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SADEQA JOHNSON

The House of Eve
Yellow Wife
And Then There Was Me
Second House from the Corner
Love in a Carry-On Bag

KEEPER *of* LOST CHILDREN

— —

SADEQA JOHNSON

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For my father, Tyrone Murray—
my forever example of love.
I am because of you.

PROLOGUE

Mannheim, Germany, 1946

A hand pounded against the front door. Startled from her morning prayers, Sister Proba clutched the cross hanging around her neck, hoping it was just the wind. But then she heard it again.

Rap, rap, rap.

Wearing only her thin nightgown, she quickly got to her feet and grabbed her robe.

The knocking got louder and more aggressive as she moved down the winding back stairs, draping her veil over her wispy hair and pinning it in place. At the bottom of the steps, Junior Sister was dressed just as haphazardly, brow furrowed with concern. With only a look between them, the two nuns moved down the long hall, passing the dining room, and then through the foyer.

After flipping on the light in the small vestibule, Sister Proba looked through the peephole. She touched her forehead and then made the sign of the cross before unlatching the door.

Under the portico stood a woman with pasty skin and slightly wrinkled clothes. Streaks of dried tears stained her hollow cheeks.

A child's legs wrapped around the woman's waist, and tiny arms were tightly fastened against her neck.

"Help me," the woman croaked.

The nun stepped aside and ushered the pair into the parlor, where Junior Sister was already at work starting a fire.

"I cannot keep him." The woman's eyes were filled with shame.

The child stayed fitted around her so tightly, it was hard to see where one began and the other ended. Sister Proba gestured for the woman to take a seat.

"My father banished me from our village." The young woman re-positioned the boy in her lap, and when he faced forward, his sweater was a size too small and his thick hair unruly. It was just as the nun had suspected.

Mischlingskinder.

The two nuns exchanged a look but said nothing.

"He threatened to sell him to the traveling human zoo as an exotic for twenty-five deutsche marks. My son would be kept in a cage and put on display." She wrapped her arms more tightly around the brown-skinned boy. "We ran away to a shelter, but the conditions . . ." The woman dropped her eyes. "Deplorable."

The billows made a whooshing sound as Junior Sister stoked the fire.

"I have found work as a live-in housekeeper, but I cannot bring a child. You are my last hope. Please, take him."

Sister Proba stood and reached for the boy, who was so sleepy he didn't put up a fuss. "Write down the usual information before she goes," she directed Junior Sister, then squeezed the frail woman's shoulders. "May God be with you."

The boy grew heavier in Sister Proba's arms as she ascended the steps to the second floor. This child would be number twenty-two at the orphanage. All occupation children, all of mixed-race parentage and a result of war.

The large dormitory room smelled of babies' breath and pillow drool. She lay the sleeping boy down on an empty cot and tucked the gray wool cover around him. Just as she turned to go, the boy lifted his head and clutched the hem of her robe.

"Mummy?"

"Shh, go back to sleep. You are safe," she cooed.

But the boy wouldn't be mollified. "Mummy. Mummy," he said, louder this time. The child next to him stirred, then the one in front of him. Harmonious cries of "Mummy. Where's Mummy?" echoed throughout the room.

"Go back to bed, children, it is okay." The nun moved from one child to the next, tucking them back under the covers, rubbing backs, and whispering sweet words of affection.

Still the boy would not be pacified. He pushed off the bed and started running across the floor. "Mummy. Don't go. Please, no!"

Part I

*When I discover who I am,
I'll be free.*

—RALPH ELLISON

CHAPTER 1

Prince Frederick, MD, September 1965

SOPHIA

On the morning of her first day of tenth grade, Sophia Clark lay in a damp nightshirt, cowering at the sound of roof rats eating through the plaster walls of the farmhouse's kitchen. Through the tiny window, she could see that it was still purple outside, and although she wanted to stall a bit, she could hear Ma Deary's nagging voice, *If you want to eat, then you got to work.* The sole rooster in the barn began to crow like he was being paid to warn farmers within a five-mile radius that the sun was coming. Although his *cock-a-doodle* was the constant start to her mornings, today his cawing plucked against her temple.

As her eyes adjusted to the dark room, she touched her forearms, inflamed with welts that had sprouted like blades of wheat. Her throat felt parched, but when she reached for the mug of water she had placed on the milk crate beside her bed, she discovered that it had been tipped over by the wild flailing of her limbs through the night.

Sophia rose carefully to avoid hitting her head on the low ceiling. Her bedroom was so small she couldn't even cuss a cat without getting fur in her mouth. It really wasn't a bedroom. More like a space

meant for storage adjacent to the kitchen. Ma Deary had forced her into the tiny space so her night screams would stop waking the rest of the house.

Stepping out of her faded nightshirt and into threadbare overalls, Sophia fastened them at her shoulders with safety pins. Then she used the rubber band on her wrist to tie back her ginger hair. As she opened the door to the kitchen, she stomped her feet to scare the rats into their hiding place.

Sophia moved to the sink and turned on the faucet. The basin was tarnished with rusted copper streaks. The pipes shook, then sputtered out brown water. After about fifteen seconds, the water ran clear, and she dipped her mug and drank. From the front bedroom drifted the hard snorts of Ma Deary, which somehow harmonized with the soft snores of the Old Man. Sophia gritted her teeth.

She shuffled across the scuffed plank floors to the back of the house, where her twin brothers, Karl and Lu, were curled head to toe on a mattress that smelled of piss no matter how many times Sophia sprinkled it with baking soda.

“Boys. Time to get up,” she coaxed, but when neither moved, she pulled the blanket, pocked with moth holes, down to their waists.

Karl tugged the covers back over his thick head and mumbled, “Five more minutes.”

Sophia tapped his back. “Can’t, bud. Today is the first day of fifth grade, remember?”

“We gotta do chores on the first day a school?” Lu sat up, rubbing his hazel eyes. “No fair.”

“You know the men aren’t here to help, and we gotta take care of the chickens and the cows before we head off to school. Now move it.” Sophia shoved the blanket to their ankles to show she meant business. Both boys groaned, and she understood why. They were dog-tired.

The summer had been hard as shoe leather on all of them. In the past, Ma Deary’s brother, Uncle Wayon, had hired recently released

convicts in conjunction with a government program to do some of the more strenuous work on the farm. But this past spring, Unc had spent all of his time in D.C. chasing tail—Ma Deary’s words, not Sophia’s—and had forgotten to reapply for the program before the May 15 deadline. So all fifty acres had fallen on Sophia and her brothers. While their classmates had enjoyed lazy lake swims, the kids had worked their tails off.

They spent each day with their backs crouched, hauling heavy buckets of produce, grinding tubs of feed, dragging sprinklers across the massive fields, feeding the animals, and fighting with faulty machinery under the merciless sun. In the evenings, they heaved debris until their shoulder blades screamed, and shoveled animal manure until what little they had in their stomachs threatened to come back up. Before bed, they scrubbed every surface clean, and disinfected the farm tools and equipment until their heads were dizzy from the smell of Peridox, a concentrated cleaner which prevented bacteria, viruses, and the outbreak of disease.

For the past three months, Sophia and her brothers had labored twelve-hour days, and now that school was starting, she wasn’t sure how they would manage it all.

“Hurry, boys.” She flicked on the light. “Time’s a-wastin.”

When she was satisfied that the twins were slipping into their sweatpants, Sophia went through to the kitchen and pushed open the screen back door. A cool breeze caressed her cheeks, and the burst of crisp air awakened all her senses.

Her older brother, Walter, sat on the porch in a corroded metal rocking chair, chewing on a piece of straw. “Morning.” He tipped his wide-brimmed panama hat to her.

“How’d you sleep?” Sophia dropped in the seat beside him while reaching for her mud-caked boots.

“Nothing like breathing in all that fresh open air.” He smiled, showing off the gap between his two front teeth. Walter’s skin was so

tanned that his nose was peeling. When it was hot like it had been, Walter preferred to sleep in a hammock outside rather than on the sagging sofa in the living room of their two-bedroom house. “You?”

Sophia shook her head and pulled her shirtsleeves down over the red marks on her arms, but she knew that Walter had already seen them.

“The dream again?” He wrinkled his brows with concern, but she changed the subject.

“Any word from Unc? He knows today is the first day of school, right?”

“He’ll be by soon.” Walter stretched his long legs out in front of him and then stood.

“If you don’t see those boys in the next five minutes—”

“I’ll wrangle them and send them your way.”

Sophia mumbled her thanks as her boots sank into the soft earth. She could smell the morning dew and could already hear the dawn chorus of hens summoning her to the coop. As she rolled back the barn door, the stench of chicken feces and ammonia greeted her. “Buck-buck-buck-badaack,” clucked the hens.

“Morning to you too.” Sophia sneezed while picking up one of several white pails stacked next to the pallet of hay.

Along each side of the barn walls were wooden raised coops stacked in rows of three and four. Each contained individual nesting boxes for the nearly five hundred hens that Sophia was responsible for. Some of the boxes cradled brown eggs abandoned by the hens, already out foraging the barn for food.

Sophia collected the eggs off the floor, from the empty nests and the dark corners where some hens liked to lay them, and put them atop the hay she’d collected earlier. There were always a few broody hens who honored their motherly instincts and refused to move from their nests, and she gently scooped them up and out of her way to secure the eggs. As she gathered eggs from nest to nest, rotating full pails

for empty ones, Sophia tried to let the squawks of the hens drown out the talking picture that had been playing through her head all morning, but the noise just kept getting louder.

Sophia had never told Ma Deary or the Old Man about her school counselor, Mrs. Brown, pulling her from the school's breakfast line to meet the white woman in the pillbox hat.

The visit had taken place on the first Monday after Christmas break, last school year. Sophia's toes had still been cold from her walk to school when Mrs. Brown invited her to sit in her office. Every person at W. S. Brooks High School was Negro, and Sophia remembered being taken aback to see a white woman with gold rings on most every finger smiling up at her.

Mrs. Brown had introduced the woman as Mrs. Winston from the Prosser Foundation, explaining that she had come to Brooks High School searching for the brightest Negro student in the county to offer the privilege of attending an elite boarding school to continue high school education. Sophia had been selected along with Kathy Baker and Alonzo Morton to sit in the library and take the three-hour placement test.

"Today? Without studying?" Sophia sputtered, but Mrs. Brown assured her that she would be fine.

"There is nothing to prep. It's a standard test."

They were each ushered to a different table in the library, given two pencils, a question booklet, and a bubble sheet. Once the exam had concluded, the three students were lined up outside of Mrs. Brown's office and called in one at a time for an interview with Mrs. Winston.

During Sophia's interview, Mrs. Winston offered her a cup of peppermint tea and shortbread cookies on a paper doily while asking questions about her family life, education, hobbies, and future aspirations.

Sophia got stuck on the notion of hobbies and told the woman

frankly, "There isn't much free time on the farm. 'Cept maybe a quick game of catch in between milking the cows and composting the dung."

Mrs. Winston's stricken look made Sophia wish she had made something up. She left school that day with a small bag of goodies that had included a keychain with "West Oak Forest Academy" on it and a brochure slathered with pictures of smiling students in brightly decorated classrooms holding brand-new books. The glossy pamphlet provided a portal into a new world that Sophia had never imagined existed. On the farm, she had told only Walter. To which he'd smiled and said he'd pray on it for her. She didn't have the heart to share the idea of West Oak Forest Academy with Ma Deary: She would be the weed to Sophia's seedling, choking out the life of her dream and depriving it the light to grow.

What had gotten Sophia through her gruesome summer days cleaning the horse stalls, watering and feeding the chickens, cows, cats, and goat, collecting eggs on top of eggs, and harvesting and grinding corn for feed, was knowing that at the end of each night, she had the shiny pages of the school's brochure waiting for her. Against Sophia's will, hope had seeped in, and a deep yearning had taken root. Her whole body had begun to crave a life away from the farm.

But as the metal handle of the pail dug into the crevices of her dry palm, the reality of her life brought her back into the barn, and Sophia chided herself for being so foolish. Attending West Oak Forest Academy had been nothing more than a pipe dream.

Finished with pulling the eggs, she lifted the garden hoe hanging from the wall and scraped the roosting bars from left to right until all the waste had fallen to the ground. While she swabbed the bars with a sponge she kept soaked in vinegar, Karl and Lu entered the barn with the chicken feed and fresh buckets of water.

The boys were fraternal twins but looked nothing alike. Karl was tall and big-boned, with skin the color of toast, and had inky eyes. Lu

was short and willowy, with eyes so see-through he reminded her of a kitten.

Sophia wanted to give them the job of carrying the eggs down to the mudroom, but she didn't trust them not to break them.

"Lu, while Karl fills the feeders, you grab the pitchfork and turn the bedding in each nest. If it looks soggy, just replace it with clean straw from the pallet."

"Why can't I feed the hens?" Lu whined.

"You did it yesterday," said Karl.

"Boys, we don't have time for arguing."

"He started it," said Lu.

"It was you," said Karl.

"You have twenty minutes, so make haste. We still gotta milk the cows." Sophia headed for the barn door and then remembered, "And don't forget to close up all the nests so the chickens can't get back inside."

Sophia lugged two pails of eggs at a time to the small mudroom at the back of the farmhouse. It was more like a shed with a refrigerator and a long aluminum prep table. It took her several trips to get all the pails inside. Sophia then examined each egg, checking for cracks, and then wiped them all down with a clean rag before placing them into the cartons.

Satisfied with her work, she stacked the cartons in the refrigerator. The Old Man would carry some to their local customers in town later, but the bulk of the egg production was delivered to three restaurants in Washington, D.C., on Thursdays, just in time for the weekend rush.

Next she had to milk the cows, the chore that she abhorred most. As she rounded the corner to the milking parlor, she hoped the cows were in a good mood.

Inside the parlor, she found Walter already perched on the milking stool, cleaning the cow's udders.

"Don't you have to water the fields?" she asked.

"I'll do it after this. You go get ready for the first day of school."

"You have school too, Walter." Sophia put her hands on her hips. "Just 'cause you're a senior don't mean you can skip."

He swatted at a fly in the air. "I don't need to go on the first day. It's more or less the same. 'Sides, I promised Unc that I'd have the milk ready for the morning pickup. He said he should have two or three hands by tomorrow, and then I'll go."

Not having to fool with the cows would give her time to freshen up before the three-mile walk to school. "You sure?"

"Go on, now." He turned his face back and started lubricating the teats.

Walter did not have to tell Sophia again. As she headed back to the house, she couldn't understand how Walter could be so content with farmwork. Sophia could not wait to grow up and wear classy dresses with high heels and perfume like the pretty girlfriends Unc brought around.

Sophia washed her hands at the spigot that ran on the side of the house. Cracked and calloused, her fingers looked like they belonged to someone twice her age. The Old Man was already out on one of the tractors—she could hear the motor chugging from around back—but Ma Deary continued to snort and snore.

As Sophia set the eggs to boil, she thought lovingly of her television mother, Margaret Anderson from *Father Knows Best*. Margaret would never let her children go off to school without presenting a beautifully set dining table, covered with bacon, eggs, toast, and freshly squeezed orange juice. Sophia rolled her eyes in the direction of Ma Deary with disgust.

She walked down into her bedroom. An octagonal window the size of two fists let in a stream of sunlight. There were no electrical sockets in her room, and the only other light that came through was when she left the kitchen door ajar.

Sophia pulled her school skirt out of the trunk in the corner.

Last school year, the skirt fell below her knee, as required. She must have grown at least two inches over the summer, because now the skirt stopped above her knee. Seeing that it was all she had to wear, it would have to do.

The farm sat a ways back from the main street, so Sophia and the twins traipsed through uncut grass for a quarter of a mile before reaching Double Oak Road. Sophia checked her brothers for ticks, then the three walked along in single file. After dropping the boys off at the big red barn that had been converted into a lower school, she walked the last mile alone to the high school, feeling her stomach slip from a loose loop into a tight knot.

W. S. Brooks was a single-story brick building that sat back on a large lot with a smattering of white ash and hickory trees. The grass smelled freshly mowed, and the high-pitched laughter of classmates reuniting after summer rang out loud. Sophia pushed her hand over her head, not sure why she had even wasted time with the brush and comb because the morning humidity had already puffed up her hair like a horse helmet.

As she crossed the parking lot, tugging her too-short skirt, she saw upperclassmen wearing their first-day best, posted against freshly washed vehicles, shooting the breeze. A group of sophomore boys tossed a football while blushing girls flashed their teeth, thirsting after the attention their two-hour morning routine deserved.

“Orangutan,” a shrilly voice called out.

Sophia’s shoulders stiffened. It was Maxine and her dreaded triad of flunkies. She picked up her pace.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know your name all of a sudden.” Maxine spoke louder, and her acolytes scratched under their arms while producing monkey sounds: “Oo-oo-ah-ah.”

Sophia didn’t have to look at them to know that all four girls had on

brand-new A-line skirts, starched white blouses, and two-toned flats, with their hair pressed to a shine. Their flowery fragrances contrasted with her own aroma of egg yolk and the rotten-plant residue stuck to the bottoms of her shoes. The girls were on her heels by the time Sophia had reached for the school's front door with a trembling hand.

"Don't fall asleep in class this year, either. Wouldn't want the boogeyman to get you," Maxine hissed in her ear and cackled while the flunkies chorused their monkey sounds.

Sophia was about to run away from them like she had all last school year, but something deep inside of her rooted her to the ground. She turned and looked Maxine dead in the eye. "And don't you eat lunch. Might be a razor blade in your sandwich."

Maxine looked so stunned that, in the time it had taken for her to recover, Sophia was already down the hall ducking into her first-period class.

She had been assigned to eleventh-grade chemistry even though she was technically in tenth grade. While her teacher went over the year's objectives and what they would master, a student entered with a note for the teacher.

"Sophia Clark, report to the principal's office," her teacher said.

The knot was now so tight in her stomach, Sophia thought she would throw up. Swallowing hard, she gathered her things. It seemed like every eye in the room turned to watch her get out of her seat. Her knees wobbled so much that, right before she reached the door, she tripped over her own foot and grabbed the doorknob to catch herself from falling. The kids roared with laughter.

"Now, class, settle down." The teacher slapped her palm three times against her desk.

Sophia moved through the deserted halls, wondering if she was being summoned because Maxine had told on her about the razor-blade comment, or if one of the hall monitors had reported her for dress-code violation on account of her too-short skirt. If it were the

comment, she would deny it, and if it were the latter, she would assure Principal Travis that the short skirt was an accident. She'd say that her mother had bought the wrong size but would take her shopping over the weekend. Which was a bald-faced lie. Ma Deary never took them shopping. She simply brought home clothes from the hospital's lost-and-found box and told them to choose whatever passed as fitting. Unc's latest girlfriend had given Sophia what she wore now, probably out of sheer pity. She had looked Sophia over and said, "Sugar, you are way too pretty to be dressed like an old maid."

The school's office had a small reception area with a desk and two bookshelves.

"For heaven's sake, Sophia?" The white-haired receptionist looked up from her ledger.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Mrs. Brown's just about had a cow trying to locate you. Head on back now before you give that woman a full-fledged heart attack."

Sophia breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Brown would be easier to talk to about her circumstance than the principal. When she reached the end of the hall, she could hear Mrs. Brown's heels click against the vinyl-plank floor. Mrs. Brown was wearing a plaid blazer with a pleated skirt, and as she removed her reading glasses, her mouth hung agape. Sophia bristled. She could tell by the look on the woman's face what was coming next.

Detention.

Mrs. Brown was the first lady of First Samuel's Baptist Church, and very no-nonsense about girls looking and behaving like young women: no short skirts, no fingernail polish, no earrings bigger than a hatpin, and no foul language permitted under any circumstances. Sophia was in violation of at least two of the hard-and-fast rules and braced herself for the consequences.

"Sophia. Why are you here?"

"A student pulled me from class with a note," she stuttered.

Mrs. Brown's dimples deepened as she shook her full head of Shirley Temple curls. "I mean here at Brooks High School. Did you not receive my message?"

Sophia touched her forehead. So she was not in trouble. Which meant that there was no detention, leaving ample time to get her evening chores done before the sun went down. It was near impossible to work in the barn in the dark, and she always worried about stepping on chicken snakes.

Then Mrs. Brown's words registered. Sophia asked, "What message?"

Mrs. Brown lifted a file folder from her desk with "Sophia Clark" written in red ink. "Your application to the Prosser Foundation was accepted. You've passed all the necessary tests and have been admitted to West Oak Forest Academy."

Sophia blinked her eyes, not sure she had heard correctly.

"The school's headmaster has called countless times looking for you. He said two letters were mailed out to you over the summer. I even called and left a message with your mother."

"I got in?" Sophia asked, stunned.

"Yes. You did it. Congratulations." Mrs. Brown's lips were stretched so wide with laughter that Sophia could see the gold crowns wrapped around her molars.

Sophia put her hand to her mouth as she sank into the chair opposite Mrs. Brown. Why hadn't Ma Deary given her the message?

"They were going to give your spot away to a boy from Richmond, but I told them that I would have you there before class tomorrow morning." Mrs. Brown slid the folder across the desk to Sophia. "I am certain that it was your mother I spoke with on"—she spun her chair toward the calendar hanging behind her head—"July 29, 1965."

July 29 had been the one day, all summer long, when Sophia had been away from the farm. Unc and one of his girlfriends had taken them to the bay for a picnic and a swim on Walter's eighteenth

birthday. Sophia thought to lie to cover for Ma Deary's negligence. She usually had something at the ready, but right now she was drawing a blank. She fidgeted with the hem of her skirt around her fingertip.

"Something told me to stop by your house, but I got so busy with the prep for the new school year." Mrs. Brown beamed. "Well, in any case, you've already missed a few days, so it is imperative that your parents drive you first thing tomorrow." She shuffled a few more papers. "Here's the packing list. You can head on home to prepare. Oh, and I almost forgot."

Sophia watched as Mrs. Brown reached under her desk and then handed her a silver gift bag tied with a white bow.

"A few of us in the office got you this. To get you started."

Underneath the shiny tissue paper was a white cotton nightgown with a matching robe and a pair of fuzzy slippers. A package of new panties, knee socks, and a pair of gently used loafers. Sophia could not remember ever receiving a gift, let alone one packaged so beautifully. Not even on Christmas.

"I had to guess your shoe size. I sincerely hope they fit. You will be given a school uniform upon your arrival, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Thank you," Sophia breathed, weightless with glee.

"Your parents won't have any issues getting you there tomorrow, will they?" Mrs. Brown eyed her pointedly. "I'd take you myself, but I have a meeting with the superintendent on the terrible condition of our textbooks."

"No, ma'am." Sophia swallowed hard.

"Good. Here is my telephone number. Call me if you have any problems at all." Mrs. Brown stood, and before Sophia knew what was happening, Mrs. Brown had swept her into her arms. She was big-breasted, smelled like peach cobbler, and her embrace was as comforting as anything Sophia had ever known.

“I don’t know how to thank you.” Sophia couldn’t remember the last time she had been hugged, and she didn’t want to let go.

Mrs. Brown patted her shoulder. “Doing your best is thanks enough. Now go on. Make Brooks proud.”

Sophia picked up her bag of goodies, and as she walked out the door, Mrs. Brown called behind her, “And for the love of God, do something with that hair.”

CHAPTER 2

Lourdes, France, July 1950

ETHEL

Ethel Gathers rode the train to Lourdes, France, desperate for a miracle. She clutched her rosary beads, knowing that a healing encounter with the Virgin Mary was as likely as Pope Pius XII inviting her to the grand dining hall at the Vatican for dinner. Still, she had no choice but to believe. Dr. Burroughs's letter with her diagnosis was like energy radiating from inside her purse, and she found herself patting the top of her bag, trying to suppress the dissemination of his memorandum, which stated that Ethel was unable to bear a child.

As the wheels of the train churned and clacked beneath her feet, Ethel kissed the crucifix of the rosary and then made the sign of the cross before draping the multicolored beads across her cotton gabardine skirt. She had already prayed the full rosary three times over the past six hours while riding through the woodlands of France, but she did not feel at peace.

Since she had arrived as a newlywed in Mannheim, Germany, three months earlier, Ethel had rarely left their apartment. She had no friends, did not speak German, and whenever she ventured outside to do more than on-base shopping, she found herself disoriented on

the streets. With her husband, Bert, working long hours in the field, she was often alone, and the solitude had begun to unravel her. She found herself restless and had started to lose weight. It was Bert who suggested that she join the other army wives on the trip to France.

“I’ll miss you”—he’d pecked her cheek as he produced the pamphlet—“but it’ll do you some good, darling, to make some friends and see a bit of the world while we’re over here.”

Now the women were traveling from Mannheim, where they were stationed with their high-ranking officer husbands, on a spiritual pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, where St. Bernadette was said to have had eighteen visions of the Virgin Mary. Ethel had agreed to the long journey because she believed that the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of all, could heal her womb and change her fate. *For we walk by faith, not by sight*, she reminded herself as she reached for her leather-bound diary resting in the empty seat next to her.

As a reporter at large for Baltimore’s *Afro-American*, Ethel had been assigned a feature on the living conditions of the Negro military stationed abroad. She picked up her pen, with the notion of writing about the mistreatment Bert had shared with her of the Negro soldiers by the white military police, but after starting and stopping, starting again and stopping, she had managed to write only one lack-luster paragraph. Capping her fountain pen, she abandoned the idea, at least temporarily, and looked out the window. She saw a clear, bubbling stream running down lush green hills into an open valley. The burgeoning blue sky held just a small trace of clouds, where two birds soared and circled each other. And then the train shunted through a lavender farm so purple and wild that Ethel could smell its soft powdery scent. Never had she experienced a rolling landscape that changed like a picture show, but even with so much beauty, Ethel had begun to feel her knees stiffen. They had been on the train for nearly seven hours. Perhaps she needed to stretch her limbs and walk a bit.

Ethel rose from her seat and made her way down the aisle toward the lounge car for a refreshment. As she passed through the railcar, she saw the other wives. While there were no segregated cars in France, she noticed her companions had managed to separate themselves. The whites sat on the right front side of the railcar. Ethel had sat in the center, on the left side. Julia Jones, the only other Negro wife on the trip, sat behind her, though she'd been sleeping the whole way.

The scent of burning cigarettes reached Ethel at the entrance to the lounge car, which was filled mostly with French and Spanish patrons eating on white china plates and sipping from champagne and highball glasses. Two young boys wearing knickers played checkers at one of the tables while their parents cackled over a board game that Ethel did not recognize. Sitting alone on a velvet sofa was a dark-haired woman with olive skin and striking blue eyes. She was the American wife who had coordinated the trip, but Ethel couldn't recall her name.

"How do you do?" The wife tilted her chin while taking a long drag from her cigarette.

"I'm well. You?"

"Positively exhausted of this train, that's for sure," she said, exhaling.

Ethel chuckled. "That's why I came for a beverage. Ripe for a change of scenery."

"Where are my manners? Please, have a seat." The woman gestured to the spot next to her.

Ethel hesitated for only a second before smoothing down the back of her skirt and taking the offered seat.

"Any idea how much longer we have to go?" Ethel sat her envelope purse in her lap. The classical piano music felt good against her ears.

"I think about thirty minutes more."

A waiter appeared in a stiff black uniform. Ethel ordered a cup of English breakfast tea and the woman a gin fizz.

“Please, tell me your name again?”

“Ethel Gathers. My husband, Albert Gathers, is the army chief warrant officer.”

“I’m Dorothy. Dorothy Hansen.” She exhaled. “I’m married to Lieutenant General Skip Hansen. I’m glad you were able to join us. I’ve run this trip for three years straight. It was designed so that the new wives who arrived on base had the blessing to be fruitful by the Virgin Mary.”

That was Ethel’s hope, but she could not tell Dorothy. Instead, she said, “I have always wanted to take a religious pilgrimage.”

Dorothy smirked. “Well, hallelujah! You are the first. Most of the women are along for the adventure and the promise of a soak in the hot thermal baths that the Pyrenees Mountains are famous for.”

“Well, that sounds delightful too.”

The waiter returned and poured their respective drinks. “How long have you been in Germany?” Dorothy said as she sipped.

“A little over three months. Still trying to get my bearings.”

“Living abroad is an adjustment, but you will get used to it. I have come to appreciate the cultural experience. Back home I was forced to be so closed-minded.” Dorothy released the swivel handle of her belly-skin handbag and pulled out a book. “I think this will help.” She turned the book over to Ethel. The cover read *The Army Wife* by Nancy Shea. “It’s been a life saver for me. Outlining all the dos and don’ts that come with this gig. You are welcome to borrow it.”

Ethel wanted to refuse the book—she had enough reading to do for the article she was writing—but she recognized the book as an olive branch and decided to accept it. “Thank you, that’s very kind.”

“Don’t mention it.” Dorothy waved her comment away. “On this side of the pond, we have the freedom to get to know each other. Let’s take advantage of that.” She pinned Ethel with her blue gaze until both women couldn’t help but smile.

There was something refreshing about Dorothy, and Ethel found

herself saying, “I’d like that, and I’ll be sure to return the book when I am finished.”

At Gare de Lourdes, Ethel disembarked to blaring rail announcements in French and the smell of unflushed toilets. She touched the beaded necklace at her throat, hardly able to believe they had finally arrived. Dorothy led the group down the platform, through the station’s doors, and onto the street.

Tiny cars were scattered along the curb, and Dorothy pointed to the red passenger van waiting for them to the left of the entrance. As the women giggled their way onto the van, Dorothy confirmed the party with a head count.

Julia Jones slid across the leather seat next to Ethel. Julia had a square face and small eyes that reminded Ethel of Eartha Kitt. She smelled like maple syrup, and her hair was tightly curled.

“Well, this is the most exciting thing I’ve done in a long time, I must say.” Julia whipped out a black compact stenciled in gold with hummingbirds and flower petals. She powdered her cheeks, forehead, and nose as the van came to a traffic stop. “Have you traveled much?”

“Back home a bit,” said Ethel, touching her bangs. “But this is my first time in France.”

“Mine too,” cooed Julia.

“Your compact is stunning.” Ethel pointed.

“Thank you. It was my grandmother’s. Wouldn’t believe it was made in the thirties,” she said, dropping it back into her purse. “Mama said to hang on to it, might be worth some money one day.”

The town of Lourdes sat in the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains, and as the van drove west toward the religious attractions, Ethel could hear the gurgle and flow of the Gave de Pau babbling through the center of the city. The van twisted past what looked like gingerbread houses and storybook shops sandwiched by piney

hills and jagged mountaintops. The driver parked at the tip of a slim pedestrian-only street. The aromas of frankincense, myrrh, and balsam greeted Ethel as she followed Julia off the van. The white wives pivoted around one another, just far enough away from Ethel and Julia but in earshot of Dorothy's voice.

"Ladies, there's lots to see here," bellowed Dorothy as she smoothed down her rose-printed swing dress with oversize black buttons. She wore a bold red lipstick, with a matching scarf tied at her neck, and short black gloves. "You can visit the shrine, wander the cathedral, shop the vendors. Whatever you decide, please go in pairs, and make sure you are back at the van by three o'clock."

Instant chatter burst between the wives as they looked to one another for confirmation on where to start, but Ethel had no plans to be confined to a group consensus. Without consulting anyone, she let her navy flatties carry her through the pedestrian plaza, where she inhaled the collective joy of people pulsing with belief and hope.

She joined the queue to see the shrine of Lourdes alongside Catholic nuns in long black habits, crippled men in wheelchairs, elderly couples stooped over wooden canes, young adults giddy with possibility, elegant European women carrying Hermès bags, and small children asleep in prams.

Ethel closed her eyes as the line of people shared in the collective singing of "Ave Maria" in a bevy of languages uniting into one. Ethel felt so warmed by it all that sweat beaded her brows.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Ethel turned to see Dorothy remove her cat's-eye sunglasses. Julia Jones and a woman with blond curls stood beside Dorothy. Ethel had gotten so wrapped up in her personal mission that she had not realized the three women were behind her in line.

"I've never in my life experienced a crowd pulsing with this collective energy."

At the entrance, racks of white candles set up in the shape of

a Christmas tree burned brightly in front of the grotto of Massabielle. In the center of the grotto stood a statue of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by green trailing flowers. The line of people moved at a steady pace. The three wives chatted behind her, but Ethel prayed the Hail Mary again and again under her breath.

When the four women reached the small cave, people slowly slipped into the walkway surrounded by thick layers of stone. The air of the grotto cooled Ethel's balmy skin, drying her sweat almost in an instant. Against the wall rested a glass prayer box, and she mumbled another Hail Mary as she removed Dr. Burroughs's diagnosis from her handbag and dropped the slip of paper into the box. She then mimicked the stout man in front of her and ran her hands along the grotto's stone.

As her fingertips brushed the smooth rock, a staticky feeling pulsed deep inside her. Ethel felt a glowing warmth flow through her belly. Her arms tingled, and her chest heaved up and down. She blinked several times at the white mist that appeared just in front of her. Then a raspy voice uttered, *"You have much to offer others."*

It was so loud and clear that she wondered if anyone else had heard it. Was that the message she had come for? Had that been the Virgin Mary herself? Ethel had not realized that she had stopped, stalling the line with her hands outstretched on the grotto, until she felt a hand on her elbow.

"Ethel?" Dorothy asked. "Are you feeling all right?"

Ethel took a deep breath and nodded while the words continued to thread through her. *You have much to offer others.*

Praise be.

Ethel staggered out into the light of the day, trying to cloak and swaddle what she had experienced in the grotto.

"Well, that was an uplifting experience for sure," said Dorothy,

tugging her gloves back on. They had moved to the right of the crowd and into a small patch of shade.

Julia added, "I must say, I feel like I have just prayed a month of Sundays and received the promise of all my blessings."

Ethel stood silent with her hands folded in front of her. Her mouth was dry, her body heavy, and she wished she had something to lean against.

"Ethel, honey?" Dorothy crinkled her brows.

"Yes." Ethel shook her head, trying to find where they were in the conversation.

"You look faint, dear." Julia peered at her. "Do you need some water?"

Ethel remembered the empty bottle she had tucked in her purse. "Yes. Let's head over to the spring and collect some of the holy water."

"There's holy water too? I should have studied up on the history of this place before we arrived," said Julia, chuckling.

As they walked, Ethel's head began to clear, and she told the ladies that the Lourdes water had flowed since the apparitions in 1858 and was reputed for miraculous healing. What she didn't say was that she had planned to sip a little and sprinkle drops on her belly each night before bed.

Once the four had collected the holy water, Dorothy and her blond friend decided to explore the town and extended an invitation. Julia complained about sore feet and said she would wait it out inside the van. Ethel declined and walked north toward the Basilica of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception to pray in gratitude, for she was convinced that she had been healed.

CHAPTER 3

Prince Frederick, MD, September 1965

SOPHIA

Sophia's walk back to the farm seemed like it took half the time it usually did. Despite the extra weight of the gift bag, and being chased down the road by the full blaze of the midmorning sun, she felt agile on her feet. She had spent most of her trek home turning the conversation with Mrs. Brown from one side of her mind to the other. Mrs. Brown said that she had spoken to Ma Deary, but Ma had never uttered a word. Had someone else answered the telephone? One of Unc's girlfriends, perhaps, and she had forgotten to give Sophia the message? And where was the acceptance letter? she wondered.

Even without all the details, her insides bubbled over with excitement. She was so tickled with possibility that on more than one occasion she found herself skipping down the road, twirling, and laughing herself silly. She had done it. Sophia was the best student at W. S. Brooks High School and had been admitted to one of the most elite schools in the state of Maryland.

As she slipped off the main road onto the grassy path that led to the farm, Sophia's thoughts wandered to the pages of the school's brochure. The campus was sprawling, and the library was a building

unto itself, unlike Mrs. Brown's closet-size room with two shelves of tattered books. The dormitories had real beds, not a mattress in a storage room. No rooster to wake her before the sun or laying hens ready to peck her hand to bleeding. No more hauling hay, making soap, or feeding animals.

Sweaty and out of breath, she finally glimpsed the house. The slates of plywood that Walter had used to patch the shingles were cracked and curled from the weather. He must have run out of either wood or time, because there were two big bald spots with no shingles at all. The exterior of the house was mostly a dull, chipped yellow, except for the siding along the backside of the kitchen. That was half gray. Last summer the Old Man had gotten it in his head that the house needed a coat of paint, but he'd brought home only one can, and that one wall was as far as he'd gotten. The windowpane in the front door had a hole in it as wide as her foot and had been covered with plastic and reinforced with tape. No one used the front door, anyway. It jammed all the time, and if a person pulled too hard, the whole house seemed to rattle. If Sophia didn't live in the farmhouse, she would suspect that it was abandoned. As much as she wished she had received the news from West Oak Forest Academy sooner, she was suddenly glad that Mrs. Brown had not stopped by to deliver it after all.

Ma Deary's Rambler was parked in the dirt patch just to the left of the house. When Sophia saw it, she reminded herself to slow down. *You can't cross a bridge before you reach the river.* When she opened the door to the kitchen, she saw that Ma Deary was still asleep. She worked the four-to-midnight shift at Freedman's Hospital as a nurse, and the hours she spent at home were mostly in her bed.

Sophia listened for snoring and then removed her shoes, tiptoeing over to the short cabinet that doubled as the stand for the black-and-white television set. It had a catchall drawer for loose buttons, small tools, safety pins, pencils, scratch paper, and mail. The drawer

was stuffed to the gills, and Sophia had to rattle it a bit to pry it open. At the top of the pile were stacks of bills, a few with the words “Final Notice” blazed in red, two postcard advertisements, and then she saw it: an envelope crested with “West Oak Forest Academy” in navy blue. The letter had been opened, and when Sophia held up the document, she spotted a coffee stain in the top-right corner. She heard the mattress springs creak as Ma Deary sat up in bed.

“Rusty?” she called out to Sophia, her voice hoarse with sleep. Ma Deary had given her the nickname Rusty on account of her hair; Sophia despised the name. She was the only redhead in their family. In second grade, two boys had yelled, “Get away from her. She’s Satan’s daughter. Run!” Sophia hadn’t known who Satan was, and when she came home crying to Ma Deary, asking why she looked so different from everybody, Ma Deary just barked, “Stop asking dumb questions. Just be grateful for what you’ve got.” And that was the end of that.

Sophia held the letter between her fingers as she watched Ma Deary push up from the bed. She pulled on a pin-striped duster robe. Her big breasts flopped from side to side as she stuffed her feet into teal slippers. Her hair was in pin curls, covered over by a silk head-scarf.

“Why aren’t you in school? It can’t be three o’clock yet. Feels like I just put my head on the pillow,” she said, and then leaned her torso forward and let out a “pfft.” Sophia could smell the sour cottage-cheese odor of the flatulence instantly, and she waved her hand in front of her face.

“‘Scuse me,” Ma said, shuffling toward her closet.

“Mrs. Brown sent me home.”

“What for?”

Sophia held up the letter. Ma glanced at her, tsked her teeth, and then went back to thumbing through her wardrobe.

“Ma, have you read this? Mrs. Brown said that West Oak Forest Academy is one of the best schools in the state, and I got in.”

“Who said you could apply?” she snapped. “Ain’t nobody notify me, ’cause I would have told them not to waste their time.” She inspected her uniform and, when satisfied, hung it on the closet door.

Sophia exhaled and made her voice softer. “Ma Deary, I’m the only one in the whole school who was selected to go. It would be foolish to pass this up.”

“Rusty, we’re barely making ends meet ’round here. Y’all eating us outta house and home as it is.”

And you inhale anything that’s not nailed to the table, Sophia thought, but she didn’t want to get popped for being smart-mouthed.

“Says right here that my tuition is fully covered by the Prosser Foundation. All you need to do is get me there. They’ll put me up, give me a uniform, and I’ll receive a top-notch education.”

Ma Deary walked into the living room, scratching the pit of her right arm. Then she looked down at her fingernails and flicked something white in the air. “The school you go to is fine, and we need you working this here land.”

“But Unc told Walter that he’d have two or three new hires by tomorrow. They could take my place.” Sophia’s voice cracked. She could feel her dream of going to West Oak Forest Academy slipping away from her.

Ma Deary sucked her teeth. “Umph, he’s been saying that all summer long. I’ll believe it when I see it.” She walked to the kitchen, opened the cabinet, and reached for her tin of Maxwell House coffee.

“But if he does, can I go?”

Ma Deary spun around so fast, it caused Sophia to jump two steps back. “Rusty. That fancy school ain’t nothing but a pie-in-the-sky dream. They don’t want no ragamuffin like you. You’ve got as much in common with them fancy white folks as I have with Lady Bird Johnson. Now, please.”

“But—”

Ma Deary picked up a spoon and slapped it in her hand and then

pointed it at Sophia. "Not another word. Now, since you want to be home, go on down there and harvest some corn so you can feed your brothers tonight and forget all this foolishness."

Sophia's eyes burned as she pushed past Ma Deary and stomped her feet out the back door. She ran barefoot up the hill, past the chicken coop, to the back half of the farm where they planted all their crops. A few weeks ago, Sophia had put in rows of collard greens, broccoli, spinach, and romaine. The cornfield had a slight slope, and the path between the two fields was wide enough for a tractor to pass through without harming the crop.

Sophia grabbed an ear of corn as if it were Ma Deary's head, bent it straight down until it snapped, and then ripped it from the stalk with all her might. That woman didn't have an ounce of love for her children. Why had she become a mother, anyway? To make them work until their fingers bled? Sophia grabbed another stalk. Bend, snap, rip, bend, snap, rip. She was holding seven ears in her arms before she realized that she had forgotten the wheelbarrow back at the house. She threw the corn to the ground, bent over at the waist, and screamed, "Ahhhh," so loudly that she startled a flock of mourning doves, who took off into the sky.

"Whoa."

Sophia turned to see Walter coming through the field on his old Schwinn bicycle.

"Rusty, what's the matter?"

She could no longer support herself and crumpled to the ground. Then she told her brother all that had happened at school with Mrs. Brown and then Ma Deary.

"She's an evil witch. I'm tired of working like a mule, Walter. I got this on my own merit. I want to go." Her eyes felt bloodshot.

"So then go," Walter said, straddling his bicycle.

"On what? The back of your wobbly bike?"

"Don't talk about Lucy." He patted the seat as he climbed off,

carefully propping the bicycle on its kickstand. “She’d get you there, we’d just have to leave right now for tomorrow morning.” He chuckled, folding his legs beneath him, joining Sophia on the patch of grass.

Walter’s overalls were covered in motor oil, and Sophia knew he had spent some of his morning under the hood of one of the spotty tractors again. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of wrapped peppermint.

“Where’d you get this?” She took the candy and placed it in her mouth. The menthol flavor cooled her.

“The girl who works at the General Store is sweet on me.” He smiled, popping a mint into his mouth.

“Seriously, I have to get to the school tomorrow, or all is lost. And Lucy won’t get me there.”

Walter ran his hands over the grass until he found a yellow buttercup. He picked the flower, placed it beneath his chin, and smiled at her. “Lucy won’t. But Ma Deary’s car will.”

Sophia snorted. “Ma Deary wouldn’t give you the keys to her Rambler to drive me to the General Store, let alone a boarding school that she said I couldn’t go to.”

“That’s why we’re gonna steal it.”

Sophia looked at her brother with her hand shading her eyes from the sun. His gaze didn’t waver. He was serious about this. Could they really pull it off?

“How are we going to steal the car without Ma knowing?”

“You let me worry about that. Just be ready at first light.”

“What about the twins?”

“Maybe you being gone will force Ma to take care of them. If not, they’ve got me.”

“It can’t be that easy. What if we drive all the way up there and they want parent signatures or something?”

Walter leaned back on his elbows and narrowed his eyes at her. “You want to go or not?”

Sophia pulled her knees to her chest and rocked. “I’m scared,” she confessed after a long pause.

“God wouldn’t have opened this door for you if He didn’t want you to rush through it.”

Walter was the only one who talked about God on the farm, and Sophia felt the hum of possibility slowly creep back up her spine. If she didn’t at least try to get to West Oak Forest, she knew she would regret it for the rest of her life. What did she have to lose by going for it? She stood, dusting her legs off. She could feel the swelling of at least three mosquito bites on the back of her thigh.

“You gotta make those boys go to school. I don’t want them messing up their education on account of farm chores. Make sure Unc gets the workers here to help. You can’t do it all by yourself, Walter.”

“I will. Promise.”

Sophia looked up at the clouds and sighed. “Then I want to go.”

When Sophia returned to the house, her arms filled with corn, Ma Deary was already dressed in her white uniform, smearing a tube of brown lipstick across her full mouth.

“I’m heading off to settle some business ’fore my shift starts. Make sure you check the corn for bugs, then set it to boiling.”

She moved past Sophia, smelling like lily-of-the-valley perfume, without so much as a touch. As soon as her Rambler pulled onto the road, Sophia went out back for the big metal washing bucket that she’d been using to clean all the laundry since the wringer washing machine had broken down last summer. The Old Man claimed he would fix it, but he was waiting on a part.

Sophia dragged over the hose and filled the tub with water. The few items of clothing that were suitable for her to take, she immersed in the homemade lye soap mixed with 20 Mule Team Borax. While

they soaked, she decided to follow Mrs. Brown's advice and do something with her hair. After rummaging around underneath the bathroom sink, she found two unopened boxes of Ogilvie Sisters magic color. She had watched Ma Deary apply the dye to cover up the grays sprouting around her temples. After reading the instructions, Sophia decided that she would combine both boxes to color her entire head. She would go to West Oak Forest Academy with a fresh start, and no one would ever mistake her for an orangutan again.

CHAPTER 4

Philadelphia, PA, May 1948

OZZIE

The sun had gone down on the annual Memorial Day block party, but the smells of charcoal, barbecue sauce, and smoke still ruled the air. The women of Ringgold Street were covering leftovers of chicken, chitterlings, pig feet, creamy potato salad, and collard greens with tinfoil while pushing children with pound-cake and oatmeal-cookie crumbs in the corners of their mouth into the two-story row houses.

First thing that morning, all the cars had been cleared off the narrow one-way street, and Mr. Raymond's Teletalk speaker had been placed in the middle of the block. The mothers had insisted that the day start with the gospel sounds of the Blind Boys of Alabama and the Dixie Hummingbirds; the young folks took over in the afternoon, swinging in a circle to Louis Jordan's "Boogie Woogie Blue Plate"; and now the men were winding it down with homemade hooch and a game of bunk to Fats Waller's "Ain't Misbehavin."

Ozzie, who had made the mistake of guzzling three cans of Schmidt's, sucked on an ice cube, trying to sober up, while keeping an eye out for Rita. His head felt heavy as he tried not to think about

this being his last evening at home. His final moment with Rita. In less than twenty-four hours, he would arrive for basic training as a volunteer for the United States Army.

Ella Fitzgerald's "In a Sentimental Mood" crooned through the speakers as the screen door across the street finally slid open. Ozzie rocked forward, steadyng his chair on all four legs as Rita's red ankle-strapped sandal hit the top step of her limestone front steps.

She had gone inside to change her dress after some little kid had spilled cherry water ice all over her. With her curls pooled on top of her head, her long neck was left bare. The sky-blue shirtwaist dress she wore was cinched with a crimson patent belt, matching her sandals exactly. When she saw Ozzie watching her, she dipped her chin at him and batted her lashes in the way that made his heart swoon. Then she waved him over to an empty card table with a set of checkers.

"You doing all right?" she asked, fingering the chips.

Ozzie nodded, intoxicated by her smile. "How you feeling, pretty mama?"

"Can't believe it's your last night," she said, pouting, and Ozzie longed to lean in and kiss her, but there were too many people out on the street.

The mothers had taken their seats with fruity drinks in Styrofoam cups and bowls of potato chips, tee-heeing over neighborhood gossip. His uncle Millard was teaching backgammon to a woman who had wandered over in a short skirt from Oxford Street.

"Got everything all packed?"

Ozzie told her that he did as Mr. Mel, the chubby man who owned the corner store, stopped at their table. He removed his hat and held it in his hand. Ozzie stood, pulling himself to his full five feet and eleven inches, his broad shoulders erect like two boulders.

"Son, I just wanted to let you know how proud we all are of you. Takes a strong man to volunteer. We're countin' on you to go over

there and show them. Make sure they know that the Negro man is just as heroic and capable as the white man."

"Yes, sir." Ozzie's chest swelled two sizes. People had been treating him with respect all day, but this was the first time it had happened directly in front of Rita.

"Brought you a little something from me and the missus." Mr. Mel handed him a paper bag filled with Chick-O-Sticks, licorice Snaps, Red Hots, and Squirrel Nut Zippers, all of Ozzie's favorites. "Just a little token of our appreciation for you serving, son."

Ozzie shook Mr. Mel's hand, and then the older man wandered over to the tunk table.

Rita beamed. "Aren't you the celebrity?"

"It's been like this all day. The block mothers made me a quilt, and a few women from Bucknell Street came 'round asking me to talk some sense into their knucklehead boys."

"Well, I'm proud of you too." Rita touched her foot to his shin under the table. Her stroke sent a tingle up through Ozzie's thigh, settling in his midsection. Rita and Ozzie had been going steady for over a year.

"I could say the same about you, college girl."

"Somebody's got to change these laws and fight for our daggone rights."

Her Southern drawl tickled him. "You'll make a fine lawyer."

"First in my family. Got to, after what they did to Uncle Maceo." She stood gingerly and wandered over to the women's table.

Two years ago, her uncle Maceo Snipes had been shot in the back by the Ku Klux Klan after he'd cast his vote in the Georgia Democratic Primary. He'd been the first Negro in Taylor County to vote.

"Once I'm a lawyer, no more Negroes will die because they don't have colored blood at the hospital," Rita said, having returned with two Styrofoam cups containing a tip of clear liquor. "That's the first

law I'm going to work on." Her uncle had dragged himself three miles to the hospital only to be told that the hospital had no blood for coloreds.

"Hurts my heart still, to think that Uncle Maceo died from wounds that could have been easily treated." Rita turned somber. After her uncle had passed, waiting on a blood transfusion, her parents had worried over her safety and sent her up to Philadelphia to stay with a great-aunt.

"I have no doubt in my mind that you're gonna be amazing at whatever you set your sights on."

"Glad you know it."

Ozzie raised his cup, tapped it to Rita's, then downed it. The clear liquor made him cough. "What was that?"

"Corn liquor." She smirked.

"I gotta keep my eye on you, pretty mama. Trying to get me drunk so you can have your way with me?" He eyed her until she blushed.

"Now, Ozzie." She giggled. "I've enjoyed these last few weeks with you." She pushed the black checkers across the table to him and started setting up the red ones.

"I'm sorry it has to end. I never get tired of spending time with you." Ozzie pressed his ankles on hers, boxing her legs in from both sides. Fever spread through his torso. He knew the warmth was partially the effects of the liquor, but it was mostly Rita.

Ozzie and Rita had spent every weekend since Easter Sunday taking in bits of the city together. They had gone to the Lakes for a picnic, walked through the department stores in Center City, and even saw Pearl Bailey perform at the Pearl Theatre on Ridge Avenue. The only thing that they hadn't done was *it*. Whenever they came close, Rita reminded him in her sugary Georgian lilt, "Now, Ozzie, why buy the pig when the sausage is free."

Ozzie, who had two older sisters, knew to respect her way of thinking, but man, he wanted her. Rita was fine. Thick legs, deep-set eyes, and smooth caramel-colored skin that always smelled sweet