was before, with only a sidestep in time.

She kept walking until late in the afternoon, when she found herself at the edge of a park. She took off her shoes and walked in the grass until she could see down a long hill to a river. Train tracks paralleled the river, just like back home, and she could see the station, perhaps two miles behind her, past a long, lazy oxbow. From the other direction, she heard music playing, and when she craned her neck, she could see a white tent rising behind blossoming trees. She smelled popcorn and roasting peanuts. She put the white ankle socks and flats back on her bare, dirty white feet. She tucked her suitcase under a low-hanging pine and covered it with needles, took a nickel out of her purse for ice cream, and walked down the grassy hill to see the circus.

* * *

Outside the big top, a man cranked an organ and a monkey danced, holding out his little red cap for pennies. The midway stretched to her right, crowded and noisy, smelling of fried meat, burned popcorn, sweat, and cigarettes. She heard a lion roar, looked for elephants but didn't see them. She wandered down the midway, surrounded by white people. Tall men in workmen's clothes smoked cigarettes, threw down the butts, and ground them into the

dirt with their heels. Babies cried until they were red in the face. Little girls shrieked as little boys stamped on their new shoes. A white man said, “Scuse me, miss,” when he bumped into her. She didn’t see a single colored person, not even hauling boxes behind the food stands. She passed the corn dogs and cotton candy. It was getting darker and cooler, and the lights inside the little sheds made the food look unnatural. It was too chilly for ice cream by the time she found where they were selling it, so there was no line. The white girl behind the counter looked up from a movie magazine, her lipstick-red lips pushed out in surprise.

“Choc’lit er ’nilla?” she said.

The prices were written out in pink chalk on a painted board. Ten cents a scoop.

“We ’bout to close,” said the girl. “I give you a scoop o’ each fer a nickel.”

Cassie put her nickel, hot from being clenched in her hand, on the counter. The white girl picked a pointed cone from a neat stack and scooped the ice cream casually, expertly. She squashed the glistening sphere of vanilla into the cone and the chocolate on top of it. She wrapped the cone in a napkin and gave it to Cassie.

“Already seen the show?” she said.

Cassie shook her head.

“Starts in ’bout five minutes,” said the girl. “Gotta ticket?”

“No.”

“You gonna miss it for sure if you doan go now,” said the girl. “You gotta dollar f’the ticket?”

“Yes,” said Cassie.

“Well, look,” said the girl. “I kin give you a ticket half-price. Git you in f’shore, an’ you ain’t gotta stan’ in line.” She reached for a napkin and wrote on it in the same pink chalk as the ice cream prices.

Let this gal in sined Gloria

She held out the signed napkin to Cassie. “Fifty cent. Come on, now. You know we gotta elephant an’ a lion an’ little dogs does tricks.”

Ice cream drips ran down to catch in the napkin around the cone. Cassie set her purse on the counter, dug in it for the right change, and gave that to Gloria. Gloria gave Cassie the napkin with a friendly smile.

“Enjoy the show,” said Gloria.

Cassie turned back down the midway, which had emptied out. She licked the ice cream, which was good. When she gave Gloria’s signed napkin to the man at the big top, he laughed hard and she knew she’d let herself be robbed. She gave him a dollar. He gave her a real ticket. She threw the remaining ice cream in the trash and went in to see the circus.

The circus had already started when she walked in, and all the bleacher seats in front were taken. Little dogs dressed as clowns raced in circles, jumping through hoops while trumpets played. Cassie climbed up to the top of the bleachers. A draft came in from outside, and the canvas smelled of mildew. Below and to her left was the flap in the tent where the animals and performers waited their turn. She didn’t have a very good view of the ring, but she could see straight down to the women in glittering costumes sitting on the backs of dappled horses. A colored groom adjusted harnesses and handed up feathered headdresses. A white man in a dusty black jacket and a satin top hat sat on a bench smoking. A long whip was propped up beside him.

Laydeeez and Gentlemen!

Children of alllll ages!

Drums rolled. Trumpets blared. The horses snorted, and their glittering passengers stood up on their backs, touching the lower bars of the bleachers for balance. The man in the top hat stamped out his cigarette, grabbed the long whip, and jogged out to the ring, waving to the crowd. The women on the horses followed, and the groom shoveled up horse manure. When most of it was cleared away, he pulled the tent flap wider for the elephant.

The elephant. It had been waiting just outside, visible, Cassie now

realized, as a shadow against the canvas. It was enormous. She could have touched its back from where she was sitting. A woman rode the elephant, sitting astride just behind its ears. She wore a low-cut bathing suit made of bright red spangles and a headdress with scarlet feathers as long as Cassie was tall. The elephant smelled of hay and horse manure. The woman took a compact mirror out of her cleavage, checked herself, and dropped it back in. She saw Cassie staring.

“Well, honey,” said the woman, “how do I look?”

“Fine,” said Cassie breathlessly.

“You wanna pat the elephant?”

The way she said it, it sounded like another trick, but Cassie reached through the railing and brushed her fingers along the gray hide. It felt like the bark of a tree.

“Hey!” shouted the woman and Cassie jerked back, but the woman was looking down at the groom. “Get that horse shit off his feet! What the hell is wrong with you?” She straightened and pawed at her headdress. “Damn niggers,” she said to Cassie.

Trumpets rang out. The elephant stepped forward, and the woman on top of him swept past in a flash of red.

Cassie glanced down at the groom. His face was hard to see. In the ring, the elephant strode around and stopped in the middle. The woman posed on his back, on his head. Trumpets tooted merrily. The elephant knelt in front of the man with the whip, and she stepped down. The man raised his whip. The elephant stood and raised one foot. With great drama, the woman lay down and put her head underneath. Drums rolled menacingly. The elephant lowered its foot until it was touching the woman’s head, and the three of them held that pose while the audience gasped. Cassie looked down at the groom, watching, his arms crossed. She knew what he was thinking as clearly as he felt her gaze. He looked up, impenetrable. She looked away before he saw right through her.

She left before the lion and the clowns and the high trapeze act. They were lined up in that order outside the tent, and Cassie saw Gloria too. As a white

girl, Cassie had the right to beat Gloria to a pulp to get her fifty cents back, but without the ice cream counter between them, Gloria looked spindly and underfed, and Cassie found herself feeling sorry for her the way she sometimes felt sorry for Judith. She kept going, away from the lights of the circus, back to the dense trees in the riverside park, up the hill until she found her suitcase. She took out Lil Ma's shoes and put them on and sat in the cool evening until it was completely dark. She put on one of the sweaters Mrs. Glade had given her and wrapped her legs in another and went to sleep with the suitcase as a pillow. When she dreamed, she saw Lil Ma sitting across a table from Grandmother. Lil Ma was as dark as ever, but Grandmother, dressed in red sequins and a fancy feathered hat, had turned as white as white could be.

In the morning Cassie straightened up as well as she could. The compact the Glades had put in her purse had no mirror; she could only guess at the state of her hair and her face. Her hands looked grimy, especially around the nails, and the fascinating blueness of the veins had turned to an unwashed bluish gray. Her clothes smelled of the damp ground. She needed to use a bathroom. She felt in the pocket of her dress for the tar. It was stuck there, not in any danger of falling out.

She changed back into the ankle socks and the flats that hurt her feet, put Lil Ma's shoes in her suitcase, and made her way out of the park.

She was terribly hungry. She turned down the first big street she came to. Shops were starting to open. She had fixed her hair as well as she could, but she wasn't used to this hair. It hung in tangled clumps and refused to obey her combing fingers. She found a bit of string in the bottom of the purse and tied it back. She felt sure her pale face looked puffy and dirty. For the first time since she and Judith had left Heron-Neck, Cassie felt a weepy desperation. She wiped her eyes, but that only made it worse. She stood where she was, eyes squeezed shut, clenching the suitcase in one hand, her purse in the other. People passed by. She felt them looking at her. A hand touched her arm, and she opened her eyes to see a well-dressed colored woman.

“You cain’t be standin’ round here with your suitcase and your cryin’. You scarin’ away my bizniss.”

Through the plate glass were dresses on hangers, scarves, handbags arranged prettily on shelves. There was a long counter lined with mirrors and fancy hats.

“This my shop,” said the woman. “This our street and this our neighborhood. Y’hear? Now, you need some money?”

Cassie wiped her eyes. “Nome.”

“You know where your side o’ town is?”

“Nome.”

The colored woman cocked her head. Other colored people had stopped to see what was going on. All were well dressed—the men in top hats with canes, the women in stylish dresses and beautiful shoes.

The woman pointed at the next intersection, where there was a traffic light. “Turn lef’ at that light. That’s Third. Walk all the way down the hill, an’ you’ll find a diner an’ a flophouse. I ’spect they’ll take care of you.”

Big cars waited at the light, all driven by coloreds. At least one was driven by a colored chauffeur with colored passengers.

What *Community* was this? What *Opportunity* did these people have? Did the Reverend and Mrs. Glade know about them? Did Mister Mallard know? She looked down at the mesmerizing blue veins in her own pale hands.

“Is you witless?” said the woman. “Dincha hear me?”

Cassie walked toward the traffic light. She turned the corner of Third and made her way down the hill past neat brick houses with roses in bloom, azaleas, apple blossoms, and tulips. Her own side of town was just ahead, past a used car lot and a vacant-looking warehouse. She could see the river. The railway station was visible past a jumble of industrial rooftops. Between her and the tracks were thrift stores and boardinghouses. She found a diner, called *Ida’s*, where a white waitress served her without a second glance at the state of her hair and clothes, probably because the rest of the white people there looked just as shabby. She sat at a table by the window and ordered coffee, pancakes, hash browns, and sausage. The pancakes and hash browns

were good, but the sausage wasn't cooked all the way through. She asked the waitress if she could borrow a pencil. The waitress said, "What fer?" and Cassie told her she needed to write a letter to her mother. The waitress looked around at the rest of the diner and said that since it wasn't crowded, all right, but if anyone came in and wanted Cassie's table, she would have to leave. She gave Cassie the pencil and asked what she was planning to write on. Cassie smoothed her unused napkin. The waitress said, "Wait a minnit," walked away, and came back with a clean sheet of paper. It had the diner's name and address at the top. "I should write my momma too," said the waitress.

Cassie wrote:

Dear Lil Ma,

The lead-pencil words lay on the crisp paper. The rest of the letter might as well be on the paper already. *I have found the thing that has made me white.* She could almost see the words. She erased *Lil Ma* and wrote *Dear Grandmother* instead.

Cassie folded the paper with trembling white fingers and put it in her purse without writing any more. She put the pencil in too, without thinking that it belonged to the waitress. She got up to pay at the register, and the waitress asked if she'd gotten her letter all written. Cassie nodded, and the waitress told her there was a post office down a couple of blocks by the train station. She gave Cassie her change, and Cassie remembered the pencil. She dug fruitlessly for it in the gritty bottom of her purse while the waitress watched her in such a way that Cassie was certain she had turned colored again before the woman's eyes. But the waitress took another pencil out of her apron and scribbled an address on the back of a used order slip. She pressed it into Cassie's pale palm.

"If you need somewheres to stay, you come over to my place. It's a hell of a lot safer'n some o' these damn flophouses, y'hear? An' I don't mean I'd

charge you rent'r nothin'. You look like you could use a little help.”

“Yessum,” said Cassie. “Thank you, ma’am.” Cassie walked out of the diner and turned left, down the hill. Judith, she thought, would have remarked upon the woman’s kindness, but Cassie could only imagine how long it might be before the words *damn nigger* came out of that mouth. When she came to the train station, she wadded up the slip with the waitress’s address and threw it in the trash. Then she sat on a bench in the shade, took the paper out of her purse, found the pencil, and finished writing to her grandmother.

I have made it to Richmond, Virginia. I have met some very nice people on the way. One of them gave me this. I think it is what you have been looking for. I have used it myself, but I think it will still work for you. Scrub your hands and your face with it, and you will see. You can't let anyone else know about it, not even Lil Ma, or the black will come right back. You will have to leave Heron-Neck forever if you decide to stay the way it changes you.

Cassie folded the paper in half, then in quarters. She took the tar out of her pocket and squeezed it and pressed it until it was absolutely flat, no bigger than a playing card. She folded it inside the letter to Grandmother and checked her hands. Still white. Would the tar work on Grandmother? Cassie had no doubt that it would. Would Grandmother leave Lil Ma, vanish from Heron-Neck, and make a new life for herself somewhere as a white woman? Where would she go? What if she came to Richmond—to the address on the diner’s stationery—expecting to find Cassie living her days and nights as a white girl? Cassie picked up her suitcase and purse and went into the post office. She got an envelope and stamp from the postal clerk, addressed the envelope to Grandmother at the Laundry on Negro Street, and sealed everything inside. Lil Ma would never see it or the tar.

There was one thing left to do before she got back on the train.

At the station, she found the phone inside a wooden booth. She had never used a phone before, but Tabitha Bromley had had one in her store, and Cassie had seen how other people did it. The door folded closed, and there was a seat inside. The booth was snug and almost soundproof, and far too small to fit the suitcase. She left it where she could see it and sat for a while

in her terrible secondhand shoes. The white ankle socks were now dirty and bunched. Her heels had blisters. She took the receiver off the hook and waited for the operator to speak. She would give her the number and tell the Glades she was sorry, but she was going to stay a colored girl. She was going to go back to Judith, but only until the business with Bill Forrest was settled. Then she would come back to Richmond and find out how the colored woman had gotten her own store and how it was that a colored man chauffeured other colored men. She would ask the Glades if they knew anything about the coloreds in Richmond.

“Operator,” said the operator abruptly, in her ear. “What city, please?”

Cassie told her.

“What number, please?”

Cassie told her.

For a moment there was silence. Then static, then a buzz.

“I’m connecting you now,” said the operator, sounding far away.

The buzz became intermittent. It went on for what seemed like a long time.

“I can’t hear anyone,” said Cassie. “Are they there?”

“There’s no answer, ma’am,” said the operator. “You’ll have to try again later.”

She hung up the receiver and leaned against the booth’s wooden wall. If the tar had still been in her pocket, would someone have answered the phone? She repeated the number in her head, but this time wasn’t sure she had it right. Or perhaps she’d had it wrong the first time. She picked up the phone again and waited.

A different woman’s voice spoke in her ear. “Operator. What city, please?”

Cassie told her.

“What number, please?”

Cassie told her.

“I’m connecting you now.”

Another intermittent buzz, which Cassie guessed was the sound of the

phone ringing. It rang for a long time.

“There’s no answer, ma’am,” said the operator.

“Thank you,” said Cassie.

She never tried to reach the Glades again.

* * *

Cassie bought her ticket to Remington at the Richmond station from a white man in the ticket booth. This one was younger than the man in Remington. He had a thick black mustache, but it didn’t hide the look he gave her as she handed him the money for the ticket. It was the same look people gave to Judith—white people as well as colored people—which said, with languid movements of the eyebrows and corners of the mouth, that she was nothing, had never been more than nothing, and would never be more than nothing nohow. Cassie walked down the platform with her ticket, thinking that Judith could probably learn a lot from the Glades. With better clothes and a curl in her hair, Judith might be able to hoist herself up in the world. The Glades’s *Opportunity* probably included makeup, heels, and a really good hat. Cassie tried to picture herself dressed just so, but in her mind’s eye, it looked like a disguise, the same as this white skin.

She got on the train, avoiding the colored porters’ helpful hands, and sat in the white car just in front of the colored car, in case something unexpected happened on her way south.

* * *

Cassie arrived in Remington at about four in the afternoon, almost exactly two days since she’d left Judith. To her surprise, Judith was still waiting on the platform, slumped beside her luggage in about the same spot Cassie had left her. She looked ruffled, like she’d been there the whole time. Cassie hunched down in the seat. She shouldn’t have left without saying anything, but what else could she have done? To ask what Judith would have done in her shoes was pointless, but what really surprised Cassie was that Judith had

faltered. The girl with the bloody dress, the girl with the huge voice, the girl with the *plan* was still sitting out there, chin in her hands, bare dirty knees, and socks without shoes, like somebody's lost child.

The light dimmed inside the car, and Cassie caught a glimpse of her own pale reflection. What would happen now? Her cinnamon color remained on her body within the general outlines of a bathing suit. Her arms and legs and head stuck out of it. What if that was the way she stayed when Judith saw her? What if that was what the Glades and their community considered fair? Cassie dryly swallowed her doubts. The train shuddered to a stop. The conductor shouted "*Remington!*" She picked up her things and headed for the door.

Judith saw her the minute she stepped onto the platform and rushed over, leaving purse and suitcase in a sad little pile.

"What happened?" Judith demanded. "What happened? You fall 'sleep? You fergit to git off? I bin waitin' here forever."

Cassie looked down at her arms, as brown as ever, maybe turning the moment Judith laid eyes on her. The white people around her, who had been on the same car with her, who hadn't noticed her when she was white, took no notice now. Maybe the saddling gift of the tar was to encourage people to see what they expected to see, but she doubted it.

"Sorry," she said to Judith. "I fell asleep. I went all the way to Richmond, spent a night there, an' I had to pay to come back."

"I din't want you t'think I'd run off an' left you," said Judith, "so I stayed here till you came back."

"I'm real glad you did," said Cassie.

Judith squinted at her. "You miss me?"

"Maybe a little."

"For a while there, I was afraid you ain't never comin' back."

"It was only two days."

"Felt like longer."

"'Cause you was sittin' by the tracks the entire time."

"Where'd you sleep in Richmond?"

“Under a tree. Near a circus.”

Judith’s eyes lit up. “You go in?”

“I touched the elephant.”

Judith looked impressed.

“The lady riding him called me names.”

“For touchin’ her elephant? That’s jes’ shameful.”

“I thought so too.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Remington was smaller than Richmond and bigger than Enterprise. It lacked a dusty hardware store and a diner specializing in pie. No incongruous marble monuments stuck up out of its main street. But there were cars, bars, banks, and restaurants, tall brick buildings, and telephone poles. Drivers waited impatiently in the morning heat as people on foot made their way between traffic lights with speed and determination. The women—white and colored—wore heels and hats. The men wore ties and jackets. They all seemed to have business. Nobody took a second look at the girls from Heron-Neck.

“Did you eat?” said Judith.

“I had breakfast,” said Cassie.

“Nice ol’ granny lady gave me a sandwich this morning,” said Judith. “Guess she thought I looked poor.”

“You do look poor,” said Cassie. Compared to the hats and heels and suit jackets, they looked like beggars.

“You don’t look no richer.” Judith smoothed her hair, uselessly. She straightened herself like a soldier, which made her look skinny as a stick. After her experience as a white girl, Cassie saw Judith’s self-importance as painfully revealing. Cassie knew just what was going through her mind. *Progeny. Inheritance. New York City. Big reddio star.* Cassie smiled, because it was good to be in familiar company.

“What’s so funny?” said Judith.

“Nothin’. Let’s find us a newspaper and see what the date is. Then let’s

find your daddy.”

* * *

Newspapers were easy to find. A colored boy was selling them on the corner but refused to tell them even the date without a nickel for the paper first. Judith, exasperated and tired, finally gave him the nickel but didn't take the paper. The boy told them that it was Saturday, March nineteenth.

They were two days early for whatever was going to happen with Bill Forrest, Eula Bonhomme-Forrest, and the riches left over from the estate.

Up the hill from the train station, they found the Veranda Hotel: a white four-story building with white columns across the front, like an old plantation house. They stood across the street from it, surveying the front and the people going in and out.

“It look kinda like Miz Tabitha's ol' place,” said Judith. “'Ceptin' not so run down. You think they coulda made a hotel outta that ol' house?”

“Who'd come to Heron-Neck to stay inna hotel?”

Judith crossed her arms. “Still. Shame to let a nice ol' house jus' fall to pieces.”

“It was fulla ghosts,” said Cassie.

Judith studied the hotel across the street. “You think this place got ghosts?”

“It's got your daddy in it.”

“*Our* daddy.”

“Ain't that enough?” Now that they were so close, Cassie felt uncompelled to claim any part of Bill Forrest. “How much money you got, Judith?”

“Half the singin' money plus 'nuff to git to New York City.”

“I got enough to get to Boston and a little more.” Close to fifty dollars. A small fortune in her purse.

“Boston?” said Judith.

“I don't know yet.” It was important to keep the money, not spend it on

something frivolous that Judith might come up with. “Can you do maid work?”

“What,” said Judith, “like makin’ beds an’ such?”

“Sweepin’ and dustin’ and cleanin’ the toilet. Kin you do that?”

“I kin if you kin.”

“Your daddy may not be here,” said Cassie, because it had to be said.

Judith uncrossed her arms and picked up her suitcase. “He’s here. I kin feel it.”

“All right,” said Cassie. “You go in front an’ see if they need a maid. I’ll go in back an’ see if they need help in the laundry.”

A narrow alley ran down the shady side of the hotel. Cassie found a service door at the very back of the building. The back of the hotel faced a parking lot, which opened onto the next street, where a movie theater took up a good portion of the block. Two stylized metal falcons faced each other from opposite sides of the marquis with polished monumentality. The marquis said:

OLDIES FESTIVAL!

IMITATION OF LIFE

CLAUDETTE COLBERT AND WARREN WILLIAM

Cassie’d never been to the movies, but the title struck her as obvious. Weren’t they all an imitation of life? She wondered how much it cost to get in and if colored people were allowed.

She knocked at the service door. After a minute a middle-aged colored woman opened it, wiping her hands on a towel. Behind her was a huge, well-lit room with large tables stacked with folded towels and sheets. The colored woman looked Cassie over.

“Somethin’ you need?”

“I’m lookin’ for laundry work, ma’am,” Cassie said. “I been working in the laundry since I could fold a hanky.”

“You’re not from around here.”

“Nome. I’m from Mississippi.”

The woman cocked her head at the cars in the parking lot and peered around the back of the building as though there might be accomplices out there looking for work. Birds sang in the warmth of the afternoon. Car doors slammed down by the movie house.

“Mississippi,” said the woman.

“Yessum.”

“That’s where my daddy’s from,” said the woman. “You from Biloxi?”

“Heron-Neck. It’s just a little town.”

The woman looked around a bit longer. Finally, she said, “Let’s see how you iron a shirt.”

The woman’s name was Eden Pomeroy, and she was in charge of the laundry. She was a big woman with a big bosom. When she put her hands on her hips, she looked even bigger, formidable. She put a basket of shirts on the table beside an ironing board. Cassie took the first one and spread it out. The shirt was linen, finely woven, and no doubt expensive. Cassie flicked water at the iron. Steam curled up.

Eden Pomeroy stood right next to her. “You do the yoke first.”

“Yessum.” She watched her own hands smoothing the white cloth, her cinnamon color compared to Eden Pomeroy’s skillet black. She felt how hot and close this room would be, long before the end of the day. She leaned into the iron’s breathless vapor. The fabric submitted, flat and crisp.

“Lemme see you do them buttons,” said Eden Pomeroy.

Cassie touched the iron to the cloth between delicate bone buttons.

“Cuffs last.”

“Yessum.”

She did the sleeves and cuffs and put the shirt on a hanger. Eden Pomeroy ran her fingers over the creases approvingly.

“She *fast*,” said someone from the other end of the room, and Cassie looked up to see two molasses-colored women, each with a cart of crumpled white towels.

“Hey,” said one of them. “Your name Cassie? There a white girl upstairs lookin’ for maid work sez she knows you.”

Eden eyed Cassie, the same way she'd eyed the parking lot. "That true?"

Cassie wished she'd told Judith to wait half an hour before she decided to explode upon the scene. "Yessum."

"What's a colored girl from Mississippi and a white girl doing together?"

"We tryin' to get to New York City. We run out of money, so we stop to get some decent employment."

"What's in New York City?"

"Miz Judith gone be a big singin' star."

One of the molasses women laughed. "That girl? She way too homely to be on stage."

"She really amazin' when she sings," said Cassie. "She lifts up your soul." She meant it to sound sincere, but the words came out like something she'd said too many times already.

Eden Pomeroy gave an irritated snort and walked off in the direction the two molasses-women had come from, presumably to see what was really going on upstairs. The second she was out of sight, the two women descended on Cassie, demanding her name and introducing themselves as Bethesda and Iris. Both had the last name Meadows but insisted that they weren't related.

"You really think that white gal kin sing?" said Iris.

"She sing just like a bird."

Iris and Bethesda giggled.

"What kinda bird?" said Iris. "'Cause the only bird I could think she sound like was some kinda cacklin' hen."

Eden Pomeroy came back about twenty minutes later and pulled Cassie aside. "What's this white girl to you?"

"We known each other a long time. We from a real small town."

"You think she be good at maid work?"

"Oh, yessum," said Cassie.

"You sure? She cain't seem to stop talking 'bout herself."

"She jus' excited 'bout bein' this close to New York City."

Eden Pomeroy let out a breath, like she wanted to believe what Cassie was

saying but was too suspicious at too deep a level to let herself do that. “The boss says all right, you hired. Two dollars a day.”

“Yessum.”

“You say anythin’ else sides ‘yessum’?”

Cassie looked back at the big room and at Iris and Bethesda, who were watching from a distance as though they could read lips. “You know anyplace got rooms for rent?”

“For who? You? Or you an’ that white gal.”

She wasn’t sure what to say.

Eden Pomeroy studied her for a long, uncomfortable minute. “Damn,” she said. “That girl’s got your eyes. She got your mouth. You sisters?” She didn’t wait for Cassie to answer. “You sisters. Does *she* know you sisters?”

“Ever’body in town knows.”

“This world, this world.” She angled her head at some point past the washing machines and dryers. “There’s a storeroom where I stay in the winter when the weather’s bad. There’s a bed in there and a bathroom down the hall. You can have that.”

“Both of us together?”

“Yes, gal, both of y’all together.”

* * *

At six that evening, Cassie found Judith across the street from the hotel in her gray maid uniform, looking at the mannequins in the window of a fancy dress shop. Eden Pomeroy had given Cassie a uniform too, but it was such a depressing piece of clothing that Cassie had washed and ironed it and hung it so as to put off wearing it until the next day. On Judith, the gray drabness of the uniform made the dresses in the window seem even more exotic and out of reach. They were sleek and modern, close-fitting in shades of blue, each outfit with a matching but insubstantial hat.

“You sing like a chicken,” Cassie said to her. “And you cain’t afford none of those clothes.”

“You got work?”

“I got work.”

“I got work too. What they payin’ you?”

Cassie showed her the two dollars she had earned for the day.

“Me too,” said Judith. “Strange, though.”

“What’s strange?”

“I thought they’d pay you more’n me.”

Cassie had been thinking just the opposite.

“Cause you got experience.” Judith turned to stare at the dresses again.

“He ain’t on the second floor.”

“What?”

“Daddy. He ain’t on the second floor. That’s where they was showing me how they wants the beds made an’ such. They showed me a buncha rooms. You know this a res’dential hotel? People live here. They got their pichers on the walls, little kids with toys all over. They got their dogs and cats! I din’t see nuthin’ of his.”

“He’s here. For sure?”

“He is,” said Judith. “I asked.”

“You tell ’em he your daddy?”

“I ain’t a idjit,” said Judith. “I asked about weren’t there a big estate goin’ up for auction ’cause of some rich man round here died.”

“And?”

“Well, the girl who was showin’ me round looked real surprised, like how’d I know ’bout that, but she said there’s a big to-do, and it been in the papers how the Forrest fam’ly fightin’ over who gits what. She said las’ fall relatives was comin’ into town from all over.”

“Las’ fall? They *all* still here?”

“I din’t ask,” said Judith. “The Forrest fam’ly. Never knew there was that many Forrests. It must be the same ever’where when it come to progeny, like Miz Tabitha back home. Ever’body want their share.” She turned away from the window. “Let’s go find ’im.”

“Right now?”

“He’s spendin’ our inher’tince ever’ passin’ minnit,” said Judith. “We got to get some ’fore it completely gone.”

Since they couldn’t search the hotel for Bill Forrest in their street clothes, they stopped in the laundry for Cassie’s uniform. She took Judith to the storeroom Eden had shown her and changed there.

Judith surveyed the room. There was a bed covered with a clean throw and a mirror on the wall. A lightbulb hung from a cord in the middle of the ceiling, tented with parchment paper from the kitchen. The walls were thin enough to let in the heat and the rolling thrum of washers and dryers.

“We kin stay here?” said Judith. “Both of us together?”

“That’s what she said.”

“They gonna charge us?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I bet they do. You too innocent. People look at you and think, *Well, there’s a ignorant Negro from somewheres south. I bet I can soak her.* You gotta learn to say, ‘What’s this gonna cost me?’”

Cassie wiped her forehead. She was hungry, and the heat in the laundry had left her with a layer of grit on her skin. What she really wanted was a decent dinner and a tub full of cool water, but Judith was in too much of a hurry.

Judith took a moment to pat at her hair in the mirror. “I’m ready,” she said.

She already seemed to know the hidden passages for the service staff, and they went up the back stairs to the lobby. They stood by the service door for a moment, flanked by potted palms. In the lobby, framed by a pair of glass doors, a desk clerk with a pencil behind his ear handed out keys and mail from a bank of wooden pigeonholes. Outside, it was early evening. The streetlights had come on, casting a yellow glow over the Veranda’s marble porch.

“You see ’im?” said Cassie.

“Nope,” said Judith. “Maybe he in the salon.”

Cassie followed Judith around the corner, where the marble floor of the

lobby ended and the thick rugs of the salon began.

The salon was the biggest room Cassie had ever seen. Dark wooden beams in the high ceiling gave the room a gloomy graciousness. Windows stretched from floor to ceiling, draped with green velvet curtains. Sofas and soft chairs were arranged around little tables, where people read newspapers and smoked cigarettes. Two big chandeliers, each missing a noticeable number of lightbulbs, made the flocked green velvet wallpaper look faded and the leather furniture dull. Smoke caught in the lamplight, diffusing it into a layer of golden haze. The salon made Cassie think of the elephant in Richmond, big and old and a little dirtier than it ought to be.

Judith poked Cassie in the side. There was Bill Forrest, sitting, reading a newspaper. He, too, was smoking, a pipe, not a cigarette. Smoke curled over the top of the newspaper and made a little cloud.

“That’s a new jacket,” hissed Judith. “An’ lookit them shoes. An’ a *pipe*?” She let out a kind of growl. “Oh, I shore as hail hope he ain’t spent my entire inher’tince already.”

Bill Forrest shifted in the chair, crossing his legs, checking the clock. He folded the paper, tapped out his pipe, and glanced expectantly at the elevator at the far end of the salon. The elevator made a sharp *ding*, the doors opened, and a thin, elderly woman with a cane came out. She was dressed all in black, including a thin veil that covered her face, as though she were in mourning.

He stood up as she came across the room.

“Good evenin’, Miz Eula,” he said, so loudly that everyone looked up.

“That mus’ be Eula Bonhomme,” whispered Cassie. “The one who wrote to your momma.”

Eula Bonhomme extended her gloved knuckles for Bill Forrest to kiss. “How are you this evening, suh?”

“Jus fine, ma’am, and you?”

“As well as can be expected.” Her voice was faint and papery. She fanned herself feebly with her fingers. “My heavens, I feel I’ve had one foot in the grave all day.”

“I kin gitcha glassa water,” said Bill.

“No, no thank you. I’ve just come down to get my mail.”

“You set down right there,” said Bill. “I’ll git it for you.”

Eula Bonhomme lowered herself to the edge of a leather sofa, stiff as a dry branch. Bill Forrest strode across the salon, right past Cassie and Judith, heading for the lobby and the desk clerk. He passed close enough to leave a trail of aftershave. Cassie could have touched his sleeve. He looked neither left nor right. He shouldered through the guests waiting for the clerk and rapped on the front desk with his pipe.

“Miz Eula Bonhomme’s mail,” he said in a very loud voice. “Room 414.”

The clerk checked the pigeonholes with the kind of indifference that made it seem like this happened every day.

“Nothin’, suh.”

“You certain?”

“Certain, suh.”

Bill turned and marched back to Eula Bonhomme, and this time Cassie was sure he would see them. He didn’t. He sat next to Miz Bonhomme and spoke in a low voice. She put her hand to her forehead as though she felt faint. He helped her to her feet and walked her to the elevator. They both got on, and the doors closed like a curtain. In a moment, the lights above the elevator door stopped at the fourth floor.

Judith turned to Cassie with her face an expression of pure disgust. “Oh, he’s a rat, jus’ like Momma said he was. Oh, he’s jus’ a *rat*.”

They took the stairs with no clear idea of what to do when they found Miz Bonhomme’s room, what they would say if Bill was there—or how to explain themselves if he wasn’t.

They arrived panting on the fourth floor. Judith made a beeline to the linen closet and took out a stack of towels.

“You better put those back,” said Cassie. “What if someone sees you takin’ ’em?”

“This what a maid does inna hotel,” said Judith. “You bring clean towels to each room, ever’d day, and you takes th’ old towels to the laundry whether they dirty or not.”

“You mean we washin’ *clean* towels?”

“That’s what they tol’ me this mornin. Come on.”

Cassie followed her down the hall, watching the numbers on the doors, which were even on one side and odd on the other. Miz Bonhomme’s room was on the right.

Judith pressed her ear to the door.

“What’re you *doing*?” whispered Cassie.

“I just wanna know if he’s in there.” Judith listened another moment. “He ain’t.”

“Course he ain’t. She’s proper.”

Judith put her hand on the doorknob, but Cassie caught her wrist. “What if this isn’t a good idea? What if she think we’re thieves?”

“We practically her relatives.”

“We got nuthin’ that says who we are.”

“We got her letter.”

“You got her letter?”

Judith took her hand off the doorknob. “Don’t you?”

“I ain’t seen it since we was at the Glades’.”

Judith switched the towels to her other arm. “Was it in the car?”

“It don’t matter where it *was* if we don’t have it *now*.”

“Well, we got the words in her letter anyway.”

“She’s old,” said Cassie. “What if she can’t remember what she wrote?”

“Well, we ain’t lost nuthin’ till she say *no*. An’ even if she does, we ain’t no worse off. Ain’t that right?” She patted Cassie’s cheek. “You got to have a little more conf’dence,” and before Cassie could say anything else, she rapped on the door. “Maid with th’ towels heah, ma’am!”

There was a rustling behind the door. It opened, and Eula Bonhomme peered out. She was even older so close. Her hair hung in a long braid, iron colored, with the unsilky look of a horse’s mane. Her eyes were black, sharp over high cheekbones and a narrow, suspicious mouth.

“More towels already? Put them in the powder room.”

Cassie followed Judith in. The room was spare and dim. The bed was

neatly made. There was a kitchenette with a sink, a refrigerator, and a hotplate. Opposite the bed, ancient pictures of an ancient family hung behind the armchair where Miz Eula had been sitting, reading by lamplight. She eased herself back into the armchair while Judith puttered in the bathroom.

Cassie stood in the middle of the room, realizing that she had no duty to perform.

Miz Eula picked up a leather-bound book from a side table, opened to the middle, and marked the place with a piece of ribbon. "You're new," she said. "You both are."

"Yessum," said Cassie.

Judith emerged from the bathroom, and Miz Eula raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know Mrs. Pomeroy hired white girls for the laundry."

"We been doing laundry together since we was little," said Judith, stretching the truth yet again. "We sisters."

Miz Eula examined Judith. "Most young women in your position would have the sense to pass for white."

"Ma'am," said Judith, "I am white. Cassie an' me, we got diff'rent mommas but the same daddy."

Miz Eula smiled faintly. "I'm sure it's most interesting," she said, "and sadly, far too common, but you must have other things to do this evening besides explaining yourselves to me."

"Ma'am," said Cassie, because there was no stopping now, "our daddy's name is Bill Forrest."

Miz Eula put the book in her lap. "William Forrest."

"You wrote a letter to my momma," said Judith. "You said there was a inher'tince. You said I was *progeny*."

"I recall the letter." Miz Eula looked at Cassie, piercingly this time. "And what are you?"

"Ma'am, I reckon I'm progeny too."

"I reckon she is, ma'am," said Judith.

"And I 'reckon' she is, even without you saying so," said Miz Eula. She put the book on the small table beside her. "Are you supposed to be working

right now?”

“We’re off for the night, ma’am,” said Cassie. “We saw you in the salon with Judith’s—our daddy, I mean—and we thought we better come up and introduce ourselves.”

“We ’fraid he’s done gone an’ spent all our inher’tince,” said Judith. “Do you know if it’s true?”

“Sit down,” said Miz Eula. She pointed them to the foot of the bed and a threadbare quilt. “Let me tell you about your family.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Miz Eula Bonhomme rose from her chair, her brittle black clothing crackling around her. She opened the room's only closet and took out a large, stiff folder made of some animal's scaly hide. She untied the silky ribbons that held it shut and opened it on the bed. Inside were newspaper clippings and pages from old magazines, each separated from the other by a sheet of onionskin. All the paper except the onionskin had turned brown, giving the contents of the portfolio a layered look, fawn-colored ruffles alternating with white, like some old party dress, once flounced, now flat.

"What's important is the past," said Miz Eula. "Since William is father to you both, this portfolio contains his past, my past, and yours as well, your *begats* if you wish." She turned the layers of paper and onionskin to a yellowed page of poetry. "This, for example, was written by a great-great-great-aunt of yours, a southern woman who, while northern soldiers devastated the countryside around her, wrote poems to honor the Confederate dead. Did anyone in your family ever tell you about the ghosts?"

"My momma tol' me my great-grandmomma had to shoot her husband with his own horse pistol," said Judith, "but she never said anything about no ghosts."

Miz Eula turned to Cassie. "What about you?"

"My grandmother told me I was named for my great-great-grandmother Cassandra. She said Judith and I were probably sisters and cousins both because our white great-great-great-grandfather and his white son had gone

around sowing their wild oats.”

Miz Eula turned over another layer to expose a second, smaller portfolio, this one made of fragile cardboard. “Let me show you the ghosts.” She opened the smaller portfolio with even greater care. Inside were three silvery black rectangular glass plates, each wrapped in fine white cotton cloth. “These are called daguerreotypes,” she said. As she unwrapped them, Miz Eula laid them on the faded quilt. The images were impossible to make out without better light, but Miz Eula spoke as if they were paintings in plain sight upon a wall. “The first one is William, my husband, your father’s great-great-grandfather. Your father was named for him.”

“You were married to our great-grandfather?” said Judith.

“Your *great-great-great-grandfather*,” Miz Eula corrected. “My faithless William who came from poverty in the foothills of Virginia and built the mansion here in Remington starting from nothing but a swamp and a crew of wild slaves. His vision was to start his own dynasty. He is the thread that connects us. I am no actual blood relation to either of you. I am the abandoned wife, like Sarah in the Bible, who came from the desert to be the vessel for a great and noble line. But I became wrong.” She touched her iron-colored hair self-consciously. “Too black, though you two are the only ones who know that, and I rely on your discretion. And then my William, no Abraham to be sure, chose his own Hagar—your great-great-great-grandmother, whose name was Helen.”

She held the picture out to them, and Cassie took it carefully, turning it to the light. A man stood in front of a columned veranda, hands on his hips, hat cocked on his head. He looked for all the world like William Forrest—the current one. “This is our great-great-great-grandfather?” she said. “The one whose mansion’s going to be auctioned off?”

“Him indeed,” said Miz Eula. “And look here at the second ghost. My son, Charles. See how handsome he is, how finely he sits on his horse, how strong the line of his jaw, how white he is, just like his father. Yet this is the son William claimed was tainted with black blood and so disowned.”

“He disowned his own son?” said Cassie.

“Not just his son,” said Miz Eula. She picked up the third daguerreotype. “His grandson, too. Here is your discarded cousin. My only grandchild. Look how fair he is, how pure, and still ruined by the drop, the single drop of black blood.” She took a ragged breath. “I gave William a *good* son. And he repudiated us, left *us* in wrack and ruin, forced us out as though *his son* was only a mule. He considered our marriage null, void, to mount a different mare more fitted for his *dynasty*. That’s why I wrote the letter to your mother, Judith. So that her William, your father, doesn’t abandon his family the way my William abandoned me.” She turned to Cassie. “But you—*you* are most like my son. Too black to be bothered with. I had no idea you even existed.” She stood by the bed straight as a rod. Tears came down her parchment cheeks.

Judith touched her arm. Miz Eula just stood there. “Go,” she said. “Take the portfolio with you. Take everything, even the ghosts. They’re yours now.”

* * *

In the basement room beside the furnace, Cassie and Judith sat on the bed with the contents of the portfolio spread between them. It was warm and late, and they had undressed to their underwear. Judith, cross-legged on the coverlet, smoothed a newspaper clipping dated 1861.

“How old you think that ol’ lady is?” said Judith. “An’ she don’t look colored to me.”

“Not as old as she thinks she is, and she’s white enough to pass.” Cassie held one of the daguerreotypes at an angle to the tented bulb. “I never seen a picture like this on glass. Look at this man with his mustache and fine hat and short little horsewhip. This her son, Charles. But it can’t be. She can’t be that old.”

“Mistah Legabee was. Them Mallard boys said he was a hunnert and twenty-five.”

Mister Legabee’s widow had given Cassie the tar. “You believed that?”

Judith came to peer over Cassie's shoulder at the black glass. "His daddy left him, like my daddy left me—our daddy, and us. He sure don't look poor, though. I mean he got some nice clothes an' a pistol, an' this horse must be worth a bundle." Judith picked up the next bit of shadowed glass and held it like a mirror to the light. "This her grandson? He fair, sure enough." Judith put her bit of black glass down and shuffled through the papers in the portfolio. "Look a' this," she said. "It's one of them poems by that southern lady aunt. Kin you read it?"

Cassie read aloud.

*Then God bless him the soldier,
And God nerve him for the fight,
May he lend his arm new prowess
To do battle for the right;
Let him feel that while he's dreaming
In his fitful slumber bound,
That we're praying—God watch o'er him
In his blanket on the ground.*

Judith sat cross-legged on the bed. "She wrote this kinda thing with shootin' all round? I think I'd be tryna find a way outta there."

Cassie put the poem back on its bed of onionskin. What had she, Cassie, said when Judith told Miz Eula who they were? She had said, "Ma'am, I reckon I'm progeny too." And Judith had said, "I reckon she is, ma'am," and Miz Eula had said, "And I 'reckon' she is, even without you saying so." Cassie pressed her tongue against her teeth and to her surprise, tasted tar. That was why William had left Miz Eula and her son behind. He'd discovered the taint, the way the blood divided out into halves and halves and halves again, until it was down to one half a drop, and that was still too much. No matter how finely divided, it would never disappear. The taste of tar. Had always been there? Did Miz Eula have this taste in her mouth, too? Did Grandmother have it?

The contents of the portfolio lay spread out across the coverlet. Newspapers and photos and clippings from a hundred years ago that might as

well have been pasted to the kitchen wall back home in Heron-Neck to keep the drafts from coming in.

My Dearest Sister, I am sorry to tell you that our father is dead.

What did any of this mean for her? Would she be wealthy from her part of the inheritance and live the rest of her life in ease? Not likely.

“What’s important is the past,” Miz Eula had said, and she was right to a point, but, Cassie thought, put a yam and a sweet potato in front of the old woman, and she would not know one from the other. Cassie looked up at the ceiling as if she could see through the layers of floors in the hotel, all the way up to the fourth, where Miz Eula wept over her family history. She pictured Miz Eula’s hair, coarse as braided wire, wrapped up tight as a spring. And why? Yams from sweet potatoes. Without restraints, that hair would escape into its natural billow and reveal the drop of blood it came from.

Miz Eula and Grandmother would’ve had a lot to talk about. Both would’ve jumped at the chance to meet the widow Legabee’s sticky grandbaby and erase themselves without a second thought.

“I’m tired,” said Cassie. “We got to work in the mornin’.”

“You sleep,” said Judith. “I’m a keep lookin’ at all this fam’ly history.”

Except for William, though, Cassie thought, it was the colored side of the family Judith was looking at. The daguerreotypes, the poetry, the stories Miz Eula was so distraught about had nothing to do with Judith. They were Cassie’s history. Cassie lay back on the bed, too warm. The dryers thrummed behind the walls. What if all she and Judith had in common was a father and a distant great-great-great-grandfather? It didn’t really change anything. She thought back to the day she’d defied Lil Ma and helped Judith pull the wagons up the hill. That was the day her life had changed. That had put her on this track. Otherwise she would be back home now, struggling with Grandmother over the albino boy. Cassie turned over and hugged the pillow. She missed Lil Ma. The first thing she would do, when she was sure Grandmother had used the tar and was clear of town, would be to send the

Boston money to Lil Ma and get her out of Heron-Neck for good.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the morning somebody banged hard on the door, and a woman's shrill voice sawed into their sleep. "*Ain't you up yet? You hear me in there, Judith Forrest? It five thutty! You hear me, gal?*"

Cassie jerked awake, thinking she had somehow fallen asleep at Judith's house in Heron-Neck. Judith practically leaped out from under the sheets, shouting, "Yessum! Yessum!" She grabbed her wrinkled uniform dress from the foot of the bed, gave it a huge shake, as though that would take care of the wrinkles, and dragged it over her skinny shoulders. She raked her fingers through her hair, jumped into her shoes, slammed the door, and was gone.

Cassie sat up and rubbed her eyes. Eden Pomeroy had told her to be in the laundry room by six. She reached up to turn on the light and saw Miz Eula's newspaper clippings scattered on the floor. Judith might have left them in some kind of order, but the wind from her exit had blown them all over the place. Cassie gathered up the clippings, poems, papers and put them back between their onionskin layers and wrapped the daguerreotypes in their swaddle. She put everything back into the ancient portfolio and slid it under the bed.

* * *

Eden Pomeroy and morning work were waiting for Cassie in the laundry room. Three brittle black dresses in a heap. Black underthings, including three pairs of silk stockings and a garter belt so narrow, it would have fit a

ten-year-old girl.

“You know anything ’bout this fabric?” said Eden Pomeroy.

Cassie rubbed the hem of one dress between her fingers. “Taffeta?”

“And lace,” said Eden Pomeroy. “This lady act like these dresses her most prize possessions. She send ’em down here all at once and ’spect to get ’em back the same day. I ain’t got the hands t’do it. So, you know anything ’bout taffeta?”

“You got to be gentle with it.”

“Ain’t no shortcuts with taffeta. And them stockings, them dainties—”

“They ain’t all that dainty if you ask me!” said Bethesda from where she was ironing sheets. Iris was folding towels with mechanical precision.

“Lawyers is comin’ to see her tomorrow,” Eden Pomeroy said to Cassie. “She got to look right. You think you kin do this?”

“I kin,” Cassie said.

The laundry sink, where the luckless were sent to wash by hand, wasn’t far from Bethesda’s ironing and Iris’s folding. Cassie filled the sink with warm water and three or four shakes of Borax powder. She sank the tired dresses into a pillow of suds and guided them gently back and forth. “Why this ol’ lady got to see lawyers? She a big criminal?”

Iris and Bethesda laughed in great snorts.

“She only about a hundred year old,” said Iris, rapidly folding towel after towel.

“She been here for months,” said Bethesda, “waitin’ on the settlin’ of the estate.”

“The contestation of the will,” said Iris.

“All I know,” Bethesda said to Cassie, “is this old white fella useter live in a big ol’ mansion out a ways from town, and he died las’ fall, and suddenly, he got relatives crawlin’ out the woodwork.” She flicked a drop of water on the iron, and it sizzled. “He got cousins and uncles and nephews and nieces, first, second, third removes.”

“There was some *philanderin’* in the fam’ly,” said Iris, “if you know what I mean, but they blood jus’ the same, and they think they owed some piece of

the pie.”

“This ol’ lady,” said Bethesda, “*claims* she some kinda in-law, but she so old she don’t know what she is. She prob’ly don’t even know *where* she is.”

“Or *when* she is,” said Iris.

“Ennyway,” said Bethesda, “ever’body else got sick o waitin’ for them lawyers to do their revisin’, and they all left.”

“‘Ceptin’ that one fella.” Iris put the towels to one side and began folding washcloths.

“William Forrest,” said Bethesda. “He some long-lost somethin’-or-other, and he been hangin’ on her since way back when.”

“Since duck huntin’ season,” said Iris.

“Must be a nice mansion,” said Cassie. She pressed the taffeta gently into the froth of bubbles.

“I ain’t never seen it,” said Bethesda. “I guess it musta been nice at one time. Ever’body talking ’bout Oriental rugs an’ crystal chandeliers an’ armoires an’ fine china.”

“It old too,” said Iris, “been round since this town was jus’ a sawmill. My great-granddaddy used tell us ’bout his uncle what was on that plantation, an’ his uncle tol’ him the place was fulla spooks and hoodoo.”

“Full-blood African hoodoo,” said Bethesda. “Folks still talk about the haints inna woods there.” She put the iron down and said to Iris, “You know Myra, Doyle’s girlfriend? She tol’ me Doyle’s boys snuck on down there to see if there was ennythin’ left inna mansion. Somethin’ started howlin’ inside, an’ they ran outta them woods like they pants on fire.”

“You know, ain’t nothin’ livin’ in that house, an’ there ain’t nothin’ gonna howl in them woods ’cept mebbe a bobcat. Them two boys ain’t got a brain between ’em!” Iris was done folding washcloths, stacks of gleaming white terrycloth, without a stain, a fray, or a loose thread. She reached for the pile of sheets but kept pressing her lips together like she was trying to hold on to her own next words as long as she could. Finally, she said, “That howlin’, prob’ly Doyle ruttin’ with his *other* girlfriend,” and she and Bethesda burst into laughter.

That seemed to be all they had to say about Miz Eula, the mansion, and the will. Iris and Bethesda chattered on about Doyle and the woods and the likelihood of poisonous snakes. Their hands never stopped except when they came to some kind of stain or tear, and they had to comment on the hotel resident who had spilled coffee or grape juice or who had used a perfectly good towel to wipe up dog pee.

Cassie took her time with the dresses and the dainties. She ironed shirts. She folded linens. The dresses hung to dry. Eden Pomeroy brought sandwiches and coffee from the kitchen for lunch. She looked over Cassie's work and didn't say anything, which Cassie took as a good sign. The three black taffeta dresses had been hanging in the breeze of an open door all morning and would be completely dry in about an hour. Cassie could press them and have them ready to go by two. Shortly, the housekeeping staff would bring down the loads of laundry for the afternoon. In the meantime, Eden Pomeroy allowed her staff a break. Iris and Bethesda went outside to smoke cigarettes. Cassie went upstairs to find Judith.

Judith was making beds on the second floor. She looked as disheveled as she had when she'd run out of their room this morning, but the bed she was making was perfect. The pillows were fluffed like marshmallows, the sheets crisply turned, the blanket tucked immaculately at the corners. Judith tossed a white coverlet across the bed and made sure it was even on all sides.

"Where'd you learn to make a bed like that?" said Cassie, because surely it hadn't been back in Heron-Neck.

"From Miz Frances," said Judith, breathless. "She run the maids. An' she said she'd whup me no question less'n I did ever' bed on this floor jus' zactly right. Come on!" Judith rushed into the hall, where there was a cartful of fresh, precisely folded sheets, towels, and washcloths. Cassie followed Judith into the next room. The last had been spare and unremarkable. This one had a kitchenette, a sitting room, and three bedrooms, two apparently occupied by young children.

"Why they leave their damn toys all over?" Judith scooped up baby dolls and teddy bears and dumped them in a toy chest. Someone had spilled a bowl

of cereal and milk right next to the bed. Judith didn't see it until she put her foot in the puddle. She let out a growl, kicked off the wet shoe.

"We gotta find our daddy," said Cassie.

"Oh, I found his room, but he ain't in it." Judith picked up the wet shoe and shook it. "There was letters with his name on 'em. Open letters on a table. From somebody-and-somebody, esquires."

"Lawyers." Cassie grabbed her hand. "Miz Eula's meetin' with lawyers tomorrow. There's something goin' on about the will."

"I'll show you the letters." Judith abandoned the spilled cereal, slipped into her wet shoe, and pulled Cassie out the door, leaving the unmade beds. Out in the hall, the elevator made a musical *ding*.

"*Hail*," Judith whispered with terrible despair, "what if it's Miz Frances?" But it was Miz Eula who emerged from the elevator, terribly thin, wrapped in a white bathrobe, her iron-gray hair loose in a frizzy billow. She looked both ways, as though crossing a dangerous street.

"I've been looking for you," she said when she saw them. She reached into the pocket of the robe and pulled out a crumpled page. "The auction's tomorrow, and first the lawyers are coming. You must come with me to the meeting to establish your claim."

Cassie took the letter and tried to read it, but the only thing she could really understand was that *issues* in the will were *unresolved* and that the auction was set for the next day at three in the afternoon.

"Without your claim, you get nothing," said Miz Eula. "Your father gets his share but not you."

"But we've come all this way," said Cassie.

"It wouldn't matter if you'd come from the moon," said Miz Eula.

"We're *progeny*," said Judith.

"I'll take you to the mansion," said Miz Eula.

* * *

That evening, though the weather was clear, Judith came into their storeroom

with an umbrella and a flashlight. She leaned the umbrella against the bed, reached under the mattress, and pulled out the horse pistol. Cassie was almost glad to see it.

Judith dropped the gun and the flashlight into the umbrella, like it was a pocket. The umbrella bulged a little, but no one would have guessed what was inside.

There would be no point in Cassie asking about the gun. Judith wanted to take the gun because she had a gun to take.

“Bandoned house,” said Judith. “Might be haints.”

“You ain’t gone hit a haint with no bullet.”

“No,” said Judith, “but we’ll be ready fer ennythin’ more solid.”

Judith gave Cassie the umbrella. Cassie hefted the awkward weight of it and hooked it over her arm. “Better not rain,” Cassie said.

“It ain’t gonna rain.”

“Then we gone look stupid carryin’ this umbrella. You put bullets in the gun?”

“Sure did.” Judith smoothed her dress, the blue one the Glades had given her. “We gonna get our due,” she said, so gravely that it surprised Cassie at how adult she sounded. “We not gonna be poor no more, wearin’ these old hand-me-downs. We gonna have more than a penny to our names.”

Cassie wanted to point out that not only did they each have far more than a penny; Judith had sung them up a notch from their poverty. The Glades had gifted them with cash. In Cassie’s opinion, this adventure into the snake-filled woods that Bethesda and Iris had been talking about was almost unnecessary. The sole reason was to show Bill Forrest that he still owed his family, and while that was important, it might not be important enough to invade an old house filled with Miz Eula’s ghosts. She didn’t say any of that. Judith was set on this path, and it was time to follow.

Cassie hefted the umbrella. “You gone tell Miz Eula we gotta gun?”

“Now why would I tell her that?”

“So she don’t bring her own.”

“If she do have one, it’s gotta be small. She don’t have the strength to lift a

cuppa coffee.”

“Still,” said Cassie, “I wouldn’t want to be around if she start shootin’.”

Judith went over to the door and opened it. “Me neither.”

Miz Eula was waiting for them in her freshly pressed taffeta under the only light in the parking lot. It was late, and the sun had vanished behind the trees, leaving only the indigo bowl of the sky. She motioned them over with stick-figure gestures and pushed the car key into Judith’s palm. Miz Eula sat in the passenger seat and insisted that Judith drive, which put Cassie in back with the umbrella, the gun, and flashlight. The car wasn’t much newer than the one Cassie and Judith had driven from Mississippi to South Carolina, but it was cleaner.

“Which way?” said Judith.

“East,” said Miz Eula. “Straight out of town. Follow the railroad.”

* * *

There were few other cars and no trains either. The dark seemed pure and empty, quiet except for the sound of the car itself and the night calls of birds. Cassie rolled down the windows. The sweet evening fragrance of honeysuckle blew in.

“I’ll show you where to stop,” said Miz Eula. “But the drive is a shambles. We’ll have to walk in.”

“How long a walk?” said Cassie.

“A good half mile,” said Miz Eula.

“Kin you walk that far, ma’am?” Judith.

“I assure you that I *can*.”

They missed the entrance twice, not because it wasn’t marked but because it was. A gas station had been built at the end of the mansion’s drive; a business for however long, then abandoned. The gas pumps were gone. What remained were a concrete apron and a boxy building with plate-glass windows, all shattered.

The first time they passed the entrance, Miz Eula remarked that she didn’t

remember any buildings on this road. The second time Cassie held the flashlight as they passed and made Judith creep forward so the old woman could peer into the woods. After the second U-turn on the empty highway, Judith pulled in to the remains of the gas station and angled the car so the headlights shone into the trees.

“This has to be it,” said Miz Eula.

“When was the last time you were here, ma’am?”

“It was winter,” said Miz Eula “No. It was spring.”

Judith turned off the engine, and Cassie helped Miz Eula out of the front seat. Cassie hooked the umbrella over her right arm.

“Will it rain?” Miz Eula said.

“You never know,” said Cassie.

Judith pointed the flashlight into a darkness made more dense by thick brush. Crickets and frogs called from deep in the forest, and Cassie could smell the wet decay of a marsh. Miz Eula hung on to Cassie’s left arm, getting her footing as they made their way from concrete into the tall weeds. She weighed hardly anything and smelled faintly of camphor. She was hot but dry, almost feverish through the black taffeta. The bones in her thin arm poked into Cassie’s ribs.

The trees parted slightly, and Judith shone the flashlight over a rutted track where heavy rains had cut uneven channels into what had once been a drive wide enough for two carriages to pass side by side. The smell of swamp grew stronger.

“You sure you want to do this, ma’am?” said Cassie over the creak of insects.

Miz Eula gripped Cassie’s arm even more tightly, teetering in her narrow black shoes.

Judith glanced back at Cassie. “You want me to take the umbrella?” meaning she wanted the gun, but Cassie wasn’t ready for her to have it. There were too many imaginary things to shoot at just yet. The real things were ahead in the house, and there were only three bullets.

Miz Eula was breathing hard, but she didn’t show any sign of stopping,

not so long as the phantom house lay ahead. Cassie could feel that pull herself. She glanced at Judith, striding along, swinging the flashlight so that the beam rushed up into the dense branches and then down again, like she knew where she was going and didn't need the light anyway.

Miz Eula leaned more heavily on Cassie's arm. Up ahead, the roaming flashlight beam glinted off something that might have been a window. Cassie felt her heart jump.

"Hand over that umbrella," said Judith. "I think I see the house."

Miz Eula swayed in the dark, breathless and hot. "The house. *The house.*"

"Turn off that light," Cassie said.

Judith obeyed and took the umbrella, felt noisily around inside it, and gave it back, lighter. The three of them stood at the edge of the black canopy of trees, letting their eyes adjust to the depth of the night, and the size of the house, burdened by years and weather, its roofline sagging against the stars, its walls plastered with ancient advertisements for snuff and shoeshine, cigarettes and whiskey.

"It was a dry goods store," said Judith, sounding surprised. "Jus' like Tawney's back in Heron-Neck."

"Bigger than Tawney's," said Cassie.

The front stairs were still sheathed in marble and gleamed eerily in the shine from the stars, but the porch, *the gallery* as Grandmother would have called the ruined stoop that ran all the way around the first floor, was wooden and rotten.

"Watch where you put your feet," said Judith, flashlight still turned off. The horse pistol was a dull, iron shape in her hand, looking more like a club than a gun.

The three of them edged across the broken porch, making for the front door.

"It'll be locked," said Miz Eula. "You'll have to break in through the windows."

The windows were shuttered, but as the three of them came closer, they could see that at least one shutter had already been pried open. Judith put a

tentative hand into the even deeper blackness that was the window.

“There ain’t no glass,” said Judith. “Someone’s got here ’fore us.”

“Go *in*,” Miz Eula hissed.

“I ain’t goin’ in without no flashlight,” said Judith. “They snakes in there. I know it.” She groped at the window, then caught her breath like she’d heard something. The three of them froze, listening in the dark for a sound from the house, bounded by the calls of night birds, frogs, and crickets.

“He’s *here*,” whispered Miz Eula.

“*Who’s here?*” Judith squinted at her in the dark.

“She’s talkin’ about the past,” whispered Cassie.

“There is no past,” moaned Miz Eula. “There’s only *now*.”

“What we’re askin’,” said Judith, “is if you think someone’s in there right *now*.”

Miz Eula trembled, hot as an ember.

Cassie heard Judith cock the horse pistol.

“Turn on the flashlight,” said Cassie. “If anybody’s inside, they’re bound to’ve heard us.”

Judith pointed the flashlight into the empty house. Cassie craned forward to see blank walls and a rotting floor. There was no furniture. No fixtures, no carpets or chandeliers. What was left of the wallpaper lay in heaps. The mantle from the fireplace was missing, with only a blank frame of bricks around a yawning hearth to show where it had been. There wasn’t a single thing worth auctioning off. There was nothing left but crumbs.

“Did you ever live here, Miz Eula?” said Judith.

“Yes,” whispered Miz Eula, “and then he banished me.”

They climbed in through the glassless window. Judith went carefully ahead, checking the floor, toe-first, the pistol held out at arm’s length as though it could sense intruders, aim on its own, and kill them before she had to think to pull the trigger.

“Can you see them here at Christmas?” whispered Miz Eula as they crept through what must once have been a grand sitting room. “Can you see my William, his new wife plump-cheeked and unmindful, his son and daughter,

the mistletoe, the slaves, half sisters, half brothers to his legitimate heirs? The slaves, dressed for the occasion, laying the table in the next room. The slaves that were his own children.” She shuddered as though she might shake apart and all that would hold her together would be the black taffeta. “We said good night to our wedding guests from those stairs.”

Judith shone the flashlight along the tilting banister. “They don’t look so safe. Ev’ry third step’s missin’.”

“Can’t you feel the ghosts?” said Miz Eula in a whisper. “My son, my Charles, a brave young man.”

Upstairs, something heavy fell and broke. Someone in the shadows near the top of the stairs let out a curse.

Judith aimed the gun and the flashlight up into the dark.

“It’s him. It’s *him*,” gasped Miz Eula. “*William!*”

Judith began to shout. “You! You up there, you-all come on out where I kin see you!” She shoved the flashlight at Cassie and held the horse pistol in both hands.

Cassie stuck the flashlight out, her hand shaking, the umbrella hanging like a flightless bat. Miz Eula quivered on Cassie’s other arm. And whoever was upstairs shuffled into view.

“Don’t shoot,” said a man’s voice, and in a moment, he appeared, heavysset, at the top of the stairs. His arms were loaded with all that he could carry. “Who the hail’s down there? Don’t shoot!”

“William!” cried Miz Eula.

“Eula?” said the man.

“Jesus Christ,” said Judith, not lowering the gun. “Daddy?”

They heard him take a breath at the top of the stairs. “Judith?”

“You stay right there!” Judith shouted. “Momma was right when she tol’ me you was nothin’ but a rat!”

“Honey, din’t Momma tell you I was comin’ up here for her? For *us*? Din’t she tell you I was comin home jus’ soon’s I could?”

“You lef’ us for a *hoor!*” Judith said, as firmly as she could. “You lef’ us with *nothing!*” And whether she meant to or not, she fired the primordial gun.

The noise was like a cannon. The bullet left a trail of sparks, which lit the room for an instant and left a choking stink. The bullet hit something with a terrible thump. Miz Eula screamed and collapsed into Cassie's arms. Cassie dropped the flashlight. The flashlight rolled over to a hole in the floor, dropped into it, and the whole place went dark. Bill Forrest let out a sound just loud enough to let everyone know that the bullet had missed him, and the house groaned. A chunk of the ceiling fell. Bill bolted invisibly down the stairs. The ransacked booty in his arms dropped away as he descended, crashing like pottery or rolling like coins.

"Dammit!" said Bill as he hit the main floor. He switched on his own flashlight and yanked the pistol away from Judith. "Your momma sent you with this?"

"I came on mah own!" Judith shouted. "I came to tell you I'm progeny too!"

More ceiling fell. Splinters and dust cascaded over them.

"Miz Eula?" Cassie crouched over the taffeta husk in her arms. "We got to leave!"

"What's she doin' here?" Bill demanded and shone his flashlight in the old woman's face. Miz Eula's eyelids fluttered. She looked pale as paper, limp, and bloodless. "Now looky, Judy, you done give her a heart attack!"

There was a quick movement to the left, and Bill swung his flashlight over to reveal a night watchman, who was small and old and clung to a baseball bat as though there were dangers in the old mansion no bullet could stop.

"Whoever y'all are," he said, brandishing the bat, "you're trespassin', robbin' hoodlums, just like the rest of 'em. The police are here. Y'all just stay right where you are."

Flashing red lights poured over them, flashed on the peeling walls, turned blinding white and then red again. Male voices came from another part of the house, speaking in commanding tones. Red light washed across Miz Eula's face, and she opened her eyes long enough to see Bill Forrest leaning over her.

"My William," she whispered, "I've found you."

There were two police cars outside the back of the house, where long ago the slaves would have come and gone. Now there were four policemen with guns. One grabbed Bill by the arm and yanked the still-smoking horse pistol away from him. They put him in handcuffs and shoved him into a police car. One of them crouched over Miz Eula.

“Call an ambulance!” the policeman shouted. He paid no attention to Cassie because she was, of course, Miz Eula’s maid and a passive player, if a player at all.

“A little late for you to be wandering around in an old house, ain’t it, missy?” one of the policemen said to Judith. “And with this old lady too. Ain’t you see the NO TRESPASSIN’ signs?”

With lights on, Cassie did see that this side of the mansion was generously covered with NO TRESPASSING signs.

“We came in the other side,” said Judith, without apology. “We came to get my inher’tince.”

“Your inheritance?” said one of the officers. “This place been empty for years. Hardly anything worth taking. You could’ve waited for the auction tomorrow instead of trying to vandalize the place.”

“*Vandalize?*” said Judith.

Cassie left it to Judith to tell either the infuriated truth or outrageous lies. She held Miz Eula’s head in her lap. A floodlight showed the back half of the property. The woods had been cleared and replaced with a lawn, wide and neatly trimmed. A long, paved driveway passed a sign that said MANSION MINIATURE GOLF. Just down the hill from the sign lay a shadowed wonderland of windmills, castles, elephants, and ogres. Just beyond that were tables covered with white sheets, set up for the estate sale. The police were right. What was left to auction off?

“Miz Eula,” said Cassie. She took Miz Eula’s hand, cool and limp. “Can you see all that?”

When the ambulance arrived, a broad-shouldered white man hurried over, pushed his fingers against Miz Eula’s bird-neck, and listened to her taffetaed chest. He straightened and told the policemen that she was dead.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The night clerk wouldn't let them into the Veranda. He didn't believe Judith and Cassie were employees. It was two in the morning. Without their gray uniforms, they looked like vagabonds.

The desk clerk called the hotel manager at home. Fifteen minutes later, the manager arrived; his wife, her hair in curlers, waited in the idling car outside. The manager expressed terrible shock that Miz Eula had passed on and that Mr. Forrest was in lockup. Judith, dirty from poking around in the mansion, disheveled in her secondhand clothes, spoke out righteously and at length about her due as progeny and about how her father had robbed her *and* Miz Eula. She didn't mention Cassie. Cassie sat down in the nearest chair and waited to hear her own name come up. The clock edged closer to three. Finally, when Judith was red in the face and on the verge of genuine hysterics, the manager offered to put her in a room upstairs free of charge until the lawyers arrived in the morning.

"Now, who're you?" the manager said to Cassie.

"Oh," said Cassie. "I'm progeny too."

The manager let out a laugh that indicated he was glad someone in the room was willing to acknowledge how ridiculous this business was, with this crazy dirt-poor white girl and her midnight rant about lost riches.

"It's true," said Cassie. "I'm her sister. And I want a room upstairs too."

The manager, his wife still waiting in the car, handed Cassie a key with a number on it. "It's on the fourth floor," he said. "Just keep quiet."

The room upstairs was clean and quiet. The bed was soft under crisp sheets. Cassie lay down on the softness, but she couldn't sleep. She was too angry at Judith to do anything but get up again and sit by the window, watching the lights run around and around on the movie marquis on the other side of the hotel's parking lot. At five o'clock, she straightened the bed she hadn't slept in, replaced the towel she'd used to dry her face, and took the dirty towel down to the laundry.

At about nine thirty Eden Pomeroy came over to where Cassie was ironing and told her that a couple of lawyers up in the salon were looking for her. Iris and Bethesda stopped midfold and midgossip. As far as Cassie could tell, no one knew that Bill Forrest had been arrested or knew what had happened to Miz Eula. Judith was no doubt still sound asleep, too sure of what was coming to her to get up and be a maid.

When Eden Pomeroy told Cassie about the lawyers, Iris made her eyes big and her mouth round. "Don't you go up there," Iris said. "Them'll send you t'*jail*."

"Don't be a fool," said Eden Pomeroy. "They ain't that kinda lawyers. They prob'ly think you know where that white girl's hidin'." Cassie seemed reluctant to leave, and Eden Pomeroy said, "Git up there, gal," the way someone would speak to a carthorse.

* * *

There were two lawyers, both white men with cigars and ties. One was fat and wore glasses. The other was fatter. Judith was already with them, and so was Bill Forrest. Bill Forrest looked like a man who'd spent the night in jail. Judith had taken time to clean herself. She was wearing the second best of all her secondhand dresses. The dress was blue, and she had done her hair up in a bow, also blue. Cassie had never ever seen Judith's hair in a bow. The color of the ribbon matched the dress so perfectly, she suspected Judith had cut it out of the hem.

Judith motioned Cassie over. Despite the dress, the bow, and all, she

looked furious and pale in contrast to last night when she'd been furious and red-faced. "Now we kin start," she said to the lawyers.

"Who the hail is *she*?" said Bill Forrest.

"She's your other chile." Judith actually shook with anger.

"I ain't never seen her before in my life!"

"What's your name, gal?" asked the fat lawyer, and Cassie told him.

"I don't see the connection," said the fatter lawyer. "What makes you think he's your father?"

"My mama told me," Cassie realized how thin that sounded. "Ever'body in town knows it."

"*I* knows it," said Judith, "and *he* knows it."

"You got documentation?" said the fat lawyer to Cassie. "We really can't do anything without documentation."

"You got a birth certificate?" asked the fatter lawyer.

"*I* ain't got no birth certificate," said Judith, "and he *married* my momma."

"Well then," said the fatter lawyer, "I see we're going to have a problem."

The lawyers began to talk to each other in what seemed to be a language not quite English. There were words Cassie recognized: *inheritance*, *birthright*, *descendants*. And those she didn't: *assertion*, *bequest*, *allegation*. And those she could guess at: *legacy*, *entitlement*, *testimonial*. But there was nothing she heard that translated into Judith's rendition of *progeny*, and as the conversation went on, Cassie could see Judith's fury fading into worried hope. After some time, the lawyers, their thick necks folding and unfolding, turned to Bill Forrest and to Judith.

"Concerning your claims to be heirs to the Forrest estate," said the fat lawyer.

Bill Forrest drew himself up, unshaven and unwashed. "Yes."

"Other than the late Eula Bonhomme, who seems to have been divorced from the original William Forrest, the Forrest line is too disparate for any single person to be considered an heir."

The fatter lawyer nodded as if any fool could understand. "There is no

reason to postpone the sale of the estate. Whatever comes out will be split among the remaining claimants.”

“Remaining claimants?” said Bill Forrest.

The fat lawyer took a pad of paper out of his briefcase and consulted it. “There are twenty-three that we know of.”

“Twenty-*three*?” said Bill.

“Just because they aren’t here doesn’t mean they don’t have a claim,” said the fatter lawyer, speaking to Bill as though he were a child.

“But my *name* is Forrest!” said Bill.

“Of course it is,” said the fat lawyer, “and once the estate is sold, you’ll get your equal share of the proceeds, along with every other Forrest who’s made a claim.”

“Equal share,” said Bill. “How much is that likely to be?”

The lawyers frowned as though they were silently debating the numbers.

“I would say no less than eighty-five dollars,” said the fat lawyer.

“*Each*?” said Bill.

“Certainly no less,” agreed the fatter lawyer. “After our fees, of course.”

* * *

Eden Pomeroy let Cassie off for the rest of the day, and since Judith had been fired for not showing up for work that morning, Cassie and Judith went to the estate sale in Miz Eula’s old car, which had been towed back from the mansion and slumped in its old space, leaking oil, drop by drop.

“Eighty-five dollars is a lot,” said Judith as she drove the rattling old heap. “I guess I thought it would be thousands, though. Mebbe millions.”

The breezy warmth of the afternoon blew in through the car, dispelling the smell of gasoline and oil. Since they didn’t know how to get to the front of the mansion, they parked in the back by the gas station and walked in through the overgrown drive again. The walk seemed much shorter this time, and this time they didn’t go through the house. They found a path along one side and made their way to the front.

Unlike Tawney's, hardly anyone had shown up, and those who had were clustered around the draped tables. All of them were white people, probably just curious about all those rumors about lost riches. Cassie and Judith wandered over to see what was left from the house. There were a few sconces, a couple of broken figurines, a set of jackknives, as though someone had been collecting them, and a satin-covered box filled with faded, stained silk handkerchiefs. The rest was rusted junk, barely enough to cover the three tables, and when the auctioneer started selling the lots, he sounded dispirited, as though this auction was hardly worth his while. Cassie and Judith looked for Bill Forrest and found him, keeping his distance on the far side of the tables.

"What you gonna do with your share?" said Judith.

"I ain't getting any money," said Cassie. "An' if I understood it right, you ain't getting any either."

Judith let out a long sigh. "If I still had that ol' gun, I could shoot my daddy and get my inher'tince direct from him."

"You'd be spending it in jail."

"Well," said Judith, "I 'spect eighty-five dollars might go a long way in jail."

Cassie rubbed her eyes. "Judith," she said.

"Hmm."

"You got enough money to get to New York, and you ain't got no job here."

"You know what I'm gonna do."

"You gone have to do it by yourself."

Judith looked away at the tables with their poor spread of goods. "I was real upset when they brought us back to the hotel last night," she said. "I know I din't mention you. I din't think they'd understand that an' ever'thin' else what was goin' on. I'm sorry for that."

"It's all right," said Cassie softly.

Judith looked down at her own feet. "You gonna stay here?"

"I guess I am," said Cassie. "When are you gone leave for New York?"

“I ain’t got no place to sleep no more,” said Judith. “So I guess I’ll be takin’ the train today.” She squinted at her father, who was studiously ignoring them.

“You kin probably still sleep downstairs.”

“It’s all right,” said Judith. She smoothed her blue dress and blue hair ribbon. “This what I bin’ waitin’ for. I may’s well git started.”

They left the mansion and its minigolf facade. A sign across the doors said CONDEMNED.

When they got back to the Veranda, they went in to get Judith’s suitcase. In the dim, warm room, when everything was packed, they took each other’s hands.

“Ain’t you gone say good-bye to your daddy?” said Cassie.

“He doesn’t care, and I’ve had just about enough of him.”

“I guess I’ll be washin’ his towels.”

“No,” said Judith. “They gonna kick him out on account of not payin’ his bill. Miz Frances tol’ me.” She squeezed Cassie’s hands, hard. “I’ll write to you.”

“You can’t write,” said Cassie. “You can’t read neither.”

“Then you write to me,” said Judith. Her hands, gripping Cassie’s, were hot and sweaty. “I’ll git someone to read it to me.”

“I won’t know where to write to,” said Cassie. “Less’n you learn how to use the telephone and call me.”

“Telephone?” Judith’s nails pressed into Cassie’s palms. “You think they got ’em in New York?”

“You don’t have to go,” said Cassie. “You could probably sing round here and get famous just like that.”

“I know.”

“I can’t come with you,” Cassie said and gently pulled her hands away. “I ain’t gonna be your maid, an’ I guess I can’t really be your sister.”

“I know.” Judith picked up her suitcase. “I’m sorry I din’t tell them police you was progeny too. I’ll come back an’ see you. In mah big ol’ car with mah lil ol’ dog.”

“I’ll be list’nin’ to the reddieo,” said Cassie. “Every single day.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With or without Judith, it fell to Cassie to clear out Miz Eula's hotel room. Eden Pomeroy had guessed that Judith and Cassie were sisters. To Eden, it was a family duty and entitled Cassie to whatever she found up there, a few old books and the faded quilt, worn but neatly kept.

Cassie was putting everything into Miz Eula's suitcase when she found the two thick envelopes on the nightstand by the bed. One was addressed to Judith. One had Cassie's name on it. That was the one she opened. Inside there was a roll of bills and a letter. Cassie counted the money first. It was two hundred and fifty dollars. Heart pounding, she put the money back in the envelope and took out the letter, which was written in the same neat hand as the one Judith had brought to the laundry months ago.

Dear Cassie,

This money is your legacy. I know there will be nothing of value tonight at the manor, and that you'll get nothing from the estate sale tomorrow. You are an outcast like myself. This small sum cannot possibly compensate you for the troubles you have had in your life, but hopefully it will make some difference in your future.

Perhaps in some way we were sisters, like you and Judith, but regardless, you both are part of my family and I cannot let you go without knowing that you have a past and generations of relatives, all of whom were striving for the same kind of justice you and I (and Judith) deserve.

By the time you read this, I will be gone from the hotel and on my way home. I hope you will keep me in your thoughts.

Yours,

Eula Bonhomme-Forrest

Cassie picked up the other envelope, which had a similar size and heft. Miz Eula had left the same for Judith, most likely with a different note. Cassie read hers over again and this time put the money in her pocket. She put Judith's envelope in Miz Eula's suitcase and took the suitcase down to the room by the furnace. Then she sat on the edge of the bed with the lump of bills in her pocket, trying to think. She was as close to rich as she was ever going to get, and her mind spun with what to do with the money. It wasn't clothes and a car, like Judith would've wanted. Judith would probably have been jumping around the room, crowing with victory. For Cassie it was getting Lil Ma out of Mississippi.

* * *

Since there was no will, the funeral home cremated Miz Eula's body. The manager of the hotel offered Cassie the ashes in a cardboard box; she took them to the old mansion to scatter them.

Even from the golf-course side, which had been shored up and painted white, the condemned house was swaybacked and buckling. When the mansion was torn down, it would probably disperse as dust, not as beams, bricks, or shingles. From the front, where Cassie and Judith and Miz Eula had entered almost a week before, Cassie stepped out under the leafy branches of the ancient live oaks and picked her way through brambles and creeper, past what might have been a summer kitchen, and farther into woods to where the slaves had lived. Once, cabins had lined either side of the barely visible path; now no more than two bricks stood on top of each other. Back at the mansion, which showed as a shadow behind the trees, like the elephant shading a canvas flap, Cassie opened the box and gingerly scooped up a bit of the ash. She scattered it as far as it would go, which wasn't far. Her dress caught in the thorn bushes. More ash spilled as she pulled herself free. She apologized to the box. Judith would have looked at her like she was crazy, roaming around in a ghost-infested forest with yet another potential ghost right there in the box. Judith would have told her to *git the hail out*. This was

life without Judith. Cassie took the rest of the ashes up the steps of the big crumbling house and set the box on the porch under the broken shutters, just to the side of the front door.

Birds trilled in the soft air. Wild flowers had grown up in the remains of the mansion's front lawn, and she picked a few, thinking she would leave them by the box, but the gray, vandalized face of the mansion was no place for flowers. Miz Eula had always worn black anyway.

* * *

Cassie used some of her money to move out of the Veranda and in with an old widow on the colored side of Remington. The widow, Mrs. Morgan, had one daughter, who lived in Baltimore, and Cassie rented her old room. Every night after Cassie got home from work, Mrs. Morgan made her sit down for a cup of hot tea and ginger cookies and told Cassie about how, after Mister Morgan had died, her daughter had insisted that she sell the house and move to Baltimore. "He built this house with his own hands!" Mrs. Morgan would say. Every night Cassie did her best to act appalled and to offer advice. She wrote a letter to Mrs. Morgan's daughter and after several weeks, received an envelope with ten dollars in it and a note about how awful Baltimore was this time of year. Mrs. Morgan had no relatives in town, but she showed the money to her elderly friends and told them that even though her daughter was rich now, there was no way she would ever abandon Mister Morgan's hand-built house. Her elderly friends visited regularly and fussed over Cassie as if she was somebody's long-lost child. It made Cassie unbearably homesick. It made her think about Heron-Neck and what life might have been like without the burden of Grandmother's designs.

Cassie started eating supper at the Veranda and coming home well after Mrs. Morgan went to bed. She found herself less homesick at the laundry and stayed longer hours than she might have; not just because of Mrs. Morgan's tirades, but because of Winston, one of the bellhops. Winston was cherry-black, as Lil Ma would have said, with eyes so warm they melted her insides.

Cassie started meeting Winston for breakfast. He was charming and handsome and eighteen years old. He told her about his life, growing up in Remington with his granny, his mama, and his six brothers and sisters. Cassie found herself envious of the idea of brothers and sisters and even more envious of the extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins, all growing up in the same section of town. She told Winston about Grandmother and Lil Ma. There had been nothing else but laundry, and as for extended family, only Judith. She didn't mention Grandmother's grand plan for lightening the family bit by bit, or the albino boy, and certainly not Porterville, but she did tell him some of the adventures she and Judith had had on the way from Heron-Neck, and some of them, mostly the ones about Judith and her harebrained schemes in pursuit of fame, were funny. Cassie and Winston laughed together.

Later, Cassie felt guilty for laughing at Judith, and at the widow's house, she turned on the radio very softly, right around midnight, to pick up WINS. She tried to listen as often as she could, straining to hear Judith's voice among the background singers, but she was never sure she did. One night, though, it was different.

... tonight we have a special hello from one sister to another—you know who you are, gal!

The disc jockey played the song they'd heard at the Wivells' coming from the albino boy's bedroom, and on the road to Porterville, the time they hadn't found the place. It was the energetic colored version too, not the mediocre white rendition. Cassie knew the song was sent from Judith, better than a postcard. It gave her hope that Judith was on the right track and had at least learned how to use a telephone, since that was the way you got dedications onto Radio WINS.

The song ended, and the DJ played some ads. There was no more message from Judith. Nothing like *I have become a big star an' jus' you lissen*.

She introduced Winston to Radio WINS, and they would stay up late together in the laundry room listening to radio and sometimes even dancing

to the music. He was a good dancer, not the same way as Judith was, but when he took her into his arms the first time and spun her around, she thought she might pass out with joy. For the first and only time, she felt sympathy for Grandmother for falling in love with a colored man and having a child by him. Heat was what she felt right now.

* * *

Late in August, certain that by now Grandmother had discovered the benefits of the tar and was long gone, Cassie wrote to Lil Ma. She used the Veranda stationery, which was thick and cream-colored, with a hand-drawn sketch of the hotel and its address embossed at the upper left corner. It was beautiful paper, and she wrote on it in her best hand.

Dear Lil Ma,

I am writing to tell you that I am well and in Virginia. Judith found her daddy. I don't know if he ran off with a hoor or not, but it turns out even though we have the same great-great-great granddaddy, there was no money for Judith or me in his estate. Bill Forrest got \$85 as far as I know, and had to pay it all to the hotel where he was staying and where I am working. Otherwise the police would have took him to jail. I can send you money if you need it and you should come up here if you want, but I am not coming back to Mississippi.

I have had many adventures, but I miss you.

Your daughter,

Cassie

Days passed. Two weeks passed. In the laundry, steam rose in starchy puffs from the iron. Light filtered in from high, bright windows. The air was warm but not oppressive. The smell of bleach was a pleasant tang. A letter was imminent. Cassie could feel it. But the first piece of mail she got at the Veranda was a postcard from Judith.

Eden Pomeroy gave it to her with a *tsk*, like she'd already read it.

Dear Cassie,

I have made it to New York City. I stayin' with Shelly, who sings in clubs. She has give me a nice dress. We gonna be famous. Lissen for us on the radio.

*Your friend,
Judith Forrest*

It was written in a scrawl—presumably Shelly’s—barely more literate than Judith’s blocky signature at the bottom. The black-and-white picture on the other side was of the Statue of Liberty. Cassie read the postcard again. *Your friend*, not *Your sister*. That told her everything Judith hadn’t told Shelly, and that Shelly was white. There was no return address.

“Girls all alone in the big city,” Eden Pomeroy said and threw the whites in the washer.

For the next few nights, Cassie stayed up late, listening to Radio WINS with the sound turned low. None of the singers sounded remotely like Judith. Her worry over Judith clouded her sense of how soon Lil Ma’s letter would arrive. When Eden Pomeroy handed her an envelope from Mississippi a few days later, Cassie found herself relieved that it wasn’t from Judith, full of veiled, worrisome news. She expected Lil Ma to be far more straightforward.

Dear Cassie,

I hope this letter finds you. Your Grandmother left six weeks ago on the train. She wouldn’t tell me where she was going. She didn’t even pack her things. She just took half of all the money we had and left. Perhaps she came to see you? I saw Judith’s momma, and she was angry that Judith had run off to be rich just like her daddy, and now she is afraid that Judith will not send back any of the money. I told her what you said in your letter, but it made her even angrier.

Mrs. Duckett is running the laundry now, and I have enough money to come on the train. You do not need to send anything. I will be there on October 13 at 9:15 in the morning. I miss you very much.

*Your mother,
Adelaine*

Adelaine. Not *Lil Ma*. But not *Lainey* either.

Lil Ma sounded puzzled over Grandmother, as though she might find her in Remington. Since she’d mailed the tar from Richmond, Cassie had wondered if that was where Grandmother might go first, expecting to find her granddaughter erased and waiting. Cassie had pledged to herself never to set

foot in Richmond again. She thought about Grandmother, but as time passed, she found her presence less insistent, as though Grandmother were physically moving farther from Richmond, Remington, and maybe even Virginia. Cassie folded the letter and put it in her pocket.

Iris, ironing sheets, said, "That from your crazy singin' friend?"

"It's from my mama. She's coming to see me." It was just the beginning of October. Lil Ma would be here in ten days.

"All the way from Mississippi?" said Bethesda, pressing down on her iron. "Just in time to keep you from gittin' in trouble with that Winston boy."

"She already in trouble with *him*," said Iris. "Her mama comin' up for the *weddin'*."

Cassie denied that, and they laughed.

* * *

On the morning of the thirteenth, Cassie walked down to the station. She'd wanted Winston to come, but he couldn't get the time off, and as she waited for Lil Ma on the train platform, she thought it might be better if Lil Ma didn't meet him right away. Lil Ma hadn't approved of the albino boy in Heron-Neck, but Winston was dark. Very dark. Even if Lil Ma had signed herself *Adelaine*, it didn't mean Grandmother's shadow had vanished completely.

The autumn morning was warm. There were only a few people at the station. Half a dozen white men stood together at one end of the platform, smoking cigarettes and checking their watches. A colored woman and three little children waited at the far end with suitcases and a picnic basket. A white woman stood alone between the two groups, hatless, smoothing her hair against a nonexistent breeze.

Cassie made her way toward the end of the platform where the woman and her children were. She passed the spot where Judith had waited through Cassie's two days as a white girl. It made Cassie nervous to be anywhere near there. Someone at the station might have witnessed Cassie's transformation.

Some porter, some conductor, some engineer, some stationmaster with a bristly white beard. The fear that a guest at the Veranda would recognize her was a nightmare that often woke her.

The white woman on the platform turned to watch Cassie. She was elderly, with bleached-looking hair and a lot of lipstick. Her cloth coat was too heavy for the mild autumn air, but she hunched into it like she was cold. There was no way to get to the far end of the platform without passing her, and Cassie looked at other things—the leaves on the ground, the benches, the cloudless sky—anything to keep from looking at this woman whose eyes she felt examining her from head to foot. For a terrible second Cassie thought it was the waitress from the diner in Richmond who had offered her a place to live—back when she was white. But this woman was too old. Against her will and after months of resolve, Cassie glanced into the woman's face for just a second. As their eyes met, the woman flinched as though she'd actually been struck. She clutched her coat and backed away, and in that moment, Cassie saw the kinky iron color her hair had once been, her dark complexion.

Everything on the platform seemed to freeze. At their end, the white men paused in their smoking. At the other, the colored woman frowned in their direction. The white woman's face took on a terrible expression. "Get away from me," she whispered in Grandmother's voice. With gummy slowness she took a step and another. She fled with tremendous effort, across the tracks and away from Remington, her feet seeming to stick each time they touched the ground.

Cassie stumbled to the nearest bench and sat, seized with fear that the tar could work in reverse, and that when she looked at her own hands again, all the whiteness she'd left in Richmond would come rushing back. She kept her eyes on the trees on the other side of the tracks. Had this woman—Grandmother?—been on her way to Boston to be absorbed into the Porterville *community*? Cassie dared to examine her own hands, her arms, her ankles. All still cinnamon.

In a while the train came, carrying Lil Ma in the car at the end, reserved for colored people. When she finally saw Lil Ma, all she could do was sob in

Adelaine's arms.

* * *

Lil Ma loved Winston. He was charming and beautiful, and she told Cassie in girlish whispers what a catch he was. Mrs. Morgan fell ill and became very frail. Instead of looking for work, Lil Ma took care of her. She sent letters weekly to the widow's daughter in Baltimore, describing Mrs. Morgan's worsening condition. Often there was no reply.

In the kitchen one November evening, over tea and ginger cookies, Lil Ma said, "I'm worried about her. She's fading. Someone in her family should be with her." Mrs. Morgan was asleep in the next room. Lil Ma kept her voice low. "Her daughter said she was glad we were taking care of her. She said she would try to come at Christmas. She sent money in case we need a doctor." Lil Ma was quiet for a long while. "Children should come when their parents are in need."

The house was silent. The tea cooled.

Lil Ma said, "Cassie, do you know why your grandmother left?"

Cassie took a sip of too-hot tea and swallowed, too guilty to speak.

"Do you have any idea where she is?"

"Nome," said Cassie, "I don't."

Lil Ma put her hands around her teacup and said in a soft voice, "I can't even tell if she's alive anymore."

* * *

Winston proposed to Cassie at Thanksgiving, and their engagement was announced in the colored paper, the *Remington Opportunity*. Lil Ma cut out the announcement, and instead of sticking it on the wall, like in Heron-Neck, she put it in a nice frame. Mrs. Morgan died right after Christmas. Lil Ma sent the obituary to Mrs. Morgan's daughter, who had never come down from Baltimore. Mrs. Morgan's daughter gladly sold them the house. Cassie used some of Miz Eula's money, telling Lil Ma she'd been saving up. Miz Eula

would have approved, she thought.

In January, Judith's second postcard came to the Veranda. This time the writing was even and crisp; an educated hand. Even Judith's signature looked neater.

Dear Cassie,

I am doing well. I am waiting tables. I am singing in church every Sunday. Jesus is my savior.

God bless you.

Judith Forrest

The picture on the other side was of Radio City Music Hall. There was no return address.

"Judith Forrest is singing for the Lord," said Lil Ma. "Maybe she's finally on the right track."

"At least she has a job," said Cassie. Iris and Bethesda had told her everything they knew about New York City. They had friends, uncles, and cousins of cousins who knew how terrible and dangerous big-city life was. Cassie did her best to sort the absurd from the likely, but the likely was pretty bad.

The picture of Radio City Music Hall was in color, decked out with Christmas lights arranged to resemble an immense tree and a line of huge candles. The candles were twice the size of the people standing below in the snow, waiting to get inside. The place would speak to Judith. Clearly anyone who sang in the Music Hall would end up on the Radio. She hoped they sang gospel in the Radio City.

One rainy Sunday when Winston had to work and Lil Ma was napping, Cassie wrote a letter to Judith. There was no address to send it to, but Cassie felt that if she ever found out where Judith was, a reply would have to be quick. Judith didn't seem to stay in one place for long.

Dear Judith,

I am still working at the Veranda Hotel. My mother is here, too. I am engaged to Winston Childs, who is a bellboy. We plan to get married in March and start a family.

I have gotten your postcards from New York City. Iris and Bethesda tell me how dangerous that place is, but I know you will make the best of what you find. I am listening to the radio as often as I can. I know I will hear you one day.

Miz Eula left you an envelope with some money in it. I haven't opened it so I don't know how much, but when you have an address, please let me know so I can send you your part of our legacy.

She stopped. The hopeful words felt empty. Judith always acted like she enjoyed living by her wits, but she would almost certainly end up at the mercy of strangers with less talent and better lies. Cassie had pictured Judith homeless, dirty, frightened—at best, unhappily waiting tables—but always moving forward. She had never imagined Judith defeated, and she had no advice to offer. She wrote,

If you ever get tired looking for fame and fortune, please come back to Remington. We will always have a place for you.

*Your sister,
Cassie*

On the first day of spring, Cassie and Winston got married in their own backyard. Friends from the hotel threw rice and peach petals. Their picture was in the *Opportunity*, and Lil Ma cut it out and framed it. Cassie became pregnant, and Lil Ma bought a dozen frames, anticipating baby pictures.

One of the upstairs rooms would be the nursery, but now it was full of odds and ends from the late Mrs. Morgan. Before she got too big to do anything practical, Cassie set herself the task of cleaning out the room and making it suitable for a baby. Between winter clothes, old shoes, and a trunk of the widow's things, she found Miz Eula's portfolio, which she had brought from the hotel and forgotten about. When Cassie opened it, nothing had changed. The onionskin layers, the swaddled glass daguerreotypes, the ancient newspapers, and the yellowed pages of poetry. Cassie had seen Miz Eula's obituary in the newspaper. It had been short, noting that she had been a guest at the Veranda for some time, but made no mention of her age. Cassie had meant to cut it out, but hadn't, and now, seeing the bits of the past that

Miz Eula had insisted on keeping with her, an obituary seemed out of place, like an end to something that could never completely end. *What's important is the past*, Miz Eula had said. Cassie took the daguerreotypes carefully from their wrapping, brought them downstairs, and put them in the frames Lil Ma had brought home for the baby.

They fit nicely, and in the glance of light from the kitchen window, the images there from a century ago reflected in black and white.

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SUZANNE FELDMAN, a recipient of the *Missouri Review*'s Jeffrey E. Smith Editors' Prize and a finalist for the Bakeless Prize in fiction, holds an MA in fiction from Johns Hopkins University and a BFA in art from the Maryland Institute College of Art. She is the author of award-winning science fiction titles such as *Speaking Dreams* and *The Annunciate*, published under the pen name Severna Park. Her short fiction has appeared in *Narrative*, *The Missouri Review*, *Gargoyle*, and other literary journals. She lives in Frederick, Maryland. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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About the Author

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