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April 9, 2010

Town and Country

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## Abstract

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By Kelsey Chanel Holden

*Town and Country* is a novella inspired by Jane Austen's famed *Pride and Prejudice*. It examines the clash between a physician, Sebastian Steele, and a maid, Jocelyn Roberts, as they navigate their way through rural and urban African American societies on the eve of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The two fight their attraction to each other from Newton, Texas to Atlanta, Georgia and back again. The novella deals with issues of class and race as well as the differences between city and country life. While not a retelling of the beloved British novel, *Town and Country* definitely deals with the themes of pride and prejudice while examining the motivations behind advancement within the established socioeconomic hierarchy of the African American community.

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## **Chapter One**

Everybody knew that if a relatively poor colored girl from southeast Texas got a chance at a colored man with a stable job and some money, she had better jump on it. Opportunities like that didn't come around everyday and if she didn't jump on it, some other woman would. Whether she was in love or respected the man was immaterial. As long as there was no indication that he would beat her, have another family on the side, or possess some other equally objectionable trait, a woman was well-advised to marry him. This truth was the basis of the conversation around the table at Jocelyn Roberts' house and the reason why she couldn't find out what kind of man her cousin, Nette's, new husband was. Beyond finding out that he had a job and wasn't broke, no one had bothered to ask what kind of a person he was and no one had any other information.

Nette had lived her entire life in Newton, just like Jocelyn and her sister, Angela. In a town whose total population teetered around 1,500, there were fewer than 500 Negroes. When you dismissed the number of age-appropriate colored men who had been carted off to prison on make-believe charges and those who had no higher aspirations than to get out of sharecropping, the volume of available men left for a Negro woman who wanted to get married and start a family dwindled to such a pitiful amount that Jocelyn repeatedly stopped herself from ruminating over it. She'd grown up with most of the available men who hadn't been shipped off to the war and couldn't see herself being with any of them for an extended period of time. Their minds were set on living in Newton, like a small southeast Texas town was the best place for any colored person in America. Her sister wouldn't mind staying here for the rest of her life, but Jocelyn



wanted a conversation based on more than which church was having an anniversary celebration next week and who'd stopped cooking at one white lady's house to go mother another one's children. Twenty-four years had shown her that such an exchange was wishful thinking. The only solution she could come up with was to get out of this town. Apparently her cousin was now capable of giving tips on how to do so. Marrying a man in Atlanta had pretty much guaranteed an extended period away. Marrying a man in Atlanta who had money meant she would never have to move back, regardless of what happened to him.

Aunt Louella wiped her nose on one of the linen napkins Jocelyn and Angela had bought their mother for her birthday. "His name is Josiah Washington and he's an attorney!" Aunt Louella repeated, giving the other women at the table a good view of the porkchop being chewed in her mouth. Aunt Louella was immeasurably proud of her daughter for marrying well and excitedly gave a recitation about Josiah Washington's college degree, his family in Atlanta, his new job, and the small wedding Josiah's family had given the couple.

"Nette says Josiah's mama is soooo elegant!" Aunt Louella squealed. Most of her speech came out as high-pitched squeals. "And she's really involved in the community. She's a part of the NAACP and helped found the League of Negro Women Voters in Atlanta with Mrs. Ruby Blackburn!"

Jocelyn and Angela shared a glance and sighed. Aunt Louella and their own mother, Gertrude, coveted positions in such organizations but couldn't afford to join them. Their employers made it quite clear that participation in such "activities" was

reason enough for dismissal and there were only so many white people in Newton who would pay for cleaning ladies. Besides, in such a small town, showing an interest in voting and rights for colored people was just as liable as not to get a burning cross in front of your house. Only a few brave people were willing to meet with Negroes from other towns for these types of things.

Gertrude, Jocelyn's mother, gasped and slapped her hands on the table. Jocelyn and Angela reached for their sweet tea as their glasses rattled and slid around. Louella and Gertrude screeched back and forth about the virtues of black civic involvement while Angela and Jocelyn hurried through their meal. At times like this, Jocelyn wished she could go over to Aunt Louella's house and eat dinner with Uncle Zeke. It was probably quieter over there. Her mother and aunt were so loud that being in the vicinity of their conversations was often painful.

Jocelyn leaned over to speak to Angela. "I still haven't figured out what kind of man Josiah Washington is. I mean, we got one letter from Nette saying she went to some ballroom with a man who's shorter than her, the next thing we know, his mother is paying for their wedding. I mean, this is 1952, not 1901! I know he has money, but people should be able to get married for more than forty acres and a mule."

Angela rolled her eyes and leaned her chair back so she could reach the last square of cornbread that sat on the kitchen counter. "What else should people get married for? Love? Don't be foolish. Mama was in love with our father and look how that turned out. I was in love with Danny and that didn't turn out much better."

“Everybody’s not like Danny and our father,” Jocelyn responded, choosing to end the conversation with that comment. Angela was more of a romantic than Jocelyn was and Danny Simpson was an idiot. Jocelyn had told Angela that Danny wasn’t worth the time before her sister went out with him, but Angela chose to believe what she wanted about other people, often putting herself in a pickle. Danny Simpson wasn’t worth feeling sad about. Angela would be okay, though, this wasn’t the first stupid man she’d fallen for, and probably wouldn’t be the last.

“They’re going to be here in two weeks,” Aunt Louella was saying, “And Jessamine said we could use her house to give them a party!”

Jocelyn’s mother gasped again and squealed. Jessamine Crabtree was an elderly white lady with nearly translucent skin who had the biggest, most beautiful Victorian mansion in Newton, Texas. That she would offer her home for a reception for the daughter of her cleaning lady said a lot about the woman. So did the fact that she let Aunt Louella call her by her first name. According to the other white women in town, there was just no telling what ideas British people would get into their heads. Such a relationship was gauche and Uncle Zeke had taken some heat for it on his job at the logging company from men who wanted him to keep his wife in line, but it continued.

According to Mrs. Crabtree, there was just no telling what ideas Americans would try to force on other people. She took great pride in telling how Great Britain had outlawed slavery thirty years before the American Civil War. She took less pride in having married a Texas cowboy who had the misfortune of being drunk enough to fall to his death a few years after bringing her to this “uncivilized land.” Jocelyn always pointed

out the fact that Mrs. Crabtree could have gone back to England if she hated Texas so much but chose to stay in her ornate home on the hill for more than fifty years. The land couldn't be too uncivilized for her.

Jocelyn and Angela left their mother and aunt around the table and cleaned up the kitchen. After they finished, they headed next door to talk with a friend. Ruby Johnson was only twenty years old and there was nothing more important in her life than getting married. Most of her conversations with Jocelyn and Angela consisted of proclamations related to this goal and her rather uninsightful views tended to help Jocelyn understand her own preferences better.

"I don't know what you want!" Ruby said from her spot on the front stoop. Jocelyn's house was the only one on the street with a porch.

"Haven't we told you about starting a conversation like that?" Angela called as she and Jocelyn crossed the expanse of Bermuda grass between the houses. "We don't know what you talking about!"

Ruby stood up and jammed a fist on her ample hip. "I went for a very nice drive with Lionel Hicks this afternoon, that's what I'm talking about. That man opened the door for me and he gave me candy. We had a very nice talk about all kinds of *interesting* things, including you, Jocelyn. He said no man in his right mind would want you with the way you are."

Jocelyn laughed. "I can assure you that my life is complete without Lionel Hicks approving of me. I never told that man that I would go anywhere with him. My mama set that up and he shouldn't have expected me to be happy about it."

“Well, your mama can just send any man you don’t want my way,” Ruby declared. “I’ll treat ‘em much better than you. Especially if they treat me right. Just look at what a nice time I had with Lionel!”

“Lionel borrowed that truck from his cousin and got that candy on credit. You ought not to be too impressed with your fine time this afternoon,” Jocelyn said.

“Jocelyn!” Angela hissed. “Don’t talk about him like that. Lionel Hicks is a very nice man. Everybody gets stuff on credit. You can’t expect him to be like those people you read about in books. And Ruby! I thought you were trying to get married.”

“I am!”

Angela raised an eyebrow. “If you take all of Jocelyn’s leftovers, no man in his right mind is gonna want you. He’ll think you been used up.”

“Don’t nobody think that about Jocelyn!”

“Jocelyn don’t act the way you do!” Angela answered.

Ruby rolled her eyes and turned to Jocelyn. “Have you read anything interesting in the paper this week?” she asked.

A former teacher of Jocelyn’s lived in Los Angeles. Miss Laverne Jenkins, soon to be Mrs. Lamar Belden, subscribed to the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a black-owned newspaper in the city. Miss Jenkins and Jocelyn had become pretty close friends after Jocelyn graduated the eighth grade when she was fifteen. Two years ago, Miss Jenkins moved to Los Angeles to live with her brother and work at a new colored high school there. Knowing how much Jocelyn longed for exposure to life outside of Newton, especially the life of Negroes outside of Newton, Miss Jenkins had begun mailing her old

newspapers to Jocelyn almost as soon as she relocated. After she read the week's news, she mailed the paper to Jocelyn. Jocelyn began to tell Ruby and Angela about a televised talent show with only Negro participants.

Gertrude stopped her daughters in the living room when they returned later in the evening. "Jocelyn, you might want to look at that box of books in the corner. Mrs. Alexander found them in her closet and she gave 'em to me. If you don't want them, I'll see if Ruby Haxton does. You know how she likes books."

Gertrude cleaned houses for Mary Alexander, a woman who couldn't find a needle if it was sitting on the end of her nose. This wasn't the first box of things she'd found in her house and given to Jocelyn's mother. Gertrude often didn't want the stuff, but took it anyway. Sometimes Mrs. Alexander gave her something that she really liked, like a dress or a record player. Gertrude felt that if she turned down all the things she didn't want, Mrs. Alexander would stop offering and she would miss out on the good stuff.

Jocelyn headed into the living room to look in the box. Only a couple of the books seemed really interesting and she took those into her room. She didn't have a bookshelf and so lined up her few books on the floor between her bed and the wall. Some of her favorite times were when she was reading. It allowed her to learn about other points of view than those that abounded in her circles and she was looking forward to reading a new book tomorrow.

\*

Newton, Texas was a patch of plainness amid rich, vibrant green, kind of like the circle of white set within midnight black fur on Mrs. Sutton's cat. The town consisted of one street going down the middle with four streets intersecting it. Clustered around the main street were the typical businesses one would find in a town that size. A general store, a grocery, the sheriff's and doctor's offices, the electric company, an appliance store, and the tailor's shop, among others, were all within a five minute's walk of each other. At the south end of Main Street was the county courthouse. The town was immensely proud of its courthouse and held a parade around its square every summer. Scattered on the streets intersecting Main Street were houses. Some big, some small, all belonging to white people. All the Negroes lived farther out, most at the edge of town, forming their own community that only interacted with the whites for business. The main industry in the area was timber. The few unfortunate visitors who passed through the town were always surprised not to see oil derricks in everyone's backyard. Someone would tell them that they had to drive over sixty miles to find black gold.

Previously, the economy had been focused on the farms that Jocelyn's friends sharecropped, but the last few years had seen a change. A paper mill was built alongside the lumberyard in Evadale, a town a little more than half an hour away. So, the people in Newton shifted their courses. Some whites sold their farms and moved away. Coloreds got jobs at the paper mill and moved into small houses in town, ending their time of sharecropping and making the farms less profitable for their owners. Richer whites bought up the smaller farms, consolidating their power and wealth. They all thought themselves so very important, the whites earning more money than ever, the coloreds

thinking themselves so independent since they were off the farm. Sometimes it made Jocelyn laugh, the puffed-up nature of her fellows.

Newton was a patch of plainness amid a vibrant forest of green and so was everyone in it. Most of the buildings had the same weathered appearance, faded by sun, wind, and time. They stood proud, with their false fronts looming high in the sky, fooling people about the size of the buildings underneath them. Some people tore down the old buildings and constructed new ones. Even the new ones had the same beaten feel to them. Their brick was nice and new, their windows polished until the light reflected from them at certain times of the day threatened the safety of passing drivers, but they didn't feel progressive. They didn't feel new. They felt like new cloth on an old garment. The façade would only work for so long before it made the tear worse. New or old, a plain garment was a plain garment. It appeared to Jocelyn that whites were becoming more dangerous and the Negroes were becoming less independent. At least as long as they sharecropped, they understood the landlords were taking advantage of them. With large proportions moving into town and catching rides to work everyday from the few coloreds blessed enough to own a car, they assumed they were more free. But Jocelyn realized they weren't free. She'd lived in town for as many years as she could remember and understood that just because the whites didn't take eighty percent of your cotton at the end of the harvest didn't mean they weren't taking advantage of you. Jocelyn worked for the banker's wife and Mr. Sutton gave her her money in cash every Thursday. She put most of it into the "pot" that took care of expenses at home.



Money from the pot paid for the electricity and water. Newton County Water System was operated by whites and the electric company was owned by them. Some money went to pay for the new icebox that was purchased at the white-owned appliance store. Other money went to buy food and household necessities from Bates' Store. Howard Bates was the brother-in-law of Jocelyn's employer. On the occasions when Jocelyn and her mother and sister had enough to spare for new clothes, the material was purchased from Masterson's Materials, owned by John and Paulette Masterson, a white couple who lived across the street from Mrs. Anderson.

A tenth of Jocelyn's money was tithed to Haxton Memorial Church of God in Christ, where they were pooling their money in hopes of continuing to add on to their church building. The materials for the new building were purchased from the lumberyard, which was owned by whites. As far as Jocelyn could see, living in town off the farm did not signify an end to oppression for coloreds. They were just as manipulated, but tricked into thinking they weren't. White people gave the money because they knew they would shortly get it back.

If Newton was plainness within a forest of vibrancy, Jocelyn considered her station to be a mix of the two. The shotgun cabin she shared with her mother and sister sat on the edge of town, almost in the pine forest. Jocelyn thought it was funny that Negroes were banished to the outskirts of town and yet the colored neighborhoods were closer to the richness of the region. More houses were being built across the street by opportunistic whites for which Negroes would be paying slightly unreasonable rents. Jocelyn's vibrancy was inching away from her and it made her uneasy. The changing

town made her uneasy. It wasn't so much her discontent with her station of subservience. That had been her lot for her entire life. It was the shifting balance. So many things were slipping and sliding and bumping into each other that she was sure something was going to explode. Jocelyn wanted to be far away when that occurred.

\*

Their mother had consented to making new dresses, mostly because she wanted a new dress herself. They all opted to wait a couple of weeks and wear them to Nette's celebratory party. After the party, Jocelyn and Angela slipped out of their new dresses and got ready for bed. They'd been unable to really talk with their cousin that night, since so many people had vied for Nette and her new husband's attention. Jocelyn and Angela felt it was better to stay back and let everyone else talk with the newlyweds. The two were coming over after breakfast tomorrow, so Angela and Jocelyn would be able to ask all of their questions then. Angela went into the bathroom before her, so Jocelyn got underneath her covers and opened her book to the place where she'd stopped reading this afternoon.

She'd finished one book a week ago and was almost finished with the present one. She couldn't read as much as she wanted to, having to start dinner at the house she cleaned, come home and help her mother and sister cook their own dinner, go to church several times throughout the week, and see to various other matters that came up in the run of a day. She'd just started the last chapter when Angela came back into the room.

“Are you still reading that book?” Angela asked with disgust.

Jocelyn didn't answer her.

“You might as well go on to the bathroom. I’m turning the lights off after I read this chapter in my Bible. It’s a short chapter, too, so you won’t be able to finish your book,” Angela huffed. “How many more of those do you have, anyway?”

“Four.”

Angela sighed loudly and flopped onto her bed. She stared at Jocelyn as she tied a scarf around her head. “Aren’t you going to put the book down?”

“I’ll be finished in ten minutes if you stop talking to me.”

Angela made a face and began rubbing Vaseline onto her feet and hands. She read the chapter in her Bible, her lips moving silently as she sounded out the words. Angela could barely read but Jocelyn admired the fact that she tried. She wouldn’t read in front of people not in her family and even then, she’d only read if Jocelyn or their mother didn’t want to. But Angela made certain to read her Bible everyday. As a matter of fact, they all did, but Jocelyn was sure God was pleased with the effort Angela had to put forth to read even the little chapters.

By the time Angela was finished with her reading, Jocelyn had finished her book. She took care of everything in the bathroom and climbed into bed, anticipating tomorrow’s conversation with Nette and her new husband.

## **Chapter Two**

Some women had feminine faces. Without adornment, without paying much attention to how they looked when they left their homes in the morning, they just looked like women. They had small faces with full lips and wide eyes rimmed with curly lashes that always looked very womanly. There were other women who needed curls and earrings and makeup to look like ladies. They had a square jaw or a heavy brow or features that were just put together harshly, like a man's, and their physical femininity relied on extra help, on artificial fortification to present a face of womanliness to the world.

Jocelyn felt her face fell somewhere between these two. If she'd gotten enough sleep, she could manage to just wash her face and brush her teeth and men would fall out of their pickups offering her rides to work. Without enough rest or perhaps if clouds prevented the sun from slanting across her face just so as she awoke in the morning, more work had to be done. It was a disheartening reality of her life that Jocelyn tried her best to take in stride. She took pride in the fact that she didn't exactly have man-features but knew that she would never be as beautiful as her sister. Angela was the beautiful sister that had had boys chasing her for as long as Jocelyn could remember. Jocelyn wasn't really ugly, but there was something missing from her features, something that made her face "interesting" instead of exquisite. She tried not to let it bother her as she got ready this morning.

An hour later, Jocelyn and Angela were sitting in the living room with Nette and Josiah. Jocelyn rolled her eyes at her mother's transparent attempts to hear all

conversation in the living room despite her declaration that she would leave the young people alone to talk. As Gertrude stepped onto the porch and began talking loudly to the lady next door, Jocelyn turned back to her newlywed cousin. “So, how come y’all got married in Atlanta?” she asked.

“My family lives there,” Josiah offered, preventing Nette from answering. “It made the most sense at the time. All of my family wouldn’t be able to travel over here to Texas for the wedding and all of you wouldn’t be able to travel to Georgia. So, we just got married there and came back here to Newton for a reception.”

“We’re just mad because we didn’t get to be bridesmaids,” Angela chimed in.

Josiah offered a smile and responded but Jocelyn didn’t hear him. She was too busy evaluating his face, a luxury she hadn’t had last night because of the groups that constantly surrounded the newlyweds. Josiah’s smile was unattractive, because his lips opened really wide, exposing his gums and stretching across his rather wide face. His skin was oily and there were great big shiny patches on his forehead and both sides of his nose. Last night, Josiah talked a lot, loudly, and generally irritated Jocelyn whenever she got within hearing distance. His conversation was not the least bit stimulating and after listening too long, his voice became grating. Jocelyn went to bed hoping her impression last night hadn’t been fair and that Josiah was better in a setting with a smaller number of people. Her hopes dwindled the longer he sat in their living room. Angela thought he was really nice, but then, Angela generally thought everyone was nice. Josiah looked less comfortable on Jocelyn’s mother’s tea green mohair couch than he had in Mrs. Crabtree’s

home, poised just so on the dainty floral couch, enclosing Nette's gloved hand with both of his.

Nette's outfit last night had looked like something out of a fashion magazine. Every other woman had on a flowery cotton dress with a wide skirt. There was an occasional crinoline to be found underneath the dress of someone who could afford the special slip, but for the most part, dresses relied on their wearers to give them life. Nette's dress, though, wasn't anything Jocelyn had seen a lot of, especially on colored women. The yellow-gold brocade dress nipped in at the waist and had a skirt that fit close to Nette's hips and legs, giving her the hour-glass figure God hadn't. Gold heels, pristine white gloves, and shiny pearls completed the outfit. To top it all off, Nette wore makeup. She'd always refused to do so before, insisting that her natural beauty was good enough for anyone to look at. She looked like a completely different person, different from every other woman in the room. She'd always blended in before, but her outfit was a sight to behold last night. She looked like she had a lot of money. She probably did now. Jocelyn was almost positive that Josiah was relatively rich compared to all the other people in the room.

"So, how was the wedding?" Jocelyn asked when there was a lull in the conversation. "Was it really pretty?"

Nette smiled and clasped her hands together. "It was so beautiful! There weren't a lot of people there, just Josiah's family and his friends from college."

"You went to college?" Jocelyn turned to Josiah. "Where?"

"Howard University in Washington, D.C."

Gertrude passed through the living room at just this moment and plopped her heavy frame onto the sofa between Josiah and Nette. “You went to school in Washington, D.C.? Is the city really nice? How was it? Have you ever seen President Truman?” Gertrude gushed, grabbing Josiah’s arm.

Jocelyn and Angela’s mother thought Washington, D.C. was next to heaven. It was far enough north that it wasn’t the deep south and far enough south that it’s very existence wasn’t an abomination like New York City. If Gertrude had ever had enough money to move, she would have moved to Washington, D.C. To have this man from the nation’s capital, this *colored* man from one of the best schools in the country for Negroes, sitting next to her was an unparalleled event in Gertrude Roberts’s life. The only thing that could have made it better was if Josiah had brought some friends of the same caliber to Texas with him.

Seeing that she would not be able to get her questions about college answered as long as her mother was present, Jocelyn began a discussion about the wedding with Nette and Angela.

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The next morning Nette, Jocelyn and Angela sat in the church nursery with the babies. Haxton Memorial Church of God in Christ had only recently added this room, along with offices for the church leadership, onto its fifty-year-old sanctuary and all of the mothers of the congregation were excited about its existence. Women no longer had to hold crying babies and wiggling toddlers on their laps or walk outside with them during the middle of service. The church had raised money for three years and was

expanding its campus to add to the services it was able to offer its worshippers. The head offices of their denomination had matched all of the funds that the congregation raised and promised to continue to do so in the future. Previously, Reverend Haxton had to prepare his sermons at his kitchen table and the deacons and missionaries had to meet at their respective homes. Now, the church had space for them to carry on their work and the current building project was a cafeteria that would double as a school room for the literacy school Reverend Haxton wanted to start for the community. There were still too many people in the Negro community in their small town who were barely able to write their names and their pastor was eager to address this problem.

“I hope you and Angela can come out to Atlanta to visit me!” Nette exclaimed.

“How are we supposed to get to Atlanta?” Angela asked, wiping slobber from Colietha Washington’s round little chin.

“On the bus.”

Jocelyn raised an eyebrow. “Who’s going to pay for these bus tickets?”

“If y’all can’t pay for it, Josiah will for sure,” Nette assured them. “Y’all coming out to visit was his suggestion. He was saying last night how much he liked both of you and that he thinks y’all would love Georgia.” Josiah and Nette were spending their time in Texas at Aunt Louella and Uncle Zeke’s house and Jocelyn could just imagine the types of conversations occurring there. Luella and Josiah both thought themselves so very important and that everything they had to say was of the utmost importance to everyone. Those discussions were probably the most boring ones ever held in that house.

“How about you?” Jocelyn questioned. “Are you going to like Georgia?”



Nette smiled. "I might as well. That's where we're going to live."

"But you've never been anywhere before," Angela insisted. "You don't know anything about living in the city."

"I've been to Atlanta!" Nette retorted. "And I loved it! You have to go, it was amazing."

"And how to you propose we get there?" Jocelyn asked. "My boss's wife isn't going to insist that I go on a trip with her like yours did. Mrs. Sutton is more liable to slap me in the face than to help me have fun."

"And Melinda McCall thinks Atlanta is an abomination," Angela said with a small laugh. "She doesn't believe that that many coloreds should be gathered together in one place. She talks about it all the time. 'Negroes should be spread out all over the country' because we cause more problems in groups than by ourselves."

"I can't think who's the bigger idiot, Mrs. Sutton or Mrs. McCall. At least Mrs. McCall's husband keeps his hands to himself," Jocelyn said.

Nette frowned. "Does Mr. Sutton still try to kiss you, Jocelyn?"

"Usually when he's had something to drink," she responded.

"Isn't he a drunk?"

"Leave it alone, Nette. We need the money and there's nowhere else for me to work."

Nette's frown deepened as she glanced between the two sisters. Jocelyn shared a look with Angela and sighed before grabbing little Paul Wayne as he tried to toddle out of the nursery.

Jocelyn's mother was upset to learn that her daughters were volunteering in the new nursery. None of the men of the congregation could see them or hear them sing during services if they stayed back here. They wouldn't let her find replacements for them, though, and so she'd gone into the sanctuary on her own. Jocelyn was sure Gertrude managed to initiate conversations with half of the eligible men about her single daughters before service started. Gertrude thought it was horrendous that neither had married yet, especially since they were well into their twenties. Having married when she was barely eighteen, Gertrude thought twenty-two was too old not to be married yet. She was convinced everyone in town thought her daughters were old maids and was determined to marry them off as soon as possible. For Gertrude, church was the perfect place to find husbands. Not for herself, she would never remarry after the debacle with Jocelyn and Angela's father. But she could find some nice God-fearing men for her daughters at Haxton Memorial Church of God in Christ and she would not be swayed from her goal.

As for Jocelyn, she just wished she could get something more out of church than what not to do to make sure she escaped hell. She had no intention of burning for all of eternity but believed God wanted something more out of her than just compulsory attendance while she was still on earth. To that end, she read her Bible everyday, trying to determine what kind of life God wanted her to live.

She often had questions that no one had answers to. She asked her mother and even Reverend Haxton but, after a certain point, they had no more answers and would become irritated with her. She didn't think it was wrong to wonder why God didn't strike

down everyone who upheld the Jim Crow system. After all, in the Old Testament, He opened the ground and swallowed complaining Israelites. The least it seemed He would do was cover all white supremacists with boils. Things of this nature seemed perfectly logical to Jocelyn. She wasn't trying to be blasphemous, she genuinely wanted to discuss this.

No one ever had an answer for her, though, and seemed offended at her questions. Jocelyn showed Reverend Haxton a passage in Proverbs that told believers, "with all thy getting get understanding," and he became highly offended when she said that she didn't always understand his sermons. Apparently under the impression that Jocelyn was criticizing the delivery of his messages, her normally congenial pastor had yelled at her and insisted that she would be punished for her unbelief. Jocelyn didn't understand that either. Why was she suddenly an unbeliever because she had a question?

So many things didn't make sense to her and though she could never remember the exact location of the scripture, Jocelyn distinctly remembered reading a verse that said that God was not the author of confusion. It was in the Bible, so Jocelyn didn't doubt the veracity of confusion not coming from God. She just wondered why she was still so often confused. Since God sent pastors to enlighten His people, why could Reverend Haxton not relieve the confusion? On occasion, Jocelyn had heard other preachers and none of them did better jobs than her own pastor. It seemed to her that other people would have questions, as well, so much so that pastors would have gotten together to figure out the correct answers. But it appeared that no one else had questions. After examining herself, Jocelyn was sure she wasn't attempting to find a reason to not believe

in God. That wasn't what her questions were about. She just wanted to know and couldn't understand why no one could help her.

She turned her attention back to the conversation between her sister and cousin in time to hear Nette say that Josiah's friends were coming to Newton to visit next week.

"Why?" Jocelyn asked.

"Why what?" Nette responded.

"Why would they come to Newton to visit?" Jocelyn questioned. "Why don't they visit Josiah in Atlanta? He doesn't live here."

"They live in Atlanta, too," Nette informed. "They're really using this as an excuse for a vacation. Both of them have started new jobs within the last year and neither has really had any substantial time off. They're going to stay here for about two weeks."

"Where are they going to stay for two weeks?" Angela asked.

Nette looked confused for a second before her mouth fell open in surprise. "I can't believe we forgot to tell you!" she said. "You know how Mama, Daddy, and Aunt Gert are going to Memphis for the convention? And you know how Daddy's brother, my Uncle Kirkland, lives in Memphis? Well, Josiah suggested that they go up to Memphis a week early and stay a week late. They can visit with Uncle Kirkland while they're there. So, me and Josiah are going to stay here in their house for the three weeks that they're gone. Sebastian and Christian are going to be here for those first two weeks."

"What about Mama?" Angela asked. "She was supposed to ride to Memphis with Uncle Zeke and Aunt Lou. How is she going to get there if they're already there?"

“They’re going to ask her today if she wants to go and stay the whole time with them,” Nette answered.

Jocelyn shook her head. “What about her job? She can’t just leave for three weeks. Mrs. Anderson’ll fire her.”

“Josiah will work it all out,” Nette said with assurance. “Trust me. He can be very persuasive, even with white people. It’s why he’s such a good lawyer.”

Jocelyn and Angela shared a glance, then shrugged their shoulders. Their mother had never been on a vacation before. This might be good for her. She worked really hard and deserved some time off. They would just have to wait and see how this all played out.

### **Chapter Three**

“You know how Josiah’s friends are coming to visit?” Gertrude asked Jocelyn as she attached an earring to her ear. Gertrude refused to pierce her ears and so wore clip-on earrings. She’d been hideously upset when Jocelyn came home from her friend’s house with holes in her ears. She’d promptly declared that Jocelyn was going to hell and didn’t speak to her for a week. Angela was the go-between for her mother and sister during this episode just the same way she was the go-between in all of their altercations. Jocelyn would do something Gertrude didn’t appreciate such as embarrassing the family by making some sarcastic comment at an “inappropriate time” or turning down a young man Gertrude had found for her to go on date with. Gertrude would refuse to speak to Jocelyn and then force Angela to carry messages between them because she still needed to communicate with her youngest daughter. Jocelyn would try to speak to her mother, but Gertrude refused to pay any attention until she finally decided to forgive her. Gertrude was a rather childish woman, but her daughters had gotten used to it.

Jocelyn sighed. Her mother had talked about Josiah’s friend coming for a week now. Gertrude could never remember the friends’ names, but Jocelyn knew that her mother wished she could stay here to facilitate the interactions between the friends and her daughters. Their coming was a perfect opportunity for her girls to get husbands, but she wouldn’t be here to make sure everything went accordingly. It was almost enough to make her want to stay home from Memphis. Almost.

“Yes, Mother, I know that Josiah’s friends are coming.”

“Well, if you and Angela know what’s good for you, y’all will snatch ‘em up real quick!” Gertrude declared.

“Mama!”

“What?” Gertrude speared Jocelyn with her eyes. “Ain’t neither one of y’all getting no younger and you done run off every man that’s done ever tried to say ‘boo’ to you and I don’t know what’s wrong with Angela, why she can’t keep a man. You would think that somebody that pretty would be able to get a man to propose. I don’t know what I’m gone do with y’all.”

Jocelyn rolled her eyes and went into her room.

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A week later, Jocelyn stood on Aunt Louella’s front porch with Angela and waved at her aunt, uncle, and mother as Uncle Zeke’s car pulled out of the yard. They were going to drive the nine hours necessary to get them to Memphis, Tennessee. They would spend the first week resting at Uncle Kirkland’s and looking around the city. None of the three had ever been to Memphis before for the annual Church of God In Christ Convention, otherwise known as the Holy Convocation and were really excited about it. The convention lasted a week with services each night and special sessions each day for missionaries, deacons, pastors, and the like. There would be special guest singers there, famous gospel greats like the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, the Swan Silvertones, and Mahalia Jackson. Gertrude was most excited about Mahalia Jackson. Along with that, all of the church dignitaries would be there, all of the bishops and people who were high up in the organization and on the last Sunday of the convention, they would all wear their

special robes and take communion together. Jocelyn would like to attend the meeting herself, but knew now was not the time for her to go. She had to go to work and it would be unfair for her to attend without Angela and both of them couldn't fit in Uncle Zeke's car with both their mother and Aunt Lou in there, neither of whom were small women.

"Well, ladies," Josiah said when the car rolled out of sight. "What do you suggest we do now?"

Angela smiled. "We already have plans," she said. "We're going to help our friend make her wedding dress."

"Whose getting married?" Nette asked.

"Clara Fields," Jocelyn said with a giggle, knowing what Nette's reaction would be.

"Ugh!" Nette exclaimed. "Whose marrying her? Is she pregnant?"

"Nette!" Angela cried with a frown. "That is so mean! Clara Fields is a very nice girl. Why wouldn't Samson Collins want to marry her?"

Nette's mouth fell open. "Samson Collins?"

Jocelyn was laughing so hard by this time that tears were rolling down her face. Nette and Clara Fields had been sworn enemies since they were eight years old and Nette told Samson Collins that Clara was really a boy. Nette had had a crush on Samson but he'd liked Clara who never forgave Nette for starting the rumor. For months, the other children made fun of Clara for her supposed cross-dressing and several scandalous boys had taken it upon themselves to raise Clara's dress up to see what was underneath. They'd eventually found someone else to tease, but Clara hadn't had a civil word for Nette since then. Angela and Jocelyn, however, had never had a problem with Clara but



had constantly been on guard against hurting either Clara's or Nette's feelings by their friendship with the other.

"I can't believe Samson Collins is marrying her!" Nette screeched.

"What's wrong with her?" Josiah asked.

"Clara Fields looks and smells like a field mouse!" Nette declared. "She sounds like one, too. Are y'all sure she's not pregnant?"

"She's not pregnant!" Angela insisted with a frown in Jocelyn's direction. She was visibly upset with her sister's amusement, but Jocelyn didn't care. The situation was too funny. Though Nette had insisted that she left her crush on Samson Collins behind when she turned nine years old, Jocelyn never believed her. She was quite sure that Nette carried a torch for him until she married Josiah. And seeing as how Josiah did not fit Nette's previous preferences in a husband, Jocelyn wasn't so sure her attachment to Samson Collins was really over.

Josiah joined Jocelyn in laughter and slung an arm around his wife. "Do you want to go with your cousins to help sew the dress?" he asked, winking at Jocelyn.

Nette huffed and rolled her eyes before stomping into the house. Shaking his head, Josiah followed her.

"When are your friends from Atlanta getting here?" Jocelyn asked Josiah before he closed the front door.

He shrugged. "They should be here sometime between today and tomorrow," he answered. "The drive is pretty long. Your mother will probably be in Memphis before

they arrive.” He waved to Jocelyn and Angela before entering the house. The sisters stepped off the porch and walked to Clara’s house.

\*

The next morning, Jocelyn and Angela moved down the pew for Nette and Josiah. There were a lot of people milling around the sanctuary right now, finding seats. Nette and Josiah had almost lost their seats. Nette leaned over and whispered so low they could barely hear her. “Sebastian and Christian got here late last night,” she said. “They were so tired they just stayed in the bed this morning. We haven’t told anybody they were going to be here. We’re trying to keep the number of ‘visitors’ down as long as we can. You know every girl and her mama will be over as soon as they find out those men are at my mama’s house. So, don’t tell anybody.”

Jocelyn and Angela assured their cousin that they wouldn’t say anything. Just then, Reverend Haxton’s brother, Deacon George, got up to begin the service with prayer. Jocelyn stifled a sigh, bowed her head, and closed her eyes. Deacon George was incredibly long-winded and she hated for him to lead service. Then she felt bad for hating it because she was sure God didn’t mind. She just wished he wouldn’t pray for so long. Deacon George was older than Reverend Haxton, who just in his mid-forties, and sometimes forgot what he said. He once prayed for fifteen straight minutes without realizing he’d said the same thing three times. Fifteen minutes wasn’t long for an individual prayer at home in one’s prayer closet. To open the church services, however, fifteen minutes was a bit overboard.

Fifteen minutes later, Samson Collins moved to the lectern to read the Old Testament scripture. Jocelyn had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at her cousin. Nette had pursed her lips and rolled her eyes when she saw him walking down the center aisle. Jocelyn's shoulders were still shaking when Samson's little brother went up front to read the New Testament scripture. She felt something poke her in the back and turned to see Ruby Johnson, her neighbor, making a face at her. Ruby knew why Jocelyn was laughing and obviously thought it was funny as well. Deacon George went back to the front of the church after the reading and asked "the new Mrs. Josiah Washington" to come up and lead the congregation in a song.

Nette smiled tightly and crossed over Josiah, Brother Daniel and his wife, Sister Hattie, to go to the front. She didn't like to sing alone in public but knew there was no way that she was getting out of this. Deacon George rarely took no for an answer, especially when he was at church. While Nette didn't sing as well as Angela and Jocelyn, she sung pretty well and Deacon George considered it a "treat" to hear her today. Josiah stood and clapped as Nette stood in front of the church, bringing smiles to the faces of many people. He was clearly smitten with his new wife and unnecessarily proud of her singing ability.

Nette led the congregation in singing His Eye is on the Sparrow and then sat down for the testimony service. Cloris Bates gave a testimony about her landlord lowering the rent and Tom Murphy told about his ailing milk cow's recent recovery before Deacon George ended that part of the service and took up the offering before the choir sang. Jocelyn and Angela were in the choir but had missed practice Thursday night

helping their mother finish the new dress she was making to wear in Memphis, so they couldn't sing this morning. Jocelyn had to stop herself from groaning when she realized Deacon George was giving the sermon this morning. Reverend Haxton and his wife were in Memphis for the Holy Convocation, as well, but would return in time for the church services Tuesday night. Deacon George gave a sermon on the dangers of fornication and adultery which was unusually short, something for which Jocelyn was extremely grateful. She was on the fence about whether or not she was looking forward to meeting Josiah's friends and just wanted to get it over with.

Josiah's friends were sure to be like him and he made her uncomfortable. Not his manners, because he was a very open, amiable man. Jocelyn just didn't really know how to handle him. She had the feeling he thought she was beneath him but he'd decided not to hold that against her. She'd noticed the way Nette spoke now. Of the three of them, Jocelyn had always had the best grammar, but now Nette was catching up to her. Nette also carried herself differently now. She seemed much more confident, almost to the point of conceitedness. Jocelyn knew her cousin wasn't conceited, but she didn't look to other people for validation anymore. Well, she didn't look to Jocelyn and Angela anymore. That didn't necessarily mean she didn't look to anyone. Maybe she thought they were beneath her now, too. Jocelyn mentally shook her head. She wouldn't think that. Not about Nette. She could always count on Nette.

Josiah, on the other hand, was a different story. Jocelyn didn't really feel inferior to him, he just reminded her of the things that she'd missed out of life. Much of it had to do with him going to college. One of her greatest dreams had been to go to college and

become a teacher, just like Miss Jenkins. There had never been enough money for it, though, and no one to help her out. So, she cleaned houses and read books. She usually felt smart until she got around people like Josiah, who were educated far beyond her level. She would meet people like that at the state meetings in Austin every year. Their church was set up much like a country: there were the head offices in Memphis, the state-level people, the district-level people, and finally the people at the individual churches. High church officials' children tended to have been blessed enough to go to one of the few colored high schools and several had even gone on to college. When she got around those people, she usually remained relatively quiet so as not to clue them in to her level of ignorance. She didn't think they were more intelligent than her, they just knew more because they'd been to school longer. Two additional men like that were sure to be interesting.

After the altar call in which several people moved to stand in front of the altar, Deacon George dismissed the church in a benediction which was inordinately long. Jocelyn left the sanctuary feeling tricked. Deacon George had fooled her into thinking he might be abandoning his long-winded ways with his short sermon, but clearly this was not the case. Jocelyn stepped into the afternoon sunlight and shaded her eyes. Little clusters of people stood around the churchyard while children ran around, squealing and laughing. Jocelyn had to hug Mother Springer and Missionary West before she could join the circle in which Clara Fields and Ruby Johnson were standing with one other girl. She talked with them for a while, careful not to mention the presence of Josiah's Atlanta

friends at her cousin's home, before Nette showed up at her side and slipped her arm through Jocelyn's.

“Josiah said he could drive you and Angela home if you want,” Nette said.

Jocelyn eyed her cousin, who was gesturing to the car with her eyes. “Are we leaving now?” Jocelyn asked.

“We can!” Nette said brightly. She waved goodbye to the other women in the circle and pulled Jocelyn away. Angela was already at the car when they got there, standing to the side while Josiah engaged in a conversation with Jethro Boldin. Jethro Boldin seemed convinced that if he could wear Angela down, she would finally consent to marrying him. Angela, however, wanted nothing to do with the man and did everything she could to get out of talking to him. Jocelyn told her she was too nice about it and that's why Jethro always came back. Jocelyn was sure that Jethro had followed Angela to Josiah's car. He obviously hadn't counted on Josiah monopolizing the conversation. His long face brightened when he saw Nette and Jocelyn coming. “I ain't gone keep you no longer,” he told Josiah. He firmly shook Josiah's hand and walked off, nodding to Nette and Jocelyn as he passed.

Nette and Jocelyn giggled as they climbed into the car. “Stop laughing at me!” Angela insisted, barely keeping a smile off her own face.

“Do y'all want to go to the house with us right now and meet Josiah's friends or do y'all want to go on to your house?” Nette asked.

“We can go meet them now,” Angela said without checking with Jocelyn. Jocelyn would have preferred to go home but would have a hard time explaining why, so she didn’t say anything.

They pulled up in front of Aunt Louella’s house and got out of the car. Jocelyn let everyone walk ahead of her. She got to the bottom of the porch and realized she was being ridiculous. She had no reason to be intimidated by Josiah’s friends. So, they went to college and lived in Atlanta. So, what? She could handle herself in the presence of any man. She would be fine.

She marched into the house in time to watch two of the most attractive men she’d ever seen in her life walk out of the kitchen.

“I’m so glad y’all went ahead and fixed yourselves something to eat,” Nette told them as she grabbed her cousins’ hands. “I want you to meet my cousins. This is Angela and Jocelyn Roberts. Angela, Jocelyn, this is Sebastian Steele and Christian Lawson.”

Everyone shook hands and sat down. “How was your trip?” Jocelyn asked the men, determined to prove to herself that she could have a conversation like a normal person. She hadn’t expected them to be so good-looking. Josiah wasn’t ugly, exactly, he just wasn’t attractive in any way. That both of his best friends were so appealing certainly wasn’t expected. Jocelyn thought the taller one, the doctor, was the handsomer of the two.

The ensuing conversation revealed a lot of things, the most important of which was probably that Jocelyn wasn’t as easy around strangers as she’d formerly thought. She didn’t say anything stupid exactly, just that she wasn’t her usually talkative self and her

sister and Nette both noticed. They'd tossed speculative glances her way several times and she knew she would have some explaining to do later.

Jocelyn and Angela learned that Sebastian was a doctor and Christian was an engineer. They lived near each other in Atlanta and both had known Josiah before they'd all decided to attend Howard University. Jocelyn and Angela also learned that of the two, Christian was more pleasant. Everything about the way Sebastian held himself said he thought Jocelyn and her sister were beneath him. Christian and Josiah sat relaxed, talking animatedly to the whole room. Sebastian held himself as though he'd been dipped in starch along with his crisp white shirt. His broad shoulders were thrust back, his chin so high in the air Jocelyn wasn't sure how he managed not to choke on his own breath. Every remark he made came out sounding as though it pained him to speak and he barely addressed anyone. When a general question was asked to the three men about their time at college, something which Jocelyn was very interested in, he never answered, merely inspected her as though she was a curious specimen of humanity he'd not yet encountered in his life. Questions asked directly to him garnered short, terse answers that soon demonstrated to both Angela and Jocelyn that it would be better not to speak to him at all.

About half an hour later, Jocelyn and Angela rose to go home. They needed to change out of their clothes and start dinner.

"Nanette and I were planning to cook dinner for you all tonight," Josiah announced.



“Oh,” Jocelyn and Angela said simultaneously. They looked at each other in question but didn’t say anything else. They’re plans for the evening were easily changed, but they didn’t want to impose.

“I hope you’ll come back,” Christian offered with a smile. Though his words were addressed to them both, his gaze was clearly directed at Angela, who smiled at him and lowered her eyes to the floor.

“Of course they’re coming,” Nette insisted with a carefree attitude. Jocelyn wondered if Nette truly didn’t see Sebastian frowning at her or was ignoring it. The doctor obviously didn’t want Angela and Jocelyn to return this evening.

Josiah retrieved his keys from the decorative bowl on the coffee table. The bowl was a present for Aunt Louella from Nette since she’d missed her mother’s birthday. It looked out of place in the shabby living room with its worn furniture, but Jocelyn knew that she would buy her mother things just as nice if she had the opportunity. The fact that it would be displayed in a room that didn’t really match the gift’s level of fanciness was irrelevant.

Nette grabbed the keys from Josiah’s hand. “I’ll drive them back home,” she offered. She gave Josiah a quick kiss before he could respond and skipped out the door.

With smiles to the room and quick waves, Jocelyn and Angela followed. “So,” Nette said as she pulled onto the street. “What do y’all think?”

“Of what? Josiah lets you drive his car?” Jocelyn asked, hoping to lead the conversation in another direction. Uncle Zeke had taught all three of the girls to drive when he first bought his car, just in case of an emergency. He refused, however, to let

Louella or Gertrude drive his automobile. They'd both been overcome with fright and excitement the first time they were behind the wheel and after a close run-in with Harold Milner's mule, he'd declared that neither woman was ever allowed behind the wheel of his precious car.

"Yes, Josiah lets me drive his car," Nette said. "You're not going to change the subject. What do y'all think of Sebastian and Christian? Aren't they handsome?"

"Of course they are," Angela agreed. "Especially Christian. Is he always that nice?"

"Is Sebastian always that rude?" Jocelyn asked before Nette could respond.

Angela frowned. "I didn't hear Sebastian didn't say anything that was rude."

Jocelyn smirked. "I'm sure you didn't. You were too busy hanging onto every word that came out of Christian Lawson's mouth."

"I didn't hear him say anything rude, either," Nette said. "Though he can be rude sometimes. Don't let it get to you. Sebastian really has to grow on you."

"I don't want that bad attitude growing anywhere near me," Jocelyn insisted.

"I think you're making a big fuss about this because you like him," Nette accused.

"I was watching you. You could barely stop looking at him."

"That is not true!" Jocelyn said, shooting an annoyed glance at her sister who was giggling.

"Yes, it is," Nette said with assurance. "And, yes, Angela. Christian is always that nice."

Angela smiled widely and Jocelyn rolled her eyes. She could see how this was going to play out and didn't like it one bit. Angela was going to spend the next two weeks mooning around with Christian while Nette and Josiah were still practically on their honeymoon. That would leave Jocelyn by herself to deal with the ornery doctor and that was enough to smother any fun she would have.

"One of us will be back to pick y'all up in the car around 5:30," Nette said. She pulled the car to a stop in front of Jocelyn's and Angela's house.

"You know we could just walk over there," Jocelyn said, disgruntled. "We do it all the time."

"Josiah won't like it," Nette said. "It's no problem." She backed onto the road and drove away.

"Don't be such a sourpuss," Angela said as she unlocked the door. Jocelyn rolled her eyes and didn't say anything.

## **Chapter Four**

Christian was the one who drove over and picked them up. Jocelyn hadn't paid any attention to the other car parked in front of Aunt Louella's house and hadn't recognized the vehicle that pulled up. He said it was Sebastian's car but he'd chosen to stay behind at the house with Nette and Josiah. Angela sat in the front beside Christian and Jocelyn climbed into the back, valiantly trying to have a better attitude than she'd had before. She'd been fine until Angela and Nette started teasing her. She didn't know why she was so touchy. Maybe she was just disappointed that Sebastian was so rude. Angela and Christian were already paired off and while Jocelyn wasn't necessarily trying to find a boyfriend, it would have been nice to have someone to talk to who didn't behave as though such conversation would drain the life out of him.

They walked into the house and entered the kitchen. There was no separate dining room in Aunt Louella's house, but the kitchen was uncommonly large and her prized dining room table fit into the room quite nicely.

"Whose dishes are these?" Angela asked.

Jocelyn hadn't noticed the new tableware because she was looking around the room for Sebastian. He wasn't there. She glanced over at the table. It was set with ivory china dishes and sparkling silverware that she'd never seen before.

Nette set a platter in the middle of the table. "Josiah bought them as a surprise for Mama. Aren't they pretty?"

"I bet Aunt Lou was excited," Angela said.

“You know she was,” Nette said. “I’ve never seen so much jumping around and screaming in my life.”

“That’s ‘cause you weren’t here when she got that letter saying you were getting married,” Jocelyn said with a laugh.

Nette grinned and clapped her hands together. “What did she do? I asked her how she reacted but she made it sound like she was so calm and I do not believe that at all.”

“She ran, literally now, all the way to our house, screaming ‘Gertrude!’ at the top of her lungs,” Jocelyn said.

“And then she stood in our living room breathing so hard she looked like she was about to die,” Angela inserted.

“Then, when she caught her breath, she started jumping up and down. She’d grabbed Mama’s hands with the letter still in hers, so they tore it up with all of their theatrics,” Jocelyn finished the story. “That’s why she sent you that letter with all those questions. She couldn’t figure out what the answers were.”

Nette laughed. “I’d wondered about that. I thought I had answered most of her questions in the first letter and couldn’t understand why she was asking me again. Then I figured I had just been too excited when I wrote telling her I was engaged that I left out half the things I meant to say.”

Jocelyn shook her head in amusement and walked through the house. When the house was originally built, the inhabitants used outhouses instead of bathrooms. Since the house wasn’t designed to accommodate a bathroom, when it was finally built, it had to be attached at the back of the house. Jocelyn’s need to use the bathroom had her walking

down the hallway in time enough to overhear a conversation between Josiah and Sebastian.

“Nobody said you have to marry them,” Josiah said. “Though I think if you did try to marry Angela, Christian would fight you for her.”

“God forbid Christian tries to marry that country bumpkin,” Sebastian interrupted. “It takes more to be a good wife than being pretty and sweet, something I’m sure you’re going to realize soon.”

“Hey, that’s not necessary,” Josiah said. He sounded angry and that surprised Jocelyn. Though he seemed easily excitable, she hadn’t taken Josiah for one to get angry easily. “This is Nanette’s parents’ house and Jocelyn and Angela are her cousins. All of that means that you should show them the same amount of respect that you show to me and Christian. I’m not asking you to marry them, I’m asking you to be a little more congenial than you were earlier today. And if you can’t talk about my wife with more respect than you did just now, you might need to go back to Atlanta.”

Jocelyn heard a huge sigh that she assumed came from Sebastian. “I’m sorry,” he said in a voice only a smidgen more humble than before. “Nanette is a good woman and I know how much you love her. I will try to be more civil. To everyone. Especially her cousins. What are their names again?”

“Jocelyn and Angela.”

“Which one is which?”

“Angela is the one Christian cannot stop staring at and Jocelyn is the other one,” Josiah explained. “Nanette says Jocelyn is really smart. She reads a lot and stuff. Talk to

her. There are worse things than being away from work for two weeks and in the company of an intelligent, beautiful woman.”

Sebastian snorted. “I looked around this little town this afternoon. I seriously doubt it breeds intelligence. When do they stop going to school? The eighth grade? Both Jocelyn’s intellect and her beauty are in question.”

Jocelyn’s eyes widened and her mouth fell open so wide a pickup could have driven into it. She might not be the most beautiful woman in the world and her face might be ‘interesting’ but there was no reason to be so mean. And she couldn’t help not going to school past the eighth grade. If there was no colored high school, there was just no colored high school. And there was certainly no money to pay for college. Besides, how rude was it that he hadn’t even remembered her name?

“You don’t think Jocelyn’s pretty?” Josiah asked in shock.

“She’s alright. I guess.”

Jocelyn huffed. She was more than alright. Especially today. She’d looked really pretty this morning when she was getting ready for the church. She’d looked at herself and smiled in delight at how well she looked. Jocelyn held her head high and walked past the open door to the end of the hall.

“Jocelyn?” Josiah called. She turned and faced him and Sebastian with as innocent an expression as she could muster. They both stood in the doorway looking at her with guilty expressions on their faces.

“Yes?” she asked sweetly.

He cleared his throat. “I didn’t realize you and Angela had arrived.”

“Sebastian came and picked us up,” she said with a sugary smile.

The two men shared a glance. “No, I didn’t,” Sebastian said.

Her brow furrowed before she plastered on a look of surprise. “Oh, are *you* Sebastian?”

He nodded.

“I’m sorry!” she said, slapping a hand to her chest. “I thought you were Christian. Can you forgive me?”

Sebastian nodded again. “It’s not a problem.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Some people get *so offended* when you can’t remember their names.”

His eyes narrowed. Maybe he was catching on to the falseness in her tone. Good.

“I promise,” Sebastian said. “It’s not a problem.”

Jocelyn smiled again and fluttered her eyelashes. “Alright, then, I’ll take your word for it. I have to go make sure I’m all pretty for dinner!” she trilled and pushed open the door to the bathroom.

She stood and looked at her reflection in the mirror. Aunt Louella had insisted on a long mirror where a person could see their whole body. It had cost Uncle Zeke a small fortune but he’d gotten it for her for Christmas a couple of years ago. Jocelyn turned her head to one side and then to the other. She leaned close to the mirror and inspected her face. Then she stepped back and slid her hands down her sides until they rested on her hips. She twisted her body to one side and then the other. She faced the opposite direction then looked behind her at her reflection in the mirror. “ ‘Alright,’ my behind,” she



whispered to herself. “I don’t need Mr. High-and-Mighty Doctor-Man to tell me so. I’ve gotten too many marriage proposals to be ugly.”

She used the bathroom and washed her hands, then looked at herself in the mirror again. “I’m smart, too. I don’t care what he thinks.”

She whispered a prayer for forgiveness for lying about not remembering Sebastian’s name and let herself out of the bathroom. She walked back into the kitchen to see Josiah holding Nette’s chair for her and Christian doing the same for Angela. Sebastian looked at her, offered an amazingly bright smile that she refused to be charmed by, and pulled out the remaining chair. It would look really suspicious if she refused to let him seat her. She moved across the room and lowered herself into the chair. She could do this. She could sit beside him and converse like an intelligent person. After all, she was an intelligent person. And one with better manners than Dr. Sebastian Steele.

Jocelyn looked down at the table and wondered why there were so many forks. Before her grandmother died, she’d often remark on the silliness of white people who insisted on having so many forks for one meal. “If the fork gets so dirty that they need another one after all they ate was dinner, maybe they oughta let me fix ‘em somethin’ better to eat than that mess they always askin’ for. Then they’ll clean both they fork and they plate for a change,” she said. “They just wanna make more dishes for me to wash.”

Jocelyn, Angela, and Nette had always laughed and shook their heads, pitying both the silly white people for their foolishness and their grandmother for her line of work. Sitting on the porch steps playing with their dolls, they’d discussed having to do the work their mothers and grandmother did, dreading its inevitability. They sat, one on

each step, with unstraightened hair precisely plaited, skirts covering their knees, socks reaching halfway up their shins, ivory dolls on their laps. Carefully, they brushed the synthetic blond hair and lamented that there was nothing else for them to do but wash dishes and clean up. But those discussions had taken place years ago, before their grandmother died, before Nette married a bougie lawyer from Washington, D. C., before everything changed. Nette wasn't white, but she'd brought these dishes into the house. In reality, it wasn't really a big deal, but it almost seemed like a betrayal of her grandmother's memory for Nette to have put all of this silverware on the table. They weren't this kind of people. They didn't have room for impracticalities like washing all of these dishes when half the volume would have been enough for dinner. But Jocelyn guessed that Nette was that kind of person right now. Josiah could probably afford a housekeeper to wash all of the extra dishes. Besides, he was the one who'd bought these table settings as a gift for his new mother-in-law. Maybe she was overreacting.

But what was she supposed to do about these forks? Jocelyn looked around the table to see which utensil everyone else was using. Nette and Josiah were spreading butter on their bread. Angela was sitting with her hands in her lap, listening intently as Christian said something to her. Jocelyn didn't want to check Sebastian's fork. The last thing she wanted was for him to catch her looking at him. Would it be worse for him to catch her staring or for her to use the wrong fork and have him stare at her? Just as she snuck a peek at his plate, Sebastian spoke to her.

"A lady your age should be married," he said, a smile tilting his lips. "I'm surprised no enterprising lumberjack has snatched you up yet."

“A lumberjack?” Jocelyn asked, wondering if he was calling her an old maid.

“That is what they do in this neck of the woods, isn’t it?” he questioned. “Fell trees?”

“Nanette told me that lots of men in this part of Texas fell trees,” Josiah said, jumping in. “Lumberjacking is a very lucrative business.” His voice was louder than it needed to be with only five other people at the table. Jocelyn noticed her sister wince.

Lumberjacking? “We call them loggers, not lumberjacks. And they drive logging trucks, not lumberjacking trucks. They put logs on their trucks, not lumber,” Jocelyn said.

“Isn’t it the same thing?” Josiah asked.

Nette laughed. “Not to them it isn’t.”

Sebastian gave a little laugh and tugged on his shirt collar. “I didn’t realize having dinner tonight would be an exercise in appropriate word choices,” he said.

“Shouldn’t dinner tonight be an exercise in eating your food?” Jocelyn asked icily.

Angela shot her a disapproving look but Jocelyn ignored it. Maybe she was being unnecessarily rude, but she couldn’t forget what this man had said about her earlier. He’d been disdainful about her sister and Nette, too.

“Yeah, the food,” Sebastian said, making a face at Christian across the table.

“Another creation I’m sure Josiah dredged up from a cookbook that went out of print for a reason.”

Christian rolled his eyes and Jocelyn watched as he leaned closer to Angela.

“Josiah is notorious for forcing dishes no one has ever heard of down the throats of his friends. You should feel honored that he would bring out one that we all hope to forget.”

“This is a delicacy!” Josiah declared.

Jocelyn shared a glance with Nette who playfully rolled her eyes and grinned.

“I’m sorry I brought it up, I was simply attempting to have a conversation,” Sebastian said.

Jocelyn sighed. Josiah Washington, Christian Lawson, and Sebastian Steele. A lawyer, an engineer and a doctor, all with degrees from Howard University in Washington, D.C. The three were vastly different people, which was something Jocelyn hadn’t expected. In her mind, “those” black people, the ones who had privilege and opportunity, the ones whose only claim to blackness was the color of their skin, all behaved in the same way.

She hadn’t met very many of them, though. Maybe that’s why she’d been so wrong. Josiah was loud and boisterous. He reminded Jocelyn of her cousin Mickey. She was always embarrassed to be in public, especially around white people, with Mickey. He didn’t know how to act. Josiah knew how to act. Christian was more Jocelyn’s type. He was interesting and fun, but not overly loud. His manners seemed natural, like that’s just the way he was. It was quite clear that Christian was developing a little crush on Angela and Jocelyn thought that it was cute. He was the first man in a long time whom Jocelyn did not mind liking her sister.

Of the three men at the table, Sebastian was the hardest to figure out. He'd been beyond rude earlier today and he'd made those disparaging remarks about her not fifteen minutes ago, but he was actually trying to be nice right now. The thought of what her mother would think about him made Jocelyn smile. To have these tall, attractive, , *single* black men from Washington, D.C. sitting at the table was an opportunity their mother would have given her front teeth to arrange.

“So, there’s no man wanting to whisk you away to stand in front of a preacher?” Sebastian asked as they began to pass dishes around the table.

“Why do you keep asking these questions?” Jocelyn asked, trying to take the bite out of her voice. “Do you want to marry me?”

He laughed softly and shook his head. “I don’t think that would be the best idea. I was just making conversation. You know, small talk?”

She sighed. She would give anything to leave the table and return home. She had a couple of books there that she still hadn’t read. She could get started on one tonight.

“Josiah said that you like to read,” Sebastian said when she didn’t respond.

“That’s right. I do.”

He smiled. “What’s your favorite book?”

“*Pride and Prejudice*,” she answered without hesitation.

Sebastian laughed, then tried to hide his laughter with his hand.

“Why is that funny?” Jocelyn asked, defensive again. “Jane Austen was a great writer. Or didn’t they make you read any of her books at Howard University?”

A grin peeked through his fingers before he wiped the amused expression off his face. “As a matter of fact, I have read Jane Austen. I just think it’s interesting that your favorite book was written by and is about white Europeans. Not only that, but it’s set during the time when our ancestors were being kidnapped and brought to this country in chains by the shipload.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with the book being good,” Jocelyn said.

“You’re right. It doesn’t have anything to do with the quality of her work. But, I would think that you, especially since you live in the Jim Crow South, would admire the work of Negro writers. Only the good ones, of course.”

Jocelyn was slightly ashamed that she hadn’t read many books by Negroes, mostly because she had very limited access to books in the first place. Any books she had were usually given to her by Mrs. Anderson or Jessamine Crabtree and she would be very surprised to find white people in the south owning any book written by a black person unless it was used to point out some other imagined imperfection on the part of the “lesser race.” Mrs. Crabtree had given Jocelyn a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and she’d really liked the book. As a matter of fact, Sebastian kind of reminded her of the Darcy character. Jocelyn wondered if he would turn out to be as honorable.

“What you’re telling me,” Sebastian continued, “Is that you like *Pride and Prejudice* more than *Their Eyes were Watching God* and *Annie Allen*? How can that be?”

“Most educated black people don’t like *Their Eyes were Watching God*,” Christian said. Jocelyn could have kissed him for speaking up since she’d never heard of those books.

“That’s true, but I still think she would have more in common with black people in Florida than with the British aristocracy in place over a hundred years ago.”

Jocelyn shrugged. “Maybe I prefer to read books that are generally accepted as good literature.”

“Who decides what good literature is?” Sebastian questioned, seemingly offended.

White people decided everything, but Jocelyn was certain that would be the wrong response in this room. Half the people here had been college-educated and probably believed that what they thought mattered. The other half knew the truth.

“The people who read books decide if they’re good or not,” Nette cut in, surprising Jocelyn and Angela. She never entered intellectual discussions before. “What difference does it make if the Book of the Month Club likes the story if you can’t stay awake during it?”

“Besides, lots of white critics like *Their Eyes were Watching God*.” Josiah re-entered the conversation.

Sebastian shook his head. “That was only an example. Here’s another: Gwendolyn Brooks won a Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen*. A Pulitzer is a pretty good indication that a book is good literature. Have you read *Annie Allen*?”

“Our jobs don’t really allow us a lot of extra time for reading,” Angela said in a voice barely above a whisper.

“If she can read *Pride and Prejudice*, she can read *Annie Allen*,” Sebastian insisted.

“No, I haven’t read either of them!” Jocelyn said, unwilling for her big sister to be baited. Sebastian could pick on somebody who was able to give as good as she got.

His mouth dropped open. “That’s only two books! What about all of the others?”

“What about all the others?” Jocelyn asked.

Sebastian just looked at her for a second. “Have you read *any* book written by our *own* people?”

“No, I haven’t,” she said, secretly so embarrassed by her obvious lack of exposure that she wanted to die. She wouldn’t let him know it, though. “Just because I haven’t read a whole lot of books by black authors doesn’t mean that I’m unintelligent. I’m not reading for the enjoyment of black intellectuals anyway. I’m reading for mine.”

Neither of them said anything for awhile. Glasses and silverware clinked, the bread basket was passed around again. Nette opened one of the windows and a warm breeze wafted into the room. Christian and Josiah a conversation about someone they knew in Atlanta. Jocelyn shifted her attention to the other conversations around the table, resolved to suffer through the rest of dinner quietly. While conversing with Sebastian wasn’t the most excruciating experience she’d ever encountered, she didn’t want to encourage much one-on-one interaction.



## **Chapter Five**

Angela smiled widely and waved at Christian before closing the front door of their house. Christian drove them back home after dinner was over. He'd asked Sebastian if he wanted to come along for the ride. Sebastian had glanced at Jocelyn then shook his head. He told the ladies good night and disappeared down the hallway. He hadn't even stayed to help Josiah and Nette with the dishes.

Angela skipped to the couch and sat down with a rapturous sigh. "Christian is so handsome!" she exclaimed.

Jocelyn shook her head and sat beside her. "So is Sebastian," Jocelyn said. "That doesn't make either of them a nice person." She took off her shoes and wiggled her toes.

"But Christian *is* nice. And funny, and smart. He's an engineer and he's really good at it."

Jocelyn nodded.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Angela asked.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. Did you like Christian?"

"He's nice enough, I suppose," Jocelyn admitted. "I just think you need to be careful. You know how easily your emotions get involved. Christian does not live in Texas. A relationship between y'all wouldn't go anywhere."

Angela rolled her eyes and changed the subject, unwilling to hear any of Jocelyn's warnings. "What did you think of Sebastian?"

"He needs to work on his manners."

“He was better than before.”

Jocelyn shrugged. “That’s not hard to be at all.”

“Oh, come on!” Angela said. “You know you like discussions like that, talking about books and stuff. Didn’t you say you wanted somebody who could talk with you about more than how high the corn is growing this season?”

“I don’t want to feel like an idiot during the conversation,” Jocelyn insisted. “He’s the kind of person I always saw myself with. You know, tall, handsome, intelligent, with a good job. He went to college. He’s travelled around the country. He’s educated, sophisticated, and has money. But I don’t know if I want that anymore. He’s kind of a hard person to be around.”

“Nette said you have to warm up to him,” Angela said.

“I don’t know if I care enough to.”

The room was quiet for several minutes before Angela broke the silence.

“Christian really is a good engineer. One of the best at his firm. His bosses love him and they’re white!”

“White people have loved black people for as long as people have been around, especially if they could work. So, he’s a good engineer,” Jocelyn shrugged, “That’s better than a bad one.”

“But he’s so good that his bosses absolutely love him! They trust him with really big, important clients and they give him all of these nice things. Do you know how hard it is for a black man to get to that level, even in Atlanta?”

Jocelyn rubbed circles on her temples and closed her eyes again. “No, Angela, I didn’t know that because I’ve never been there before.”

Angela shrugged. “What did you and Sebastian talk about besides books?”

“Nothing really.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, each lost in their own thoughts before Jocelyn spoke up. “You ever notice how some black people have so much and others have so little? We’re all black, right? What do you have to do to be one of those who get a break? Take Josiah and Christian and Sebastian. It’s obvious their families have money. That’s given them the education and opportunities they have. What about us? Do you think God doesn’t like us as much?”

“Is that what you think?” Angela asked in surprise.

Jocelyn sighed. “I don’t think so. I just wonder about stuff.”

Angela was quiet for a little bit. “I don’t think God loves them more. There are only so many black people with money. We couldn’t all be born in those families.”

“But why are there any differences like that at all?” Jocelyn asked.

Her sister shrugged. “Sometimes I think that God didn’t intend for there to be differences.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at the garden of Eden,” Angela instructed. “Adam and Eve had everything they needed. They obviously didn’t need to know the difference between good and evil. If that was necessary, God would have already given them the ability to know that when He made them. I bet that if God had created more people before Adam and Eve sinned,

there wouldn't have been big differences in money and houses and the way people get treated and everything like that. I think everyone would have walked around, butt-naked and eating fruit off trees without washing it off first, happy as clams."

Jocelyn laughed. "Why do you think they didn't wash the fruit off?"

"It doesn't say that they did."

"It doesn't say that they didn't, either."

Angela shrugged. "I don't know. I just assumed."

Jocelyn shook her head. "Okay. I'm going to bed." She rose and walked out of the room.

"Jocelyn?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you wish you were like Christian and Josiah and Sebastian?"

Jocelyn didn't know how to explain the way she felt. "It's not that I hate the way that I am right now. I just wish things weren't so hard, you know. And I really wish I could have gone to college. I love to learn stuff."

"But you still don't like living in a small town, huh?" Angela asked. "You want to move?"

Jocelyn nodded. "I would like to move. I want to be somewhere where everybody doesn't know me."

Angela nodded, but didn't say anything else. Jocelyn went on to bed.

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“Aren’t you going to help set the food out?” Angela asked as she breezed into their kitchen the next evening. “You don’t want to be rude to the guests.”

“You’re the one who invited them over here,” Jocelyn said. She continued to dribble frosting onto the cake she’d made to go along with dinner. Desserts were her specialty and it was all Angela and Nette would let her make this evening.

Angela set down the platter she’d picked up and turned toward Jocelyn. “What is wrong with you, now? We had such a good time all evening and now you want to act a fool. Will you please stop?”

“I’m sorry,” Jocelyn sighed. “It’s just that every time I start thinking I can have a normal conversation with that man, he says something and I can’t tell if he’s making fun me or what.”

“Well get right! I know Sebastian’s not the nicest person we’ve ever met, but he’s Josiah’s friend and Nette’s guest, so the least you could do is be nice.”

“Niceness only encourages him.”

Angela placed her hands on her hips, accentuating the hour glass figure that so many of their friends envied her for. Jocelyn was shaped like that, too, but no one paid much attention. “It’s probably all those looks you give Sebastian that ‘encourages’ him to keep teasing you,” she accused.

“What looks?” Jocelyn asked.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Angela said with a smirk. “Those looks that say he’s better looking than Harry Belafonte. And you’d give the shirt off your back to get him to take off his.”

Jocelyn's mouth fell open. "Angela!"

"What?"

"I do not look at him like that!"

Angela raised her eyebrows and shrugged before reclaiming her platter and heading into the dining room. The words, "If you say so" floated over her shoulder as the door swung closed.

Jocelyn stood in the kitchen and fumed, furious that her sister would say such a thing to her. She barely restrained herself from stomping her foot. Angela knew that Jocelyn never looked at any man like that. Of course, no man had ever looked like that before. Her clenched fists relaxed as she thought about it. Sebastian Steele was as close to perfect as a man could get and he most certainly looked better than Harry Belafonte. He was slightly taller than Christian and almost a foot taller than Josiah, easily several inches over six feet. He was built like a baseball player, not so big he looked like he felled trees for a living, but not skinny either. His clear, even brown skin was several shades darker than Jocelyn's own and his full lips would have had her swooning the first time she'd seen him if she hadn't ended her inspection back at his eyes. Chocolate brown eyes that returned her gaze with barely concealed amusement. Was he laughing at her? Probably, it was what he seemed to do whenever they were in the same room. Sometimes Jocelyn wouldn't have to say anything, he would just start smiling like he could barely contain his laughter. It was very annoying. She couldn't stand it.

Jocelyn wiped away icing that had dripped onto the counter, picked up the cut-glass cake plate, and sailed through the door, chin in the air.

After dessert, Jocelyn walked out onto the porch with a newspaper that had come in the mail that day and sat on the top step. Maybe one day she would go visit Miss Jenkins in Los Angeles. That would be fun. The door opened behind her and Sebastian came to sit beside her on the top step.

“There are an awful lot of black people on that page for the local paper,” he commented.

Jocelyn flipped back to the front page and tilted it in his direction so he could see the name of the paper. “It’s not local. It’s from Los Angeles.”

He looked surprised. “How do you get colored newspapers from California?”

Jocelyn explained about her friendship with Miss Jenkins.

“You still call her ‘Miss Jenkins’?” he asked.

“What else should I call her?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “You don’t think you’re old enough to use her first name?”

Jocelyn tilted her head to the side. “I’ve never thought about it before.”

Sebastian smiled and opened his mouth to say something else but Ruby Johnson screeched from her place at the edge of the yard before he could. “Yoo-hoo! Who is that that you got over there, Jocelyn Roberts?”

“A friend of Nette’s new husband.”

“A single friend?”

Jocelyn laughed. “Yes, Ruby, he’s single.”

“Really?” Ruby scuttled across the yard to stand in front of them. Jocelyn was still grinning as she looked over to gauge Sebastian’s reaction. The look on his face melted Jocelyn’s smile. It was a mixture of horror and the kind of morbid fascination that caused people to watch a pack of wolves take down a deer despite the gruesomeness of the sight. It was like he was waiting for some kind of disaster.

Ruby stopped in front of Sebastian and introduced herself, shaking his hand and fluttering her eyelashes. Jocelyn tried to see her friend from Sebastian’s point of view. The first thing she noticed was Ruby’s attire. The ill-fitting dress in a bile-inducing faded purple color had definitely seen better days. There were no shoes on Ruby’s feet and her hair looked as though she’d combed it with a stick. She’d hotfooted it across the yard with a stride that Jocelyn’s mother insisted was a whorish invitation for any available man to get in her drawers. Jocelyn wouldn’t go that far in her critique of Ruby’s walk, but did admit that it was slightly indecent.

“How long you gone be in Newton?” Ruby asked, her hip cocked to the side with her wrist resting on it.

“For a little while longer,” Sebastian said, his voice noticeably cooler than when he was speaking with Jocelyn earlier.

“How long is a little while?” Ruby questioned.

“Ruby!” Jocelyn exclaimed.

“What?” Ruby asked.

“Maybe that’s his business,” Jocelyn said, hoping Ruby would take the hint.

“It’s my business, too!” she declared.



“How do you suppose that?” Sebastian asked.

“Jocelyn said I could have all of her leftovers,” Ruby said matter-of-factly.

“Ruby!” Jocelyn said, horrified at what Sebastian must be thinking and the thought processes that had to have gone on in Ruby’s mind for her to even think something like that. Jocelyn chanced a glance at Sebastian to find him eyeing her speculatively, his eyebrows raised high on his forehead.

“I did not tell you that, Ruby!” Jocelyn said. “What ‘leftovers’ do I have to give you? Besides, Sebastian is not my boyfriend.”

Ruby frowned. “You did tell me that I could have your leftovers,” she insisted. “Just a couple of weeks ago you said that. I can have Angela’s, too. And what do you mean ‘what leftovers’? Don’t you remember Lionel Hicks and Gerald Defoe and Chauncey Howard and all those other men that your mama fixes you up with? I told you to send them my way when you got finished. I’m looking for a husband, same as you.”

Jocelyn placed her hands on her face and closed her eyes.

“Sounds like you get around, Miss Roberts,” Sebastian said, all warmth gone from him. He looked like he’d been dunked in starch right along with his shirt.

“I do not get around anywhere!” Jocelyn corrected. “Ruby, you know I don’t go out with those men. I can hardly help it if my mama makes them think I’m letting them court me and they show up at the house.”

“Well, Gerald Defoe said...”

“I don’t care what he said!” Jocelyn hissed.

Sebastian stood. "I think I'll let you ladies continue this conversation without me." He walked back into the house without saying another word.

Ruby stomped her foot. "How rude!" she said. "He just got up and left."

Jocelyn sighed and went into the house, as well.

## **Chapter Six**

When Jocelyn was eleven and Angela was twelve, their father, Chester Roberts, left their mother for the lady who lived down the street. He had never been around much that Jocelyn could remember and she was almost relieved when he left. He never had anything good to say about Jocelyn, Angela, or Gertrude. He was liable as not to hit one of them as they passed by his chair and every word out of his mouth was venomous, intending to wound. Jocelyn would never forget the time when he told her and Angela that the only reason he married their mother was because she was pregnant. Having recently learned exactly what men and women did to make a baby from Marcus Calkins, Jocelyn was horrified. She couldn't imagine why anyone would want to do that anyway and had just reconciled herself to the fact that her parents had obviously done it at least twice to make her and her sister. People who did that without being married committed fornication and considering how disgusting it sounded, Jocelyn wasn't surprised that God considered it a sin. She'd learned what fornication meant from her Sunday School teacher. Actually, Sister Maybelle had been talking to Sister Rachel about Carol Allen, but Jocelyn had understood the gist of that conversation.

After her father revealed this news, she'd looked him in the eye and asked why he told them such a thing. She figured it was just to make Angela cry. She did that quite easily, something that Jocelyn found very irritating. Their father had looked at them both and said he told them because he wanted them to realize their mother was evil, just like him. Enraged, Jocelyn had flown at him, biting and scratching and screaming. He'd thrown her across the room just as her mother came to see what the commotion was

about. As she lay on the floor, Angela hovering over her with tears and questions about whether she was alright, Jocelyn watched her mother tell her father to get out of the house and never come back.

Jocelyn couldn't remember her mother ever saying that before, not in her entire eleven years. Obviously her father had been just as surprised. He'd stopped his ranting long enough to search Gertrude's face. Whatever he saw, it let him know that she meant business. He'd walked into the room he and Gertrude shared, grabbed an armload of clothes and walked out the front door. He'd never come into the house again, but rather stayed with Miss Sister six doors down. Miss Sister had several children herself, and for two years, they'd made fun of Jocelyn and Angela because their father would rather take care of someone else's children than his own. One day, though, Miss Sister's children didn't come to school. Jocelyn and Angela had to walk past Miss Sister's house to get home from school and it looked deserted. Several weeks later, they heard that their father had moved to New York City with Miss Sister. That was the last she'd heard of the man who fathered her.

After Chester Roberts left, Gertrude began attending church regularly. Before, she would let Angela and Jocelyn go with Nette, Aunt Lou, and Uncle Zeke sometimes, but Gertrude never went. Now, though, Gertrude was there almost every time the church doors opened. Jocelyn watched her mother turn from a hollow shell of a woman who stayed alive only to make sure her children were safe to a happy, vibrant person in the community. Gertrude loved her life now and one night when Jocelyn was fourteen, she got up enough courage to ask her mother about the transformation.

“I was never very happy with your father,” Gertrude admitted. “I was relieved when he left. He’d never been faithful to me, not even before we were married. He wasn’t a good person for you girls to be around. I felt like no one loved me, until one Sunday I was sitting in church and Reverend Haxton said that if we could get clean and be better people on our own, God wouldn’t have sent Jesus. I realized then that God saw me for who I was and sent His son anyway, because He wanted me to be close to Him. I don’t regret that decision at all.”

Jocelyn had thought about that long and hard. She’d got out the Bible and studied it the best that she could, looking for scriptures that said that God loved them. She found one, 1 John 4:8, *He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love*. If God was love, then He couldn’t help loving her and her mother and Angela. Even if He wanted to, He couldn’t. It’s just who He was. From that day forward, Jocelyn turned to God when times got tough. She often didn’t understand things, which was frustrating, but she’d made her mind up that she would never turn her back on the Lord. He would never stop loving her and she would never give up on Him. Even if she only made it to heaven by the skin of her teeth, she would be there, hanging on, refusing to let go.

She felt that same determination in some of the other members of her church and she loved the feeling of unity that it brought. She didn’t think they necessarily had to be at church as often as they were, because they were often there four or five times a week, but not going was not really an option. That’s why she was surprised the next afternoon as she sat in the porch swing with Sebastian when he told her that not only was he not going to Bible study with them that night, but that he didn’t believe in God.

“I don’t attend church,” Sebastian said. “I think it’s a crutch for the weak and I would rather rely on myself. God cannot possibly exist the way they teach at church and I see no point in going.”

Jocelyn stared at him for a minute, trying to assimilate this information. He’d been rather standoffish with her today, not that he’d ever warmed up to her completely. But she had a feeling that he believed everything that Ruby had said last night and now thought she was a bad person. She wasn’t sure if he was telling the complete truth about not believing in God or if he was exaggerating because he knew it would upset her. “You don’t go to church in Atlanta?”

“Sometimes, I do,” he admitted. “When my sister or mother drags me along with them.”

“So, your mother and sister are weak people who need a crutch to survive?”  
Jocelyn asked.

“You could say that,” he answered.

“Do *you* say that?” she questioned.

He shrugged. “I just feel like if there really is a God, He doesn’t do a good job. If that’s the case, why would I want to serve Him?”

“You mean aside from not wanting to go to hell?”

“I don’t believe any such place exists,” he said calmly.

“Do you think that matters?” Jocelyn asked, trying not to overreact. She hated it when people told her what to do and didn’t want to do that with Sebastian. Everything he was saying didn’t add up, though, and she wanted to know where he stood.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Do you think that if hell exists, your lack of belief makes any difference? It’s not going to disappear because you don’t believe in it. It’ll still be there.”

“Be where?” he pressed.

“I don’t know,” Jocelyn admitted. “Wherever hell is. I’m not going to find out. I have no intention of going there.”

“You don’t think that women who sleep around with a lot of men go to hell?”

“Excuse me?”

Sebastian repeated himself slowly. Jocelyn interrupted before he could finish. “Ruby Johnson talks a lot and has a tendency to exaggerate things. I sincerely hope you’re not going off of her words yesterday and insinuating that I sleep around with a lot of men,” she said.

He shrugged. “If the shoe fits.”

So angry she could barely speak, Jocelyn just looked at him. After awhile, he squirmed underneath her gaze and looked away. She rose and walked into the house. “What’s wrong with you?” Angela asked from her place on the couch beside Christian.

Jocelyn shook her head. “Are y’all about ready to go?” she asked. They nodded and stood. Everyone except Sebastian piled into Josiah’s car and headed for the church. Jocelyn looked out the back window and watched Sebastian as he sat alone on the porch steps.

\*

Last night at church, Mr. Floyd met Josiah and Christian. Jocelyn liked Mr. Floyd. He didn't have any teeth and had hair growing out of his ears. He was really nice and had invited them all out to his farm to pick blackberries. The fruit was just coming ripe and he figured he might as well share. There were blackberry bushes in the back of almost everyone's backyard, Jocelyn's being no exception. They agreed to drive out there the next afternoon, though. Mr. Floyd's farm was nice and Christian and Josiah wanted to see all of his animals.

So Jocelyn found herself picking blackberries off of a bush beside Sebastian the next day. The invitation hadn't included him since Mr. Floyd hadn't known he existed, but the old man didn't mind that Sebastian showed up, as well. He told them to pick all of the berries they could and then come inside the house and make him a cobbler. Mr. Floyd lived by himself and had finagled more than one dessert in this fashion.

"If you wanted a blackberry cobbler, all you had to do was say so," Angela informed him with a smile. "We would have brought you one."

Mr. Floyd just laughed and went inside his house.

Half an hour later, Jocelyn began filling her second pail. Sebastian hadn't said anything to her today, even though she'd spoken very cordially to him. She decided she didn't appreciate moodiness in a man and didn't try to speak to him again.

"I want to apologize for what I said yesterday evening," Sebastian said.

Doggone it. How was she supposed to not speak to him if he started talking to her?



“I was out of line to suggest that you don’t behave in a manner befitting a lady and I can assure you that it won’t happen again.”

Jocelyn faced him. “Your apology is accepted,” she said and went back to picking blackberries.

“I think this is my first time being on a farm,” Sebastian said.

“They don’t have farms in Georgia?” she asked.

“They don’t have farms in Atlanta,” he told her. “There are some around the city, out in the country, but I don’t ever have a reason to go out there.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” Jocelyn said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that such a big important person as Doctor Sebastian Steele would have no reason to lower himself to such a degree and be out amongst the common folk,” Jocelyn said, half-jokingly.

“That’s not fair,” Sebastian insisted. “My work and my family are in the city. I don’t know anybody on a farm and so have no reason to be out there. My father worked hard so that I would never have to slave away behind a mule, growing crops for some white man to come take away from me after I did all the work. I’m not going to pretend to be ashamed of that. My father grew up like that and he didn’t want that for me.”

Jocelyn rocked back on her heels and eyed him. He was incredibly defensive right now for no reason. “I never said you should be ashamed of it. I was just making an observation. What if you owned the farm and got to keep all the profit?”

“That wouldn’t change the fact that I was working the land like a slave,” he said.

“So, it’s the work that you object to more than the fact that white people get a cut at the end?” Jocelyn clarified. “You think this is beneath you.”

“Don’t you?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “I think it’s beneath me to break my back in someone else’s fields. I think that’s beneath every human being. I also don’t care that much for farming and would be unhappy living here. However, if a person enjoys this type of work and can do so on his own land, that’s a completely different matter. Mr. Floyd owns this farm. He’s one of only three colored men in the whole county who owns his own farm. I’m proud of him for that, even if it’s not as ‘important’ as your doctoring. Somebody has to grow crops. It might as well be somebody who wants to.”

“Do we have to argue every time we have a conversation?” he asked, exasperation in his voice.

Jocelyn shrugged. “I don’t know. Do we?”

“Why don’t we talk about the weather?” he suggested. “It sure is hot out here today, don’t you think?”

“Not really,” Jocelyn responded.

He sighed and threw his hands up in the air.

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After leaving Mr. Floyd’s with their own blackberry cobbles along with a couple of buckets full to the brim with the freshly-picked fruit, they all went to Aunt Lou’s house where they ate sandwiches for dinner. Nette pulled the checker board out of the closet in the living room and set up the game for her and Josiah. Angela and Christian

went for a walk and Sebastian was left to follow Jocelyn into the kitchen where she was making blackberry jam.

Sebastian sat down in a chair at the table. “I think Christian has a crush on your sister,” he said.

Jocelyn looked over her shoulder at him. “Josiah already married one country bumpkin and now Christian likes one? I hope it’s not catching, then you might fall for one, too.”

He slapped his hand on the table. “I knew you heard us the other day,” he exclaimed. “I’m really sorry I said all of those things. I was out of line.”

“Have you ever noticed how you’re always sorry and always out of line?” Jocelyn asked.

“Would you rather I didn’t apologize?”

“I would rather you were a better person who wasn’t always out of line and having to apologize for it,” Jocelyn said, adding pectin to her pot of crushed blackberries. Her grandmother had scorned the use of pectin, preferring instead to stand over her stove for hours, tending the fruit. Jocelyn refused to do that and had found that her jams and jellies tasted just as good.

Sebastian didn’t say anything. Jocelyn bustled around the kitchen, adding this and that to her pot, stirring it and tasting a little bit every now and then. Her mixture was boiling on the stove before she spoke. They talked about their jobs and their families. She asked him questions about college and finally the jam was ready to cool.

After sitting the jars in a straight line on the counter, the two of them walked back into the living room. Angela and Christian had returned and were playing checkers now. Nette and Josiah had went on their own walk. Jocelyn and Sebastian went on the porch and sat in the swing. They ended up there often. It relaxed Jocelyn after the long days she'd been putting in. She and Angela still had to go to work everyday, cleaning houses. Then, when they got home, they either came over here to Aunt Lou's house or Nette and the men came over to their house. Jocelyn wasn't sure what they did all day, but knew that they got a lot of visitors. A lot of women visitors who had been leaving food the past couple of days, so they hadn't cooked in awhile.

"The first boy I ever had a crush on was white," Jocelyn spoke into the silence of the evening. The creaking of the porch swing hardly counted as noise. It was just background and blended with the noise of the neighbors' children playing hopscotch in the street.

Sebastian's foot held fast to the porch floor, stopping the swing mid-motion. He frowned a little frown, glanced at her out the corner of his eye, exhaled a small laugh, and moved his foot, allowing the swing to continue its journey. Jocelyn liked his little frowns. They were cute and didn't signal anger, but rather puzzlement, amusement. They were a signal that he was enjoying himself. "Hopefully, your taste has improved since then," he teased.

"I wouldn't say that just any black man is an improvement over a white one," Jocelyn countered with mock seriousness.

He shrugged. "Not all of the time. Just a lot of the time."

Jocelyn giggled. “Who was the first girl you ever had a crush on? Was she black?”

“We’re not finished talking about your white prince, yet,” Sebastian interjected. “Let’s talk about him first, and then I’ll tell you about Modestine Harper who was the most beautiful light-skinned black woman an eight year old boy has ever seen.”

“Modestine?” Jocelyn laughed even harder.

Sebastian shifted to face her. His eyebrows were raised and his eyes had opened wider in an attempt to intimidate. “Do not talk about her. Modestine Harper was an angel!”

“Was?”

He smiled. “That conversation only comes after we talk about your white lover.”

“He wasn’t my lover! Just my boyfriend. My pretend husband, in fact.”

“Tell me about him.”

Unsure of why she’d started this conversation, Jocelyn told Sebastian all she could remember about Webster Markintale. He was the second son of Judge Clyde Markintale and Jocelyn’s mother cleaned their house until Jocelyn was about nine years old. For several weeks before kindergarten started, Jocelyn’s mother had to take her and Angela to work with her because Aunt Louella was laid up from an accident with her back. Jocelyn, Angela, Webster, and Clyde, Jr. had played house. Angela and Clyde were married and so were Jocelyn and Webster. The two couples lived next to each other and Webster and Clyde were kind enough to let Angela and Jocelyn visit each other whenever they wanted. The game had abruptly ended when Clyde, Jr.’s best friend came over and

proclaimed that white men never married black women and the four of them were going to go jail. Clyde and Webster promptly put Angela and Jocelyn out of their respective houses and snubbed the two girls for the rest of the week. School started then and even amidst Jocelyn's excitement about finally being at school and learning to read, she remembered Webster Markintale. It took almost until Christmas for Jocelyn to become interested in another boy, Johnny Roperson. He declared that she was his girlfriend and they had to kiss the way his big brother, Jimmy, and Jimmy's girlfriend did. Johnny Roperson was black and didn't throw Jocelyn out of the house when his friends came over.

Sebastian looked at Jocelyn, his gaze lingering on her lips before rising back to her eyes. He cleared his throat. "My first romance was a lot better than yours."

"Oh, was it? Just how much better was Modestine than Webster, with her little light-skinned self?" Jocelyn asked.

"Ouch. Do I detect bitterness toward the light-skinned sisters?" Sebastian asked.

Jocelyn put on her most innocent face. "No, dear sir. You detect nothing of the sort. I'm just not the least bit surprised that your first love was as close to white as you could get without actually getting a white girl."

"You wound me," Sebastian accused with a hand to his heart.

"Just making an observation," Jocelyn shrugged. "I didn't say it was a bad thing."

Sebastian straightened. "We'll leave that conversation for another time, fair maiden. For now, I must extol the virtues of the breathtaking Modestine Harper. She was the best Sunday school teacher a man ever had."

Sebastian smiled in response to Jocelyn's exaggerated eye rolling and continued his recitation. "She was so beautiful and so tall, a lot taller than me. She had the prettiest hair and she would let me touch it each Sunday. I fell in love with her because of her hair, you know."

"No, I didn't know," Jocelyn interrupted.

"Well, now you do," Sebastian went on. "It didn't end because my skin was too dark for her."

Jocelyn gasped. "It didn't?"

"No. It ended because of another man."

"Another man?" Jocelyn asked with wide eyes and a mouth opened in shock.

Sebastian laughed at her antics and continued. "Yes. He was Pastor Oakes' son. He came back from seminary school and swept my Miss Modestine off her feet. She told us one Sunday before we sung our songs that she was getting married."

"What did you do?"

"Fell on the floor and burst into tears. My mama had to come get me and I had to stay in the Women's Sunday school class that morning."

Jocelyn burst out with laughter. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," Sebastian said dryly. "My daddy was so mad. I got the worst whoopin' of my life. Up to that point, anyway."

"'Whoopin'?" Jocelyn asked.

“Yes, ‘whoopin.’ It was an occasion for one. Other, lesser offenses got ‘whippings’. This one got a real, honest-to-goodness, with-a-hickory-switch-that-I-had-to-pick-off-the-tree-and-that-broke-while-it-was-being-used whoopin’.”

“I never got one of those,” Jocelyn said with her nose in the air.

“I don’t believe you,” Sebastian said.

Jocelyn shrugged. “You don’t have to. I only got ‘whippings’ with a belt, mister. A couple of times with a wooden spoon and always with a fly-swatter at my grandma’s house, but never a hickory switch.”

Sebastian laughed. “I’m sure our parents wish we were all so well-behaved.”

“I’m sure they do,” Jocelyn said primly.



## **Chapter Seven**

Sebastian and Christian had been in Newton for a little over a week and half. It was almost time for them to go home and a week after that, Nette and Josiah would go back to Atlanta as well. Though Jocelyn would only admit it about Nette, she thought she would miss them all. They'd had some fun times over these last several days. Last Saturday they'd driven up to the lake and fished. They'd run into a disaster because although the men could catch fish, they didn't know how to clean them. Neither did the women. Cleaning fish had always been Uncle Zeke's job. With the women laughing all the way there, they'd driven the fish over to Mr. Floyd's house where the men were teased mercilessly until all the fish were clean. They'd remained at Mr. Floyd's house to share their meal and had a wonderful time.

Jocelyn and Sebastian had had their share of run-ins. Both were exceedingly stubborn and between his uppity attitude and her defense of a town she didn't even want to live in, half of their time spent together consisted of arguments. He'd gone to church with them on Sunday, though, and again on Tuesday, even though she hadn't asked him again. She didn't question his attendance and he didn't mention it either. He'd beaten her in checkers last night and that's why she was in her kitchen making a blackberry jam cake. He'd decided that he wanted the cake as his prize.

Angela had already walked over with a record that Josiah wanted to hear, but Jocelyn was waiting ten more minutes for her cake to come out of the oven. She would carry it over to Aunt Lou's and frost it there.

“Knock, knock!” Sebastian called from the back door. Jocelyn went over and opened it and moved back to the sink where she was cleaning her mixing bowls and spoons.

“Are you making my cake?” he asked, taking a seat at the table.

“Yes, I am,” Jocelyn said. “It’s almost finished.” She bustled around the kitchen, straightening things so she wouldn’t have to come clean them in the morning. It was time to take the cake out of the oven when she realized Sebastian hadn’t really said anything to her. “You’re being awfully quiet this evening,” she pointed out.

“That’s because I have something to say,” he said in a strange voice.

Jocelyn frowned. “You have something to say so you’re not saying anything?”

“Can you just sit down for a minute?” he asked.

Jocelyn turned to look at him. He looked nervous, which was strange because she didn’t think she’d seen him nervous at all in the past week and a half. She sat down across from him at the table. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

“No,” he said, letting out a shaky breath. “I have to...I came over here...this evening, to tell you how much I love you.”

Jocelyn didn’t say anything. She wasn’t sure what he was doing, but it wasn’t funny.

He stood and began pacing around the kitchen. “Believe me, I’m as shocked about this as you are. I can’t believe I let this happen, but since I did, I thought you should know. I tried to talk myself out of it, but it didn’t work.” He stopped in front of

her and took her hands in his. “I also thought you should know that I want you to become my wife.”

Jocelyn jumped up, pulling her hands away. “What are you doing?” she asked.

He shrugged and stretched his hands toward her, palms up in supplication. “I don’t know. You know? I know that you’re all wrong for me. You could probably never fit into my world and yet I want you there. Sometimes I look at you and I don’t understand how you could think and say the things that you do and then other times I’m amazed at how profound you can be. You’re the most unsophisticated woman I’ve ever been attracted to and yet you’re the only one I’ve ever seriously considered marrying. And what’s even more strange is that I just talked Christian out of proposing to your sister for these very same reasons that I’m laying out to you right now!”

“What?” Jocelyn screamed, horrified beyond measure. Of all the idiots Angela had ever had the misfortune of dating, Christian was the only one who was good enough to marry her.

“Yeah!” Sebastian said, nodding at her as though she was in agreement with his feelings. “And I tried my hardest to get Josiah to not marry Nette, but he obviously didn’t listen to me. I don’t know what’s going on with me right now. So many things don’t make sense, but you’re the only thing that does. I woke up this morning knowing exactly what I had to do. I had to ask you to marry me. I figure I can just stay here until your mother gets back from Memphis and we can get married then. And we’ll just go back to Atlanta after that. My mother is probably going to lynch me when she finds out what I’ve done, but my sister...”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Jocelyn cried. “Don’t go making all these plans when you haven’t heard my answer yet.”

Sebastian, looking a little bewildered, stopped talking, sat down and stared at her.

“I don’t know what I have done to make you think this is a good idea,” Jocelyn began, “But there is nothing you could possibly say to make me want to marry you.”

A look of confusion passed over his face. “I don’t understand.”

“How can you stand there and say all of those horrible things about me and propose at the same time?” she screamed. “Are you insane? Why would I ever say yes to that? And I cannot believe that you would convince Christian to not propose to my sister! She is a beautiful and very sweet person. She would make Christian a lovely wife!”

Sebastian sighed. “That doesn’t have anything to do with it. Angela would be less able to cope in Atlanta than even you would. I’m thinking of her.”

“You expect me to believe that garbage?”

“I hope you do. I’m telling you the truth.”

Jocelyn stood, breathing heavily and trying to regain control of herself. “You don’t even think I’m pretty,” she finally said.

“That’s not true. I think you’re very beautiful,” he insisted quietly, hurt in his voice.

“Since when? Because I distinctly remember you telling Josiah that I was ‘alright.’”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I really do think you’re pretty.”

Having a hard time finding the words she wanted, Jocelyn sighed heavily and placed a hand to her forehead. “No! Do you hear me? Just, no! I will not marry you!”

“Might I ask why?” he asked.

“Because I don’t love you! Because I just met you a week and a half ago! Because you are the most condescending, siditty man that I’ve ever met! Pick whichever one suits you better! It doesn’t matter to me.”

His nostrils flared and his jaw tightened before he took a deep breath and rose from his chair with more dignity than Jocelyn figured a freshly-jilted man had a right to possess. “Perhaps if I had withheld all of my concerns over our union, you would have denied me in a more ladylike manner. But I’m not going to apologize for my apprehensions. They are reasonable and just.”

“Perhaps if you had a better personality and a more humble spirit, you would have proposed in a more gentlemanlike manner. And I’m not going to apologize for not accepting! That is reasonable and just!”

“That is enough!” he said loudly.

“I’ll tell you when it’s enough!” Jocelyn screeched, so angry she couldn’t think straight. “How dare you tell Josiah not to marry Nette? How dare you convince Christian not to propose to my sister? But you know what? If Christian is not man enough to stand up to you, he doesn’t deserve my sister!”

“I’m leaving,” Sebastian said. He walked out the door. “I’ll tell everyone you’ll be along shortly.”

“Tell them I have a headache and I’m not coming!” Jocelyn ordered before slamming the door. She whirled around and looked at her freshly cleaned kitchen and smelled the cake burning. She hurriedly pulled it out of the oven to find a fresh layer of black all over the top. In exasperation, she dropped the whole thing into the garbage and burst into tears.

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She couldn’t believe it. He acted like nothing had happened. Sebastian sat across the table from Jocelyn, carefully inspecting each bite on his fork before eating it. He conversed in his previous condescending manner, putting down everyone around him with carefully aimed words. Everyone darted curious glances at him but no one said anything. Jocelyn was livid. She wasn’t sure what she expected him to do, but to pretend that last night hadn’t happened, like he hadn’t proposed and been turned down, was not expected.

Jocelyn hadn’t told anybody what he said. Angela had come to check on her, but she’d pretended to sleep. She didn’t want to talk to anybody, she wanted Sebastian to go home. Of all the nerve, proposing to her like she’d just been waiting for him to do it. Please. It would be a cold day in hell before Jocelyn accepted anything resembling a marriage proposal from this man.

Everyone at the table was eyeing her, as well. She could feel it. She wasn’t joining in the conversation, but that didn’t mean no one could ask her a question or anything. They’d been talkative enough before, but now they didn’t want to say anything. It was just like when her father had left. Everybody walked on eggshells around her,

Angela, and Gertrude. Good riddance to a piece of garbage, she thought, then quickly repented. The Bible said that she had to forgive if she wanted to be forgiven. Her mother and Angela hounded her about it enough. Jocelyn would get to the place where she thought she'd forgiven her father, but would have a thought like the one just now and wonder if she really had. If she'd forgiven him, would she still be mad? And would she ever be able to forgive Sebastian?

“We're going to leave a day early,” Christian said.

There were sounds of disappointment all over the table, except from Jocelyn and Sebastian. Jocelyn glanced up to see him staring at her. He dropped his gaze to his plate, not quickly like he was embarrassed to be caught looking, but slower, like he wanted her to know he thought her beneath his notice. He continued eating.

“I know, we've had such a wonderful time, but we really must get back.”

Jocelyn didn't join in the discussion about the travel route and time calculations. She pushed her food around her plate and thanked God that they were leaving. She walked home alone and grabbed her Bible. She didn't open it, just sat with it clutched to her chest. She would be fine. She always was. *This, too, shall pass*, she thought.

She didn't know how long she sat there in that position, but Angela walked into the house with tears tracing paths down her cheeks. “I can't believe he's leaving,” she whispered.

“They were never going to stay forever, Angela,” Jocelyn said woodenly. “I told you that before. Last week as a matter of fact. They were only here for less than two weeks.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Angela said. “That doesn’t matter at all.”

Angela managed to pull herself together to say goodbye to Christian and Sebastian without looking like a water fountain. Christian gave her a long hug before pulling back to look at her face. He took a deep breath as though he was preparing to say something and hugged her quickly once more. He gave Jocelyn a quick hug as well, before jumping into the passenger seat of the car. Sebastian stood inside the open door to his car. He was half in and half out, as though he couldn’t wait to leave. He waved at Jocelyn and Angela and got into his car. He pulled out into the road and drove away. Angela followed the car to the road and stood in the middle of the street waving. Christian had turned around in the car and he was waving at her as well. Jocelyn watched this all from her station on the porch, hugging a post. Sebastian never looked back.

\*

Jocelyn had never been so glad that her mother and sister often forgot to check the mail. Had they remembered today, there would have been so many questions that she didn’t have the answers to. Sebastian sent her a letter.

There it was, in black and white, her name and address. And in the upper left corner, Sebastian’s name and address. Jocelyn walked to the front porch and sat down on the top step. Did she even want to open it? She wanted to be mad at him, but she couldn’t seem to stop missing him long enough to do it. She hadn’t expected that.

Sebastian had walked into her life like he was God’s gift to mankind and turned it upside down. She would be lying if she said she’d never thought of him romantically before he proposed. But she hadn’t thought of him that way for very long. There was only



so much condescension that she could take and remain attracted to a man. Sebastian had dealt out more than his fair share but Jocelyn had determined to just be nice to him while he was in town. After all, Nette appreciated her efforts to get along with him and Angela appreciated the time she got to spend talking with Christian.

Thoughts of his proposal still angered her to the point where she could barely see straight. But when she calmed down, she remembered all of the other, fun times they'd had together. Sure, they spent a significant portion of the time arguing. But their arguments were probably better described as interesting discussions or heated conversations. Looking back on it, Jocelyn realized she'd actually enjoyed verbally sparring with someone who was prepared for the battle. Besides, they'd spent a good deal of time not arguing. She'd showed him how to make buttermilk biscuits from scratch one morning; he'd surprised her with fishing skills she didn't expect him to have. She hadn't really considered him a friend, but the way she missed his presence made her question the things she'd been telling herself.

Sure, he'd offended her beyond measure when he revealed that he didn't want Christian to marry Angela and had tried to stop Josiah from marrying Nette. Actually, she was still mad about that, but, misguided as his reasons for doing that were, they were still probably legitimate to him. Jocelyn had talked Angela out dating several men, or at least she'd tried to talk her out of it. And Nette had been stuck on Samson Collins for as long as Jocelyn could remember and both Jocelyn and Angela had tried to talk their cousin away from that attraction. Besides, she understood what Sebastian meant when he said they were from two different worlds. People talked like there were only two Americas,

white America and colored America. But that wasn't true. Besides the fact that there were other kinds of people in this country, there were many different kinds of black people. And Jocelyn and her family were a different kind of black person than Sebastian and his friends.

Jocelyn was a servant. Sure, she got paid for all of her work, barely, but at the end of the day, she did the jobs other people thought were beneath them. She cleaned the toilets and vacuumed the rugs. She cooked dinner and even changed diapers. She only had an eighth grade education and even that probably wasn't equivalent to the kind of eighth grade education Sebastian had gotten. There were all kinds of rules and etiquette that went with having the kind of money and job Sebastian had and Jocelyn didn't know any of them. She was just as likely as not to embarrass herself in a room full of Sebastians and she was just as aware of that as he was. She would stick out, painfully, and someone as aware of themselves and their position as Sebastian was would have a problem with that. Shoot, even Jocelyn had a problem with it.

She sighed and looked at the envelope. Her feelings about Sebastian couldn't be more confused and she didn't really have anybody to talk to about it. Angela's history of romantic relationships made her one of the last people Jocelyn would go to for advice about men and Gertrude wouldn't care about anything Jocelyn said once she heard that Sebastian had proposed. Maybe she could go talk with Miss Tessa. Mr. Floyd had mentioned that his sister and her husband, Clyde, were back in town after their stay in Houston for Clyde's back problems. Miss Tessa had been Jocelyn's first Sunday school teacher and Jocelyn loved her almost as much as she loved her own mother. It was too

late tonight for Jocelyn to go over there since she wasn't sure what kind of sleep schedule Clyde was on, but she would go tomorrow.

Having decided that, Jocelyn took a deep breath and opened her letter. She might as well have something to say when she went over there.

*I want to apologize before I say anything else. My behavior toward you was inexcusable and one of my greatest hopes at this time is that you can forgive me. As I look back over my time in Texas and the interactions between the two of us, I realize that my suit was doomed before it began. I went to your town with certain notions that colored my perception of you and your circumstances. I imagined a little hamlet full of wretched souls searching for a rescue and I saw myself as a savior. From the time that I realized how drawn I was to you, I didn't consider that you would not accept me. Even if you did not love me, you would accept to escape the squalor of your life. Your horror at my proposal and subsequent refusal were out of my comprehension for several days. I honestly could not understand how such a thing could happen. Three days ago, I was at my mother's house and listened to her go on and on about how her maid's cousin refused her financial assistance in some matter, the details of which I cannot remember right now. I considered her behavior and realized how like her I was. Though I love and respect my mother, I have long recognized her arrogance. I just never realized how much that characteristic was present in myself. Though I sense that you are discontented with your life in Newton, my assumption that I presented the solution to your dilemma was out of line. My arrogance in this instance surpassed that of my mother and my attitude was even*

*worse than hers because of my refusal to communicate with you further. I sincerely regret not telling you goodbye before I left for Atlanta. Josiah mentioned that you and your sister will come to Atlanta this summer. I hope to squelch any discomfort or awkwardness between you and I in the future. Though the two of us did not part ways amicably, I would like for us to get along when you're here. I have sent you a peace offering. This is not a bribe and I don't mean to suggest that this book in any way makes up for my behavior. I just wanted to do something nice for you and thought you might like this book. I hope you will write me back and let me know what you think of it.*

Jocelyn read the letter twice. She sat on the porch for several minutes before gathering her thoughts together enough to determine how she felt about what she'd just read. That Sebastian would apologize was almost inconceivable to her. Sure, he'd apologized before for practically calling her a whore, but Jocelyn figured he'd done that because he realized he'd made a mistake. This apology was about his behavior, something she was sure he'd never questioned before. Had he thought about his behavior previously, he would have fixed it before now. Jocelyn looked down at the letter again and laughed. The language of it made him sound even more siditty than he did in person. His "suit was doomed before it began," a "little hamlet full of wretched souls?" She understood what he was saying but was greatly amused by the way he said it. Jocelyn rose and went into the house, determined not to dwell on this all night. She would discuss the situation with Miss Tessa tomorrow and maybe everything would be clearer then.

\*

Miss Tessa had a very expressive face. A person could almost always tell what she was thinking just by the look she had. Jocelyn watched as Miss Tessa read Sebastian's letter. She'd sat as Jocelyn told her all of the events leading up to the letter, butting in only twice to ask questions. Now, she raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. She glanced up at Jocelyn, rolled her eyes and continued reading. A few minutes later, she handed the letter back to Jocelyn and just looked at her.

"Well?" Jocelyn said.

"Well, what?"

Jocelyn frowned. "What do you think about him?"

Miss Tessa shrugged.

"Come on!" Jocelyn exclaimed. "I know you think something."

"I think he's very full of himself. He sorry for being so full of himself but that's just the way he is and he want you to ignore that and love him anyway."

Jocelyn just looked at her friend for a couple of seconds then burst into laughter. That pretty much described the Sebastian she knew and that Miss Tessa could see that in such a short amount of time, without ever having spoken to the man, was even funnier than his letter.

"I don't know why you laughing like that," Miss Tessa said, a mock frown on her face. "It ain't supposed to be funny. I'm trying to warn you."

"Warn me about what?" Jocelyn asked.

“This man can be either be the best thing that ever happened to you or the worst. And ain’t no way of us finding out which until it’s too late to do anything about it,” Miss Tessa proclaimed.

“He’s a good person,” Jocelyn said. “He really is. He doesn’t know how to act, needs to learn some more manners, but other than that, there’s not that much wrong with him.”

Miss Tessa sighed. “That’s enough, child. Goodness knows a body wouldn’t be able to take much more being wrong with him.”

Jocelyn sat back in her chair and shrugged.

“Why did you come over here with this business?” Miss Tessa asked. “So I can tell you if it’s alright for this man to court you through the mail?”

“Yes.”

“I ain’t gone tell you no such thing,” Miss Tessa said. “That’s for you to decide all by your lonesome. I will tell you this, though. It’s good to listen to people around you about such things.”

“But you won’t tell me what to do!” Jocelyn interrupted. “What’s the point in listening to the people around me if they ain’t saying nothing?”

“Do you like this man?”

Jocelyn was quiet for so long that Miss Tessa got impatient. “It ought not to take you this long to answer a simple question.”

“Kind of,” Jocelyn answered quietly.

“Kind of ain’t good enough!” Miss Tessa declared.

“I don’t know,” Jocelyn said. “Maybe.”

“Well, you better figure it out,” Miss Tessa said. “You and Angela gone be in Atlanta soon enough.”

It was only October. Jocelyn and Angela weren’t going to Atlanta until June next year. Jocelyn figured she only had to have her feelings figured out before then. Besides, there was no guarantee that Sebastian was even going to feel the same way about her when she saw him again. The thought of that made her stomach clench and Jocelyn gave up. She would read the book and answer his letter and hope that another letter came from him. Maybe if she corresponded with him, it would help her decide if this unexplainable attraction she had for him should be buried forever.

“You decide what you gone do?” Miss Tessa asked. Jocelyn nodded and Miss Tessa smiled. “Good,” Miss Tessa said, “And I done figured out what I’m gone do.”

“What can you do about this?” Jocelyn asked.

“Pray!” Miss Tessa said.

## Chapter Eight

Letters passed between Jocelyn and Sebastian for the next seven months. Sometimes they just said whatever was on their mind, sometimes they responded specifically to something the other said, and in these seven months, Jocelyn gained insights into Sebastian's character that made her dislike of him disappear. By the time she left for Atlanta, she wasn't sure how she felt about him. She didn't hate him but she wouldn't say that she loved him. She didn't know if she wouldn't say it because she was scared to or because she really didn't feel that sentiment.

One of her early letters addressed a question of his about how she could read so well when she'd only went to school through the eighth grade.

*Miss Jenkins, who is really Mrs. Belden, now, was a regular visitor at my house after I graduated from the eighth grade. I'd enjoyed her teaching so much and loved to read so, that she came each week to bring me a new book and discuss the old one. When she first began doing this, I had trouble with some of the reading, not having read anything on that level while I was still in school, but my reading skills progressed over time. The first book of hers that I read and understood all of the way through was Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. I think that has something to do with why it's my favorite.*

One of these same letters explained Sebastian's views about the current debate over the correct path colored leaders should be taking for their communities.

*I want colored people to get the vote because I believe that's the only way we're going to get the kind of treatment we deserve. I shouldn't have to go into the back of a*



*restaurant to get my meal when there are seats out front. To tell the truth, there are a lot of places that won't let Negroes in that I don't want to go to anyway. But in a country founded on freedom, I should have the freedom to walk into such a place if the notion ever strikes me. A system that treats you like dirt on the bottom of a shoe should be changed. However, if all Negroes can't get a better education, are they going to know what to do with a vote? I don't know. Maybe the NAACP is right about going after the education aspect right now.*

They learned about each other's families during these times, too. He had particular questions about her father, since he'd never heard anyone talk about him.

*My father left us when I was ten years old and moved in with the lady down the street. He never said anything to us again and was a daddy to her children, none of whom belonged to him. Then, when I was fourteen, he left them and went to Atlanta for a while. Last I heard, he was somewhere in Chicago. I decided a long time ago that I didn't care about him anymore. Caring hurt too much and it made more sense to not hurt anymore if I could help it. I tried to get my mother and Angela to do the same thing. But I'm not sure if they did. We don't talk about him anymore.*

Sebastian's response to this letter had taken longer to arrive than his letters usually did and when it finally got to Newton, Jocelyn saw why. He'd obviously taken a while to decide if he was going to say what he really wanted to say, but he finally did.

*If someone hurt you and you stopped caring about them to protect yourself, have you forgiven them for hurting you in the first place? I don't think so. And how badly do you have to be hurt to justify not caring about someone anymore? Does 'not caring'*

*stop the hurt? I don't think it does. I don't want to dictate to you how you should behave, but I think, in the end, if you don't forgive your father, it's going to keep hurting and in the end, you will be the one with all of the bitterness inside you. Not him.*

Jocelyn appreciated his attempt to not sugar-coat his opinions. It wasn't anything she hadn't heard before, and it was something she was working on, but she appreciated the fact that he'd been able to tell her to forgive her father without condemning her to hell for not having done so already. In her response, she offered some information about being her mother's daughter and Angela's little sister.

*It's bad enough that everyone thinks of me and Angela as 'Gertrude's poor daughters who'll never catch men because of the mother-in-law that would come with them.' But, then, Angela's always been 'the pretty sister' and I've always been 'the smart sister.' I want, just once, for someone to acknowledge that a person can be both at the same time. Just because I like to read doesn't mean I'm ugly. My mother doesn't help the situation any, always comparing the two of us. I've heard her say that Angela looks like her and I look a lot like my father. I wonder if that's why she thinks Angela is prettier than me. She doesn't remember my father with any trace of fondness so I'm sure my face doesn't help her to forget him. I was almost twenty years old before I realized that looking like him didn't make me an unattractive person.*

The last letter Jocelyn received before she left for Texas began with a recounting of some of Sebastian's family history.

*My father's mother was a maid. He always told me and my sister that he was proud of her for the way that she'd supported herself and her younger siblings before marrying my grandfather and for the way that she'd stood up for herself against my great-grandmother. My great-grandparents were horrified to think that my grandfather was marrying 'riff-raff,' as they called her. My grandfather called her a goddess and married her anyway. My father called her a queen and boasted about her accomplishments until the day he died. I guess I forgot about all of that. While my father was a very loving man, he wasn't around all the time and my mother influenced my sister and me in ways that I don't think he realized. Underneath my mother's tutelage and aided by the circle of friends that we keep, I grew to believe everyone who wasn't 'on my level,' who hadn't had the opportunities I'd been afforded, to be beneath me. Menial labor was for people who hadn't the wherewithal to get ahead in life. 'We're all colored people operating in the same United States. We're all discriminated against. So, if some get left behind, it's their own fault. We have overcome it.' I've only recently considered the fact that my father overcame 'it' all for me. The opportunities afforded to colored people in Atlanta have been handed to me without a whole lot of dealing with whites. My status as a colored person in this city is therefore different than that of the colored person who has to clean the house of whites everyday. It comes as no surprise that there are two Americas, one white and one colored. But there are a lot of people who don't acknowledge that there are multiple colored Americas, too. Seeing you return everyday while I was in Texas, knowing you'd cleaned the home of some white lady*

*who probably was quite capable of doing the work herself and likely wasn't doing anything else with her time anyway forced me to see that there are multiple colored Americas and I didn't like it. It shook the rationale I relied on not to be overwhelmed with guilt and worry for the colored people I see everyday. The ones who have to take the streetcar to work, who have to chance getting accosted by drivers and thrown off so that whites can have a seat, who live in constant threat of their lives, limbs, and livelihoods while I drive, safely and comfortably, to my secure job at a hospital where my only patients are colored and I don't have to deal with the bigotry so prevalent in this city that prides itself on its 'progressive race relations.'*

\*

“I’m so excited y’all are going to Atlanta tomorrow!” Gertrude squealed, throwing her arms around both of her daughters.

Jocelyn and Angela grimaced as they were swung from side to side in their mother’s grasp. The two young women often found themselves in awkward positions due to their mother’s displays of emotion.

“We’re excited, too, Mama,” Angela offered. She tried to extract herself from her mother’s grip, but Gertrude just tightened her arms.

“And I know Josiah knows a whole bunch of rich black people and you make sure he introduces y’all to some of ‘em,” Gertrude insisted. “I don’t want either of y’all coming home without a man. I’d hoped his friends that were here before would like y’all but ain’t nothing came of that, so y’all just make sure you meet some other men while y’all are there.”

“We’re just going to visit Nette, Mama, not catch men,” Angela dared to say.

Their mother heaved a massive sigh and went over to the shelf in the living room that housed their second-hand record player. Mrs. Alexander, Gertrude’s employer, bought a new one last year and let the Roberts women have this one. All of their recently-acquired records were of gospel music because Gertrude didn’t believe in listening to anything else.

“Are you going to put on Mahalia Jackson? Do we have to listen to that everyday?” Jocelyn asked. “And it’s not a phonograph, Mama. It’s a record player.”

“You don’t got to listen to nothing.” Gertrude responded as she put Mahalia Jackson’s record on the turntable. “I’m gone put *my* record on *my* phonograph! And then *I’m* gone listen to it! And I’ll call it a phonograph till Jesus comes back if I feel like it.”

Angela shook her head and led Jocelyn from the living room down the hall to their bedroom. Angela went to their closet and began taking dresses out while Jocelyn flopped on her bed. She’d been doing a lot of thinking and changing within the past couple of months and realized that while she couldn’t change her mother’s behavior, she could change her own. Previously, Jocelyn would have gone to her room and screamed into her pillow. But that wasn’t necessary and wouldn’t change her mother’s actions. She could only change her own attitudes and actions about things. Jocelyn sat thinking about this and watching Angela pull clothes out of the closet.

The two heard their mother’s loud steps in the hallway, the poor construction of their home amplifying each meeting of her feet with the floor. “*And*,” Gertrude yelled in the doorway, “Both of y’all are gone find men. Or at least you, Angela. You’re much

prettier than Jocelyn is and you don't run the men off the way Jocelyn do. I'm counting on you Angela! Don't let me down!"

With that, Gertrude trudged back up the short hallway and Angela laid a dress across Jocelyn's stomach. "We have to look at our clothes and see what we're going to take with us," she said. "We only want to take our best things to Atlanta. I don't want Josiah's friends looking down on us."

"You mean you don't want Christian looking down us?" Jocelyn asked, fingering a hole in the sleeve of the pink flowered dress on her stomach. Neither of them had had any new clothing in a long time but they'd both been saving money since Nette mentioned a trip to see her new home. "I've noticed he's been sending you letters once a week, even though you haven't said anything about it."

"It's not like you've said anything about those letters and packages Sebastian sends you," Angela said. "Though why it's okay for you to talk with him but not for me to talk with Christian, I don't know."

"I said that more than six months ago!" Jocelyn said. Her feelings had been hurt when she realized that Angela and Christian were writing to each other but Angela wouldn't talk about it with her.

"Well, since you never said anything about Sebastian, I never said anything about Christian," Angela responded, not looking at her sister.

"Does he still like you a lot?" Jocelyn asked. Angela didn't respond.

"Angela!"

"Why didn't you tell me about Sebastian?" Angela asked.

“What?”

Angela sat beside Jocelyn on the bed. “I saw one of the letters he wrote you. Y’all talk all the time. He even mentioned something about proposing to you while he was here. Why didn’t you tell me? I’m your sister and you expect me to tell you these things, but you won’t talk about it with me. If you can’t trust me enough to tell me, why should I trust you enough to tell you?”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Jocelyn said. “It’s just that if I told you about the proposal I would have had to tell you about other things too, and I didn’t want to do that.”

“What other things?”

Jocelyn sighed. Maybe she should stop trying to mother Angela and protect her from everything. Her sister was a grown woman. She was older than Jocelyn by almost two years. “When Sebastian and Christian were here with Nette and Josiah, Christian was going to propose to you and Sebastian talked him out of it.”

“I already know that,” Angela said.

“How?”

“Christian told me,” her sister responded. “He tells me everything. He said he was both sorry and glad that he’d listened to Sebastian.”

“Why?”

“He said we could have worked things out if we had got married last fall, but it would have been harder for us when I moved to Atlanta. He said this way, when we do get married, we’ll have discussed a lot of the things that could be wrong and we’ll be prepared.”

Jocelyn was quiet for a moment. “What things?” she asked.

“Just other people’s reactions to me.” Angela shrugged. “He said it’s very likely people won’t treat me nicely at first. That they might look down on me because I’m from Newton or because I’m not as educated or cultured. And he said that I would have to adjust to a different kind of life than I’m used to. If we’d have gotten married last year, all of this might have been too much for us.”

Again, Jocelyn didn’t say anything for a while. Finally, she asked, “Why didn’t you just ask me about Sebastian?”

“I shouldn’t have to ask you.”

Jocelyn rolled her eyes. “At first I didn’t want to tell you because you were so stuck on Christian, that would have tainted anything you had to tell me. Then, I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know how to explain how upset I was with Sebastian without letting you know about Christian not proposing. I didn’t know how you would react to that.”

“I’m not a child, Jocelyn,” Angela insisted. “You need to stop treating me like one.”

“Well, Angela,” Jocelyn said, a bit irritated with the conversation, “Until recently, you’ve always acted like I was the big sister and you were the little one. I’ll know better next time, okay?”

“I don’t want us to fight,” Angela said. Jocelyn took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Whenever a conversation got out of Angela’s control, she always tried to stop it. Instead of responding appropriately, she ended the entire discussion.



“I don’t want us to fight, either,” Jocelyn said. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you everything up front.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Angela said. She hugged Jocelyn and promptly began to tell her sister everything, starting with the first letter Christian sent her. Their relationship was more serious than Jocelyn had expected. Apparently, the two of them planned to get married at the end of the summer.

“Christian said that’ll give me enough time to get used to Atlanta and the way things work around there,” Angela said. “And he’ll send Mama a bus ticket so she can come to Atlanta and be there for the wedding.”

“You wouldn’t want to get married here?” Jocelyn asked. Though she didn’t care to remain in Newton for the rest of her life, this was the town where she grew up. She would love to get married here, around all the people who’d helped her become who she was. Then, she would leave. She would have expected Angela to feel the same way.

“Well, Christian just assumed that we would marry in Atlanta,” Angela said. “I plan to talk to him about that when we get there.”

“Maybe next summer I can come visit y’all,” Jocelyn said with a sad smile. She was happy for her sister, but sad that she would have to come back to Newton at the end of the summer.

“Maybe you could get married at the end of the summer, too,” Angela said with a sly look.

Jocelyn shook her head. “It’s not like that between me and Sebastian,” she said. “We’re just friends.”

“Friends who write letters back and forth and send each other presents?”

“I’ve never sent him a gift,” Jocelyn clarified. “And it’s only books that he sends me. All those letters and he’s never mentioned anything about wanting to see me or us having a relationship or anything like that. And I’m fine with it.”

Angela narrowed her eyes. “Are you really?”

“I don’t have choice. It’s not like I could ever propose to him.”

Angela shrugged. “You never know what’ll happen.”

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“Bye, girls!” Gertrude waved at Jocelyn and Angela as the bus pulled away from the station.

“Bye, Mama!” As they waved back, their mother grew smaller and smaller until they finally couldn’t see her anymore.

Jocelyn and Angela positioned themselves comfortably in their seat near the back of the bus. Then they looked at each other, eyes wide, and giggled like little girls. They were finally on their way to Atlanta. The trip would take about two days, but with only predetermined number of stops along the way, the sisters had decided to wear their new outfits from the outset of the trip instead of trying to find a place to change. Angela’s new dress was a slate blue with white polka dots. She’d refused to have it made with a pencil skirt, stating that she felt the style was too provocative, especially for the daytime. Instead, the skirt of her dress was a swing skirt style and she’d splurged on a crinoline to wear underneath it. The wide, pristine white collar framed her face and matched her gloves, hat and heels. Jocelyn went with an ivory blouse and a green high-waisted pencil

skirt that her mother favored because it would “show off her figure” and could entice a man. Jocelyn liked it because it felt sophisticated and didn’t look like anything she’d ever owned before. She’d finished off her outfit with white gloves and green heels, but had no hat. She’d hotcombed her hair before she left home and didn’t want the hat to damage her new hairstyle.

Jocelyn sat back in the seat and smiled. She was finally doing it. She was finally getting out of Newton. She knew it wasn’t forever, she would be back at the end of the summer. But at least for right now, Jocelyn was going away from her hometown. And of all the places she could be on her way to, she was on her way to Atlanta. It was a city full of strangers and Jocelyn couldn’t wait to arrive.

The minutiae of small town life was neither quaint nor charming for her. Whereas Angela thrived on the day to day details, Jocelyn hated the monotony and forced conformity. While Gertrude saw their trip as a nice episode in her life to be recounted later to her many grandchildren, Jocelyn saw this as an adventure that had the potential to change her life. Not that she was on the prowl for a Georgian man the way her mother wanted her to be. The only man in Georgia she could ever want was Sebastian and that wasn’t likely to happen. Besides, she didn’t need a man to change her life, all she needed was a change of scenery. She viewed this city of strangers as a refuge, a haven, a place to be the person she really was, an inquisitive woman with a love of reading and desire for finer things.

She wasn’t looking for a mansion. A house with paint that wasn’t peeling and furniture that had been replaced in the last fifteen years would be nice. Though she’d

never spent an extended period in any city, from her conversations with different people, she'd learned that while there were social expectations, they could always be escaped. If one group of people wouldn't accept you, there was always another one somewhere in the city. In such a small town like Newton, if the group didn't like you, there was nowhere else to turn. Jocelyn had spent the past twenty-four years feeling inhibited, underappreciated and unthankful. She hoped that her summer in Atlanta would prove that life didn't have to be that way. Even if she remained in Newton for the rest of her life, Jocelyn believed this experience had the power to change her.

Seventeen hours later, Jocelyn and Angela found themselves on a Greyhound bus, pulling into the station in Atlanta. The trip had taken less than twenty-four hours, despite the delays they'd encountered. Their new outfits were wilted and they'd been weary almost beyond measure, but both were getting a new burst of energy as the bus rolled to a stop. The farthest they'd ever been from home before was Austin, Texas for the state meeting of their denomination. They went every year but were kept so busy with services and stuff that they never got to experience the city. This would be their first real excursion into an urban setting.

## **Chapter Nine**

“We’ve been waiting for you for hours!” Nette exclaimed as Jocelyn and Angela disembarked from the Greyhound bus.

Neither woman could respond for several minutes as Nette and Josiah hugged them both in turn. “What happened? Why are you so late?” Nette asked.

Jocelyn and Angela shot each other looks and sighed. “We had to get off the bus in Houston and wait for another one.”

“Why?” Josiah asked.

“Because a white lady and her son didn’t have a seat,” Jocelyn answered.

“Then we had to get off again in Baton Rouge,” Angela added.

Josiah grunted. “For more white people?”

“Of course.”

Josiah and Nette shook their heads and led the way inside the station. “Did they take your luggage off when they put you off the bus?” Josiah asked.

“No,” Jocelyn responded. “The first bus driver said that our things would be waiting for us when we got here.”

“Let’s hope they are,” Nette said.

Twenty minutes later, all luggage accounted for, the four entered Josiah’s navy blue car and pulled away from the bus station, Jocelyn and Angela in the backseat. Jocelyn had never seen a car like this before. There were two doors in the back, one that opened down, like a truck, and the other that opened up, like the trunk of a regular sedan.

There was a lot of storage space back there. Jocelyn twisted around in the seat and watched as her and Angela's luggage slid around in the open space.

"We live on Simpson Road," Nette informed her cousins, as though they knew where that was.

"Oh?" Angela said it like it was a question.

"Yes, lots of well-off black people in Atlanta are moving there these days," Nette continued.

"Have you lived there the whole time you've been in the city?" Jocelyn asked.

"Yes," Josiah answered. He went on to say other stuff that Jocelyn paid no attention to. He asked her a question but since she didn't know what he said, she just shrugged and looked out the window. There were so many lights outside, from streetlamps and buildings, and they passed a trolley. She'd never seen one before but knew what it was from descriptions she'd read in books.

"How was my mama when y'all last saw her?" Nette asked.

"She was pretty good," Angela said. Jocelyn let her sister tell Nette about Aunt Louella. She was exhausted. The bus wasn't the best place for her to sleep because of its rocking motion. Even if she'd been able to fall asleep, she wouldn't have felt safe doing so. There were a lot of men on the bus and they kept talking to Angela and Jocelyn and trying to touch them when they got off the bus at the rest stops. She was not anticipating the trip back to Texas at the end of the summer.

“We’re almost to the house,” Nette said. “There’s no food waiting because I thought we’d cook when we got back but I didn’t figure it would be so late. Are y’all hungry? Josiah can stop somewhere so we can get you something.”

They let her know that they wanted something to eat and Josiah pulled into the parking lot of the Chita-Chata. The restaurant was a new experience for Jocelyn and she soaked it in. There were booths along the window and many tables scattered around the room. There appeared to be some kind of cover on the backs of the chairs and she wondered what it looked like before. The new fabric was pretty with its alternating hunter green and ivory panels. There was a vine trailing down the center of each ivory panel and Jocelyn thought the print would be pretty on a dress. Towards the back of the restaurant there was a raised platform enclosed within a shoulder-high wall. She could see the people sitting at the tables up there. The raised position made them all seem pretty important and Jocelyn wondered if only special people were allowed up there or if anyone who came into the restaurant had an equal opportunity to be above the crowd.

She stood behind Nette and Josiah as they ordered food at the counter and let her gaze light on people around the room. Everyone in the restaurant was black. There was no “coloreds in the back and whites in the front.” No white people were in the restaurant at all. Everyone was eating happily and laughing and talking. They looked less careworn than Negroes Jocelyn was used to seeing and she wondered at that for a short moment. Then she saw the sign in the window that proclaimed the Chita-Chata to be the “South’s Finest Colored Drive-In” and realized their cares were probably different than those of the colored folks back home. When black Atlantans went out to eat at a restaurant, they

weren't pumping money back into the hands of whites, they were patronizing the business of another black person. The Chita-Chata was owned by black people. Thinking about that made Jocelyn smile and she stood up straighter. Though she wasn't paying for her food this evening, it felt good to know that the money for her meal was going to coloreds. She was quite sure Josiah worked hard at his job and it was a relief to know that all his hard work wasn't going to line the pockets of whites.

Shortly after receiving their food from a rather jolly man with skin that was as black as night, they left the restaurant, all armed with hamburgers, fries, and milkshakes. They'd eat when they got to the house, Nette said. Jocelyn had never been in a restaurant where the food was fixed so swiftly and people were expected to take their meals home and eat them.

"Do you eat at restaurants like this all of the time?" she asked.

"No," Nette said. "About once a week or so."

Jocelyn and Angela shared a look. Once a week? They ate at a restaurant once a week? At home, a restaurant signaled a special occasion and was reserved for such. A couple of times a year was more along the lines of what they considered normal.

"Are there any restaurants here where we're going to side down and eat our food?" Angela asked.

Josiah laughed, long and loud, and Nette tried to cover her giggles with her hand. "Yes," she answered. "There are. As a matter of fact, I've made reservations for us at a really nice one for Tuesday night. I think you'll like it."



“Here we are!” Josiah proclaimed before anyone could say anything else. He drove the car into the driveway of a red brick house and turned off the car. “You won’t really be able to see much tonight, but I’ll take you on a tour of the neighborhood tomorrow,” Josiah said.

He sent the ladies on into the house and went around to the back of the car to get the luggage. Jocelyn stood on the porch to watch him open the doors to the trunk before following her sister and Nette into the house. She really liked the way the trunk opened. She would have to inspect it at another time.

When she stepped into the foyer, she stopped and stared. The only house she’d ever seen that was better was Jessamine Crabtree’s. Not even the Sutton’s house was as nice and they had one of the nicest homes in town. She should know, she cleaned it often enough. The floors in the foyer and the dining room to her left were hardwood, but there was beige carpet in the living room. She looked up and saw a beautiful chandelier hanging from the two-story ceiling. There was another chandelier in the dining room as well. The décor was like something out of a magazine and Jocelyn was awed. She supposed if Josiah had shopped for this furniture himself because she knew Nette had never been exposed to things like this. Nette would be lost in a furniture store.

“Josiah will take your stuff upstairs,” Nette said as she walked through the house, turning on the lights as she went. “We’ll go ahead and eat now, though. He won’t mind if we don’t wait on him.”

Nette didn’t go into the dining room, as Jocelyn thought she would, but rather went through the living room. Jocelyn noticed a huge fireplace in the living room before

turning the corner and seeing a smaller eating room off the kitchen. “This is where we eat most of the time,” Nette said. “We usually save the dining room for special occasions.”

Jocelyn and Angela just nodded and sat down. They ate their food while answering questions from Nette, then went upstairs to their rooms. Jocelyn’s room was decorated in bright yellow and white. There was a large bed, a vanity with a round mirror attached, a chaise by the window, and a selection of books lined up along the top of the chest of drawers. The nightstand and lamp between the bed and the closet matched the chest at the foot of the bed. Jocelyn found the room utterly charming but didn’t enjoy it long before she undressed and climbed into the bed.

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Nette, Jocelyn, and Angela sat around the table eating oatmeal and toast and drinking orange juice late the next morning. It was pretty close to lunchtime, but they’d just risen and felt the need for breakfast food. Jocelyn was used to eating more for breakfast but didn’t want to ask for anything else. When Nette was just their cousin who lived a couple of streets over, Jocelyn wouldn’t have hesitated to request anything else. In fact, she would have gotten whatever she wanted without asking. But now Nette was a married woman with her own house and a husband and a whole new set of rules. Jocelyn didn’t want to offend her or Josiah.

“The restaurant last night was so nice,” Angela said, wiping toast crumbs from the side of her mouth.

“Josiah’s mother doesn’t like that place,” Nette said.

Jocelyn frowned. It had seemed like a pretty nice restaurant to her. “Why not?”

Nette rolled her eyes. “She said only low-class colored people go there and we should really have more pride.”

“Is that true?” Angela asked with wide eyes.

“No! She just tries her best to seem better than everybody. The thing is, she gotta invent ways to make herself different from everybody else. I don’t know how she thinks low class people have enough money to go out to eat all the time.”

Jocelyn and Angela shared a glance but didn’t respond. There must be people like that everywhere. Reverend Haxton’s niece and nephew were like that. The two usually showed up in Newton for a couple of weeks in the summer to visit their “country relatives” and did everything they could think to do to make sure everyone knew they lived in San Antonio. Their entire stay was filled with conversations in which the big city was better than such a small town, and by extension, they were better than everyone who lived in Newton. They never came right out and said the last part, but that’s the message that came across pretty clearly. Newton was so backwoods, without culture or refinement and so was everyone in it. Rosalee and Horace were so sophisticated because they went to school all the way until the twelfth grade and weren’t household help. If that’s all it took to be sophisticated, Jocelyn didn’t think she would be too prideful about it. She agreed the big city was better than Newton, she just didn’t like their attitude.

“Sebastian and Christian are coming over to visit tonight,” Nette said.

“Really?” Angela shrieked. She rose with her hands to her cheeks and did a little dance around the table. “I’m so excited! I haven’t seen Christian in such a long time!”

Nette turned wide eyes to Jocelyn. “What is her problem?”

“They’re getting married,” Jocelyn said.

“What?” Nette asked. “Since when?”

Jocelyn smirked. “Since they’ve been writing letters to each other ever since he came back to Atlanta and they’re in love and all that crap. You didn’t know? I thought Christian and Josiah were best friends.”

“So did I!” Nette grabbed Angela’s arm as she twisted by Nette’s seat. “How come y’all didn’t tell anybody?”

Angela stopped moving long enough to say that Christian didn’t want his mother to find out until after she’d met Angela. A look of understanding crossed Nette’s face and she nodded. “That makes sense,” she said. “Christian’s mother is worse than Josiah’s. I’ve never seen a colored person more prejudiced against other colored people in all my life. Unless you count Sebastian’s mother. Now there’s a horrible lady. You ain’t planning to marry him, Jocelyn, are you?”

Jocelyn snorted and shook her head. Angela stopped her prancing long enough to shoot a knowing look in Nette’s direction. Nette raised her eyebrows and turned to look at Jocelyn. “Don’t look at me like that,” Jocelyn instructed, frowning at her sister and cousin.

“Like what?” Nette asked.

“Like I’m hiding something, but y’all just found out about it,” Jocelyn said.

“We’re not the ones packages and letters from doctors and stuff like that,” Nette said.

“How do you know?” Jocelyn asked. Angela hadn’t told her, Jocelyn knew that. Jocelyn had spoken to Angela on the interminable bus ride about when her and Christian were going to let people know about their engagement. She understood keeping it a secret from Gertrude. Their mother would have beat them to Atlanta just so she could meet Christian and his family. If Christian’s mother was as bad as Nette said she was, that would be disastrous. Angela said it was okay for Josiah and Nette to know but they shouldn’t talk about it with anyone else until after she’d spoken with Christian about it. However, Jocelyn had never given Angela permission to say anything to anyone about her correspondence with Sebastian. What did Nette know about it?

“Sebastian told us last month that he’s been sending you books and y’all have been writing letters back and forth,” Nette said. “Imagine how surprised I was to have to find this out from him. To know that my own cousin wouldn’t tell me first.”

“Angela didn’t tell you she was getting married, either,” Jocelyn shot back.

“I noticed. Apparently moving away means I’m no longer a part of this family,” Nette said.

Angela sat down. “Don’t feel bad,” she said. “We didn’t talk about it with each other until a couple of days ago either.”

“Why not?” Nette asked.

They both shrugged. Nette sighed. “Whatever,” she said. “So, you and Sebastian aren’t talking about getting married, too?”

“No,” Jocelyn said forcefully. “And don’t say anything about that ever again. If Sebastian hears that, I’ll be so embarrassed.”

“Why?” Nette asked. “Why do you care what he thinks?”

Jocelyn frowned. “Why wouldn’t I care? He’s my friend. I tend to care what my friends think.”

“No, you don’t,” Angela said incredulously. “You don’t ever care what people think about you.”

“That’s not true. It’s just that most people aren’t informed enough for their opinions to have any bearing on whatever it is that I’m doing,” Jocelyn said. Nette and Angela rolled their eyes.

“Well, they’re coming over tonight for dinner,” Nette said. “If y’all go on and get dressed, I’ll take you to a department store before it’s time to fix dinner.”

## **Chapter Ten**

Jocelyn sat on the bed in her room at Nette's house and eased her shoes off her feet. Jocelyn had never walked around a store for more than an hour at a time. Sure, she was on her feet all day, but the Suttons had carpet on their floors and she often had to change positions during the day, kneeling on the floor, sitting in a chair. The three hours of walking around Jocelyn had just done with her sister and cousin had been three of the most fun and horrible hours of her life. Not only did her feet hurt, but the shoes she'd chosen didn't offer very much support, so her knees hurt worse than her feet.

Jocelyn, Angela, and Nette had walked around Davidson's department store looking at various merchandise. Jocelyn hadn't bought much, a pillbox hat that would be divine with her Sunday dress and a blouse to go with a skirt she'd gotten the last time she went to Austin but never wore. Nette had cautioned them to not spend a lot because one day next week she was taking them to Rich's department store. Right now, Jocelyn couldn't imagine going to another store for the rest of her life.

Nette stuck her head in the door. "Could you make a cake for dessert?" she asked. "It doesn't matter what kind, but you know your cakes always taste better than mine."

Jocelyn nodded. Maybe she'd bake a blackberry jam cake. Sebastian never got to taste any of it because it had burned when she'd baked it for him in Texas.

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Jocelyn inhaled sharply as Josiah held the front door open and Sebastian and Christian walked into the house. Christian barely greeted everyone before moving to Angela's side and taking her hands in his. He whispered something to her and Angela

giggled. Jocelyn turned from them back to Sebastian. He smiled at her and she tried her best to offer a smile in return. Nine months had done much to dilute her memories of his appearance. Either that, or he'd gotten even more good-looking since the last time she'd seen him.

“How was your trip?” he asked. She couldn't answer because Nette chose that moment to scream as though she were being murdered.

Josiah ran into the kitchen and everyone else quickly followed. They got there to see Nette dropping a blackened pork loin into the garbage. “Please tell me there's a problem besides dinner,” Josiah said. “I hope some criminal was trying to break into the house with the way you were screaming.”

Nette frowned and rolled her eyes at him. She turned to the stove and began scraping burnt potatoes from a pot. “The food is ruined!” Nette said through clenched teeth. “How are we supposed to have dinner with no food?”

“Don't worry about dinner,” Christian advised, taking Angela by the wrist and backing out of the kitchen. “Don't try to fix anything else. Joe, why don't you take Nanette out for dinner? Angela and I will go to a restaurant and I'm sure Sebastian can find somewhere to take Jocelyn.” Christian and Angela moved down the hall and out of the door before anyone could say anything.

Jocelyn's mouth dropped open at how quickly Christian had taken advantage of the situation and a laughing Sebastian asked if she wanted to go to a restaurant. She looked over at Nette and Josiah. He was consoling her about her ruined dinner and



neither was paying attention to anyone else in the room. Jocelyn looked at Sebastian and shrugged. "I guess so," she said and they got into his car and drove away.

Jocelyn looked out of the window at the houses they passed. The homes were all really nice, a lot had two stories and nicely manicured lawns. The paint wasn't peeling off any of them and Jocelyn thought she would be proud to live in a home like these. "Do you live around here?" she asked Sebastian.

"Yes," he said. "About ten minutes away."

"Does your house look like these?"

He nodded. "You want to see it?"

"Right now?" she asked. She wasn't sure if she should go to his house. It didn't seem appropriate. Sure, he'd been in her home when just the two of them were present, but going to his home, where he lived by himself, seemed like it would be doing too much.

Sebastian turned the car around and headed in a different direction. "Now's a good time," he said. "My sister's there and it's still light outside so none of my nosy neighbors can say anything about you being there."

"I didn't realize people paid so much attention to their neighbors in the city," Jocelyn said.

"I don't think they do," he answered. "I think my neighbors are special. A lot of the people in my neighborhood already knew each other before they moved there, so they're friends and want everyone in the area to be as friendly as they are."

Jocelyn didn't have anything to say to that and so sat quietly until they pulled to a stop in front of Sebastian's home. The house was white with black trim and had a profusion of flowers lining the fence in front of the sidewalk. "Do you take care of these flowers yourself?" Jocelyn asked. She couldn't imagine him puttering around performing such an activity. His hands would get dirty and she didn't think he would like that unless it happened in a hospital room.

Sebastian said that his sister, Viola, came to take care of his flowers. "She likes doing it," he said. They stepped onto the front porch and the door opened. A woman stood in the doorway who could only be Viola Steele. She looked enough like Sebastian to know that two were related even without an introduction, but she didn't look masculine at all. In fact, she was enchanting. She was even prettier than Angela and more delicate-looking. She had beautiful white teeth and she beamed throughout the introductions. "I'm so happy to meet you," Viola said, pulling Jocelyn into the house. "Sebastian's told me all about you."

"Has he?" Jocelyn asked, looking over her shoulder at him and wondering what he'd told his sister. He shrugged and followed the two women as Viola showed Jocelyn all over the house. Viola took her in every room and pointed out everything of interest. "I'm so glad I was here when he brought you over," Viola said. "He wouldn't have pointed out everything that's interesting about the house, like this desk. It's been in our family since Reconstruction."

"Oh?" Jocelyn asked, not entirely sure what Viola was talking about.

“Yes, our great-great-great grandfather Cletis Steele was part of the Georgia State Legislature from 1867 to 1872. This is his desk,” Viola said proudly, running her hand over the wood.

“A colored man was in the government?” Jocelyn asked, incredulously.

“Oh, yes!” Viola said with wide eyes. “Colored men were in government in Georgia after the war and up until 1908 when the whites stole our right to represent our people.” Jocelyn noticed Sebastian roll his eyes as he listened to his sister talk. “But we’re working on that right now. ‘A voteless people is a hopeless people’ and when we can vote like we’re supposed to, you’ll see some stuff happening.”

“That’s nice,” Sebastian said, taking Jocelyn’s hand and pulling her to the car. “We’re leaving now.”

Viola followed them outside, asking Jocelyn questions. She seemed a bit disappointed when Jocelyn didn’t have any interesting tidbits to reveal about any of her great-grandparents. She kept talking and Jocelyn believed Viola would have gotten right into the car with her and Sebastian so she could continue the conversation had Sebastian not told her that she couldn’t come to dinner with them. Viola stood on the sidewalk and waved as they backed away.

“Vi is in the NAACP,” Sebastian explained. “She gets a bit excited sometimes about voting and such and I thought we should leave while we could. Otherwise we wouldn’t get any dinner tonight.”

“I thought you wanted colored people to vote, too,” Jocelyn said.

“I do,” he insisted. “Vi just gets overly emotional about it and I talk about this enough that I don’t want to listen to it all of the time.”

Jocelyn didn’t say anything.

“Unless you want to talk about voting rights,” Sebastian said hesitantly.

Jocelyn giggled. “No. We can talk about something else.” she looked out of the windshield window and frowned. “What kind of place is this?” she asked.

“It’s an Italian restaurant,” Sebastian said. He got out of the car and walked around to open her door.

“It looks like a dump.”

He took her by the shoulders and gave her a little shake. “Don’t be such a sourpuss. This place has the best Italian food I’ve ever tasted.”

Jocelyn didn’t respond and let herself be pulled into the restaurant. They waited for fifteen minutes before they got a table. The smells of garlic and tomatoes whet her appetite and Jocelyn was hungry by the time they sat down. She’d been too nervous about Sebastian’s arrival to even think of eating anything at Nette’s house, but the past half hour had done much to calm her nerves. He was being just as nice as he’d sounded in his letters over the past couple of months and Jocelyn was happy about that. The things that he’d written had sounded almost like another person. Without the cynical looks and the patronizing tone that had seemed a permanent part of his personality in Texas, there was just a smart man who had rather interesting perspectives that Jocelyn had never considered. She wondered which one was really him.

“What’ll you have?” Sebastian asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had this before.”

Sebastian told Jocelyn about Italian food and when the waitress came, he ordered for them. Jocelyn looked in surprise at the waitress. The lady was black. She hadn’t really been paying attention when they’d come into the restaurant. Jocelyn looked around and noticed that almost all of the patrons were black and everyone who worked there was black.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Do black people own this restaurant?”

He nodded.

“Black people own an Italian restaurant?”

He laughed. “Yes. Carl was in Italy for a couple of years after the war and when he got back here, he opened this restaurant. The food is great.”

“Were you in the war? How old are you?”

“I’ll be thirty in a couple of months and no, I wasn’t in the war. I was at school.”

Jocelyn was immeasurably pleased to know this. Miss Tessa’s son had been killed in the war, as had several other men in her Newton. Others had come home changed, different in ways no one really understood. Roger Hines, a middle aged white man who’d been in the war from Pearl Harbor until V-J Day, often walked beside Jocelyn on her way to work. He’d scared her the first several times he walked with her, but she’d since realized that while his stories of war were gruesome and she often was forced to talk loudly over him to avoid hearing the details he related, he was harmless. The things she

did hear, however, she had to work hard not to think about and it made her sad to know what all he'd been through. She was glad Sebastian had escaped all of that.

“Where did your name come from?” Jocelyn asked Sebastian.

He frowned, confused about the switch in conversation. “From my mother.”

“She didn't get it from *Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare?”

Sebastian smiled. “Yes, actually, she did.”

Jocelyn grinned triumphantly and gave a nod of her head. “I thought so, since y'all are twins. Wait, Viola's almost thirty?”

“Yes.”

“She doesn't look it at all.”

“And I do?” he asked indignantly.

Jocelyn giggled. “Maybe. Has Viola ever dressed up like man?”

He laughed. “Yeah, but I can't tell you about it.”

“She dressed like a man?”

Sebastian nodded and continued to laugh.

“Had she read the play before she did that?”

“Yeah. My mother told us about that play when we were really young.”

“Why won't you tell me about it?” Jocelyn asked.

“She would be embarrassed. She swore me to secrecy. I promised I wouldn't tell anybody.”

Jocelyn scowled and sat back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Don’t look at me like that, I promised I wouldn’t tell. You don’t want me to break my word do you? ‘Let your yea be yea and your nay nay.’ That’s what it says in the Bible,” Sebastian reminded her. “Do you want me to fall into condemnation?”

Jocelyn rolled her eyes.

“Where did your name come from?” he asked.

Jocelyn smiled and looked across the restaurant. In her mind’s eye, she could see her mother as she told the story, twisting their Sunday best dresses until a few drops of water came out. She always did that, never satisfied that the wringer did a good enough job. Jocelyn was just glad they finally had a washing machine.

“When my mama was a little girl,” she began, moving her spaghetti around her plate, “My grandmother cleaned house for this old white lady. Miss Goodnight was her name and she had never been married. My Uncle Earl and Uncle Spoon used to call her Miss Good Morning and Miss Good Afternoon.”

“You have an uncle named Spoon?” Sebastian interrupted.

“His real name is Vernon.”

“Why do you call him Spoon?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But, anyway, Miss Goodnight really liked my mama and Aunt Louella. She used to buy them presents all the time and Grandma said it’s because she didn’t have any children of her own. She bought Mama and Aunt Louella dolls for Thanksgiving. She would make up reasons to give them presents and Thanksgiving was one of those reasons. Anyway, they loved those dolls because they had eyes that opened and closed when you laid them down and picked them back up.

Miss Goodnight told them that Aunt Louella's doll was named Guinevere and Mama's doll was named Jocelyn. Mama's liked the name ever since and that's what she named me."

"Why didn't she name Angela Jocelyn?"

"My father had a sister who died when she was really young and her name was Angela. He wanted one of his children to have her name," Jocelyn said. "So, Angela is Angela and I'm Jocelyn."

"And you've never heard from your father in all this time?" Sebastian asked, obviously remembering what she'd written him about that man.

The waitress brought their food to the table and Jocelyn nodded as her stomach growled. She hoped he hadn't heard it. She looked up and he sent her a crooked grin before bowing his head to pray over the food. She was rather surprised that he was doing so and barely managed to bow her head before he said amen.

"Amen," she said. She put her napkin in her lap and decided not to say anything about his praying. In public, no less. He'd written that he'd started back going to church with his sister. She hadn't realized he'd progressed to the point where he was willing to pray about anything, much less his food.

"You've never told me anything about your father," Jocelyn told him.

"Really?" he asked. He looked off into space for several minutes before beginning a recitation that made Jocelyn jealous. Sebastian had followed in David Steele's footsteps to become a doctor. Sebastian's father had spoiled his only two children and Sebastian said enough that Jocelyn realized his mother wasn't the only parent who'd endowed him



with a conceited attitude. However, compared to all that Jocelyn's father had given his family, Jocelyn would have preferred conceit. That was better than hurt and bitterness.

"I want to meet your mother," Sebastian said, as though he'd just decided it that very moment.

Jocelyn burst out laughing. "Why?"

"I want to meet the lady that could raise two such different daughters. I'm sure she's a very nice woman.

"If she ever saw you and learned that you were a doctor, she'd probably hit you over the head, tie you up, and make you stand in front of Reverend Haxton with me. She wouldn't let you go until you said 'I do.'"

Sebastian raised his eyebrows and a smile spread slowly across his face. "She wouldn't have to hogtie me to get me to marry you."

Jocelyn's amusement quickly fell away and she dropped her eyes to her plate. "Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"I'm ready if you're ready," he said.

She sighed, pushed her chair away from the table, and stood up.

"I hope you enjoyed your dinner," he said, coming around the table and linking her arm through his. "If we hurry, we might can get a slice of pie from Hawk's Dinette before they close. They have the best pies in Atlanta."

"Or we could hurry back to Nette's house before her and Josiah eat the entire cake that I made."

"What kind of cake is it?"

“Blackberry jam,” Jocelyn said, careful not to look at him as she said it. She sat in the car for several minutes and finally had to look up to see why he hadn’t closed her door. He was standing there, looking down at her. “What are you doing?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I never got to have any of that cake you made me in Texas.”

Jocelyn frowned. She preferred to leave the past in Texas and didn’t want to talk about what had happened there. She wanted to forget that Sebastian had ever been a mean person and couldn’t do that if he brought it up. “You won’t get any of this cake either if you don’t come on,” she said.

He walked around the car and got in. He looked at her for several moments before she got even more agitated. “It’s just cake,” she said, determined not to let him read anything into this. “It’s not a big deal.”

He smiled. “If you say so,” he said.

Jocelyn rolled her eyes and looked out the window. She felt a smile creeping up on her face and tried to subdue it. In all these months of sending letters, Jocelyn hadn’t let herself consider that Sebastian still wanted to marry her. She’d been quite assured of the fact that his return to Atlanta and everything about the place that made him object to marriage to her would have killed any desire he had to further pursue that type of relationship. Indeed, after mentioning his proposal in the first letter that he sent her, Sebastian had never said anything else about marriage between the two of them. But now, it sounded like he hadn’t dismissed the idea. And if he hadn’t dismissed the idea, then maybe Jocelyn should seriously consider it.

All of her thoughts on that subject had been hypothetical, what if she'd said yes, what if he came back to Newton and proposed again, what if it hadn't been the worst proposal ever? She never allowed herself to think of it in a serious manner because there was no point. But now, it seemed like there was a point. This evening had shown her that being around Sebastian could be an enjoyable experience. She couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed an evening more, in fact. Not ten minutes ago, he'd insinuated that the idea of marrying her wasn't abhorrent. What if he proposed again?

## **Chapter Eleven**

“We’re going to Josiah’s mother’s house after church, today,” Nette said the next morning as the women sat down to breakfast. “Christian’s and Sebastian’s mothers will be there, too.”

Angela took a deep breath and squeezed Jocelyn’s hand. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to eat anything,” Angela whispered.

“Oh, don’t be so silly,” Jocelyn said with more bravado than she actually felt. “Everybody who meets you likes you. There isn’t anything to worry about.”

“I’m going to meet my future mother-in-law and she doesn’t know that I’m marrying her son!” Angela wailed. Jocelyn pursed her lips and didn’t say anything. “Don’t look at me like that!” Angela told Jocelyn, “You’re not going to meet *your* future mother-in-law!”

Deciding that ignoring her sister was the best response to Angela’s current theatrics, Jocelyn ruminated on the idea of meeting her future mother-in-law. She and Sebastian weren’t engaged or anything, but his behavior last night when they’d returned from the restaurant had done even more to show Jocelyn that he had never stopped thinking of marrying her. She’d only been joking with herself in wondering if he would propose again, but now Jocelyn wasn’t sure if it was really a joke. She wouldn’t be surprised if he did ask her to marry him. If he didn’t, then meeting his mother today wasn’t anything to fuss over. But if he did propose again, Jocelyn was pretty sure she would say yes. And if that happened, meeting Elizabeth Steele today was something to worry about. Nothing Jocelyn had heard about Sebastian’s mother foretold of an

enjoyable meeting. Suddenly feeling a bit queasy herself, Jocelyn turned to her sister. “At least Christian will be there,” Jocelyn said. “If anything gets uncomfortable, I’m sure he’ll smooth it over.” Sebastian probably would, too.

“Christian won’t be there,” Nette interrupted. “None of the men will. They’re going to some event for colored men at the college this afternoon.”

Angela groaned and Jocelyn felt stricken. Nette laughed at them. “Don’t look so scared,” she admonished. “They can’t do anything except talk.”

“Sometimes talking hurts,” Jocelyn said.

Neither woman responded. Angela picked at her eggs and Jocelyn tried to swallow some milk. Nette happily ate her breakfast without seeming to give any more heed to the apprehension of her cousins across the table.

“Nette,” Angela ventured when it seemed their cousin was finished with her meal. “How has it been for you here? Have people been nice to you? Do you have any friends here?”

Nette shrugged and swallowed her last drop of coffee before speaking. “Josiah’s mother doesn’t like me. Neither do her friends. Josiah’s friends are nicer about it than her, but they don’t think I really belong here either.”

“Because you were poor?” Angela asked.

“Because I’m not their kind of colored person,” Nette said. “If you walk with your head at a normal level where you can look people in the eye, if you don’t talk like you went to college, if you’ve never ‘travelled,’ if you talk to the help, you’re not their kind

of colored person. And while they'll be nice, they don't really understand you and you don't understand them."

"So what do you do?" Jocelyn asked.

"Be polite and go on about my business," Nette responded. She put her dishes in the sink and began to wash them.

"But aren't you lonely without anybody to talk to? And what do you do all day?" Jocelyn asked.

"A couple of mornings a week, I go in to Josiah's office and help out around there," Nette said. "I read stories to the children at the Auburn Branch Library. I'm part of the women's group at church. And Sebastian's sister, Viola, is fun to talk to when she isn't in her 'negro-voting' attitude. And her friend, Dinah, is really nice, too. I mean, I'm not going to lie and say that everything is always marvelous, but I love Josiah and I like my life here. I'm sure I'll have more friends after I've been here longer, and I'll definitely have something else to do when we have children."

Jocelyn and Angela shared a glance. It didn't sound so bad. Granted, Nette could probably be happier, but she hadn't been here for very long, not even a whole year. It just took time to get used to a new place and new people.

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Jocelyn sat between her sister and her cousin, disappointed that her maneuverings hadn't landed her a seat beside Sebastian. Nette had obviously taken Jocelyn's denunciation of a relationship with Sebastian seriously and thus exerted a tremendous amount of effort at getting Angela and Christian seats beside each other. Jocelyn leaned

forward and looked past Nette and Josiah to see if Sebastian had made it onto their pew. He sat beside Josiah, looking at her. When he caught her eye, he winked and smiled. Jocelyn rolled her eyes and sat back, unwilling to be caught flirting in church. She determined that she would focus on the service and forced her mind away from Sebastian.

Jocelyn looked around the sanctuary in awe. The soaring ceiling and freshly painted walls provided a perfect place for the cushioned pews and the raised pulpit upon which the pastor and other church dignitaries sat.

She had a mixture of relief and disappointment about knowing most of the songs sang during the worship service. She was relieved because she wanted to participate and disappointed because she wanted to hear something new. Granted, the rhythms of some of the songs were different than what she was used to, but Jocelyn was able to keep up.

The pastor wasn't going to be speaking this morning, but rather his nephew from New York City who'd just graduated from seminary school. Pastor Griffin introduced the newly ordained Minister Isaiah Mitchell. Minister Mitchell was not a tall man, but he cut a nice figure. His suit was well-fitting and Jocelyn wasn't sure she had ever seen shoes so shiny. He stepped up to the podium, arranged his Bible and some papers, looked out over the congregation and smiled. "Good morning, church," he greeted.

"Good morning," the congregants responded.

"We're going to read this morning from Matthew, chapter 22, verses 35 and 36." He gave the people several moments to find the scripture. "Read along with me, now. 'Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,

Master, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Now, turn with me to the book of Mark, chapter 11 and verse 29. You’ll see how these scriptures go together in a minute.”

The congregation turned to the next scripture and read along. “‘And Jesus answered and said unto them, I will also ask of you one question, and answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.’”

At the end of the reading, Minister Mitchell prayed over the church then began his message. “I was preparing for this message for several weeks,” he said. “I wanted everything to be perfect because I knew I would be speaking before a lot of people who have prayed for me and helped me to stay in seminary. I wanted to make you all proud and show you that your support hasn’t gone to waste. Last night, however, God spoke to me and had me change what the topic for today is. He told me to speak about questions, that y’all need to know about the difference between questions and questionings.”

Jocelyn sat, enthralled at finally getting an understanding about what was being preached. Minister Mitchell spoke about the difference in attitudes of people who had a question about something they were confused over and those who questioned God in doubt, not believing or having faith in what He said. “If having a simple question was a problem, Jesus would not have asked questions of his disciples. The problem comes when people are ‘tempting’ God, when they have already made up their minds about how they view a certain thing and nothing God reveals to them is really going to change it. The Greek word that ‘tempt’ in verse 35 comes from means ‘to test.’ The Pharisees in Matthew chapter 22 did not honestly have a question because they thought they already had the answer. They asked their question to prove a point, to test Jesus, not to become



enlightened. And how many of y'all know, that when it comes down to passing a test, Jesus always passes it? His point is always right.”

Jocelyn smiled as people in the congregation clapped and vocalized their agreement with variously-pitched “Amen’s.” Why did she have to come all the way to Atlanta to learn that it wasn’t a sin to have a question about the Bible? She was so glad over finally having that burden off of her that she almost missed what the minister was saying next. “When we have a question, God wants us to know the answer, and those answers can be found in the scripture. The Bible says, in Second Timothy 3:16, that ‘all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for *instruction* in righteousness.’ The instructions for life can be found in the Bible, the answers to the questions you have about who God wants to be in your life can be found in the Bible. And it’s up to you to find it. Yes, God has given us apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers ‘ for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,’ as it says in Ephesians. And these men and women of God are supposed to use the word of God when reproofing and correcting and instructing. However, it is *your* responsibility to know what the Word says for yourself, so you can judge whether or not they’re correct in what they’re saying and whether you should do what they’re telling you. Turn with me to Second Timothy again. In chapter two, verse fifteen, it says to ‘study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.’ That means you have to read the Bible for yourself, *you* have to study the scriptures *yourself*, so that you rightly divide the word of truth that is preached to you from any pulpit.”

Minister Mitchell talked on for another half an hour before closing. “When you have a question about the things of God, there’s nothing wrong with asking it. Ask elders in the church, ask your minister, discuss it with your family and friends, and ask God to help you find the answer. When somebody offers what they think is an explanation, ask them where they’re getting this information. Ask them to show it to you in the Bible. If they can’t show you, then you probably ought not to pay them any attention. Don’t ever take for granted that somebody is right, regardless of what position he holds in the church. *You* study to get the answers to your questions and have faith that God will help you to get the answers you’re searching for.”

After the altar call, Jocelyn stood for the benediction. When the service was over, people began moving around and Sebastian came over to her. “Did you enjoy the service?” he asked.

“Yes, I really did,” she said. “I have a question, though. When you’re studying the scripture and trying to find the answers to your questions, how do you know where to look? There are so many scriptures, you can’t have them all memorized and a verse about the types of animals on the ark isn’t really going to tell you anything about tithes.”

As they all filed out of the church, Sebastian told her about something called a Bible concordance. You could look up a word in the concordance, much like using a dictionary, and it would list all the verses that contained that word. They talked about places where Jocelyn could buy a concordance and things Sebastian had learned through the use of his own recently-purchased copy. Jocelyn shook Minister Mitchell’s hand as they passed him in the doorway and thanked him for the sermon. When they reached

Josiah's car, they found the others already gathered around it, talking. Jocelyn's appearance seemed to be the women's cue to leave and Angela and Nette got into the car.

"I hear you're going to meet my mother this afternoon," Sebastian commented before Jocelyn could get in.

"Yes, I'm sure it'll be a delightful experience," Jocelyn said, with a laugh. Sebastian did not share her mirth and instead told her that he would be over to Josiah's later that night to see her. "Is your mother so awful that you'll have to come check on me?" Jocelyn asked.

Sebastian shrugged, a rather apprehensive look on his face.

"After all," Jocelyn added, "There's no reason she should be mean to me. I'm not anybody special. Just Nette's cousin. Right?"

He didn't respond to that, just opened the car door for her. "I'll see you tonight," he said and Nette drove the car out of the parking lot.

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While Josiah's mother lived in a very nice neighborhood, it didn't seem to be more upscale than that of Sebastian or Josiah. The car stopped in front of a two-story Victorian painted yellow with brown trim. The women filed up the front walk. Nette took a deep breath, let it out, then opened the door without knocking. She walked into the first room on the left and stopped just inside the doorway. Only one woman was present, and Jocelyn knew without a doubt that this was Gladys Washington.

Josiah's mother was a grand lady. Jocelyn knew of no other way to describe it. She was a southern belle if Jocelyn had ever seen one. So light skinned she looked white,

Gladys Washington wore her elite status like a cloak. Her nose was tilted in the air ever so slightly, not enough to give the impression that she thought herself above her present company, but just enough to make everyone else think so. She rose gracefully from her chair and glided across the polished hardwood floor. It seemed as though she never even moved her feet. She stopped in front of Angela and clasped her hands together.

“Nanette, darling, your friend is absolutely beautiful!” She took Angela’s hands and squeezed them. “To think, this jewel has been languishing on the vine out there in that godforsaken wilderness for years. How awful!” She brushed a fat curl of chocolate hair shot through with silver over her shoulder and moved on to stand in front of Jocelyn. Her rather beady eyes moved over Jocelyn and came to rest on her face. “Your other friends seems like a good, well-mannered person. How lovely that you could have brought them out of captivity!”

Nette rolled her eyes at her cousins and followed Mrs. Washington to three chairs with legs that seemed too spindly to hold anyone up. Everyone perched on the edge of their seats and Mrs. Washington spoke to a woman behind Jocelyn. Jocelyn hadn’t realized anyone else was in the room, however, a rail thin woman with skin the color of pecan shells came to stand in the space between Jocelyn’s and Nette’s chairs.

“Geneva, darling, could you bring us some tea and scones? I really want Nanette’s friends to sample your pastries. I’m sure they’ve never tasted anything like them.”

Geneva gave an almost imperceptible nod and the smallest curtsy Jocelyn had ever seen before backing out of the room. Jocelyn looked over to see Mrs. Washington

purse her lips and shake her head. "It's a shame they way low-class Negroes act toward people who are only trying to help them out. Isn't that what DuBois said with his 'Talented Tenth' idea. The top tenth go back and help the next tenth and so on? I declare, you can hardly help people anymore."

One of the books Sebastian had sent Jocelyn was DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and Jocelyn was fully cognizant of the idea that Mrs. Washington was talking about. She wasn't sure, though, that DuBois would consider merely providing Geneva with employment a way to 'help' her gain equality.

The four women sat for the next ten minutes, eating scones, drinking tea, and understanding that Mrs. Washington had the upper hand in her own home. She carried the conversation, not allowing anyone else to speak. Whenever either of the younger ladies attempted to talk, she spoke louder and faster until they finally stopped trying to enter the conversation. Mrs. Washington did not stop talking even when they heard a knock at the door. She nodded at Geneva and Geneva went to open the door.

"I'm sure that's Elizabeth and Ida," Mrs. Washington said. "Mrs. Steele and Mrs. Lawson to you three." She rose to greet her friends and managed to get in one last comment before the two ladies entered. "I beg that you don't worry about the way you're dressed. Elizabeth and Ida like to have the distinctions between our stations preserved and your clothes do that quite nicely."

Angela frowned and turned to Jocelyn, a question on her face that asked if Mrs. Washington was saying their clothes made them appear poor. Jocelyn pursed her lips and rolled her eyes, noticing that Nette was silently shaking her head in disgust.

Elizabeth Steele and Ida Lawson breezed into the room behind Mrs. Washington, hawklike eyes surveying Angela and Jocelyn before they could even get close enough to shake their hands. Nette performed the introductions and they were all seated.

“Now, isn’t this nice?” asked Mrs. Washington. “It’s so wonderful to have you all over this afternoon. It’s also wonderful the way you and Ida knocked and let Geneva answer the door before you came in.”

Mrs. Steele and Mrs. Lawson nodded at Mrs. Washington, glancing at Nette out the corner of their eyes. Jocelyn chanced a glance in Nette’s direction, as well, and could tell from the expression on her cousin’s face that she entered Mrs. Washington’s home without knocking on purpose. Mrs. Lawson, the quieter of the three women, began a conversation about a young woman named Francine Mason who she’d seen at a gathering the previous evening. Josiah’s mother had been unable to attend and Christian’s mother wanted her to know all about this young lady.

“She just graduated from Atlanta University’s School of Education and has plans to be a high school teacher,” Mrs. Lawson said. “She’s just the prettiest little thing, with such nice light skin. At first, when I saw her, I thought she was white. Well, I went over to meet her and her mother and while I was talking to them, I had the most magnificent idea. I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if I could introduce her to Christian? It’s about time for that boy to be getting married!’ And so I invited them over to my house for dinner on Tuesday night.”

Angela gasped and returned her tea cup to its saucer, both dishes rattling wildly in her hands. All three of the mothers in the room eyed Angela. Josiah’s mother pursed her

lips and turned her attention back to Mrs. Lawson, who smiled and continued speaking. Mrs. Steele raised a disapproving eyebrow in Angela's direction and interrupted Christian's mother. "The very same thing happened to me last night, too!" she said in a voice that was significantly more enthusiastic than the expression on her face.

As they listened to a conversation about the various merits of the young ladies at the event last night, Jocelyn and Nette looked at each other, indicating with minute movements of their faces their level of dissatisfaction with the present conversation. A glance at Angela showed that she was barely composed and Jocelyn wondered how long it would be before she embarrassed herself in front of these prideful women by bursting into tears.

"I wish that I had been able to attend a party full of young ladies," Mrs. Washington sighed. "Then I could have found a wife for my son. But," turning to Nette, "He outsmarted me and made that choice before I could help him out. Not knowing any of the qualities he should look for, he just made that decision and now he's married. Dear, Nanette, I'm sure you know how fortunate you are."

Nette didn't speak, just opened her lips and showed her teeth in a gesture that the entire room understood to be a fake smile.

"I hope we're not boring you young ladies with our worries about our sons' future wives," Mrs. Lawson said with a sugary smile and a pointed look at Angela. Jocelyn was sure that the woman had some suspicion of her son's attachment to Angela but couldn't figure out how she could have come across that information.

Jocelyn answered for her sister. “Oh, we completely understand a mother’s concern for her children. Our own mother is just as eager for us to find mates.”

Mrs. Steele’s lips flattened into a straight line. “I hope she didn’t send you all the way to Atlanta to find husbands,” she said. “I know there’s a larger proportion of well-to-do colored men in this city than in that little backwater you’re from, but that would be a bit unseemly, don’t you think?”

“My aunt would never have done such a thing,” Nette offered in the same falsely congenial voice.

“Indeed,” Jocelyn said, “Such a thing would have been unpardonable and worthy of reproach in a mother. She is not the type to pimp her daughters out to the highest bidder but would rather lure... welcome an eligible young man into her home and decipher his character and determine his qualifications before pursuing a match.”

“Indeed!” Nette exclaimed boisterously. The two cousins looked at each other with wide eyes and nodded before turning back to the older ladies in the room and nodding at them as well. Jocelyn tried not to look at her sister, who was holding her hand over her mouth, attempting not to laugh.

Mrs. Washington’s nostrils flared, showcasing her displeasure before she regained control of herself and changed the subject. “Angela, dear,” she said cheerfully. “I’ve barely heard a peep out of you all afternoon.”

Angela looked up at Mrs. Washington, glanced at Christian’s mother, then dropped her gaze back to the floor. “I didn’t want to interrupt your conversation,” she whispered, twisting her tea cup around in the saucer.



“But what can you mean by not saying anything?” Mrs. Washington asked.

“I’m just learning,” Angela said, with a peek at Jocelyn.

A sound rather similar to a snort escaped Sebastian’s mother before the woman could stop it. She shared a glance with Mrs. Lawson and the two women sent each other significant looks. Mrs. Washington continued to speak. “What exactly are you learning?”

Angela seemed too distressed to answer coherently, so Jocelyn jumped back into the conversation. “The three of us are learning a lot from you,” she improvised, not knowing what Angela meant with her comment about learning. “One day, we hope to rise above our present stations and be in the position of finding wives for our own sons.”

“Indeed!” agreed Nette.

“We didn’t realize that’s how it was done among cultured people,” Jocelyn said with a shrug and the most bewildered expression she could muster. “Angela and I are learning how best to behave to snag good mates. It doesn’t matter whether or not the men would like to spend the rest of their lives with us. If we endear ourselves to their mothers, we’re sure to be married.”

“Indeed!” Angela chimed in. Jocelyn turned to her sister with a smile, proud that Angela had realized the game they were playing. If they could cloak their comments in pretty words and cultured flourishes, they could say pretty much anything in this setting. Though Josiah, Christian, and Sebastian’s mothers obviously didn’t like any of the younger women, they wore their manners like expensive coats tailored their specific condescension and demeaning opinions. They were too proud to behave poorly and would rather use their manners as weapons, rare custom-made artillery to blow holes into

the self-respect of Nette, Angela, and Jocelyn because they weren't as rich. Well, Nette had already married Josiah. Judging from the smitten air of Christian last night at Nette's house and earlier today at church, Angela was sure to be married by the end of summer, even if Mrs. Lawson protested. Jocelyn didn't know how her relationship with Sebastian would end, but from the things he'd written to her since last fall, she was sure his mother did not have as much influence with her son as she thought she did. Sebastian would do what he wanted regarding marriage.

## **Chapter Twelve**

The women arrived back at Nette's house, rather disgusted with the women who were presently or hopefully in the future would be their mothers-in-law. They traipsed into the house and began dinner. The men arrived from the meeting just as the food was being set on the table and they all passed an enjoyable evening eating and talking about the follies of parents. On Jocelyn learning that Josiah possessed the board game Monopoly, she convinced everyone to play the game. The Suttons had the game and many times as she dusted it off on the shelf, Jocelyn wondered what it would be like to play the game. She saw her opportunity and took it. The six of them had just gotten all of the play money distributed when there was a knock on the door. Josiah went to answer it and returned to the room with a yellow slip of paper. "Telegram for the Misses Roberts," he said and delivered the paper to them with a flourish.

Wondering who would have sent them a telegram, Jocelyn and Angela leaned in to read it. "Come home as soon as possible," it said. "Gertrude very sick." The message had come from Uncle Zeke. Jocelyn and Angela looked at each other in horror. Unwilling to wait for them to read it aloud, Nette snatched the message from them and read it herself. "What do you think is wrong?" she asked.

"I don't know!" Jocelyn said.

The next few minutes were spent in confusion. It was too late for a bus to be leaving for Texas tonight, but there was surely one leaving tomorrow. Josiah went to purchase tickets and Angela and Jocelyn went upstairs to begin packing. Jocelyn wasn't in her room for very long before she realized Sebastian was standing in the doorway. He

seemed like he was at a loss for words and Jocelyn felt tears come to her eyes as she looked at him. “I just know something really bad has happened!” she wailed as she began to cry.

He gathered her into his arms and listened as she talked through her tears. “She would never let them tell us to come home if it wasn’t something really bad. She was counting on us finding husbands while we were here. We’ve only been here for two days!”

Sebastian remained with her for another half hour before he left. “I wish there was something I could do to help. Let us know her condition as soon as you can when you get back,” he said.

Jocelyn nodded and looked at him, willing him to say something about their relationship before he left. Who knew when or if she would ever see him again. He stared at her for a while before leaning in and kissing her. Then he walked down the stairs and out the door without saying anything else.

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The bus ride to Texas passed in a haze of worry for both Angela and Jocelyn. It didn’t occur to either of them that they had no way of getting home from the bus station until the bus pulled to a stop, three days from the day when they’d left to go to Atlanta. When they got off the bus, Uncle Zeke was standing there waiting for them and Jocelyn wanted to cry with relief. Angela did cry and was pretty useless in retrieving their luggage and getting to the truck.

On the way to Newton, Uncle Zeke told them about the accident. Saturday morning, Mr. Floyd had picked up Gertrude in his truck and driven her to Beaumont. Gertrude had wanted to visit her elderly aunt and Mr. Floyd had some business to attend to there. They returned to Newton that evening and just as they passed the courthouse square, a pickup collided with Mr. Floyd's truck. As there was no hospital in town, Mr. Floyd was taken to his home and Gertrude carried to hers to await the doctor's arrival. Mr. Floyd was going to be fine, receiving only a couple of broken ribs and numerous bruises from the accident. Gertrude, on the other hand, had yet to wake up from being knocked unconscious. The doctor said that she might awaken or she might stay unconscious until she finally died. He set her broken leg and broken arm and left some medicine for the pain she was sure to be in if she ever woke up. He hadn't been back to the house since Saturday night and it was now Monday night. The one colored doctor in town, Dr. Coleman, was away in California and wouldn't return for another two weeks. Gertrude and Mr. Floyd had been attended by the white physician, Dr. Reynolds, who, while he took care of their immediate needs, refused to follow up with them. He insisted they were not his patients and that there was nothing more that he could do for either of them.

“Reverend Haxton has gone to Jasper to see if Dr. Murphy can come look at Gert,” Uncle Zeke said. “We didn't realize until this afternoon that Dr. Reynolds wasn't planning to come back, otherwise Reverend would have went for the other doctor sooner.”

Uncle Zeke stopped the truck in front of Jocelyn's house and before he could turn it off, she was out of the car and running up the front steps. Angela was right behind her and they entered their mother's room at the same time. Gertrude lay in the bed, eyes closed, face bruised, arm in a sling and leg in a cast. Louella sat in a chair by the bed, snoring, a position Jocelyn was sure indicated the exact amount of help Louella had been so far during this ordeal. Jocelyn and Angela inched closer to the bed and looked down at their mother. The first thing Jocelyn thought was that her mother would be quite upset about the bruises on her face when she woke up. Angela began to cry again and her noise caused Louella to awaken.

"Oh, Precoius!" Aunt Louella said. She enveloped both of her nieces in a hug. "I'm so glad y'all are here! It would have been awful if she died before you got back!"

With that said, Aunt Louella burst into tears herself and Jocelyn was forced to escort her out of the room. Uncle Zeke was just coming in the house. "There were a lot of people here before," he told Jocelyn. "But I shoosed them all away. They weren't helping nothing by being here."

Uncle Zeke and Jocelyn settled Aunt Louella in Angela's bed and then wrestled the couch into Gertrude's room. Angela was sitting in the chair vacated by Aunt Louella, tears silently streaming down her face. It took little coaxing to get her to relocate to the couch and Jocelyn sat down beside her, feeling incompetent. There was nothing she could do to help her mother except hope a doctor came. And even that wasn't guaranteed to help anything. After all, if Gertrude didn't wake up, the doctor couldn't do anything either.

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For two days, Jocelyn and Angela rarely left their mother's room, wanting to be close by in case anything happened. Reverend Haxton hadn't been able to get Dr. Murphy to come check on Gertrude either. Dr. Murphy insisted that if Dr. Reynolds didn't feel it worthwhile to examine Gertrude further, there was no reason for him to drive so far to do so. He trusted Dr. Reynolds's medical opinion. Reverend Haxton visited in the morning and evening each day, checking to see if Jocelyn and Angela needed anything. On Wednesday evening, they stepped onto the porch to speak with Reverend Haxton about paying for the care Dr. Reynolds had given Gertrude the one time he'd come to the house. They had enough money to pay for that visit, but using it would deplete their resources. As they'd planned to be away for the entire summer, their employers had hired other workers for the next three months and so neither woman could return to her job. Reverend Haxton promised to see what he could do about it. His car had just disappeared from sight and another, unfamiliar car slowed down in front of their house when they heard Gertrude's voice from the bedroom. They scrambled around each other to return to the house. Their mother was frowning and probing her face with her uninjured hand, speaking rather loudly to Louella when Jocelyn and Angela burst into the room. Gertrude became outraged at the sight of them.

"What are you doing here?" she yelled before grimacing in pain and closing her eyes. "You're supposed to be in Atlanta," she whispered.

Laughing with relief, the two girls bent over the bed and hugged their mother. She patted them weakly on the back, fussing the whole time. "How can you catch a rich man

if you're back here so soon?"

"Mama!" Angela said. "You almost died! How can you think we would stay so far away from you when something like this was happening?"

"I didn't almost die," Gertrude contradicted. She was clearly in a lot of pain and Jocelyn turned to find the medicine the doctor had prescribed. She poured some water from the pitcher Aunt Louella had left on the dresser and turned to give the capsules to her mother. Before Gertrude could get them to her mouth, they heard a voice say that she probably shouldn't take any medicine without having some food first.

Jocelyn spun around so fast that water sloshed out of the glass onto her dress. The dress that she hadn't changed since yesterday morning. The dress that Sebastian was now seeing her in. "What are you doing here?" she shrieked at him. "You're supposed to be in Atlanta!"

Sebastian walked into the room and gently eased the pills out of Gertrude's hand. "Your uncle said that you were having a hard time getting a doctor to treat your mother, so I figured I would come do it. My medical degree is as good in Texas as it is in Georgia."

"You just decided that you would drive halfway across the country to doctor a lady you don't even know?" Jocelyn asked.

Sebastian didn't immediately answer Jocelyn. Instead he requested that Angela fix something light for her mother to eat. Then he introduced himself to Gertrude and began an examination of her injuries. Unsure of what to do, Jocelyn lowered herself to the couch beside her aunt without saying anything else.



“Is this Josiah’s friend? The one that’s a doctor?” Louella asked Jocelyn. Jocelyn nodded.

“You must think a whole lot of Josiah if you’re going to travel fifteen hours to check on his wife’s aunt,” Gertrude said, her voice barely above a whisper. She couldn’t speak as loudly or as quickly as she was used to doing, but she was very alert and Jocelyn caught the speculative looks her mother was casting her and Sebastian.

Sebastian smiled. “I don’t think that much of Josiah,” he said. “However, I do think that much of Jocelyn. I figured that, seeing as how I intend to marry her, it would make sense for me to make sure her mother’s alive for our wedding.”

Gertrude’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as Sebastian took a stethoscope from the bag at his feet and used it to listen to Gertrude’s heart. Louella gasped and squeezed Jocelyn’s hand with more strength than one would have supposed her to have. Jocelyn didn’t notice any of this. “You want to...marry me?” Jocelyn stammered.

“Of course,” Sebastian said. “I plan to stay here until we’re sure your mother’s going to be fine. In that time, I’m sure I can get Mrs. Roberts to side with me in convincing you to marry me. I’m counting on you Mrs. Roberts.”

“Call me Gertrude,” Jocelyn’s mother whispered. “And if you turn out to be a good man, I’ll make sure my daughter marries you.”

Sebastian laughed and pulled other medical instruments out of his bag. He continued to talk, charming Gertrude and getting Uncle Zeke to tell him all that Dr. Reynolds had said about Gertrude’s condition. Jocelyn remained quiet, watching him

interact with her family and realizing that he could really be a nice person when he put some effort into it. Tears came to her eyes when she realized that he was going to take care of her mother. Just because Gertrude had awakened didn't mean that all was well. It reassured Jocelyn to know that a trained doctor would be treating her mother. It also reassured Jocelyn to finally know that he wanted to marry her. Though she'd felt guilty every time it happened, the thought had crossed Jocelyn's mind numerous times on the bus ride back to Texas from Atlanta that her abrupt departure had probably ended the chances of Sebastian revisiting his desire to marry her. She'd counted on that summer to let Sebastian see that while his reservations about her fitting into his life in Atlanta were just, she could do it.

Angela returned to the room with a bowl of vegetable soup and Uncle Zeke and Sebastian helped Gertrude sit up in bed so she could eat. As she ate the first meal she'd had since Saturday, Sebastian told them of his plans for Gertrude. "I want to take a look at the inside of her head. To do that, I'm going to need an x-ray of it. Do you know if the doctor here in town has an x-ray machine?"

"I doubt he'll let you use it even if he does have one," Uncle Zeke said. When Louella had hurt her back years ago, they'd gone to Houston to see a colored doctor there and he'd used an x-ray machine to look at Louella's back. Jocelyn could tell that her aunt and uncle were proud that they knew what the purpose of such technology was. Sebastian and Uncle Zeke made plans to go see Dr. Reynolds in the morning.

"If he doesn't have one or won't let me use it, we can always go to Houston," Sebastian said. He had friends there who could help him.

After Gertrude had finished her soup and taken her medicine, Sebastian hustled everyone out of the room so she could rest. He and Uncle Zeke removed the couch from the sickroom and placed it back in the living room. Louella wouldn't hear of Sebastian remaining in the house without her or Zeke present, and since she was tired and could finally retire to her own bed, she demanded that Sebastian follow her and Zeke to their home where he was to stay while he was in Newton. He was barely able to tell Jocelyn goodnight before he was forced out the door and to his car.

"I guess my wedding won't be the only one happening at the end of the summer," Angela said before the two girls went to sleep.

"He hasn't asked me yet," Jocelyn reminded her.

"Didn't he ask you last year?"

Jocelyn nodded. "Yeah. But I said no that time. He has to ask me again."

Angela rolled her eyes and turned off the light.

"Did you ask Sebastian if Christian was coming any time soon?" Jocelyn asked her sister.

"He said that Christian will be here at the end of the summer."

Jocelyn smiled and was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

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Dr. Reynolds had a brand new x-ray machine, something he was quite proud of. He was the only doctor he knew outside of a big city that possessed such a thing and was quite fond of telling this to anyone who would listen. He always conveniently left out the fact that it was his heiress wife's money that had paid for the machine, but everyone

knew just the same. None of that mattered to Sebastian, however, and after much conversation and cajoling between the two men, Sebastian was given permission to use Dr. Reynolds's coveted machine.

Gertrude was rather excited to look at a picture of the inside of her head and was disappointed when Dr. Reynolds refused to allow her to take the picture home with her. Sebastian was satisfied with the results of the procedure, sure that there was nothing wrong with Gertrude's head or brain stemming from the impact to it during the car accident. While he was in town, Sebastian treated Mr. Floyd as well. He would accept no payment from either of his patients and got Dr. Reynolds to waive his fees for setting Gertrude's broken arm and leg since she'd provided him with his first opportunity to make use of his new x-ray machine. Jocelyn couldn't understand why Dr. Reynolds hadn't taken advantage of Gertrude's injuries to use his x-ray machine in the first place, but decided not to argue with the cancellation of her family's debt to the man.

Sebastian stayed in Newton for three weeks, though Jocelyn was convinced that such a duration was not necessary to ensure her mother's recovery. Gertrude was able to hobble around the house on her crutches a week after Sebastian's arrival. Jocelyn and Sebastian had had a fight about her mother's crutches when Sebastian let them all know that he was leaving town for a day to go buy Gertrude a wheelchair, an item that couldn't be found at any store in Newton. Rather Jocelyn fussed and he endured the lecture with a half grin on his face that plainly said he found her objections amusing. Jocelyn didn't think it was appropriate for him to make such expensive purchases on her family's behalf and knew that Gertrude wouldn't be doing much of anything for a while anyway. Even

with the wheelchair, her mother would insist on someone else pushing it around. As that was the case, she could do without a wheelchair and just sit on the couch or the porch when she felt like it. Sebastian glossed over all of Jocelyn's points and proclaimed that he intended to buy his future mother-in-law a wheelchair despite her daughter's inconsiderate wishes. He kissed Jocelyn just as she started to restate her arguments and ran out of the house laughing before she could recover her sense enough to say anything. He'd backed his car out onto the road before she made it to the porch in time to yell at him to stop kissing her. At this point, Ruby Johnson, who'd been sitting on the stoop in front of her house, skipped over to Jocelyn and kept her outside for over an hour with questions about Sebastian and Atlanta and detailed descriptions of the last three dates she'd been on.

Gertrude insisted that while she needed to get to know Sebastian better before she would make her daughter marry him, she also needed to get outside in the sunshine. To that end, Sebastian, Gertrude, and Jocelyn went on walks everyday with Sebastian pushing Gertrude's wheelchair down the street. Not only did Gertrude get to examine him, but so did the people in the neighborhood. They would walk out to the road and stop the trio for a conversation that typically consisted of them questioning Sebastian about his life and then Gertrude questioning them about all the happenings she was missing while confined to her house for most of each day. Gertrude's discussions lasted anywhere from fifteen minutes to almost an hour and it was during one of these times that Jocelyn let Sebastian know that she expected an actual proposal from him before he left. "I won't marry you without one," she said primly.

He only smiled and told her he could take care of his own business. Several days later, she realized just how correct he was. Almost from the day he'd arrived in Newton, Sebastian's sister had been mailing him her copies of the *Atlanta Daily World*, the only colored newspaper to which she subscribed. After dinner each evening, Sebastian and Jocelyn would sit on the porch and pore over the newspaper together as the sun went down, discussing the articles until it grew too dark for them to see. Three days before he returned to Atlanta, Sebastian left the paper with Jocelyn and walked to Zeke and Louella's house. He'd left something there that he wanted her to see. Jocelyn sat on the porch swing and read the paper, wondering at its diminished size. There were far fewer pages than normal and no pictures on the front. Jocelyn began reading the first article entitled "Local Man's Heart Handed to Him on a Platter." She was expecting a story about a gruesome act of violence but instead, got one about an undisclosed man who proposed to a woman only to have her reject him. The story sounded suspiciously like what had happened with Jocelyn and Sebastian last fall. She moved on to the next story and read about a woman who met her future mother-in-law for the first time. Jocelyn wondered at the complete lack of news present in the paper that day and read the last story on the front page about two sisters who visited relatives in the big city only to have to return home suddenly to care for their ailing mother. Jocelyn dropped the paper and looked around suspiciously. She wasn't sure what was going on but she didn't like to think of the entire colored population of Atlanta knowing everything that had happened to her over the last year. The stories in the newspaper were clearly about her and she didn't appreciate it.

“You didn’t read the article on the back,” Sebastian said as he walked onto the porch.

“Did you tell them to write about me in the paper?” she asked, ignoring what he said before.

“I’m not going to tell you anything until you read the article on the back,” Sebastian insisted, taking a seat beside her on the porch swing.

Increasingly agitated, Jocelyn turned the paper over and read the last article. It was rather short and told of a man named Sebastian who had racked his brain trying to decide on a special way to propose. The article ended with the line:

*All of this is really just an elaborate way of asking you to marry me again.*

Jocelyn dropped the paper onto the floor and looked at Sebastian. He grabbed her hand and slid a ring on her finger while speaking, “I’ve changed a lot since meeting you and all of the changes have been for the better. I have been trying, over the past couple of weeks, to show you how much I love you, not just say it. But I’m saying it now. I love you and the only way I can make sure any more changes in me are good ones is if I marry you. So, I’m asking you...one more time. Will you marry me?”

Unable to speak, Jocelyn just nodded, tears running down her smiling face. She’d known he planned to propose again, but in the back of her mind, she always wondered if he would change his mind or if something would happen to send him back to Atlanta without becoming engaged. Now that it had actually happened, she couldn’t stop crying long enough to speak. She needn’t have worried, though. Her mother and sister were speaking enough for her. Apparently they’d known that Sebastian was going to propose

and had been peeking out of the living room window at the Jocelyn and Sebastian. They came out onto the porch as soon as they saw her nod her head and were talking so much Jocelyn could barely hear herself think.

Eventually, the pandemonium ceased and Sebastian was able to explain where he'd gotten this newspaper. He had a friend who worked at the *Atlanta Daily World* and they'd made the pretend paper for him. He'd been awaiting its arrival for the past several days and was glad that it got to Newton before he had to return to Atlanta. The little family did not have peace for long. Ruby Johnson soon showed up in the front yard, wanting to know what all of the hubbub was about. When she learned that Jocelyn was engaged, she'd shrieked loud enough to bring all of the neighbors out of their houses and an impromptu gathering occurred in the Roberts's front yard.

People came and went for a couple of hours, congratulating Jocelyn and Sebastian, whom they'd grown to like over the past couple of weeks. Not only had he treated Gertrude and Mr. Floyd, Sebastian had gone around treating other unwell Negroes and for some, he could do no wrong. They were immensely happy for the doctor and amazed that Jocelyn could get someone as well-off as the doctor to propose. Jocelyn paid them no attention and eventually the two snuck off to Aunt Louella and Uncle Zeke's house, where they sat in the living room alone and talked for hours. Sebastian had to leave in three days and they had much to discuss before then. Before the night was over, it was settled with Angela that the sisters would have a double wedding in a little over two months. Sebastian and Christian would return to Newton at the end of August and the two couples would be married.



Though Gertrude's theatrics at Sebastian's departure gave the impression that she was the person most affected by his return to the city, Jocelyn's tears portrayed her feelings adequately on the occasion. He left town with many promises to write and he did just that, sending Jocelyn a letter everyday. He wrote often of his plans for converting one of the spare rooms of his house into a library in which Jocelyn could collect books to her heart's content, but it wasn't until after the wedding in Newton and the honeymoon in New York City that Jocelyn realized he'd actually put his plan into action. She was carried over the threshold of her new house as Mrs. Sebastian Steele and the first thing her husband showed her was the library. A cushiony loveseat and armchair in Jocelyn's favorite colors were arranged on a large rug in front of a fireplace that hadn't been in the house at the beginning of the summer. A writing desk and chair was the only other furniture in the room. Sebastian had used one floor to ceiling bookshelf for his medical and scientific texts and filled another with books for his bride. There were two empty bookshelves that Jocelyn was supposed to spend the rest of her life filling up.

"What if I have more books than will fit on these shelves?" she asked, running her fingers along the spines of books, looking at titles and almost forgetting her husband was in the room.

Sebastian came and wrapped his arms around her. "Then I will build you another bookshelf and another one and another one until you have the best library in the whole city," he promised. Jocelyn smiled and didn't say anything else, sure that she already had the best library in the whole city. Nothing could have made it better because it had been constructed just for her.

All of her life, Jocelyn had been made aware of her responsibility as a relatively poor colored girl from southeast Texas to snag a husband with a stable job and some money. While loving and respecting the man were never requirements for this future marriage, Jocelyn was glad that she'd found a man who was worthy of both.

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